

## Lance Freeman, Psychic Detective

Lance Freeman, Detective. That's me. You want to find a lost child, a lost husband or a lost poodle, I'm your guy. I don't care much for cases that involve getting the goods on your ex-business partner, or finding out which sleezeball your former spouse is hanging out with, or what your husband is doing on nights when he's pretending to be busy with clients, not that I'm not any good at these things, but just because I hate to be involved with really seedy people. I do run into plenty of these as it is, but I like to keep the incidence of such encounters to a minimum. You see, my main talent is that I can read peoples' minds, and it's really a dirty business, at best.

I first realized that I had such a talent when I went to grammar school at the age of six. I had had this talent since I was born, naturally, but I just didn't know that my ability was anything special. I figured that everybody was like me, or rather that I was just like everybody else, because I wasn't around anybody but my parents, both of whom were isolates and avoided the company of others like the plague. Each of them had a modicum of my ability, just enough to be really bummed out by the rest of humanity, and enough to not want much to do with other people. My father was a forest ranger in Siskiyou County, California, and my mother ran a mail-order business, selling dog collars, which she made herself in her workshop in our back yard. We lived on the outskirts of Yreka, which is the capital of Siskiyou County, and has a population of 7290. At least that was the population when I last lived there, in 1991, when my parents died and I left town, presumably reducing said population to 7287. The town didn't change much while we lived there during my first twenty years, except to acquire a small shopping mall, five guest hotels, and two sporting goods stores.

Yreka is a small town, as you can judge by the population numbers. It is located 22 miles south of the Oregon border, nestled, as the local Chamber of Congress is fond of saying, in the northernmost corner of the majestic Shasta Valley. It's main claim to fame is hunting, fishing, and alpine skiing. When I lived there, its main claim to fame was boredom, of which I suffered a lot, having little penchant for sports or for the redneck mentality, both of which profusely abound in that locality. I was also an assiduous reader, and experienced early on the limitations of the Siskiyou County Library System. I longed to live in a big city with a huge library I could lose myself in, whose dusty shelves might offer me a wider range of the eclectic subjects I interested myself in. My reading appetite subsisted largely on inter-library loans, but suffered often at the delays and malfunctions inherent therein.

As I mentioned already, I didn't become aware that my mind-reading talents were anything but the norm until I attended first grade at the James Madison Grammar School. Since Yreka was a small town, this was the only grammar school. When I went there, there were about a hundred other kids, ranging in age from six to eleven. What impinged quickly on my fertile brain was the realization that they weren't at all aware of things in the ways that I was. I quickly saw through their stratagems and avoided most of their attempts to fit me into their pecking order. I wasn't well liked because I was so adept at games, being able to anticipate the actions of my fellow students, and so quick to assimilate the small amount of academic information available in the classrooms, being able to cut through the camouflage of oral abstraction on the part of the teacher to the mental meat of any subject. It seemed to me that the majority of class time was spent on

keeping the other kids in line, and the teachers had very little knowledge of the world to pass on to us, their vagaries on geography, for example, uncomplicated by the experience of actual travel. I had gone to school with great aspirations of acquiring knowledge, only to have my hopes quickly dashed with the realization of how little was actually available. I succeeded in class because I knew in advance the answer to every question, being able to see it in our teacher's mind, and soon became disliked by my fellow classmates. I was aghast at the murderous impulses which obsessed the majority of them. My parents had had their own personal quota of such impulses, but, having some of my empathic abilities, had kept the internal display of them to a minimum. I had also been blessed with no siblings, so I was not prepared for the onslaught of raw human emotion I was exposed to from my classmates.

I made it through middle school and high school by avoiding the company of others, realizing early in my relations with my teachers and fellow classmates the importance of keeping them from guessing at my abilities, knowing after my calamitous beginnings that I would be universally shunned, were my psychic talents to be discovered. I became adept at hiding my understanding of others, by feigning error, giving wrong answers to questions, and pretending ignorance of what I saw in their minds. I did well at school, my grades were always tops, and I graduated magna cum laude in my senior class. I could have had my pick of universities, but decided against an academic career, or any career which required constant contact in the typical work place. It never occurred to me back then that I was perfectly suited to becoming a librarian. I was certain there was some way to make a living through my wits and my psychic abilities. My parents had little interest in academia, and only hoped that I would find a profession which would support me. Their untimely demise made it much easier for me to follow my own instincts in this regard.

On the eve of my graduation from high school, my parents were killed in an auto crash, our family sedan being demolished by a large RV loaded with avid hunters from the big city who were also loaded with alcohol, their rifles at the ready, loaded with ammo, ready for whatever deer or elk might dash out at any moment from the side of the road.

The dual funeral had a small attendance, my parents' friends being small in number, and their few relatives all living on the east coast. My aunt Eustachia was the only family member who made the trek across the continent, and, except for a small contingent of fellow forest rangers who had worked with my father, that was it. My parents were cremated by the Neptune Society, through whom the services were arranged, and seven people attended – four rangers, my aunt, myself, and the funeral director. My parents' ashes were to be scattered at sea at some future, unspecified date. Afterwards, my aunt treated me to dinner at a local surf-and-turf restaurant, where I had steak and lobster tail and she had crab cioppino.

I put the family home in the hands of a local realty, trusting that the meager discrepancy between the mortgage and the final selling price, might, after real estate fees and taxes, support me until I decided on the right occupation, and, as soon as I got my affairs in order, packed up my few belongings and took the Greyhound bus to San Francisco, a city I had had my sights on since I was a little boy.

Finding a way to use my psychic abilities to make money proved to be a difficult task. One would think that being able to read others' minds would give me an

insuperable advantage, but it proved to be otherwise. Card playing came early to my mind, but, even in that arena, knowing the holdings of the other players is not the only factor in winning. Getting the right cards is even more important. For weeks I hung around the card parlors down on the peninsula, suffering the mental masturbations of my fellow card players, trying to make a few bucks, but it wasn't easy. One thing a lot of people don't realize is that good card players have a certain flare for psychic abilities themselves, perhaps not on my level, but substantial enough to give them an edge, enough at least to compete with my abilities. After a couple of months of substandard earnings, I gave it up.

For some time after this, I examined a long series of possible occupations, but none of them seemed practical. I thought of wandering through the stock exchange, picking the brains of the stock analysts, but I quickly dispensed with the idea. It required capital, in the first place, of which I had little, and it required picking just the right brains, of those whose guesses would prove out in the end. There were cases where insider knowledge made the buying or selling of particular stocks a sure thing, but the instances were too rare, and, again, it required having sufficient capital, plus a working knowledge of stocks and bonds which I did not possess, nor care to acquire.

I also considered psychoanalysis, but that required some kind of degree, at least one in psychology, and, when I considered it, it wasn't of much value to know what was wrong with a patient, even if such were possible, considering the complexities of the human mind, because the success of analysis depended on the patient himself realizing what was wrong with him, and he had to come to that realization by himself. Nobody could help him by explaining it all to him. No, that was out as well.

I could have tried my luck as a stage mentalist, but stage shows were a thing of the past, except, perhaps, at watering holes like Las Vegas, and I was afraid to let my talents come to the attention of the police or the intelligence agencies. They would no doubt be extremely happy to employ me, but they would also never let me go, and I might be forced to do work I didn't altogether approve of. I shuddered to think what a career with them might be like. I shuddered also at the prospect of being constantly in the presence of such limited minds.

You would have thought that I had already gone through all of this while growing up, but the truth is that I hadn't been faced with survival in the real world back then. I was free when I was young to consider all these occupations, but I hadn't done anything but daydream about them, and although such possible endeavors had flitted through my mind on numerous occasions, I hadn't put any really serious thought into them.

There was one attribute I didn't share with my parents, and that was in the area of social toughness. I had somehow weathered the storms of the emotions of others, so I wasn't fazed by the psychic onslaught that had driven my parents into social isolation. I was able to act with calm and deliberation, a valuable asset when confronting others.

So, after much intensive deliberation, I finally came up with my present occupation. It was the only idea that had any chance of working. My talents would be put to maximum use. I would be able to question people and get answers I could trust. I could tap into their minds without their knowing it, and retrieve information that would be useful to the object of my search or deduction. Even people who didn't want me to know something couldn't suspect that I could know it without their telling me. It seemed ideal. The more I thought about it, the more clearly I saw that it was the perfect job for me. I

didn't need to keep regular hours, I didn't have to acquire any specialized information, I required no degrees. At the most I needed to obtain some sort of license.

My first years in the trade were rough ones, economically. I couldn't choose my clients; I had to make do with the strange customers who responded to my ads. I have taken the liberty of describing a few of my early cases:

## 1. The Case of the Purloined Poodle

The fat blonde who edged her way through my doorway looked around my tiny office with a look of vague apprehension. It was close to closing time, and I had been considering leaving early.

"Mr. Freeman?" she said, thinking she had come to the wrong location.

"That's me," I responded. "Sit down and make yourself comfortable."

She peered with annoyance at the wooden chair I provided for my guests, her mind teeming with a roiling mass of petty anxieties. She finally overcame her reluctance to subjecting her large, dainty bottom to such Spartan discomfort and plunked herself down.

"It's my dog," she said cryptically, breathing heavily and eyeing me suspiciously as if I were to blame for something. I could see, of course, what was on her mind.

"She's lost," I said, cutting to the chase.

"Stolen," she replied. "By that god-damned Nazi who lives in the apartment down the hall."

"Since you know what happened to her," I replied, "it would seem that you don't really need my services."

"I need to prove it," she said, "so I can sue his god-damned ass. He's probably eaten her by now." I scanned her mind for the symptoms of a lost pet. I saw only the symptoms of lost property.

"Of course," I said. "I should tell you my rates."

"Rates, shmates," she said. "I don't care about your god-damned rates. I want my little Fifi back. She's a valuable dog. I've got the papers to prove it."

"Of course," I said placatingly, noting Fifi's resurrection from the dead, "but first you must sign one of my forms. Then we can talk business." I shoved one of my standard forms across the desk to her. I had just printed off a batch that morning on my PC. I also handed her a pen.

"Three hundred dollars a day?" she exclaimed. "That's highway robbery."

"Nevertheless," I said calmly, "it's what I charge. The rent on my office alone is fifteen hundred a month."

"For this tiny dump?" she said.

"Downtown locations don't come cheaply," I said, half hoping she would get up and storm out. But no such luck. Fifi was easily worth three hundred dollars a day.

"I'll pay," she said. Visions of surgically removing my testicles danced through her head.

"Plus expenses," I said, eliciting another frown from her, plus another mental onslaught on my manhood.

"Just find her," she said. "*Find* her."

Dr. Haig Albarian lived in apartment five, just down the hall from Mitzi Sprague, the owner of the lost Fifi. Dr. Albarian was luckily in, willing to see me, and anything but a Nazi. I didn't ask him his nationality, but, from his name, I would have guessed him to be Armenian or Turkish.

"Please come in, Mr. Freeman. Sit down, sit down. You will forgive the informality of my dress. I have just been doing my yoga."

My host was dressed in what looked like a cross between pajamas and jogging clothes, the saffron color reminding me of Buddhist priests.

The room was large and airy, the furniture Danish modern, the walls newly painted in a neutral color, a print of a forest scene hung on one of them, some potted plants in the corner. The sofa was green corduroy, and soft when I sat on it. Dr. Albarian's mind was quiet, a pleasant contrast to the usual noisy variety. The kindness shown on his face matched the quietness within, a man of consistency.

"I've been employed by Ms. Sprague of apartment three to find her lost dog," I began, not believing in beating about the bush.

"Ah, yes. The beloved Fifi," said Dr. Albarian, seating himself opposite me in a wooden chair of rather severe design. "Ms. Sprague was over to see me again earlier this morning. She is still very distraught, naturally, over the loss of her pet."

"Again?" I asked, seeing in his mind a brief encapsulation of the visit, hardly a peaceful one.

"She came originally yesterday morning," he explained, "when her dog was first lost. Today she came to check again, just on the off-chance I had any information I had neglected to tell her on her first visit."

"And did you?" I asked.

"Unfortunately not," he said. "Fifi and I have hardly been friends, so my knowledge of her whereabouts is nonexistent."

"Ms. Sprague seems to think you are German," I said.

Dr. Albarian smiled. "Ms. Sprague is rather forceful in her opinions."

"When was the last time you saw her dog?" I asked.

"Not since several weeks ago when I encountered her and her mistress on the stairs."

"Encountered?" I asked, sensing a negative connotation.

"Fifi bit me," he explained, accompanying his verbal explanation with a mental picture.

"The dog disliked you?" I asked.

"The dog seemed to be very unhappy," he said.

"Do you have any ideas about what might have happened to her?" I asked.

"Ms. Sprague occasionally allows Fifi to run freely in the corridor," he said. "The door is open at these times. I think the dog may well have left the house on her own."

"How would she get out the front door?" I asked.

"By slipping through when someone entered," he explained.

"Ms. Sprague told me she blocked the stairs with a screen," I said.

"Fifi would not find that screen much of an obstacle," he replied.

Sutter Street was humming with activity. It was eleven in the morning as I exited the apartment house. I could have tried to interview the other residents, but I figured most of them would be out and into the day. I also figured that Mitzi had already done the job for me, judging by many of the comments she had made the day before about the lack of interest on the part of her fellow apartment house dwellers. Fifi had apparently not been very popular among them, a quality she seemed to share with her mistress.

If Fifi had indeed escaped in the manner suggested by Dr. Albarian, the best thing to do was to check with the shop owners on the street, in the hopes that one of them might have caught sight of the errant black dog. Next door to the apartment building was a

cleaners with a worn sign, dulled by time and tide, proclaiming BRITE SPOT. A woman was standing over an ironing board, dutifully pressing tank tops. I stood for some time before she noticed me.

"Yes sir," she said, putting down her iron on its back and turning in my direction.

"I'm looking for a black poodle," I told her. "She escaped from her owner two days ago, just about this time."

The woman's mind was awash in a fog of blariness. She seemed to be fighting a combination of fatigue and lack of sleep, brought about, I gradually realized from the random images which emerged from her stream of consciousness, from a night of dealing with a drunken husband. "A dog, you say. Seems to me I *did* see a dog." While she was talking, I saw in her mind the fleeting image of the semblance of a black poodle.

"Yesterday morning," you say?

"No," I said, "the day before yesterday. Tuesday. Same time as now."

"Sorry," she said. "I think I did, but I can't be sure."

"Which direction was it going in?" I asked, certain that she had seen it.

"That way," she pointed, indicating a downhill direction, towards Market Street. "But I'm not really that sure. I was just standing in the doorway, taking a break and having a cigarette. Maybe I just *thought* I saw a dog."

"Thanks very much," I told her. Dr. Albarian's theory seemed to be bearing fruit. In her brief mental picture, the dog had been running. That would fit in with the idea that the dog had been escaping, rather than just gamboling about. Knowing the way in which dogs tend to run only for short distances, stopping to check out each street corner for the smells and scents of the doggie world, I figured I would check with the shop owners a block down the street.

"A black dog you say?" said the man behind the counter at BOOTS & BAGS. He massaged his chin a moment, letting his thoughts meander. I watched his mental pictures flow by. No dog.

"Sorry," he said.

"Sorry," said the woman at PASSION PIZZA.

"Sorry," said the older teenager sweeping up in front of BINK'S BURGERS. "I don't work on Tuesdays."

"Yeah, I might have," said the old geezer sitting on his front steps smoking a pipe. His mind was still focussed on the girlie magazine he had just laid down. "A black poodle, you say? Yeah, I think I did. Tuesday? Yeah. It was running in that direction."

I thanked him and continued on downhill. Things were looking up.

When I got to Taylor Street, I had collected two more sightings of the black poodle. So far, she had stuck to Sutter Street. By this time, I felt like a rest, and the sign THE SERENDIPITY SNACK SHOP caught my eye. I remembered the story about the three princes of Serendip, and the whimsy appealed to me.

"Hi," said the pretty brunette behind the counter. "Like a menu?"

"I think I'll just be serendipitous and take whatever you bring me," I said.

She smiled. "Okay. You promise to pay for it even if you don't like it?"

"I promise," I said. "Although I think I'll probably like it."

She disappeared into the small kitchen that lay on the other side of the doorway which connected it with the tiny shop I was sitting in. I tried to read her thoughts, but she

was too far away for me to see anything but scattered pictures. I looked around at the two teeny tables between me and the window to the street. It was almost like an elves' kitchen, straight out of Tolkien.

"Here you are," she said, laying before me a small bowl of soup and a plate with a sandwich. I noticed that the crust of the sandwich had been carefully removed.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The soup is potage maraicher, and the sandwich is asparagus and salmon," she said.

"Potage maraicher?" I asked.

"Moroccan," she explained.

"Glad I took my chances," I said, ladling a small bit of the soup and bringing it to my mouth. Spicy and delicious. I took a small bite of the sandwich. It had a marvelous delicacy. "I think I've died and gone to heaven," I told her. "Are you the owner?"

"How'd you guess?" she said with a quizzical smile.

"No mere employee could have concocted this," I said. "Have you been in business long?"

"Just a few weeks," she said. "I hope I make it. I got tired of working for other people."

"I wish I lived closer," I said. "I'd be here every day."

"Thanks," she said. "What do you do?"

"I'm a private detective," I told her.

"What are you detecting right now?" she asked.

"Actually, I'm looking for a lost poodle," I said. "You happen to have seen one?"

A shadow passed quickly across her face, so quickly I might have missed it, had it not been accompanied by a mental picture of a poodle. What caught my attention was that the poodle in her mind was black.

"Sorry," she said. "What color was it?"

"Black," I said. "It ran away on Tuesday."

"Tuesday," she said, pretending to think about it. Her mind belied the pretense. "I guess not," she said. "I don't get much chance to notice the street, I'm so busy waiting on people."

"Of course not," I said. "Well, I'll just have to keep on asking."

"How do you know it was running away?" she said. "Maybe it was just lost."

"Just a hunch," I said. "It seems to have been a concerted effort on the part of the dog."

"Was its owner cruel to it?"

"Only in the sense that its owner is cruel to everyone," I said. "She is very concerned about getting her back, but I get the impression that the dog might not feel the same way. It's hard to judge, since I haven't talked to the dog yet."

She smiled again. "I get the feeling you like animals," she said.

"I do," I said. "My mother raised a wolf cub. He was a great animal. He had to be taken back to the wilds when I was nine, because he was constantly raiding the neighbors' chicken coops."

"How amazing. How did you get him?"

"My father was a forest ranger. A hunter had shot the wolf's mother, so my father brought the wolf cub home. My mother fed him from a baby's bottle. He was a real member of our family. He used to stand guard over my crib."



"I hope all my customers are as interesting as you," she said. "What part of the city do you live in?"

"The Noe Valley," I told her, "but my office is up on Bush Street, near Polk. How about you?"

"Out in the Mission," she said.

"Wherabouts?" I asked.

"On a little street called Hook, just off of Diamond. It's only about three blocks long."

"Hook," I mused. "That's an interesting name. Sounds like the direction you might give a boxer."

"What do you mean?"

"Make a left on Hook," I explained.

"Do you always make such terrible puns?" she asked.

"You get hooked on them after a while," I said.

"What's your name, by the way?" she asked.

"Lance," I told her, "Lance Freeman. And you?"

"Gertrude Lawrence," she said.

"Great name," I said. "I don't run into very many Gertrudes nowadays."

"Want some coffee?" she asked. "On the house."

"Sure," I said. "Do I have to sit on the roof while I drink it?"

She shook her head disparagingly, vanishing into her tiny kitchen for a moment, then returned with a steaming cup.

"Cream?"

"Sure," I said. I sat, sipping the coffee and admiring her mind. Some people have beautiful minds. Her's was one.

That evening after dinner, I made a little trip to the outer Mission. I traveled West on Diamond, or maybe it was North. My directions get a little confused in San Francisco. I remembered that old joke of Groucho Marx about Leavenworth – "or was it Twelveworth?" Hook wasn't too hard to find, although I made a right onto it instead of a left. I had found Gertrude's name in the telephone book, and the reverse directory had yielded up her address.

"You," she said as she opened the door.

"Mind if I come in?" I asked.

"I'm afraid the place is a mess," she said.

"Isn't everyone's?" I said.

"Come on in," she said, a little reluctantly. I could tell by her thoughts that the dog was in the next room.

"How'd you know?" she asked. I knew she was asking about the dog.

"I'm a detective," I said cryptically.

"You might as well see her," she said. She led me to her bedroom, where a black poodle greeted us effusively. I could tell immediately by the dog's thoughts, if one can call what an animal does as thinking, that it absolutely adored its new mistress. Fifi smelled my hands and tried to lick my face.

"She likes you," said Gertrude. Gertrude's thoughts were sad. I could tell that she really loved the dog as well.

“What are you calling her?” I asked.

“I was thinking of ‘Mitzi,’” she said.

I almost choked. Gertrude saw my astonished reaction. “What is it?” she asked with concern.

“That’s the name of her owner,” I said, stifling a laugh.

“Wow,” said Gertrude. “Am I psychic, or what?”

We sat for a while, petting the dog. I wanted to pet Gertrude. The dog seemed extremely happy.

“I guess I’ll have to return her,” said Gertrude.

“I wonder what the dog thinks,” I said.

“She seems happy with me here,” she said.

“She does,” I said. I sat there, just stroking the dog, and thinking. What would Sam Spade do in this case? I remembered him turning Mary Astor in, just because a detective had to be true to his calling.

“What do you mean, you’re quitting the case?” Mitzi Sprague blurted out. I sat on the edge of her sofa arm, suffering a barrage of vituperation from her overwhelmed mind.

“I mean I’m quitting,” I said. “Throwing in the towel.”

“But I paid you a hundred dollars,” she screamed.

“And I’m giving it back,” I told her. “It’s a cold case. Your dog took off running. I found a few people who verified that, but God knows where she might be. At the rate she was traveling, she’s probably in Daly City by now.”

“I thought you were a real hotshot detective,” she yelled at me, her verbal and mental abuse both on the same wavelength now.

“You did report the dog as missing, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Yes, yes, I told you that. So what?”

“So, if they find her, they’ll notify you.”

“Big help you are!”

“Here’s your check,” I told her. “Hasn’t been cashed yet.”

“Get your god-damned ass out of here,” she screamed.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, suiting my action to her word.

On Sunday, Gertrude and I took Mitzi to Dolores Park. She ran her heart out, while Gertrude and I sat and munched on asparagus and salmon sandwiches. We gave a little piece of salmon to Mitzi on her return.

## 2. The Mystery of the Lost Girl

She came out of the blue, or should I say out of the green. Out of the emerald forest, out of redwoods and eucalyptus trees, she shot out from under a manzanita bush like a brace of quail, a sudden rush of silent thunder. In that frozen frame of stopped time I caught the sense of her - an intelligent face with a pale complexion, a creature who shunned the day, coming out only at evening when the sun's rays were low in the sky, looking at me with soft doe eyes, curious, wondering eyes, what are you doing here. Then gone. Gone like a sudden breeze..

I was lost, trying to find my way to Hugo Winter's, winding my way up that road that leads from Tam Junction up to the top of Mt. Tamalpais, or over to Stinson Beach if you were looking for a sleepy little town on the ocean's edge. Hugo was the lucky possessor of one of those few plots of land that predated the establishment of Tamalpais State Park.

Anyway, I was nearing my destination when my clutch went out. I've always been hard on clutches, not having outgrown my childish zeal to beat everyone off the mark when the light turns green. My car was an Alfa Romeo, and I had a tendency to pop it into gear. I stashed it at the turnout of the next bend in the road. I didn't want to do any more damage to the clutch.

My cell phone chose that moment to not work. I looked around to see if I could spot any satellites, but they were all out of sight. Out of radio frequency as well, it would seem. One of these days, I thought, I'm going to understand this satellite business properly. My cell phone had an irritating habit of going nonfunctional just when I needed it.

I decided to walk. I knew where Hugo's house was, or thought I did. I didn't know the area that well, but I figured I had about a half hour's walk, and, since I was a half hour early, I decided to hoof it from there. The road was narrow, and, although there wasn't much traffic, the little there was seemed to consist solely of late-model road-racing fanatics in an incredible hurry to get to Stinson Beach, and who therefore wanted to take advantage of the entire surface of the road, including the edge that I was walking on, so I was happy to find an overgrown path that paralleled it.

The minute I dropped down from the road bed onto the steep hillside I was aware of being in a different place. Lazy bugs in slow crash dives lulled me into molecular zones. I spaced out on hazy cobwebs glued to the branches that barred my path. Miniature prisms glinted tiny rainbows.

The ancient path was just visible enough to be navigated, the one piece of order in a tangled territory. I stuck to it, noting with apprehension its upward climb. I had long ago passed the last of the houses, except for the few like Hugo's, and had become quite charmed by this piece of unkempt nature, bathed in the rosy glow of sunset.

Anyway, it was then that I saw her. Or more accurately caught sight of her. And in that fleeting second, like a deer that is there and then gone, in that second our psyches crossed paths, and we said some kind of hello. Before bounding off, she asked me a silent question. Who are you? What are you doing here?

I turned to pursue her, but suddenly three men appeared out of nowhere, blocking my way. Three oriental men in plain brown uniforms, with no insignias or patches. They just stood there, saying nothing, but meaning everything with their eyes. Their minds

were polished steel. Small private thoughts lingered around the edges of their auras. They looked well muscled. One of them nodded his head in the direction of the road.

"This is private property, sir." Serious brown eyes allowing no alternatives. His mind-set was equally adamant. No trespassing.

I didn't argue. I clambered up through rough underbrush to the road above. That was all there was to it. I soon found my way to Hugo Winter's house, where I was greeted with exclamations when it was discovered that I had walked the last of the way. During dinner, over deer meat in raisin sauce, I told my hosts the little story about the woman in the woods. Hugo was intrigued.

"I wonder if that's 'Institute' land," he said to his wife, Anna.

"Institute?" I asked, seeing nothing in his mind that would elucidate his remark.

"of Behavior and Learning Disorders," she explained to me. "Some of the inmates are allowed freedom of the grounds."

"I guess I ran into an inmate," I said.

"Sounds like it," said Hugo. "And then her keepers ran into you."

"Seems like a strange place for such an institute," I said.

"Not in Marin," said Hugo. "Not with all the other kooky organizations we have around here." The disapproval on his face was reflected in the abstract mental images that passed like fleeting dark shadows across the surface of his mind.

And that was the end of that. After dessert we got down to the business for which I had been invited there in the first place, that of finding a lost child.

Hugo Winter had called me at my office the Thursday before. After speaking to me for a few minutes and discovering that I might be interested in working for him, he invited me over for dinner.

I had met Hugo at a meeting of the Society for the Study of Psychic Phenomena, where I had been invited to give a short talk on the Laura Huntsecker case, which had also involved a lost child, and afterwards, over a small buffet luncheon, we had had an animated conversation about his lost niece. Since he had talked about the possibility of engaging me to find her, I wasn't surprised when he called me.

So there I was, one Saturday later, in Hugo Winter's Swiss chalet, looking out over a canopy of treetops onto the hillside below, talking about a little girl who had been kidnapped fifteen years before.

"After this long a time, the leads will have died out," I said to my hosts. "It's liable to be a total waste of money. Was there a ransom attempt?"

"None," said Hugo, his fifty-year-old face showing its age for just a moment, as a shadow of forgotten pain flickered across it.

"You were close to your niece?" I asked unnecessarily. I could see the psychic trauma in his mind.

"I'm close to my sister," he explained. "If it hadn't been for your extraordinary success in the Huntsecker case, as well as our little conversation the other day, I wouldn't consider suggesting that she hire another detective. There have been lots of others before you, I assure you."

"The police were not effective?"

"They did all they could. The F.B.I. was called in as well, as they are on all kidnappings. For three months my niece's picture appeared on cereal boxes in the six western states."

"Where was the father during all of this?"

"Dead. He passed away a year before my niece's abduction."

"Was it documented?"

Hugo smiled. "I was at his funeral."

"Were the father and his child close?"

"Very. Except for his empire, Arthur lived for his daughter."

"How was his marriage to your sister?"

"As well as could be expected. It was pretty clear he'd married her for her money, but she seemed fairly content with their relationship. At least it was socially satisfying for her."

"But not emotionally," I said.

"The two of them slept apart since my niece was born, but Arthur was circumspect about his extra-marital relationships. If you were to have met the two of them at one of the many social functions they participated in, you'd have gotten the impression of a successful marriage."

"Well," I said. "The case does intrigue me, and I don't mind taking your sister's money, just as long as she realizes the unlikelihood of success."

"My sister has never given up hope. The loss of her child virtually unhinged her. She lives for one thing only - to be reunited with her daughter. And it *is* her money. She has quite a lot of it. Much as I disliked Arthur for marrying her for her bank balance, I have to admit he had a real genius for making money with money."

"If her daughter were still alive, she would now be a twenty-one-year-old woman. I should also point out to you that most lost children are found within a year or not at all. After fifteen years, the chances aren't good."

"I told my sister about my meeting with you and it's got her going again. Don't worry about it. She can afford it, and I imagine you can use the work. Besides which, I am quite excited to see what you can do with the case. What do you say?"

"I think I would like to see your sister first."

"I can arrange that. Let me see. Tomorrow's Sunday. Are you free in the afternoon?"

"I guess I could be," I said.

"Then why don't I pick you up tomorrow about two?"

"Okay. I'll wait for you in front."

"Let's make sure I have your address."

"Do you still have my business card?"

"Yes, yes, here it is," he said, getting up and searching through the cards on his telephone table. "Would you like another cup of coffee?" he asked.

"I'd better get going," I said. "I still have to call Triple A."

Hugo was right on time. His gray Mercedes looked a little out of place, a cut above all the other cars on the block. I was out in front, waiting for him, since there were no parking spaces on either side of the street for a block in both directions. The loaner I had just picked up that morning was sitting in my driveway.

“Morning,” he said to me as I got in on the passenger side. He was in a cheery mood, despite the seriousness of the occasion, but that hardly seemed inappropriate. After all, I reflected, his niece had been missing for sixteen years, and the chances of finding her still alive were slight.

“Is it usually this foggy in the Noe Valley?” Hugo asked as he drove up Clipper to connect with O’Shaughnessy and Bosworth en route to Highway 280.

“It varies,” I said. “Usually Twin Peaks blocks the fog coming in from the ocean. Most days lately have been sunny. Today’s an anomaly.”

The fog disappeared when we went from 280 to 101, and then onto 80. There was a slight overcast as we crossed the Bay Bridge, but it was minimal, and the weather promised to be sunny. Hugo was silent during the drive, his mind preoccupied with how he was going to present me to his sister and how he was going to broach the issue of her missing daughter. I got the impression from his stream of thought that his sister was still in mourning for her vanished daughter.

“Excuse my silence,” he said as we passed the toll gate plaza and moved into the left lanes to get onto 80 East and the Berkeley turnoffs.

“No problem,” I said. “I imagine you’re preparing what you’re going to say to your sister.”

“I guess that’s predictable,” he said. “Still, I get the uncanny feeling at times that you’re actually reading my mind. You disclaimed that, however, in your talk at the Society last week.”

“A lot can be read from mood, facial expressions, and circumstances,” I said. “Psychic connections are tenuous and untrustworthy. Sometimes I get strong impressions, sometimes not. It seems to be in the lap of the gods.”

He nodded, satisfied with my answer. As we drove along the East Bay freeway, with the San Francisco Bay on the left and West Oakland on our right, his mind was occupied with keeping an eye out for the first Berkeley turnoff, and, as soon as we passed Ashby, he moved into the right lane, and onto University Avenue.

Twenty five blocks later, we came to the Berkeley campus of the University of California, where we made a left. Six blocks later, we were north of campus on Spruce Street, traveling steeply uphill. Five or six blocks after that, Los Angeles Avenue slanted steeply downhill from its intersection with Spruce. Hugo’s sister lived in an old two-story Victorian with a large front yard which looked like the result of a professional gardener. A white, picket fence separated it from the street.

Hugo parked his Mercedes in the driveway and we walked to the gate, which swung open onto a flagstoned path. A low hedge separated the path from the well-cropped lawn on either side, flower beds between the lawn and the house. Everything looked well clipped, pruned and groomed. The path ended at the front porch. We stepped up and Hugo pressed the bell. A few moments later the door opened, and an attractive older woman answered the door.

“Agatha, this is Lance Freeman, the gentleman I was telling you about. Mr. Freeman, my sister, Agatha Huntoon.”

I nodded to her politely as she opened the door to us, waving us in.

“So you’re the detective Hugo was telling me about,” she said. Her mind was complicated, half a dozen competing streams of thought struggling for supremacy. “Why

don't we sit in the front room," she said, leading us through the hallway to a large, dark room beyond. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I made out a sofa, which I sat in the corner of. Hugo sat next to me, while his sister chose an armchair facing us.

"Would you like some refreshment?" she asked me. I shook my head, and Hugo did likewise. "Then let's get down to business," she said. "What do you know about the case?" she asked me.

"Only what your brother has told me," I said. "That your daughter was abducted at four thirty on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, 1990, which, I understand, was a Friday.

"There was something special about the day she was kidnapped," said Mrs. Huntoon.

"What was that?" I asked.

"It was her birthday," she said.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. I could feel the psychic pain from the woman. It was emanating from her on all wave lengths.

"I was in the kitchen making her birthday cake for her," said Agatha. "I had just put it in the oven when I went out to the back yard and found her gone."

We sat there for another minute or two in a kind of suspended animation.

"Why don't you go on with your summary," Hugo suggested to me.

I collected my thoughts and continued. "As I understand it, the police were immediately notified, and an APB bulletin put out. The F.B.I. was also notified, as it always is in matters of kidnapping. After three months of intensive searching, your daughter was still missing. The case was put on the shelf a few months later, although I understand that you had several detectives working for you for the next several years, all to no avail."

"For the next five years," Hugo interjected.

"Right," I said, "for the next five years. I suppose you have the reports submitted to you by those detectives," I said to Mrs. Huntoon.

"I anticipated that you might want them," said Agatha. "I have them, plus the newspaper clippings from the local newspapers at the time of my daughter's abduction, as well as a copy of the police report."

"You're well organized," I said to her.

"I got that from years of living with my husband," she said.

"The reports ought to keep me busy for a couple days," I told her. "I'd like to meet with you again after I've had a chance to absorb them."

"I'm always here," she said. "Except on Wednesday evenings, when I play bridge."

"Before I leave," I said, "I'd like to visit the back yard."

"Of course," said Mrs. Huntoon. She rose and led the way through the rear of the house. Behind the staircase to the floor above was a short, narrow hallway to the kitchen, and the back door to the house, beyond which lay the back yard.

I was immediately transported into a different realm. I was reminded of a childhood novel which had captivated me when I was seven, called *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett. I was standing on a long, narrow lawn, about fifteen feet deep and thirty feet long. I wandered about, inspecting it. A five-foot fence surrounded it, covered with blackberry bramble. Standing on tiptoe, all I could see beyond was a sea of backyard fences, leading up the slope on the right towards the backs of the houses on Spruce Street. Tall trees rose up in the distance against the sky, evergreens as well as deciduous, further enclosing this quiet haven from the outside world. In the right corner

of the yard was an iron structure, with two swings, side by side. Connecting the house to the right rear fence was a tall green-painted wall, rimed with green moss, about twenty feet high, with a single door which led to the side yard. I tried it, and it was locked, as it reportedly had been on the afternoon of Liza's disappearance. On the left side of the yard, the house abutted the fence which surrounded the property.

While I was strolling quietly around, inspecting the yard, Hugo and Agatha stood silently behind me, affected as I was by the charm of this retreat. I could tell by the images in their minds that this had also been their family home as children, and that they, too, had spent many hours of their childhood here. It was something I had not been told, something that was so much a part of them that no stray reverie had come to me from them previously on this matter.

I spent most of Monday and Tuesday at home going through the reports, although I didn't learn much. The basic facts were rather slim, and the results of the various investigations hadn't added much to them. At 4:00 P.M., Mrs. Huntoon had been whipping up the cake in the kitchen, just prior to putting it in the oven, while her daughter, Liza, had been playing in the back yard. At 4:30, just after popping the cake in the oven, she had gone out to check on her daughter, and the girl was gone. There was a side gate from the back yard which led to the front, but it was kept locked, to keep intruders out. Mrs. Huntoon had searched the house and grounds frantically, but the girl was gone. At 4:45 she called the police, who arrived about 5:10. A further search was made of the surrounding area, and neighbors were questioned, but nobody had seen the little girl.

The reports of the various detectives seemed to add nothing to the known facts. Various sightings were followed up on, but they led nowhere. She was just six, and would have begun the first grade the following month. The child had never left the house before, didn't attend preschool, and had no playmates. There were absolutely no leads, and none were ever developed. The little girl had simply vanished into thin air. Her picture was placed on cereal cartons and widely circulated, but, except for a couple false leads, netted nothing in the way of information. After a few months, the police dropped the case from the active files. The researches by the various detectives who were hired, one after the other, for varying periods of time, added nothing to the known facts. Nil, nada, niente, nothing. I reread the police report, then stowed the lot on the back of my desk. It was about 4:30 in the afternoon. I had a dinner date in the evening, and wanted to take a nap first, but I decided to try one more possibility.

Hugo was in when I called. He was in the middle of some real estate paperwork, but was willing to spare a few minutes for me.

"Thank God for computers," he said. "I'd hate to do all of this by hand. What's up, Lance?"

"I'm fresh out of leads," I told him. "What can you tell me about your sister's relatives and friends?"

"Not much," he said, "because there aren't any. My sister and I had no siblings, and both our parents were only children."

"So, if a stranger didn't make off with your niece," I said, "the only suspect left is good old Harry."



“Who died a year before the kidnapping.” I could hear the amused irony in his voice, as well as see it in his mind.

“Right,” I said.

“You think he traveled through time and abducted his own child?” asked Hugo.

“I’m willing to entertain any idea right now,” I said. “You said he had extra-marital relationships. Do you know who he might have been going around with just before he passed away?”

“It’s interesting you should ask. By sheer coincidence, I had him checked out once, a couple months before his death, just to satisfy my curiosity. If I had known he was going to die, I wouldn’t have bothered.”

“And?”

“At that time he had been having an affair with an unscrupulous woman by the name of Helen Winkler,” he said. “A management trainee in his company. Academically brilliant, with a great body, and no soul. I may still have the reports in my garage, but I’m not sure. I meant to throw them away, but I never got around to it. Want me to look?”

“Why not?” I said. “I’m really grasping at straws right now.”

“I can’t see how it can help you,” he said, but I’ll take a look this evening, when I get through with all this paperwork.”

“I’d appreciate it. Give me a call if you find them. If I’m not here, leave a message on my answering machine.”

“Will do. I’m not promising anything. I may have tossed them. I’m not really sure.”

“Okay,” I said. “Like I said, give me a call.”

My dinner date was with two females – Gertrude and Mitzi. Mitzi was a dog, but Gertrude certainly wasn’t. I had met her on a previous case, and we had become an item. She had invited me over for dinner, and she was one of the best cooks I had ever run across. She lived out on a little street named Hook, which was off of Diamond, out in the Mission. I took a long, luxurious nap, then a good long shower, shaved, put on some nice casual clothes, and went out to my rentacar, a new dark blue Mazda, bright and shining, still perched in my driveway. It didn’t have the speed and handling of my regular car, an Alfa Romeo, which was still in the garage being repaired, but the Mazda was pleasant to drive and stunning in appearance.

My two girlfriends greeted me effusively when I arrived. Mitzi managed to lick my face, despite the care I took, and Gertrude gave me a big kiss on top of it. It was almost like group sex, although I kept the comment to myself.

“Tough day at the office, dear?” asked Gertrude with a smile, as she helped me off with my coat. I handed her the bottle of Willikenzie Pinot noir I had brought with me.

“I stayed home today,” I told her. “I’m on a new case, and I had a lot of reading to do. How about you?”

“I had a lot of customers today,” she said. “I made nearly a hundred sandwiches today, believe it or not.”

“Wow,” I said. “Production-line gourmet cooking.”

“It looks like I’m going to have to hire an assistant,” Gertrude said.

“How could two people fit in that tiny shop of yours?” I asked, “and still have room for customers?”

“It’d be like one of those wooden block puzzles,” she said. “Come on in and help me put dinner on the table.”

Dinner turned out to be Poulet du Général Tao, avec légumes grises frites Yukon Gold.

“All wok and no play,” I said.

“Save your awful puns until after we eat,” she said with a fake frown.

The meal was, as were all the meals from her kitchen, incredibly delicious. It was beautifully complemented by the Pinot noir. Those who slavishly insist on Cabernet with chicken haven’t really lived.

“So what are you working on?” she asked after she had cleared off the dishes and we had relocated ourselves in her front room, bringing what remained of the Pinot noir with us. Mitzi had been given the leftovers, which she quickly devoured, leaving her plenty of time to beat us to our seats.

I described the case to Gertrude and she gave me a studious frown. “How in the world can you solve a case like that?” she asked.

“I haven’t got a clue,” I said. “Literally. As a matter of fact, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll check my answering machine and see if Hugo found the report on Agatha’s husband.” I retrieved my cell phone from my coat and entered my number, followed by the secret code that accesses my messages. After cycling through five ads, I finally heard the quiet tones of Hugo Winter’s voice.

“Hello, Lance? We’re in luck. I found the folder. Right on top of the box I thought it was in. I’ll be in tomorrow morning if you want to come over and get it. Give me a ring before you leave, okay?”

Gertrude’s eyes were focussed on mine as I closed the cell phone and placed it in my shirt pocket. Her pupils looked like two question marks.

“He’s got it,” I told her. “I’ll pick it up tomorrow morning.”

“You mean the report on that woman’s husband?”

“Right.”

“How can a dead man tell you about his missing daughter?”

“Maybe I’ll have to conduct a séance,” I told her.

We got up at seven the next morning, and I drove Gertrude to work before returning home. I waited until nine before calling Hugo, and he was in.

“How’s the weather?” he asked.

“Stunning,” I said. “How about over there?”

“Same,” he said. “You coming over now?”

“Just as fast as I can get there within the speed limit,” I told him.

The drive over was uneventful, most of the traffic going in the opposite direction. Hugo was waiting for me on his front porch as I walked up the steps of his fake Swiss Chalet. He invited me in with a nod of his head and I followed. As soon as we were inside, he gave me the folder containing the detective’s report on Harry Huntoon, Agatha’s husband.

“Mind if I ask you a few questions in advance?” I asked.

“Why don’t you read over the report first and call me up if you still have questions,” he said. “I’ll be in and out most of the day.”

I couldn't explain to him that I might discover a few leads from his mind that I might not think of asking him. "Humor me," I said.

"Sure," he said. "Come on in the kitchen. I'm brewing a fresh pot of coffee. Maybe you'd like a cup."

"Sounds good," I said. I don't ordinarily drink much coffee, although I don't dislike it, but it gave me a good excuse for trying to draw him out on the subject of his brother-in-law.

"Ask away," he said, as soon as we were sitting down at his kitchen table, looking out over the splendid view of Marin, with San Francisco slightly hidden by the curve of the peninsula.

"Just what kind of a guy *was* Harry Huntoon?" I asked. "That's something that won't be in the report. I just mean from your point of view."

"Harry could be very charming," Hugo said. "That was one of his assets, and he clinched a lot of business deals on the strength of it. But he was also a womanizer, and I am very protective of my sister. Those two aspects didn't mesh very well, as I'm sure you can understand. I remember at a party once, . . ."

While he was talking, I zeroed in on the pictures in his mind, and, from them, I assembled a rough portrait of Huntoon. I saw him in Hugo's mind's eye, a slightly heavy-set, yet muscular man, one who looked like he might once have been a sportsman, with a confident smile on his face, leaning on a piano, surrounded by pretty women, a cocktail in his hand, holding forth on one of his favorite subjects. I paid little attention to the flow of words from Hugo, concentrating instead on his visual images, his impressions of this man called Harry. I almost didn't notice when Hugo stopped talking, taking time out to sip his coffee. He gave me an odd look.

"You listening to me, Lance?" he said.

"Yes, yes, of course," I said reassuringly. "I was just trying to summon up a picture of how he must have looked and acted socially, while you were talking."

"I had that peculiar feeling again," Hugo said.

I saw the accusation in his mind, but I pretended otherwise. "What feeling is that?" I asked innocently.

"I think you know," he said with a slight smile.

"I wish I did," I said, realizing, of course, quite precisely what he meant.

"Forget it," he said. "What else would you like to know?"

"I think that'll do it for now," I said. "I just wanted a sort of mental picture of what Harry Huntoon was like, and I think I was able to draw that picture from what you were saying." As soon as I said that, I realized that I was inadvertently telling him exactly what he wanted me to say, because he gave me another little knowing smile. Hugo was tricky, I realized. I would have to be more on guard with him.

"Well," he said. "Look over the report, and don't hesitate to call me if you have any further questions."

"Right-oh," I said.

"More coffee?"

"No thanks. I'll go home and read the report."

The detective's report on Harry Huntoon had more in it than I expected, and I found myself reading it intently, taking quite a few notes – addresses and telephone numbers

mostly, but also the names of some of the other players in the mystery I was trying to unravel – Rudolph Erheim, the name of Harry’s doctor, who had been with Harry when he died of a sudden heart attack in Erheim’s office, Alfred Stackpole, the man whom Helen Winkler, Harry’s ex-girlfriend, had married after she left Harry, and George Banks, Harry’s best friend. There was much food for thought, and I took my time digesting it all. When I was through, I gave Hugo a call.

“This George Banks,” I asked him. “Did you ever meet him?”

“A few times,” he said. “What did you want to know?”

“What he looked like, how he acted,” I said. “There’s nothing in the report on his appearance or demeanor. Just his address and telephone number. “Was he involved in any of Harry’s business enterprises?”

“Harry had a lot of business enterprises,” said Hugo. “Harry was a positive genius at business. The only thing he lacked at the beginning was capital. That was why he married my sister.”

“I see,” I said. “And this George Banks. Was he one of Harry’s partners?”

“Only in a silent way,” said Hugo. “Never, to my knowledge, in any official capacity, but I’d bet my last dollar that he was in on a lot of Harry’s schemes.”

“Was Harry crooked in any way?” I asked.

“Not that you’d ever catch him at it,” said Hugo, “but I got the impression that behind his honest-looking exterior lurked a lot of shady deals. When you’re a man of the business world you develop a knack for suspecting such things.”

“I notice that he was the president of Consolidated Electronics,” I said. “Did it appear to be a bona-fide company?”

“Absolutely,” said Hugo. “I still own quite a lot of shares in it, and they’ve paid off handsomely over the years, even during the recent crash. No, if Harry had any crooked schemes, they had nothing to do with Consolidated. But Harry had a lot of irons in a lot of fires. Consolidated was simply a base to operate from, a base that gave him the appearance of legitimacy.”

“I also note,” I said, “that Harry broke up with this Helen Winkler, the soul-less blonde bombshell you were talking about, that she went on to marry Alfred Stackpole, whoever he was.”

“Alfred seems to have been a kind of mystery man,” said Hugo. “I never was able to discover his beginnings. He came out of nowhere, almost like a creation of Harry’s.”

“You mean he wasn’t real?”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that. Plenty of people attested to his existence. He just kept a very low profile, always flying under the radar, so to speak. He avoided the public, rather like Howard Hughes. There are no photos of him, he never went to parties, nobody ever saw him at restaurants. But there are a lot of people in the world like that.”

“I’ve never met any,” I said.

“Of course not,” said Hugo. “They’re the sort nobody meets.”

“And Helen Winkler married him. I notice that took place in Vegas, in one of those get-hitched-quick places.”

“Right. You saw that in the report.”

“He must have had some of Harry’s qualities, for her to go from Harry to him.”

“One would assume so.”

“And presumably she’s still married to him.”

"Who knows. It's been a lot of years since then. I don't even know if Helen Winkler is still around. She'd have to be in her forties by now, considering that she was in her early twenties when she was going with Harry."

"And Rudolph Erheim. Have you met him?"

"Certainly. He was at Harry's funeral. As a matter of fact, Harry died in his office. You must have seen that in the report."

"Right. What was this Rudolph Erheim like?"

"Definitely a shady type. High-priced. All his clients were rich. I just met him that one time, but I was able to sum him up pretty quickly."

"What kind of funeral was it?"

"What kind? Open casket, that sort of thing. Harry wasn't cremated."

"And how did Harry look?"

"Same as ever. I saw quite a bit of Harry over the years. If you're suggesting it wasn't Harry in that coffin, you're quite wrong. I took a good last look at him, remembering all the times I had seen him, all the bad feeling I had had about him. I wasn't entirely unhappy at his passing, you understand. I hope that doesn't sound too uncharitable."

"Not to me," I said. "At least I've had a lot of such thoughts in my life."

"Any other questions?" he asked.

"Not just now," I said, "but I reserve the right to think up a few more."

"No problem," he said. "Feel free."

After he had hung up, I realized that he had never told me what George Banks looked like, or what kind of person he was. I made a mental note to ask him again in our next conversation.

After I hung up on Hugo, I thought at length about the conversation we had had. I found myself getting more and more curious about Harry Huntoon. It was time for me to get out of my house and find some other people who had known him. I decided to see how out-of-date the address list was that I had culled from the detective's report on Harry. I decided not to try any of the telephone numbers. Not only were they out of date, but even if I were able to contact anyone from 1990 over the phone, I wouldn't have the advantage of seeing what was really on his or her mind.

All of the addresses I had were in the East Bay. It was still morning, so I had a lot of time left in the day. I decided to gird my loins and go out in search of dragons.

George Banks had lived in an apartment in a high rise overlooking Lake Merritt. I took the elevator up to the sixteenth floor and walked down the plushly carpeted hallway to suite 1620. I rang the bell several times before the door opened and an African American wearing a shirt and tie appeared.

"Yes?" he said.

"I'm looking for a George Banks," I said. "He was living here in 1989."

"That's a long time ago," the man said. "I've only been here for about a year now, and I'm afraid I've never heard of him. The tenant before me was named Prentiss. Sorry."

"Is there anyone on this floor who might have been around then?"

"I'm afraid I don't know anyone else in the building," he said. "People here are pretty private."

I thanked him and turned to go.

"Just a second," he said. "You might check with the woman in 1624. I don't know her name, but I had a brief conversation with her when I first moved in. I got the impression that she's lived here for quite a few years."

"Thanks," I told him.

"No problem," he said, shutting the door.

The woman in 1624 was just the sort of person I had been looking for. In a smaller, more intimate apartment complex, with thinner walls and less social exclusion, she would have been far happier. She looked to be the quintessential gossip and tale carrier. It was probably her misfortune that she allowed her desire for upward social mobility to exclude her from the friendlier and more egalitarian milieu of the lower middle class establishment, where her propensity for prying into the affairs of others would have thrived. She spotted me immediately as the kind of confidant she had been missing for so long.

"Mr. Freeman, did you say?" she said after I introduced myself and made my errand known. "My name is Flora Parchman. Won't you come in?"

I felt like the naive fly being welcomed into the web of the friendly spider, except that it was the tales I had to impart or listen to that were the flies in her trap. We were both playing the same game.

The inside of her large apartment looked much like the interior I had just glimpsed down the hall, walls in a sort of off-white, the furniture rather severe and utilitarian, the kind for which the term form-follows-function had been invented. Flora herself stood in stark contrast to her apartment, middle-aged, dour, dumpy, her hair in one of those old-timey buns, a Mother Hubbard in a svelte cupboard. She wore a print dress right out of Grandma Moses, and possessed a persona that was a strange mix of Ma Kettle and Mrs. Miniver. She affected a superior tone, and I detected the subtle attempts at a British stage accent stirred in with her original Midwestern twang and California cool. She was a perfect pastiche of contradiction.

"Won't you sit down?" she said to me as she walked towards the large kitchen beyond. "Tea or coffee?" she asked before disappearing from view, as if I had already assented to refreshment. "I'm afraid the coffee is only instant," she called to me. "I have so few guests nowadays."

"I'll take tea, if you don't mind," I called back to her. I tentatively perched myself on the large sofa, too roomy between front and back, forcing the unwilling sitter to choose between spinal support and leg freedom, my knees either placed at the front corner of the cushion with my legs allowed to dangle, or my buttocks squared against the back of the couch, where I could sit in comfort at the expense of my legs being straightened, sticking out above the floor like those of a small toddler. I decided on the dangle, and sat forward, my back six inches from the upholstery.

While I was struggling with the geometry of the sofa, my hostess had been preparing a small tray of goodies: a tiny plate of cookies, a dish of dried figs, and a small pot of tea, the string from the bag dangling from the top of the pot like my knees from the sofa. Two small cups of elegant porcelain, on small saucers, matching the design of the pot,

balanced precariously. She handled the tray with care, the jiggling of the pottery attesting to her age and lack of muscle tone, placing her modest attempt at hospitality between the two of us, on the large, wooden, black leather-upholstered coffee table which dominated the floor space in front of the sofa. Two magazines, a rather dated copy of *Esquire* and a newer one of *Harper's Bazaar*, lay at the two ends of the table, giving it a less barren look.

"George Banks, you said," she began, rearranging the items on the tray so that a cup sat on each side of it, the cookies and figs in between, and the pot of tea at the back. "That would have been . . ."

"At the most, about fifteen years ago," I offered. "I know he was living here in 1990."

"Oh, yes," she ruminated. I could see her thoughts buzzing around like bees gathering pollen, her mind a hive of confused activity. "I think he left fairly soon after that. I remember because I had just moved here in '88, and he had already been staying here for some time. I spoke with him only on a few occasions, although I often saw him coming and going with his friends and associates. He was always rather busy, and didn't have much time for small talk. I believe he worked for a large company."

"Among other things, he was a managing director at Consolidated Electronics," I said.

"Oh, yes. I seem to remember him saying something like that," she said. "I think he moved out the very year you mentioned – 1990. In the fall. Someone told me he moved to Pasadena."

The tea was finally ready, my hostess checking by lifting the top of the pot and peering inside, insuring its readiness by grasping the string and bobbing the bag up and down in the hot water. She poured it carefully into the two small cups, a rare elixir, more ritual than refreshment. I lifted my cup to my lips and took a tiny sip. To my astonishment, it was excellent. I had half expected something of the Lipton's variety, but it appeared to be something more elegant than that.

"Not bad," I said. "Could you tell me the brand?"

"It's a kind of English Breakfast Tea," she said. "Would you like to see the box?"

"Yes I would," I said.

She got up alertly and went quickly to the kitchen, returning with a package of Twinings. I had had Twinings any number of times, but never enjoyed it so much. Perhaps it had been my expectations of something lesser that had made it seem so good. At any rate, my admiration of it ingratiated me immensely with my hostess, who repaid me by dredging up as many reminiscences as she could of George Banks, most of them anecdotal at best, but nevertheless useful grist to my mill. I peered into the vortex of her brain, a teeming tempest of trivia. She gathered information on people like a packrat, storing away the tiniest tidbits of innuendo and hearsay. I gathered that George Banks was a womanizer and a drunk, barely civil when sober, loud and obnoxious when he was the least bit inebriated, that he slammed doors, banging on the elevator down button when he became impatient, and snubbing my hostess on every possible occasion. To her he was insufferable, but I had the vague intuition that he might also be charming when he wanted to be, a characteristic true also of his boss and buddy, Harry Huntoon.

I asked about Harry as well, but couldn't be sure if my description of him rang a bell. Some of the confused images that passed through her mind seemed like cartoon parodies

of him, but it was difficult to ascertain whether they represented him or some other denizen of George Banks' inner circle of cronies.

At last, my tea long gone, the pot long empty, the excellent cookies all eaten, and only a few of the figs remaining, I made my exit. Flora was devastated, and made me promise to return in the future, with an offer of more Twinings, plus whatever additional dirt she could dig up about George from the recesses of her over-retentive memory. I promised to return, determined not to do so unless I desperately needed information on somebody other than George. She had clearly scoured her unconscious for all references to him. I had plumbed her depths and she had plumbed my patience. I was plumb worn out.

When I got home, I made a call to a P.I. friend of mine in L.A. We had done each other a few favors now and then, and he owed me one. I was lucky and he was in.

"Hello, Lance. What's up?"

"Got a name I'd like you to check out for me. I'm just looking for surface details, like where he lives and works. The name is George Banks. Up until 1990 he was on the managerial staff of Consolidated Electric. A friend of the owner and C.E.O., Harry Huntoon, who died the same year. I've just talked to someone who informed me that he moved down to Pasadena then. Since he was a big wheel up here, I figured he might be something of the same down there. Could you be a pal and see if you could find out a few basic facts. I'd be very appreciative."

"Sure, Lance. I'm right between cases at the moment, so it wouldn't be much trouble. A couple days okay, or do you need this right away?"

"I really don't need it right away, but I wouldn't be unhappy if it were. I'm sort of at a standstill right now on the case."

"I'll do my best, Lance. Same phone number?"

"The same."

"I'll call you back tomorrow, at least let you know the progress or lack of it."

"Great. Thanks."

"Thank *you*. I'm the one who's in debt."

After ringing off, I thought about what I might while away my time on until I got his call back. There were still a couple names I had to check out. Rudolph Erheim for one. Helen Winkler for another.

"So why are you investigating this man Banks first?" Gertrude asked as we sat in her front room, Mitzi dozing at our feet, the dinner dishes waiting in her kitchen to be washed, a small amount of Lynch Bages left over from the bottle I had brought for dinner, some in the bottle and a little in our glasses.

"Girlfriends come and go. It's the friendships that last," I said. "If Harry Huntoon is still around, I'm more likely to find him through George Banks than Helen Winkler or Alfred Stackpole."

"But why do you think this Harry Huntoon is still alive?"

"He's the only known person to have a reason to steal his daughter."

"That's crazy. According to you, he's known to have died. People attended his funeral. They recognized him lying in his coffin. Even his wife did. You can't fool a man's wife. Or his personal physician."



"I have no other clue to go on," I said.

"I don't understand," she said.

"There's an old Burlesque Show joke," I said. "One of those skits that were put on between the girlie acts. Two guys are on the stage, and there's a prop that looks like a street lamp. One of the guys is on his hands and knees, searching for something, and the other guy asks him what he's looking for. The first guy says he lost a quarter, and the second guy asks where he lost it, and the first guy points some distance away and says 'over there.' The second guy asks why he isn't searching over there, and the first guy says 'because the light's better over here.' That's my reason. Because the light's better over here. I'm looking for Harry Huntoon because there isn't anyone else to look for."

"You're really strange, Lance. Maybe that's why I like you. But I still don't understand."

"Let me try explaining it another way. You play bridge, don't you?"

"A little," she said.

"Well, when there's only one possible setup that will allow you to win, only one possible lie of the cards under which you can make your contract, you assume that the lie is that particular way, and then you direct all your strategies towards that end."

"That's an interesting analogy," she said.

"It's more than an analogy," I said. "It's a method."

"The method to your madness," she said.

"Right," I said. "Now you understand."

"But I still don't see why someone else couldn't have done it," she said.

"Nobody else had a motive for stealing her," I said. "According to the girl's uncle, the man lived for his daughter."

"But lots of children get stolen nowadays," she said, "and the people who steal them always have *some* kind of motive. You don't have to invent someone coming back from the dead."

"Yes, but children have to be seen to be stolen. Liza never left the house or the back yard. I assume she got taken somewhere once in a while, but according to her uncle it was rare. No casual stranger would even know of her existence."

"She could have wandered off," Gertrude said.

"How?" I insisted, pouring myself a little more of the Lynch Bages, and pointing the bottle at her glass.

"Thanks," she said, letting me give her the last dregs.

"There were only two logical exits from the garden," I said. "One was through the back door of the house, which leads past the kitchen, where on the afternoon of the girl's disappearance the mother was baking her a birthday cake. The girl was not being held prisoner, so it's difficult to imagine why she'd sneak past her mother, especially with the allure of the aroma of the cake."

"And the other?" said Gertrude, reaching down to stroke Mitzi.

"The other exit was through the side gate," I said, "which was kept locked, and the only person besides the mother who possessed a key to that gate was the girl's father. No outsider could have whisked her away, except, perhaps, over the backyard fence, which is quite preposterous. Can you imagine dragging an unwilling child over God knows how many backyard fences just to get to the street, with all the neighbors looking on? The girl

trusted her father. One can imagine *him* sneaking through the gate and luring her away, knowing that she would obey him.”

“Couldn’t she have climbed over the gate?” asked Gertrude, just before swallowing the last of her wine.

“It’s more than a gate,” I told her. “It’s actually a solid door, set in the middle of a twenty-foot wall. I checked it myself. Harry Houdini couldn’t have gotten through it, but Harry Huntoon might have.

“But the small item that really tweaked my intuition,” I said, “was that it was the girl’s birthday. It might have been purely coincidental, but, if it were not, it points to a sentimental reason to suspect the father. If he hadn’t seen her for a year, he’d especially want to see her on her birthday.”

The last known address of Helen Winkler in the report by the detective investigating Harry Huntoon was an exclusive guest hotel in East Oakland. The clientele were mostly professional women, many of them graduates of Eastern schools, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, that sort of place. Many were also from U.C. Berkeley and Stanford. The hotel had been in business since 1890, nearly a century before Helen Winkler had roomed there. I sat in the office of the woman who ran the establishment, a Ms. Mary Throckmorton. She was a middle-aged spinster, a ramrod straight martinet who ran the hotel with an iron hand. Her thought patterns were as spartan as her appearance and demeanor, following well-defined channels. I doubted that she was capable of random thinking.

“Miss Winkler was asked to leave,” said Ms. Throckmorton. “I won’t go into details because I believe in the privacy of our guests. I only mention it because you will no doubt have read of a couple incidents that occurred here prior to her leaving.”

“Which was . . . ?” I prompted.

“In the summer of 1990,” she said. “Just prior to her marriage to a Mr. Alfred Stackpole.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t read of the incidents,” I said rather lamely, hoping Ms. Throckmorton would fill me in.

“I can’t go into details, but they involved her being caught with men in her room after visiting hours.”

“What was it that she obtained her degree in?” I asked.

“Economics, I believe,” said Ms. Throckmorton.

“From a local university?”

“Right here in Berkeley.”

“Do you have any forwarding address?”

“I have it right here. I hope I’m not overstepping the bounds of discretion in giving it to you.”

“As I explained, I’m investigating the disappearance of Elizabeth Huntoon, the daughter of a friend of Ms. Winkler, by whom Ms. Winkler was employed. I was hoping that Mrs. Stackpole, as I guess she is now called, might be able to help me. Mrs. Stackpole is not suspected in any kind of way.”

“Very well, then.” She removed a listing from the left-hand drawer of her desk, and flipped through the pages to the end. Then she took one of the hotel business cards from a small rack at the front of her desk and quickly copied a few lines onto the back of it.

“Here you are,” she said.

I glanced at what she had written. It was an address in Pasadena.

I thanked her and left. Ms. Throckmorton didn't seem as if she would be a fount of further information. I thought over what I had learned during my drive back. So Helen had married the elusive Alfred Stackpole, and just a few months before Harry Huntoon's heart attack. Pasadena again. Helen had been born there, and had returned there on her marriage, just prior to Harry's death, and George Banks had also gone there about the same time. Pasadena appeared to be a nexus in the case.

I caught a stand-by flight to L.A. the next morning. I had a last-minute reservation at the Hyatt, and took a taxi to the hotel from the airport. As soon as I had showered and shaved, I dressed and went down to the lobby to call another taxi.

1237 Mirador in Pasadena was just a twenty dollar cab ride from the hotel. I paid the driver off and told him not to wait. I didn't know whether George Banks would be in, but I decided to take my chances.

The day was slightly overcast, but it looked like it was going to be a scorcher. I walked up the steps to the house. It was set back a bit from the street, with a well manicured front yard, like all the others on the block.

I paused at the front door, rehearsing my story in my mind. I was a former friend of Alfred Stackpole's, and had been out of the country for the last fifteen years. I knew how exclusive Stackpole was, and how difficult it might be to contact him, so I had tried instead to contact Harry Huntoon, but had just learned of his untimely demise, so many years ago now. I had heard George Banks' name through Harry, so I had made an enquiry through a local friend, who had come up with Banks' address. I hoped that would do the trick. My story didn't have to stand up for long. Just long enough to get inside Bank's brain. I pushed the bell.

“Yes?” The woman who answered the door looked at me with shrewd eyes. At one time, she must have been a stunning beauty. Now she was in her forties, and the tough life she had lived showed on her face. Her mind was calm and assessing. She didn't seem to be the sort of person with whom I would choose to apply for a loan.

“I'm a former friend of Alfred Stackpole's,” I told her. “I've been out of the country for some years. I know that Mr. Banks used to be associated with him, and I wanted to try to get word to Alfred that I was in town and wanted to see him. I hoped that Mr. Banks might be able to do that.” I stood quietly under her scrutiny.

“Come in,” she said finally. I followed her into a dim hallway, the light of day not having yet penetrated this household.

“He just got up,” she told me. “You'll have to wait a few minutes. Take a seat.” A large front room was just to my right. I followed the wave of her hand.

After about twenty minutes, a large, florid man entered the room. I knew from the detective's report that Banks should be in his fifties, but he looked older than that. Hard work and harder play showed in his face. He held out his hand, and I rose to shake it.

“Friend of Alfred's?” he said, standing and looking down at me as I sat back down on the couch.

“Former,” I said.

“I guess you hadn't heard,” he said.

“Heard what?”

"That he was dead. Passed away three years ago. Heart attack."

I tried to look disappointed. "That's too bad," I said. "How'd Helen take it?"

He gave me a quick look, his eyes slightly narrowing. "You knew Helen?"

"It was through her I met him. Helen and I were in economics together."

"Friend of hers?"

"Classmate," I said. "She and I and a couple others used to study together. Alfred was the one who was a friend."

He seemed to buy my story. He sat down on a chair opposite the couch and ran a hand over his face.

"Sorry," he said. "I really tied one on last night. So what was it you wanted to see Alfred about?"

"I'm in on a scheme to make a bundle," I said. "Just the sort of scheme that might appeal to Alfred."

"What kind of scheme?"

"Securities," I said, cryptically. "A sure bet for someone with Alfred's proclivities."

"Yeah?" he said with more interest. "I might be of some use to you. As you probably know, Al and I were pretty tight."

"That's why I came to you."

"Want some coffee?"

"Sure."

"Come on in the kitchen," he said, rising and leading the way.

"So you knew Helen."

"Yeah," I said. "Helen was a lot of fun. She ever have any kids?"

"Just one," said George. "Then there was the adopted daughter, of course."

"Right," I said. "Elizabeth, wasn't it?"

"Betty," said George. "She's up in Berkeley, now, studying Economics herself. She and her mother never got along."

"And Helen's own daughter?"

George looked down at his coffee, then up again. "Never really made it," he said.

I looked askance.

"Autistic," he said. "Had to be institutionalized. It really broke Helen up."

I tried to appear sympathetic. For just a moment, George's mind had opened up, and I had looked inside. It was a snake pit.

"So tell me a little about this scheme," he said.

"Euros into dollars, dollars back into Euros," I said. "It's a sure thing. Just requires capital, which I don't have much of." I had spent some time over the phone with a friend in economics the night before leaving town concocting the elements of a swindle that would pass muster.

"Sounds interesting," George said. "Want some more coffee?"

After leaving George's place, I called a cab on my cell phone. I stood on a street corner and waited about twenty minutes before the taxi showed up. During that time, I summed up what I had learned. A daughter in Berkeley. That might be all I needed to know. I had promised George to meet him at his office the next day, a meeting I had no intention of going to.

Dr. Erheim, M.D. ret. lived in an exclusive villa in Carmel. It was one of those stucco and plaster affairs, a castle-like house surrounded by a high wall covered with scarlet bougainvillea vines, all in bloom. It hadn't been too difficult to locate him, since the law wasn't after him, and his shady past hadn't caught up with him. His shady past was, at least so far, purely a fiction of my intuition. My purpose in seeing him was to elicit some facts to substantiate that intuition, and tidy up some loose ends in the process.

I kept his house under surveillance for several days, checking out his schedule. The weather was fairly warm, almost balmy, and the upstairs windows were often open to the air, the white curtains fluttering in the gentle breeze. Only two people came and went, a grim-looking housekeeper in her sixties who looked like a stereotypical hausfrau out of pre-war Bavaria, with her hair done up in a bun and wearing a stout, practical uniform under which I assumed she wore lederhosen, and, of course, Dr. Erheim himself. Nobody else came or went. No girl friends, no bodyguards, no other staff.

Erheim appeared first, around seven thirty, bright and early for his morning run, wearing all the appropriate designer jogging attire. He did a slow mile out to the beach and back, a nice, mild workout for a man in his late sixties. His housekeeper showed up in her new silver-colored VW around eleven and left at two in the afternoon. I guess there wasn't that much to do. He didn't seem to use the lower part of the house at all. He spent all his time in the bedroom-study complex on the top floor. His housekeeper prepared a simple lunch for him and, from the evidence I was able to accrue through my binoculars and the open windows, took it up to him. The rest of the time she spent on keeping the place looking spiffy.

He pulled his Mercedes out of the garage at six P.M. and drove to town for dinner, returning home around nine. That seemed to be it. Erheim was by himself from two till six every afternoon. It was time for action. I was getting tired of living off sandwiches and Chinese takeout, and, even though the motel I was staying at had a soft bed, I was beginning to miss my own.

That evening I gave him a call from my cell phone at nine thirty, just after I saw him get home from dinner. I told him I had some information he might be interested in, refusing to be specific, hoping his curiosity would get the better of him. He agreed to see me the next day at one forty five in the afternoon. I had chosen that time because his housekeeper would still be in, and I figured he'd feel a little safer with her there, even if just to let me in.

I waited till the appropriate time, then checked out of the motel. I had brought my Colt Detective Special with me, an item I had acquired when I first started out in the detective business, but which, until now, I had never had any use for. Now I had one. I didn't know much about Erheim personally, but I figured that anyone who could murder someone else for profit had to be pretty arrogant, and probably wouldn't be likely to put up with my questions. On top of that, he might easily think I was some hotshot cop trying to nail him for his past crimes. He had lots of reasons to refuse to cooperate with any attempts I might make to get the truth out of him. I needed an edge, some way to get the upper hand with him. I needed to put him at a disadvantage. I also needed to convince him that I didn't represent the law. Pulling a gun on him would accomplish that. No self-respecting lawman would do such a thing. A warrant for arrest and the reading of rights would always accompany the appearance of a gun.

“Yes?” The housekeeper viewed me with suspicion.

“I’m here to see Dr. Erheim.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“I have an appointment.”

“Your name?”

“Keen,” I said.

“Just a moment.” The door closed in my face.

“The door opened again “Dr. Erheim will see you.”

I followed her in. She led me up a short flight of stairs to a study on the second level. I hadn’t seen Erheim up close, but I knew it was him, sitting in a swivel chair at a small desk. He was in slacks and a loose shirt, his thin, sandy hair not quite combed, tall lean frame comfortably slouched back, a confident expression on his face. He looked to be about sixty five, but he carried it well. The day was warm and the window was open. He waited a moment until the housekeeper had scurried away, shutting the door behind her.

“Mr. Keen?” he said, offering me a limp handshake. “Please sit down.” He motioned me to the only other chair in the room, peering at me over the top of his reading glasses, his blue eyes serene, unconcerned, the look of a man who had it made. His mind was calm, unruffled, like the surface of the sea when there’s no wind.

“Thank you,” I said, placing the small bag I was carrying on the side table.

“Keene,” he repeated. I was wondering. Is that like in Carolyn Keene, the author of the Nancy Drew books?” he asked.

“No, I said. “It’s like in ‘Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons.’”

“Afraid I don’t know him,” said Erheim.

“You could have,” I said. “He was an old radio detective. Lasted well up into the mid-fifties. You would have been about twenty five years old when the program folded.”

“How do you know about him? You don’t look that old.”

“I came across it in a book about the old radio days,” I told him. “Naturally, the name leaped out at me, being the same as my own.”

“So you’re a tracer of lost persons,” he said.

“Actually, yes,” I said. “I’m looking for one Elizabeth Huntoon, kidnapped when she was six years old, back in 1990.”

“The name doesn’t ring a bell,” he said.

“It should,” I said. “Her father was Harry Huntoon, an old buddy of yours.”

“Ah, yes. Harry. He passed away in my office, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. Only he got resurrected and started a new life down in Pasadena.”

Erheim’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t say anything. His mind was in a whirl, rejecting premises as fast as he could come up with them. In the distance, I could hear the hum of his housekeeper’s VW driving away.

“Looks like his untimely demise resurrected you as well,” I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I could see anxiety building up in him. He was alarmed to learn the extent of my information.

“Meaning you made out like a bandit,” I said. “How much did Harry pay you to bump off Alfred Stackpole?”

“I’m afraid you’re over-reaching yourself, Mr. Keen. “You said you had some information to give me.”

“That was just a ploy so I could get you to see me.”

"Then I'd like you to leave. He reached for the bell on his desk to summon the housekeeper, but his motion was arrested by the sudden appearance of my Colt Detective Special which I surreptitiously pulled from my pocket and pointed at him. I didn't really need to be in such a hurry, because his housekeeper had already left. I could see in his mind that he knew it as well. The bell was nothing but a bluff. It was almost amusing to watch him go through his predictable little act.

"You'll never dare to use that," he said. "The housekeeper will hear it."

"No she won't," I said. "We both heard her driving away a few minutes ago."

"I hope you know what you're doing with that," he said with increasing alarm, trying to keep his eyes off the revolver, struggling at the same time to maintain his composure. Wild fantasies of disarming me swirled giddily through his brain. He estimated the distance between me and him, considered what his chances might be of getting the gun away from me before I could shoot him.

"I *do* know," I told him, carefully keeping the weapon pointed straight at his face. "I spent quite a few practice sessions at the firing range back when I bought this gun, but I don't think they'll be necessary at this distance. On the other hand, I've never shot anyone at such close range before, so now's your big chance if you're thinking of taking it away from me." I kept my voice decisive but cheery. Audacious humor is much more effective than macho bluff. It's difficult for the other guy to know whether you're kidding or not when you've got a kidding tone in your voice.

It also helps to be a mind reader as well, because you know immediately the effect of your words. I saw the sudden indecision, the careful, wary thoughts going on behind his poker face, and I knew that I had him under control. Very soon I'd have him at my mercy. I transferred the pistol to my left hand, keeping my eyes glued to his face, reaching over blindly to the side table to fumble for the bag I had brought in with me. I tossed it to him.

"Open it," I told him. He reached into the bag.

"It's a roll of duct tape," he said. "I suppose you mean to tie me up with this."

"Close," I said, "although 'tie' isn't quite the right word. Turn your chair around please, so that your back is toward me. Good. Now get rid of the bag and unroll a length of the tape." While he was busy with this, I stuck the gun in my left pocket and pulled out a pair of thin rubber gloves from my right pocket. I took a moment to slip them on, watching him carefully, making sure he stayed occupied with his simple task.

I pulled the gun out again with my left hand, and pointed it at the back of his head. Then I reached over his shoulder with my right hand and took the tape from him. "Put your hands on the armrests," I told him. I stuck the end of the sticky tape on his right wrist, and wound it around the armrest, dropping the roll momentarily so that it hung from the tape, then reaching around to grab it again and complete the circuit. I repeated the process a couple times until his right arm was at least partially immobilized. Then I pushed the swivel chair away from the desk and rummaged through the right-hand desk drawer until I found a pair of scissors, keeping the gun pointed at him all the while, my eyes averted for only a moment. I reached down and unsnipped the roll of tape, allowing it to fall to the floor.

I rolled his chair closer to the window, bent down, and picked up the roll. Then I secured his left wrist to the left armrest, just enough to make sure he couldn't use it. Then I laid the gun on his desk. I unwrapped the roll at leisure, winding the tape around

his chest and the chair back. I spun the chair around and wrapped his ankles together. Then I took the remainder of the roll and did a better job on his arms. Finally I was through. I stood behind him, placing the end of the gun just behind his right ear, firmly enough so that he could feel the cold steel. He was really beginning to feel uncomfortable now. That was important, because it reduced his sense of control even more.

"What do you want?" he asked. He was starting to sound a little frayed around the edges.

"Just some answers to some questions." I kept my voice as casual as possible.

"What are you going to do with the answers?" He was beginning to sound a little sullen.

"Nothing. The events I'm going to ask you about are too long ago. This is just for my own, personal elucidation. I have no intention of using this information against you."

His mind still exuded suspicion, but the answer seemed to reduce his anxiety somewhat. "Fire away. Metaphorically, speaking," he added, trying out a little gallows humor, a strained bravado concealing the cowardice beneath.

"Let's start by talking about Alfred Stackpole."

"Poor Alfred," he said contemptuously, "he didn't see it coming. He was just a pawn."

"But he had one thing going for him, didn't he," I said.

"Yes. He was a dead ringer for Harry." Erheim was beginning to relax a little as he got into his subject. He was still concerned about his immediate safety, but he knew that he was in no danger of being arrested.

"Dead ringer," I said. "That's an apt phrase. How did he come to their attention?"

"It was at a bar," he said. "Harry and Helen were slumming one night at a jazz joint in West Oakland when they ran across him. They immediately saw the striking resemblance."

"What line of work was he in?"

"Who, Alfred?"

"Who else are we talking about?"

"He was some kind of mechanical engineer. Smart enough to handle the kind of impersonation Harry had in mind. No wife or family, no ties. He was practically an unknown man. Perfect for Harry's purposes."

"How did Harry sell him on it?"

"He told Alfred he needed a stand-in, someone to represent him at meetings he didn't want to attend, someone to sub for him when he wanted to be somewhere else. And he offered Alfred a lot of money, much more than he was making at the time. Poor Alfred. He trusted us implicitly. He had no idea what we were setting him up for."

"Did he really look that much like Harry?"

"Incredibly close. Just to make it perfect, we did a little plastic surgery, some dental work, a little speech training. We took our time. We really groomed him. Harry wasn't in any hurry." Erheim was warming to his topic. He probably hadn't had a chance to brag about his part in the deception before.

"How about his marriage to Helen? Was that real?"

"No way. Helen couldn't have been less interested, but she was in on it with Harry. She realized how important it was to set things up just right."



“So she seduced poor Alfred.”

“Poor Alfred didn’t mind. He had probably never had a woman like Helen before. She was really a hot number, you know.”

“And then they got married.”

“Sure. That was just for show, of course, so that Harry could just take over once Alfred was out of the way.”

“Why did Harry want to establish a new identity?”

“He wanted to be free of dull, drab Agatha.”

“You found her to be that?”

“She was all right, but not much to go home to. Not compared to Helen. Harry married Agatha for her money. Everyone knew that.”

“Why didn’t he just divorce her?”

“Because she owned him. He needed a new identity to pump a lot of money into. He couldn’t just earn it himself, because then she would have claimed more than half of it. But he could create a dummy corporation and siphon his money into it. If he had done that for himself, it would have been noticed, and perhaps investigated. With Alfred running it, nobody would consider checking the books. Nobody would ever know.”

“And you were on the board, I imagine.”

“Sure. Helen and I were both on the board.”

“What was the name of it?”

“G.E.I. It’s still going strong. I ought to know.”

I looked into his mind and saw a picture of stock certificates. It looked like quite a few.

“You ought to know because you’ve got a few thousand shares of it,” I said to him.

He jerked his head back towards me. “You some kind of mind reader?”

“Just good at looking at private reports,” I told him.

“Assuming you’re correct, what’s wrong with stock invested in the company of a friend?”

“It’s payment for your part in the demise of Alfred, AKA Harry. That’s what’s wrong with it.”

I allowed him a moment to ponder upon his sinful actions, but he was bursting to know how I had gotten my information.

“How did you get your hands on these private reports?” he blurted out, almost angrily.

“I’ve had you researched by the best men in the business,” I said. “I’m getting tired of this Q and A. Let’s jump to the chase - how did you do in poor old Alfred?”

Erheim shrugged his shoulders. “It was dead easy. An overdose of digitalis was all it took. Alfred had the same problem as Harry. A weak heart.”

“And then Harry just took over his identity.”

“Right. Alfred had already relocated in Southern California. So Harry just continued to maintain the same low profile that Alfred did. Harry was a genius at planning things.”

“And then Harry himself died from a heart attack, just three years ago.”

“I heard about that. Poetic Justice, I guess. Poor Harry. He was only 47. But he had known for years that he had a heart condition.”

“I understand that his second daughter had problems with autism.”

"Dolores. Yes. She had problems from the start. Some children are like that. Hard to predict. They sent her to special schools, but her condition just got worse. Helen was devastated."

"And Dolores is now in an institution?"

"Is she? I don't know. I haven't been in contact with Harry for a long time."

"Well," I said. "You seem to have answered all my questions."

"What are you going to do with the answers?"

"You asked that before. My response is the same. Nothing. There's nothing I can do. The case is too cold. It's too late to exhume Alfred's body. Or should I say Harry's first body. It gets confusing. Anyway, as I said, I can't prove a thing. Nothing of what you've said here is admissible evidence, since it's all hearsay, extracted under duress."

"So you're going to untie me?"

"Not yet. I'll give the cops a call when I'm far enough away. Although, if I had my druthers, I'd lock you in here and let you die of malnutrition."

"That would make you a murderer. You don't seem like the sort of person who could live with that."

"I don't know," I said. "I've never tried it before."

"How are the cops going to get in?" he suddenly blurted out, placed in the curious predicament of one who had been concerned up till now with keeping them out..

"I'll leave the front door open for them," I told him.

"What if some maniac wanders in while I'm waiting for the cops?"

"That might be an interesting predicament," I said with a chuckle. "It might be a proper payment for your sins. Where do you keep the key to this room?"

"I'll never tell," he said. I looked in his mind and saw the image of a pottery jar. It looked just like the one on his mantelpiece. I walked over and pulled a keyring out of the jar. He looked a trifle bewildered.

"How did you know where they were?" he asked.

"Just a good guess," I told him. "By the way, I'd advise you to say nothing of my visit to your friends in Pasadena. They wouldn't understand your loose tongue, and, even though you couldn't do them any harm at this late date, it might set their fears at rest by putting out a contract on you." I found a small, leftover scrap of duct tape and placed it over his mouth, just to make the haughty bastard suffer a little during his confinement. I hoped, for his sake, that he didn't suffer from nasal congestion.

I locked the door to his study behind me when I left. The lower floor was empty as I skipped down the stairs. I let myself out, making sure the front door was locked behind me. I had no intention of calling the cops. I wanted Erheim to sweat it out for a while.

The next morning, after a leisurely breakfast, I walked over to 24<sup>th</sup> Street and found a phone booth with a public telephone that was still working. I put in a call to Dr. Erheim, and, luckily for him, his housekeeper had just arrived. I told her about him being tied up and locked in his room. He was right about my not being the sort of person who could live with being a murderer, although in his case it was tempting to put it to the test.

Monday, bright and early, I was walking down Telegraph from where I had parked my car up on Dwight Way, en route to the Administration Building on the University of California campus. It was just after nine, and Sather Road was brimming with students. I went up the steps of the Ad Building two at a time. I was feeling good after my

successes of the preceding week, and I was especially looking forward to the reuniting of mother and daughter.

Tom LaRosa was in his office when I arrived, and he seemed glad to see me.

"Thanks for giving me some time at such short notice," I told him, as I sat in the visitor's chair.

"No problem," he said. "What can I do for you?"

I had met him while I was on the Huntsecker case, Tom being the godfather of Laura Huntsecker, the lost little girl I had returned to the arms of her bereaved parents.

"I need to see the class schedule for Betty Stackpole. She's an Econ major."

"Economics, eh? Why do you need her schedule?"

"Because I want to talk to her. I think she's the missing girl I'm looking for."

"Does she know she's missing?"

"No, I don't think so," I said. I went on to describe the case.

"Amazing," he said. "Have you reported all this to the authorities?"

"No," I said, "but I intend to. The problem is that I have no proof. My first job, however, is to find her, not bring her abductor to justice."

"Just a sec," he said. Let me fire up my computer."

Economics 201A was a graduate course which met in Dwinelle Hall, just a few steps from the Administration Building. It was due to break at ten fifty, in just ten minutes. I stood outside the classroom. I had no idea what Betty Stackpole looked like, so I had had Tom print off an improvised sign on an 8 ½ by 11 sheet of computer paper with her name in the largest type font that would fit. I held it above my head as the students exited, putting out a silent prayer for success.

One of the students, a brown-haired girl with glasses, looked at me peculiarly as she came out the door, started to walk off in the opposite direction, then changed her mind and turned and walked back reluctantly towards me.

"Betty Stackpole?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "What do you want?" Her mind-set was grim. She seemed to think I was going to try to sell her something she didn't want.

"Just to talk to you for a few minutes."

"That's all I have. I have to get to a class over in Wheeler auditorium."

"And after that?"

"After that I go for lunch."

"May I treat?"

She looked at me suspiciously. "Who're you supposed to be?"

"A friend of your mother's," I said.

"A friend of Helen's?"

"No," I said. "A friend of Agatha's."

"Who's Agatha?"

"Your real mother," I said. "Can we meet for lunch?"

"Okay," she said, looking at me with extreme suspicion. "Is this supposed to be for real?"

"Put off your questions until lunch, okay?"

"Okay. Where do we meet?"

"Larry Blake's okay with you?"

"Sure. When?"

"Your class is over at eleven fifty, right? How about twelve ten? I'll meet you at the bar."

"All right." She looked at me again with a peculiar expression on her face, then turned and walked off in the direction of Wheeler Hall.

"How do you know she's my real mother?" she asked.

"I *know*," I said. "But I can't prove it. At least not without some DNA tests."

"What *do* you know?" she asked.

"I don't think my telling you what I know would help right now," I said.

"What would?"

"Coming along with me for a visit to the house you spent your first six years in," I said.

She looked at me suspiciously, wondering whether I were some kind of nut, planning to lure her into a strange empty house where I could do something awful to her, or where I could hold her for ransom.

"I'd like to take you to meet your real mother," I said, "but I'd rather she didn't know."

"Why don't you want her to know?"

"Because I want you to be sure," I said.

"How can I be sure if you don't tell me anything?"

"I think you'll remember the house," I said. "I'm counting on that."

We sat in silence for a few minutes. The remains of our lunch had already been whisked away by a busboy, and our glasses were empty. She looked up at me appraisingly, wondering what to do.

"All right," she said finally. "I probably shouldn't do this, but if I walk away now, I'll wonder about it the rest of my life. How do you want to do this?"

"When's your last class of the day?" I asked. I didn't have to ask her, because I had her schedule in my pocket, but I didn't want to frighten her.

"I'm through with my classes right now," she said.

"How about now, then?"

"All right," she said in a small voice.

I pulled out the cell phone from my coat pocket and dialed Agatha's number. It rang twice, and then I heard Agatha's voice.

"I just wanted to make sure you were in," I said to Agatha. "Can you handle a couple visitors?" I waited for her reply. "No, I said, I'd like to bring an assistant of mine along with me. Her name is Betty. I'd like her to take a look at the house and the back yard. Betty's got an intuition about these things. She's had some experience with kidnapped children, and I'd like to get her feelings. Would that be okay?" Agatha asked me when I wanted to come over. "Right now," I told her. "It'll take us about twenty minutes to get there. No, we're right here in Berkeley. At Larry Blake's, as a matter of fact, and my car's nearby. Okay? Great. See you." After I hung up, I could see that Betty was relieved by what she had heard of my end of the phone call. I signalled to the waiter for our check.

I tuned in on Betty as we drove up Spruce Street, and when we turned onto Los Angeles I could see confused images welling up. She was already on the verge of recognizing familiar things. After I parked the car in front of the garage and we went through the gate and began walking up the path, she was starting to get fuzzy premonitions. The gate itself had started lost streams of consciousness, and the sight of the house, especially the wall between the house and the fence on the right, began tripping signals of a sort.

Agatha met us at the door, and I introduced Betty to her, again referring to her as my assistant. Betty was sociable but silent, taking covert glances at Agatha when she thought Agatha wasn't looking. I suggested we walk out to the garden. As we passed through the house, Betty was already beginning to experience vague memories.

"How long have you been assisting Lance, Betty?" Agatha asked as we stepped into the garden, but Betty wasn't paying attention. She was suddenly remembering things, whole things, entire memories. She looked around with alarm, at the fence, especially the swings. She walked around like a sleep walker waking up, old memories breaking through, overwhelming her.

"Yes, yes," she said in an odd excited voice. She turned and looked at me in the strangest way, then at Agatha. "You're my mother, aren't you?" she said. Agatha stared at her with wonder. "Liza? Is it really you, Liza?" She walked over to Betty and reached out to touch her face. Tears began welling up in Betty's eyes, and then she suddenly hugged Agatha, burying her face in the older woman's breast. "Mother! Mother!" she choked. I turned and walked back to the house, leaving the two of them in each other's arms.

Hugo stopped by to pick me up at my house the next day. He was in an exuberant mood. "You're remarkable, Lance," was the first thing he said when I got in his car. He was practically singing all the way across the bridge, not actually breaking out into song, but the tune was blasting away in his head, with Brubeck on piano and Desmond on alto sax playing *Look for the Silver Lining*. He was the happiest I had seen him during our brief acquaintance.

"The two of them have been talking non-stop since you brought them together yesterday afternoon," he said. "Liza stayed over, of course, and they continued the next morning at breakfast. Liza's been asking Agatha a zillion questions about her early life, before she was kidnapped by her father. But now they want some answers."

"I'm not sure they'll like them," I said.

"Nevertheless, they need to know them," said Hugo. "Just stick to the bare essentials, and let them fill in the details. That's what you did in the first place, wasn't it? I've got to hand it to you, Lance. You handled everything in the very best possible way, like a fireman using a minimum of water, taking care to put out the fire, but without doing a lot of collateral damage. You brought them together with a minimum of explanation, and let them fill in the gaps. It was truly impressive, Lance."

I nodded in appreciation of his accolades. I was also pretty pleased with myself.

"But now it's time for some real explanations, Lance. They've got to know what happened."

"I've got to be careful," I said. "Both of them loved Harry, in different ways of course, and it's going to be difficult to keep from telling them what a rat he was."

"You're right," said Hugo. "I wonder what's the best way to do it. Maybe keep Helen out of it as much as possible."

"I don't know if I can do that," I said. "Helen was definitely a central character."

"Maybe we can make her out to be the brains of the conspiracy," Hugo said, "the evil genius that seduced Harry into her master plan, with the mad doctor Erheim at her side. Liza doesn't like her stepmother very much anyway, does she?"

"That's a possible treatment," I said. "We'll have to see how it plays out."

Somehow I got through it all. I just stuck to the basic plot and didn't fill in too many of the blanks. I told them how I got all the facts from Dr. Erheim, and they listened to me with rapt attention as I described how I tied him up and got him to give me all the gory details on how they set up poor Alfred Stackpole and then did him in. Agatha was somewhat perturbed to learn about her ex-husband living it up just five hundred miles to the south while she was mourning his death, but she was too transported by the return of her long-lost daughter to be bothered as much as Hugo and I had feared. I had to argue with Hugo to keep him from doubling and tripling my fees, but I won out in the end. A contract was a contract, I insisted, and, in the end, he had no recourse but to accept it.

A few weeks later, I had a meeting with an assistant D.A. in Berkeley. I explained all the facts in the case as well as I could, making a point of all the unproven allegations that were left hanging. He insisted he would still try to carry out some kind of investigation anyway. It bothered him that a couple slimeballs like Helen and Dr. Erheim would be allowed to get away with what they had done. I didn't argue with him. I gave him my number and told him I'd cooperate as much as he wanted. He was a little perturbed over the treatment I'd given Dr. Erheim, but he clearly didn't want to give me any trouble over it. Erheim deserved it, I could see in his mind. I felt the same way myself.

It must have been a few months later, and I was invited to dinner again with Hugo. I thought of the first time I had been to visit him, as I skirted the flanks of Tamalpais en route to his place. It seemed so long ago to me, now, remembering my car breaking down, and the strange girl I had encountered in the woods.

It was later, after dinner, as Hugo and his wife and I were sitting around, talking about Hugo's sister Agatha and her new-found daughter Liza, that something came up that definitely caught my attention.

"You remember Liza's half-sister, Dolores," said Hugo.

"Oh, yes," I said. "The autistic one."

"You mentioned that she had been institutionalized," said Hugo.

"Right," I said.

"I've been checking into it, with Liza's help," said Hugo, "and we've managed to locate that institution."

"Really," I said. "Where is it?"

"It's the Institute of Behavior and Learning Disorders, the one you paid an inadvertent visit to on your first trip here."

"You don't mean to say . . .," I began, and then I saw the answer in Hugo's mind.

"Right," he said. "It may have been Dolores herself that you ran into."

"My God," I said. "That's truly amazing."

"You just don't know how psychic you really are," said Hugo.

“‘Synchronicitous’ might be a better word,” I said.  
“Maybe even ‘psychic synchronicity,’” said Hugo.

### 3. The Case of the Missing Schoolboy

A few months after my success with the Elizabeth Huntoon case, I received a phone call from Agatha Huntoon.

"I hope I'm not bothering you Lance," she said, "but something's come up that seems right down your alley."

"You're not bothering me at all," I told her. "I was just relaxing, listening to some music. What's up?"

"It has to do with a friend of mine, Rosalia Delgado, or, rather, it has to do with her son, Felix. He traveled with a group of friends to a music festival in Slovenia this last August, and everything seemed to go according to plan, including an uneventful flight home, but, on his return here at the Oakland Airport, he appears to have vanished. His mother contacted the police, but they haven't managed to discover anything of the boy's whereabouts. None of his friends seem to know anything about what's happened to him, and his mother's frantic. She was talking to me at bridge about it last night, because I've been telling everyone about the fantastic job you did in finding my Liza, and I suggested she get in touch with you. She asked me if I would do her a favor and call you myself. So that's what I'm doing."

"How did the boy plan on getting home from the airport?" I asked her.

"His mother found out that he shared a cab with some friends, and that he was dropped off in Oakland, at the Nineteenth Avenue Bart Station. He told them that he was going to get home by public transportation from there. He wasn't carrying much luggage, so nobody thought much about it."

"How long has he been missing, now?" I asked.

"About three weeks," she said. "As I said, poor Rosalia's been frantic."

"I'm not doing anything particular right now," I said. "Why don't you tell her to drop by my office?"

"I hate to impose on you, Lance, but I was wondering if you could drop in on her, instead. She lives up on Spruce Street, just a couple blocks above me."

"Okay," I said. "When would be good?"

"How about tomorrow?" she said. "Ever since the death of her husband, she's become a recluse and doesn't go out much. I know she's going to be at home."

"Tomorrow would be fine," I said. "What time would be best?"

"Let me call her," said Agatha. "I'm sure she's in, and I'll call you right back."

"Okay," I told her. "I'll be waiting for your call."

"Thanks so much, Lance."

"No problem, Agatha."

So the next day, shortly after lunch, I found myself driving across the Bay Bridge again. The weather was nice, and the traffic was light. After getting onto the East Bay freeway, I took the University Avenue turnoff and drove the length of University to Fulton. After a few blocks on Fulton, I made a right onto Rose Street and then a left onto Spruce.

I always enjoyed the part of town north of the Berkeley campus. It's still a sleepy enclave of older homes with a lot of trees. The student dormitories are all down on the



south side of the University, and the student population hasn't encroached much on this older residential district.

I had no problem finding the address which Agatha had given me, and I parked across the street from it, on a long stretch of curb with no driveways. Mrs. Delgado lived in a large old, shingled Victorian with a small garden in front, which had the look of a professional gardener's touch. I walked down the steep driveway to the house. The front door was on the left of the house, inside a covered, open porch. I rang the bell and the door opened almost immediately. Mrs. Delgado was expecting me.

"Mr. Freeman? Please come in. I'm Rosalia Delgado."

She led me into a large living room in the back of the house, with a large picture window with a magnificent view of North Berkeley, with San Francisco in the distance. A Steinway baby grand sat in a corner of the room. I sat on the sofa and admired the view as Mrs. Delgado sat down opposite me.

"May I offer you some refreshment?" she asked.

"No, thanks," I told her. "I just had lunch."

"Well," she said, "then I will just get to the point. It has to do, as Mrs. Huntoon has told you, with my son Felix. He has been missing now, for three weeks, every since he and his friends got back from a music festival in Ljubljana." As she spoke, I could hear the underlying latin accent in her voice. I guessed she was Mexican, as was suggested by her name, which could also, of course, have indicated any number of Latin American origins, since her name was common throughout both Central and South America.

"Agatha explained about his being missing," I said. "Do you know of anything that may have happened during his trip that could explain it?"

"No," she said, wagging her head sadly. "He sent a couple postcards which I didn't get until after he was supposed to come back, and he just wrote about the good times he was having there."

"And how were things here at home," I asked, "before he went on his trip?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," she said. "There was no quarreling or anything. He just seemed happy to be going to Europe for this festival. It was the first time he had been there, and he was very excited."

"What kind of a boy is Felix?" I asked.

"Oh, just a normal boy, I guess," she said with a wistful look. "No, he was not really a normal boy. Actually he is a very talented boy. He is so good at so many things."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Oh, for example he is very good at music," she said. "He has won all kinds of awards, every since he was a little boy. He is also very good at Science and Mathematics. After he graduates from high school this year, he is going to go the the University and study Engineering. Just like his father, he is very talented."

"Mr. Delgado is dead?" I asked.

"Yes, he died when Felix was only thirteen. That was four years ago. It is not an easy thing, raising a son all by myself."

"What did your husband do?"

"He was also an engineer, like Felix is going to become." He voice took on a dreamy, rhapsodic look. I could tell by her thoughts that she had great expectations for her son.

"Mrs. Huntoon said that he had gone to a music festival," I said. "Were his friends also interested in music?"

"Yes," she said. "I believe so. He does not bring his friends here very often, so I must go by what he has told me. But yes, I think that it is so. They were all of them very much interested in music. I think that this music festival was all folk music."

As she was talking, I could see that she vaguely disapproved of his friends, but no explicit thoughts appeared on the surface of her mind.

"What do you think of his friends?" I asked.

"Oh, they are all very good children, very polite, good parents, I think. Felix does not bring them here very often, like I said, but when they have called here and asked for Felix they are always very nice, very respectful. I can tell they have all had a good upbringing." Behind her words, I sensed unexpressed reservations.

"I get the impression that your son has never been in any kind of trouble."

"Oh, never. My Felix is a very good boy. Never any trouble. Everybody likes him."

"Does he go out a lot?"

"No, not too much. He plays in some kind of a jazz group. They meet in some coffee house in Oakland. I don't know much about it." Her mind had taken on a disapproving tone again. I got the impression she didn't like jazz music.

"Is that the kind of music Felix is interested in? Jazz?"

"No, no. Felix is interested in every kind of music. Mostly classical, I think. He has been taking piano lessons ever since he is nine years old. He has a lot of talent. He plays like an angel. You should hear him. She pointed to the Steinway. That was his father's piano. Now Felix is the only one who plays it." Her thoughts took on a wistful note.

"How did Felix and his father get along?"

"Oh, no problem. No problem. Of course, his father had to work very hard. He had a very difficult job. He was extremely good at what he did, and he worked very long hours."

"What kind of engineer was he?"

"He was a mechanical engineer. He worked on airplane engines. Mostly theoretical design, I think. He didn't work in a factory or anything, just a big office. I visited him once in a while, where he worked, in Oakland. He had these very complicated drawings on a big desk, like blueprints or something. I couldn't understand them, of course." I could tell by her thoughts as well as her words that she really admired her husband.

"So your husband didn't have much time for Felix?"

"Oh, he saw him every night, but he didn't have time to do anything with Felix because he was always so busy. But there wasn't any problems between him and Felix. They always got along fine. Felix was never a problem. He was always a good boy."

There was, however, somehow a problem. I could tell that while she was talking. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was some kind of underlying disagreement between the mother and her son, a disagreement she didn't want to talk about. I realized that if I were going to understand the situation, I was going to have to learn more about her son, and it didn't look as if I were going to learn it by simply asking her questions.

"Would you mind if I looked at your son's room?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know if Felix would like that," she said. "He has always been a very private kind of boy. I never go in his room, not even to clean it."

That suggested she did her own housecleaning.

“You don’t have a house cleaner?” I asked.

“I am a housewife, Mr. Freeman,” she said. “Why do I need a house cleaner? I am not some lazy woman who sits around. I come from a good family myself, but I never want other people cleaning my own house for me. For what? So I can sit and watch television? Or spend all my time like so many women at my bridge club, going to spas and hairdressers? I like to look nice, but my husband always worked hard at the office. I have always worked hard at home, doing my part.”

I nodded politely. “I don’t mean to intrude upon your son’s privacy, Mrs. Delgado, but it would be very helpful to me if I could get some sense of him as a person. That was why I asked to see his room.”

“Well, you *are* a professional investigator,” she said grudgingly. “I guess it wouldn’t do any harm. I guess that you are willing to try to find my son, then?”

“I’d like to defer that decision for the moment, Mrs. Delgado. First I’d like to gather a little more information. You must understand that I don’t have a staff working for me, and I have to make sure that this case doesn’t require more investigative power than I can bring to it.”

“Very well,” she said. “Why don’t you follow me, then, and I’ll take you up to Felix’s room.” She rose and waited for me to get up before she turned and led the way into the front hallway and up the stairs to the second floor of the house.

Felix’s room was a little world of its own. It wasn’t the usual teenager’s room, with pictures of rock stars, and clothing strewn all over. For one thing, it was extremely neat and uncluttered. Besides the bed, which was made, there was a large desk with a computer and keyboard, a small bookcase with books, and a rack of CDs standing on the floor next to a pair of loudspeakers. A music keyboard stood on a small stand. A large poster of Venezuela was on the wall between two windows.

“Your family comes from Venezuela?” I asked.

“No, no. That is just Felix. I come from Sonora, and his father is from Mexico City. Felix has many interests.”

“This room is abnormally clean for a teenager,” I said.

“Again,” she said, “that is just Felix. He cleans it himself, he makes his own bed, he keeps it tidy. This room is his world. I almost never come in here. I do not wish to intrude upon his privacy.”

“I’ll try to keep my intrusion to a minimum,” I said. “Why don’t you give me a few minutes here by myself?”

“I would appreciate very much if you didn’t poke through his drawers, go through his things,” she told me. “Felix is a very private person.”

“You do want him back, however,” I said.

“Of course. You look at what is necessary for that,” she said. “I will go down to the kitchen. I am baking some bread, and I should check on it. I will come back up in a little while in case you might have some more questions.”

I listened to her departing footsteps as I glanced at the titles on his CD rack. The classical music was at the top. I looked at the names of the composers. Carlos Chavez, Revueltas, Halffter, Ricardo Castro. All Mexican. These were followed by more well known composers – Bach, Rachmanninoff, Stravinsky. Below the classical was some

jazz. Brubeck, Hancock, Ellington, Coltrane. At the bottom was some contemporary rock music.

A small bookcase stood to my right. Mostly fiction, arranged by author. Camus, Dostoyevsky, Hesse, Kafka, Marquez, Murakami, Rilke. Not the sort of books one would expect a seventeen-year-old to be reading. At the end was The Oxford Dictionary of Music, The World Almanac, Roget's Thesaurus, The Chicago Manual of Style, a small row of language textbooks – French, Spanish. Nothing on science.

I walked over to his desk and sat down, looking around, trying to see his slant on the world, imagining what his thoughts might be as he sat there. A pair of earphones lay on the desk, plugged into a tape player which stood just behind the PC monitor, and a collection of audio tapes stood in ordered rows in a bookcase to the left. They were neatly labeled, with cryptic titles. I took a tape at random and inserted it into the player. I put on the earphones, and pressed the ON button, then pressed START. I adjusted the sound as the music began to play. It was keyboard music. It was basically classical music, but it was also jazz, maybe a little bit folk music. I guessed that it was composed by Felix. It was very, very good, although just a little amateurish here and there. There was no doubt about it, however. As his mother had said, Felix had talent.

After a few minutes, I regretfully stopped the music and inserted another tape, this time from another place in the row of what were clearly personal tapes. I began playing it, and was again transported by the music. It was different from the first tape, this time a quiet, reflective, romantic piece, something to be played when you were alone, something you played when you wanted to enjoy that aloneness.

This time I let the tape play to the end of the first selection. Then I stopped it and placed it back in the rack. I had heard enough to be convinced that Felix had real ability at composition. I glanced around the desk, but I saw nothing that told me anything. I pulled open the desk drawer and poked around. Mrs. Delgado would not like it. At the back of the drawer I find an application form from Juillard. It appeared to be several years old. I put it back, and closed the drawer. I remembered that his mother had mentioned that he would be studying engineering. I wondered what he thought about that.

I had an idea. I found the ON button on the right side of his computer and listened to the whirl of the fan starting up. After a few seconds, the monitor lit up and I was looking at the background screen – a view of Chichen Itza. The usual computer icons were neatly arranged on the left of the screen. One of them was the familiar blue C which identified the Internet Explorer. I moved the mouse arrow to it and pressed. Almost immediately the Google search window filled the screen. I keyed in the name 'san francisco conservatory of music' in lower case and hit the enter key on the keyboard. The website for the conservatory sprang into view. I clicked on 'prospective students,' then 'degrees.' I learned that the bachelor of music was offered in composition. Under 'application information' I saw that three years of English, as well as three years of a foreign language were required, as well as a satisfactory academic record. There was a line which read 'All applicants must perform an audition for admission to the conservatory.' A number of screens later I found the information I really wanted. I got off Google and turned the machine off. The screen put up some messages about files being saved, then went dim. Just at that moment, Mrs. Delgado walked into the room.

“That is Felix’s own private computer,” she said to me sternly. “You promised me you would not search through his personal things. Felix would not like that.”

“I was only looking something up on the internet,” I told her. “I haven’t been reading his files. For one thing, I don’t know his secret password.” I hoped she wouldn’t understand that only his email files were password protected. It was an easy way to deflect her concerns.

“I have often heard of the internet,” she said, “but I have never learned about computers. Felix has often tried to get me to learn, but I have no facility for these things. My friends at the bridge club are always talking about the internet, and all the things you can do on it. I guess one of these days I will have to learn how to use it. What was it you were trying to find out?”

“Why don’t we go back downstairs,” I told her. “I’ll explain then. I’d like to talk to you some more about Felix, and I’m through here.”

“So,” she said once we were settled again in the living room. “What is it you wanted to talk about?”

“You mentioned that Felix was good at Science and Mathematics,” I began. “Wasn’t he also good at English and foreign languages, and maybe history as well?”

“Yes, yes. He is a very talented boy. He is good at nearly everything. Why do you ask?”

“Was it his wish to study engineering in college?” I asked.

She looked at me as if I were intruding on something private and beyond question, something settled long ago. There was anger in her mind.

“Of course,” she said. “It was also his father’s wish, and mine.”

“Is there any particular reason?”

“Any particular *reason*?” she echoed, not quite understanding me. “Of course there is a *reason*. There are a lot of reasons. One is that it is the best thing he could possibly study. He would always be assured of a good job, no matter how the economy was doing. He would be able to continue to have a good life, enjoy his music, travel if he wished.”

“In other words, it was a practical decision, rather than a decision of his heart,” I said.

“Practical? Yes, yes, it is practical. Why should it not be practical?”

“Did some of this decision come from the fact that his father was an engineer?”

“I guess. Surely that is so. He has his father’s genes. His father was an excellent engineer. There is no reason that Felix would not also be an excellent engineer. He is able to study hard, he has the talent which is necessary. Why should he *not* become an engineer?”

“Maybe just because it *is* practical,” I said. “*Too* practical.”

“*Too* practical? How is something *too* practical? Is it not practical to have bread on the table, money in the bank, a job one can depend on?”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s important to have all these things. It’s also important to work at something that one loves. Does he love science? Would he love engineering?”

“Love?” she said scornfully. “What is this *love* you talk about? A job is to earn money, to make a life for oneself. Some day Felix will want to marry, to raise a family. To do these things you must have a job. A good one, so you don’t have to live on

welfare, so you don't have to live in a ghetto and watch your children turn into drug addicts."

"That's all true," I said. "I can't disagree with you, and for most people what you say is absolutely correct. But Felix is not most people, is he? Unlike most people, he has a *special* talent."

"You are talking about his music," she said. It was not a question.

"Yes," I said. "I'm talking about his music."

There was a long silence. I sat there, tuning in on her mind. Inside her head it was a raging storm. She was torn between concern for finding her son and anger towards me. She was thinking of asking me to leave. I waited until the storm abated a little, then I asked,

"Mrs. Delgado, do you love your son?"

"Love my son? Of course I love my son. What kind of mother do you think I am?"

"Do you want him to be happy?"

"Yes, yes, of course I want him to be happy. Are you saying that he cannot be happy unless he devotes his life to music?"

"I'm not saying it. You're saying it. He's saying it, with everything I could see of him in that room of his, with the tape recordings I listened to of his compositions, his wonderful, beautiful music. Felix is not only talented. He's exceptional. He could become a world-class composer, to be played by all the major symphony orchestras in the world. Do you realize that? Do you realize how much more proud you could be of him than if he just became an ordinary engineer?"

There was another long silence. This time it was not a storm that was raging inside her. It was a sea of sorrow, washing over the rocks of regret. Regret for all the plans that she had made, all the expectations she had ever had of her son, all the many thoughts at so many times about him becoming like his father, becoming a famous engineer. She finally found her voice again.

"So you think he is really this good at music?"

"He is better than good," I said.

"So what do you want me to do?"

"I think you know. To enroll in a good music school. To learn to be the first-class composer he is meant to be."

"And you think he could never be happy as an engineer?"

"No. Not really. Even if he were able to give up his dream of dedicating his life to music, it would never be enough for him to just dabble at it, never enough just to play at it, join groups here and there for jam sessions, play for his own entertainment or the entertainment of others. It would gnaw at his heart. It would become a stone in his being that he would take to his grave."

"Do you think that is why he has not come home?"

"I'm sure of it."

"So what do you think I should do?"

"Let me go out and find him. I don't think it would be difficult. But when I bring him back here I want you to make a promise to me."

"What is that?"

“Make him an offer. Allow him to apply at a good school of music, a school that can teach him what he needs to learn. If they will accept him, and if he can be successful in his studies with them, allow him to go on to get his bachelor in music. If, on the other hand, they decide that he will never be anything but a talented amateur, then he must agree to study something that will give him a practical job, engineering for example.”

“Do you think he would accept that proposition?”

“Yes. He knows that he’s good. He would be willing to take the chance. And if he’s the kind of boy you tell me he is, and he cannot succeed in music, he’ll go on to become that engineer you always dreamed he would be. I guarantee it.”

“You are that sure of him.”

“I’m that sure.”

“What kind of music school should he go to? He can’t just go to any school.”

“I would recommend the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. It’s right here in the bay area. It’s already a world-class school, maybe not quite with the prestige of Juillard, but possibly almost as good. And he could continue to live at home.”

“How much does it cost?”

“Probably not much more, and maybe even less than U.C. Berkeley, and definitely less than Stanford,” I told her. “The tuition at the San Francisco Conservatory is thirteen thousand dollars a semester.”

“Thirteen thousand dollars!” she exclaimed.

“That was what I was looking up on the internet,” I told her. “You must already have priced the cost of a university education. A hundred thousand dollars altogether is not so much for a first-class education at a four-year college. And I think you can afford it.”

“I guess I could,” she said at long last. “Are you willing now to go out and find my son and bring him home?”

“I could find him. I’m quite sure of that, but I couldn’t bring him home unless he wanted it. I won’t try to find him, however, unless you agree to make him the proposition I outlined for you.”

“You mean give him a chance to enroll in this conservatory?”

“Yes, and if he fails to be accepted, or if he fails to make it in his studies there, he must agree to go into engineering. That must be the offer.”

“You think he will accept that?”

“Somehow, I’m sure of it, and when I find him, I’ll let him know that you are offering that. I have no doubt whatsoever that he’ll take you up on it.”

I could see by the thought processes that were going on in Mrs. Delgado’s mind that she also had no doubt about it.

“Very well,” she said. “Will you go out and find him, now?”

“Yes,” I said. “First I must find out the names of his friends. The ones he was on the music trip with. The ones who said they dropped him off at the Bart station.”

“I can give you those. I talked with some of his friends, and they gave me their phone numbers.”

“Let me have their numbers and I’ll call them right away.”

Louise Lassiter was one of the names Mrs. Delgado gave me, and when I called her, she was at home. She agreed to see me right away. She was only a twenty minute drive away, in a small apartment near Lake Merritt. The traffic was light, and, after arriving at

her address, it took me ten minutes to find a parking place and walk to her apartment complex. It took only an additional ten minutes to tell her about Mrs. Delgado's offer and to convince Louise that it was genuine. She agreed to call Felix right away and tell him about the offer.

Two hours later, I sat with the reunited mother and son. I had picked Felix up at the rooming house in West Oakland where he had been staying and driven him back to his mother's house. On the way, he had told me how he had been making it, working as a part-time cook in a hamburger joint and waiting on tables in a restaurant. I had had to do some talking to convince him that his mother's offer was for real. I stayed with the two of them to make sure the conversation went the way I wanted it to, and I didn't leave until Mrs. Delgado had formally made the offer to her son and he had accepted it. When his mother was out of the room for a moment, I gave him my card and insisted that he give me a call in case anything went wrong. I also told him to invite me to his next public performance, wherever it was. It didn't matter what kind of music he would be playing. His was one career I didn't want to miss out on.