

# Psych Out

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## Chapter 1

Just south of downtown San Francisco, below the tangle of freeways that carve the sky into twisted triangles, in the more humble underbelly of the city, on the corner of Hicks Street and Industrial Alley, a small but determined little hotel stands above the squalor of the surrounding small factories, metal shops, garages, and sheds. Three floors of apartments, above a ground floor with restaurant and bar, make it at least a story above the buildings in its immediate vicinity. Over the doorway, a large, vertical neon sign, which has not worked for 24 years, proclaims it in large block letters to be the "Good Times Hotel."

Originally, it had been the Hoover Hotel, but since the name "Hoover" had been repellent to the politics of the owner at the time of the change, who, since he was of French descent, had renamed it "L'hôtel du Bon Temps," which means "The Good Weather Hotel." A later owner, inadequately schooled in French, had altered it to "The Good Times Hotel." The weather, although temperate, was not its major drawing card, so the idea of having a good time was much more attractive. Besides, the denizens of the bar and restaurant below had no greater knowledge of French, and accepted the altered name, although a few had grudgingly favored the foreign sound of the old one. At any rate, these changes had occurred during the first two decades of the hotel's existence, and all memory of them had been forgotten. The name changes had also predated the erection of the neon sign, which, for better or worse, officially proclaimed it forever to be the "Good Times Hotel," at least until the next act of God or the ultimate descent of a wrecking ball.

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Lars Svensen sat back in his chair and looked out at the bleak cityscape of cement and glass that stared blindly back at him from every direction. His face reflected the craggy concrete of the factory buildings below. It showed a young toughness, born of tennis courts, Olympic swimming pools, and the slopes of the Sierras, tempered with Golden Glove championships and bar-room brawls. His tempestuous thirties were turning into fiery forties, but those fires burned more slowly and wisely. He had learned from earlier years the importance of pulling his punches, of making mind matter.

His thoughts were as gray as the day outside, the sun a ghostly white disk swimming in the billows of fog still spilling in from the ocean five miles to the west. He remembered how much he and his old gang had liked the place when they had first moved in. Now, except for the hired help and a much-diminished gang, he was on his own. It was only two months since he had last used George Anderson to track down the rest of his former accomplices and retrieve the fortune they had run off with, leaving him with no share at all. Now all but one of them were dead, and Svensen was sitting pretty with all their shares - a cool ten million stashed away in his safe. It was time now to begin the next phase of his career.

"Mr. Svensen?" He turned in his chair to face the woman who suddenly appeared at the door to his office. "A gentleman is here to see you," she announced, rousing him from his private musings.

A tall, thin man stood slightly behind her, clad in a pale gray, well fitted suit. There was a slight stoop to his manner, as if apologizing for his stature. His eyes, behind thick lenses, burned with a strange intensity, lighthouses in a sea of uncertainty. He held his hand out in a timid, but resolute fashion.

"Dr. Moritz, I presume," said Lars, as he rose to take his guest's hand, offering him the visitor's chair. "I trust you had no difficulty finding your way here."

"None at all, none at all," said his visitor, "although I've never been in this part of town before. He sat down while he removed his spectacles and wiped the lenses carefully with his pocket handkerchief. He put them on and looked around approvingly. "Nice place you have here," he said. "You had this penthouse built yourself? I love the octagonal shape. Great view as well. Too bad there isn't more to see."

"You're right," said Lars with a wry grin. "It's the factory part of town. A little sun might help, though. No, the previous owner had this room built for his meditations. Architecture was always a hobby of mine, however, and, because of its shape, this penthouse was an attraction to me. I like to sketch buildings." He gestured at the drawing board off to the right. "Even with no sun, there's always a lot of light up here."

His guest nodded in agreement, looking around. "Quite a collection of movies," he said, glancing around at the low shelves that rimmed the room, tightly packed with the shiny spines of video tapes.

"Mostly crime films," said Lars.

"Picking up pointers?" asked the doctor with a glint in his eye.

"Quite a few," said Lars with a smile. "Mostly things not to do. But ways to be, ways to behave. Be polite. Give everybody a nice smile. Don't brag about what you do. Don't threaten, just be cool, be a gentleman, but at the same time scare the shit out of your enemy, like Joe Don Baker in *Charley Varrick*, or Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death*. There's a lot of reality in some of those old flics," he said, looking fondly around at his collection, "like in *Goodfellas* or *The Godfather*, or just plain funny, like in *Dog Day Afternoon*. Without crime, there'd be no world as we know it. Just a lot of fucking farmers. Crime movies proved one thing, that everybody has a secret desire to be a criminal. Look at the popularity of *The Sopranos*."

"Perhaps I could avail myself of your film collection at the new house?" said Dr. Moritz.

"Certainly," said Lars. "It might be fun, sitting around with my new gang watching some old crime films. The only films my *old* gang wanted to watch were porno flicks."

"They watched them up here with you?"

"God, no. This was my refuge. Just like the previous guy."

"Who also used this room for his meditation. You said he was Chinese?"

"Yeah, he's the same guy I got George from."

"Really? Excellent - two birds with one stone. "Is George Chinese as well?"

"No. I think George is Martian. But Sam was Chinese. Like I was telling you, I used to see him down at the track, and he was doing too well on his bets to believe, so I pushed him into letting me in on his secret. I tried for some time to buy George from him, but he was too smart to sell the golden goose.

"But he was getting old, and he finally decided to retire in Hong Kong. His wife's idea. She still had relatives there. He hadn't been back there for forty five years and couldn't care less. But that's married life. You ever been married, doctor?"

"Only once, and, mercifully, briefly. So go on about your business arrangement."

"So he made me a deal on the whole lot. The whole kit and kaboodle. Bar, restaurant, hotel, cook, and George. The cook, Arcadia, is the lady who let you in. There used to be a manager, but I had to let him go."

"So did you try to run the place by yourself?"

"No way. Without a liquor license, it's just a restaurant, and I'd have to have had it completely rebuilt and get it through all the rat inspections. One of the conditions of sale was that Sam got to sell the license to another guy looking to open up a bar in the neighborhood. I just wanted the place for my headquarters. As soon as I took over, I closed the restaurant and got rid of the tenants, but I kept the cook, Arcadia, partly because of her Cajun cooking, but more importantly as a kind of nurse for George. His mother had passed away some years earlier, and he obviously needed a woman to look after him. Arcadia says she's not the motherly type, but I have a private opinion that all women have a built-in ability to act as mothers. Don't tell my girlfriend I told you that."

Dr. Moritz nodded as if with slight, but understanding approval. He removed his glasses once again, for what seemed to be another cleaning.

Lars took this as an encouragement for him to continued. "Anyway," he went on, "it made an ideal hangout for a good five years. Back when I had a gang. It was fun at the start. We frosted the inside of the windows in the bar and restaurant so we could use the place for a headquarters, have a little privacy. We had a proper hangout, close to the freeways, in the middle of a virtually empty neighborhood, with no inhabitants on the streets. No children playing. Not even any vagrants or dogs. Just beat-up old auto repair shops. At night there's only the roar of the city. Too bad I can't advertise it in Craig's List under 'ideal gang headquarters.'"

An easy silence fell upon the two, the feeling of agreement and common purpose bringing into their interchange a pleasant camaraderie, the sense of honor among thieves.

Lars turned his attention back to the moment. "You know, doc, I was just realizing what a great listener you are, why you must have been good at what you did. Jesus, I haven't been on a talking jag like this in a long time."

Dr. Moritz' gaze seemed to express friendly acceptance. "You are correct," he reflected, "as to my many years of listening attentively to others. That is the important word – 'attentively.' It has magical qualities. Many pretend to such an ability, but they do not realize the importance of their role. Just because they are silent, it does not mean that they truly listening."

The two sat quietly, as if testing this hypothesis. Faint traffic noises drifted up from the street below. Somewhere a dog barked.

"What happened to the old gang?" asked Dr. Moritz, priming the pump once more.

Lars smiled. It's a long story, but I'll make it short. That good old gang of mine ran off with all the loot from the last job, my share included. Thanks to George, however, or rather to his talents, I managed to get almost all of it back, their shares as well."

"Using his ability to read others' minds, I gather."

"If that were his only ability, I wouldn't have succeeded, but George turned out to have a number of other psychic powers. He could just pick up an object, turn it around in his hands, and know things about the last person who had touched it. He could just sit and stare off into space, and see things at a distance. Without him, I wouldn't have been successful in running them all down. All but one, that is." Lars looked wistfully off into

the distance. "It really isn't as simple as you'd think. George generally needs to be in the physical proximity of the possessors of whatever inside information one happens to be seeking. To be able to look into their minds, you understand. That's one of the reasons I wanted to have you in my employ – to assist me in discovering some of the other dimensions of George's abilities, dimensions that might offer additional means of information."

"I'm becoming more and more interested in this George person. When will I be able to begin working with him? You said something about moving into some new digs."

"Soon," said Lars. "As I mentioned over the phone, despite the idyllic aspects of this place, I'll be moving out at the end of the month, which is getting pretty close now. I've wanted for a long time to relocate to a quiet neighborhood, where I'm not as well known. I've got to make it look as if I've made a clean break with the past. That's one of the conditions exacted upon me by my girlfriend, who'll be moving it with me. I'm therefore desirous of creating the illusion that I'm calling it quits with my former nefarious existence."

"Good luck on that one," said Dr. Moritz. "I have a healthy respect for the intuition of women." It's lucky that women don't have our kind of intentions as well, or we'd be in all kinds of trouble."

There was a pause while they mused on the wonderful strangeness of women while focussing their attention on the changing weather outside. Patches of blue now showed through the tops of the thinning wisps of fog, and the sun was just starting to make a tentative appearance, glinty rays peeking out between the cracks of blue.

"Still, it is a pity, in some ways," said the doctor, returning to their earlier subject, "that you have to leave. Such a charming building. So ideally located. It must have quite a history. The name suggests an older, simpler age - 'The Good Times Hotel.'"

"Yeah. The age of innocence. Like kewpie dolls and motels called 'Bide a Wee,'" said Lars. "Must've been pretty easy being a crook back then."

"You might be right," said Dr. Moritz. "Even the *crooks* were innocent, by our standards. Look at the Teapot Dome Scandal."

Both mused upon the limitations of the criminals of the past, wondering to what extent they might transcend them, but no further observations could be added to such profound profundities. The silence was almost palpable.

"Do you know when this building was built?" Dr. Moritz asked, breaking the ice once more.

"1920, I understand," said Lars. But it was just a quiet little backwater place until the Second World War. Then they hit it big for a few years, but in the late fifties it sort of fizzled out and eventually sank into oblivion. For a decade it was nothing but drunks and gays. It was just a little before the beginning of the hippie period when Sam, the Chinese guy I was telling you about, picked it up for a song. It took him some moolah to fix it up, but in the long run it was clearly worth it. He had a reliable business for about twenty years. However, the last ten years weren't so good. That was another reason he had for selling."

"And now you're moving out as well. Where are you moving to?" asked the doctor.

"Out in the Sunset district near the ocean, away from the constant noise of freeways."

"Ah," said the doctor. "That appeals to me as well."

"Where have you been staying?" asked Lars.

"With some friends in Corte Madera," said Dr. Moritz. "I've been enjoying the quiet, rural atmosphere there, so your new location would suit me well. How large a place is it?"

"A six-bedroom affair," said Lars. "You'll have a large bedroom and a decent-sized laboratory adjoining it. We'll have to talk about refitting it for that purpose."

"And how big is your staff?" asked his guest.

"My old gang is gone," said Lars with a smile. "Sounds like a line from an old song. The cook herself is retiring, and I'm expecting the arrival of my new chauffeur and bodyguard tomorrow. They're flying in from Chicago."

"Are they as special as that?" said Dr. Moritz. "I should think such positions would be easy to fill in a diverse population center such as this."

"I met them on a visit to an acquaintance of mine in Chicago. He loaned them to chauffeur me around town, and we hit it off pretty well. Sly drives like a grand prix driver and Big Bill can handle entire bars of drunks. Fortunately my friend was willing to dispense with their services for a small consideration."

"Are those their names? Sly and Big Bill?" asked the doctor with a smile. "Sounds like they're out of an old gangster film."

"That's just part of their charm," said Lars. "Besides being in-charge guys, they don't pose me any problems. They're willing to sit around and amuse themselves when nothing's happening. And they never talk back. And they don't get in trouble. As I said before, they're masters at their crafts. And when it comes to brains, I have enough for the three of us."

"Any domestic servants?" asked the doctor, steering away from excess megalomania on the part of his new, unexpected, but seemingly would-be patient.

"Not yet," said Lars. "I'd like to keep my new gang at a minimum, so, outside of my girlfriend, Billie, and you and me and Sly and Big Bill, that's it, so far. And George, of course. I can hire cleaning services, so all I have to think about is getting a cook."

"That's very interesting," said Dr. Moritz, "and it brings me to another question. How would you feel if I offered to fill that void?"

"As cook?" asked Lars, surprise showing in his eyes.

"As long as it doesn't require large, formal dinners," said the doctor. "I've always enjoyed preparing small gourmet meals for myself, and I rather fancy the idea of cooking for others. Especially as there's so few of us, and you can afford the price of the best ingredients."

"There shouldn't be any problem with that," said Lars. "I plan on taking everyone out for meals on Saturday nights, and we could expect people to fend for themselves at least one other evening. That way we could keep our in-house dinners down to something like five nights a week. Breakfasts should be simple affairs, and lunch could be everyone for himself. Or herself," he added, wryly remembering Billie's frequent corrections of his male chauvinist speech patterns.

"That sounds ideal," said the doctor. "How soon can we make it official?"

"Gimme a coupla weeks," said Lars. "I've had the house thoroughly gone over by a cleaning service, and a hotel supply outfit will be delivering the beds and furniture this coming weekend. Billie's lining up the sheets and bedding and laundry service. It takes a lot of arrangement. You're welcome to stay here in the hotel until then. I've got oodles

of empty bedrooms. The sheets are clean, but they might be kinda dusty. I haven't renewed the maid service."

"I think I could deal with that," said the doctor. "So that only leaves me with the most important question. When shall I get to meet this George person?"

"Whenever you like," said Lars. "He's probably in his room right now."

"How much freedom do you allow him?" asked the doctor.

"He doesn't care much for freedom," said Lars. "That's one of the reasons I'm moving to a quieter location. George doesn't like crowds."

"The mental anguish of suffering other minds?" asked Dr. Moritz.

"That's it in a nutshell," said Lars.

"No pun intended?" asked the doctor with a slight smile.

"Everything associated with George is serious," replied Lars.

## Chapter 2

Except for the first five years of his life, of which he had only painful scraps of recollection, George had lived with his mother Josephine in their tiny little apartment no. 8 up on the top floor in the back of the Good Times Hotel. He had only vague memories of his father, Gandolf, who, according to his mother, had been a demented wandering minister, ordained by God rather than the church. Those memories consisted mainly of the times his father had been drunk, and had talked to George about things George could not understand.

George plagued his mother frequently for details of his father, what he looked like, what he did, what other people thought of him, why he left, and what were those strange pieces of advice that his father had been so intent on giving him? His mother seldom answered him, partly because she abhorred the very memory of his father, although she had respected their social relationship in the context of the commune they had been co-members of. She had suffered so many of his affairs with other women, and so many of his drunken debaucheries, that when the call of God had come for him to move along once more, she had not objected. But she did not lie to her son about his father having had any virtues, because she knew that her son, with his strange ability to know her thoughts, would see through it immediately, so there was no point in lying.

After her husband had left her, Josephine had gone to work for Sam Kee, the owner of the Good Times Hotel. In return for Josephine's services - cleaning all the rooms plus restaurant and bar, Sam gave her free room and board plus a small stipend for other expenses. It was an ideal situation for Josephine, who was thereby able to keep an eye on her young son while doing her chores, which were a full-time occupation, including assisting the waitress when the restaurant was full. She worked from dawn till dusk, with little time for herself. Her parental upbringing had prepared her for a life of self-sacrifice, as her mother had been the same way.

Sam had come to San Francisco in 1963 from Hong Kong at the age of 36 with one hundred thousand dollars in the bank. He knew from his previous business experience that, in getting started, real estate was always the first thing to invest one's money in, so he purchased a property in an industrial sector south of Market. This property consisted of several adjacent parking lots, some unused sheds, and, most importantly, on one corner, the Good Times Hotel.

Sam knew that consistency was the key to success, so he gradually rid himself of the few undesirable guests, and only gradually took on new ones. He kept his rents modest, and only rented to singles, except in the case of Josephine and her son, George, who got their room free. It was the smallest room in the hotel, at the top of the longest stairway, and it was practically in the attic.

Sam kept the vacancy sign lit, but if he didn't like the look of a would-be guest, he told that person straight to his face that there were no vacancies. He put a lot of stock in his ability to size up people instantly, and it rarely failed him. By the same token, when Josephine had approached him looking for work, with a young dependent son, Sam saw a woman with motivation, who would work hard and not ask for pay raises. He also reasoned that her direct honesty would keep herself, as well as her son, in line, so he hired her on the spot.



After George and his mother had lived in the room together for about a year, Sam suggested that George have his own bedroom in what had been an unused store room down in the basement. This brought George more into contact with Sam, who was always moving about, checking on things, which brought him often to the basement, where all his restaurant and bar supplies were stored. When George began showing his strange ability to know things he had no right to know, Sam got together with his mother and told her that for the safety of her son, she should be completely silent about her son's abilities, that his life would be bad enough because of his talents, without others taking advantage of him.

"If they knew that he had such powers," Sam told her, "they would kidnap him or worse." Sam had a consummate understanding of his fellow man, having studied Tai Chi all of his life. He practiced it every morning all by himself in the small parking lot attached to the hotel, and, with each exercise, there was an accompanying lesson in philosophy. He would sometimes explain these lessons to George, but George had difficulty understanding them. He knew why people really did things, but it seemed to have nothing to do with the principles which Sam tried to teach him. Still, Sam was, in many other ways, a very wise man. Besides being wise, he was also greatly enamored of money. This was a useful combination. He spun profits like a spider spins a web, or like a flycaster casts his line. He did everything with calm, purpose, and a quiet style, and sought only reasonable profits. He was polite to everyone, so everyone tolerated his presence. He seldom gained from another's loss, except at the track, and in casual games with his cronies, where he cheated shamelessly. He also occasionally gave money to a street person.

When George was six, he was obliged to attend a grammar school, which was about nine blocks away in an even-worse slum neighborhood. He had a wretched time at school, having to deal with the uncontrolled spontaneous energy of 29 other children. He was given a seat at the back of the classroom, where he couldn't see very well, less hear well over the pandemonium of his screaming classmates. He was also simultaneously bombarded by the screaming minds of all of them, so he was subjected to all the wrong answers to the questions as well as the right ones, and he had problems identifying which were right and which were wrong. He was constantly subjected to 30 other versions of reality every day in his classroom, so he didn't learn much at all, except how onerous education could be.

And if that were not enough, every day that George walked home from school, he was challenged by the bullies. They all saw him as fair game. He might as well have had a big KICK ME sign pasted on his back. After all the tough guys dealt with him, then the intermediate tough guys had to show him they were superior to him as well. Every day, coming home from school was sheer torture. But George never ran. He always took it, moving away as much as he could in the direction he was going, always shielding himself as well as possible with his clipboard, but their blows took a toll.

He had no choice but to tell his mother about it. She knew anyway by the bruises and bloody noses he brought home.

Josephine didn't know how to deal with her son's dilemma, so Sam stepped in and recommended that he be allowed to mentor George at home. Sam was a patient teacher, and he believed in having George do repetitive exercises in English and arithmetic. Also defending oneself from others, which gave Sam a chance to tutor George on the martial

arts. George was not very good at martial arts, except that he did understand the point of them – that of awareness of his opponent's intentions. That part of it by itself was useful, as well as easy for George, but George also for the first time realized his right to defend himself from the worst of it, rather than accepting it as his due.

Their relationship enabled Sam to deal with his duties at the bar and restaurant, while taking a few minutes off now and then to check on the progress of his student. Sam managed to pull the wool over the eyes of the local school board, and, after having pulled a few strings as well, gave them to understand that George was now studying at a special school.

Sam went to this trouble not only because he liked to think of himself as a teacher, but also because he saw future possibilities in utilizing George's talents. He took his time in developing them, however, because he believed in allowing matters to make up their own minds. All he was doing was planting a seed. Thus his purposes were not evident to George, who admired him as much as he did anyone else besides his mother and God.

George had never been comfortable trying to read regular books, so Sam brought him a lot of old comic books, and soon George was hooked. His favorite hero was Plasticman.

He also had a special liking for the Walt Disney's Comics that had Donald Duck's adventures with his three nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie, and an Uncle Scrooge McDuck who had a swimming pool in his basement filled with money so that he could dive into it.

Going to the track with Sam was becoming less of an ordeal. Ordinarily, when he was out in public by himself, George was a natural for every guy with a scam or tale of woe, because George didn't have the heart to tell any of them to take a hike. When he was with Sam, Sam took care of all the interactions with others, so George was free to daydream or mindsurf, casually entering mind after mind, checking for track info for Sam or just contemplating his fellow man, which, luckily, he never entirely tired of, considering that he had no other choice.

He saw the most amazing dramas going on in the daydreams of his fellow humans, carried out on the stage of their personal fantasies, acted out by each person in his own little room inside his skull, small scenes acted out, sometimes started over again just in order to change a detail, sometimes abandoned abruptly, as if the director had decided to scrap the scene and tell all the actors to vamoose.

Single minds just muddling along were easy enough to understand, but abstract conversations were sometimes completely beyond George's comprehension. What made them so tough were the long strings of words people used, words that floated before his mind's eye like an unending series of freight cars, carrying indecipherable names and bound for unknown destinations. As long as people stuck to ordinary things it was generally pretty easy for George to follow. The rest of the time it was sheer torture.

George had to be focused when he accompanied Sam into *The Starting Gate*, an upscale watering hole patronized by many of the jockeys. George's job was to stay on the alert for thoughts about horses and fixes. Sam was a great favorite with the habitués and was always good for a round for the house, a practice which, with the state of the economy, was gradually becoming an expensive undertaking.

For a number of years, George's life was almost bearable, with easy days at the track, meals that Arcadia fixed up for him that he ate in the kitchen, or if things were busy, then down in his basement room.

George really liked having his own room, where he was rapidly acquiring piles of really great comic books. This made staying inside a lot more bearable. The only times that he ventured outside the house, besides with Sam, were to go to McDonald's bookstore up on Eddy for more comic books, or to Burger King on Market Street for french fries, which were much skinnier and tastier than the fries served by the Good Times restaurant, which were usually too doughy, and then there was always the problem of Arcadia the cook, who might tell his mother, and *she* might put her foot down about how many fries he was eating. Life became complicated sometimes.

There was something his mother had said to him once about forbidden fruit. He wasn't too certain what it really meant, but he had a pretty good idea about what "forbidden" meant, so he called them "forbidden fries," but only to himself, for his own little drama, where he saw himself sitting in a private room at an expensive restaurant ordering fries, and whenever he wanted more, he would ring a little bell, and a waiter would appear with another platter loaded down with steaming, crisp, forbidden fries.

George's education was not making enormous strides, but comic books were a great consolation compared to real life, because right always won out, and he enjoyed the anti-authority attitudes of the caped and masked avengers, who, despite thumbing their noses at the guys in charge, ended up becoming the good guys themselves, turning over the crooks to the inept cops. So George read them voraciously. He never got around much to reading real books, but he learned the alphabet thoroughly, and could look up names in phone books.

From the very beginning of George's affair with comic books, he found himself plugged into the minds of the children who had read them before him. As soon as he laid his hands on the most recent magazine, visions came to him about the previous readers. He became a member of a secret society of comics readers, and shared much of the enthusiasm and lore that the children before him had experienced. He wondered at times if among them there might be a few who were like him.

This hands-on ability of his also gave him information about Sam and his wife. Sometimes when he went through one of Sam's old newspapers, looking for the comic sections, he tuned in on Sam's home life.

Sam had a lovely house in the Richmond District, with a walled garden in back, where his wife Mei Ling spent many of her afternoons. She had been a lovely girl when he had married her, a tender twenty two to his thirty six. But time had taken its toll, and they had drifted apart emotionally, never having had any children, and Sam had many years before tired of her charms, so he immersed himself in personally running the hotel, sometimes staying late to take over a shift at the bar when one of his two regulars was away, or helping out on busy nights at the restaurant.

Therefore Sam was somewhere around the hotel at almost any time of the day, and he often had George perform little errands for him in the neighborhood. Sam had an account with a local hardware store, and could call up for a tool or part he needed and send George to get it. Or have him run to the local post box to put a letter in the mail. He often didn't even need to say anything to George, who just read his mind and gave Sam a little nod to show he understood.

In addition, Sam kept him busy learning all about the odds at the track, and how they were computed. George got pretty good at this as well as at simple arithmetic, and soon could even multiply two five-digit numbers in his head, as long as they weren't composed of too many nines, which tended to confuse him.

George didn't mind his room being down in the basement. It was quieter there, and he could concentrate. He made friends with all the bugs and spiders he found. When he had been younger he had had a real spider that he kept in in a large empty waterjug and fed dead flies to. He liked to sit and tune in on the spider's vague thoughts when he had nothing better to do. Unfortunately, flies were hard to come by, because Sam was a stickler for cleanliness, even in the basement, so ultimately the spider had died. George still felt a little sad about that. Still, George figured that spiders probably didn't live very long anyway.

One morning when George came up to the restaurant for breakfast, he found Sam already there, enjoying his usual pot of tea and a muffin liberally spread with orange marmelade, and reading time magazine. Something struck George about the picture in the magazine, and he leaned forward to look at it. It was a whole army made out of stone, all standing in rows and columns. Sam looked up at George's interest, but just smiled and let George figure out for himself what it was all about. He took it for granted George would read his mind anyway. Later on, George thought again about that strange army of stone soldiers, and he started imagining all the people he had ever known converted into stone statues, just like in the photograph, only instead of uniforms, they'd be dressed in their best clothes, like in a funeral parlor, except that their clothes would naturally also be made out of stone, and they would be all in rows and columns, just like in that strange photograph in the magazine, except that in George's imagination each one would only be as tall as how well he had treated his fellow human beings, like if he were maybe a miser, he'd only be two feet tall, and if he were somebody noble, like George Washington, then he'd be maybe thirteen feet tall. George's mother would not be as tall as George Washington, but she'd be up there, and Sam would also stand above the people around him, nowhere near as tall as his mother, but still at a respectable height.

When George was seventeen, his mother died. It was just before his birthday, and he always remembered that afterwards, because it had almost made him feel guilty, like maybe his birthday had had something to do with her dying. It had been on a Friday, and she had just returned from church, and she had seemed more tired than he had ever seen her before. She had trudged slowly but determinedly up all forty nine steps to the top floor where her bedroom was, and had lain down for the last time.

He had followed her up, and had begun a vigil at her bedside. Her thoughts had been vague and her mind filled with the pain of existence, and as she had passed from this life to the great beyond, he had been with her up to the very last, when he had actually shared with her passing, had experienced the great anguish which had miraculously turned into such a sudden and unexpected joy at the very end. He could not forget that part of it. But he had not followed her. Some aspect of him had intervened at the last second, and had kept him from going along with her to that great congregation in the sky, those loved ones from the past who were suddenly miraculously all alive again, and waiting. Waiting together for her to join them in blessed reunion. Come, come, they had silently called to her. Come.

And then he had lost consciousness, and others had come to prepare her body to be taken away, and they had sent him back to his own room, but somehow, during the night, he must have made his way back up those stairs one more time, because when he had become aware again, he found himself on the floor next to her bed, and then he rose up awkwardly to look at her stiff silent body lying on those flat, white sheets, and her silent white face, and those sightless eyes seeing everything and nothing.

And there was nobody to take her place. Nobody. No-bo-dy. After she was gone, after the men came and took her away, he went back down to his basement room. He remembered that somebody came now and again and gave him some food. Then he remembered that it was Arcadia. Whenever she left, he pronounced the syllables of her name, as if he had never heard them before. Ar-ca-di-a. Ar-ca-di-a. He felt they meant something mysterious, something he hadn't known before, but now he did. There was a certain magic to it, and he had great need of magic.

In the days that followed, he picked up the broken pieces of himself and tried to glue them all together again. His mother was no longer there, but now there was Arcadia to feed him and make sure he was dressed properly and when he was sick she took him to a clinic. He was getting older now and was expected to look after himself.

After George's mother was cremated, Sam held a small ceremony for her in the bar with just Arcadia and George present, and, until the arrival of the next tenant of the room, the jar with her ashes was temporarily placed on the mantelpiece in apartment number 8. After this, Sam became, in effect, George's guardian, and, as Sam was kind to him, George willingly accepted the arrangement, as he was in no condition to work at jobs where he would be constantly surrounded by people. Besides that, George knew that Sam was indebted to him for his usefulness at the track. In return, George was fed and housed, and he gradually accepted Arcadia as a mother figure. She took charge of the way he was clothed, and found him more respectable garments at the local Good Will store. When he was eighteen, Sam helped George get an identification card from the Motor Vehicle Department, which allowed him to buy beer at Whammo Liquors. Sam had discovered a six pack George had hidden in a basement corner, and had told him not to hide it, and to restrict his drinking to Friday nights, and not to tipple at it during the week, and if he ever did, not until the sun went down. Sam also encouraged him to stick to beer, because it would not get him in as much trouble.

But by this time, George had already sampled the wonderful oblivion to be had with hard booze, by whose magical means the usual onslaught of the collective mind was reduced to a vanishing roar, a train rushing past him into a tunnel, its sound diminishing with distance, leaving him alone with himself in a whisky mystic mood, stupid with sedation, at peace with the world. A wonderful, wonderful elation.

The major problem George had with the world was all the suffering he went through as a result of his mindreading abilities. During the daytime it was generally depressing for him because most people suffered a lot more than they showed, and George was obliged to wade through this "mind field," as he saw it, everytime he joined the crowds on the public street. But the nights were the times he never looked forward to, because those were when his sleeping mind would get caught up with someone else's errant thoughts, and he would find himself suddenly in the middle of someone else's nightmare. Booze was a partial antidote to this. Even a few beers helped. When he went to sleep drunk, he seldom got caught up in others' dreams.

However, when he drank too much, the next morning would come thundering back in, the train returning through the adjoining tunnel, its horn blaring, and his head would not only be filled with the din of people doing things, but also with all the hammering of his temples and his head filled with fire and his eyes struggling to focus on the bright glaring day, even when he was hidden away in his basement burrow, the daylight somehow finding him out, together with all the slippery tendrils of thought from the outside, thoughts curling in under the door, slipping past his pillow into his unwilling insane mind.

So he followed Sam's advice as much as he could, keeping his lost weekends for the weekends, and nursing himself on beer on the weekdays in between, when he wasn't with Sam out at the track. He always got home after his lush interludes, crawling in through a basement window, and slipping into his cold basement burrow.

He began thinking about his future. What was he going to do when Sam left? Where could he get the necessary money to live? All he knew about getting money was his experience at the track with Sam. He could do his half, but he could never do all the things that Sam did. He had never gone with Sam to the ticket windows, but had always stood outside, looking in. He did not feel comfortable even going into the jockey bar by himself. He could not carry on a conversation. When anybody asked him about himself, he always froze up like he had lockjaw. Most people thought he was weird and didn't want to have anything to do with him.

Some of it he could do. He could sit on a bar stool and tune into the stream of bar thoughts for hints of horses, but how could he put the information he received together with all the other stuff that Sam seemed to know, and come up with a sure knowledge of what kind of bet to place. However, George did understand the odds pretty well, so some of the time he might be able to come up with a winner.

But facing strangers, having to go to the ticket window and place his bets, he had to be able to speak to them. And George knew that his fears would be sky high, he would be tremendously self-conscious, and maybe start stuttering, and people would be suspicious of him, thinking something sneaky was going on. It was out of the question for George to make any kind of living off the track. He would need someone to run him. And he felt that time might be coming soon. Sam had been having some big arguments with his wife, who wanted to go back to Hong Kong. Which was the name of a city far away on the other side of the ocean that Sam's wife wanted to go back to, like they had lived there before. George could also see that Sam didn't want to go back, because he liked his life here. He wondered how long Sam would hold out.

That he could have found someone to replace Sam was not the sort of thing George would ever actually think about, but fate forced a replacement upon him, in the form of a man named Lars, who appeared one day and spent a few hours talking to Sam in his office. Nobody said anything to George, but, through his powers, he realized that Sam would be going, and that George would be expected to work for Lars, and that in return he could continue staying in his little room in the basement and have his basic needs provided him. He also got the impression that Lars had some sort of idea or scheme for how he wanted to use George's powers. Maybe out at the track, like with Sam.

But Lars appeared to be too involved with dealing with his five, money-hungry gang members, who weren't too interested in nickel-and-dime operations out at the track. They were much more interested in their snatch-and-grab operations out at the banks and

casinos. The high-energy glamor and fast-car getaways suited the quick money fixes demanded by their big egos.

So George's usefulness was put on ice, and he was reduced to a meaningless existence, doing nothing to extricate himself from dependence on others. Where would he go, and what would he do for money? So he was reduced to life in the basement, where he subsisted on comic books and occasional evenings at bars in the neighborhood, where he sat on a stool at the end, always drank Budweiser, and always left a very small tip. Once he even left a penny. The bartender thought this was funny, and meant to check George out at some time in the future, just to figure out what made him tick, but the bar was always too busy with customers posing problems. It was a rough kind of bar.

Oddly enough, George had no problem dealing with others' minds in a bar, when he suffered from them so much otherwise. It was that in the bars, other people's minds, at least at the beginning of the evening, were peaceful, because they were becalmed by the booze, just as George was. It was not until after a few hours of boozing, in the first onset of drunkenness, that their negative sides came sneaking back in, and then some of them began to have ill thoughts about their fellow drunks.

So George came in during the early evening hours, when customers were in a good mood, having their first drinks, looking forward to an escape from the working world, or a reprieve from the non-working one. This was the best time to be in the bar, when the pain-killing effects of the booze was working its charms on the early crowd, allowing them the natural high they would have had if they had not become so oppressed by the pain of life and the frustrations of the everyday working world.

But when the initial euphoria began to wear off under the onslaught of alcoholic oblivion, and the unconscious group mind began to surface like a creature of the deep, casting its just-awakened alcoholic evil eye across the landscape of the bar, George knew it was time for him to leave

The transition from life under Sam to life under Lars was a cruel one. It had all happened so suddenly. Sam had had a big quarrel with his wife, and had been in a terrible mood when he came to work that fateful Monday morning. With the aid of his powers, George had quickly assessed the situation. Sam was leaving, and when Sam made up his mind, he made up his mind. He was not a man who walked up a down escalator. Sam carried out his decision with speed and purpose. Soon after he had gone, the rest of the roomers were being dispersed, homing pigeons flying off to other roosts. Arcadia was staying on as cook. She was the only person left for George to hang on to. George felt a tremendous anxiety descend upon him. And this anxiety was only increased when Lars brought the other five members of his gang to live in the hotel. George remained in his room in the basement, coming up only for the meals Arcadia prepared for him in the kitchen. He avoided the gang as completely as possible. Lars and his men were terrifying to be around, their thoughts alive with vitality and cruelty, their collective spirits a living evil that struck fear into George's heart. He was overwhelmed by his circumstances.

The years that followed were filled with some of the darkest days of George's life. Arcadia was his only refuge, and he buried himself in comic books, most of them from the forties and fifties - the golden age of comic books. The only ventures he made into the world outside was to obtain more reading material. He became an expert in Batman, Captain Marvel, Superman. He delved into Classic Comics and read the great novels of

the world. Swiss Family Robinson. Robin Hood. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But there was much evil and darkness in many of the comic books, and George was careful about his buys.

He was more into drinking, and more into binge drinking, less into simple nightcaps. He had found that if he got drunk enough, he could completely silence the voices of others. Therefore a single drink was never enough, and he had to parcel out the times he drank or he would end up being drunk all the time. Besides, he couldn't afford it any longer, since Lars didn't give him the allowance that Sam had. He still had a little left of what his mother had left behind in the little box in her dresser drawer when she had died. At first George never touched it, because it had belonged to her, and was therefore holy in his mind, but as her image gradually faded, and as George's habit gradually grew, he made more depredations from it. He would soon have to find another source of ready cash if he were to continue drinking. In the meantime, when he did his morning's cleanup of the bar, a small task that Lars assigned him, he managed to pour the dregs out of the bottles in the glass recycling bin under the bar into some wine jugs of his own, creating strange mixtures of whiskey, gin, brandy, and vodka which he used to help fuel his Friday night binges. They tasted awful, but they did work.

Twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, he spent a couple boring hours up in Lars' office when Lars would question and test him, trying to figure out the best ways to use George's talents for crime. But little seemed to ever come of it, and Lars and his gang continued to pull off jobs in the ordinary ways, but with a continuing success. George could see from the thoughts in Lars' head that they were making a pile of money. George sometimes wondered idly if Lars might be interested in reading a Scrooge McDuck adventure about diving into a swimming pool filled with money. He somehow felt that Lars wouldn't appreciate such a suggestion.

And then, after five years of drudgery and despair, he was yanked out of his escape from life and thrust into the mainstream of violent thought once more, when Lars' gang made off with all the loot they had been amassing, and, worst of all, taken Lars' share as well. Lars had been as mad as a hornet in a hair net. After screaming and kicking the wall for about half an hour, until he hurt his foot, he finally calmed down and sent Arcadia to fetch George.

Lars was a tough taskmaster, and he made it crystal clear to George that he would do the most terrible things to George if George did not completely cooperate with him.

"Just remember, Moron," Lars said, "I will personally make your life a living hell if you play any games with me. For however long it takes, you and I are going to ride this rollercoaster until we hunt down every one of those motherfuckers and get all my money back. Every god damn double-crossing dollar. And it's gonna be just as painful for you as it is for me, so from now on we're in crash-dive mode until we nail those . . ." Lars' mind became incoherent at this point, and George was absolutely terrified of this evil monster glaring and leering and raging at him. The rest of Lars' conversation had been beyond description, but George had got the point.

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The rollercoaster ride had lasted four and a half months, less a day or two. At the end of it Lars had most of his millions back, and George had lost most of his mind. Their



lives had been mad driving forces raging across the country, from San Francisco to Seattle, and then down to L.A. Following the money trail. Motels and hotels and rooms for the day, sleeping in the car. Day followed night followed day, until George's mind was a vast confusion of light and darkness and the screaming of their egos, his and Lars'.

And it had all come to an end one day, when Lars had brought the lives of all but one of his former gang members to their just ends, and he had regained a good three-quarters of the money. Four of them were dead, and the fifth had vanished beyond hope of being found. George had searched and searched with his mind through the void, past the continents and the oceans that separated them, almost reaching up to the stars.

Lars had not found that one last one. He was the one that got away from George's searching mind. And George had tried, because Lars was riding him, digging in his spurs, forcing him to go further, to try harder.

But Lars' purpose had been achieved. They had recouped enough. Lars might be demanding, but he was not a fool.

His retribution had come to an end, depositing the two of them back in the hotel, Lars with his loot, and George with an endangered mind. It would take a lot of Arcadia's cooking and long, long periods of time with no one around. No one to goad him on. No purpose but to find peace and unity. George took a long time to come around. He slept for many long nights in the bowels of the Good Times Hotel, like Jonas in the whale, adrift in the sea of forgetfulness, in the arms of God.

## Chapter 3

"How's the wine?" said Lars, leaning back in his chair, looking at the way she was silhouetted against the background of the lights of the Bay Bridge, as seen through the large view window of the restaurant, once more admiring her slim shape.

"It tastes good this way," she said, sipping at the wine through the straw that had come with the glass of lemonade she had started out with. It looked incongruous, slanting up from her wine glass, while she sat back but gradually hunched her shoulders forward so she could cautiously suck on the end of the straw, which by now was almost horizontal, with just the tip of the straw below the surface of the wine. A nervous waiter hovered nearby, his eyes closed momentarily in silent prayer.

Lars smiled tolerantly. "It's fun to be naughty," he said reaching over and topping off her rapidly depleting glass. The bottle was also becoming rapidly depleted.

"I actually have a scientific reason for drinking it this way," she said mock seriously. "It's to make sure that the wine is properly oxidated."

"You didn't study chemistry," he said, "or you'd know that wine is mostly water, and that water *could* be called oxidated, in that it's hydrogen double-bonded to oxygen. However, there is actually a good reason for exposing wine to air."

"I was afraid of that," she said. "Another blow struck against the enemies of snobbery." She stuck the straw in the side pocket of her jacket so the sneaky waiter couldn't take it away when she wasn't looking, then sat upright and lowered her face dutifully close to the glass. "Like this?" she asked, her voice slightly muffled by the proximity of the glass to her face, her impish smile slightly concealed by the rim of the glass.

"What snobs do to impress," Lars proclaimed, "I do to increase my enjoyment. The airing diminishes the wood of the tannin and the sharpness of the acid, so they enhance the flavor rather than subdue it. And if you lift the glass to your lips properly, so it is close to your nose, you will be able to enjoy the perfume of the wine, which in this case is quite impressive. Wine is a delicate thing. If it isn't treated carefully, in handling, storage, temperature, vibration, or even light, the taste can be absolutely ruined.

"On the other hand," he said, "you have the right to do absolutely anything you want, outside of crapping on the carpet. Most of the rules of society are created out of fear and conformity. It's only a small number that have much sense to them. Airing wine happens to be one of those.

"If you pay attention to the first taste, when it's first opened, it may be the best taste you'll have from that bottle. If it's an older wine, and if it has a really nice aroma the minute it's opened, then you must forbid the waiter to decant it. You should pay *particular* attention to it and sample it right then, before you even look at the menu. With a younger wine, you might ask the waiter to decant it. That way it'll air faster. "Later on," he continued, "when the food arrives – delay that first bite, even when you're hungry, and have another sip of the wine. That's the time when your taste buds are at their best, and the time to make your first real judgment of the wine."

"That's quite a little speech," she said when he was through. "How much are they going to charge you for this bottle?"

"A hundred."

"Is that all it cost?"

"No. I cheated. I brought it in a couple weeks ago and talked the owner into putting in the cellar for me."

"So the hundred is just corkage. How much did it cost you?"

"Twenty eight hundred."

"Wow. Think I'm worth it?"

"The purpose of money is being able to get what you want when you want it. The truth of the matter is that we're both worth it. You, me and the bottle – all three of us – are worth it."

"Now you're granting personhood to a bottle. I guess if they can make those rotten corporations into people, you can do the same with a bottle."

"If I didn't think you were worth it," he persevered, "I'd be off with one of my other girl friends sipping Mai Tais or something even worse."

She struck at him with her straw in pretended battle. "This is the last straw," she said.

He gave her a broad smile. "The reason I didn't mention the straw," he said, "was that I didn't want to imply that you sucked."

"So," she said, ignoring his remark and raising the glass reverently to her lips. "Am I supposed to sniff it first? That's what they do in all the movies."

"That sniffing stuff went out of date after Carole Lombard and Clara Bow, although Clifton Webb and Vincent Price kept it alive for a while. The best way is to gracefully lean your nostrils over the rim and inhale the fumes directly. And this isn't the first bottle you've ever had in your life. You were probably guzzling wine at your Girl Scout Camp. Next you'll be claiming to be a virgin."

"At Girl Scout Camp we were all claiming *not* to be virgins," she said, sliding her foot over gently to touch his under the table.

"It would be interesting to see you as a Girl Scout," he said. "You have any old photos?"

"Buy me a Girl Scout Uniform, and I'll model it for you," she said with a leer.

"I might have to go to Rochester Big and Tall," he said.

"They only sell men's clothing," she responded. "Do you like women dressed in men's clothing? Aren't we supposed to be getting some food pretty soon?"

"I gave the waiter to understand that we wanted some time to enjoy the wine," he said. "I'll signal him to get things started." He looked up and managed to catch the eye of the waiter, who seemed to have regained his composure. The man nodded and walked purposively back towards the swinging kitchen doors.

"These are the only places I can remember that have swinging doors," Lars said, watching the stiff back of the receding waiter. "Restaurants and bars."

"Also federal agencies and the companies they are supposed to be regulating," she replied. "What comes first? Salad?"

"You weren't paying attention to the lengthy instructions I diligently gave to our waiter."

"I didn't understand all those foreign words," she said. "You know something? In addition to leaving out all the prices on the lady's version of the menu, they ought to leave out the foreign words as well, and put it all in English. Then I'd know what the heck I was eating."

"They probably don't want you to know. Besides," he said with a smile. "Weren't you Phi Beta Kappa in foreign languages?"

"Only in Urdu," she replied. "So is it the asparagus first?"

"Right," he said. "Actually, we should have had some Chardonnay with the asparagus."

"Then we couldn't have had that educational conversation on airing. Besides which, she said, "you could hardly afford it on top of that entire bottle of Petrus."

The waiter appeared with the asparagus like a genie out of an invisible bottle.

"Will you be wanting any more wine, sir?" he asked, staring disbelievingly at the three quarters empty Petrus bottle.

"I noticed a half bottle of Mission Haut Brion on the wine list," Lars said. "I think it was a 1991 vintage. Why don't you bring it as soon as possible so we can start it airing."

"Very good, sir. And the pheasant will be next."

"Excellent." The waiter was really impressive in the speed with which he vanished after receiving an order.

"So how soon before you'll be moving into your new digs?" Billie asked, staring into her glass of wine, swirling it slowly around and around as if she were trying read her future.

"How soon before you'll be moving in with me?"

"When will there be furniture? I don't make very good passionate love on hard floors."

"This weekend," he promised.

"Make sure they have mattresses."

"This weekend," he repeated.

"That's only three days away," she pointed out.

"I'm counting the hours," he said, lying about the counting but not the hours. He really wanted her.

"How many actual gangsters do you have in your new gang, now?"

"Just two, not including Dr. Moritz or George."

"Maybe you could explain this George person to me."

"He isn't very interesting," said Lars. "Have some more of the last of the wine."

She watched as he leaned across the table and poured a miniscule amount for her with his left hand.

"Then why do you keep him around," she insisted.

"Because he has a way of knowing things," he said. "Things that it would be much more difficult for me to know. Things to help me make money."

"Dishonestly," she said.

"Of course," he said. "A good half of everything in this world is dishonest in one way or another."

"Violently, then."

"A minimum of violence. But no guns, no holdups, no casino heists, no armed robbery, and no cops. Using nothing but our wits and some special knowledge. You know that I got rid of my old gang."

"Then why'd you hire these two new guys? They remind me of the Keystone Cops. Is that really their names - Sly and Big Bill? They don't seem like they have much in the way of wits."

"Sly's my chauffeur. He's really good. And Big Bill is his partner. He's my bodyguard."

"Why do you need a bodyguard?"

"Because some of the people I'll be taking the money away from might get physical. Big Bill is more physical than all of the bad guys anyone's ever met."

"So you're still going to be taking money away from other people."

"Of course. That's what everyone else is doing."

At this point, the waiter arrived with the pheasant. Even though the bird was incredibly meager, at least to Billie's eyes, the waiter found it necessary to fuss over it at length, performing what seemed to be a highly skilled task - the intricate and delicate manoeuvre of extricating a modest portion for each of his two customers, while maintaining the illusion of the remaining carcass as being a viable provider of more yet to come. A fiction that ranked with the miracle of loaves and fishes, Billie thought.

"Pretty scrawny bird," said Lars, echoing her sentiments in a low voice after the waiter had made another of his rapid rabbit disappearing tricks.

"We could stop at MacDonald's on our way home," she said.

"We don't need to do anything that drastic," he said. "We can simply order more entrées here. I'll signal the waiter to bring back the menus."

"Okay," she said. "I like the orange sauce, though. They give you enough of that. We've easily got enough here for three or four pheasants. Maybe he could just bring me some bread for the rest of this sauce."

"I don't think he'd be very happy about that suggestion. If we want him to be nice to us, we'd better treat him carefully."

"Isn't all the money we're paying for this enough?"

"No," said Lars. "He'd be very insulted. You could never tip him enough for him to drop his act. His pride is greater than his greed."

"That almost makes it a virtue," she said. "How about another serving of potatoes and vegetables?"

"Only if we ordered another pheasant to go along with them," he said. "You surely know all these rules. Where do you eat with all those ex society debs you hang around with?"

"MacDonald's," she said with a smile. "They only eat at high class joints when their dates are paying."

## Chapter 4

"How do you manipulate a telepath when he knows what you're doing?" asked Dr. Moritz. He and Lars had been talking about the state of the move, and everything seemed to have been taken care of. So they had some free time to talk about George.

"Whenever I'm around George, I stay out of my George place. That's a walled-up place in my head where I keep all the stuff I don't want George to know about.. I imagine my life as taking place in a kind of circle, about 500 yards in diameter, surrounded by a stone wall. And all the things happening to me are like creatures that move about within this circle. Some of them are friendly, but most of them really aren't. Friendliness is something more than the social contract. Friendliness in most people is only a millimeter thick. Beneath that breathes a cauldron of beasts."

"It can be pretty terrifying," agreed the doctor.

"But it's real, it's really there, isn't it? It's part of all of us. It's part of our heritage from the animals. We still are beasts. Civilized beasts, for the most part. Those that don't take to civilizing are put away behind stone walls."

"Well, it's not something I want to confront every minute."

"But you DO, doctor. We all confront ourselves at every minute."

"You are a persistent debator. It's difficult to disagree with you."

"So we are rational devils, part sensitive, part beastly."

"How do you live with the contradiction?"

"I put up walls. I keep the nice guy in one area, and the mean motherfucker in another. I am even, though you probably won't believe this, sometimes spiritual, and, if you stretch it, even religious. Even though I've murdered a lot of people, with no moral compunction or regret whatever. Most of them weren't worth crying over. Nothing but another human robot, made in Detroit heaven, model X-Y-Z-1234567 stamped in every mother-fucking soul. I'll tell you one thing. I have no choice but to believe in a God. It's all too God-damn crazy to have happened for no reason at all. But the only way I can square that with the way things are is to believe in *two* Gods, and Satan is good enough for the other one. We all have both, and most of us pay homage to both, at some time or other in our lives."

"An unassailable logical position," said the doctor. "I think, however, that, although what you describe is a reasonable stance, the real truth is that we are all slaving beasts, as you have so said. I do agree with you, however, that in compartmentalizing our evil, we allow ourselves in other compartments to enjoy the finer aspects of the world of the senses, say, or of philosophical discourse, or even the illusion of love. There is no reason why the slaving warrior cannot stop and enjoy a glass of wine and dance a jig."

"Well said, Dr. Moritz," said Lars. "You really are a man after my own heart, even though I don't really have one."

"You were talking earlier about learning how to use George's powers for illicit gain. Could you give me any idea about the context?"

"I'd kind of like it to be something I could feel proud of. As a kind of creative thing. Like a well put-together scam, but carried to another level through the use of what George can do. It's difficult to get information out of someone, even with George's help. I was forced to terrorize George to get him to cooperate. He seems a timid soul, but he can be obstinate at times. Somewhere deep down inside of him, beyond all the fear,

there's probably a real George. It can't be very much, because it hasn't had a chance to be out in life and become a real person. He's been stuck in a basement room all his life. He's a stunted person. You've seen it, of course."

"Now that you've told me about your 'George place,' I know about it, and the next time I see George he's going to pick it up from me. Then it won't be a secret any more."

"Oh, George knows all about it. I just don't ever let him in. That's why I plan on not permitting him upstairs. I need to relax without keeping my barriers up."

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Arcadia looked around at her empty bedroom. A few boxes were stacked up next to the door. George was sitting in the old overstuffed chair, resting. Half a dozen small potted plants sat on the kitchen table. A small plastic radio sat next to them, softly playing a tinny rendition of an old Cannonball Adderley piece, the swinging lilt of the music bringing a little bounce to the scene that it otherwise lacked.

"God all mighty," she said. "I been livin' here for thirty five years, and yet it seems like just yesterday I moved in, with nothin' but two suitcases. An' all those years in between just kinda kaleidoscoped together. Thirty years with Sam. Those were the good years. 'Specially at the beginning. Hard work cookin' all day long. You think you into movin' another box down to the truck?"

"Gimme a few minutes more, Arcadia," George mumbled. "I get so tired with all those stairs."

"I remember when you first come to the hotel with your mama," she said. "I had been here exactly ten years when you two moved in. You were such a quiet little kid. Now you're a quiet young man."

George nodded, thinking back to when they had moved in. He had only one memory of that day, and that was looking up at the sign on the hotel just before they walked in the front door. He hadn't known how to read back then, but he was told later what the sign said, and then after Sam helped him with his reading, he was able to see how to pronounce the name from the letters. He always liked the name, because in the first place the hotel looked so much more inviting than all the drab industrial buildings around it, and second because the world was such a sad place and he could imagine that the name of the hotel rubbed off on its tenants, giving them a better time than they might otherwise have had.

"I couldn't give you a mother's love," she said. "I was never cut out to be no mother to nobody. That is why I never married, never had no kids. I sought contentment rather than happiness because I had found out that happiness never lasts. It never does, in my opinion. It is always better to choose an even life. If there are less pleasures, then there are less sorrows."

"But I saw that you needed lookin' after, and so that's what I did, but you learned fast to shift for yourself, and then you had Sam as well, all those years, until he went back to Hong Kong, and Lars brought that bunch of wild men to live here with him. These last five years have been a trial to me, but I just stuck it out until I was ready to retire, and now I'm leavin' for good."

George nodded, but Arcadia was lost in her vague plans for the future. He decided it was time to torture himself again. He uncoiled his skinny body out of the chair, walked

over to the door, and stooped down to pick up another box. He grunted while he yanked it up to his midsection, then staggered with it tucked to his stomach and slowly waddled towards the door.

Half an hour later, George sat on the last box he had just hauled down to the parking lot. Arcadia was fussing around rearranging boxes inside the small trailer hitched to the back of her old 1978 Cadillac. She was standing on a small foot ladder, bending over so her fat fanny was all George could see, swinging back and forth to the movements of her unseen torso inside the trailer. He thought again about how long it had been from the time they had moved in until when Arcadia had first become a major figure in his life. It had been just when his mother died, at a moment in his life when he was completely, horribly alone, and then Arcadia had somehow appeared out of nowhere, slowly taking over the responsibilities of looking after George. Before that, she had been the boss of the kitchen, a place where George was never allowed. And even though her apartment was also on the top floor, just like his mother's, he had been afraid of her back then, because he could tell she didn't like little kids.

After Arcadia had said goodbye, George stood and watched her drive off, hauling the little UVAN trailer with all her possessions. He stood there until her car reached the end of the block and turned the corner. Then he turned as well and walked slowly back to the hotel.

Sitting in his little room in the basement, George wondered about his own future. With Arcadia gone, the house seemed empty, even though there were two new guys that had come in yesterday from Chicago, as well as Dr. Moritz, whom he had been introduced to by Lars. The move was going to happen this coming weekend, and all the boxes that Lars had packed up to take to the new house were stacked up inside the hotel entrance. George looked with dismay at the one box of comic books that he had been allowed to take with him. They were the ones that George liked the best, but it had been the toughest job in his life to select them from all the rest, because all of the comic books he owned were already the pick of what he had managed to buy at McDonald's. Altogether, he had only been able to pack fifty in the box Lars had given him for the move. He felt lost, having to leave the only home he had really known in his whole life. He couldn't remember much of the house in the Haight Ashbury where he had spent his first five years.

With Arcadia gone, George wondered who was going to fix dinner the next couple nights at the hotel. With only two days before the move, they would probably eat out at fancy restaurants. Would they take him with them? He doubted it, but as much as Lars despised him, Lars would have to find some way to feed him. Maybe he would give him some money to get his own meals at one of the local hamburger joints.



## Chapter 5

"Okay, folks," said Lars expansively, "this is it." He stepped to one side to allow the others to enter and cluster around him in the small foyer. On the other side stood a large shiny suit of armor holding a sword.

"To our left is the living room, which in general will be for guests. To the right is the dining room. All those boxes on the table are going to go into the cabinets. Plates and cups and saucers and glasses and silverware."

Dr. Moritz and Billie walked into the dining room, looking at all the empty cabinets. Big Bill and Sly checked out the front room, noting the location of the comfortable chairs in proximity to the TV. George lagged behind, not wanting to irritate Lars, who stood in the center of the hall playing ringmaster.

"And to the right," he announced, "is the kitchen. This is where we'll have everything except the evening meal, which will be presented to us by our new chef, Dr. Moritz." Dr. Moritz gave a slight bow, accompanied by a slight smile.

After this, they all trooped up to the second floor, where Lars leisurely pointed out his and Billie's bedrooms, side by side, with a connecting private bathroom. George was given a nod by Dr. Moritz, who had already let him know that on this one occasion, George would be allowed to join the others on the inspection of the upstairs. George had been told earlier that he would be expected to meet with Dr. Moritz in his laboratory, but that otherwise the upstairs would be off limits.

With the exception of the bathrooms, every room had a big TV screen. They all slowly walked into each of the very large rooms, admiring the king-size beds, the ornate dressers, the glass-topped coffee tables, the expanses of shining hardwood floors and oriental carpeting. Then they filed in and out of Dr. Moritz' laboratory and adjoining bedroom, and finally Big Bill and Sly's bedroom, with a big walk-in closet, and with two very comfortable looking overstuffed chairs facing a large wall-sized TV screen, a large coffee table on top of a large circular shag rug, and a small refrigerator against the rear wall with a coffee machine on top.

Last but not least was the large communal bathroom for everyone but Lars and Billie. It had a sink and toilet, a shower, plus a large bathtub with a built-in whirlpool. It was tiled in an alternating blue and white checkerboard. Towel racks were everywhere.

"Saturday will be house-cleaning day," Lars told the group when it was finally assembled around the toilet. "I've contracted with a cleaning service to come once a week and change all the bedding and vacuum the rugs and sweep the floors. They'll be here at ten sharp every Saturday morning, so everybody will have to be out of the sack by that time.

"Now," he said, "if you'll follow me back down, we can take in the rest of the house."

They all slowly retraced their steps down to a large room on the other side of the kitchen, with a connecting door between. It had a number of comfortable looking chairs against two of the walls, and a large TV set against the third.

"You might notice that the TV set hasn't got any cable or antenna. Only a DVD player. This is what used to be called a 'family room,'" said Lars. "I thought maybe we could call it a 'common room,' a place where we can get together and let our hair down,

or to watch movies." He smiled inwardly at their reaction. He knew that nobody would have the guts to criticize his social demands.

"Why not just call it a 'family room,'" said Billie. "It doesn't have to mean we're all related."

"Why don't we allow everyone the choice of calling it one or the other," suggested Dr. Moritz. "What's wrong with two names? Does anyone remember the line from the old song: 'It's Istanbul, not Constantinople?'"

"Yeah, sure!" exclaimed Big Bill, miraculously coming to life, with a little wiggle of his hips, while singing, with a surprisingly pleasant baritone voice, "It's Is-tan-bul, not Con-stan-ti-nople, oh it's Is-tan-bul not . . ." To the relief of everyone, Big Bill let his voice trail off after the first line.

"If anyone wants to see Big Bill do the dance of the seven veils, come one, come all," Sly intoned, mocking the style of the sex show barker. Dr. Moritz was quite amused, as was Billie, while Lars hid his disapproval.

"You have a pretty good voice," said Billie with a smile, looking straight at Big Bill.

"I used to do barbershop quartet," he explained. "They always told me I was good. But I got no taste for show business. 'I get no kicks from champagne,'" he sang briefly, while Sly raised his eyebrows to Lars in commiseration, and Billie continued to be amused.

"Maybe we could have a Saturday night singalong in the front room," she suggested with a teasing smile. "We could serve beer and pretzels."

There was a long moment of very dead silence.

"We haven't seen the rest of the house, yet," said Dr. Moritz helpfully, trying to rescue Lars from his growing discomfort. He had an inkling that Lars probably loathed anyone poking fun at him. He stowed the thought away for the future. It could become a problem in the smooth running of their little community of six. He liked Billie's sense of humor, but he was afraid that Lars didn't, especially when others were around to witness her making light of his ideas. Dr. Moritz would have to have a few private words with Lars later. He had an idea which might ease the social tensions. Everyone knew that Lars liked rules. Why not have him, Dr. Moritz, announce to all of them, in the very near future, a proposed set of rules for their little community? He could make it look like the idea had come from him rather than from Lars. It was becoming evident that Lars needed the guiding hand of an elder statesman.

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George was spending his second night in the new house. He wasn't too enamored of his new bedroom. It was just a tiny cubicle just off the pantry, behind the kitchen, with one small window up at the top. A room with scarcely more than five by ten feet of floor space into which a small single bed had been crammed. In addition he had the one box of comic books and two suitcases of all his worldly possessions. He also had the small puzzle box with what was left of his mother's saved-up earnings, now down to seventy-nine dollars and twenty-five cents.

At the moment, he was rereading the classic comics edition of the Count of Monte Cristo. It was one of his most favorite. As he got into the adventure, he imagined he was

in the Chateau d'If, and that his small room was in reality a stone room on whose walls he was carving notches to keep track of how many days he had spent in his watery prison.

He thought again of Billie, whom he could see was a very sympathetic person. And she had been able to stand up to Lars! That had impressed him. He loved the way she teased Lars, knowing just when to stick in the needle. But he wondered why she went to all the trouble.

The more George contemplated the dumpy little room he was forced to live in, the more the idea grew to escape as soon as possible, maybe even right away. Seventy-nine dollars and twenty-five cents wouldn't go very far. Maybe George could find somebody else to work for. There wasn't much George knew how to do, but he could do house cleaning. He had watched his mother doing it for so many years he practically knew it by heart. He wasn't very good at it, because he was slow, but maybe that didn't matter. He would be willing to work just to feed himself, and he needed a corner to sleep in. George wasn't very particular about such things, because his needs were simple. Maybe he could find someone to work for who would allow him to keep all his comic books. They didn't take up that much room. He decided that he ought to leave that very night, after everyone had gone to bed. That way he would have a head start on Lars.

He would have to leave the one box of comic books here. He hated to lose them, but if he escaped, he might be able to rescue the other nine boxes which were still at the hotel. Maybe he could get a job with someone who had a basement he could sleep in. Most places had basements, he reasoned, so it shouldn't be much of a problem. Having reached this decision, he started feeling better. Nobody he worked for could ever be as mean as Lars. He decided to take the Count of Monte Cristo with him, but he would have to leave the rest of the box. He knew what they all were by heart, so maybe he could eventually replace them. It would be difficult, because they were all practically collector's items.

He lay on his bed, waiting for everyone in the house to go to sleep. He didn't figure it would be too difficult to escape. Even if the front door was locked, he could probably get out through the dining room window. It was one of those tall windows on hinges that opened outwards. He had looked at it carefully while Lars had been showing off the house to the others.

As soon as all the little noises in the house had died down, George got quietly up from his bed. He put together the few things he needed to take with him, his Giants baseball cap, a tooth brush, a comb, and what was left of the money his mother had left him. He chose an old coat that was nice and thick and would keep him warm. He concealed the money in his sock, afraid the street people might take it away from him. He didn't like the street people. They were sly and crafty, and pretended to be kind and loving, when they were really just out for money. They were also pretty mean to each other. He had seen a few quarrels break out among them, either for money or for their claim to a good spot on the street for spare-changing.

The air seemed to be pretty cool tonight. He tiptoed past the kitchen into the front hallway. There were no sounds in the house except for the muted sound of a TV upstairs. Nobody seemed to be downstairs. He made his way through the dark rooms. Fortunately the moon was out. He could see its white light spilling onto the dining room floor.

## Chapter 6

Lars didn't realize that George was missing until they were all sitting around in the breakfast room. After Lars checked George's little room, he had Sly and Big Bill search the entire house, but they came up empty-handed. Lars was beside himself. His entire future depended on George, and he had hired Dr. Moritz to help him plan that future. He had no problem with money. He could live the rest of his life in relative comfort, but he would have nothing to sharpen his wits on. Without a future in crime, his life seemed useless. What would he do with all his time?

Dr. Moritz was even more concerned. He had no nest egg at all. If this job fell through, he would be back to scrounging for another one, one which wouldn't utilize his lifelong experiences in psychiatry, and he had been looking forward with real interest to working with George. He realized, however, that this was a moment to preserve his cool.

"He can't have gone very far," he told Lars. "He doesn't have any money, does he?"

For just a moment, Lars felt very much like punching Dr. Moritz out. The last thing he needed right now was somebody else's advice, even good advice, but with supreme self control he managed to restrain himself.

"None that I know of," Lars ground out in a cooler tone of voice than he felt. "Except that he always seemed to have enough to buy his damned comic books and an occasional beer. Maybe Sam gave him something."

"He's lived his whole life here in San Francisco, hasn't he? He doesn't know anyplace else."

"That's true," said Lars, starting to feel a bit mollified. "Maybe he went back to the old neighborhood. It's a long walk from here. Maybe he took the streetcar or a bus. Let's finish breakfast. Then I'll have Sly and Big Bill drive us back to the old hotel, and we can start our search from there."

"Maybe he just returned to the hotel and he's sleeping there right now," said Dr. Moritz. "But the place is locked up, isn't it?"

"George always seemed to come and go as he pleased," said Lars. "I think he has a secret way in and out."

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The night before, after escaping from the new house, George had headed north, looking for some kind of public transportation, but he hadn't found any. The entire district had been quiet, and nothing had been open. There weren't even any cars. But it had been nearly one AM by the kitchen clock, so that wasn't too unusual. He remembered the drive across the city to the new house, so he decided to walk in the opposite direction.. He finally found a street with tracks on it, and he decided to follow it. Maybe a street car would come along. He wondered how much they would charge. He remembered a couple times when he had taken a streetcar down Market to get to McDonald's bookstore. He couldn't remember what the fare had been, but he did remember it was less than a dollar.

But no streetcar showed up. George walked and walked and walked. At first he counted the blocks, but then he saw that the street signs were all numbered, and the last one he passed said Ninth Avenue. That was also where the streetcar tracks turned, so he

decided to follow the tracks. He figured they should lead downtown, and he remembered that the hotel was pretty close to the downtown area.

When he crossed Cole Street, he saw that the streetcar tracks went into a dark tunnel, and he stood and thought for a long time. He was afraid that if he tried to go around the tunnel he would get lost, so he just kept on walking. The tunnel was pitch dark, and he couldn't see a thing, but there was no need to see, because he had the tracks to follow, except that he stumbled a lot on the flat logs that the tracks lay on top of. He wondered what would happen if a streetcar did come along, but he hadn't seen a single one so far.

He finally got to the end of the tunnel, and followed the street that it led to, still having the tracks to show him the way. A little farther on he came to a big Safeway store that seemed to be still open. George couldn't remember any stores around the hotel that had been open that late. At the first big street, he looked for a sign, and found one that said Market Street, and then he knew he was okay. He followed it to the left, which he figured had to go to the Ferry Building, where he had been to once a long time ago, and he knew that the street he followed after leaving McDonald's bookstore was Turk Street, which ended on Market Street, and he knew that Turk Street was just a little beyond Sixth Street, so he knew he was practically home. When he got to Sixth Street, he made a right turn.

Another fifteen minutes of walking, and he was back in his old neighborhood. He wondered if he should sleep at the old hotel, but he decided against it. He knew another place that he had slept in a long time ago, in the back of an old garage. He hoped his old way in was still there, and that the street people hadn't found it yet.

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Felix Unterhausen opened his auto repair shop a little late. He had closed out the bars the night before, and had slept in, hoping that his hangover would go away, but of course it hadn't. He wouldn't have come in at all, but he had a rush job that a customer was paying extra for, and he didn't want to take a chance on the customer arriving early and finding the shop still closed. He unlocked the garage doors and shoved them open. They were old and dragged against the cement, so he had to push pretty hard. Inside, he flicked on the light switch just outside the office, revealing a dark and greasy interior, having never been cleaned in the thirty years that Felix had been the owner.

The car he was working on was a 1986 Honda, still in pristine shape for the twelve years it had been on the road. The owner of the car had had the car since he bought it, and was one of those rare people who kept a car for a lifetime, an attitude that Felix approved of. The transmission was going, and Felix had managed to locate a used replacement that was still in reasonable shape from a junkyard down in South San Francisco. He might have been able to get a new one through San Francisco Honda, but he believed in cutting corners on cost whenever he could. The replacement transmission wouldn't last as long as a new one, but Felix didn't care. He would make sure the customer paid the same amount for the job. His main purpose in running the garage was to make enough profit to pay his rent, maintain his alcoholism and pay for some pussy at one of the local cat houses.

He made his way to the storeroom, where he kept most of his tools. He had suffered a number of losses by thieves making off with valuable equipment while he was stuck under a car, so he kept all but those tools necessary for the job he was working on locked up.

He unlocked the door, switched on the overhead bulb, and as he made his way inside, he was astonished by the revelation of a sleeping man lying on a pile of old rags in the corner. He walked over to the sleeper and gave him a kick in the side.

"How the hell did you get in here? You some kinda Houdini?" he demanded as the guy came to and unscrambled his wits enough to look up at Felix.

The guy pointed up to the corner of the ceiling, where a couple of panels were missing. He turned his head and looked dumbly up at Felix.

"Well," said Felix, "Maybe you can work it off. I got a job to do and not much time. You willing to pass me the tools I ask for when I need 'em?"

The guy rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and nodded gravely.

"Okay," said Felix, picking up a metal toolbox loaded with wrenches of various sizes. "You follow me out to the pit. But first gimme your shoes. I wanna make sure you don't make a run for it. What's your name?"

"George," said the guy as he slowly rose to his feet.

"Mine's Felix. Now take your goddam shoes off."

George bent down and untied his shoes, using his feet to help push them off. He dutifully passes them over to Felix, who stood there frowning.

"Okay, George. Come along, now."

George followed him out in his stocking feet, standing dumbly on the oily floor next to where the Honda Civic sat on the hoist, and watched his new boss climb down under the car.

The first couple hours passed by pretty well. At first Felix called out a request for a particular wrench, and, since George didn't know one wrench from another, he just looked dumbly down at his boss. But then he saw the picture of the tool in Felix' mind, and he reached down and grabbed the wrench that looked just like the picture. Felix grunted his approval as George handed it to him.

As the morning progressed, every time George's new boss asked for a tool, George saw the shape of it in the boss' mind. A couple times, what the boss asked for was somewhere else in the garage, but George picked up on the location as well. Felix was impressed with how well George handled his new job, and nodded approvingly at him a number of times.

At the end of the afternoon, Felix climbed out of the pit for the last time. He wiped his hands again and nodded at George. "I ain't gonna pay you for this, now, but we'll consider that you've earned your room rent. You wanna go on sleepin' there, you just continue doin' what you done today, okay?"

George nodded dumbly and stood there, not knowing what to say. It seemed okay to him, at least for the time being.

"You gotta show me how you got in, however," said Felix. "I don't want any more people climbin' in the way you did."

So George had, at least for the time being, secured an okay sleeping place. Now he only had to figure out how to feed himself after his money ran out.

## Chapter 7

After an entire day spent searching all the bars in the area, Lars and his three henchmen began checking out all the resident hotels, but after twelve hours altogether, they felt entirely exhausted and opted for a nice meal at a Potrero Street restaurant that Lars was fond of. While they were eating their desserts, Dr. Moritz suggested to Lars that they complete moving the last load to the new house, and stay out of the hotel until late at night, at which time they could pay a sneak visit to the hotel basement, and see if Moritz's idea that George might still be sleeping in his old room. Moritz further suggested that they leave someone in the parking lot, just in case George heard them coming and tried to sneak out before they found him.

"His secret way in and out of the hotel must lead to the parking lot," said Dr. Moritz. "There doesn't seem to be any other sensible egress, since all the doors and windows on the ground floor are locked on the inside."

"Now I know why I hired you," said Lars. "You are a fund of sensible ideas."

At two in the morning, Lars and company drove back to the hotel and checked the basement. Sly remained in the parking lot, while the other three entered through the front door and hurried down the steps to the basement.

But there was no George. Lars' concerns went up a notch on the Richter Scale, but Dr. Moritz came once again to the rescue of Lars' sanity.

"Let's continue with the present plan for a few more days," he said. "I think our pigeon will eventually come back to roost. His comic books are still there."

"Good point," said Lars.

The second day was much like the first for George with his temporary new employer. He found the tools that Felix asked for without any problems, and he helped him guide the replacement transmission into position, using the pulley chain. At the end of the afternoon, Felix completed the repairs, and they both stood and admired the completed work. George, of course, had no idea what had been accomplished, but he could tell by Felix's thoughts that he was pleased with the results. But at the end, Felix told him that he wouldn't be needing him for the rest of the week. That evening, after Felix had closed up shop, and George had polished off the burger and fries that he purchased at Burger King, George returned to the Auto Repair Shop, and walked around the side of the building through the narrow alleyway between the shop and the adjacent building. But after he climbed the fence which cordoned off the overgrown back yards from the street, he found the opening in the roof, which had up to now provided him entry into the shop, boarded up, so he returned, via his secret passage, to his old room in the basement of the Good Times Hotel. He felt that Lars wouldn't figure on him returning. He brought with him a bottle of Early Times whisky to keep him company for the night.

On Thursday, four days after George's escape, Lars and company again paid the hotel a visit. As before, Sly waited in the parking lot while the other three hurried down to the basement on tiptoe.

As Dr. Moritz had suggested, there was George, splayed out on his bed with vomit all over the front of his coat, which he was sleeping in, and he was snoring loudly.

Dr. Moritz, with the help of Sly and Big Bill, managed to clean George up enough to bear the disgusting smell of vomit and whisky. Then they hustled him up to the car, where he was hemmed in on both sides by Dr. Moritz and Big Bill. Sly drove, as usual, and Lars sat in the front passenger seat. George's stink revolted all of them, so they kept all the windows open and turned on the air conditioner.

Thus the missing George was reunited with his very relieved family in crime. Sly and Big Bill still didn't have much of a clue as to why Lars was so keen on finding George. But then nobody had explained to them just why he was so valuable. Lars resolved from then on to keep George on a very short leash. He didn't want to take any chances on losing his key to a new and improved method of unlawful gain.



## Chapter 8

Dr. Moritz took off his glasses, sat back in his swivel chair, massaged the bridge of his nose, and considered his situation. His life at the present moment seemed like a movie script, starting with a genuine telepath, which was amazing in any situation, and ending with a playactor gang boss who spent half a million just to decorate his house, which just by itself had to have cost at least two million. Lars was a big spender. Dr. Moritz felt himself extremely lucky to latch on to him while there still was a lot left to acquire. Lars had the right idea about discovering the potentialities of an extreme rarity like George. Except that Dr. Moritz wanted to do a lot more than that. He wanted to make a proper scientific study of George, and get it into black and white. It might be worth a lot of bucks. He had to somehow slow Lars down from creating irretrievable social situations. He doubted that Lars could make a hausfrau out of Billie. It would probably be better if Billie left, and it looked more and more as if that were going to happen.

As if on cue, he heard a tap on his door and he swiveled round to see Lars poking his head into the room.

"Hello," said the disembodied head. "Got time for a chat?"

"Yes, certainly," said the doctor. "I was just thinking about our favorite subject."

"George, I presume," said Lars, sitting on the desk chair.

"Yes," said Dr. Moritz. "I understand you didn't let him bring the rest of his comic book collection."

"So?" said Lars, frowning and shrugging his shoulders.

"If we are going to study him properly, we need to have his cooperation. Why make him unhappy unnecessarily?"

"Yeah," said Lars. "Billie's already been on my case. It's just that I hate to cow tow to morons."

"That's what he'll be if you treat him like one."

"George will know right away when I want something out of him, no matter how much I dress it up. George and I go way back on this. I've established my dominance of him, and I would lose too much if I acceded at all to his wishes."

Dr. Moritz grimaced inwardly at the lack of subtlety in Lars' brute force methodology. "Then let me do it," he said. "You can continue to be the bad guy, and I can be the good guy. Good cop, bad cop. Only, of course, you're the sheriff, so you always win out. That's a scenario George would be willing to buy. It's probably a useful situation for us, for this problem to have arisen. Let him have his comics. Are they still back at the hotel?"

"I don't know. No reason why they shouldn't be. I still have ownership until the end of the month."

"Then let me go get them. I assume I can have use of the limo. Since Sly would be driving, Big Bill would want to come along. Most importantly, let me bring George."

Lars smiled grimly. "That's giving a lot of attention to George. Maybe this is just the beginning. Next it'll be bathroom rights."

"He doesn't have them?"

"I hadn't thought about it. I wonder if he's ever had a bath."

"In four years with him, you never noticed? How about that six-month ordeal the two of you went on, getting your money back?"

"He's told you about it?"

"Certainly. He considers me his doctor. Don't you want him to confide in me?"

"Yeah. Okay. I guess you're right. Can't do any harm. When do you want to do this?"

"Everybody seems to be gone today. How about tomorrow noon? Everybody should be through with breakfast by then, and the dishes will be done. You think they'll all be free?"

"They'll be free when I say they're free," growled Lars. "How about Billie? You want her along as well? You could make it into a group outing."

"I think it might be better if we treated this like a task to be accomplished. There's no reason for Billie to know about it until it's a fait accompli. You want me to set it up with Sly and Big Bill?"

"No," said Lars. "I'll tell them when I see them tonight to escort you and George to the hotel and back to fetch George's comic books. That ought to get a laugh out of them."

"Things okay between you and Billie?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, yeah. Sure. I'm just a little testy this morning. Billie kept her bedroom door locked last night."

"There's nothing amiss between the two of you, is there?"

"Well, Billie and I are still at odds about what we should call the common room. I don't want Billie to think I'm a dictator, but on the other hand I really hate to give in on everything. One victory and they want another one."

"Look," said Dr. Moritz, "Everyone in this house knows that you're the boss, and that I work for you. Isn't that so?"

"Sure, sure. So what?"

"So you let me act as your second in command. There need be no statement about this relationship. It's completely natural. They will see me as a go-between. It's ideal."

Lars thought really hard about it. He hated to accede, but how could he keep Billie here if he acted like a tyrant. He nodded to Dr. Moritz. "You're right, Ernest. Any other thoughts?"

"I took a few minutes this morning and laid out a possible set of rules. Take a look." Dr. Moritz picked up his notebook and passed it over to Lars.

1. *The living room is reserved for special guests of Lars, Billie, and Dr. Moritz..*
2. *The family room is to be used by everyone in the house at any time for relaxation and getting together.*
3. *Meals will be served at set times, but everyone is welcome to use the kitchen at any time for snacks and sandwiches. All regular meals will be prepared by our chef, Dr. Moritz.*
4. . . .

The list continued on for about seventeen categories, dealing with everything from TV watching to dinner times on the weekends, to who could use the common room and a great deal more.

Lars scanned it quickly, then went back to the top of the page and read it all again. He looked at Dr. Moritz. "Good idea, Ernest. If I tried to do it myself, they'd all be against it."

"I have one more idea. Let's bring it up tonight, and let them decide. After all, we all should have something to say about living together."

"You're a source of inspiration, Ernest. I can't understand what hold you have over me, but I really can't complain. Just think of all the time and energy I'd have wasted getting those knuckleheads to agree on anything."

"It's time for you to relax a little, Lars. You've been pretty busy moving in here. You and I should try to find some time to explore some of the possibilities with George. I'm really fascinated with the project. Do you realize the uniqueness of having a genuine telepath to work with? Think of the incredible scams George might make possible."

"That isn't an easy job," said Lars. "I've really stretched my imagination, and, I hate to say it, but, I haven't come up with any ideas at all. It seems like there should be a million ways to use George, but the more I get into them, the less reasonable they seem. I guess that's really why I brought you into my little operation. You had the expertise I lacked."

As Lars spoke, Dr. Moritz was daydreaming again about the wonderful research which seemed to be on the verge of opening up for him. There were also the possibilities of fame and fortune in the academic world. But he would have to be very careful to screen that purpose from Lars. If Lars didn't know about it, he couldn't forbid it. There was no point in sowing discord in this strange little Eden he had become a member of. His main preoccupation was to keep the operation afloat as long as possible, not only to salt away the generous salary Lars was paying him, but for additional gains in the future from the use of George's ability. All of that plus the ultimate plum – the scientific study of a telepath. Even though he had been disbarred from practice, he wasn't disbarred from publishing a bona fide research paper.

"The important thing," said Dr. Moritz, improvising rapidly, "is to create a workable temporary plan, just to get started. That way, we can set provisional goals, and set aside regularly scheduled times to achieve those goals. Order is a first prerequisite to creativity. Another is a relaxed frame of mind. Once you and I get started properly, things will just fall into place. It's quite understandable that you feel a little at odds right now. Just let the good doctor prescribe for you."

"You're so right, Ernest. Right as rain. I'm a pretty driven person, as you must know by now. I think my main problem is not having an immediate purpose, and what you say about setting up a plan really appeals to me. I'm just a little ill at ease with all this inactivity. I can only do so many situps in the gym and so many reps on a punching bag. I need something to challenge my mind."

"How about a game of chess?" proposed Dr. Moritz.

"You have a set?"

"In my luggage. Would now be a good time?"

"Sure. Where'll we play? I don't fancy hauling myself up out of one of these overstuffed chairs every time I go to make a move.."

"You're right. There're some comfortable chairs in the common room.. Everyone else is gone, so let's go down there."

"You mean the 'family room.'"

"Right as ever, Lars."

At 11:45 AM, the next day, Big Bill finally washed the last plate, and Sly waited for him to pass it to him to dry. George sat excitedly on top of a stool, his hands in his lap, his eyes fixed on the floor, waiting for the drive to the hotel. He couldn't believe that Dr. Moritz had pulled actually pulled it off with Lars, but he wasn't going to question his good luck. He really wanted to share his good luck with Billie, but she had left early in the morning.

The whole drive over was unreal to George. Dr. Moritz hadn't said anything to Sly or Big Bill about what they were going to pick up, but neither one of them seemed particularly curious about the errand. They were busy thinking about the up-and-coming Giants game and how soon they'd be getting back to the house so they could catch the game on TV. George wasn't used to traveling around the city by car. This, in fact was the second trip George had made in a car since Sam had left. He glanced around curiously at all the parts of the city he had missed out on. Sam had always taken the Bay Bridge over to Golden Gate Fields, so he had never really driven anywhere in San Francisco. It was quite an experience for George, since he had spent practically his entire life in the Good Times Hotel, and his only real experience of the world outside the hotel and its immediate neighborhood was from watching TV. But the real thrill underlying this trip was that they were going to retrieve his beloved comic books. He hoped that in the period of time since they'd left, nobody would have come by and stolen any of his treasures.

By the time they reached the hotel, however, Big Bill started wondering about the point of the trip. He especially didn't understand why George was coming with them. He didn't ask about any of this, however, because Sly had, over the years, impressed upon him the uselessness of questions, especially useless questions, as most of Big Bill's were. Also during that time, Big Bill had come to realize that Sly was smart enough to tell him all the things he needed to know. Theirs was truly a symbiotic relationship. Sly supplied the brains, and Big Bill the brawn.

After they parked the car and unlocked the front door of the hotel, Dr. Moritz led the small troupe straight to the basement, and as they went down the stairs, Big Bill was going crazy trying to figure out why. When they reached George's bedroom, Big Bill's questions were finally answered for him by Dr. Moritz' instructions that the three of them were to cart the ten boxes of comic books back to the car.

"There ain't gonna be enough room," complained Big Bill, for all these boxes and us too."

"Well," said Dr. Moritz, "we can always leave you behind." He quickly modified his statement when he saw the look of genuine concern on Big Bill's face. "Just kidding," said Dr. Moritz. "There's space enough in the trunk for almost all of these, and if all the boxes don't fit, we can just stick some of the comic books in without their boxes."

As they were moving the boxes out to the bottom of the stairs prior to carrying them out to the car, Big Bill's eyes lit on the titles of some of the magazines. "Hey," he said, "Here are some old Donald Duck adventures, with Huey, Dewey and Louie. I always used to like them."

"Perhaps George will allow you to borrow them," said Dr. Moritz. "You'll have to treat them with care, however. They're probably collectors' items by now."

Soon, Sly, Big Bill and George were hauling the boxes upstairs and out to the car, with Dr. Moritz supervising. Their mission was soon over with, and within twenty minutes they were driving back to the house. George was in seventh heaven, finally reunited with his treasures.

Back at the house, George was happily sorting out his comic books, putting them in order so as to be able to find whatever he wanted without a lot of searching. Dr. Moritz had promised to supply him in the near future with a real bookcase to put them in, and for the first time in his life under Lars, he felt a strange sense of acceptance of the new order.

With the rest of the afternoon at his disposal, Dr. Moritz took time out to unpack his belongings and move them into the dressers and cupboards of his room, as well as into the large, walk-in closet. Now that George had been retrieved, there was peace in the household. Lars was in good spirits as well, and the two of them, he and Dr. Moritz, could begin some serious discussions on how to use George's talents. One proposition that Lars had made was to acquire a lie detector machine for use with George in order to determine the extent to which he was being totally candid in his answers to their questions. At first, Dr. Moritz had worried about the psychological effect on George, but Lars had the perfect answer.

"Just continue to have that attitude," he had told the doctor, "and George will pick up on your reservations against it. You suggested the 'good cop – bad cop' metaphor already. Just let me continue to be the bad guy. I've always had the feeling that George hasn't always been totally truthful to me, and the use of such a machine would make me feel a lot more comfortable with his answers. Besides, you might find that using it as a tool has other, unanticipated values."

"Okay," Dr. Moritz had said. "Would you like me to check out what's available, and get back to you with some recommendations?"

"Perfect," Lars had replied. "I believe that you and I are beginning to achieve a real rapport. And don't let money get in the way of what would be best as far as what's available. Get the best machine on the market. I would imagine that your being a psychiatrist should smooth over any problems about whether such machines are suitable for the general public."

After Dr. Moritz finally got all his clothes put away, he turned his attention to some boxes of memorabilia he had been carting around for a number of years. These consisted of posters and photos dating from the early forties, when he had been in his teens. Many of them were illegal in Germany, but he had managed to keep them from the inquisitive eyes of Nazi haters, as well as collectors like himself. He opened the boxes and carried their contents over to his bed, where he lay them out for his inspection. There were posters of the Führer, standing with arms folded, in a brown uniform, with the caption "Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer." Another showed the former leader with his hands on the back of a chair, and the slogan "Adolf Hitler ist der Sieg." A third showed two infantrymen rushing into battle with rifles on the ready. These were museum specimens, if there were any museums in the world willing to display them. Some of them Dr. Moritz had acquired over the years from private collectors.

Another box was filled with mementos - the Iron Cross his grandfather had received in the First World War, the Order of Merit his father had earned from the S.S., a few black-and-white photos – a faded one of his grandfather with piercing eyes and an

aquiline nose surmounting a bushy mustache and beard, his father with a group of laughing S.S. buddies at a party, Dr. Moritz himself at the age of twelve in his Hitler Youth summer uniform, with a brown shirt and black neckerchief, dark blue short pants and knee-high socks with black shoes. On his shirtsleeve was a white stripe with a black swastika. The photo was in black and white, but Dr. Moritz remembered his uniform well.

His fingers touched lovingly on the medals and military decorations he had collected over the years. He remembered Ringstrasse, lined with barren trees, in early January of 1943, riding his bicycle to the German Youth meeting, avoiding the patches of ice and the convoys of German soldiers. He had only been a member of the Deutsche Jungvolk, for boys between ten and fourteen. You didn't get to be in the Hitler Jugend until the age of fifteen.

After his mother's death, his father had put him in the care of their housekeeper, Frau Wegner, an elderly Jewish woman. Moritz remembered the regret he had felt when he had had to turn her name in to the authorities. It had also made life more difficult for him, as he had been obliged to go and live with his aunt and his two bratty cousins. It had, however, been extremely fortuitous, because two years later, when the city, as well as the country, was divided into four sectors, he had ended up in the American Zone, and from there he had managed to make his way across the Atlantic Ocean to Ellis Island, and applied for American citizenship.

From New York, he had traveled across the country to San Francisco, California, where, after four years of study, he had obtained his degree in Medicine, and after another four, one in Psychiatry. The money he had been left by his father in care of his aunt had enabled him to pay for his room and board, and, since, in the fifties, the School of Medicine at the University of California in San Francisco had been tuition-free, he had been able to spend all his time at his studies. He had used his degree to hold down some well-paying jobs at several mental hospitals, listening for many years to the problems of neurotic and psychotic people. But that had all come to a bitter end just five years ago, when he had been caught carrying on several amorous relations with his female patients, and had been disbarred from his profession by the State Board. It had been a life-saver to have been hired by Lars, saving him from the dreadful prospect of going from one dismal minor job to another. That he could actually work at his chosen profession with George had brought renewed meaning into his life.

He decided to use the ample space in his large, walk-in closet to display his posters and photographs. It was a pleasure to have them in a place where he could enjoy them in private.

The years had brought about major changes in his attitudes towards the master race that his grandfather and father had believed in so fervently. He didn't doubt the basic assumption, but he saw no reason to mistreat inferior people. They had their uses, and if they were happy in their existences, it constituted no problems. Happy people were better workers. The entire treatment of the Jews, for example, was a terrible misconception of the position of the master race. Besides, most German Jews were partly German anyway, and many had been responsible for great accomplishments in music, literature, science, and mathematics.

Some of these changes to the effects of his early inculcation into the values of the Nazi party had been a response in him to the public outcry which had followed the

revelations of the Nuremberg trials. Further inroads had been made as a result of his own psychoanalysis, a requirement made of all students working towards a degree in psychiatry, during which he had uncovered the evidences of his father's disapproval of him for what his father had seen in him as a lack of backbone and toughness expected of all good Nazi children.

As a result of Dr. Moritz' altered feelings towards those inferior to him, he realized that George would prove much more pliable if he were treated properly. There was little that Dr. Moritz could do to ameliorate Lars' strong determination to keep George shoeless and penniless, but he was determined to improve George's state of mind. His interest in comic books, for example, was an area where Dr. Moritz could increase George's feelings of satisfaction with his life under Lars. As a first gesture, Dr. Moritz felt that he could assist George in obtaining some proper bookcases for his comics collection. He had several other related ideas percolating in the back of his mind.

## Chapter 9

Spring was turning into summer, and George was going stir crazy, imprisoned as he was in Lars' big old house out in the Sunset. Once a day he was allowed to take a walk on the beach, accompanied, as always, by his two jailers, Sly and Big Bill. He had attempted to escape just once, when they had allowed him a little too much slack, and when he was about fifty yards away he had attempted to run for freedom. But Sly had been faster than him and had had the wit to sprint along the water's edge where the sand was firmer. After that, Big Bill and Sly kept him on a shorter leash, allowing him no more than a dozen feet ahead of them.

It was only on his daily walk that he was allowed to wear his street shoes, which Lars kept locked up in his office. Otherwise, all he was permitted to wear around the house was an old pair of Billie's floppy house slippers. In addition to that, one of the two, Sly or Big Bill, kept him under constant surveillance. Besides the dead bolt on the front door, locks on the dining room window had been installed ever since his first escape from the house. There was a back yard, and George was allowed to spend time out there without supervision, since the fifteen-foot wooden fence was too high for George to clamber over. There was a ladder in the basement, but it was too long and heavy for George to carry, and even if he made it to the top of the fence, the drop was a good fifteen feet down to the neighboring yard.

Still, the back yard was a respite from the boredom of the house. George enjoyed the wild abandon of the back yard, weeds and overgrown bushes giving him his only privacy, except at night when he retired to the small bed in his room just off the kitchen, a former pantry with a single window too high up for George to reach, and too narrow for him to squeeze through.

But George had a lot less reason to escape nowadays, and Dr. Moritz was the main reason. He had ensured that George could hold on to all ten boxes of his comic book collection, and a trip to an unfinished furniture shop on Clement Street had resulted in three bookcases to house his entire collection. An ensuing visit to a hardware store had netted three cans of paint, and George had been allowed to select the colors. He had settled on painting the three bookcases in red, yellow, and blue.

Lars had had some reservations about such lurid colors, but Dr. Moritz had successfully pointed out that only those visitors to the miniscule pantry which served George for a bedroom could be offended by the rather vivid colors. George had been allowed to paint them himself down in the basement. It had been the first time in his life that he had painted anything, and he had enjoyed it so much that Dr. Moritz had rewarded him with a painting by the numbers he picked up at Flax Art Supply up on Market Street. George had been dubious about painting an actual picture, so Moritz had decided to start him out on something easy.

With the considerations paid to him by Dr. Moritz, George's attitude had changed considerably and he gradually became more acceptant of the testing that Dr. Moritz was putting him through. Although the new lie-detector machine had originally made George feel nervous, the way Moritz was using it really intrigued George. Rather than testing his truthfulness, it seemed to give Moritz more of an insight into George's thoughts, with Moritz becoming aware of subtleties that George himself had not noticed.



So George's outlook on his incarceration seemed to be improving. He still hated being locked up all the time, but his lot seemed to be changing. With Dr. Moritz looking out for his welfare, George felt almost happy at times. Life became a little more like it had been in the Good Times Hotel, except that he could no longer go up to McDonald's bookstore, or get some tasty French fries once in a while at Burger King. He complained about this to Dr. Moritz, who promised him a trip up to the bookstore the very next weekend for more comic books. When he brought up the fact that they were costing a lot more than when he had first begun collecting them, due to their rarity, Moritz told him not to worry about it, that he would take care of the cost himself. This cheered George up a lot.

## Chapter 10

It was on one of those afternoons, after his run on the beach, when George really felt closed in by the house, that he began his rounds of the downstairs. He always started his tour at the big knight-in-armor suit that stood just inside the front door. Lars told everybody that he had gotten it cheap for five thousand dollars, but George knew that he had actually stolen it.

As he drifted slowly from room to room, George glanced at all the stuff that was in the rooms. He would wander through the dining room, looking at the cabinets with the glass doors that you could look through and see all the stacks of plates and the rows of cups hanging by their handles. George remembered helping Sly and Big Bill carefully putting the dishes away after one of Dr. Moritz's gourmet meals. George gathered that "gourmet" meant expensive and great tasting, although he never cared very much for fancy food. He liked the same sort of things as Big Bill and Sly – hamburgers and fries. But Dr. Moritz and Lars both disapproved of fries.

It was on one of these daily late-afternoon wanderings, on a day when both Big Bill and Sly were off with the boss and Dr. Moritz to some kind of meeting, that he was making his usual tour of the house and had just come into the family room, and for some reason he hadn't noticed Billie sitting there. He was busy thinking again about the comic book run with Dr. Moritz the coming weekend, when he suddenly found himself looking into the unexpected eyes of Billie, who seemed to be just as startled as he was.

"Hello," she said after a very long minute. "I didn't realize anybody was around."

"I'm sorry," George blurted out. "I-It j-just surprised me. I always kn-kn -know when somebody is in a, a room. And, and s-suddenly you were there." He stopped talking but kept staring at her, as if she were an apparition which was likely to disappear at any moment.

"Why don't you sit down," Billie said to him. "Although we've had breakfast with the others several times by now, I don't think we've ever spoken together."

George nodded his head thoughtfully. Actually, he had seen her thoughts a number of times and had a pretty good idea of what she was like.

"How long have you been with Lars, now?" she asked.

"Five years," he said. "Five years and six months and twenty seven days."

"You sound like a soldier looking forward to getting out of the army."

He didn't quite understand her. What did she mean?

She saw the puzzlement in his eyes. "I mean it sounds like you don't like working for him, that it's like some kind of prison sentence."

"You mean like in the Count of Monte Cristo?"

"You've read that?" she asked with surprise.

"Yeah, in the classic comics. It's a great story."

"Well," she said. "I guess I do mean something like that. Tell me, just what is it you do for Lars?"

"I find out things for him that he needs to know." George felt a little nervous. He remembered all the warnings that Sam and his mother had made to him about telling other people about his special talents.

She looked really puzzled. "What kinds of things?"

He wondered if it would be okay for him to tell her. There was a long moment of silence.

"I know that Lars has you working for him in some kind of way," she said, "but I don't know what it is. Maybe that's what I really wanted to ask you. Is it okay if you tell me? Lars has a lot of secrets."

George thought again about telling her. He realized that Billie was a person he could really talk to. He saw that she didn't look down on him, like a bug, the way some people acted when they met him. Then it came to him that he had a right to do something on his own. Maybe even if Lars didn't like it. He made up his mind and nodded his head. "Sure," he said. "Lars didn't tell me not to tell anyone. Neither did the doctor. What would you like to know?"

"What is it that you know how to do?" She waited for his answer.

"You gotta promise you won't tell anyone," he said intently, almost the first forceful social gesture he had so far made towards her.

"I promise," she said, looking him in the eye. He could see that she meant it.

"I read people's minds," he said.

The silence of the moment extended itself. If there had been a grandfather clock in the corner of the room, they would have heard it chime at least once. Who thought that thought? It was her, Billie. George was so sorry she could not see his thoughts like he could hers.

"So what was I just thinking?" she asked him.

"You were thinking about an old clock ticking," he said. "I never saw a clock like that before in my life, but I saw it in your mind. It was real tall-like, and it went all the way to the ceiling. There was, there was a sort of . . ." He paused to consider, "a sort of comfortable feeling about it, like it was an, an old wooden clock servant telling us the time in an old house." He rattled off the last part of the sentence quickly so he wouldn't make another mistake. He subsided into silence, regretting the necessity and difficulty of speech. He wished he could express himself better.

She looked at him with a combination of wonder and admiration. "I like that," she said a long moment later, "a wooden clock servant."

He looked at her, not quite believing his mind. She wasn't making fun of him, of his jumbled combination of words. He saw that she actually liked it.

"Have you always had this ability?" she asked, "to know other peoples' thoughts?"

He nodded, matter-of-factly. He reflected briefly on all the thousands of minds he had entered in his lifetime. Then he thought about the stone statues, and he wondered how tall her statue should be. He realized that she was waiting for an answer. What was the question? Oh, yeah. His ability. Did he always have it.

"Yeah," he said. "My entire life, as far back as I can remember. Even when we lived in the first house. That was back when I had a father . . . and that was before we, my mother and me, we went to live with Sam, and then Lars got me from Sam."

He sat and thought about what he had just told her, and he watched her mind toy with what he had said, conjuring up her own images to fill in the blanks.

"The other house?" she asked. "Where was that?"

"On Page Street," he told her. "In the Haight Ashbury. My father was a minister."

There was silence for a minute or so. He seemed to have come to an end. A very short, short story, she thought.

"What else do you remember about your father?"

"Oh, he got drunk a lot, and then he would talk to me. He wouldn't never talk to me like that when he wasn't. But when he was drunk, he would talk a lot. On and on and on. I always had a hard time understanding him, and then, and then, . . .and then one day the call of God came to him, and he had to move on. He was a move-on kind of guy, my mother used to always say. A move-on kind of guy."

George lost himself for a moment trying once more to piece together a mental picture of what his father looked like. His mother hadn't seemed to remember his face very well. But maybe that had been because she hadn't really wanted to. The only pictures in her mind seemed to be about how he had looked when he was drunk, or when he was lying to her, or playing the big shot with the other people in the commune.

"And after your father left, that's when you and your mother went to live in the hotel?"

He nodded. "We went to live with Sam and Arcadia. At first, Arcadia was just the cook, but later, after my mother died, then she took care of me. And Sam. He was pretty good to me too. He took me out to the track so he could make money betting on the horses."

"And then this Sam gave you to Lars?"

"Well, sort of," he said. "I guess you could say that I kind of came along with the hotel, and Arcadia too, and then when Lars decided to move out here, she decided to retire and go back to live in New Orleans. She said she was fed up with gangsters. That's where she came from. New Orleans." He rested from the fatigue of putting so many sentences together.

"You came with the hotel?" she asked incredulously. "Do you mean, literally?"

"Well, Sam didn't need me anymore because he was going back to Hong Kong with his wife and he sold the hotel to Lars, and I guess Lars planned on using me out at the track like I did with Sam all those years, but then him and his gang – there used to be five other guys – they all moved in and Lars closed down the hotel and got rid of everybody else who was living there and then him and his gang they were always getting drunk and sleeping it off and planning what casino they were gonna stick up next and bringing in women whose minds were sewers and having a big party all the time with the juke box going full blast and I just stayed in my own room down in the basement and sneaked out once in a while and got cheeseburgers and fries. And once in a while some more comic books. I read a lot of comic books."

He subsided into a well deserved silence. He had just made the longest speech in his life, and he hoped she didn't ask him any more questions. He didn't want to tell her about Lars murdering the other gang members. He sighed. Maybe he should tell her he was tired and wanted to go lie down in his room behind the pantry.

But Billie wasn't through asking questions. He could see her mind

"So Lars got you from Sam and now Lars has got this Dr. Moritz to look after you and help him with his schemes."

George nodded. They sat together in silence. He could see that she was mulling over all that he had said.

Then they heard the front door slam shut, and the loud voices of Big Bill and Sly invading the quiet house, followed by loud thumping sounds as they clumped up the stairs, then all was quiet again.

"I'm in the mood for a sandwich," she said to George. "You care for one? It's four hours till dinner and I don't think I can hold out till then."

George nodded yes, and timidly followed her out to the kitchen like a faithful hunting dog. He sat at the table and watched her getting things out of the refrigerator. He remembered watching Arcadia in the kitchen at the Good Times Hotel.

"Anything you don't like in sandwiches?" she asked.

He shook his head no. He could see a picture in her mind of what she planned to put together and it looked good.

"It's nice outside," she said to him. "Maybe we could take these out to the back yard and have a little picnic lunch out there."

He nodded his head vigorously. Yes, he said silently. He didn't tell her that the back yard was his favorite place, his one refuge from the house. He couldn't escape from the back yard either, but it was still one step closer to freedom.

He followed her out the swinging screen back door, hearing the squeaky sound of it followed with the bang when it slammed shut behind him. He walked along the barely visible track, like an animal trail that meandered its way down to George's private place, a secret glade surrounded on three sides by overgrowing bushes and fence, out of sight from the house.

"It's really a nice little hideout here, isn't it?" she said to him conspiratorially as she found a place for the two of them to sit, giving him the tray to hold as she sat down. It seemed odd to George for both of them to like the same escape from the house. Maybe it was the only escape. And he, and Billie as well, had both found that same special place.

In the afternoons that followed, there were more little get-togethers at the secret place. Even when she was off on other parts of her life, he would still pay a visit by himself. Billie had a lot of questions, and George tried to answer all of them. All of this, however, took a long time to tell Billie, because George had to take time out in the middle of everything in order to figure out how to say it. George had never tried to explain himself to anyone, and he lacked the vocabulary.

But Billie was compassionate towards him, and she coaxed his explanations out of him, a few at a time, during those warm, sunny days of summer some people called the Dog Days. They had their conversations either in the family room or out in the garden in back, in what had previously been George's special refuge, a place where nobody else in the house would ever go, in what had become *their* pleasant little retreat hidden behind the wild bramble, out of sight of the house, where George could pluck thistles from the wild grasses around him and chew on them contemplatively while Billie plied him with questions.

Once she asked him if there had been any women in his life, and at first George thought she meant somebody like his mother, or Arcadia, but then he looked further into her thoughts and realized she meant something like a girl friend.

He shook his head sadly. "What woman would want me?"

"I think, even with all your powers, you don't understand women," she said. "You have many qualities. Somewhere in this world, there is such a woman."

Then the conversation turned to Lars, and he told her for the first time what Lars did for a living, and, in particular, what he had used George for. Billie was horrified. She asked George how Lars felt about his victims during the process. At first George didn't want to talk about it, but when she pressed him he closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, and gave her a short excerpt from the last time Lars had used him for such a purpose.

And that was the first moment when Billie began thinking seriously about leaving Lars. George silently agreed with her thoughts about him, nodding assent as he followed them, and he began wondering if she might be willing to take him along with her when she left. He could not leave on his own, not only because he had no money or way to get it, but also because he had no idea how he could live somewhere on his own. He had always depended on others to take care of him, and he didn't want to be a burden on anyone. He was supported by Lars and Dr. Moritz because he offered them a chance to use his talents to bring in money. He had nothing to offer Billie, however, so he had to give up the idea. It looked as if he was stuck forever with Lars.

## Chapter 11

The summer was coming to an end. August had just come blowing in from the Pacific with billows of fog, and the back yard was too cold for George, who had retired to his room to lose himself in an old Classic Comics version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Billie had taken a nap in her room, and had just come downstairs to see if any coffee remained in the thermos jug where the undrunk morning coffee was kept. There had been just enough for one cupful, which she had put in the microwave for two minutes, while she scouted for some half and half, and had to settle for some fat free milk to dilute it with. Then she wandered into the family room and encountered Dr. Moritz, who was poring over an article in the New York Times Science section on intelligent life in the universe. He looked up as she entered and gave her a friendly nod.

"Think there is any?" she asked him, peering over his shoulder at the title of the article he was reading.

"Any what?" he returned.

"Intelligent life in the universe," she explained.

"Depends on whether you consider humans intelligent or not," he said with a smile.

"You know what I mean," she said. "Other than us."

"Seems pretty likely," he said, "except we might never know about them. Unless they developed some form of TV we could tune in to."

"That'd be pretty weird," she said, "if we turned on the TV and got a program from outer space."

"It might be on a wave length we weren't set up for. And it's doubtful we could crack their language. It'd be far more difficult than decoding Egyptian hieroglyphics."

"I guess everyone's out today," she said, changing the subject and plopping herself down on an overstuffed chair facing him.

"Except for you, me and George," he responded. "Lars, Big Bill and Sly are off on some mysterious mission."

"So how are you doing?" she asked, putting her cup down on the side table after taking a sip of her coffee.

"Pretty good," he said, laying the newspaper down on the chair next to him and giving her a friendly look..

"We've never really had much of a conversation," she said.

"This looks like a good time for one," he said. "Anything particular on your mind?"

"I just wondered how an obviously smart guy like you came to work for Lars."

"The reason is simple," he said. "I was disbarred."

"Really?" she said. "What'd you do?"

"Had relations with a couple of my clients," he said.

"It surprises me that you're so candid about it," she said.

"I have no reason to be ashamed," he said. "If I'd been a medical doctor instead of a psychiatrist, you wouldn't think much at all about it. The clients weren't married. And this happened after I quit working for the system and went into business for myself."

"But a psychiatrist isn't supposed to have relations with his patients."

"True, but I wasn't taking advantage of them. They propositioned *me*. And their problems weren't sexual."

"I can't imagine mental patients who don't have sexual problems."

"One of them had an obsessive compulsive disorder, and the other a fear of heights."

"How'd you get caught?"

"I didn't realize the two of them knew each other."

"Uh oh. I can guess what happened."

"Your guess would be right."

"So that's why you were willing to work for Lars."

"That's why."

"How do you feel about the fact that Lars is a crook?"

"Crookdom is a matter of opinion. How do you feel about corporation execs who run companies into the ground and then get golden parachutes?"

"But they don't murder people."

"Is that really the worst thing you can do to someone? How about someone who loses everything he has in a stock swindle pulled on him by a con man and jumps off the bridge? When you murder someone, they experience only a brief moment of terror."

"How do you feel about murder?"

"I'd never do it myself."

"Do you have an answer for everything?"

"No," he said with a smile. "But I might have a rationalization for everything. And as far as my working for Lars goes, I'm his way of giving up a life of violence."

"For one of scamming people with elaborate cons?"

"Maybe. Isn't the corporate world full of such things? Why don't you complain about *them*?"

"I would if I knew how."

"We live in a far from perfect world. And in the battle between good and evil, it doesn't seem as if the good is winning. As a matter of fact, I don't think it ever did."

"I think you *do* have a rationalization for everything."

"I warned you," he said.

"Well," she said. "I somehow can't help liking you, even if you are a crook."

"I can't help liking you," he said, "even if you aren't."

"Truce," she said. "So what are you doing for George?"

"Trying to make him happier," said Dr. Moritz, "as well as trying to find ways of using his talents to make Lars happier. And as far as that goes, with your feelings about morality, how come *you're* living with a crook?"

"You win again," she said. "But I'm not sure I want to stay with him. I hope, even though you work for him, you won't tell him that."

"Even though you're not one of my patients, your confidences are safe with me. I wasn't hired to spy on you."

"Do you think I have even the remotest chance of turning Lars into an honest man?"

"No. Not even the remotest. One should never expect one's partner to change. You should love him as he is."

"Do you think, in a different world, Lars might have ended up honest?"

"Possibly. But he would have had to have parents who loved him."

"Do you think that's his problem?"

"I think it's many people's problem. The world isn't a nice place. Nor a sane one."

"What do you think of George's problems?"



"I can't say. I think he's starting to discover himself. You've seen a couple of his paintings."

"I have," she said. "I guess you're responsible for that."

"Not really," he said. "I just suggested that he try something he seemed to have a natural interest in, and simply hadn't discovered yet."

"I guess we're having dinner out tonight," she said. "Do you know what Lars chose for tonight?"

"A place called 'Cafe de la Paz.' It's over on Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley."

"Spanish?"

"I think it's some kind of South American, but I'm not sure. I've been told they have some really wonderful tapas, Venezuelan, Guatemalan. I guess we'll find out."

"Sounds interesting. When is Lars due back?"

"Before six," he said, "because we've got reservations for seven thirty, and it'll take us at least half an hour to drive there."

"Will George be coming with us?"

"I would think so," said Dr. Moritz. "It wouldn't be right to leave him in the house alone. Besides, he might try to escape again."

"Do you think he really wants to anymore?"

"I wouldn't think so. But I guess Lars still has doubts. Speaking of George, I guess I'd better make sure he gets cleaned up. With everyone out of the house, he can use the upstairs shower."

"He can use mine," she said.

"Lars wouldn't like that," said the doctor.

"You're probably right," she said. "See you later, then."

"See you later," he replied.

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Whenever George wasn't working with Dr. Moritz, or doing his morning walk on the beach, or talking to Billie in the back yard, or eating, or sleeping, he was in his room, happily painting pictures. In addition to the tubes of acrylic paints and a small bunch of paint brushes of different sizes, Dr. Moritz had also picked up an easel for him, as well as a small number of canvas boards to make real paintings with. The paintings-by-the-numbers were now a thing of the past. Now George was drawing his own designs on the canvas boards and then painting the areas between the lines with colors of his own choosing.

Two days ago on Sunday, Dr. Moritz and Billie had taken him to the De Young Museum in Golden Gate Park to an exhibition of the Dutch Masters. But what had really turned George on was a small room of abstract paintings. He had never seen real paintings before, and he had admired the Dutch Masters a lot, but it was the abstract paintings which had really amazed him. He had never seen such things before. At first he was puzzled, because they didn't seem to be pictures of anything at all, at least not pictures of real places and people like with the Dutch Masters. But then Billie had pointed out that the designs on rugs weren't pictures of anything, either. Once George got the idea that they weren't like regular pictures, he started to admire them. They stimulated him in ways that he had never experienced before, and Dr. Moritz and Billie

had to practically drag him away so they could have lunch in the big museum cafeteria, where he had a delicious hot dog.

In order to start him out on his first abstract painting, Dr. Moritz had suggested that he make a design on a piece of paper the same size as the canvas board the painting was going to be painted on with nothing but squares and circles and triangles, and then join them together with all kinds of lines – straight, crooked, squiggly. Then, after completing the design, Dr. Moritz had suggested that he put an R for red, a B for blue, a G for green, a Y for yellow, an O for orange, and a P for purple on the insides of all the squares, circles, triangles, and in all the connecting areas surrounded by lines. His job was to not have any two areas next to each other in the same color. That was especially hard, but he persevered, and at last completed it. He had had to cheat several times, and separate two areas with the same color with a new little area in between them. But he really liked the final design he came up with. He could imagine what it might look like with all the colors painted in.

Then he had to copy the design onto the canvas board, but that had proved to be really tough, so Dr. Moritz had brought him a piece of carbon paper, and had him put the carbon paper on top of the canvas board, and the piece of paper with the design on top of that, and then retrace the design on the paper with a dull pencil, leaving out the alphabetic letters, which then transferred the design to the canvas board. That was also hard, because the first time he put the carbon paper in backwards and had to start all over again.

The next step was to paint the colors on the canvas board according to the design. To make it easier, he decided to paint all the red areas first, then all the blue areas that weren't next to the red ones, and so on. He had to let each area dry for a whole day before painting the area right next to it. He also had to wash the brushes each time he went to another color.

The hardest part was keeping the paint completely inside each area, and he had to use the smallest brush for the edges, and it took a lot of time and patience. But it was a labor of love. While he was painting, it was like the world outside him didn't exist, and he was lost in a country of his own.

It took him almost a whole week to finish it, because he had to wait for the colors to dry before he could paint the areas which were next to the areas which were already painted. He also had to be careful of keeping the paint inside the edges, because otherwise it would run down the painting and ruin it. He had to scrub it off several times before he perfected his technique, and once he had to paint the mistakes over with white paint, and let *that* dry first before painting over it.

After each session he looked at the progress he had made in the painting. He really felt proud of his progress. After a couple more sessions he would be done. He imagined what it would look like when it was finished. He also imagined the other people in the house looking at his finished painting and complimenting him. Except for Lars. Somehow he knew that Lars would not be interested. But Dr. Moritz and Billie would like it. He didn't know about Sly and Big Bill.

He was very concerned about Billie. He could tell by her thoughts that she was thinking more and more about leaving Lars. That made him feel sad. He would really miss Billie, but at the same time, he couldn't blame her. He had never really understood

what she saw in Lars in the first place. He wondered how much longer she would stick around. He would really miss her.

## Chapter 12

It was on a Friday afternoon that Billie left. At noon, Lars, Dr. Moritz, Big Bill and Sly had gone to the car show at the Cow Palace. As soon as they were gone, Billie packed up all her belongings into five pieces of luggage, and had George help her haul them down to the front door. While he was finishing this, she called a Luxor cab, which arrived about twenty minutes later, and George assisted her in wheeling her stuff out to the cab. It reminded him of Arcadia's departure from the Good Times Hotel, and evoked a similar sadness. Billie entrusted her front door key to George, who stood on the curb watching the cab drive away.

George spent the rest of the day working on his painting. He finished it at four in the afternoon, washed his brushes and put them all away in the box he kept all his art stuff in. Then he stood and admired his achievement for about half an hour, regretting the fact that Billie would not be around to show it off to. Then he lay on his bed and got back to the latest classic comic book he was reading - Swiss Family Robinson. He really enjoyed the cleverness of the family in building their own house and finding all the things on the island that they could live off of.

At four in the afternoon, the troops trooped in from the car show, still talking enthusiastically about the cars of the future which had been displayed at the show. George emerged from his room and nervously presented Billie's key to Lars. He was very frightened performing this simple act, certain that Lars was going to hold him personally responsible for Billie's leaving. Sly and Bill glad to be escaping from the scene that Lars seemed on the brink of creating, trudging quietly to their room to play a little gin rummy. A very solemn Dr. Moritz and a very angry Lars, together with a very frightened George in tow, followed them upstairs to see if Billie's room offered any clues as to her destination. George could see from Lars' angry thoughts that he was going to be in for an intense interrogation.

The first thing they noticed when they walked into Billie's bedroom was the word "SORRY," written in large lipstick letters on the dresser mirror. There was also a note below it, taped to the mirror, which Lars snatched angrily. He didn't need to read it aloud, because George got the full impact from Lars' mind. Billie's message was that she had given up on Lars; she didn't want to be married to a crook. This was news to George, since he had never detected the idea of marriage on her mind during their conversations in the back yard, nor had he detected it in Lars' thoughts. He had known that she wasn't happy all the time, but then nobody in the world was happy all the time. George also confessed, his voice quavering at times, that she had frequently had thoughts about leaving Lars, but that they had never seemed serious, so he hadn't paid any attention to them.

He explained all this, stuttering as he blurted it out under Lars' unrelenting gaze. Dr. Moritz, in conciliatory tones, suggested that it had probably been a sudden decision, so that George couldn't be held responsible, but this did not satisfy Lars. Clearly, everyone was leagued against him, even Dr. Moritz, who claimed unconvincingly that he had never even had a personal conversation with Billie. Lars roughly dismissed them all, retiring morosely to his study like a wolf to his den, to nurse his wounds and piece together his plan of action. Dr. Moritz collared George and led him downstairs to his little room

behind the kitchen so he could sooth George's anxieties and get him into a frame of mind conducive to coming up with something approaching a genuine clue regarding Billie's destination, something to appease Lars' enormous fury over having been jilted.

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The next week was a silent one. Lars came to breakfast each day as usual, but he said extremely little, and nobody else did either, except for Dr. Moritz, who had to ask what people wanted to eat. Sly and Big Bill had been briefed by the doctor, since they had no idea what had happened, outside of the simple fact that Billie wasn't there. Dr. Moritz wanted to point out to Lars that Billie had given her front door key to George, and that, instead of escaping himself as well, he had given it to Lars. But the doctor realized that it was the wrong time for such fine points. Instead, he made sure that George met with him every day in the laboratory, and the two of them discussed ways that George might be useful to Lars in the matter of bringing in income without violence. For once, George actually conspired with the doctor in dreaming up possible schemes for Lars. George had realized by Dr. Moritz' recent treatment of him that the doctor was becoming almost a friend, in his turning George on to art, and providing him with easel, paints and canvas boards, plus advice on his art projects, and, above all, for having prevented the loss of his treasure trove of comic books that had been abandoned back at the old house.

The week after that was another silent, moody one, and at the end of it, Lars summoned Dr. Moritz to his study to make an announcement.

"I can't stand it any more," he said to Moritz. "I've got to find Billie and try to talk some sense into her. The fact that she left without talking to me seems to be proof that she didn't have the strength of her convictions to tell me to my face that she was leaving me. Let's get George on the lie detector and see what he can tell us."

"Let me talk to him myself first," said Dr. Moritz. "He's scared to death of you, and that could put a crimp in his intuitions. Okay? Afterwards the three of us can get together and let you know what George and I were able to come up with."

Lars nodded assent, his angry face almost in a permanent state of rage. He turned back to his desk as the doctor went off to find George, whom he found in his little room downstairs, engaged in reading one of his favorite Batman comic books, the one where Bruce Wayne first meets Dick Grayson, who would later become Robin, his famous side kick. George looked up as Moritz entered, and quickly tuned in on the doctor's mind. He lay the comic book down, pretty much knowing what the doctor was going to say.

"Lars wants to find Billie," said Dr. Moritz, "and he wants us to help him. He has the idea that if he could find her, he might be able to talk her into coming back."

George nodded his head thoughtfully. He didn't think Lars had much of a chance, but he didn't say that to the doctor.

"I want you to understand, George, in case you haven't already seen it in my mind, that I personally like Billie, and I don't want to have to hunt her down, but I don't have much choice if I want to continue to earn the rather large salary Lars is paying me. I don't want to have to go back to scrounging for a low-level job.

"I know you consider Billie as a friend, so I realize it's going to be tough on you to help Lars find her. You realized when you escaped that it was pretty difficult to make it on your own, maybe even impossible, so it wouldn't seem as if you have any choice either."

But after spending the rest of the day on visualization, George had gotten nowhere, and when Dr. Moritz came into Lars' study with a negative report, Lars made his decision.

"What was the name of that pizza joint we sent out to a couple weeks ago?"

"Some place on Taraval, I think," said Dr. Moritz. "Big Bill and Sly will know."

"Good. Just send out for four large pizzas," said Lars. "You guys decide what you want on them. I want to get dinner out of the way, and then you and I are going to have a heart-to-heart talk with George."

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As soon as dinner was over, Lars, followed by a somber-looking Dr. Moritz, who was followed by a very depressed-looking George – all tromped up the stairs to Dr. Moritz' laboratory. Lars mood had not changed, dinner having made no dents in it. As soon as they entered the laboratory, Lars motioned for Dr. Moritz to hook George up to the lie detector. It was a worried Dr. Moritz who attached the electrodes to George's chest and turned on the machine, watching the needle on the graph shooting up and down in an erratic fashion.

"This isn't going to be very productive," muttered the doctor, giving Lars a furtive glance. "George is scared out of his wits."

"Let me be the judge of it," growled Lars. "I know how to deal with him - look, Moron," he said to George, who was cowering under his unremitting gaze. "If you don't do your goddam utmost to find Billie, I'm going to hire someone to tear out all the bushes and flowers from your goddam little back yard hangout, and pile them up in a big fucking heap. And then I'm going to throw all your goddam comic books and those awful paintings of yours on top of that heap, and I'm going to set them all on fire, and burn them down to the ground!"

Dr. Moritz was idly thinking of the trouble that Lars would get into for breaking the fire restrictions against burning in the city.

But Lars was not finished. "And then I'm going to break all the goddam bones in your right hand so you can never paint a picture again! These are not just empty threats I'm making. I'm really gonna do it, Moron! Read my lips if you're too goddam frightened to read my mind!"

And one more thing! "he roared. "I know you told her about you and me tracking down my goddam gang and murdering the lot of them and getting my money back. Didn't you, scumbag? Didn't you!"

George nodded his head slowly up and down, afraid of raising his eyes to meet the glaring orbs drilling down at him.

Lars jerked his head at Dr. Moritz. "You! Make sure Georgie Porgie here comes up with some good answers. I'll be waiting for them!" With this, he strode out of the room and slammed the door.

A few rooms away, Sly and Big Bill looked up from their gin game. "Sounds like the boss is mad," said Big Bill, laying down his hand. "Gin!"

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On the second day of visualizations, George had a breakthrough. Dr. Moritz immediately took the news to Lars.

“What else did he see besides the suitcase?” asked Lars grimly.

“Nothing else. It might have been a baggage room at an airport, but he couldn’t say for sure.”

“How does he know the suitcase belongs to Billie?”

“He just does. You know how he knows things.”

“Yes. And he could see the tag distinctly?”

“That’s right.”

“And that’s all it had on it. Those three letters.”

“Just those three letters. L. A. X.”

## Chapter 13

Sly and Big Bill sat around playing gin rummy till midnight. Dr. Moritz had made it plain that they should hit the sack early because tomorrow was going to be a big day, but they had both found it impossible to sleep.

They had met fifteen years before at Ossining, New York, a place better known as Sing Sing. Big Bill had been doing the last of a five-year stretch for armed robbery, and Sly was finishing up a three-year stint for selling tickets for non-existent raffles. They might never have teamed up, had it not been for the arbitrary assignment of cell mates.

Once they became pals, however, they realized the advantages of operating as a team. Big Bill lacked the brains and Sly lacked the brawn. Together, they could be invincible. Early on, they both recognized how they completed each other.

Outside of being nearly total opposites in nearly every way, however, they shared one thing in common. Neither had the least desire to accomplish anything in life, except perhaps to acquire money in as easy a way as possible. Indeed, were it not for the requirements of a successful career in crime, neither one would have advanced himself one iota in his progress through the school of life. Sly himself had suggested the same to Big Bill:

"If we didn't have to think about how to beat the system, we probably wouldn't bother thinking at all," he announced early in their relationship.

Big Bill, who seldom reflected on anything at all, had been quite enthusiastic about Sly's philosophical realization. It seemed to justify his own apathy towards scholasticism, as well as his propensity for criminal activity.

"If all those goddam nuns had only realized," he exclaimed after reflecting on what Sly had said. He didn't finish his statement, but Sly knew him well enough to fill in the blanks. He also remembered all the horror stories Big Bill had told him about being raised a Catholic, back in stir where you had time for long stories. Sly felt lucky. Learning Hebrew after hours had sometimes been a drag, but he had gone to a public school the rest of the time, where corporal punishment was a thing of the past.

"Gin!" called out Big Bill.

Jesus, thought Sly. After all the years he had spent with his buddy, he should have been used to Big's uncanny ability to guess which cards to keep, but it still irritated him unduly when a guy with half Sly's mental acumen trounced him so frequently.

"Damn," said Sly. He hadn't melded anything yet.

"Fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty. What you got there, Sly?"

"Twenty five," said Sly, mentally subtracting fifteen points.

"That makes a hunderd 'n five. How much you owe me now?"

"About ten bucks. Let's knock it off, Big. We gotta get up early tomorrow morning."

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Dr. Moritz had finally completed his packing. Two suitcases lay on his bed. A larger one equipped with hangars held his suits and shoes, a smaller his underwear and socks, pajamas, a few handkerchiefs. His carry-on bag was already packed with toiletries



and an assortment of medications for George. Next to it lay his medical kit. Next to that was the lie detector, stowed away in its case.

He turned off the light and locked the door behind him. Tomorrow morning they would be flying down to Los Angeles, the city of the angels. Such silly names the Spanish missionaries gave to their cities.

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It was just the four of them. Sly drove and Big Bill sat next to him in the front seat. Dr. Moritz sat in the back with George, who was suffering the after effects of flight sickness.

“When’re we gonna stop for some chow?” Big Bill wanted to know. “I need something I can get my teeth into. That piss-ant garbage we had at the airport this morning couldn’t keep a skinny midget alive.”

“Keep a lid on it, will ‘ya, Big,” said Sly, dodging in and out of the fast-moving L.A. traffic. “We’ll eat as soon as we get to the hotel. Room service. We can have a feeding frenzy.”

The accommodations at the Princess Hotel were as good as Lars had promised. They had a pair of bridal suites, each with two adjoining bedrooms. Big Bill and Sly paired up in one of them, and Dr. Moritz and George shared the other.

After they checked out their rooms, they all got together in Dr. Moritz and George’s suite. George lay resting on a lounge chair while the other three busily engaged themselves in polishing off their room-service dinners.

“Great food!” said Big Bill, sawing off another large piece of rare steak and plunging it into the small lake of pepper sauce that inundated his plate before transporting it delicately to his large waiting maw. A still-steaming giant lobster tail lay waiting for him. Sly took time out from his broccoli beef to grunt an enthusiastic reply. Dr. Moritz inspected his breaded veal cutlet and found it quite acceptable. Not perhaps as fine as the Wienerschnitzel he had enjoyed at the Rathauskeller during his last trip to Vienna, but not bad. Not bad at all. He inspected the wine in his glass, raising it to the light to see the color.

“What kinda wine is this, Doc?” asked Big Bill. “I can’t read all those foreign words on the label.”

“Pouilly Fuisse,” said the doctor obligingly, picking up the bottle and squinting at the label one more time. “Not great, but very good. It’s a Chardonnay grape, of course.”

“Great stuff,” said Big Bill, chuggalugging what was left in his glass and holding it out for some more. Dr. Moritz obliged, gazing sadly at the diminishing level in the bottle. It was the last of the 1996 that could be found in the hotel cellar. His next bottle would have to be a 1997.

“Too bad George’s missing out on the feast,” said Sly.

“I’ll get him something to eat later,” said Moritz, “after he’s had a chance to rest. His best inspirations seem to come on an empty stomach.”

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George lay in the darkness and contemplated his situation. He was feeling better now, maybe even a little hungry. Visions of apple pie and chicken salad sandwiches danced through his head. He considered waking the doctor but desisted, choosing to savor the moment. Both his worlds seemed so serene right now, his inner and his outer. Night was the best time for him, with the libido of others at a minimum, although with any physical proximity there was always the chance of a stray thought, an errant dream catching him unawares and taking him for another roller coaster ride down into the mouth of madness.

The memory of the air flight made him shudder. The plane had been much larger than any he remembered, and they had been packed together like eggs in a carton. A faint wave of nausea passed over him, then vanished. He forced himself to calm down. He must concentrate on his mission, on finding Billie.

Her face swam into his consciousness, and he remembered how she made him feel. She had so much love in her, so much compassion for others, he had never understood how she could have fallen for someone like Lars, a man with so much cruelty, who had used George to hunt down all those ex-gang members and kill them, one by one. The present situation was different, however. Lars wasn't going to kill Billie. Lars thought he wanted *her*, but he really wanted to tame her spirit.

George's thoughts shifted to the doctor. He had originally been a little leery of Dr. Moritz, but now he trusted him, except maybe, in this business about Billie. It was strange that a man who had sold his soul to Lars and his money would have turned out to be an okay guy. The world was pretty unpredictable sometimes.

## Chapter 14

At first they spent their days inside bars and nightclubs. Big Bill and Sly would go in first, and then George and the Doc would join them, sitting around tables or on bar stools, listening to fifties pop and nineties rock, Big Bill and Sly nursing hard stuff, and George and the Doc pulling on soft drinks. Tough-looking men and hard-looking women stood around or sat with them and talked about the old times and other cities, or how it used to be back when, and then Sly would pass around some photos of Billie, and the tough men and hard women would look at them and shake their heads.

Sometimes they went into dark dives filled with young people in their twenties and thirties with pimples and acne and bags under their eyes, their hair in different colors and rings through their noses, talking conspiratorially, plotting revolutions. Then the four of them would sit at a table, and Dr. Moritz would show Billie's picture to the waitress and slip her a five-dollar bill at the same time, and the waitress would shake her head, and the doctor would motion to her to keep the fiver, and then he would ask her to pass the picture around to the other waitresses. Then they would sit and sip their drinks and watch the weirdos looking at them as if *they* were the weirdos. And then the waitress would bring the picture back and shake her head again.

George's job was to follow the thoughts that underlay the conversations, but it was difficult and dangerous. Difficult because there was so much clutter and deviousness, dangerous because underneath their thoughts lay their unconscious minds, cesspools ready to suck him down into madness. It felt as if he were tip-toeing his way through a sewer with house slippers.

Back and forth they went, between dark rooms and bright sunlight. George steeled himself for each new onslaught of greed and selfishness and the malaise of hatred, heartache and suspicion, concealed under the sham of beery bonhomie and underworld courtesy.

After dinner at the hotel they had their stream-of-consciousness sessions, with Dr. Moritz working with George on associations. He brought matchbooks and old bar napkins and even leaves from the fake potted plants which Bill and Sly had filched from the various lounges and clubs they had been in earlier. Dr. Moritz kept them in white envelopes marked with a grease pencil. George held them while the doctor consulted his notes and marched his patient through all the connections he could dredge up.

"What do you see, George?" asked the doctor, as George clutched a stained napkin.

Vague images passed through George's head. A waitress tired of her job, a frail girl out on her first date. George shook his head. Dr. Moritz took the napkin away and handed George a matchbook. He saw a fat man lighting a cigarette for a blowsy blonde, then nothing. He shook his head again, and Dr. Moritz reached in the envelope for the next object.

While Dr. Moritz worked with George on associations, Sly and Big Bill were in their room, playing gin before bedtime. Something had been bothering the big man, and he welcomed the opportunity to talk to his partner about it.

"I tell ya, Sly, I think the Doc's a Nazi."

"Cool it, Big. That kinda stuff's history. Nobody cares about Nazis anymore. Not even me, and I'm a Jew. Why d'you give a rat's ass? Go ahead and call gin. I can see it in your big mug."

"My grandpop was killed by a Nazi. I call gin when I'm ready to call gin."

"He was probably killed by a German. Lotsa guys got grandfathers that were killed by Germans. Also a lotta German guys got grandfathers that were killed by Americans. That was more'n half a century ago. Whata you care? Anyway, the Doc's Austrian, not German. Also he hadda be a kid back then. You gonna discard?"

"Okay, gin."

"I knew it. You gotta lay your cards down, or else we gotta wait all night."

"How come you know the Doc ain't German?"

"'Cause I heard him talkin' to the boss."

"How come he's got a German accent, then?"

"Whata you know about accents, Big? Anyway, they speak German in Austria."

"That right? Which side were they on?"

"In the Second World War? The German side."

"So? Same difference. What'd you get stuck with?"

"Fifty six. You're the big winner, tonight, Big. By the way, you gotta cool this talk about the Doc bein' Nazi.. Fact is, you gotta cool thinkin' about it. What if George picks up on it and tells the Doc?"

"No problem. I'll just think real hard about how I'm gonna beat the shit outa George if he says anything."

"Big, we got a good gig goin' here. You like the food, right? Good sleepin' accommodations, what more d'ya want?"

"Maybe a broad once in a while. I could really use a broad right now."

"That's a thought. I'll bet the Doc might like a broad, himself."

"That old fart? What could he do with a broad?"

"You might be surprised. Actually, that's a good idea, Big. Lemme broach the subject with the Doc."

The following evening, while Sly and Big Bill were cavorting with Lilly Mae and Roxanne in an upstairs room at the Gay Paree Massage Parlor for two hundred dollars apiece, Dr. Moritz stayed at the hotel with George. He gave George a little something to help him sleep, and as soon as he was snoring softly, retired into his room for his weekly conversation with Lars. The telephone almost seemed like an enemy. He dialed the familiar number and identified himself.

"So what's happening, Doc? How much longer d'you think it's gonna take?"

Moritz winced. He deplored the constant diminution of his title, but Lars was in some ways as boorish as the men who worked for him. "You must know what working with George is like."

"Maybe my methods worked better, Doc. A little pain can go a long way."

"The use of pain is absurd. It blocks the psychic function. To answer your question, I really can't tell you. The progress so far has been minimal, but greater Los Angeles is a large area."

"How's George doing? You think he's going to last the course?"

"So far, so good. His liver function is much better, and his appetite is improving. He's sleeping now. He seems to need a good ten hours a night."

"Where are the troops?"

"They're out on an errand right now. They were getting a little stir crazy."

"They giving you any problems?"

"Not really. They're like children, actually.. Fortunately they keep each other pretty good company, and they seem to be content with the daily routine."

"They ought to be, with the bills they're probably running up."

"You told me money was no problem."

"It isn't. You think it might be useful to hire a little local talent?"

"Not yet. Later, maybe, but first we need to pinpoint where Billie is."

"Okay, Doc. Let's keep in touch."

The following morning, after breakfast, while they sat around finishing a last cup of coffee before setting out on their daily routine, Dr. Moritz brought up the issue of their lack of success in locating Billie.

"Maybe she ain't going to the bars no more," Big Bill suggested.. "Maybe she took a vow of charity and joined a nunnery."

"You mean *chastity*," said Sly.

"Poverty, I think," said Dr. Moritz. He turned abruptly to George. "What's she doing right now?" he said. George sat back and let his body relax, responding with whatever came to him. They had tried this many times already and results had been meager. This time, however, George seemed to pick up something.

"She's sitting on a veranda. . ."

"What the hell is a veranda?" interrupted Big Bill.

"Please don't interrupt, Mr. Sweeney," said Dr. Moritz. "It's a porch. Go on, George."

" . . . so she's sitting on a porch, and there's a magazine next to her on a table only I can't see it very well. It's a big magazine like one of those women's magazines, Cosmopolitan or Ladies' Home Journal or . . ."

"Skip the magazine, George. What else do you see?"

" . . . and she's sitting in one of those, like beach chairs, foldup chairs . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Yes," encouraged the doctor.

"And she's drinking . . maybe a mixed drink, something that doesn't have much color, like lemonade maybe, with vodka or gin, and there's a cherry in it, and she's talking to someone, only I can't see him at all clearly. I think he's wearing a cowboy hat . . ."

"It'd be great if he could do this all the time," grunted Big Bill.

"Be quiet," said Dr. Moritz. "Go on, George. What else do you see?"

"Off in the distance I can see some moving things, like robots or something."

"Robots?" It was Big Bill again.

"Will you please stop interrupting," said the doctor. "What kind of robots, George? What are they doing?"

"They look sort of like those funny things they used to have in store windows back in the forties."

"In the forties!" scoffed Big Bill. "You wasn't even on this planet yet, George. Get real."

"Mr. Sweeney! Will you *please* let me conduct this?"

"Sorry Doc. But how can he know anything about the forties?"

"Through other people's experiences, probably. Will you please be quiet? What did they do, George?"

"They bobbed up and down. Plastic birds sitting on the sides of glasses drinking water. Only they didn't ever stop. Up and down, up and down, all day long."

"What other things operate like that?" asked the doctor.

"I got an idea, Doc," said Sly.

"What's that, Mr. Silverman?" Moritz didn't want to rebuff Sly, who *did* come up with something sensible most of the time.

"Grasshoppers," said Sly.

"Grasshoppers?" queried Dr. Moritz.

"That's what we called 'em when I was a kid. They're a kind of pump that sits on an oil well. You see 'em all over the place."

They set out the next day around noon, just after breakfast. Both the day manager and the doorman had been useful in suggesting possible locations of grasshopper-type oil pumps, and both had exercised considerable restraint in not asking why they were looking for them. Sly marked up a couple maps with x's and they got directions to the on ramp of the nearest freeway.

After five hours of driving around they discovered there were sure one hell of a lot of oil pumps in the greater L.A. area, stretching in one direction out towards Bakersfield and down along the coast to Long Beach. They all bobbed up and down, just as George had described.

"Scratch one bright idea," said Sly disconsolately.

"We did learn one thing," said the doctor, "that we're wasting our time with the bar scene. She's probably living out in the suburbs somewhere. Maybe somewhere nice, where there are golf courses and health clubs and spas. And oil wells."

"We're gonna go to those places to look for her?" asked Big Bill with a look of incredulity.

Sly glanced at his partner with a malicious smile. "You'd love it, Big, in one of those spas with all those women in towels with their hair pinned up and mud packs on their faces."

"He's kidding, ain't he Doc?"

"Yes, but he's not altogether wrong. We have to change our search mechanism. And George is going to have to come up with some more pictures of what Billie is doing."

## Chapter 15

For the next couple of days, they skipped going to the bars and had George spend all his time visualizing where Billie might be, but he found it difficult to concentrate, with the dull roar of the millions of minds in the area.

"We're going to have to find a quieter spot for George to work," announced Dr. Moritz at breakfast, three days after George's last vision of Billie. We've got to get him away from all this psychic noise..

"How about Griffith Park?" offered Big Bill.

"We'd probably get lost there," said Dr. Moritz, "although your idea does have some merit."

"Take a look at this, Doc" said Sly, who had been half listening to the conversation while perusing the morning L.A. Times. He passed the paper to Dr. Moritz, pointing out the ad on the page:

MEDITATE WITH THE MASTERS  
LOW HOURLY RATES  
NEW AGE ZEN TEMPLE  
12345 BEVERLY BOULEVARD  
WEST HOLLYWOOD

"That's an interesting idea," said Dr. Moritz. "If we can't get George away from minds, maybe we can at least get him away from noisy ones."

As soon as they all had their second cup of coffee, they took a spin out to West Hollywood. After all the driving they'd done, they were starting to get a feel for the area, or at least for the freeways. Sly drove, as usual, with Dr. Moritz perusing the map and Big Bill chewing his gum noisily.

The New Age Zen Temple was squeezed in between a mortuary and a furniture store. It looked as if it had once been a church, and on the signboard in front, in place of the sermon for the week was a listing of the various activities and the hours they were open. Sly and Big Bill double parked while Dr. Moritz and George went inside.

The woman at the desk was dressed in jeans and a tie-dyed tee shirt. She was very slim with small breasts and her hair was long and she had a nice smile.

"Hi," she said. I'm Monica. Welcome to New Age. Have you come for the meditation lessons?"

"Not exactly," said Dr. Moritz. "Your ad said 'meditate with the masters.' Is it possible for one to come here just to meditate. George, here, has had some experience with meditation, and he just needs a peaceful setting."

"Certainly," said the woman. "And how about you?"

"I'd just be dropping George off and picking him up. The sign in front said your meditation sessions are held every hour. Would it be possible for him to do four in a row?"

"That's rather unusual," she said. "Are you used to meditating so long?" she asked George.

He bobbed his head up and down. He was getting really nice vibes from this woman.

"Well," said Monica. "No problem. It's eleven now. Would you want to do four sessions starting today?"

"We'll just do three today," said the doctor. "After that, we'll arrive when you open at ten, and then we'll do four."

"If you're sure you're going to be coming regularly," said the woman, "it might be worth your while to become a member."

"We'll just try it out today," said Dr. Moritz. "If George feels comfortable here, we might just do that."

While Dr. Moritz busied himself with the financial details, George wandered to the door which led into the inner sanctum. He opened it slightly and heard the rising and falling chant of the voices inside. There was an extraordinary feeling of peace. He hardly noticed when Dr. Moritz left. He remembered vaguely the doctor telling him they'd pick him up at two. Monica led him inside the dim room. There were about thirty or forty people inside, all sitting in rows and columns.

"There's a spot over here that's free," said Monica, pointing out a spot near the back wall. It suited George just perfectly. He gave her one of his rare smiles and watched her walk away as he took his place.

Sly was glad when Dr. Moritz climbed in and they could get moving. He wasn't used to other drivers hurling insults at him, not just for double parking for a couple of minutes. Up in Frisco they gave you the finger but they didn't yell and scream at you. Down here they were a bunch of maniacs.

"This meditation place gonna work out?" asked Big Bill.

"Looks like it," said Dr. Moritz.

"So where're we going?" said Sly, putting his foot on the gas.

"Just drive around the area. Try to find a ritzy section and look for some sort of upscale establishment - a place that caters to the young and affluent perhaps."

"What's 'affloent' mean?" said Big Bill.

"Rich," said Sly.

"How about that MacDonald's over there?" said Big Bill.

"You know how many million customers they got?" said Sly, just missing the fender of the BMW in front of him as he moved into the middle lane. The right lane was all jammed up with cars trying to get into the MacDonald parking lot.

"Just keep driving," said Dr. Moritz. "Maybe a little more out in the sticks."

"Wherever *they* are," said Sly. "You know where *we* are?"

"I'm starting to get a little lost," admitted Dr. Moritz, "but no matter. After we find what we're looking for we can study the map or ask somebody for directions. Didn't you say you grew up here?"

"Nah, we left when I was eight years old," said Sly. "Who're you gonna ask?" he went on. "People don't walk around in this town. The sidewalks are dead empty. They're all drivin' around like us."

"True," said Dr. Moritz. "Nevertheless, I have faith that we'll find a way."

They finally settled on The West Hollywood Physical Fitness Center. It was very modern looking, with glass walls so you could look inside. They even found an empty stall in the crowded parking lot. As they walked towards the entrance, they could see all



the people inside working out at the machines. The reception desk inside was extremely busy with members being processed in and out. The harried woman behind the desk, who finally found time to speak with Dr. Moritz, said that only members were admitted. He explained that they were there to look over the facilities if that were possible.

"One of the trainers would have to show you around," said the woman, "and they're all busy right now. Perhaps you'd care to wait over there," she said, pointing to a green plastic couch opposite the desk.

There was barely room on the couch for the three of them. Dr. Moritz sat on one end, Sly in the middle, while Big Bill overflowed the other end. All they could see in any direction was row upon row of exercise machines, with men and women of all ages running on moving belts, bicycling, or sitting in various awkward-looking positions, pushing or pulling moving parts of the machines with their arms or legs. Everyone was dressed in sweat pants and tee shirts or sweatshirts. A few of the younger women were bare-legged.

"Look at that one over there," Big Bill said reverently in a hushed voice to his companions. The heads of the other two swung obediently around in the direction he was looking.

After a few minutes, the object of their attention strode off to another machine on the far side of the room. They began to notice that there was a slow periodic movement on the part of everyone from one machine to another.

"Whatta they call these kinds of things?" Big Bill asked the other two.

"Nautilus Equipment," said Sly.

"Sure looks like a lotta work," said the big man. "Makes me feel like sweating just watching 'em. What's the pointa all this, Doc?"

"For one thing," said Dr. Moritz, "it enables them to eat more without gaining weight."

"I don't gain weight, and I eat all I want," said Big Bill.

"That's 'cause you already hit max, Big," said Sly.

"Is that really true?" asked Dr. Moritz. "Do you weigh yourself often enough to be sure?"

"He can't find any scales that go that high," said Sly.

"Come on!" said Big Bill aggrievedly. "I'm only a little over three hundred, give or take a few pounds this way or that."

"May I help you gentlemen?"

They looked up to see a tall thin guy in shorts and a tee shirt. He had wiry muscles and hardly any fat on him. To Big Bill he looked like a skinny jock. To Sly, a long-distance runner. Dr. Moritz saw a basketball star who'd spent the last three months in a concentration camp.

"Yes, sir," said Dr. Moritz. "We hoped you could give us a fast tour of your facilities. My granddaughter comes here all the time. Perhaps you know her." He pulled a photo of Billie from his vest pocket and handed it to the trainer.

"Afraid not, sir," he said, handing it back, "but we have twenty trainers here. Why don't I give you the little spiel I give all our new members?"

Without waiting for their assent he turned and began walking away, while they dutifully rose and followed him.

"The machines in this first group," he said, "all have to do with developing the upper body. The two choices you have to make on most of this equipment are weights and reps. When you come in on your first day your trainer will help you make those choices."

The trainer went on and on in a whiny nasal voice which grated on Big Bill's nerves, so he just tuned him out, preferring to surreptitiously leer at all the pretty young things his roving eyes encountered. Sly daydreamed about all the possible cons he could pull if he were a bona fide member here. These people had money. You couldn't tell it from the gray sweatshirts and sweatpants, but you could see it their manner, you could smell it in the air, along with the sweat.

One of the problems with this place, Dr. Moritz realized, was the paucity of things to take away with them, as clues for George to check out psychically for hints of Billie. In bars there were matchbooks and napkins. Here there were nothing but sweat towels and gym bags. The only item he had managed to filch so far was a ball point pen from the front desk. He guessed that Sly and Big Bill had struck out completely.

"So that's the quick tour," said the trainer, turning to give them a quick smile. "If you don't mind me saying so, you gentlemen could really use a little physical conditioning."

As they were walking out the door, Big Bill muttered to Sly, "what d'ya think he meant by that?"

"He meant that you were fat," said Sly.

"I think he meant that all of us were out of shape," said Dr. Moritz with a barely discernible smile on his face. "Perhaps we should all come here a few times a week. I'm sure that we could afford it."

"You kiddin'?" said Big Bill. "All I need to stay in shape is stomp on somebody once in a while. This has been a soft job so far. Svensen hired me for muscle and I ain't done nothin' yet."

"Why don't you practice on one of those street people, Big?" said Sly as they got into the car. "Nobody would mind about one less."

"I ain't seen no street people here yet," said Big Bill. "Leastways around the hotel. Resta the time we're on the freeways."

"Oh, they got 'em, Big," said Sly. "You can bet your boots on it. All those homeless up in Frisco, they hear about this big shortage of street people here, they'd come down here in a bum's rush. Where to, Doc?"

"Well, let's try to get back to where we dropped George off," said Dr. Moritz. "We're too early to pick him up, but maybe we can find a nearby restaurant."

"Great idea," said Big Bill. "Watchin' all those people workin' out gave me a big appetite."

For the next week, George sat each day from ten in the morning until two in the afternoon with the masters and acolytes. He found it a little difficult at first to contort his legs into a pretzel like the others, but he was skinny from bouts of alcoholism and malnutrition so he quickly became used to this strange new manner of sitting.

George found the serenity of the Zen masters and acolytes extremely conducive to his psychic searches for Billie. They were very friendly to him and after a few days started nodding to him or holding their hands in an upside-down, V-shaped greeting

whenever they encountered him in their comings or goings. For one of the few times in his life George felt at ease in the presence of others. The hours passed quickly as he moved into the shared intimate personal silence, listening to the monotone rise and fall of the mantras, his own mind as clear as glass, waiting for thoughts about Billie.

And each day, while George was meditating at the Zen Center, Dr. Moritz had Sly drive around a different suburb of greater Los Angeles. They stopped at all the various golf courses and spas and tennis courts. They used a different pretext each time, and Dr. Moritz would stand and talk to the person in charge, while Big Bill and Sly surreptitiously stuffed their pockets with anything small they could find - pencils, ball-point pens, napkins, used paper cups, desk calendars, old golf balls and empty tennis ball cans. When they got back to the car, Dr. Moritz would drive a block or two away, then they would stop and open up the trunk and stand around unloading their pockets while Dr. Moritz stuffed them in manila envelopes and scribbled identifying phrases on the envelopes. They had one small cardboard box for each location and all the envelopes went in these.

They tried to cover a different suburb each morning, but they soon learned that the sheer enormity of L.A. made total coverage highly impractical. After a couple hours of labor, they would go pick up George and head back for the hotel.

In the afternoon, after another impressive room service lunch, Big Bill and Sly retired to their apartment to watch TV or sleep or play gin, while Dr. Moritz and George spent a few grueling hours chasing down connections and associations, during which George handled all the various objects they had collected on their morning rounds.

Evenings began with dinner at one of the more elegant restaurants in the area. Each night a different one of them got to choose. Sly favored the Plum Tree Inn and the Empress Pavilion which were Chinese and downtown and close to the hotel. Dr. Moritz opted for Chez Français, Café Pino, or Checkers in the financial district, while Big Bill liked the spicy French fries at Engine Company No. 28, or the big steaks and Tex-Mex food at the Sonora Cafe over in midtown. Once in a while, they would skip the hotel breakfast and go over to the Pacific Dining Car for rashers of bacon and piles of pancakes. Since parking was a nuisance, Sly left the rental car in the hotel garage and they took cabs.

Each night, after dinner, they would wait in line for whatever theatrical event - play, ballet, musical, concert - that happened to be showing in the area. They didn't attend it, of course. They just stood in line, waiting for it to start, George sampling the tidbits wafted to him by the minds and psyches of the people around him, trying to sniff out any leads he could as to the whereabouts or activities of Billie. They always left before the programs began. Sometimes, when several events took place at different times, they would wait in two or three lines in a row, only, of course, to leave before they got to the ticket collectors.

"I'm gettin' awful frustrated, Doc," Big Bill finally complained, "waitin' in line all the time, and then when whatever it is starts, takin' off to find another line to stand in. I feel cheated after awhile. One of these times I wanna just stay in line and go in with everyone else and get to see whatever it is."

"I guarantee you would be bored," said Dr. Moritz, "but there is a certain justice to what you say."

After much discussion they ended up going to the latest dinosaur movie. Big Bill loved it to death. He remembered the names of all the different dinosaurs and practiced them at great length on his associates, describing with enthusiasm how each kind stalked and killed its prey. Sly was used to listening to Big Bill go on and on, having spent three years in the pen with him, while Dr. Moritz was used to listening to patients go on and on. As for George, he was used to everyone going on and on, since most people didn't stop thinking just because they stopped talking. All of them decided privately that they would have to take Big Bill to another movie soon, so he could find something else to talk about.

## Chapter 16

On a Tuesday, two weeks after arriving in L.A., George had another vision of Billie. He was animated when they picked him up at the Zen Center, and he had an experience right there in the car. He described it as he was receiving it during the drive back to the hotel:

"I see Billie all in white, like an angel, with a radiant smile and a beautiful dress.. There are lots and lots of people there, wherever it is, and they are all clapping their hands for her. There are three men standing near her, all dressed in black. One of them hands her a hula hoop, and she puts it on the floor, stands in the middle, lifts it to her middle, and begins to rotate it around her, moving her hips to keep it going. . . ."

George's voice was hypnotic, and the other three listened in a trance. It sounded like a scene out of an old 30's musical, with a chorus line of bridesmaids and a quartet of athletic young men carrying Billie around the stage. At the end, George rested while the others discussed it.

"Well, it's clearly a wedding."

"True," said Dr. Moritz, "and the three men are probably the groom, the father-of-the-bride, and the minister. All in black, naturally. And the hula hoop is the wedding ring, plain and simple."

"How come?" argued Big Bill.

"Well," said Dr. Moritz, giving a sign to Sly not to say anything, "what's the shape of a hula hoop?"

Big Bill waited a minute for Sly to respond, then answered himself. "Okay," he said testily, "it's some kinda ring shape. But it's too goddam big to fit around any finger I ever seen."

Dr. Moritz ignored him. That it was a wedding was very clear. Only one question remained. Had it happened yet, or was it still in the future? If it was in the future, they had a chance. Svensen would be as upset as a cat caught in a sprinkler system if Billie had already gotten married to some other guy. They could all be out of a job. It was time to get serious. It was also time for Dr. Moritz to give Svensen another call.

"How can we find out if she already done it?" asked Big Bill after they got back to the hotel.

"Check the papers," offered Sly.

"Easier than that," said Dr. Moritz. "Just pay a visit to City Hall. All marriages are on public record."

"Unless she got married somewhere else," said Sly.

"Why do you have to think of things like that," complained Big Bill.

"At least it's a start," said Dr. Moritz.

"What's it prove if it don't work?" said Big Bill. "Then we're back to square one."

"Two," said Sly.

"Two what?"

"Square two. We won't have to check City Hall again."

"Oh, yes we will," said Dr. Moritz. "We'll have to check it every day it's open."

"What a drag," moaned Big Bill. Then his face lit up as a sudden inspiration came to him. "What if we blew up City Hall?"

“Get serious,” said Sly. “What d’you know about explosives?”

“I spent two years in the same cell with one of the leading pros in the dynamite world. It’s my private opinion he was in on the Oklahoma City job.”

“You couldn’t blow up your own ass,” said Sly, “except maybe by lighting your own farts.”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” said Dr. Moritz. “We’d have to blow up all the city halls between here and Mexico and it still wouldn’t stop her.”

“I got an idea,” said Big Bill. “But it would only come in handy if we knew where she was gonna get married.”

“What’s that?” said Dr. Moritz, dreading to hear the answer.

“You know the place where the minister says if any man knows any reason why this marriage shouldn’t oughta go on, and all that?”

“Yes,” said Dr. Moritz with an impatient sigh, remembering endless wacky conversations with the criminally insane during his years of servitude to the system..

“Then one of us could stand up and stop the marriage,” said Big Bill.

“What would he give as a reason?” asked Dr. Moritz.

“I’m just givin’ you a basic outline,” said Big Bill. “You gotta fill in the gaps.”

“There are too many of them,” said Dr. Moritz. “Tomorrow morning we check out city hall.”

The doctor had some good news at breakfast.

“We will not have to bother with city hall, as I had thought.”

“Why not?” asked Sly.

“Let’s go back to the marriage scene. Remember the hula hoop?”

The three other members of the gang shook their heads yes.

“I was correct in realizing that it represented the wedding ring, but I missed something more important - the hula hoop wasn’t real. It was a symbol.”

He waited impatiently for them to understand the implication. He was casting pearls before swine, but he might as well try it out on them before he explained it to Lars.

“In a way,” Dr. Moritz began, “Mr. Sweeney was right. If the wedding had been for real, a real wedding ring would have been used, right? When George witnesses events happening now or in the past, they are always realistic, because they are real events. It is only when something is in the future that objects can take on a symbolic meaning. This is because there are no real images yet to be transmitted, only the idea of them, the possibility of them. And these ideas and possibilities are processed by George’s subconscious and emerge clothed in the language of his dreams.”

George enthusiastically bobbed his head up and down. The doc was right. Why hadn’t he thought of that!

“Hey,” said Sly. “That makes a lot of sense.”

“It don’t to me,” said Big Bill. “To me it sounds like a lotta bullshit. I gotta hope you’re right, Doc. Svensen wouldn’t like it if we didn’t do something we should of.”

“We haven’t got time to do everything,” said Dr. Moritz, refusing to become embroiled with Big Bill, “so we’re forced to make educated guesses. Lars wouldn’t like it if we did something dumb, like hang around City Hall while Billie gets married at a posh church in Palm Springs.”

The third vision came on a Thursday, six days after the second. George described it to his companions on their way to dinner. They were going to the Pacific Dining Car for some prime beef, so they were in excellent humor.

"I saw like a scene," George began, looking off into the distance with his mind's eye.

"I hate this goddam tension," complained Big Bill. "Why can't he just say what he sees and not make a goddam production out of it?"

"Shut up," said Dr. Moritz. "What did you see, George?"

"I saw like a main street, big modern buildings on both sides, and then there's this huge mountain right at the end of the street. With white houses going halfway up the mountain."

There was a moment's pause. George had his audience in the palm of his hand.

"Yes, George," prompted Dr. Moritz. "What more do you see?"

"That's it," said George.

"That's a goddam vision?" bellowed Big Bill. "What the hell good is it? It might as well be on Mars."

"There aren't any streets on Mars," Sly interjected.

"You oughta know," said Big Bill sarcastically.

"Stop," said Dr. Moritz. "We're all tired of driving all over the place. L.A. is too big. We need a clue as to what part Billie is in. Maybe this vision of George's will tell us which part. Let's ask around and see if anyone knows anything that looks like a street with a mountain at the end of it."

"With houses running halfway up it," George reminded them.

They did not have to wait long for an answer. The waiter who came to take away the dinner items told them it sounded like Glendale.

"What about the mountain?" asked Sly.

"Well," said the waiter. "There is this large mountain that the town, she is, ah . . . built up against. The street you would be looking probably up is Brand Boulevard North."

"Are you very sure of this?" asked Dr. Moritz.

"Once I work in restaurant on Brand. Every day I see view. Always I notice how this street, it seem to run straight up into this mountain, how these little houses, they are so little when they are far away, these little houses seem to climb right up this mountain's front. Like picture painted by artist."

It was hot in Glendale. It was pushing a hundred and the humidity was near saturation, but somehow nobody minded particularly because San Francisco had been hot when they left, so it just seemed like an extension of the same weather, only a lot worse. Except for Big Bill. He minded because he weighed a lot and he sweated a lot. They had to stop at every watering hole so he could load up on soda pop.

Glendale had one downtown area. All the rest was old urban residences and new housing tracts. They found one country club, but the people at the desk were unwilling to discuss either the club or membership in it with anyone until or unless they actually owned homes in the area. Sly and Big Bill managed to pocket a few items, but that was all they could manage in information-gathering for the day.

On their way back to Brand, where they intended checking out an Italian Brasserie they had noticed earlier, Big Bill's eagle eye spotted a combination soda fountain and drug store a few blocks from the main drag, on the outskirts of an older residential area. Since there was, as usual, no parking available, Sly kept the motor running while Big lumbered in.

"I'll bet the place is air-conditioned," Sly said enviously to Dr. Moritz fifteen sweaty minutes later and still no sign of Big Bill.

Big Bill was in fact stuck in line silently cursing the good-looking blonde who was taking her time attending to the small group at the cash register. He wanted one of those nice, cold lemon limes so bad he could taste it. Finally he laid the sack of sodas on the floor and grabbed one out, unscrewing the cap and commencing to chugalug it, but this did not appear to faze her. She continued to take her time, so he grabbed a Milky Way candy bar from the rack next to the register and jammed it in his pocket right in front of her. Finally the log jam broke up and Big Bill was next. He banged the empty bottle on the counter along with the sack of sodas, thrust two twenties at the cashier, scooped up the change, and charged out to the waiting automobile. Three miles later, after downing three more sodas in rapid succession, he attacked the candy bar. He crumpled up the wrapper and stuck it in the ashtray in the dashboard. Sly retrieved it and handed it to the doctor.

"Here's another one for your collection, Doc. From Klug's Drugs."

"Kloog's," I think," said the doctor phonetically, dutifully placing it in an envelope.

"Whyn't they spell it 'Kloogs' if it was 'Kloogs,'" complained Big Bill. "Besides, it sounds better - 'Klugs Drugs.' Whatd'ya call that when the two words go nice together?"

"Rhyming," said Sly.

"It's a German name," explained Dr. Moritz, "and Germans pronounce it 'Kloog.'"

"Well this is here," said Big Bill, "and 'Klug's' sounds better."

Dr. Moritz didn't argue, knowing that he who gets the last word in seldom gets the first one across.

They were all quite surprised later on when George had positive reactions to the candy wrapper.

"Does that mean that Billie actually touched that actual candy bar with her hand?" asked Big Bill.

"Probably," said Dr. Moritz.

"What are the chances," asked Sly, "that Big Bill and Billie would both grab the same candy bar?"

"Astronomically small," said Dr. Moritz. "Go on, George. What else do you see?"

"I see her thinking about whether to buy it or not, and then deciding against it and putting it back in the rack." This was followed by a lengthy silence.

"Then what?" asked the doctor.

"That's all," said George.

"That's all?" said Big Bill. "What good is that? I coulda said that much myself. Obviously, if she grabbed it and then put it back, it means she didn't want it."

"There are two things that are good about it," said Dr. Moritz. "The first is that Klug's probably has a fair turnover in stock. That means Billie was there quite recently, maybe in the last few days. The second is that this drug store is not on a major



thoroughfare, so mostly local residents go there, which suggests that Billie lives somewhere nearby.”

The very next morning during Zen sitting, George had another vision of Billie. He described it during the afternoon to the others.

“I am aware of Billie standing at the front door of a house. I can’t actually see her, but I know I am seeing through her eyes. In front of the house is a wide green lawn which extends beyond both sides of the house, and in front of the lawn is a white picket fence, about waist high, which runs around three sides of the house. The only other thing is a single tree, about six feet high.”

“What kind of tree?” asked the doctor. “Deciduous? Evergreen?”

“Like a Christmas tree.”

“And there is no other tree?”

“No, that’s the only one.”

George crinkled up his eyes and wrinkled his brow and gritted his teeth and tried to see more, but that was it.

“How about the house? Is it a single-storey house, or does it have more than one floor?”

“Just one,” said George.

“You’re sure.”

“I can’t see it very well, but I’m pretty sure.” There was a pause, then he said “Oh yes. And I can see now it’s painted all white.”

“So now,” concluded the doctor, “we know what kind of house Billie is probably staying in.”

“A single-storey, white house with a green lawn and a white picket fence all around it,” said Sly.

“And a Christmas tree,” added Big Bill.

## Chapter 17

The next few days they spent driving around the part of Glendale in the vicinity of Klug's Drugs. They even pulled George off visualization duty and had him accompany them. They went up hill and down dale, driving slowly and looking at all the houses. There were many which were white, many which had white picket fences, and many with trees. All of them had lawns, but not one had only a single tree. In particular one which looked like a Christmas tree.

"We could spend the next two months cruisin' up and down these streets," complained Sly after the third day, as they passed Klug's Drugs for the fifth time that day.

They parked across from the drug store, noticing as usual the large number of teenagers who came and went. This was not surprising, because Klug's Drugs, like drug stores of the past, had a soda fountain, which on hot days drew a crowd. It was unlike the past, however, in that most of the teenagers drove high-priced cars.

"I could use a soda," Big Bill announced.

"I'll bet you think a soda is just a bottle of pop," said Sly.

"Well, what is it then?" asked Big Bill.

"It's a big scoop of ice cream on top of a soda pop. It's called an ice cream float."

"I want one," said Big Bill.

They all decided they wanted one, even Dr. Moritz. Sly managed to find a legal parking place only a half-block away. They trooped in en masse to a cool silence from the group of teenagers malingering inside. The jukebox was playing a reggae number. The boys were dressed alike in tee shirts and baggy pants three sizes too large with cuffs hanging on the ground and baseball caps turned around backwards. The girls wore no makeup and skimpy blouses or bandanna bras and short pants three sizes too small. They were all sitting around practicing looking cool while laconically sucking on various concoctions through their straws. It was cool temperature-wise as well, after the ninety five on the street. After a couple minutes, the teenagers forgot about them and went back to talking. Big Bill sat and mopped his cooling brow and looked at the Lolitas and Gidgets and Bridgets posing for the Seans and Kevins and Steves who pretended elaborately not to see them. Sly sat back and rested his eyes from the glare of driving, while George tried to tune out the psychic din which assailed him. Dr. Moritz joined Big Bill on the girl watch.

Eventually a waitress came to take their orders. George opted for a banana split with chocolate syrup and nuts and a cherry, while the other three settled for root beer floats. Big Bill eyed George's choice with unconcealed regret, as the four of them sat back and slurped or ate, watching the teenagers milling in and out, standing or sitting on the fenders of their shiny cars, greeting each other cheerily with not-so-high fives, keeping the entrance door busy, and sticking dollar after dollar into the CD machine that looked like a shiny replica of a fifties' juke box. All of a sudden Dr. Moritz shot bolt upright.

"What fools we are!" he exclaimed.

"What d'you mean, Doc?" said Sly.

“Here we are,” said the doctor excitedly, “driving all over hell and gone, trying to do a job ten times our number couldn’t succeed at, when we have the perfect work force right here.”

“You mean hire these kids to do it for us?” said Sly, eyeing the doctor askance. “I think they’re all too rich for us, and they don’t look like the working sort to me.”

“Not if you just tried to hire them,” said the doctor impatiently. “You have to use subtlety. Look - suppose you let it be known that you were doing an ad campaign, and you were looking for the perfect house - one which had a green lawn all around it with a white picket fence and a Christmas tree. Say there was a hundred dollar reward for every house which fit that description. Wouldn’t that get their attention? Wouldn’t they keep their eyes out, and wouldn’t they mention it to their friends?”

Sly looked thoughtful. “Maybe that isn’t such a bad idea. How would we go about it?”

“You look like you know how to talk to youngsters, Mr. Silverman. Why don’t you just approach the children out in front - the ones with automobiles. Tell them the story as I suggested it. Say you represent the Better American Homes Foundation, and that you’ll be here every day at twelve noon to put out good money for verified addresses. That means we’d have to check them all out, but I don’t imagine there’d be that many.”

So Sly transformed himself into Rudolph Silverman, associate vice president of the B.A.H. Foundation. He wore his new persona with aplomb, taking his time walking out to the front, where he got into casual conversation with a couple of kids. Soon the couple became a large group which became a small crowd. Dr. Moritz and Big Bill watched as Sly gesticulated and fielded questions. George couldn’t see the windows from where he was sitting, so he just tuned in to the others’ visual cortexes. After about fifteen minutes Sly came striding back and rejoined the others.

“It’s done,” he said. “I promised I’d show up here every day at noon.”

The next day, which was a Tuesday, they all slept in and had a late breakfast. George did not go to the Zen Center. The rest of them did not drive all over hell and gone picking up potential clues. Instead, Sly and Dr. Moritz departed for their noon-hour assignation at Klug’s Drugs, while Big Bill remained back at the hotel babysitting George, who had promised to work on visualizations.

It was not quite as warm as the preceding day. Low-lying white clouds came in from the Pacific and merged with the brown smog, jacking up the humidity and glare while screening off some of the infra-red. The drugstore was not so busy; only a third as many teens were sitting around looking bored and trying to impress one another, punctuating their subdued conversations with sudden fits of laughter. Sly sat by himself at a table absent-mindedly stirring an already cool cup of coffee, while Dr. Moritz waited out in the car, thumbing through a girlie magazine he had filched off Big Bill. A few of the teenagers looked over at Sly from time to time, but nobody approached him until 12:15, when two kids, probably fifteen or sixteen, burst in through the door and spotted him.

“Hey! There’s the guy.” The two of them made their way over to where Sly was sitting. One had pale skin with curly orange hair and a bad case of acne. The other was pretty-faced with longish dark brown hair tied back. They both wore reversed baseball caps, drab, oversized short pants, tee shirts with sports teams logos emblazoned on them,

and black-and-white Nike running shoes. Sly motioned them to join him and they slipped their tall skinny torsos into the opposite side of the booth.

"You gents find some houses for me?" he asked, and they both nodded. Neither one of them tried to act cool with him however but just politely which Sly appreciated.

"We got some addresses to show you if you're ready to come up with the money you promised," said the pretty boy, who appeared to be the spokesman.

"Hope you don't mind if I check'em out first." The two boys looked dubious.

"How d'we know you're gonna come back?"

"You want to come along for the ride?" asked Sly. The two boys looked at each other and seemed to come to a silent agreement.

"Okay," said the good-looking one. "You got wheels?"

Sly nodded toward the window. "Outside." He got up, tossed two dollars on top of the check and led the way to the door.

The first address proved to be a complete dud. There was no fence at all except a tiny little one which enclosed a small flower bed next to the porch. There was a lawn and there was a tree, but it was a flowering peach. The two boys agreed fairly readily that the house was not a hit. Dr. Moritz was somewhat testy about it, but he forced himself to be calm.

"Why did you waste our time with this house? It clearly does not meet the specifications."

"Sorry," said the teenager with the orange hair who sat in the front with Sly. "I guess we screwed up. Neither one of us actually saw this place before."

"Then how did you get the address?" asked the doctor.

"Well," said the dark-haired boy. "We kinda went into business for ourselves, got a bunch of younger kids to do the grunt work, then we checked 'em out afterwards. Only we musta missed this one."

This only slightly mollified the doctor, but he was starting to find himself too far out on a limb, so he nodded and told Sly to drive on to the next address.

The next three were almost-hits. Two had white picket fences which ended at the neighboring driveways, while the third had a light-brown fence. All three houses were white, but only two had green lawns. One had a huge cypress, one a palm tree, and the third no tree at all.

The last two addresses on the list seemed not to exist. Sly drove around and around for at least forty minutes before they all decided to call it a day.

"How come you guys have to find a house that looks exactly like that?" complained the kid with orange hair. "Like what's so special about a Christmas tree?"

"We made a survey of all our board members," explained Dr. Moritz, "and this is what they want. They want a house which exemplifies the principles which our foundation stands for, a house which represents the ideals of this nation."

"Yeah?" said the orange-haired kid, not entirely buying it, but not exactly caring either. "Well, it's a real bummer. Like, we spent like the entire afternoon getting all those lousy addresses. That's a lot of work down the tubes. How are we gonna pay off all our workers?"

"I'll tell you what," said the doctor, privately unwilling to face the prospect of finding the house on his own, "I don't want you boys to feel entirely discouraged. What

do you say if I give you a hundred each just for trying? But you've got to promise to keep trying. Only this time, of course, you must check more carefully for all of the specifications. Is that acceptable?"

There was only the briefest of pauses before the two boys grumbled their agreements. The prospect of getting nothing made the relief of getting something atone for the disappointment of not getting a lot more. Besides, there was always tomorrow. And perhaps one of their workers was turning up a hit right at that very moment. The half-hour drive back to the drugstore was almost amicable. The dark-haired boy who sat in back noticed the copy of the Penthouse magazine sticking out from under the front seat where Dr. Moritz had temporarily secreted it, and ferreted it out under the doctor's nose.

"Hey cool. This is the Christmas issue from last year. It's practically a collector's item." He thumbed through it with a professional eye, whistling appreciatively as Dr. Moritz kept his steely gaze locked on the landscape, wishing the moment would somehow go away. Sharing his secret sexual fantasies with a teenager was vaguely disconcerting.

## Chapter 18

On the third day Klug's Drugs paid off. Sly took a table as usual, just a few minutes before twelve, and found the two boys waiting for him. There was a different look on their faces this time. They were just as polite, but there was something reserved in their manner.

"We got it, Mister," said the pretty-faced boy with a look of assurance in his eyes.

"You found some addresses that match all the requirements?" asked Sly.

"We found the *only* address that matches the requirements." The boy had a look of arch significance, as if he were waiting for Sly to ask the right question.

"The *only* address?" asked Sly. "You're pretty sure there's only one?"

"Yeah, Mister. We're pretty sure. After sending thirty kids all over town and coming up with just one place."

"Well, let's have it. Or, better yet, let's go check it out." Sly made a motion to get up but the two boys remained seated. They all sat there for a minute, Sly looking back and forth at the two of them. "I see," he said finally. "You wanna hold out for some more."

The good-looking one met Sly's eyes. "We figure you guys aren't really from that Better Homes outfit like you were saying, but we don't give a rat's ass about why you wanna find this place. The thing is - we found it, and if you want it bad enough we figure it's worth maybe a couple grand."

"That's pretty steep."

"Take it or leave it. Maybe if we found twenty places like you were looking for. But to do all that work and only come up with one. What good's a hundred? It's worth about 30 cheeseburgers."

"Or 40 packs of ciggies," put in the orange-haired kid, breaking radio silence.

"Good to see you guys practicing your arithmetic," said Sly. "I'll have to check it out with the Director."

"Let's leave off with this 'Director' bullshit," said the kid with orange hair, giving Sly a snotty look. "You check it out with your partner out in the car. Give us a sign if you're interested, and we'll come out and we can drive to the place together, like we did before."

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Billie sat on the front steps looking at the haze of hills on the horizon. A small vee of birds flew in formation, disappearing behind a distant ridge. The muted roar of traffic from a faraway freeway registered in the background of her consciousness. She fancied she could feel the world slowly turning. She had been happy here this last four months, staying with Wanda and then meeting Bobby. It had all happened fast, once she had taken control of her life and left Lars.

Only lately had she become restive, off balance, her sleep troubled. It was true she had second thoughts about marriage, but it wasn't something she was unduly concerned about. She'd go with her sense of things when the time came. She'd always been good at making decisions and then sticking to them. No, it was something else, something she couldn't quite identify. She had the strange feeling of not being alone, yet she was

willing to swear she was not being followed. No strange cars cruised by, no men in overcoats pretending to read newspapers on street corners.

She gradually became aware of the small boy standing near the front gate. He seemed just an ordinary little boy, maybe five or six, with a red-striped polo shirt and blue short pants, skinny legs and canvas shoes. And freckles. He was just standing looking at the house, an appealing little boy with a homely face and an overdue haircut. She rose and walked over to where he was standing.

"Hello," she said, smiling down at him.

"Hello, Lady," he said, looking up at her dubiously. She could see the Irish in his green eyes.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"No," he said gravely. "I was just looking. My friend Arnie says they're gonna make a movie of this place." He stuck his forefinger into his nose, searching for an errant booger.

"They are?" she said with astonishment.

"Arnie says Tim Mortenson made a thousand dollars for finding this house." He pulled his finger out and studiously inspected the end of it.

"A thousand dollars?"

He wiped his finger on his pants and looked up. "Tim and Jason organized all the little kids and we all looked for it. They gave Arnie twenty dollars for finding it first. Twenty dollars, boy. I wish I woulda found it 'stead of Arnie."

"What were they looking for?"

"It was supposed to be the perfect house for this big movie competition or something." He stumbled over the word 'competition.'

"Really? What makes this one so perfect?"

"Well, you know. Like it hadda be a white house with a white fence. An' it hadda have a green lawn an' no trees except one Christmas tree."

"Christmas tree?" She looked around. "Oh, you mean the blue spruce. Yes, I guess you could call that a Christmas tree. Tim and Jason you said. Do you know where I could find them?"

The little boy started backing off slowly.

"I'd just like to get in touch with this movie company you were telling me about," she explained. "Do you know what Tim Mortenson's address is?"

"Nah. I don't know anybody's address. I just know what people's houses look like. I better go now."

"Is there some place where I might find this Tim?"

"Yeah, I guess he hangs out a lot at Klug's Drugs. You know where that is?"

"Oh, the drugstore with the soda fountain?"

"Yeah, that's it, Lady. I guess I better go now." He turned and hurried away, clearly relieved at being through with the conversation. Billie went back to the porch and sat down again, thinking about what she had just learned.

## Chapter 19

Regis McCracken sat behind his desk, looking over his office with pleasure. He hadn't spent much time here lately. Business had been just enough to pay the rent, and he had been forced to take on a series of lesser jobs - hotel detective during a two-week convention, extra store detective during the spring sales, the investigation of the theft of personal items in a posh retirement home. It was a long time since he had had a big case.

Now Marge was pushing him into giving up the office.

"You can fix up the den and turn it into an office at home," she had said as on so many yesterdays.

But Regis remained firm. He did not explain his reasons to his wife. Fixing up the den was like being a pretend detective. He needed a place where he could get away from her from time to time. In the past, he had set up poker games with other businessmen from the neighborhood, but downtown L.A. had been in a downward slump for the past twenty years. All his poker friends had raised their antes and moved to the suburbs, but Regis held on. The building was scheduled for demolition in another two years, so the rents weren't going up. Meanwhile, The Rain or Shine Detective Agency carried on.

The bell that hadn't rung for months rang. Regis had been expecting it but it still made him jump. He pressed a button on the corner of his desk which buzzed the outside building door open, and started counting seconds. The faster that customers made it to his office door, the more he charged them. Most made it by fifteen. This one turned the door handle on the count of twelve. Things augured well.

"Mr. McCracken, my name is Morissey. I talked to you on the phone." Regis saw a thin, elegantly-dressed, grey-haired gentleman entering his office. He looked like big bucks.

Dr. Moritz saw a fat, out-of-shape, badly-dressed man sitting behind a desk. He looked as if his services might be secured for relatively small change.

"Yes, Mr. Morissey," said Regis, standing and waving at his visitor's chair. "Please sit down."

Dr. Moritz sat and looked about briefly. The walls were bare save for a ten-year-old calendar and two crocheted mottos of the type so popular in the midwest in the fifties. The first read "Rain or Shine - We're on the Dime." The second proudly proclaimed "When You've Got a Tough Job, It's Time to Get McCracken."

"My wife made those," said Regis proudly, noting the direction of his visitor's gaze, which now swung round to the worn yellow wooden desk, barren of any adornment except for the small name plate which announced "Regis McCracken, President."

"Regis," said Dr. Moritz. "Not a name I've seen before."

"My mother loved the movies. She named me after one of her favorite actors, Regis Toomey." Mr. McCracken mistook his new client's quiet demeanor as one inviting intimacy, and went on to speak further of his deceased mother, of his attempts to train his son in the detecting business, and of the difficulties of young people in finding jobs.

Dr. Moritz settled himself down as best he could in the hard wooden chair for the long conversational siege he appeared to be in for. He had early on interpreted the human compulsion to talk as a sign of weakness, something he had always despised; it was his personal tragedy that he had chosen a profession which had exposed him to it daily. He hadn't the slightest interest in listening to other people talk about themselves.



Over a long career, however, he had adopted a manner of caring inquiry and a habit of asking questions designed to keeping his patient at arm's length. He did not pay much attention to the answers except to glean sufficient material for his next question. Besides leaving Dr. Moritz free to pursue his own private thoughts, it made him appear to be on the job.

On this occasion, however, Mr. McCracken was not a patient, so Dr. Moritz curtailed his questions, allowed his gaze to wander, and let the other man wind down on his own.

"Well, here I am running on and on. It just goes to show what a sympathetic listener you are, Mr. . . ."

"Morissey," prompted Dr. Moritz.

"Yes, Mr. Morissey. What is it that brings you to me?"

"I would like you to follow a woman for me. Find out what she does, who she sees, the addresses of her friends." He handed an envelope to the detective. "You'll find her name and present address inside, as well as a couple recent photographs. How soon can you get to work?"

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"I still don't understand why we don't just grab her, Doc."

"Tell me how you would go about it, Mr. Sweeney."

The gang was lounging around Big Bill and Sly's apartment, having just polished off another magnificent luncheon from room service. Sly and Big Bill were drinking German beer. Dr. Moritz was finishing the bottle of California Chardonnay which had come with the lunch.

"Well," said Big Bill, "Sly and me, we could just drive up to Billie's place and grab her."

"What if she weren't home?" Dr. Moritz twirled the stem of the glass between his fingers.

"Then, uh, I guess we'd wait around until she got there."

"Where would you wait - in her place or out in the car."

"Say her place."

"What if one of the neighbors saw you breaking in and reported it?"

"Well, okay, then out in the car."

"I'll skip the question about dealing with the patrol car that goes by there every night, and I won't ask what you'd do if she didn't come home at all. What if she was there in the first place and you grabbed her. Where would you take her? Drive her back here to the hotel and hustle her in in front of all the hired help?"

This silenced Big Bill.

"That's why I hired a private detective. Somebody who knows the area and is more effective at getting the kind of information we need. Just as we used the teenagers to find the house. After we know her routine, and where all her friends live, including the man she's going to marry, we'll be in a lot better position to make a plan that'll work."

"You know, Doc, I had another idea about if we knew the church she was gonna get married at."

"What's that?" asked the doctor, wondering what novelty Big Bill was going to come up with this time.

"You know how like they always have the car out in front of the church and after they're through gettin' married people throw rice on 'em an' then they drive away?"

"Yes," said the doctor, sipping the last of the wine as slowly as he could.

"Well, we could pay off the driver and hire a good getaway driver to take his place."

"And then what?" asked Dr. Moritz. "Have him drive all the way to San Francisco, dropping her new husband in the ocean as they pass Santa Barbara?"

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"In the beginning," said Billie, "I was pretty sure I wasn't being followed. I just had a creepy feeling about not being alone. Now, I'm not so sure."

"You get a look at whoever it seems to be?" asked Bobby, sitting back in his chair with his feet up on the kitchen table and his cowboy hat pushed forward over his eyes. His pale blue eyes looked up at her from under the brim, unfazed by the smoke that curled up from his cigarette.

"There's two of them, but I never see them together - a short, fat, middle-aged guy and a skinny young guy, might be his son, maybe in his early twenties. Both of them look pretty scruffy. They seem to be around me wherever I go."

"You ever try to lose them?"

"When I was at the mall yesterday the fat man was behind me, so I tried sneaking out through Nordstrom's, and there was the young guy, waiting for me. So I went back in and this time I slipped out through Penny's and found a restaurant and called a cab. Whenever I looked back, there was this beat-up old dodge that seemed to be tailing the cab. Then when I went to ask the driver to try to lose him, I couldn't see him anymore."

"Maybe it was your imagination."

"That's what the cab driver tried to convince me. But just as we went to take the off ramp to come here I saw him again."

"Still following you?"

"No, he was in the left lane. I looked real hard and it looked to me like the fat guy was driving."

"It still could be your imagination. You seem to have been under a little stress lately."

"It wasn't my imagination what the little boy told me the other day."

"You can't believe what a little kid tells you."

"He didn't make it up. Why would anyone pay a bunch of kids a thousand dollars to find this house?"

"Good question, Babe. You got any answers?"

"Only one, and I don't like it."

"Yeah?"

"Lars. He's got George working for him again. He's the telepath I was telling you about, and that's why I've been having these strange feelings of not being alone. That's how they got the description of the house. It isn't normal to know what a place looks like before you've found it. It still surprises me. I thought George was a friend of mine."

Bobby put on his best Western drawl and did his Gary Cooper imitation. "Why don't you come and live with me, ma'am? I'd be right happy to protect you."

She smiled. "Then you better get your six-guns out of mothballs, Tex, and start practicing on some tin cans in your back yard, because these guys are for real."

"I'm for real, too, honey." He hammed it up.

She laughed and said "Yeah - El Camino Real. In your hot little chevy pickup, with these guys hot on your tail, Hotshot."

He grinned. "I'm sure glad I'm hot on your tail, Sweetheart."

She grimaced, then took on a more serious expression. "I think I'll take you up on your offer, Cowboy. I feel pretty alone here, with Wanda gone most of the time."

"You just say when, baby."

"How about now? I don't have much to pack."

"Then let's get packing," said Bobby, extinguishing his cigarette in the half inch of cold coffee in his cup. He unwound his six foot five from the chair he was sitting in, stood up straight, and pushed his cowboy hat back. Standing there with his hands on his hips and with his fancy shirt and faded jeans and big boots, he looked to her just like a movie cowboy. If he could fight half as well as he could romance, she thought, she stood half a chance at eluding Lars and his gang.

## Chapter 20

"It was good of you to meet me here," said Dr. Moritz. Except for the subdued tinkle of glasses, the ring of silverware on plates and the barely audible syllables of subdued conversation, the room had the feeling of being there just for the two of them.

"No problem," said the fat man, his out-of-breath condition suggesting otherwise. "I hope I'm not late." He looked around, impressed with the elegant fixtures and the red velvet wallpaper, seating himself awkwardly, tugging at his tie, and mopping his brow with the table napkin. Dr. Moritz winced inwardly.

"Not at all. As you can see, Mr. McCracken, I am just now looking over the menu. I am told the roast duck is superb."

The detective studied his menu as if he were expecting to find a clue in it. After a few moments he looked up.

"I'm afraid this place is a little too rich for me, Mr. Morissey."

"But you are here as my guest, Mr. McCracken. Please feel free to order anything you want."

The worried look on the fat man's face was replaced by one of relief, which was soon followed by consternation. Dr. Moritz covertly watched Mr. McCracken's eyes flitter nervously over the menu.

"Do you see anything that appeals to you?" asked Dr. Moritz.

"I can't seem to find that roast duck you was talking about," said Mr. McCracken. "This *riz dee view* sounds interesting."

"I believe that might be the *ris de veau*," said Dr. Moritz.

McCracken looked up questioningly.

"Sweetbreads," explained the doctor. "Thymus glands. From the throat of the animal."

The detective looked somewhat alarmed.

"I should be pleased to do the ordering if you'd like, Mr. McCracken," said Moritz.

"Yeah, Mr. Morissey," said McCracken with obvious relief. "That'd be great. Only I don't think I want any of those . . ."

"Sweetbreads," Dr. Moritz supplied gracefully. "They're a little rich for me as well." He gave the waiter lingering in their area a slight nod of the head, and faster than McCracken could say Jack Robinson, his host had taken care of their orders, and the waiter was already scurrying away to give them to the cook.

"While we're waiting, I might as well show you what I've got," said the detective, reaching into his breast pocket and pulling out a bulky envelope which he handed to the doctor.

"There's only that one set of typewritten pages," he explained as Dr. Moritz opened the manila envelope and drew out the packet inside, which seemed mostly to be photographs. "The subject's parents were killed in a car crash in 1985, when she was ten, and she had no siblings. Outside of her boyfriend, she doesn't visit anybody, but she was brought up in Glendale by an aunt, now deceased, so if she still has any friends in the area she must be keeping up with them over the phone. There is, of course, the woman the subject has been staying with - Wanda Jenkins. She works nights as a nurse out at Castle View Hospital. I understand from one of the neighbors that her and Billie went to Glendale High School together back in 1989. So there's just the one other name - Robert

Lee Acres. I did some investigation on him. Texas oil family. Big bucks. Family home in Galveston, corporate headquarters in Dallas. Everybody calls him 'Bobby Lee.' Dresses like a cowboy. Travels in a Lear jet. Lives in a new condo out near San Pedro."

McCracken's report came to an end just as the wine and McCracken's soup arrived, and while McCracken was alternately blowing on and slurping his *soupe aux poix*, Moritz was sipping his 1980 Clos Vougeot and glancing through the photographs. The first group showed shots of Billie and her hostess, Wanda, entering and exiting the house in Glendale. The second showed Billie and her boyfriend in various stages of undress, standing or sitting around on a wooden deck that extended out from the third floor of a housing complex. In one photo, Bobby Lee stood at the porch railing dressed in nothing but a large cowboy hat and smoking a long cigar.

"Pretty good shots, aren't they," said McCracken, having finished his soup and now wiping the bowl clean with the last of the French bread. "Those were taken with a zoom lens at a distance of five hundred yards. The subjects never had an inkling anyone was in photo range. Look at the guy's schwantz. This cowboy's actually got a tattoo on his whatchamacallit. Just for fun, I did a blowup of it - you see it there? You can just barely make out what it says. 'MOTHER.' Ain't that a hoot?"

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Billie sat in the deck chair, looking out towards the eastern horizon. The sky was still dark. In another half hour it would begin to lighten, and the faraway row of dark brown hills would gradually coalesce out of the formlessness. It reminded her of Genesis. She wondered if that long-forgotten priest who had written down the first lines had sat up like her watching the dawn.

Soon the real day would be born; the roseate hues which preceded the rising sun would limn the hills with pastel pinks and oranges, silent trumpet blasts announcing the coming of the god. At the quintessential moment a tiny sliver of sun would peek over the top of one of the hills, a pent-up lake of golden fire slowly starting to leak out through a rupture in the dam of night.

Billie was impatient for the day to begin, impatient for the muted roar of the city to swell into the explosion of cars and trucks carrying people and goods from the outlying sections and suburbs into the many centers of the city. Then she could forget the worries and fears of the night, glossing them over with the optimism of a new day.

"You're up awful early." Bobby in the half light, wearing one of Billie's kimonos, the sleeves up to his elbows, cramped onto the deck chair opposite her, puffing on his cigarette like a Boy Scout trying to get his fire going.

"I woke up from a bad dream and then I started worrying about things."

"You shouldn't worry so much, Babe. I'm here with you."

"Yeah, well. There's a whole gang of them out there."

"This Lars fella that's tryin' to get you back. Wouldn't it take some lead out of his pencil if we was to get married?"

"He might even try to stop us."

"Exactly. So why don't we push up the date?"

"I thought you wanted all your relatives to come. Doesn't that take time to set up?"

“It only has to be immediate family. We could have a big party later in Dallas and invite them all.”

“How soon could we make it?”

“Two or three weeks, maybe, if we could find a nice church that isn’t all booked up.”

“Let’s do it, then. I can’t take any more of this waiting game.”

“That for real, Babe?”

“That’s for real, Cowboy. Let’s go back to bed.”

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George sat alone in the quiet of his hotel room. The chair he was sitting in was firm but comfortable. It was late in the morning and the curtains were still drawn. The air conditioning was doing a good job keeping the warm air outside. Only a few wisps of thought assailed him as he sat in a scanning mode, meditating on Billie. He had had quite a few contacts with her over the last few weeks, but most of them had been mood intensive, with little factual content. The doctor had stressed the importance of finding out the wedding date.

Suddenly he was in a church. It was a high church, very formal. The rite being performed seemed to be a strange cross between a wedding and a mass. The priest was wearing whatever it was priests wore, and appeared to be hopping up and down. Then George saw that he was actually dancing a slow Scottish reel, and the audience now joined him, all the while genuflecting and crossing themselves, to a ponderous air played upon a pipe organ, but with the traditional overtones of the Bridal Chorus from Lohengrin. George did not know this piece of music, but he recognized the melody. The participants were joined by two newcomers, a blonde woman wearing a white swimming suit and a man in a tuxedo wearing a cowboy hat. The scene abruptly shifted, although the music continued, now with the Wedding March by Mendelssohn. All George could see was an elaborately carved table with a large open book upon it with a quill pen and a bottle of ink standing to the right. When he looked more closely at the pages of the book he saw that they were blank. Behind the book stood an old-fashioned desk calendar four inches square. On the top page, in large block letters, was the word SEPT, and underneath it, in larger numerals, was 17.

## Chapter 21

Dr. Moritz sat at the telephone table. On it, in addition to the phone, was a list of the Episcopal churches in the Greater Los Angeles area. Thirteen of them altogether, if you included African Methodist Episcopal, Anglican, and Anglican Catholic, just within a fifty-mile radius of Billie's house. He had called seven of them already. Six more to go.

"Hello, Mrs. Broadhurst. Nice of you to take time out for me in what must be a busy schedule. My name is Mortenson, Ernest Mortenson, of Cinderella Wedding Arrangements. . . yes, we're a new kind of service . . . yes, announcements, wedding apparel, floral arrangements, photography, instrumentalists, chauffeuring . . . You haven't? Well, we are the first in this area, as far as I know. Yes, we've been asked to handle the arrangements for a wedding scheduled on September 17. That's a Saturday. The name of the bride-to-be is Wilma Cathcart, and that of the groom Robert Lee Acres. You do have that in your records. . . Just yesterday. Well, I guess they called us soon afterwards. I was thinking maybe I could drop by on Wednesday. Just to check out the premises before I sit down with Miss Cathcart to do any serious planning. Yes, I would like to meet Reverend Pennypacker. I'll call in advance. Thanks very much. Goodbye."

He replaced the receiver in the cradle and unleashed a sigh of relief. Now he could get to work. He picked up the phone one more time.

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After the two girls from the agency had left, Lars sat alone on the sofa. The phone rang. He lifted the receiver.

"We know when it's happening," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"The date has been set?"

"September seventeenth at one o'clock at the Calvary Episcopal Church at 7024 Windsor Drive in La Cañada."

"Good work. That gives us a little under three weeks. What do you have in mind?"

"Basically, to create confusion and abscond with Billie. If we could also discredit the boyfriend it might help."

"I like that last idea. Anything specific, yet, in the way of plans?"

His caller encapsulated the details of the scheme that had been fermenting in the back of his brain for the last few days. It took some time, as they all seemed, at least to Lars, to be a little on the overelaborate side.

"And you intend to do *all* of those things?"

"What better way to create confusion?"

"Well, set it up as well as you can, but don't commit yourself to doing anything definite without checking with me first."

"I still need one thing from you. A name."

"A name?"

"I need someone to represent me as manager of Cinderella Wedding Arrangements."

"Why so?"

"Because the manager must meet with Billie in order to finalize the arrangements, and a fake moustache could not effectively conceal my identity."

"Good reason. I'll call you back and leave a message. I know a few people in the L.A. area. A good con man, right?"

"Right."

"I'll get on it right away."

"Good. Let's stay in touch."

"Do. Hourly if necessary."

"I hope you've thought a little more about the transition for Billie. It's maybe not enough to jinx the wedding and discredit the boy friend. She may need an interim period of adjustment. We don't want her running off to find yet another boy friend."

"That fits in with a plan we talked about a long time ago. Remember our discussion about a place called San Marcos?"

"Yes."

"I think it might be wise to prepare for contingencies. I know you're pretty busy right now, but maybe you could arrange for passports for everyone."

"Including George?"

"Yes, but he mustn't know why. Perhaps he could be led to believe it was for that desert island we promised him."

"Then I had better stay away from George. He'd quickly read my mind and know our intentions. He'd never be willing to go along with kidnapping Billie."

"Will staying away from him be that easy?"

"I can let Big Bill and Sly handle him for the moment."

"Good. Let's stay more in touch. We're getting close to zero hour."

Afterwards, Lars sat and pondered the bizarre plans he and Dr. Moritz were coming up with. He was pleased with them so far, however. He hoped they had handled all possible contingencies.

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Charlie Merryman was right on time. Dr. Moritz waited for him at a table in the back. It was early in the afternoon, and they had the place to themselves. A waiter appeared with menus, took their orders, and disappeared. Mr. Merryman was a bit shorter than Dr. Moritz, as well as possessing a bit more paunch. He looked Dr. Moritz knowingly in the eye, and Dr. Moritz nodded for him to take a seat.

"You're Mr. Mortenson," he said.

"And you're Mr. Merryman," said Dr. Moritz. "Good name for what I want you for."

"Just call me 'Charlie,'" said Mr. Merryman. "And what *do* you want me for?"

"I need a president for a company I've just created,"

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Timothy Dooley was a short, gangling forty-year-old with slow movements and a fast uptake. His hair had once been red, but was now a mousy brown with a bald pate in the center. His face was wide and open, with no facial hair, and his eyes were sky blue with flecks of laughter. He had once been an I.R.A. bomber, but he had been around



explosives too long. He had miscalculated the length of a fuse on a big job, and his resulting proximity to the explosion had strangely left his hearing unimpaired but somehow affected his mind. The organization reluctantly farmed him out to their American cousins. He was still good enough for the needs of the local L.A. mob. He sat nursing a Bushmill's and water, gazing around at the decor of the Doll House. One wall of the small lounge was entirely covered with Barbi dolls. Oriental and European dolls graced the mantelpiece above the bar.

"I don't know what to think of this place, Mr. Mortenson," he said in a voice that sounded like well-oiled sandpaper. He curled a quick, lopsided smile. "I mean, who goes in for this kinda doll shit?" Moritz could hear the Irish brogue behind the American idiom.

"Small girls and demented women, I would guess," said Dr. Moritz. "I only chose this establishment because it looked anonymous."

Mr. Dooley giggled. "That mean they only allow anonymous alcoholics?"

Dr. Moritz allowed a rare smile.

"It means, Mr. Dooley, that it is better if we aren't seen too often together publicly."

"I hope that don't mean we gotta stop dating," Dooley said with a broad grin and another little giggle.

"You have a quick wit," said Moritz, careful to keep the irritation out of his voice. "If you're as quick on the job I shall be all the more pleased."

"I'm the best there is, Mr. Mortenson. You name the job, any job, no matter how complicated. If anyone can do it, I can do it better." He sat back in his chair, looking Dr. Moritz straight in the eye, all serious now, except for the nervous tic in his right eyelid which made it appear that he was winking at Dr. Moritz.

"Good," said the doctor, who had been winked at before. "Then let's get down to brass tacks. The first item on our agenda is the New Jerusalem African Methodist Episcopal Church."

"You mean the one way out on Hoosier Boulevard near Watts?"

"That's the one."

Mr. Dooley's thick eyebrows only went up a millimeter or two, and his eyelid stopped twitching for just a moment. His broad, plain face took on a beatific expression, and his Irish eyes were smiling.

"I never done a church before," he said, "letting alone a Jewish-African-Protestant one."

## Chapter 22

Fletcher Pennypacker, B.Th, D.D., right reverend of the Calvary Episcopal Church, was relatively happy with his lot. This happiness seemed particularly strange to him because it was, in the final analysis, based on a lie. Fletcher P., as he was known less formally, was an honest man, as the parlance goes. This did not mean, however, that he was more revelatory about his feelings, or more truthful on his tax returns or more altruistic in his behavior than anyone else. It just meant that, by and large, his dishonesties were never big ones. Except for this one lie he had begun a little over a year ago, shortly after both his wife and doctor died, she of boredom and he of old age, the only two people in the world who could challenge it.

As a youth, Fletcher P, known then simply as 'Fletch', and sometimes humorously as 'Motherfletcher' by a few of his so-called friends, had been something of a mama's boy and a recluse. That was before he mastered the false front which allowed him to fit so snugly into society. In his early years he was socially awkward and preferred to keep his own company. To cope with the lack of approval from others, he made himself the hero of countless imaginary adventures, and developed his daydreaming into a rich activity. Assuming different roles in his imagination became a way of acting out internally those relationships he lacked externally. It would have helped him to actually go on the stage, at least in an amateur way, but his social isolation afforded him little contact with the real world.

In his mind, however, there had always been a stage, and, when he became a minister, he converted that stage into a pulpit. It gave him a place from which to talk about matters in which he had no experience, about experiences he had never had, and about emotions of which he was not capable. But he talked about them in the broad generalities he had learned at a midwestern divinity school, so nobody saw through him. He was able to be paternalistic and authoritarian without ever having been a father, sympathetic without ever having felt sympathy, loving without ever having really loved. He turned the energy of his otherwise-suppressed hatred of others into a positive thing - into the service of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The lie that he had told was that he was going to die. This was not in itself a falsehood, since everyone ultimately succumbs to this most grievous of maladies. What made it one is that he said it would be soon.

He said he had incurable cancer of the large intestine, and that the prospect of having only a year to live had made him a reborn Christian. He had not uttered this lie out of malice or deception. It was just a fantasy he had been nurturing for so long it almost seemed real. He had had many types of fantasies, but this particular one gave him a sense of importance, a missing ingredient in his lackluster life. Willy nilly, it had just come out one day, a fetus born out of defeat, a fart emitted by a corpse, due to the retention of gas. He mentioned it as if in passing to a gaggle of other ministers at an international Bible conference, and it had transformed him in a hot minute from a boring sermonizer into a charismatic speaker. He had come home from the conference charged up, and, since then, his life had not been the same. His parishioners immediately sensed his new energy, and his sermons took on a new life. He told the lie again and again, and over time it acquired solidity. He began to believe it himself, except, of course, never to the point of sitting down and writing his last will and testament. People suggested he visit

this specialist or that, but he rejected these suggestions out of hand. God would take him when it was his time.

On this particular Wednesday afternoon, he had just told the lie once more. His listeners were very sympathetic, a wedding counselor by the name of Merryman and his assistant, O'Murphy, a strange little man with an Irish brogue and a peculiar twitch to his right eye which caused him to be continually winking at Reverend Pennypacker. This did not discountenance the most right reverend, whose own sexual impulse had long ago withered away out of disuse.

"The secret of life is to live it to the full, whether one has twenty minutes or twenty years," he declaimed to his audience of two.

"How true," murmured Mr. Merryman.

"Praise the Lord," said Mr. O'Murphy.

"And have you decided on the arrangements?" asked Mr. Pennypacker.

"I've spoken with the bride-to-be," said Mr. Merryman, "and she has asked me to oversee all of the arrangements. 'I'm just 'casing the joint,' if you will permit me to steal a phrase from the criminal vernacular. I hope you don't mind my assistant just wandering about, looking the place over. He has a particular faculty for finding the exact placement for everything. Now, perhaps you could indulge me. Miss Cathcart was particularly interested in the service you use."

"The service?"

"The text of the service, that is."

"Yes, yes. I'd be only too happy. We have several versions. I myself have a certain predilection for the standard one . . ."

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For the next member of his little cast of characters, Moritz chose one Gerda Luttmeyer.

Gerda had been one of Dr. Moritz's first patients when he did his residency at Napa State Hospital. She was a former nurse whose mental state had deteriorated to the point that she had begun killing her patients. At first she was clever enough to elude suspicion, but each success led not only to greater inroads upon her sanity, but to greater disregard for her own safety; she was finally caught in flagrante delicto. By the time they incarcerated her, she had become quite mad.

She was also quite intelligent, and quickly grasped that it was not cure that the doctors sought, but rather the appearance of it, so she concentrated on achieving that appearance, so well that, after thirteen years in institutions, with a record of good behavior, under a program introduced by Governor Ronald Reagan to empty out the overcrowded asylums, and still quite mad, she was released to an outpatient status, allowing her to become a welfare recipient.

Dr. Moritz had recognized her potential usefulness early on, and in his sessions with her had managed to win her frugal confidence. He had been aided in this by their common European backgrounds and by the fact that they were both immigrants. He shared her passion for order, her identification of 'sick' with 'weak', and her conviction of the inferiority of other races. He maintained a small card catalog of potentially useful

former patients, with whom he kept in loose contact, and hers had long been one of the entries.

Gerda Luttmeyer's last known address was a small cottage in Culver City. Sly parked in front while Dr. Moritz followed the cement path that cut across the dying lawn. The open side gate hung precariously from its remaining hinge. The front house looked untenanted. It was just as well. He wanted as few witnesses as possible to this meeting. He strode around to the house in back. It looked like one of those 'grandmothered' affairs, with a hotplate and a stall shower. The paint on the front door was peeling off, and the bell didn't seem to work. After a few minutes, Dr. Moritz knocked loudly. He waited, then knocked again. Finally he heard a sound from inside the house, and then the door creaked open and a suspicious face peered out.

"Grüs Gott, Frau Luttmeyer," said Dr. Moritz. The door opened fully and a small woman with a kerchief around her head looked up at him. "Herr Doktor," she said.

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Dr. Moritz's call came through right on schedule on Sunday evening. Lars Svensen sat absorbed in Fodor's travel guide to Central America when the telephone rang.

"Yes?"

"It's me."

"What's up?"

"Good news. My new manager was able to sign Miss Cathcart up as a new customer of our wedding services. I hope you don't mind paying her bills, as well as for the manager."

"Our wedding services? Manager?"

Dr. Moritz outlined what he had in mind. At the end he said, "You see the beauty of it. It puts us in the driver's seat, literally."

"Excellent, as well as ironic. You're showing a flair for originality I hadn't suspected in you, doctor. Anything else?"

"The explosives man. I have someone. He was recommended by the local people, and I have good reason to expect he will be more than adequate."

"Have you figured out the means by which my competitor is going to suffer his demise?"

"I've chosen the means. I have yet to determine the circumstances."

"Sounds as if things are moving along. Keep up the positive reports."

Lars replaced the phone in the cradle and sat back with a sigh. He was really looking forward to seeing Billie again. He was tired of the girls the agency had been sending him.

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At that precise moment, the bride-to-be was bridling over her bills. As soon as Bobby got his inheritance, she was going to get a credit card. She pecked at her teeth with the lead of her pencil, something she did when she was using her creative side to solve a problem, but that particular side appeared to be out to lunch at the moment.

"Darn!" she exclaimed prettily, or at least Bobby thought so. He could sit and look at her all day long if she would let him. She was the prettiest woman he had ever known, and he was damned if she wasn't going to become his wife as well.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"I wish you wouldn't call me honey. It sounds like one of those old Clark Gable movies."

"Gable was a cool dude."

"He was probably an arrogant chauvinist."

"Frankly, honey" said Bobby with a silly grin, "I don't give a damn."

She gave him a tired smile. No matter how irritating he became, he was always desirable to her. There was a certain animal magnetism about him that made her feel like reaching out and touching him. He had just a smidgeon of shyness for one so extroverted, a certain delicacy of spirit and tenderness. She had never known a man with his sexual energies. He could make her feel eighteen again.

She put her work down on the patio table and lay back and closed her eyes. One felt the sun rather than see it, anyway, the smog was so thick.

Bobby picked up what she had been working on and glanced through it briefly, then tossed it back on the table.

"Hell, most of those charges are for your new wardrobe, honey. What happens when you have to pay the bills for your weddin'? I told you I can't help you there. Once we're married, it'll be a whole different ball game. Then I get my inheritance."

He moved over to her side of the table and sat down on a stool next to her deck chair, looking down at her. She opened her eyes and looked up at him. She was glad he hadn't gone on about his inheritance. There were times when she wondered if that was why he wanted to get married.

"I have good news for you there, laddy," she told him. "It's not going to cost me a thing for my wedding. Except what you pay the minister. Everything else is free."

"How come?" said Bobby disbelievingly.

"It's a new wedding arrangements service, dearie. Part of a promotional advertisement thing. Our wedding was chosen at random."

"How do you know you won't get stiffed and end up paying for it all yourself?"

"Because I've already checked up on the service, my darling. When I met with the president, he asked for my preferences on flowers."

"And?"

"He said he'd phone them in in advance to make sure they reserved them for me. Just for the heck of it I called the florists up yesterday and got them to check in their records, and the bill had already been paid. How 'bout that, honey bun?"

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On Monday afternoon, Lars' regularly scheduled massage was interrupted by an unscheduled call from Dr. Moritz. He told the masseuse to make herself at home while he put on a robe and retired into his office.

"Yes."

"It's me again. Sorry to bother you, but a lot has been happening and I thought you ought to know."

“Sure. What’s up?”

“As I told you in our last conversation I need to refine our scheme somewhat. You asked me if I had decided on the means by which your . . . competition, I think was how you put it . . . was going to meet his demise. I told you I had the means but hadn’t yet determined the circumstances. I think I’ve come up with a new wrinkle that will provide us those circumstances. It would also prove to be a source of some embarrassment to your competition.

He proceeded to explain his plan in all its details.

“Your scheme is getting better and better,” said Lars, concerned that things were as a matter of fact sounding goofier and goofier, but realizing that it was by now too late to back out. “Have you got anyone in mind for the girl?”

“I think I have a line on a former director and acting coach. Did some work with Corman back in the sixties, but not much since, so he ought to be a willing accomplice. I had an amicable conversation with him yesterday. I’m hoping he can enlist her himself. He might know a good casting agency. It would be best for him to deal with her exclusively.”

“Good. It’s nice when one can delegate authority. Next item.”

“I’ve hired an investigator in the Galveston area to dig up some information on the cowboy. All we need is an unaccounted-for chunk of time in the last couple years. Maybe a holiday he took somewhere else that enough people know about. It doesn’t need to stand up to much scrutiny.”

“Excellent. You’ve handled all of this quite ingeniously, Doctor. There’ll be a little extra waiting for you at the conclusion of this affair.”

“When will you be coming down?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I’ll let you know when you call on Wednesday.”

“Until then.”

## Chapter 23

Things had been pretty slow the last two weeks. Big Bill and Sly were at the table in the sitting room playing gin, while George was in his bedroom watching cartoons on TV.

"I'd like to know what's been goin' on lately," said Sly, taking the top card of the discard pile.

"I guess the Doc ain't got no use for us right now," said Big Bill, picking a card from the stack and putting it in the right place in his hand.

"Actually," said Sly, "we *are* doing something right now, at least *you* are."

"What's that?"

"Playin' nursemaid to George."

"Yeah," said Big Bill, sitting and thinking about it. "But what the heck's that mean?"

"It means the Doc doesn't ever see George," said Sly.

"So?"

"It means he doesn't want George to know what he's planning. It also explains something else."

"Yeah?" said Big Bill.

"It explains why he hasn't said anything to us about what he's workin' on," said Sly.

"Yeah?" said Big Bill. "Why hasn't he?"

"Because then George would read us and find out."

"Ah . . .," said Big Bill, comprehension briefly illuminating his battle-scarred face.

"You mean he don't want George to know what he's doin'."

"Right," said Sly.

Consternation gripped Big Bill once more. "But why don't he want George to know?"

"Maybe if George knew what the Doc's plans were, he wouldn't cooperate with him."

Big Bill was still puzzled over the answer. He played mechanically for a few minutes, mulling it over. He didn't even notice when he drew his fourth ace. He stuck it mechanically in the right place, and got rid of a jack which was at the top of a straight. He was so distracted he didn't even notice that he could meld all his cards.

"Gin," said Sly.

"Damn!" said Big Bill. "I coulda knocked a couple turns ago. You got me all mixed up with that stuff about George."

After Sly had left to go back to his suite, Big Bill wandered into the bedroom to see how George was doing.

"Whaddya watchin', George?"

"National Geographic," said George. "They got a thing on about birds."

"How come you don't have the sound on?"

"I just want to watch the birds," said George. "I don't want to listen to all the talk."

"Okay," said Big Bill. "I'm gonna hit the sack, George. You want anything, you wake me up, okay?"

“Okay,” said George, not turning around. He listened to the big man’s footsteps clumping to the near bedroom door. He tuned in on Big Bill’s brain, sensing him pulling off his clothes and plopping into bed, troubled by the question Sly had stuck him with. Why didn’t the doc want George to know what he was up to?

George sat and thought, long after Big Bill had succumbed to the seductions of sleep, the question which had been bothering the big man now forgotten. It wasn’t forgotten, however, to George, who took over Big Bill’s question, but now with his own spin. What didn’t the doctor want George to know? And an even more puzzling question – *why* didn’t he want him to know?

For the last two weeks, George had been placed on hold. He had gone nowhere and was assigned no tasks. He had seen nothing of Dr. Moritz. He ate breakfast and watched TV with Big and Sly, and played solitaire while they played gin.

But then, his two companions had also had no assignments. Something big was in the air. George could feel it. On Thursday the three of them went down to get their passports, a man having already come to their rooms a few days before to take their photographs. Before they left San Francisco, Dr. Moritz had mentioned to George the necessity of obtaining his passport so that he could go on the trip that Lars had reserved for him, and then it had made sense. But why was it necessary for Big Bill or Sly to get their passports as well? He had peered into their minds, but they seemed to have no more knowledge than he, that it was on the boss’s orders.

If Dr. Moritz didn’t want George to know what he was doing, it meant that George would be unhappy if he knew about it, and there was only one thing that would make George unhappy. That was to lose out on the deal that Lars had promised him – a one-way ticket to a remote South Seas island and a guaranteed thousand dollars a month, just enough to keep him in cheeseburgers and comic books. He had long regretted helping them find Billie, and he had only done it to get his ticket out. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that they were going to keep him around for some other purpose. Maybe Lars and Dr. Moritz wanted to go back to studying George so they could use his powers to get more money for Lars.

If they weren’t going to send George to that Pacific island, where *were* they going to take him? Why had they all gotten passports? Maybe they were all going somewhere else together, somewhere outside the country. George felt frightened, but he also felt angry. Even though he hadn’t had any choice about it, he had betrayed Billie, and then, on top of it all, it had been for nothing.

What should he do? If he stuck around, he might never be free again, but if he escaped, he might be able to find Billie and tell her all he knew. Which wasn’t much, as Dr. Moritz hadn’t told anyone what he was doing. But at least George could warn her. He didn’t know his way around L.A., but he had memorized a map of the area at breakfast a few mornings ago. It had been in one of those tourist brochures that only showed the main streets, but it was better than nothing. If worst came to worst, he could always ask for directions.

After he had decided all this, he felt a certain relief, maybe the relief that he could finally feel right about himself again. He also felt fear, the fear that he might fail in what he had to do next, that they might catch him, and punish him.



He stood by the door to the other bedroom, listening to the regular breathing of Big Bill. In, out, in, out, the *in* sounding like a toilet flushing, the *out* like the air brakes on a bus. George tiptoed into the room. Big Bill started snoring, and George moved forward and got down on his knees and groped under the bed for the big man's right shoe. Big Bill's theory was that anyone searching for his loot would first have to get past his smelly socks, which he jammed in after his wallet each night as he retired.

George listened in on Big Bill's sleeping mind as he groped for the big shoe under the bed. Nothing much was going on except a vague dream about a nude woman with a large ass that Big Bill was crawling after.

The money roll seemed especially thick. George replaced the empty wallet and socks in the shoe and tiptoed out. When he got to his bedroom, he unrolled the wad and slowly counted it out. He wasn't sure, but it seemed to come to almost 4300 dollars. That would surely be enough for more than a month if George used it carefully. He hated stealing like this, but he had no other choice. Without the money, he would have to live on the streets, and then he would once more end up drunk and mindless in a gutter.

He slipped out of the hotel suite, a thief in the night. Night gave him an advantage. He could deal with the few strands of waking thought which came his way much more easily than the daily bombardment of the mass mind. He avoided the elevators and headed for the stairs. An elevator would be faster, but the manager downstairs might look up and notice that it was being used.

He stopped when he reached the bottom of the stairs and the door to the lobby. One man was at the front desk; he needed to take a pee real bad but was trying to hold out until his next break. George glanced at his watch. It was twenty after three. He stood and waited, watching the minutes crawl by, tuned in to the mind of the man at the desk, who was, in turn, tuned in to the mind of his bladder.

At three thirty three the man ducked under the counter and walked briskly down a corridor towards the rear, where there was a men's room. George popped out and strode even more briskly straight out the front door. Nobody accosted him as he emerged into the cool air. The street outside was empty. A cab sat in front of the hotel with a dozing driver who woke up when George got in the back.

"Union Station," he told the man behind the wheel, summoning up a stylized map of central Los Angeles he had memorized from the booklet, which had a little drawing of each significant building and only showed the major streets. He had initially been interested in it because it showed the route to the place where all the mastodons and saber-toothed tigers got stuck in the tar pits. He figured he could switch cabs at Union Station. The driver thought it was a weird place to go in the middle of the night. There weren't any trains leaving at this hour except maybe an Amtrak to Chicago. Maybe his passenger had seen too many old movies and thought it was still a hub of activity, but it wasn't any of his business.

## Chapter 24

Dr. Moritz looked out through the grayness of the early evening which, along with him, had invaded Hoosier Boulevard. Its name, so obviously of an earlier, gentler age, was inappropriate to the battleground which the Watts area presented to his jaundiced eye, but it mattered little to him. He did not care about the wants and needs of the people who lived here, or the desperation which issued like a bad smell from the broken buildings which lined the street and the broken bottles which filled it. He sat in the car which Sly and Big Bill had stolen earlier that day and waited for Tim Dooley to return.

He was getting old and weak. When he was young he would have waited without anxiety. He would not have been concerned about a prowler car cruising along and questioning his presence. He would not have feared death itself, for he had been immortal in the way that youth is forever immortal, not believing in death. Now he saw death in every wrinkle, every arthritic joint, every murmur of his heart, every glance of recognition which the old and dying shared with each other. He no longer wanted the things of youth - fast cars and fast women and fast cash and fast food. He wanted exquisite meals with fine wines, long walks before long naps, submissive ladies of the night who didn't stick around to mar his mornings, and when he was too old for rich foods and lusty women, to lie on beaches in sunny climes and listen to the sounds of the sea.

He heard a slight tap on the driver's side and peered out at Mr. Dooley's fierce Irish face motioning for him to open the door.

"'Tis all done, Mr. Mortenson," the man grated as he slid into the driver's seat.

"Then let's leave as quietly as we came," said Dr. Moritz.

"It's a pity, Mr. Mortenson," said Tim. "I've never blown a church to billy hell before, may God strike me dead, and I'd dearly love to witness the event."

"We'll witness it from a safe distance, Mr. Dooley. Afterwards, we'll drive by and view the damage first-hand."

But it was difficult to find a nearby location from which they could witness anything. The area was flat, and they had to settle for a view of the top of the church marquee from a couple blocks away. There was no missing the explosion that came off right on schedule, however. It sounded like the crack of doom.

"Ain't that a blast, Mr. Mortenson?" said Mr. Dooley, a look of pride in his pale green eyes.

"Right on time, as well," said Dr. Moritz, consulting his stop watch. "It'll be interesting to see how long it takes the police and fire departments to get out here."

It wasn't long at all. In less than three minutes they heard police car sirens, followed soon after by the wail of other emergency vehicles, presumably fire engines. They tried to figure out whether it was a two or a three alarm fire, by counting the sirens.

"How long do ye think we'll have ta wait here, Mr. Mortenson," said Tim, anxious to see the results of his latest handiwork.

"As soon as the sirens have stopped," said Dr. Moritz.

But they couldn't see much first-hand, as they cruised slowly by in the parade of cars being shunted around the cluster of squad cars and fire trucks jammed up around the tall sign which still had enough readable letters for one to make out the name: NEW

JERUSALEM AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH. In the lurid light, with occasional tongues of flame licking out from the blackened windows, it resembled less a church than an arcane theater playing a monstrous horror movie.

Smoke was still billowing up from behind the still-standing facade of the building, kept in an erect position by the force of the high-velocity water from the hoses of the hooks-and-ladders. A straggling crowd of local residents lined up along the other side of the street, many still huddled in bathrobes and other hurriedly-donned attire. Tim seemed to have gotten over his disappointment at not viewing the explosion. Besides seeing the result, at least they had been able to hear the blast, still plenty loud ten blocks away over on Lynwood.

“Now ain’t that a beautiful sight, Mr. Mortenson?”

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Dr. Moritz viewed with equal pleasure the article on page one in the L.A. Times the next morning. Big Bill and Sly were having an early breakfast before going out to continue their hopeless search for the missing George. Big Bill was proud that the bombing had been his idea, and listened intently as the doctor read excerpts aloud to them.

“Yesterday evening, at 8:17 P.M., at 18555 Hoosier Boulevard in Watts, close to the site of the famous Watts rebellion of 1965, the New Jerusalem African Methodist Episcopal Church was burned to the ground in what police can only speculate is a new outbreak in the burning of black churches . . .”

“I didn’t know that Billie was gettin’ married in a black church,” said Big Bill.

“She isn’t,” said Dr. Moritz, irritated at the interruption. “This is only the first of a series of three bomb threats. Only the first one is real. That’s to convince the authorities that the last two threats will also be real.”

“I don’t get it,” complained Big Bill.

“The next time we threaten to blow up a church, will they ignore us?” asked the doctor.

“I guess not,” said Big Bill, irretrievably lost.

“That’s the point,” said Dr. Moritz.

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Two days later a second article appeared. The Times had received a letter from the person(s) allegedly responsible for the Watts Bombing. It read:

“BEWARE, WHORES OF BABYLON SODOM AND GOMORRAH! THE DAY OF JUDGMENT HAS ARRIVED! ON AUGUST 15 AT EIGHT O’CLOCK IN THE EVENING THE NEW JERUSALEM AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH WILL BE DESTROYED BY THE MESSENGERS OF THE WRATH OF GOD (MWG).”

“The fools who planted the bomb sent the letter too late for the warning to be acted upon,” commented Robin Johnson of KRTZ News.

Channel 17 News: “The letter appears to have been a warning about the bombing, and correctly states the time of the explosion. To bolster its authenticity, several details were mentioned about the placement of the bomb that the police found difficult to discredit. The problem is that the letter could have been mailed after the fact . . .”

“Has the Bible Belt mentality unleashed a new wave of Biblical terrorism upon us?” the Cucamonga Despatch enquired.

Dr. Moritz smiled at the variety of responses his little message had provoked. His next message would be sent a little sooner. This time, to Mr. Dooley’s infinite regret, they would forego the Fourth-of-July fun and games and check out instead the response time of the bomb squad.

He was still perturbed about the effect George could have on the events he was setting in motion. He had done all he could. The photographer who had taken the photos for George’s passport had made two hundred duplicates, on the reverse side of which Big Bill and Sly had written ‘\$10000 D.O.A.,’ and Dr. Moritz had passed them on to the local organization, which, for an additional contribution of \$20,000, had agreed to put the photos out on the street. Every hit man, every bookie and shill and con man, every dope dealer, robber, car thief and pickpocket would be on the lookout for him, and a small army of doormen, taxi drivers and street gangs, not to mention a few cops, would have been secondarily alerted by friends in crime to keep an eye out for someone of George’s description. Dr. Moritz had no doubt that the two hundred copies would soon be augmented by a larger number of xeroxed ones. The ‘D.O.A.’ did not carry the usual police connotation of ‘dead on arrival,’ but an older one from the wild west - ‘dead or alive.’ Useful though George’s talents might be, right now a dead George in the hand was worth a live George in the bush. It was astonishing, he thought wryly to himself, how suddenly a valuable asset could become a dangerous liability.

## Chapter 25

When the driver let him out at the station, George found it dark and deserted. He didn't see any place for taxis. An armed guard came out of a little room to the left of the main doors, which were all closed. The guard looked suspiciously at George, who started walking, hoping to find a cab stand with cabs. The first street sign he saw was North Alameda and he decided to follow it. He wondered vaguely where Wilshire Boulevard was, because that was where the tar pits were. Except for occasional cars, the streets were dead. No people at all. George had spent his whole life in San Francisco and wasn't used to such empty streets, even at night. He wondered where the homeless slept. He listened to the hollow knocking of his shoes on the cement and wondered if he would be able to find Billie. All the buildings around him were big, tall office-type buildings. One of them looked like the city hall. There were no stores or houses. He kept an eye on the street signs, but the map he had memorized didn't have all the streets. Commercial Street, Temple Street, East First, East Second. Then he remembered that the numbered streets in the vicinity of the tar pits were all 'West' streets, so maybe all he had to do was guess which way was west.

It seemed to George that he had been walking for hours. A couple of times cars full of young punks slowed down and called out challenges to him, but he ignored them and kept going. Once, an empty coke can hit him on the leg, and on a later encounter something liquid splattered on the sidewalk behind him, but he just kept trucking along. He tried to think of marching songs, but he didn't know any. All he knew were church songs and, except for Onward Christian Soldiers, they didn't have the right rhythm. He wondered how well he would have done in the Army. They did a lot of marching. As long as he didn't have to kill anyone. But then he remembered the movies he had seen about barracks life, and being surrounded by other people twenty four hours a day, and he shivered.

The squad car pulled up alongside him, slowly keeping pace, then suddenly blossomed with red and blue lights. He pretended he didn't see it and tried to keep marching.

"You over there!" grated the voice over the loudspeaker. He came to a halt and looked around. The police car pulled in to the curb and stopped next to him.

"Approach the car, please. Keep your hands out of your pockets." George obeyed, blinded by the spotlight. He stood a moment, feeling eyes staring at him, minds probing him.

"Where you goin', buddy?" asked a disembodied voice.

"I'm trying to find a cab, your honor . . . I mean sir . . ." George blurted out.

"Sounds like he spends a lot of mornings in front of the judge," George heard one of the cops say to the other.

"You had anything to drink?"

"No sir." George heard the car door open and felt the grip of the officer as he was led into the glare of the headlights.

"Lean forward and put your hands on the hood of the car, please."

George felt the hands of the policeman patting him down, fingers searching through his pockets."

“Check this out, Dan. A fucking passport yet.” George saw his little blue book being passed to the other cop.

“Get in the car, sir.” George allowed himself to be manhandled into the back seat, one of the policeman’s hands holding his head as he ducked under the door.

“This is quite a lot of money to be walking around with, sir. There’s nearly five thousand in cash.” George sat alone in the back while the radio sputtered out a stream of cryptic chatter. The driver held a small mike in his hand, reading off information from the passport, while the other cop leaned over the back of the front seat, fixing George with an eagle eye.

Half an hour later, the police dropped him off at the cab stand in back of Union Station. They severely admonished George for wandering around in a dangerous area, and told him to get directions before he started off on his own.

George stood and looked at the row of cabs. How was he supposed to have known that the cabs were parked out here, in back of the station? He had been walking for hours and hours for nothing at all. Why did they have to make everything so complicated?

He went up to the cab at the end of the line and knocked on the window. The cabby looked up and motioned him to the front of the line. This time he had to knock a lot longer, because the driver was fast asleep.

George asked the driver to take him to the house where Billie was staying. It took a while for George even with the driver’s help to come up with the name of the city.

Twenty six dollars later they were in Glendale. Fortunately George had memorized Billie’s street and number. He kept his eyes open for the white house with a white fence and a green lawn with a Christmas tree.

And there it was, looming into view. George asked the driver to leave the meter on. The house was dark and nobody answered the bell. He walked all the way around the place, peering in through every window. Then he sat down on the front steps and put his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands and tried to figure out what to do next, but nothing came to him.

He stared at the full moon lying low in the sky, larger than he had ever seen it. It stared back at him ominously, pregnant with unspoken warning. When he tried to look away he saw its reflection in every windshield on the street.

He sat, trying to visualize, trying to pick up images of Billie, but all he got were pictures of Wanda, who owned the house. Wanda watering the plants, Wanda mowing the lawn. Where in the world was Wanda? Why was the house empty in the middle of the night?

After keeping the cabby waiting half an hour with the meter running, George gave up and had the driver take him to the cheapest hotel with a vacancy. It was a place out in Venice called The Blue Vue Cottages, only they were just rooms in a building and the only blue George could see was in the heavily-mascaraed eyes of the prostitutes who paraded in and out with their johns. Still, the price was right and George had to count his pennies or his 4300 dollars would run out in no time.

“Forty bucks a night, no smoking, no drinking, return your key at the desk as you leave.” The weasel-faced man at the desk seemed unconcerned that George had no luggage. He was thinking about the big tits on the number in 305. He put George’s two twenties in the till and handed him a key. The tag said Room 103.

George lay on the uncomfortable mattress, unable to sleep, thinking about Billie and wondering if she were staying at her boyfriend's. Unfortunately, he had never found out where the boyfriend lived, as Dr. Moritz had never thought about it in his presence. And where could Billie's friend Wanda be?

## Chapter 26

Joyce Vanderbilt was relaxing in the late afternoon sun, trying to improve her tan. Her agent was going over her lines with her.

"This is the weirdest thing I have ever done, Larry."

"We drop out the minute the discomfort factor gets too high. I told you that, Joycee."

"Nah, I need the bread," she said resignedly. "You're sure I won't have to do any time?"

"I'm sure. I talked to an ex-cop friend of mine. Your cover story is tough to disprove, and your new I.D. is cool. The guy who hired me told me he even got a private dick to dig up the background info. As I understand it you're just a diversion. You'll be in the limelight five minutes max. You'll be long gone before they get an inkling anything's wrong."

"What happens if they arrest me or something?"

"They won't, but, even so, I'll have a lawyer waiting in the wings, briefed and ready to pop you out."

"You promise you really will do that, Larry?"

"The lawyer and bail are part of the package. These people are organized. But it'll never get to that. You'll be able to take that trip to Hawaii instead."

"And what happens if the minister doesn't say what he's supposed to?"

"He will, Joycee. Don't you worry your pretty little head about it."

"They even fixed the minister?"

"When the money's good, honey, you don't ask questions like that. Now let's go over it all one more time."

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"Mr. Dooley tells me you used to be a professional wrestler." Dr. Moritz looked across the table at the massive man in the oversized expensive suit. The lights in the cocktail lounge were dim, but he could still see the pugilistic set of jaw, the thick cords that rose out of bulging shoulders to join up with a bull neck.

"Yeah, Mr. Mortenson. Like I told you on the phone. I was even on a tag team once with Herman the German." The big man hunched his shoulders and stared moodily into his schooner of beer. "But that was a long time ago," he said, looking up. "Tim said you was looking for some muscle, but he didn't give me no details. I figured you needed some guy put out a commission, maybe break an arm or leg."

"Nothing quite so violent, Mr. Palusky. All I want you to do is a little manhandling. Maybe some intimidation."

"This guy big?"

"Six four, two twenty. Played a little pro football."

"He lift weights?"

"Not for some time, according to my information. He's probably a little out of condition. He shouldn't be any match for you, tag team or otherwise. I guess I have only one concern."

"Yeah, Mr. Mortenson?"



"You're supposed to come from Texas, but you sound like you're straight out of Brooklyn."

"Doan't y'all worry yoahseff abaht thet," said Mr. Palusky. "Ah kin kick cow paddies with the best of 'em."

"Fortunately you don't have to say very much," said Dr. Moritz.

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George lay on the narrow bed, listening to the screaming of the universe around him. Since the late afternoon he had been lying there, staring at the faded wallpaper, converting the spots and stains into continents and islands on a map of an imaginary planet. But the arrival of evening gradually turned the world on the wall into a murky sea of despondence.

For the last week, he had been visiting Wanda's house once every four hours, around the clock, sleeping fitfully in between. The cab rides were rapidly running him out of money. The alternative, public transportation, made him nervous..

He tried it once - an Interlink train from Union Station which dropped him off at an abandoned adobe depot surrounded by an anchor fence. He tried asking directions, but everyone spoke Spanish with little English. He wandered around, peering into grimy machine shops and shady cafés, seeing only alien mestizo eyes. Time hung in the hot motionless air. He was overwhelmed by the pervading sense of fatalistic hopelessness. He sat on the bus and tried to tune out the din of the everyday thoughts of everybody around him, all the petty jealousies and desires, the pent-up anger with an uncaring world, until the intensity became unbearable. He bolted out of his seat, jostled past surprised passengers for the rear door of the bus, alighting onto the uncomplicated pavement.

A few sweaty miles taught him that cabs did not stop here when hailed. He discovered later that you either found a taxi stand, or you found a public phone and called the cab company. And you had to be in the right part of town or they wouldn't come at all. Fortunately, this was the right part of town.

From then on, he took cabs exclusively, and often kept them waiting for the return trip.

But where was Wanda? He found an old cat food dish on her back patio, but the cat which presumably went with it was not around either. Only spiders and flies. And ants. Sometimes he listened in on their faint wisps of consciousness. He remembered the spiders in Sam's basement. But he got no pictures of what Wanda did when she was away from home.

Once he caught a glimpse of what looked like Sly and Big Bill walking up the street, but the cab turned the corner before he could catch a second glance. He would have to keep an eye out for them. They were, he had no doubt, keeping an eye out for him.

So here he was, lying on a lumpy mattress in a gloomy room, thinking gloomy thoughts. He tried to visualize Wanda, but his psychic horizon was bare. He did get bits and snatches of Billie's thoughts and feelings, but there was little substance to them. He was depressed, and so was his wallet. In just two short weeks he had spent nearly three thousand dollars.

George was in a quandary. In his entire life, he had never made a decision about anything. Once his mother had made them for him, but after her death he had let other people make his decisions. Now he had to make a decision, and he didn't know how.

The possibilities danced through his head. Maybe he should move to Glendale. Then he could cut down on the cab fares. But there weren't any cheap hotels in Glendale. He remembered the Mexican part of town he had walked through once. Maybe he could rent a room there. How did one go about finding a room? It made his head spin. Maybe he should go out and buy a bottle. That would stop his head from spinning. No, he told himself. He had to warn Billie first.

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"Hey Pops. How come I can't make the sound go on?"

Dr. Moritz looked up from the pile of newspapers on his lap to the shamelessly nude girl on the sofa beside him. She pointed the control box imperiously at the television set, but nothing happened. He admired the side view of her young breasts, pertly pointed upward.

"You probably pressed the MUTE switch by accident."

"Guess what switch I'm pressing right now."

"How about the TV-VCR switch?" he asked. "It has to be clicked on TV."

"Jeez. Why do these things have to be so complicated," Mona whined, flitting her dark eyes at him. He cringed slightly as the sound returned full blast.

So splendidly made and so dumb, he thought. He went back to his newspapers, allowing himself a brief smile as he read the reports on his latest bomb threat. They were not on the front page this time, and all were brief, probably since no destruction had been involved. They did, however, tie the threat to the previous bombing. The reporter had been swift enough to notice that both churches were Episcopal, which was the other main point that Dr. Moritz wanted to have made. Even though a different police department had been involved, the anonymous telephone call had been taken seriously and the bomb squad had appeared within a half hour. The fact that the bomb had been real and set to go off at the time specified in the phone call would provide the next bunch of cops with some motivation to be on schedule.

"Whatcha readin', Pops?" Her whiny voice cut into his personal silence like a dentist's drill.

"Nothing much," he said, as he stacked the papers together and dropped them on the floor on the other side of the couch.

"Don't want me to know what you're readin', huh?" she said, smiling at him over her shoulder while she continued to chew her bubble gum. She also continued to change the channel, punctuating each station change with a big bubble, which she would pop and then tongue the remnants back into her mouth, where she would chew up the beginnings of the next big bubble.

He fervently wished that she would go. He had no real interest in a female once he had completed his experience, but Mona would get a little more by staying longer, so he indulged her. 'Mona.' What an inappropriate soubriquet. When he thought of 'Mona' he thought of 'Mona Freeman,' the exemplar of youthful goodness and virtue in the movies of the 30's and 40's, not a mindless trollop with too-old eyes and too-bad breath.

He was displeased with the young girls he had been able to obtain locally. That was one item he could improve upon in the bordellos of impoverished countries. The nymphets he had tasted in areas of economic deprivation had been extraordinarily satisfying. The local talent here was bored, laconic, and ill-mannered.

There was still no news of George. From what Merryman had told him of his conversation with Billie, in his role as wedding arranger, there seemed to be no sign of suspicion, so Moritz' previous efforts at staying physically apart from George might have paid off in keeping his plans secret. Assuming at worst that George managed to contact Billie, the most he could tell her was about their finding the house where Billie had been staying.

After monopolizing the bathroom for a good half hour, Mona made her departure. While picking up her bubblegum wrappers and tidying up the other small signs of her visit, Dr. Moritz took a long look at himself in the mirror on the wall. Gone was the gangling, muscular youth of seventeen, the handsome womanizer of twenty five, the sleek renowned psychiatrist of thirty five, the distinguished-looking administrator of fifty. He no longer asked who was the fairest of them all. He only asked how long he had left.

On the highway of life, he grudgingly knew, he was running out of gas. His egg timer was also running out of sand. This would have to be his last job. He had already received sufficient cash advances from Lars to augment his retirement funds to the point where he could live indefinitely in a third-world country in a style which suited his needs. As soon as Lars paid him off, he would purchase a one-way ticket for a certain little Latin American country run by a military regime, where he still had a few friends left over from a previous lifetime. Lars was the only problem. It might be to Dr. Moritz' benefit if George could manage to stay disappeared. If Lars didn't have George, he wouldn't need Dr. Moritz. There was no need for a puppet master if there were no puppet.

## Chapter 27

George was cool, but not very calm, when the air-conditioned cab left him off on the corner of Cerritos and Gardena. It was like stepping out of a refrigerator into a blast furnace. This was the part of Glendale he had seen when he had first come by train. Small, one-story, single-family houses with scorched, peeling paint and back yards with falling fences overgrown with weeds and fat brown children. The sense of slow-moving purpose could be felt everywhere. Things were getting done just as long as they weren't out under the simmering sun. On the hot sidewalk, where George lumbered along, even the insects were hiding under rocks and dead leaves.

He had just 1131 dollars left over from the 4300 he had taken from Big Bill's shoe. What would he do when that ran out? He would have to force himself to take buses. Maybe he could find an old bicycle. He would have to economize. He remembered his mother, always saving. Saving and scrimping so his father could take what little was left and go out on the town. He hated the memory of his parents, hated their mean, petty little thoughts, hated their love making when he, as a young teen-ager, was forced to lie in the room next to theirs, unable to sleep, tuning in unwillingly on his father's lust and his mother's distaste for what was being done to her.

Room for rent. Stop. Knock on the door. Dark, latin faces peering out at him. Oh, you come for the room. Wait a minute, please. Old women staring out at him, unpleasant crazy images racing through their heads. The room? Oh, it is already rented, hating him because he made them lie. Go away, hombre, they said silently. Go back to where you come from. Go back to your own people.

But he persevered. He trudged for hours in the heat, asking here, getting an answer there. An ancient Amerindian face stared out at him from a dark porch. A room? Try the Café de Luz. One street that way. One street to the left.

The Café de Luz was near the corner. It had a swinging screen door. Inside, it was five degrees hotter. It was dimly lit, with four tables and a counter with five chairs and a cash register. Behind the cash register stood a massive woman. She was barely five feet in height, but she made up for that horizontally, with a belly like a Buddha, and fat arms and thighs. Her face was beautiful, however, with a cherubic bow of a mouth, and dark, sultry eyes looking out through dark lashes. Her voice was deep and strong, but quiet and sexy.

"You want to sit at the counter?"

George only wanted to ask about the room, but one did not argue with such a woman. He sat in the middle chair at the counter.

"You would like some beer, perhaps?" she asked. "Unfortunately the refrigerator does not work very good, so the beer is only cool. You still want?"

George shook his head no. He was afraid to tell her he had just come to ask about the room. Perhaps he should order something. He looked up at the big piece of plywood above her head. It was painted with the prices of the food that was for sale.

"I would like a chicken enchilada," he told her.

"No chicken. Just beef."

"A beef enchilada," he emended.

"You want it hot?"

"Yes, hot," he said, thinking that hot meant not cold. He watched her heating up a tortilla in a pan, putting some beans on to fry, spooning chunks of steaming beef out of a pot.

"Not so many people come to my restaurant any longer. When I get my refrigerator fix then maybe business get better again." Her back was to him and he noticed how long her thick black hair was.

"I don't see you around here before," she said, turning to him. "You come from Los Angeles?"

"I came to ask about the room." There. He had finally said it. He sat, waiting for another rejection. He looked up into the cool appraisal of her eyes. There was a tinge of amusement in them.

"You are afraid I say no."

His eyes twitched with surprise. He wasn't used to other people guessing his secrets.

"You don't look dangerous to me. What is your name?"

"George," he told her.

"Just George?"

"George Anderson, ma'am."

"And how long you want my room?"

George shrugged his shoulders. He hadn't thought about that. Until he ran out of money, he guessed.

"I don't know. How about two months?"

"You pay in advance?"

"Sure. You want me to pay it now?"

"You eat first. Then we go look at the room. You figure out if you want it or not. What you wanna drink? I got coke, root beer."

"Water."

She sighed. "I got no water. Water for cooking, for washing, but not for drinking. How about a beer? I got some are still cool." Without waiting for his answer, she walked to the maligned refrigerator, opened the door, and pulled out a dripping can of Dos Equis. She raised a hand to his objection.

"You drink."

He drank. It was his first beer in over two months, ever since Big Bill and Sly had pulled him out of that cheap room on Brannan and the doctor had cleaned him up. Even slightly warm it tasted wonderful. Before he realized what was happening, the can was empty and she was placing another cool can in front of him.

"No, I can't . . ." he started to say, but she silenced him with another imperious wave of her hand.

"You drink," she said, turning her back once more to him. He drank, this time more slowly, watching her deft hands moving pots around on the stove top. Soon she turned back to him, this time with a large plate filled with food.

"Don't touch the plate," she commanded. "You want hot sauce?"

He shook his head no.

"You eat." She turned away from him again, scraping the stove top down and putting things away.

He turned to his plate, his nostrils invaded pleasantly by the odors wafting up from the enchilada. It was covered with a thick, brown sauce and surrounded by a sea of beans. A small, covered plastic dish held a short stack of corn tortillas.

He ate. About three minutes into the enchilada, George noticed that his throat was burning. Then his nose filled up and started running. He gulped down what was left of the beer, and she brought him another.

"You tell me, I don't make it so hot. I ask you want it hot and you say yes." She took the plate away from him and dumped it in the garbage. Then she put the plate in the sink

"I thought . . ." George began lamely.

"I know. I know. Hot mean two things. In Spanish we say 'piquante.' But they got no word for that in English." He could hear her moving pans again, turning up the fire under some more beans. Soon she turned to him with another plate, setting it down in front of him as before. It smelled just as good as the first plate.

"You go ahead and eat," she told him. "This time is not piquante, okay?"

"Okay," he replied, digging his fork into the steaming enchilada. This time he didn't choke up after a couple minutes. He ate with enthusiasm.

"You want some more beans?"

"No, that's all right . . ."

"I fix," she said, and turned back to the stove. In a minute he had another plate of beans. It looked delicious. He tried to eat it more slowly than before, but his plate was soon empty.

"You a hungry man. You eat my food, I make you healthy again soon, fill out those scrawny shoulders. You wanna see that room, now?"

## Chapter 28

Billie lay back in the deck chair, her mind flitting over the up-and-coming wedding arrangements. On Wednesday they had had the rehearsal. Two of Billie's old high-school friends were acting as bridesmaids, and afterwards the three of them had gone out to Gennaro's for Caesar salads and gotten tipsy on Chardonnay. Merryman, the strange man from Cinderella Wedding Arrangements, had been generous with the arrangements. Besides paying for the wedding gown and bridesmaid's costumes, he had even paid the string quartet to play for them during the rehearsal, a little touch that Billie had really appreciated. The flowers would be set up Saturday morning. She couldn't imagine what bothered her about Merryman. Perhaps it was his manner. He was very pleasant and always had a smile on his face, but she just couldn't imagine him running a wedding arrangement business.

"What's buzzin', cousin?" Bobby Lee strode into the room like one of the broncos he bragged about busting. As he passed, he gave her a quick peck on the cheek which she held up for him, then coiled his six foot five inches into the deck chair opposite hers and gave her a big grin, as he pulled out a new pack of Marlboro's and began tapping it against his palm.

"I was just thinking about Merryman," Billie told him.

"Who's he?" Pulling the thin, cellophane strip that opened the package and tossing it on the floor.

Billie winced. She hoped his inheritance would afford them a maid. "I thought you said you were giving up smoking."

"I decided to put off giving up until tomorrow. Who's this Merryman?"

"The guy who's paying for all the wedding arrangements."

"Oh, him. He seemed okay. Maybe a little on the overly chummy side."

"Sometimes he gives me the weirdest feeling, like he's a wolf or something pretending to be my grandmother."

"Hey," he said. "If this Merryman guy is standing tall for the whole tab, he's got a right to act a little weird, right?"

"Right, Hansel. You pick up your tux?"

"I figured I'd do it tomorrow."

"Along with giving up smoking. Get a new pair of shoes?"

"Not yet."

"But you agreed not to wear your cowboy boots."

"I thought you were supposed to love me like I was."

"Only after we get married," she said. "Up till then I'm allowed to be picky."

"Where d'you come up with all these rules?" he asked, coming over and sitting on the small table next to her.

"I make 'em up," she said, pulling him towards her. "It's a woman's prerogative."

"We're too heavy for this chair."

"Let's give it a try, anyway. Just don't do anything fast."

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When Lars arrived at L.A.X. late Friday morning, his three henchmen were there to pick him up. The drive to the hotel was convivial, almost gay. Everything seemed to be progressing well. Lars took what had been George's room and they immediately ordered a big meal from room service. Food was the best way to conduct gang business. It was the first item of business. The second item was George. Sly pushed away what was left of his Chinese Chicken Salad, and led off.

"At first we spent a few days pretty solid out at Billie's friend Wanda's, but then the neighbors must've reported us, because the local rent-a-cops seemed to know when we was there, and they rousted us every time." He stopped to have a swallow of Sauvignon Blanc and the others watched his Adam's apple go up and down a few times. He stopped and wiped his mouth and cleared his throat.

"So we started parking a few blocks away and walking past the place. Once in a while we'd cruise by . . ."

"And no sign of George?" Lars put in.

"Nor hide nor hair," Big Bill answered for Sly. Dr. Moritz looked sharply at Big Bill, as if to tell him to shut the fuck up.

"That doesn't mean he couldn'ta been," continued Sly. "He could've been there a whole bunch of times, and we just missed him. But I doubt it. I don't think he's even in the area."

"From all the signs, Billie's friend Wanda appears to be on vacation," said Dr. Moritz.

"Signs?"

"No mail ever dropped off. Also, Mr. Silverman at my request put a piece of Scotch tape on the bottom of both the front and rear doors."

"Which were never broken?" asked Lars.

"Which were never broken," said Sly.

"So even if George could've gone there, there wasn't anyone for him to spill his guts to," suggested Lars.

"Exactly," offered Big Bill, eliciting another dark look from Dr. Moritz.

"But what if he still somehow got to Billie?" said Lars, not one to leave a stone unturned.

"She's shown no signs of distrust," said Moritz. "Merryman met with her on Wednesday afternoon at the rehearsal and he said she couldn't have been nicer."

"You found Billie?" asked Big Bill, not believing his ears.

"I'll fill you in later, Mr. Sweeney," said Dr. Moritz. "There's a lot that's been happening that you don't know about." Sly and Big Bill were just bursting to know what their superiors were talking about, but, like all experienced combat soldiers, knew that the battle plan would not be revealed to them until the eve of battle.

"So its finally down to the last act in your little drama, eh Ernest?" Lars was carefully cryptic. The time had come for a more intimate conversation. Dr. Moritz gave Sly and Big Bill the eye, and they rose quietly, grunting their disgruntled goodbyes, vamoosing into the adjacent suite for beer and TV and gin rummy. Dr. Moritz wandered over to the side table and fetched a bottle of very old, very sweet Madeira and poured two glasses, handing one to Lars.

"Now I know how the producer of Ben Hur must have felt," said Dr. Moritz, indulging himself in a rare smile.



“And what then, after the play is ended, and the critics have sent in their raves? Will you leave the theater?” asked Lars with a peculiar glint in his eye.

Dr. Moritz shrugged his thin shoulders. “When one’s time comes, it comes. One cannot postpone it.”

“I have done a little checking on you,” said Lars, “and I have discovered that you have friends in San Marcos. There is good reason to think you might eventually head in that direction.”

“I haven’t yet decided.”

“Remember the importance of being earnest. An introduction to the hierarchy of San Marcos would be invaluable to me. But there is something of even more value that you have to offer. It is related to the fact that Billie will probably not come of her own volition.”

“How would I figure in that?”

“She could be your private mental patient. It’s the easiest way to get her out of the country legally. You could request private use of the facilities at a clinic in San Marcos. We could make it all semi-legal. A little money changing hands should help make some of the red tape go away.”

Dr. Moritz sighed. He saw his retirement from crime slipping away. He shook his head. “No, Lars. I’m too old for all this excitement. I’ve enjoyed working with you, but this will have to be my swan song.”

Svensen leaned forward. “I wouldn’t ask anything further of you. It’s time for me to take a long vacation as well. I have all the money I could possibly want. Maybe I could put it to work for me. All I need is a regime that protects me from extradition. And all you need to do is play psychiatrist to Billie. Plus introduce me to the right people. I’d pay you well. After all, you’d be the one sitting in the driver’s seat.”

“How much would all this be worth to you?” asked Dr. Moritz.

“How about a cool million,” said Svensen.

There was a long silence.

“I’d make one stipulation,” said Moritz.

“Name it,” said Svensen.

“That we operate as equals.”

## Chapter 29

The room at the Café de Luz was small and the wallpaper was faded, but the woodwork had recently been painted and the floor freshly waxed and everything was clean, including the bedsheets, which were changed twice a week. The mattress was hard and the bed springs were cheap, but there weren't people wandering around all night like at the Blue Vue, so George was finally able to sleep.

The one drawback was that he had to go to bed early, for his room was next door to the kitchen and he was woken each morning about seven, when his new landlady arose to perform her culinary tasks - getting the pots boiling, chopping up the onions and peppers and spices for the sauces. George dozed through the quiet clatter, aware sometimes of the lilt of a Spanish air, for Rosalia, which was the name of his new landlady, had a fine contralto voice and liked to sing while she worked. Sometimes it would be *Maria bonita* or *La que se fue*. At other times it would be something stirring, like *Guantanamera*. Once in a while she would sing the songs she learned as a child in a remote village in Sonora.

Around eight o'clock the heady aroma of coffee would pervade his room, gently assailing his nostrils. Some of Rosalia's cronies would appear around this time, tapping at the front door. Most of them were old men. They would sit around sipping coffee with wise eyes and ironic smiles uttering short pithy remarks in soft Spanish. George would drift off into fantasies and dreams that closely resembled the old spy movies that he had used to watch on late night TV when he was a kid.

At nine George would give up trying to sleep, drag on his trousers from the day before, button himself into his only shirt, struggle into his shoes, and join the group in the restaurant. Rosalia would greet him with a big smile and a big mug of coffee while he pushed the hair out of his face and rubbed the sleepy sand out of his eyes.

George had been near physical collapse when he came to rent the room, and he had made some fair signs of recovery in the first week, but on Sunday he went to a fiesta with Rosalia and some of her friends, and on Monday morning his head was all jammed up and he could scarcely rise from bed. Rosalia made him eat soup and bundled him in additional blankets. On Monday evening he developed a fever, and later that night when she looked in on him he was shivering uncontrollably, even though it was barely cool. Being a practical woman, she took him into her own bed to warm him up. Being a passionate woman as well, and one who had not had a man for as many years as there were pots and pans in her kitchen, she quickly responded to his body. She held him close to her, his face between her pendulous breasts, his upper torso enveloped by her massive belly, her large thighs and short, muscular legs wrapping him up like a big, warm tamale.

"Mi cariño," she whispered to him. "My precious."

And for the first time in his life, George had an erection with a woman. It frightened him for a moment, but Rosalia knew what to do with it. She maneuvered him inside her and began a slow rocking motion. George's fears melted away. He was at the center of a warm, pulsating peace, disturbed only by the growing itch of desire which gradually took possession of him. He rocked back, their flesh united in one mutual passion which roared over him, leaving him spent and stranded in a cosy tide pool of content.

On Tuesday morning the fever had broken, and George awoke, feeling light-headed and hungry. Rosalia heated up some more soup to tide him over until the grill was hot and she could prepare him a real breakfast.

From that day on, George never returned to his own bed. Rosalia stopped charging him rent, and he gave her the thousand dollars he had left so she could have the refrigerator fixed. He figured that he had done his best for Billie. If she needed help, somebody else would have to be there for her. Like a sinking ship, ravaged by storms and taking on water, he had found safe haven.

## Chapter 30

Wedding bells were jangling in Billie's brain when she awoke with a splitting headache and the vague presentiment that there was something she was supposed to remember that morning. It had to be a Saturday. It felt like a Saturday. But what was so special about a Saturday?

"Ohmygod!" she yelped, sitting bolt upright. After an extended moment of silent but intense astonishment, she emitted a sigh, then collapsed back on the bed.

Beside her, the previously inert form of Bobby Lee stirred slightly and moaned. A sleepy arm reached instinctively out for her, missing her by inches. This was followed by another moan. Now the other arm went into automatic, this time in the vague direction of the bedside table until it collided with it, fingers groping across its surface for something that wasn't there. Finally, the previously inert form of her husband-to-be raised itself up out of the twisted sheets, blue eyes out of focus and hair akimbo.

"Where are my goddam cigarettes?" he mumbled hoarsely.

"You quit. Remember?"

"Oh God, you're right," he groaned. He collapsed back on the bed and massaged his face groggily. "By the way, what the hell were you yellin' about?"

"I just remembered all of a sudden that we were getting married today."

He punctuated his moaning with a laugh. "You mean you forgot?"

"Of course not, you silly. It's just that I didn't realize it was today already. What the hell happened to yesterday?" She yawned and pulled herself back up into a sitting position, rubbing her eyes. "God, I haven't felt this disoriented since we got drunk in Disneyland. What the hell *did* I drink last night?"

"At the restaurant or the bar?"

"Let me see. The bar, I guess. The restaurant I think I can remember totally. We were having a very nice bottle of French wine. It's after we moved the party to the bar that it starts to get fuzzy. I hope I didn't do anything indecorous."

"You were listenin' very attentively to my Uncle Jack. He told me later on how much he had enjoyed talkin' to you."

"*Had* enjoyed?"

"You were passed out by then."

"So what the heck *was* I drinking? God, I can't remember talking to him at all."

"That's because he did most of it. As to what you were drinkin' - my uncle calls 'em 'Mucky Ducks.'"

"What are they made of?"

"Some really awful combination of . . . what? . . . Cuervo and Cointreaux? . . . I just can't remember. Sorry, Babe."

"Stop calling me 'Babe,' Rube. So why didn't you warn me?"

"And risk antagonizin' the richest relative I have? Besides, I figured you'd make it through the conversation a heck of a lot better with a brace of Ducks under your belt. He'd've bored you to death otherwise."

"Is that how much I drank? A brace? That's only two, isn't it?"

"Just a manner of speakin'. It was probly a whole flotilla. You sure were floatin', Admiral."

"Floating, eh? You were probably too busy flirting with your cousin, that blonde hussy, whatsername, to notice what I was doing. I saw you making eyes at her over dinner."

"Hey, a man's got a right to celebrate his last night of freedom." He drew her toward him and began kissing her nipples through her nightie.

"God, you have a lot of relatives, and they all spend money like they're richer than Croesus," she said. "Seems like I've been through an absolute whirlwind of elegant and lavish dinners this week. Stop kissing me there. It's making me horny."

"They probably *are* richer than Croesus, whoever he was. God, I wonder if I'm gonna make it without cigarettes."

"Through our marriage?"

"Through the day I meant, you fool woman." His voice was muffled with his face pressed up against her left breast.

"Hey, it tickles when you talk." She was smiling now.

He had managed to extricate the lower part of her body from her nightgown and was now working on the upper half.

"I'll never regret marrying you, Babe," he said.

"Even when I'm old and wrinkled?"

"I'll be used to the wrinkles by then."

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On this same Saturday morning Dr. Moritz was also up early. Lots to do. Lots to do. He felt like a juggler in charge of a zoo.

First, he had to make sure his big animals were up and eating. The so-called 24-hour room service had nothing but sandwiches between 4:30 A.M. until 8:00 A.M., at which time the restaurant reopened and the cooks were allowed once more to crack eggs, so until then they had to get cracking with sandwiches. The three of them had gone over the menu the evening before and made their choices. Two egg-salad, one liverwurst and swiss, and one baloney and American for Big Bill, and a club sandwich, no mayo for Sly, both with fries. Dr. Moritz had a roast beef on white with potato salad. There was a sense of excitement in the air, not with regard to the food, which was quite good, but with respect to the day which awaited them. Neither Big Bill nor Sly would participate in the wedding ceremonies, nor had either of them been briefed on what was going to transpire there. Outside of picking up some old lady and driving her to the wedding, all they had been told to do was to pack their suitcases, so all they knew was that they would be leaving the hotel soon, and most likely L.A. as well.

"I gotta say one thing, Doc . . ." said Big Bill, pausing to take another big bite of sandwich.

"Say it, man," said Sly, waiting impatiently for him to finish chewing it.

Big Bill swallowed his mouthful hurriedly and helped it down with a quick gulp of coke. "I just wanted to say that I'm gonna be sorry when this particular caper comes to an end."

"And why is that?" asked Dr. Moritz, unused to such philosophic expression by the larger of his two cohorts.

“Because this is some of the best chow I ever had in my life, Doc, right here in L.A., except maybe for the time my old man took me to New York when I was seven but which I really can’t remember very good anymore.”

“Great comment, Big,” said Sly, toasting him with his cup of English Breakfast Tea.

Dr. Moritz declined to answer, but raised his eyebrows and nodded silently, in complete accord with Big Bill’s culinary comment. Normally he would have responded, but he was too preoccupied with what remained of his agenda for that morning. Just to make sure he didn’t miss anything, he had written it all down:

1. Send Sly and Big Bill off to pick up Gerda Luttmeyer in Culver City at 9:00 A.M.,
2. Call Sweeney to make sure he arrives at 8:45 A.M.
3. Phone Larry, to make sure he picks up Joyce & Tex.
4. Check with bass player of music trio.
5. Call chauffeur to make sure he picks up Billie and Bobby on time.
6. Check with Mrs. Broadhurst on floral arrangements and Reverend Pennypacker.
7. Call McCracken.

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Larry’s call came right on time. Joyce was putting on her eye shadow when the phone rang, and she noticed it was nine on the nose.

“Good morning.” Larry sounded upbeat, an edge of excitement to his voice. “All ready for the big day?”

“Just about,” she told him. “I had a continental breakfast at seven thirty and an absolutely scrumptious forty-five-minute shower.”

“Sounds like you’re enjoying your new life of luxury.”

“If you can turn a couple days into a life, you’re right. It sure does seem strange staying at a hotel in the same town I live in.”

“Glad you’ve been enjoying it. You gonna be ready at ten?”

“Sure. I’m just putting my face on, now. I’ll have time to burn.”

“Great. Be out in front at five minutes to ten. Okay?”

“Where exactly should I stand? On the curb?”

“Just inside the entrance with the doorman. Tex should be there as well. You can keep him company.”

“The big Palooka? He up yet?”

“Yeah, and don’t you call him that. He’s sensitive. His name is Palusky. I was just speaking to him. Talk about the lap of luxury. He polished off a four-course breakfast in the dining room and is now sitting in the lobby smoking a five-dollar cigar. I had to have him paged.”

As with all the other events in her life, Joyce arrived with little time to spare. Larry was sitting there in his big red Caddy convertible with the top down and the bellhop holding the passenger door open for her. As soon as she was in, Larry pulled out of the hotel entranceway and accelerated onto the street, throwing her back into her seat with a lurch.

“Hey, Al Unser,” she said with a smile. “Just let me off at the next pit stop.”

"How Yew, Joyce!" Tex Palusky seemed to fill the entire back seat. He had a big cowboy hat on and a cigar in his mouth. He took the cigar out and gave her a grin and a wave. She remembered him from the night before, when the three of them had had dinner, getting their stories together. He seemed like a big friendly dog who just wanted to lick everyone's face. He was kind of cute, a Polack from Texas of all things, but it was hard for her to picture him as her brother. More like an uncle, maybe. A kindly, shy, lecherous, big bear of an uncle who never gives up trying to get you to sit on his lap.

"All set for the big day?" Larry was still in a gay mood. That augured well. Joyce always did better when there was a sense of fun in the air. Then she could forget herself and get into her role.

"Yeah," she said with a smile. "I better be by now."

"You look stunning in that dress," Larry told her.

"Thank you, sir." She turned around to glance at Tex Palusky. His sport coat looked a little large on him, and he was large enough already, but somehow it seemed to work. Her smile broadened. Large animals always appealed to her.

"Mr. Palusky's lookin' pretty spiffy, himself," she said.

"Aw, come on, Joyce. Call me Tex." His sad eyes looked imploringly at her. If he had had a tail, he would have wagged it.

"I'm not sure I know you well enough for that," she said with feigned coyness, enjoying his discomfort.

Larry's smile turned into a frown. "Jesus, Joycee! He's supposed to be your goddam brother. You two better start getting into your parts." He turned his attention away from the freeway traffic long enough to look at his watch. "Boys and girls, in exactly one hour it's Show Time!" Then he pressed his foot down on the accelerator, and began whistling *Get Me To The Church On Time*.

## Chapter 31

Zero hour had arrived at last, and, so far at least, everything had gone precisely according to Dr. Moritz' master plan. Eighty five guests milled around the extensive grounds of the Calvary Episcopal Church, talking on the lawn, being bored by Reverend Pennypacker, dazzled by the masses of hothouse flowers in every nook and cranny, entertained by the baroque music being played in the foyer by the young string trio, or getting their daily doses, smoking on the sidewalk, flipping their butts onto the street. Nearly half were of the Texas delegation, some forty strong. Another twelve were old schoolmates of Billie, together with their twelve spouses. Nineteen were local friends, including Wanda, who had just returned from a cruise to Alaska. The last two were the chief of police and his wife, whom Reverend Pennypacker always invited to his weddings. Adding to this the six organizers, four usherettes, two chauffeurs, the janitor, the three string players, four police persons, two passing children, and the dog from across the street, there were altogether ninety nine souls on the premises at that moment. This did not include one Gerda Luttmeyer, who had slipped quietly into the merry mob after being deposited two blocks away by Sly and Big Bill. She did not figure on any of the invitation lists, although she possessed a bona fide invitation were anyone to challenge her.

The cars were parked three deep on the street in front of the church, while two squad cars, one at each end, used the remaining lane to handle the long, slow line of gawking local traffic. Reverend Pennypacker had never regretted that serendipitous impulse in inviting the chief and his wife that first time, an impulse stemming from a desire to establish more direct relations with the local power structure, combined with an accidental meeting with the chief's wife at a benefit, wherein he learned of her obsession with weddings. It should also be admitted that he had long envied the local Catholic churches and their seeming immunity from parking irregularities. He stood next to Mr. Merryman, enjoying being the center of attention for the moment. As soon as the sacrament of marriage had been performed, it would be the bride upon whom all eyes would be centered, the virgin flesh made divine by the ritual, now permitted to enter into union without sin. It did not occur to the good reverend that Billie was probably not a virgin, nor that any of the hundreds of young people that he joined in holy matrimony had already been joined in an unholy one. St. Paul had said, "It is better to marry than to burn," but Reverend Pennypacker had never really understood these words, as he had never gotten too heavily involved in the lusts of the flesh, not being overly endowed with talents in such directions, so he was, as a result, enjoying his widowerhood, wanting neither of these extremes.

Standing in another part of the room, Dr. Moritz was very much enjoying *not* being the center of attention. The phony facial hair and wig might not, on too close a scrutiny, conceal his identity from Billie, but she would not notice him on her walk up the aisle. His eagle eye was checking out all the details of the processes he had set in motion. He noted the arrival of Gerda Luttmeyer. She caught his eye and gave him a subtle nod as she passed him. Five minutes later, Larry's bright red caddy pulled up with Joyce and Tex in tow. He saw with approval that the limousine driver who had brought the bridal couple had parked at the front of the row for a fast getaway. Local mob had provided him with a responsible man. All the pieces were falling into place, like a sequence of



doors clanging shut behind him, leading to the success or failure of the single event down to which reality was being channeled. If things went well, he would be free as well as rich. If they went really badly, he could conceivably end up in prison, and not so rich.

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There is a strange characteristic about the human experience of time, and that is the amount of wait time that it takes for a longed-for or anticipated event to occur, the way the minute hand seems to slow down as it approaches the appointed hour, the pause of the cat before it leaps, the eternity between 'aim' and 'fire,' and yet, conversely, how suddenly the awaited time strikes, the tumble of legs as the lioness brings down her prey, the ring of the bell signalling the end of the test, the tongue of the beheaded man still on the last line of the prayer. For a solid hour now, people had been arriving and mixing, parked cars had been piling up, and organizers had been organizing.

All of a sudden it was eleven o'clock. Time for the main event. Reverend Pennypacker had already donned the vestments for the sacrament, the bride and groom were standing with the bridesmaids, the relatives were gathered round while the usherettes led people to the proper places. They asked to see invitations and consulted their lists, placing family in the front two rows. There were special seats for the police chief and his wife. The back row was for the organizers - Mr. Mortenson and his assistant O'Murphy, Mrs. Broadhurst, Mr. Poorbody, the church Beadle, and Marjory Morningside, the lady from the flower shop. Next to them was space for the four usherettes and the string trio. The seemingly unfillable church was packed, S.R.O. Reverend Pennypacker was in seventh heaven, or as close to it as was possible for one weighed down by gravity and the sin of mortality.

At the end of the second row, next to the aisle, in one of the seats reserved for members of the wedding and immediate family, sat a strange, vaguely repellent, dumpy-looking woman, dressed rather severely and on the cheap side. She didn't seem to talk to anyone and nobody appeared to talk to her. As a matter of fact, nobody seemed to notice her at all. She had simply walked up and taken her seat without consulting any of the usherettes, and her presence had not been contested. Billie figured it was one of Bobby's extensive family, and Bobby was too concerned about what he had to do next to notice. Each usherette had figured one of the other three had checked the old lady out already, and was afraid to risk insulting her.

Joyce and Tex Palusky asked to sit in the back row. Since they seemed to possess valid invitations, the girl seating them didn't bother looking at her lists.

Standing in the back row gave Dr. Moritz the advantage of being able to keep an eye on all the seating arrangements. He spotted Gerda up in front and Joyce and Tex to his right, having recognized them from the brief glimpse he had had of them when Larry dropped them off earlier. They didn't look much like brother and sister, but nobody would have time for comparative anatomy in the rapid-fire sequence of events he had set in motion.

Finally the trio began to play the Bridal Chorus from Lohengrin. The wedding procession began, slowly and decorously, the father and the bride, the two bridesmaids, the groom and best man following demurely down the aisle at the end of which stood Reverend Pennypacker in his robes. The rite of mystical union slowly and majestically

commenced. Finally the procession reached the end of the aisle, and the reverend raised his hands. The house was silent, except for the faint sound of the dog barking out in front who wanted to be inside with everyone else.

“Dearly beloved, we have come together in the presence of God,” intoned Reverend Pennypacker, “to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in holy matrimony. The bond and covenant of marriage was established . . .” His voice soared. His audience had stopped actively listening, but Reverend Pennypacker was no longer of this world. He loved this version with its exalted language. His words resounded from the rafters. He finally got to the part he had always had a special liking for.

“Into this holy union Robert and Wilma now come to be joined.”

He paused dramatically, then leveled his eyes at the audience and spoke in a tone of authority.

“If any of you can show just cause why they may not lawfully be married, speak now; or else forever hold your peace.”

There was another silence. Reverend Pennypacker always enjoyed prolonging this moment, but in the fifty plus years he had been preaching no person had ever come forward, so when Joyce began her long walk down the aisle, he just stood and gaped at her. A large, well-muscled man joined her, walking slightly behind her. She stopped when she was about six feet away from the two-soon-to-be-one. Stopping, and in a firm voice speaking loudly enough for everyone to hear, whether they wanted to or not, she said:

“I challenge this union.”

The entire audience was aghast. This was one of those alternatives that never happened. A sense of dread overtook everyone, except for one Mildred T. Fremont, a distant relative of General John C. Fremont, who had throughout her life loved to see the stiffness of formal events reduced to the inane. As a little girl, she had been among the first to laugh at a fart in church. She alone took perverse enjoyment in this unexpected turn of events.

“You must explain,” said the reverend, recovering from his initial shock.

“Robert E. Lee Acres,” she said, with a drawl straight out of little ole West Texas, and looking Bobby Lee right in the eye. “I accuse you of falsely declarin’ that you was innerested in gettin’ married to me in Galveston on a vacation we took together back in August of 2000.”

The hush which followed this pronouncement was more like a din. Reverend Pennypacker finally managed to restore order.

“Proofs,” he blurted out to the determined-looking young woman before him. “We need proofs.”

With this, the young lady proceeded to tell her story, quickly and succinctly, beginning with the shared vacation at the Dead Dog Motel, and ending with him promising to write.

“These aren’t proofs! I have never met this . . . *person* in my entire life!” spat out the maligned Robert E. Lee Acres. I demand that she be thrown out so we can get on with this here weddin’!”

“You’ve more than met me, Bobby Lee!” the young woman hollered back, giving one of the best performances of her life. “I’m Anna May Jewiston out of Fort Worth and you know it. You need proofs? I’ll give you proof!”

The moment she said this, the general hush became an absolute silence. In simple but graphic terms, she explained in a loud, clear voice exactly what she meant. The absolute silence became even more absolute. To comment on what she had just said would only make things worse. Everyone just wanted her to unhappen.

Especially Bobby Lee. Billie was still in a state of shock, but Bobby Lee was hotter than a handlebar on a Harley in a heat wave. He approached his accuser with mayhem on his mind, but, before he could act, the large man who had been standing behind the young woman strode forward and gripped Bobby Lee by the shoulders.

“Ahm her brothuh,” he proclaimed, “and y’all keep yoah hands off her, or Ahl pussonally throw yew in the next county.”

At this point, things became quite confused. Gerda Luttmeyer slipped into the aisle behind Bobby Lee, her right hand concealed beneath the bottom hem of her jacket, gripping the hypodermic needle at the ready. Almost simultaneously, Reverend Pennypacker moved forward to intercede in what threatened at any second to erupt into fisticuffs, but just as he reached for Bobby Lee, Bobby Lee pushed the brother of his accuser backwards and followed after him with the intent of doing great bodily harm, causing the good reverend to unexpectedly occupy the point in space previously filled by Bobby Lee. One nanosecond earlier, Gerda Luttmeyer had already committed herself and sprung forward, and was now jabbing the hypodermic needle firmly into the buttocks of the man in front of her. But that man was no longer Bobby Lee.

In fact, Bobby Lee was punching Tex Paluska all the way down the aisle, across the vestibule, and practically out the front door. Joyce Vanderbilt was hanging onto his coattails screaming, and Billie Cathcart had hiked up her gown, kicked off her shoes and was hot in pursuit, leaving the rest of the wedding party with a temporary case of lockjaw. Reverend Pennypacker lay on the floor, dead as a doornail by way of a lethal injection of potassium chloride, but nobody noticed him. It was the beadle, Mr. Poorbody, standing in the back, who spotted him lying there and pushed his way up the aisle like a salmon swimming upstream. He yelled for help when he arrived at the prostrate form of his late boss, but none materialized, so he turned and fought his way back down the aisle to solicit help outside.

The police officers handling the traffic in front saw the two fighting men come tumbling out through the front doors of the church and onto the lawn, followed closely by the dog, barking at them to stop, and followed in turn by a large, disorganized mob led by what appeared to be the bride, with her gown hiked up over her shoulder.

It took both cops to pull Bobby Lee off Tex, who had long given up the fight and was only trying to minimize the damage being done to himself. One of the cops manhandled Bobby down to the ground and handcuffed him, while the other cop ran back to the squad car to summon the pair of officers directing traffic a block away. By this time, the first cop, engaged in leading Bobby Lee to the squad car, was set upon by Mr. Poorbody, who screamed at him that the Reverend Pennypacker had suffered a heart attack and needed an ambulance.

In the eye of this hurricane, Dr. Moritz was rapidly reassessing the situation:

One - Bobby Lee was still very much alive, but in the process of being arrested, so instead of being taken away in an ambulance, he was being taken away in a police car.

Two - his bride-still-to-be was not in a state of collapse over his death, but was instead in one of alarm over his arrest.

Three - the newlyweds' getaway car still stood at the front of the row, gaily festooned with ribbons and tin cans, and the driver lounging against the fender. Dr. Moritz strode to the side of a very distraught Billie and grabbed her arm.

"Do not get involved with the police," he hissed at her.

"Why the hell not!" she shouted, not questioning the unexpected presence of Dr. Moritz, whom she had imagined as still being back in San Francisco.

"Because you can't change their minds! He's resisted arrest and they've arrested him. They're going to take him down and book him, and they aren't going to listen to you. The best thing you can do is be at the station when they book him, so you can bail him out. Come on!"

"Come on where!"

"The limo that brought you here. The chauffeur used to be a cab driver. He knows every station in town and he'll know where they're taking Mr. Acres as well."

"But I don't have any money on me!"

"I have plenty. Let's go." He dragged her shoeless past the police car where Bobby Lee sat in back, his arms cuffed behind him. The chauffeur saw Moritz approaching with Billie in tow, and opened the rear door. The strange woman Billie had seen at the wedding was getting into the cab from the other side. Billie stiffened when she saw her but Mr. Mortenson pushed her inside unceremoniously. Less than a minute later they were a block away, heading towards L.A.

"Hey, you're going the wrong way!" Billie yelled, but neither the driver nor Mr. Mortenson seemed particularly disturbed.

"They'll be taking him to the Glendale Police Station!" she shouted. "Why are you going toward L.A.?" Mr. Mortenson ignored her and pulled a small leather case from his vest pocket from which he removed a miniature hypodermic needle and a tiny vial. He pressed the point of the needle into the vial and pulled the plunger, sucking the contents out of it. He turned to Billie, taking hold of her left hand in his right and holding the hypodermic needle in his left. Gerda Luttmeyer moved closer to Billie and gripped her right arm tightly.

"Now, this isn't going to hurt at all," Mr. Mortenson said soothingly as he pressed the needle into her left wrist. The last sound she heard was herself screaming.

## Chapter 32

While these nuptial festivities were transpiring, Regis McCracken was sitting in the Manor Coffee Shop in Glendale waiting for ten thirty to arrive so he could stroll over to the police station across the street and deliver the letter he had been paid to deliver. He glanced at his watch again. Ten fifteen. The mousy waitress with the stringy blond hair and the anxious eyes scurried over again with her perpetual pot of coffee. He put his hand over the top of his cup. If he drank any more, he wouldn't sleep until next Thursday.

"Anything else, sir?"

"No thank you, Miss. I'll just sit here and finish up. Here. You can keep the change." He handed her a twenty and she very nearly genuflected.

"Thank you, sir."

He looked at his watch again. Ten sixteen. Only a minute had gone by. He wanted to get the show on the road. He had never done anything quite this illegal before and he was nervous about it. His story was rock-solid, however, and there was no way he could be implicated in the escapade that Morrissey was planning, even if Morrissey were caught. As a matter of fact, if Regis didn't carry out his little assignment, he would be morally responsible for a number of innocent deaths. His only crime would be lying to the police about something that was really going to happen. He would be perceived by everyone as a citizen performing his moral and civic duty.

In addition to these considerations, he was being paid handsomely for this morning's work. Adding together all the not-so-small fees he had collected from Morrissey, he would finally be able to actually retire. Maybe buy a cheap home in Montana and spend his time hunting and fishing. Marge loved the outdoors. It was a natural for both of them.

Captain Harding sat back in his swivel chair with his feet up on his desk, abstractedly manicuring his nails with his pocket knife while deeply immersed in a rapid-fire phone conversation. Finally he hung up.

"L.A. County has been contacted and they're sending some bomb personnel by helicopter. In addition, I've dispatched a squad car to the church. We've tried calling them, but nobody's answering the phone." He turned his attention to Regis. "Now, suppose you go through that story of yours again, McCracken."

So Regis told him once more about the strange visitor he had had a week before. He kept the image of John Malkovich in his mind, and described him as best he could. It had been Morrissey's idea to choose a movie star bad guy Regis knew well. He told Captain Harding about how he had been hired to deliver a letter, which had been given to him together with the instructions enclosed in a brown manila envelope, and told not to open the envelope until nine A.M. on the day in question, which was today. He had been paid two hundred dollars. The last thing his visitor had done was to recapitulate the necessity of following the instructions to the last jot and tittle. Captain Harding raised his eyebrows at this peculiar terminology, but said nothing as Regis continued his tale.

At nine that morning he had opened the manila envelope, which contained, as advertised, a sealed envelope addressed to the Glendale Times, and a single sheet of paper with printed instructions, the same two items now lying on the Captain's desk. The

instructions directed him to deliver the letter to the editor of the Times in person, and at twelve noon sharp. The time of delivery was in boldface type.

"So what made you suspicious?" Harding asked. "I can't believe all your customers level with you. You must be in the dark quite a bit of the time. What made this situation different?"

"The importance of the time. Why noon sharp? Why all the emphasis on punctuality. There was only one answer in my mind."

"Which was?"

"That there had to be some other event that this had to be timed to. And that if I delivered the letter early, it would interfere with this other event."

"So you decided to open the letter."

"I didn't do it right away. After all, I had contracted to do this job, and I like to be a man of my word. I guess the problem was that I had too much time on my hands. Traffic was light this morning, so I had a couple hours to kill, and the importance placed on the time of delivery kept nagging at me. I tried to put it out of my mind but it kept coming back. So I finally grabbed the damned letter and tore it open."

"And this is what you found inside."

"Yep. As soon as I read it I came here post haste."

"Lucky we were just across the street."

"The Times are just a few blocks away. I was planning on a leisurely walk."

A buzzer on the desk went off just as the Captain opened his mouth to respond. He flicked a switch.

"Call on line 7, Captain."

"Harding here." The phone was close enough to Regis that he could almost hear the excited voice on the other end. The Captain replaced the phone in the cradle.

"Can you believe it? We sent out an all-cars message to anyone in the area and there were two right on the spot. They're evacuating the church as I speak. Looks like we made it in time. I guess congratulations are in order for you, McCracken."

"I'm relieved to hear it, Captain."

"Like a ride?"

"Sure. Where?"

"I'll give you one guess. We won't be able to get very close until the bomb squad has done its work, but I won't be able to think about anything else until this is over, anyway. Maybe you can spot this mysterious customer of yours."

"You think he would blow himself up?"

"No, I guess you're right, although you never know about religious fanatics. Well, let's go. Later on we'll get hold of a police sketch artist. Hope you don't have any plans for the day."

## Chapter 33

Many hours later, after the bomb squad had hauled the bomb away, and all the witnesses had been thoroughly questioned, and the county brass were all gone, and all of the cars had been driven away, and all the nosy neighbors had finally retired, and even the dog had gone home, a very tired Captain Harding sat back drinking the last of his cold coffee.

It had been a long day for McCracken as well, who had watched the many events from the safety of the passenger side of the police car, happily playing the role of disinterested spectator.

"What a three-ring circus!" Harding was saying, finishing his coffee and crumpling up the soggy paper cup and tossing it in the rear for a subordinate to pick up later.

"I've never seen anything like it," McCracken said. "You sure earned your salary today."

"Tell me about it, baby. It had its moments though. I'll never get over what the girlfriend said about the groom. I guess you don't know about it."

"I don't think so," said McCracken cautiously.

"She said in front of God and a hundred spectators that Mr. Acres had 'MOTHER' tattooed on his penis. You ever hear anything so bizarre?"

"I guess not," said McCracken with a weak smile.

"There was another strange thing. You know the pastor who dropped dead in the middle of the ceremony? It turns out he's been talking about dying for the last year. And then he chose that very moment!"

"It must have been the shock," offered McCracken.

"We'll see when the coroner's done his thing. God, I'm going to be up all night with this. We still have to locate the bride, who somehow took off in the midst of all the confusion. In addition to all that, we can't find the guy who planned the ceremonies, nor his assistant. We did get depositions from the girlfriend and her brother. They seemed to be the least flaky of the whole bunch.

"And the groom is in jail."

"Yeah, we'll probably let him go in the morning. The brother says he's not going to press charges. I thought it was damn nice of him, considering it was him who got punched out. The groom will still have to post bail, but his family seems to be well off."

"So you're pretty much through here, then," said McCracken, thinking about his wife and supper after the last six hours imprisonment in a squad car.

"Looks like it. You care for Chinese?"

"You mean food? No thanks. My wife's keeping dinner hot for me. If you could just drop me off at my car."

"Glad to. We'll have to ask you to come back tomorrow morning so we can work up a sketch of the man responsible for all this."

The two were silent the rest of the drive back to the Glendale Police Station. McCracken was thinking about the funds which would be mysteriously transferred to his checking account the next morning. He was also considering how to broach the subject of retirement with Marge. Harding was glad for once he didn't have to go home to Ethel. He'd be busy until midnight at least.

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Larry had just split, leaving Joyce and Tex with a couple bottles of cold champagne and each other.

“Good going, gang,” Larry had said. “You both were wonderful, and Joyce was great. That was Academy Award stuff, Joycee. We’re going to have to find some better parts for you in the future.” He removed a pair of sealed envelopes from his breast pocket. “This is for you, Tex. I hope your face gets better,” he said, throwing one to the battered man on the bed, and “Joyce,” tossing her one as well. “You’ll find a little extra for a job well done. It might be wise if you both checked out tonight. No point in tempting fate.”

Afterwards, Joyce and Tex took a cab to Joyce’s flat. No point in wasting two bottles of perfectly good, third-rate champagne. Trust a man with a top-of-the-line Caddy to bring the cheapest champagne.



## Chapter 34

For months now, it had been raining, and when the rains persisted, the mosquitoes infested, for to the north, south and west was tropical rain forest, with puma, jaguar, margay, ocelots, monkeys, bats, sloths, anteaters, peccaries, tapirs, raccoons, scorpions, and snakes. And mosquitoes. This idyllic enclave of sandy beaches and green hills was isolated from the rest by a low-lying circle of mountains, gathered around the confluence of two rivers which formed a shallow bay.

The sky was a retreating armada of massive gray ships blown away towards the southwest by the trade winds, and the hot sun had finally appeared. After six hours of uninterrupted warmth, it was now on the verge of disappearing behind them, swallowed up by the massive rain forest that covered the entire eastern slopes of the continent. The city of Dos Rios, capital of the Republic of San Marcos, spread out before them, sloping down to the edge of the sands, beyond which the languid warm rollers came endlessly marching in long columns, only to crest and crash, spilling up onto the dunes, where lovers kissed in the dying day.

The wide terrace was falling into damp darkness, dimly lit by the candles at the tables. The low chatter of the diners was punctuated by the tinkle of silverware. Shadows of waiters came and went. The lights in the city below were beginning to wink on.

"It's almost perfect, isn't it?" said Dr. Moritz, lifting a glass of 1989 Meursault to his lips and gently allowing a trickle to pour into the middle of his tongue.

"The wine, or the scene?" asked Lars Svensen.

"Both, to be sure. What more could one want?" said Dr. Moritz. "Some sunshine to warm the bones. A wonderful shellfish dinner, fresh caught, simply and elegantly prepared, a lovely bottle of wine, an incomparable view."

"I wish Billie could have joined us," said Lars. "She's spending far too much time in her room."

"I'm a little concerned about her weight loss as well," said Dr. Moritz. He paused while the waiter silently refilled their glasses.

"Another bottle, monsieur?" Waiters in every would-be elegant restaurant in the world pretended to speak French.

"Why not," said Dr. Moritz. "It's absolutely decadent to open a second bottle of a wine as fine as this, but I'm feeling decadent."

"Oui, monsieur. Would there be anything else?"

"Non, merci," said Moritz. He was silent until the waiter was out of earshot. "Perhaps I should decrease the lithium."

"I just hate to see her so listless," said Lars. "She used to love to shop, but I can't seem to interest her in anything. She hasn't read a single book since we got here, and she used to always have her face stuck in the latest best seller."

"I don't mean to criticize you, Lars, but she's really a bird in a gilded cage. She's pining away here. I'll do my best for you, but there's only so much control you can exercise with drugs alone."

"And I don't mean to criticize you, Ernesto, but I find myself wishing more and more that that phony cowboy had hit the dust the way he was supposed to."

"It sounds as if you *are* criticizing me."

“Not really. It was an outrageous scheme, and, despite all the things that went wrong, it still worked. You stopped the wedding, disgraced that tin-roof Texan in front of his whole family, and brought Billie back to me.”

The waiter appeared with a second bottle, putting their conversation on ice while he poured a small amount in Dr. Moritz’ glass. Dr. Moritz directed him to dispense with the tasting and fill the glasses.

“It’s interesting that we didn’t need the bomb squad after all,” he said after the waiter had left.

“No, but it was a fitting finale,” said Lars, “and it had to have made a real mess out of any orderly investigation by the cops.” His good feelings faded as his thoughts turned once more to Billie.

“I just wish she and I could carry on where we left off.”

“Perhaps with time,” said Dr. Moritz, “she’ll forget the cowboy. Now that we appear to have been given a little respite from the rains, I’ve decided to organize a little ocean cruise for late tomorrow morning. Perhaps you and Billie might care to join me? Or even just you alone. I’ll ask Leita and she can bring a friend.”

“Thanks, Ernest. I’ll ask her, but I doubt if I can talk Billie into it. And as far as going without her . . . I think I’ll head back in now. Do you mind finishing the wine without me?”

“Not in the least, Lars. Buenas noches.” Far away, the clouds had vanished, and the day had been swallowed up by the night. The darkness of interplanetary space descended upon them. A myriad of stars began faintly to appear, like reflections of the city lights in the ocean of the sky.

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From another window high above, another person also looked out upon the luminescent night and sighed. Not so long ago, she had been on the verge of getting married to Bobby Lee. It was difficult to comprehend the whirlwind of events that had carried her off like Dorothy Gale, and deposited her on the beach of this rainy little country, into virtual captivity here in this hotel, where Lars’ money bought everything, including her captors.

She had thought a lot about the way in which Dr. Moritz had reappeared in her life, and had now become her personal physician. And that horrible little woman, Frau Luttmeyer, had become her nurse.

For a month, now, she had been the princess imprisoned in the castle. She had not seen Bobby Lee since she had left, with him handcuffed in the back of a police car. He would surely have been released long ago, but he couldn’t have any way of knowing what had happened to her, nor where she was. She had little hope of being rescued.

So she sat in her room, day after day, looking out at the rain and refusing to eat what they brought her. Lars allowed her complete freedom of the town, and gave her a generous allowance, so she usually ate out. She was always followed, of course, but discreetly, by Big Bill and Sly, to whom she had not spoken since San Francisco. She took the same route each day, rain or shine, down to the waterfront and along the Via de la Playa to the Cafe Oskar, where she sat and drank cheap white wine until the restaurant opened at eleven A.M., at which time she would have her only meal for the day. Often it

was the early morning catch. When there wasn't one, she would order a seafood stew or a fish enchilada. Afterwards she would take a stiff hike around the northern perimeter of the large town, always enjoying the discomfort she imagined it was causing the two tailing her, especially if it were raining.

Back at the hotel she would swim and shower and nap, rising in the late afternoon to read what she could of the local newspaper or last week's Sunday edition of the New York Times, the only English language paper available in town. Two large chests of books stood in the corner, all best-sellers. Lars must have bought the store out. But she had no desire to read them. Maybe it was because Lars had bought them, because she felt too much like a guinea pig already, but she was damned if she were going to do what he expected her to do.

Dr. Moritz had been easing up on the medications and she had had more energy, but it was difficult to overcome the tremendous psychological lethargy she had been suffering. The pills they gave her orally she tongued and pretended to swallow, later spitting them out when the sharp-eyed Frau Luttmeyer wasn't watching. The shots she was forced to submit to, but she was resolved to wait Lars out. She refused his advances, and treated him coldly but politely, answering his questions only when it suited her. She affected an apathy she did not entirely feel. She wanted to worry her captors a little and gain some slight advantage thereby.

## Chapter 35

September had become November, and then December. Happiness seemed to make time pass quickly for George. The Café de Luz was entering a new period of prosperity. George had repainted the dining room and Rosalia had gotten the refrigerator repaired. They subscribed to a new coffee service which provided some fancy machines as well, and Rosalia was already thinking of buying a freezer so they could sell ice cream cones on hot days. From eleven in the morning until nine at night there was a constant small stream of regular customers.

The whole neighborhood was aware of George's new status and treated him accordingly. It was a novelty to George for people to greet him with respect and ask his opinions. The only problem was with the church, where the priest was putting subtle pressure on Rosalia to become a respectable woman. George had already noticed the beginnings of marital fantasies flitting through Rosalia's mind, so it was no surprise to him when she proposed making their relationship a proper one. He could think of no reason to refuse, but felt it was necessary for Rosalia to understand his strange and dreadful powers, so he told her all about himself one night. He told her about his life as a child, the insecurities and confusion of growing up and dealing with life, exposed to the raw emotions of others. He told her about Svensen, the way Lars had used him to hunt down the rest of his former gang, and then recently to hunt for Billie. Rosalia had that rare capacity for really listening, and, as she was not bogged down by the prejudices of modern science, she had little trouble believing him. It explained to her the wonderful empathy he had towards her sexual needs, and the way he seemed to know just what was troubling her, even before she admitted it to herself. She saw no threat to her in his abilities, and was impressed that he never used them for his own betterment. She had never met a man as honorable as he seemed to be, and if he did not have all the attributes generally considered important in a man, perhaps they were not so important to her.

But his own upcoming marriage reminded him often of Billie's. He had been keeping an eye on the newspapers ever since he had come to live with Rosalia, but he had seen no news at all, until one day when he was replacing the old newspapers, which Rosalia used as shelf paper, and he came across an article from the September 18th issue of the Glendale Times. At first he didn't recognize the bride's name - Wilma Cathcart. The article spoke of the interrupted ceremonies, the death by apparent heart attack of the pastor, the fist fight between the groom and the brother of the woman who had interrupted those ceremonies, and of the bomb threat, with the bomb experts arriving by helicopter. George then realized what Dr. Moritz had been up to..

It was not until the second week of December that George began receiving transmissions, but he knew not from whom, nor from where. He knew only that the tone was one of separation and despair. There were occasional visualizations, and they were always of a small city on the sea, in some rainy clime far from the engines of industry and commerce. There was a searching quality to them that haunted George, when they came to him at night when he was with Rosalia. He began talking to her about them, not to disturb her, but to explain to her his recent preoccupations. She listened but asked him nothing.

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Big Bill was bored. He and Sly had played gin twice already that morning. The early afternoon sun was hot. The air sizzled around them like tiny firecrackers, and there was a faint hum as of a million insects, but none could be seen. Nothing moved. Not a ruffle of canvas in the gaily-colored umbrellas that topped the tables of the Hotel Internacional de San Marcos. No stir of air disturbed the tranquility of the idyllic setting. The palm trees stood like silent sentinels, waiting for the next coming of the conquistadores. Now and then, an errant mosquito, forgetting what season it was, flew in under the radar screen and dive-bombed the nearest ear.

All citizens with any sense were sawing logs in their haciendas, fat with the noonday meal. Even the insects knew the folly of venturing out into the blast furnace. Only a few foreign guests idled aimlessly about, thumbing year-old magazines in the lounge, sweltering about the village looking at closed shops, visiting the small museum with its display of Miskito folk art, or stopping for wine coolers at the Café Oskar, the only restaurant in town which didn't close for the siesta. More intrepid sufferers paid good money to go out in the sport fishing boats, to try their hand at catching a swordfish or some barracuda.

Except for the sport fishing, Sly and Big Bill had tried all of these. They had even tried playing snooker in the games room, but it was too difficult and eclectic for ex-pool-hall denizens. Sometimes they sat and watched the English contingent play the game, but the Brits played too slowly and talked too much about the great snooker players of the past.

Their main job was keeping tabs on Billie. Each day they took turns tailing her as she took her late-morning walk to town. It was grueling work, especially when she took the path that circled the village along the shoulder of the low mountain to the north, and even more especially during the rainy months when they had first arrived here. Today it had been Big Bill's job, on what seemed the hottest day of the week, and he had been greatly relieved when Billie had forgone her usual outing, opting instead to sit around the pool reading magazines and nibbling on sandwiches from the dining room.

"I sure wish they had some decent TV here," said Big Bill. "I'm gettin' tired of old *Kojak* and *I Love Lucy* shows. I seen 'em all when I was a kid. The only other thing they got are movies in Mexican without no subtitles."

"Spanish," corrected Sly.

"What's the difference?" asked Big Bill.

"Not much," said Sly.

"You wanna play some gin?"

"No thanks, Big."

"Me neither."

And so it went for their eighty-third day in San Marcos.

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Captain Harding was fed up with Bobby Lee and all his talk about abduction. He hoped this face-to-face meeting would put an end to it all. As far as he was concerned, the missing persons report Bobby Lee was trying to sell him on was just another refusal by the cowboy to accept the obvious fact that his girl friend had run out on him. He

didn't bother to rise as the big Texan entered the office. He remained in his favorite position, leaning back in the swivel chair with his feet up on the desk. He waved his visitor to the only other chair in the office. Bobbie Lee tossed his hat on the hat rack with a three-point shot which irritated Harding and sat back himself, putting his feet on the opposite side of the desk. Harding gave him a little wave of the hand.

"I beg your pardon?" said Bobby Lee, not understanding the wave.

"Feet off the desk, please," said Harding.

"But you have your feet on the desk," said Bobby Lee.

"It's my desk," said Harding.

There was a moment of tense silence. Then Bobby Lee removed his feet. Captain Harding looked at his watch. "I can give you about fifteen minutes," he said.

"But I've been trying to see you for the last month."

"You've already seen me once. I'm a busy man. Do you have anything new to support your theory that your girl friend was abducted?"

"It isn't a theory!" yelled Bobby Lee. "Besides, isn't it your job to dig up the evidence?"

"Keep your voice down, please. It isn't my job to dig up evidence for every crackpot theory that comes along. Your lady friend got fed up with your shady past and went off to greener pastures."

"Then why did she go off without her clothes or possessions?"

"She did that once before."

"When?"

"Four years ago she walked out of an apartment she shared with another friend in Chicago. Left all her things."

"How d'you know that?"

"Wanda told me. The friend in Chicago is an old friend of both of them. They all went to Glendale High School together. Seems like your girl friend was all hot on some guy named Lars when she disappeared. Maybe she ran out on him just like she did on you."

"But she didn't run out on me, God damn it!" said Bobby.

"That's it," said Harding, standing up. "Interview's over. Amscray."

"What's 'amscray' mean?"

"It's pig latin for 'scram.'"

"So even the pigs speak Latin."

"Get out of here!" yelled Harding.

Bobby Lee got.

## Chapter 36

"It's Billie," George blurted out, sitting straight up in bed. Rosalia stirred, her eyes flickering, and she unconsciously reached out a muscular arm to draw him back to her. Then her eyes opened.

"Whassamatter, corazon. You can't sleep?"

"The pictures I've been getting. It's Billie again. She's in some place called San Marcos."

"San Marcos?" she echoed. "That's funny. I got a sister who live there."

"In San Marcos?" he said unbelievably.

"Sí, in San Marcos. Her name is Consuela. She work in hotel, make beds, bring breakfasts to rich people."

"Is it a place near the ocean?" George asked, "with a beach?"

"Sí, es circa del Caribe, como dice in Ingles, Caribbean."

"Ah," said George.

"This 'Billie' same woman you tell me about before, eh?" she asked.

"Same one, yeah. The one Lars wanted me to find."

"His old girl friend."

"Yeah."

"Not your old girl friend."

"No, Rosalia. You're the only girl friend I ever had."

"So why you worry about her?"

"Because she was always nice to me when nobody else was. And because she's in trouble, trouble I helped get her into."

"Again?"

"Still. I guess Lars must have captured her and taken her there. Let me show you something."

He turned on the light and struggled out of bed half-blinded by the glare, making his way to the dresser. He opened the top drawer and pulled out an envelope. When he returned to the bed he opened the envelope and pulled out some newspaper clippings.

"This was a coupla months ago. I almost missed it 'cause I didn't know Billie's real name. Let me read it to you."

There were a few moments of silence after he finished.

"So you think these things that happen were not an accident?"

"No, Rosalia. I think Lars Svensen's behind it all. Him and Dr. Moritz. They were trying to ruin Billie's wedding. They probably kidnapped her and took her to this place."

"To San Marcos."

"Yeah."

"So what you going to do? Go rescue her all by yourself?"

"I gave up trying to rescue Billie when I started being with you, Rosalia, but I think I oughta try to contact this Robert Acres guy, the one who was gonna marry Billie. He'd probably wanna rescue her. The newspaper article says he comes from a rich family, so he could probably afford it."

Rosalia was moved by his little declaration of commitment, and raised herself up to give him a big smack on the lips.

“That soun’ like a good idea, George. You do that in the morning. Now we try to go back to sleep, okay? I got a big day tomorrow.”

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Special agent Roscoe Commons was sitting sipping a scotch and water in the Martini Bar Lounge when Bobby Lee arrived. It wasn’t actually cold outside, but the wood-burning fireplace was aglow and the warmth felt good. He hadn’t met Bobby Lee in person yet, but there was no doubt that it was he, with his height and his cowboy hat and boots. He rose to shake hands.

“Mr. Acres?”

“You must be Agent Commons. Just call me Bobby Lee. You been here before?”

“I’ve been coming here since it was the old Columbia Bar and Grill.”

Bobby Lee looked at his watch. “We still have a good half hour. I made reservations for seven. You mind starting right away?”

“Not at all. Let’s get you a drink first.” He caught the eye of a passing waiter and gave him a nod. “I’ve just been going over my notes covering my meeting with Captain Harding . . .”

“He was actually willing to see you?” said Bobby Lee, interrupting.

“Captain Harding was most helpful. I did get the impression that you and he did not see eye to eye.” Agent Commons gave a brief imitation of a smile.

“That’s the understatement of the year,” Bobby said, giving him a real one back.

“Well, anyway, I’ve made a checklist of the items that I think make a case for your allegations of kidnapping.” He drew a notebook from his breast pocket and opened it.

“One, the attempted bombing was the last of three, one week apart, and for the last two months there have been no further related incidents. This suggests strongly that the one actual bombing and the bomb threat which followed were decoys, just as the religious overtones of the letters sent by the bombers were decoys, all meant to belie any relation to the aborted marriage ceremony.”

The bar waitress came and took Bobby Lee’s drink order, then Roscoe Commons continued: “Two, although the first two bomb incidents were accompanied by letters sent to the press, the third threat was delivered by hand.”

He noted Bobby Lee’s look of surprise. “You didn’t know that, I see. A private detective by the name of McCracken was hired to deliver it. He got suspicious and opened it ahead of time and reported it to the cops. Otherwise the entire congregation would have been blown to kingdom come.”

“How does this support the kidnapping theory?” asked Bobby.

“Why deliver it by hand? Just make sure it gets sent late. The only advantage of a delivery man is that he could purposely deliver it early, which suggests the bombers didn’t really want the bomb to go off.”

“You done any checking on this private detective?”

“He retired and moved to Idaho. That in itself doesn’t prove anything, but it does seem suspicious.”

Roscoe continued. “Item three on the list is that the man who planned the entire wedding, a Mr. Merryman, vanished just before the bomb squad arrived. In addition, the firm he was president of, Cinderella Wedding Arrangements, does not appear to have



ever existed. And his assistant, a Mr. O'Murphy, seems to have vanished at the same time as his boss."

"You know he was doing it for free?"

"That's item four on my list."

"How about the pastor dropping dead on the spot?"

"I've taken a look at the coroner's report, and it seems he did a pretty routine job on it. The report said that the death was caused by a massive heart attack, which doesn't seem to have much to do with assertions the pastor previously made to the effect that he was dying of cancer. If this case acquires any more solidity, I may ask the D.A. to have the body exhumed."

"So that could almost be item five."

At this point in time, the waiter interrupted them to say that their table was ready. Agent Commons chose the New Zealand snapper, and Bobby Lee settled for the trout. To the waiter's silent disapproval over good claret being served with fish, they ordered a bottle of 1989 Talbot. Their conversation subsided into generalities as they sipped the big, full-bodied Bordeaux and dawdled over their hors d'oeuvres. Roscoe talked about Bobby Lee's Uncle Jack, and Bobby Lee talked about a tryout he had had in his younger years with the Dallas Cowboys. It wasn't until after the entrées and the arrival of the dessert menu that Bobby Lee raised the issue of the woman who had challenged the services.

"That's the most suspicious point of all," said the special agent. "Those particular lines inviting anyone to come forward and so forth aren't used that much nowadays, and only by the Episcopalians. How did this Anna May Jewiston know those lines were going to be included?"

## Chapter 37

The next morning, while Rosalia was clattering about in the kitchen with boiling pots and simmering pans, George took a taxi to Wanda's, one last time. The weather was strange, flipping back and forth between warm and sweaty and cool and chilly, with a partially overcast sky and a slight breeze up around flagpole height. Down at cab level the air was unmoving. It felt as if it ought to rain but probably wouldn't. George had the driver lower the passenger windows so he could get the illusion of a breeze while the cab was moving. This meant putting up with a little grumbling on the part of the driver, as it forced him do without the air conditioning, but for once George was too abstracted by his own dilemma to pay much attention. He tried to think about what his meeting with Wanda might be like. If she couldn't help him locate this Robert Acres person, he'd be forced to put in an ad, and he didn't even know which papers to put it in. Maybe the guy had moved back to Texas. George felt overwhelmed. He had never been good at planning, and now he had to somehow come up with something in a hurry so he wouldn't be too late. He prayed that Wanda would be there for him.

The driver rounded the turn. There it was, the familiar white house with the lawn and the white picket fence and the tree swinging into view. George gave the driver a twenty and told him to keep the meter running. He unlatched the gate and walked up the steps to the front porch. For once the place felt inhabited. A newspaper lay on the welcome mat and he could hear the squeak of water pipes. He rang the bell, listening to the familiar lonely jangling sound, but this time he heard somebody yell something and the sound of the door being unlocked; it swung open to reveal a round face with a peaches-and-cream complexion and a pair of enquiring blue eyes frowning at him out from under a ruffled, blonde, page-boy haircut. A cigarette dangled from her lip. The lower half of her appeared to be swathed in a voluminous, worn, terry cloth robe.

"Yes," she said curtly.

"Uh, my name is George Anderson. I was uh looking for . . . I wanted to find . . . Are you Wanda?"

Her face went from a wince to a scowl. "Yeah, I'm Wanda. What is it you want?" She disengaged the cigarette from her lower lip and flicked the ash off.

"I'm looking for Robert Lee Acres. I have something extremely important to, uh, tell him, and since you're a friend of Billie's . . . that is uh, Wilma - Wilma Cathcart - and she was gonna get married to him, this Robert Lee Acres guy, an' I thought, uh, maybe you could tell me where I could, uh, find him." He stopped and did some heavy mental breathing. It was the longest speech he had made in his life. He stood and sweated.

"What is this thing you gotta tell him?" She kept the door open just enough to lean out. Her eyes were guarded.

"I know where Billie is. I thought he oughta know so he could try to get her back."

"How do you know she wants him to know where she is? Maybe it's better you don't tell him." She blew out some more smoke.

"No, no. You don't understand. She's been kidnapped."

Wanda eyeballed him carefully. She looked at the cab parked below. "You just wait out here, mister, while I get some clothes on, okay?"

George nodded and the door slammed in his face.

The driver called up to him. "You gonna be much longer, buddy?"

George frantically signalled to him to wait. If Wanda wouldn't let him in, he wouldn't be able to call another cab.

After about five minutes of nail biting, the door opened, and Wanda reappeared, clad in shorts and a halter. She shut the door behind her.

"Okay. Now, what's this all about?"

George told her, stammering and running his words together and getting confused at points, but persevering.

"You say she's in this place called San Marcos?"

George nodded yes.

"I still don't understand how you came to know this. Did she write you or call you or what?"

"It's too complicated," George said. "I couldn't explain it to you, ma'am. Please just trust me."

She eyed him narrowly. "This is all pretty weird, but okay, let's say I trust you. What is it you wanna know?"

"Like I uh, said, where I can reach Robert Acres. You, uh, know him, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know him, but I'm afraid I don't like him all that much. Billie always did go for the he-man type, but does she want him back after that . . . that woman got up and said all those things about him?"

"At the wedding?" George asked.

"Yes, at the wedding. What about all that?"

George thought about what he had read in the newspaper article, and he remembered the tricks and lies that Lars and Dr. Moritz were capable of.

"It's probly not true," he said.

"I see. And you say Billie was kidnapped."

"Yeah, and she's bein' held prisoner."

"And you can't tell me how you know."

George shook his head. He stood there stolidly.

"Why don't you go to the police?" she asked.

"They wouldn't believe me," he said.

"Why should I believe you?"

George just looked at her sadly. He reminded her of a skinny basset hound, with those eyes.

"Okay, it's against my better judgment, but just a minute and I'll go get his number."

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"Beautiful view, isn't it?" Lars sat in a chair next to hers, gazing out the arched open window, with the town spread out before them like a patterned quilt in concrete white and tile roof red. Beyond that the aquamarine sea stretched to the horizon, where it blended into a cobalt sky. Outside, it was hot and still, siesta time once more. Inside, it was barely cool. In the corner, the perpetual fan beat its heart out, revolving slowly on its stand until it faced the wall, then reversing back the other way until it reached the other wall, back and forth, day and night.

"I wonder how often it has to be replaced," murmured Billie, half to herself.

"What, the view?" said Lars.

"No, the fan. That's not a bad idea though, replacing the view. Why don't you replace it with Glendale."

His seriousness softened long enough to let a laugh escape. He reached out to touch her, but she drew away from him.

"How can you pretend to care for me when you never give me what I want," she said.

"I'll give you everything you ever wanted, baby. All you have to do is come back into my life again. It was really good once. Have you changed since then? Has either one of us really changed? Come on. You're the same person you were when you met me. You were smart and hip then. Nothing's really changed."

"One thing has" she said in a flat, determined voice.

"What's that?"

"I don't want to be controlled by you any more, Lars."

"How do I control you?"

She laughed. It was almost hearty. Then she recovered herself.

"You're controlling me right now by keeping me prisoner in this godforsaken place."

"You're free to come and go."

"Where? To town for the hundredth time, twiddle my toes down at Oskar's over a wine cooler and a fish enchilada? Another visit to that dumpy little museum to see how half-demented villagers wove baskets five hundred years ago?"

"As soon as I know I can trust you, we can travel anywhere, do anything we want. All you have to do is let me know when you're ready to come aboard."

"What a despicable phrase - come aboard! What are you, some kind of admiral? Where's your fleet, admiral?"

For just a moment, Lars' face took on a menacing look. Then he smiled.

"You've always had a good wit, Billie. One of the things I like about you. We have so many things in common."

"The only thing we had in common is pretty common."

"You're an uncommon woman."

She was silent again. The fan turned slowly. The world outside turned even more slowly. Dinnertime was still many yawns away.

"I'd like to be alone," she said.

He rose, taking his time. "I haven't seen you wearing that necklace I gave you."

"Wearing your jewelry just tells everyone I'm your property."

"You're the only person who thinks that. It didn't seem to matter before."

"I'd like to be alone."

"I'm leaving, I'm leaving. Will I see you for dinner?"

"I don't think so. Please don't pay me any more visits, Lars, and don't bother bringing me any more presents. Presents are a celebration of relationship, and we don't have one, except maybe one of captive and captor. That's the only kind of relationship you understand."

"You're just upset now. Things didn't go the way you planned. That's all it is. We'll get you back to normal soon."

“Get the fuck out of here! Don’t you understand I don’t want you. I want the man you stole me from.”

“Time heals all wounds,” he said, walking to the door, where he turned briefly. “And when it comes to your ex-boyfriend, I suspect that it also wounds all heels.”

She looked around for something to throw at him, but the door had already closed.

## Chapter 38

Bobby Lee's beat-up old Chevy convertible looked right at home as he pulled up into the faded green zone in front of the Café de Luz. A few boys playing on the dusty street stopped their game long enough to watch him clamber out and go ambling up to the swinging doors and push his way in. With the cowboy hat and boots, all he lacked were a pair of six-guns dangling from his belt.

Inside, the patrons looked up disbelievingly from their enchiladas and chile rellenos at the tall, blond intruder, cowboy hat in hand. He towered over Rosalia at the cash register. The room was quiet, everyone listening now to hear what he said.

"I'm Robert Lee Acres, ma'am. Come to see George Anderson."

"You follow me," she told him, turning to lead the way into the private part of the house, but just before she turned she gave a stern glance at her patrons, who all immediately looked back at their plates.

She led him to a room in the back of the house which seemed to serve as a kind of office. A skinny, gangly guy with his hair uncombed stood up from the desk.

"I'm George, uh, Anderson."

"And I'm Bobby Lee. We talked on the phone."

"May I offer you something?" Rosalia asked. "Maybe a nice tamale."

"No thank you, ma'am," said Bobby Lee. "This is just business."

"Maybe when you are through with your business," Rosalia told him. "I fix you something good."

"That's very kind of you, ma'am."

"You will excuse me, then. I guess I better go back to my customers," Rosalia told them, making a hasty departure.

"Sorry about the mess," George said, offering his visitor a chair.

"No sweat," said Bobby Lee. "You oughta see my place." He looked around for something to prop his feet up on, but the few items of furniture were all loaded down with stacks of paper and documents of various kinds."

"So," said Bobby Lee, deciding to prime the pump, "you said you knew where Billie is."

"San Marcos," said George.

"And how do you know this?"

This was the subject that George dreaded most, but it had to be dealt with, and George knew no other way than to blurt things out, willy-nilly, hoping his visitor would be able to put it all together.

He told about his membership in Lars' gang, the way Lars controlled him. He could see the doubt in Bobby Lee's eyes as he talked, but there was no getting around it. Bobby Lee had to know all of it to understand and to believe. George held on grimly. He explained how his powers worked and how he had been used by Lars to locate Billie. He told him about the candy bar that Big Bill had bought, and about offering the kids at the soda fountain a reward for finding Wanda's place.

Gradually the frown of disbelief turned into a grudging interest as items started jelling in Bobby Lee's mind. He remembered Billie talking about the psychic who was being used to find her, and about the child talking to her about a reward for finding Wanda's place. He remembered all the times Billie had expressed concern over Lars'

finding her, and had wondered how that would be accomplished. Now he was hearing the details, and they seemed to fit. It was hard to accept the idea of psychic abilities, but George Anderson seemed like such a strange guy himself, it wasn't that hard to imagine him having such powers.

"If only you could show me something that could prove it to me," said Bobby Lee.

"That I can do these things."

"Yeah. If you could do that, then maybe it'd be easier to believe you knew where Billie was."

George looked darkly at him. "People don't like it, you know."

"To have their minds read? Is that what you mean?"

George nodded. "When they realize I'm really doing it, it scares them and they get mad at me. They don't want anybody inside their heads."

"How come you're not makin' a bundle playin' cards for money?"

George looked at him reproachfully. "It wouldn't be right."

"How about doin' spy work for the Federal Government?"

"They'd lock me up and study me. Try to figure out how I do it. Even if they didn't do that, working for them would be just like working for Lars or the doctor all over again. I'd never be free."

"The doctor?"

"Dr. Moritz. Lars had him come down here to find Billie."

"With your help."

George nodded. Bobby Lee thought for a moment.

"You say people get mad at you when you read their minds?"

George nodded again. "But you want me to do it anyway."

Bobby Lee sat back. "Let's go."

George closed his eyes. "You've been talking to some kinda government guy. FBI I guess. Yeah, FBI, right? You had dinner with him last night. No, maybe a couple nights ago. You both had some kind of fish, right? He had snapper. Red snapper. And you both drank red wine. There's a 'T' on the label. Some kinda French wine."

Bobby Lee gaped at him.

"What'd I eat?"

"I'm not sure. There's a 'T' in it, too. Oh yes, trout."

"What kind of drinks did we have before dinner?"

"Uh, he had a scotch and water and you . . . you had a beer."

"What brand? Can you guess? I'm picturing the label in my mind."

"Millers. Millers Genuine."

"Wow," said Bobby sitting up straighter in his chair. George continued.

"It didn't come in a bottle. It was a . . . wait a minute. I see this big handle above the bar and the beer comes out of a faucet underneath the handle. I forget what you call that."

"Draft beer," said Bobby Lee. "Go on."

"The FBI agent was talking about Billie. About how you were right about her being kidnapped."

"Right on the money, George. Jesus! I always thought mind readin' was a lot of bullshit. You know - smoke and mirrors and stage tricks."

George nodded. He was well acquainted with public disbelief in psychic phenomena.

"So you're telling me you can read Billie's mind all the way from . . . where did you say? San something."

"San Marcos," said George.

"Yeah, San Marcos."

"No," said George. "I didn't read her mind. People gotta be close for me to be able to read them."

"Then how do you make contact with her?"

"She comes to me in visions, like she did before when I was working for Lars."

Bobby Lee decided to test George out, so he just thought his next question.

"Yeah," said George, answering it. "Visions are different from tuning in to people's minds. A vision is something more like a picture. I get pictures of Billie. Billie sitting looking at the ocean through a window. Sometimes the pictures have feelings with them. I know that Billie doesn't like being there. She wants somebody to come and rescue her."

"How do you know where it is from just pictures? How do you know she's in this San Marcos place?"

"Sometimes besides pictures and feelings I know things too. Like I know it's San Marcos. But I can't tell you how. It just comes to me."

"I see," said Bobby Lee, frowning like mad and thinking furiously.

"I wish I knew someone in San Marcos I could get to verify that she's there. I believe you, I guess, but I could never get Commons to believe it. Not on your say so."

Something clicked in George's mind. "My wife, that is, uh, the lady who is going to be my wife. Rosalia. She told me she has a sister who lives there."

"In San Marcos?"

"That is what she said."

"That's pretty weird," said Bobby Lee. "To know anyone at all livin' in a podunk place like San Marcos. What the hell are the odds against it? But on the other hand, who cares? Can we talk to your wife right now?"

"I will go and see," said George.



## Chapter 39

Lars and Dr. Moritz sat once again at a table on the veranda of the Hotel Internacional. They had now had an entire month of idyllic weather, and they were getting tired of it. The sky was of the same incomparable cobalt blue, the sea the same quixotic blend of blue and aquamarine, the air as clear and unsullied as ever. The tile rooftops that formed a staircase to the sea were just as picturesque, the waiters that hovered in the wings just as obsequious, the seagulls waiting patiently for scraps just as daring, the sun which beat down on them just as merciless. But, somehow, in some way, things were not the same. Somehow, the view seemed to have become ordinary. One could *oh* and *ah* over something for just so long.

It is true that the hotel restaurant deserved at least three of the four stars accorded it, and that the chef went out of his way to present a new dish at least once a week, but still, for someone from a large metropolitan area with thousands and thousands of restaurants, the variety was miniscule. One could only have beef bourgignon, or coq au vin, or fettucine alfredo, or pepper steak, or lobster, or swordfish, or sole meunière so many times and then it began to become old hat. One longed for an occasional pizza, or a cheeseburger with fries, or fish and chips, or won ton soup, or sushi.

“Paradise isn’t always what it’s cut out to be, is it, Doc?”

“No, indeed. I’d have to agree with you. I guess it’s the human condition to become dissatisfied with just about anything, no matter how good it is. It all started with Adam and Eve.”

“Speaking of Eve, I wish Billie would come around a little faster, so I wouldn’t be so imprisoned here.”

“What would you do?”

“Hire a yacht. Hell, buy a yacht. A big ocean-going one with all the trimmings. Sail all over the world.”

“You could do that now.”

“Not with Billie the way she is. I’d have to watch her like a policeman in every port.”

“What’ll you do if she never comes around? You can only keep a wild animal penned up so long.”

“She’ll come around. She just needs to get that cowboy out of her head. If only I could get her to forget the last year of her life. Then we could go back to how it was. You know any ways to induce a year’s worth of amnesia?”

“I do, but you wouldn’t want to try them. You don’t want to break her spirit, do you?”

“I guess not, but she’s no use to herself or to me just now. It’s all stubbornness on her part. We had a perfectly good thing going and she had to throw it away. She’s been listening to too much women’s lib bullshit and she’s trying to prove something. Maybe it’s time for me to get tough.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” said Dr. Moritz. “She might prove to be tougher yet. The more you push, the more she pulls. Never argue with a woman. Distract her.”

“But how?” said Lars.

“Get her interested in another man.”

“Want me to break this bottle over your head?”

“And waste a perfectly good Chardonnay? I didn’t mean another man for real.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“I have an acquaintance, of sorts,” began the doctor. “A lady killer. Lives off women, tourists mainly. Wines them and dines them and then pulls a scam and vanishes into the hinterland with a chunk of their money or property. But whenever he makes a score he always returns here to rejoin his lover.” He paused a minute, then added, “who happens to be another man.”

“So he’s a switch hitter?”

“Not exactly. I take a special interest in sexual aberrations, and I had a lengthy conversation with him recently. He has the peculiar misfortune of being able to enjoy women only when he is using them. He could never have an ordinary heterosexual relationship.”

“So otherwise he’s homosexual.”

“That is his primary polarity. But, to women unfortunate enough to be the objects of his hunt, he can be fascinating and alluring, as well as a potent lover.”

“What’s the catch?”

“Once the game is over, he has no more use for the woman.”

“When *is* the game over? I don’t like the idea of paying some bozo to make it with my girl.”

“I can arrange it so that doesn’t happen.”

“How can you guarantee such a thing?”

“The man is a professional, and he is very sophisticated.”

“So the idea is he gets her to fall for him, and when she asks for it she gets dumped.”

“Exactly.”

Lars leaned back, staring at the distant horizon. “Billie’s pretty desirable,” he said. “How do I know he can stop on a dime?”

“Because at that point he becomes psychologically impotent. The moment he has exacted payment, it is over for him.”

“You’re absolutely sure of everything you’ve told me?”

“As much as one can be sure of anything having to do with the human psyche.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t comfort me much.”

“In this case, I feel quite certain. The man is a classical case straight out of Krafft-Ebing.”

“How would you arrange it?”

“I’d offer him a sizeable sum, pay for a suite here at the hotel where he can be close to her. You’d have to stay completely out of the picture while this is going on. And you don’t have to pay off if he doesn’t succeed. You’re only out a hotel bill.”

“I like it. That way she forgets the cowboy and ends up frustrated. Ready to come hopping back into my lap.”

“Exactly.”

“Doctor, I change my mind. I don’t like it; I love it. Let’s have another bottle of this wine to celebrate.”

## Chapter 40

The small living room seemed even smaller with the three large men sitting on the sofa and the overstuffed chair. To Rosalia, they looked more like professional football players than government agents, Mr. Commons from the FBI and. Stokes and Byerly from the CIA. Rosalia was extremely impressed. It was all very secret, of course, and not something she could brag about to her cronies in the restaurant. George had explained it all to her the night before, when he came home from his meeting with Acres and Commons. Roscoe Commons and Leonard Stokes were drinking Dos Equis; Mr. Acres was sticking to Millers; Byerly had switched to coffee. Rosalia was having a hard time trying to be a good hostess and follow the conversation at the same time. Mr. Stokes was talking about the political situation in San Marcos.

"... not quite the same as they were back when your Uncle Jack," he said with a little nod and smile in Bobby Lee's direction, "tried to fly a plane load of girls from Nicaragua to Honduras. with the Sandinistas hot on his tail."

"I'm a little hazy on the exact location of San Marcos," Roscoe Commons interjected. "It's in that same vicinity, isn't it?"

"Right next door," said Stokes. "In fact it's still being run by one of Somoza's former generals. It's on the Atlantic side of Central America, on the Caribbean, just due South of the Yucatan peninsula, between Nicaragua and Honduras. You can't see it on most maps. It's only a few hundred square miles, a lot bigger than Monaco and a hell of a lot smaller than Montenegro. It was previously an unincorporated area, and it has no inland connections. In the sixteen hundreds it was used as a pirate base."

"What's there now?" asked Bobby Lee.

"An international hotel with a four-star restaurant and a swimming pool. There's a small yacht harbor. The local fishing boats take sports fisherman out for the day. A lot of Europeans go there during the sunny season, January to May. The indigenous population is Mestizo, but the locals are mostly from other Latin American countries. A small number of Black Creoles furnish the farm labor."

"What do they raise?" asked Roscoe Commons.

"Mostly food crops," said Stokes. "Everything centers around Dos Rios, the only so-called city, which is really nothing but a big town of about twenty thousand."

"Anything besides the international hotel you mentioned?" asked Bobby Lee.

"Four small hotels for transients who can't afford luxury. A scattering of small cafés and restaurants."

"So the people we're looking for will be at the International Hotel," said Bobby Lee.

"No doubt," said Stokes. "Now, who is the person in Dos Rios you want to reach?"

"That is my sister," said Rosalia. "She is a maid at the Hotel International."

"We could probably reach her through the hotel management if she doesn't have a phone of her own," said Stokes. He turned to look enquiringly at Rosalia.

"No, sir," said Rosalia. "I don't think she have a phone, but I don't know."

"Do you think we could get through to her there?" asked Bobby Lee.

"Yeah, I think so," said Stokes. "Probably have to go through Mexico City and Managua. There's about a three-hour time differential, so it's a little late right now. Best time might be tomorrow morning around eight, which would make it eleven there. Do you know the number of the hotel?"

“We were hoping you could help us out there,” said Commons. “Do you have anyone in the area who might know?”

“I don’t think the U.S. recognizes San Marcos, so we certainly wouldn’t have anyone on the spot. I’ll have to see what I can do. May I use your phone?” he asked Rosalia.

“Yes, sir,” she said. “You follow me, Mr. Stokes.”

Two hours later, after the three government agents had left, Bobby Lee remained to set things up for the next morning.

“How much this telephone call going to cost me?” asked Rosalia.

“None of this is going to cost you anything, ma’am. You’re doing me a big favor as it is. We’ll use my cell phone..

“What I going to say to my sister?”

“What I suggested before. You said you and George here were going to get married. You just tell her you’re thinking of going to San Marcos for your honeymoon. You said you and your sister used to be close.”

“Close?” asked Rosalia. “Ah, ah. Close. Yes, we are very close. Only we don’t write so many letters, now.”

“It wouldn’t seem strange to her for you to go there for a honeymoon?”

“Yes, it would seem ver’ estrange. She know I don’ have much money.”

“I mean to want to combine your honeymoon with a visit to her.”

“Oh, no, that would not be so estrange. Only estrange maybe I got the money to go there.”

“How’d you like to go there for a real honeymoon? If I paid for it?”

“Is dangerous for George, no? This gang boss. He know what George look like.”

“True. We’d have to make sure it would be safe for George. I would be there also, of course, and I would bring some help. But all this is strictly hypothetical.” He saw Rosalia’s confusion.

“Maybe none of this will really happen. Right now it is just an excuse for you to get in touch with her. Once you talk to her you gotta get her to call you back from another phone, just in case the hotel management decides to listen in.”

“Where this other phone?”

“Stokes is gonna call me back later tonight. I’ll know tomorrow morning.”

“Is all so complicate,” she said. “I don’ think I make a ver’ good spy.”

## Chapter 41

The new Mr. and Mrs. George Anderson dutifully fastened their seat belts and gazed out through the twilight at the vast expanse of Mexico City. The sun had already set when they boarded the Mexicana superjet which would take them to Kingston, but now they were able to catch a second glimpse of its dying rays. Below, in the purple twilight, they watched the city lights twinkling on, obscured by the brilliant orange hues of the western sky as the reddish sun plunged into the Pacific ocean. In two hours they would be over another ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, and from there they would veer to the south, bound for the sunny climes of the Caribbean and the island of Jamaica.

The Mexicana stewardesses were demonstrating the safety gear on the plane, showing, in both Spanish and English, how to use the oxygen masks. Rosalia was atwitter with excitement. She and George had spent the day in Mexico City, jamming as much as possible into the eight-hour layover from the connecting flight on Pan Am from Los Angeles, and the ensuing day in Mexico City had done him in. It is the dream of every Mexican citizen to see the capital of his country, and Rosalia had never been there. It seemed as if they had spent the entire day in taxicabs, doing a whirlwind tour of the city - the National Palace, the National Museum of Cultures, the National Museum of Art, the National Museum of the Revolution, the Wax Museum, the Palace of Fine Arts, the Flea Market. George had only been to a museum once in his whole life, and now he had practically galloped through seven of them in one day. His feet were sore and his brain was weary from the psychic onslaught of nine million Mexican minds.

But Rosalia was happier than a shellfish in a month without an R. She bought a tour book and made the cab drivers take them to every church, museum, and public square in town. George did his best to tune out the pack of people around them, and just concentrate on her.

He had roughly two hours to nap before they touched down in Kingston, Jamaica. The plane had some time ago left the last outskirts of the vast city behind them and they were now passing over the massive mountain chain of the Sierra Madre Oriental. George let his seat back and nestled down. Rosalia's left hand still gripped his right, but the rest of her was turned away from him, glued to the small, thick, oval window, enthusiastically squinting at what little she could make out in the gathering darkness below.

Shortly after midnight the big Mexicana jet touched down at the Norman Manley airport in Kingston. Even Rosalia had finally succumbed to the seductions of sleep, so they were both groggy and disoriented as they navigated the long corridors through security and customs and the baggage claim area. Fortunately, Bobby Lee had supplied them with plenty of American dollars, which were good anywhere, so they had no hesitation in stepping right into an elegant limousine to take them to their hotel.

The Morgan's Harbour Hotel lay just minutes away from the airport, and their rooms had been secured an extra day in advance, so there was no delay in having their bags whisked to their bridal suite, where they found a bottle of champagne waiting for them with a little note from Bobby Lee welcoming them to Jamaica and telling them to expect a visit from him at eleven the next morning. They tumbled into their beds to dreams of flying.

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Rudolfo Maria Silvestre Ortega stood in front of the mirror. At the age of 37, he still cut a handsome figure. His stomach was still firm, his pecs were impeccable, his beautifully tragic face was still just as beautiful and tragic as ever. He eschewed all facial hair, holding that mustaches and beards were disguises. His hair was done in a pompadour style, slicked back like Rudolph Valentino, one of his greatest idols.

He ran five miles every morning, followed by a vigorous mile in the ocean, a half mile out and a half mile back. He never drank to excess. He ate twice a day, once at noon after his exercises, a healthy vegetarian lunch with all the major food classes represented, and a small gourmet dinner at eight with an excellent bottle of wine.

In the afternoons he meditated or painted pictures or made love with his soul mate, Francisco, who had been his friend since childhood. Francisco was also an artist. He made beautifully carved and enameled boxes which he sold to the tourists in the small gift shop in the front of the house. He was also an excellent cook, and prepared Rudolfo's meals. During his childhood in San Jose, Costa Rica, Francisco had studied ballet, and was still an excellent dancer. Sometimes, at small, private parties, he would dance for his friends.

Rudolfo had reason to regard himself critically in the full-length mirror in his dressing room. His new contract involved a young woman. This was indeed a challenge, for, in truth, Rudolfo's professional emphasis had for such a long time been focussed solely on older women. He understood so well the idiosyncracies of the mature adult female: her fears, her needs, how to fulfill her fantasies. Rudolfo had not dealt with a young woman since he was a young man.

This was also an intelligent woman. That did not worry Rudolfo from the point of view of keeping up his side in a conversation. He had gone to the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, in Mexico City, where he had studied Political Science and Economics, sent there by his father who was also a graduate. This was before the big scandal which had alienated him from his family and driven him into his present, and now permanent, profession - that of fleecing females.

But an intelligent woman, although perhaps not so much a challenge on the intellectual plane, could be a far greater challenge on the emotional one, for if she understood herself well, she would be less susceptible to Rudolfo's wiles. He would have to be cleverer than he had been in the past.

A second item which concerned him was the condition of his new employment. This time it was not a matter of gaining confidence in order to extract money. It was a matter of winning a woman's heart in order to throw it back in her face, scornfully almost, almost an act of vengeance, it would seem, but Rudolfo was a professional, and did not concern himself overly with the reasons of his employer. The money was good, extremely good, so much so that he was willing to overcome his usual prejudice against operating in Dos Rios, where he lived, for he had been assured there would be no repercussions. He had been given photographs of the mark - in the village, lying by the swimming pool at the hotel, eating in the restaurant. He sat at his work table and studied them again, memorizing every inch of her face, imagining what she might be like. Tomorrow morning he would "arrive" in Dos Rios and check in at the Hotel Internacional, whose hospitality he had never previously enjoyed, ready to assume his new role under the new name of Valentin Rodolfo, a reversal of the name of his screen

idol. He was looking forward to this new adventure, but now he must begin practicing sexual abstinence in order to build up that randyness that was so essential to attraction. Francisco would be bitchy and jealous about it, not because Rudolfo would be experiencing carnal knowledge of a woman, but knowing he would be at that hotel, eating meals prepared by that other chef, and not by him, Francisco. He had long ago come to terms with the nature of Rudolfo's profession, but he never let himself think about it.

Francisco had much hatred towards women, which was one of many reasons Rudolfo had never discussed his work with him, but once in a blue moon, when maybe Francisco had had too much wine after dinner, he would go into a tirade and hurl questions and accusations at Rudolfo, but his friend never answered, never became angry. He would only gaze at Francisco with resignation and concern, waiting for him to expend these negative energies. Afterwards they would make incredible love.

## Chapter 42

When Bobby Lee knocked on their door the next morning, George was still stumbling into his clothes and slurping his way through his first cup of room-service coffee. Rosalia had already been out for a brisk walk around the yacht harbor which was attached to the hotel. It was hot outside, but the air conditioning kept the room cool and comfortable.

“Rise and shine, lovers,” Bobby Lee said cheerily. “Have a good trip?” He sprawled out on one of the armchairs while Rosalia chattered at great length about all they had seen and done in Mexico City, and George stood in the bathroom struggling to get his hair to lie down flat. A jitney bus waited outside, complete with driver, and as soon as the bellboy got their bags stowed away in the back, Bobby Lee took them for a whirlwind tour of Kingston, Jamaica.

Everyone seemed to drive very fast here, even faster than in L.A., and they all drove on the wrong side of the road. The city itself was small but very modern, with tall hotel buildings with restaurants on top, surrounded by short, quaint edifices which the driver, in his musical English, told them were hundreds of years old. Within minutes they left the city behind, and, except for the range of purple mountains behind them, all they could see were acres and acres of blue sky and mile after mile of white beaches. Beyond the endless stretch of rolling surf was the deeper blue of the Caribbean sea, extending out to the horizon, dotted here and there with the tiny white sails of toy sailboats.

A small power launch awaited them back at the yacht harbor. The driver helped them haul their luggage along the dock and into the boat.

“Are we going to sail all the way to San Marcos in this thing?” Rosalia wanted to know, but Bobby Lee only laughed and refused to say anything. They maneuvered their way slowly out of the harbor, flanked on both sides by tall, disorderly rows of masts which wobbled slightly as they passed. The names were colorful - Gypsy Queen, Le Roi d’Yx, Bama Girl, Libertad, Jungfrau, Esperanza. There was even one named Rosalia.

“That is my boat,” she declared grandly. “Some day I will have a boat like that, with big white sails like wings, and I will fly across the ocean.”

“But then what will I do with my restaurant?” she wondered after a pause.

By this time they were out past the breakwater and heading toward the open sea. Rosalia began to get scared, thinking maybe they really were going to sail all the way to Central America in a big rowboat with a motor attached to it. What if they ran out of gas?

Far ahead, Rosalia could see a small bird standing on the water, a very strange little bird which got larger and larger and then she could see it was a plane. An airplane in the water with feet that looked like canoes. She was charmed.

“This is Paul Sykes,” Bobby Lee told them as they clambered up the rope ladder into the cockpit of the seaplane. A wiry little man with dark penetrating eyes greeted them as he gave them an assist at the top. Inside, it was very small, with room for only five people. Bobby Lee sat in the copilot’s seat. They stowed the luggage between the seats and on the one empty one.

The takeoff was exciting. They had to race for quite a few miles, skimming along the surface of the sea until they attained sufficient airspeed. A small group of flying fish preceded them for the first few hundred yards, rising up in unison, then turning and



diving back into the ocean. Then, almost miraculously, the plane lifted off. It was a sudden feeling of lightness after the choppy ride along the waves.

As soon as they were in the air and riding comfortably, Sykes passed out their new documentation, Mexican passports for Rosalia and George in the name of Rosalia and Jorge Torres, from Mexico City.

“Can I keep this?” asked Rosalia, entranced with her new identity.

“Afraid not,” said Sykes. “You’ll have to give them back afterwards. In the meantime, you’d better let me hang on to your real passports and identification. We wouldn’t want anyone in San Marcos going through your things and finding out who you really are.”

“People are going to go through my things?” said Rosalia.

“Probably not,” said Bobby. “But just in case it ever happened.”

“It’s just company policy,” said Sykes. “It’s for your own safety.”

She looked at George, who nodded reassuringly to her. She looked at their new passports again. “What if somebody try to talk to Jorge in Espanish?” she asked.

“That’s a tough one,” said Bobby. “I shoulda thought of that.” He looked at Sykes.

“Perhaps he could pass as a mute,” said Sykes. “We wouldn’t want him to be deaf as well because then he’d have to know sign language.”

“But he’d still have to understand when somebody spoke Spanish to him,” said Bobby.

“That is okay,” Rosalia interjected. “George even understand me when I just think in Espanish.”

“Of course,” said Sykes. “That’s perfect, then. You just have to tell everyone that George can’t speak at all.”

“No problem,” said Rosalia. “George don’t like to talk a lot, anyway. That okay with you, George?” she asked.

George nodded. It was a good idea.

## Chapter 43

Valentin Rodolfino regarded himself in the mirror. This time it was a mirror in the Hotel Internacional. The evening was a warm reminder of the hot day which had preceded it. The slightest of breezes entered his room through the open window. The scent of jasmine was in the air.

He regarded his suit with criticality. It was a constant problem, keeping up with the latest styles. A suit could be out of date in just a few years. He finally decided that he would pass muster.

The dining room was not busy, but Valentin told the maître de to give him a table on the terrace. The Cathcart woman liked to sit outside. He wondered when they would meet. He had been here a whole day and had caught sight of her only once, as she had set off for the village in the late morning. It was important for their first meeting to be as accidental as possible.

Wasn't that she over there, he asked himself as he followed the waiter to his table. He looked again once he was seated and the waiter had handed him the menu and the wine card. She wore a simple, white, pants-suit and a white silk blouse with lace around the collar. Her face was a full oval, and her breasts were full, but her waist seemed slim, as much as he could see from a right-frontal view. She appeared to be quietly investigating the people around her. He liked what little he could judge of her character at a distance of eighteen feet. She seemed artless in an artful way, achieving a kind of simplicity through complexity.

He judged that she herself must have already finished, as he saw the waiter clearing away the last few dishes from her table. Further investigation had to be postponed as his waiter reappeared to take his order. He asked for the rack of lamb, medium rare, pommes frites, and to bring as the last course a small green salad with vinegar and oil. As his new employer was also paying whatever incidental bills he incurred at the hotel, he decided on a bottle of Martha's Vineyard. The vintage was a great one. 1974. He wondered how it had fared over the quarter of a century in between. It would probably be the most expensive wine he had had in his life.

As soon as his waiter left, he turned his attentions once more to her. He let his eyes look off into the distance as soon as he sensed she was returning his glance. If he could feel the power of her even at this distance, how much more impressive must she be up close. He was going to enjoy this assignment.

Except for the condition. He did not like that condition. Always in the past, he had conquered the woman physically in the end, and by so conquering her had also destroyed her attractiveness to him. That was the key. That fool doctor had not completely understood the mechanism. But money was money, especially when it was big money.

Now she was looking directly at him. He tried to appear diffident, but he was used to being in charge, and it made him nervous. It also aroused him sexually. He saw her walking towards his table, a glass of wine in her hand.

"Do you mind if I join you?" she asked, improbably. Things were not supposed to happen in this way, but he found it invigorating. He recovered his senses and stood.

"Please do," he said.

"I know you will think it brazen of me," she began, but he held up his hand to stop her little speech.

"Please to sit down. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Valentin Rudolfo. But my friends call me Val."

"Hello, Val," she said. "My name is Billie."

"Billie," he echoed. "Like Billie Holliday. Are you on your holidays, Billie?"

"Sort of," she said with a smile of appreciation. "And your name reminds me of something too, but I can't quite place it. Valentin. Is that short for 'Valentino?'"

"I believe that is the Italian version," he said. "'Valentino' sounds rather florid, kind of sissified, don't you think?"

"Were you ever teased about it in school?"

"No. 'Valentin' is not a name to be teased about. But it would not have mattered. I was too good a fighter."

She appraised him with a thoughtful eye. "You certainly have the build, but you don't have cauliflower ears or bruised cheekbones."

"Cauliflower ears? I do not know what they are."

"Cauliflower is a kind of vegetable. Like a cabbage, sort of."

"I have never had this vegetable, but I think I understand your allusion."

"You speak pretty well. Where were you educated? I mean besides at home."

"The University of Mexico, in Mexico City."

"I'm impressed. What did you study?"

"Economics and Political Science. But that was many years ago. Now I just make money."

"Doing what?"

"Import export. A little trading in precious stones."

"Are you here on business?"

"Here? Oh, dear no. I am just getting away from things for a little while. Why are you here?"

She smiled. "Would you believe me if I told you I was being held prisoner here against my will?"

He did a double take. Then he returned her smile. "I see you are playing games with me. It is no business of mine why you are here, Señorita, but I am certainly glad that you have joined me. This is too beautiful an evening to waste by being alone."

"I agree with you, there," she said, tipping her wine glass back to capture the last drops.

"May I offer you some of my wine?" he asked.

"Sure. Thanks. Heitz. Martha's Vineyard. Wow. I've heard of that. Strange to be drinking a California wine on the Caribbean. You must be doing pretty well in the gemstone business." She let him fill her glass half way, then held it under her nose and then up to the candle to see the color. Their eyes met and held for just a moment. Then she raised the glass to her lips and took a sip.

"Gorgeous," she said. "It's a real knockout." She sipped some more, slowly savoring it.

"Just as you are a real knockout," he said, raising his glass to her, then returning it to his lips.

"It was a good year for both of us," she said with a strange smile, then the implication struck him.

"You mean you and the wine were both born on the same year?" he asked with genuine astonishment.

"As it so happens, yes," she said laughing. It's the god's honest truth, as my father used to say. September 12, 1974, in Glendale California."

"And it was in September that the wine was put in cask, and in September also, two years later, it was bottled. You and the wine were both brought to my table by the most miraculous serendipity."

"Serendipity? I don't think I know that word."

"It comes from the ancient name of Ceylon - Serendip. According to legend, there were three princes of Serendip, one of whom had the strange ability of discovering treasures which he was not seeking."

"It's a lovely word. I was thinking that from my point of view you could call it 'synchronicity.'"

"Now you have used a word I do not know. 'Synchronicity.' What does it mean?"

"It means when things which are naturally related and have nothing to do with each other happen at the same time, or come together by accident."

"Serendipity meets Synchronicity. I propose a toast."

They raised their glasses, smiling into each other's eyes.

"Now I know what your name reminds me of!" she exclaimed.

"What is that, dear lady?"

"It's practically Rudolph Valentino backwards. Isn't it?"

He almost spilled his wine. "I'm afraid you have guessed my secret, Billie. The truth is," he said, extemporizing rapidly, "that my grandmother had a great crush on him."

"Your grandmother named you?"

"You don't know my grandmother. Of course it is impossible because she is dead. But my grandmother was the kind of woman, even in her time, that when she said something, everybody listened."

"Just like E.F. Hutton."

"I do not know this person."

"A silly remark. So your mother let your grandmother dominate her."

"I am afraid so. My mother was more delicate, *sensible* as the French would say. She had great talents in the arts."

"You strike me as being more of an artist yourself than a business man."

"Thank you, Madame. I like to think of myself as such. I am at least an aficionado of the arts, if you will permit me to steal the word from another arena."

"Does that mean you think the arts are a lot of bull?"

He had some slight trouble not coughing up his wine. "Touché, Billie, touché!" he exclaimed when he recovered himself. "You have a fast mind."

"I hope you don't think I'm a fast woman," she said with another smile.

He narrowed his eyes at her for a moment, then got the gist of it. "You are certainly too fast for me, Billie. Here, have another glass of wine."

"You won't have any left for your meal."

"I have already had my meal," he said, looking into her eyes just as the waiter arrived with his rack of lamb.

"I'm afraid the waiter thinks otherwise."

“Would you join me, Billie. I invite you to be my guest.”

“It’ll have to be another time, Val. I couldn’t handle a second meal.”

“Then I will look forward to that occasion.”

“Don’t get up, Val. I want you to know this is the first real conversation I’ve had in three months, and I’ve really enjoyed it. Thanks again for the wine.”

He watched her retreat as the waiter asked him if he wanted more wine. He wished that she were on the menu. He would be willing to forgo the wine.

## Chapter 44

Rosalia felt tired. She had had so much excitement the last three days, and now it was a journey with nothing to see. Except for the Cayman Islands, she spied no other spot of land. They were flying low, at about five thousand feet, and except for an occasional fishing boat, there was nothing to see but ocean. It was not like the maps of the world, where one could see the distant continents. She had never realized how big an ocean could be, even a small one like this. It seemed like all afternoon they had been buzzing along, the only breeze caused by the motion of the plane, and the air was hot. She applied moisturizer to her face several times, and rubbed it on her hands and arms as well. About mid-afternoon, Bobby Lee opened a small freezer chest and produced sandwiches with bottled water and beer. There was little conversation, except for brief dialogues between Bobby Lee and Paul Sykes. Rosalia babbled nervously to George, who nodded and tried his best to come up with responses. The sun traveled towards the west from directly above until it was low on the horizon, just about the time a large section of the coast of Central America came breathtakingly into view. Slowly the coastline became more and more distinct, and the seaplane decreased altitude as they came closer, until the surface of the sea appeared to be only a few hundred feet beneath them. Rosalia could see the crests of the waves below, and the dark mountains ahead, limned by the blue sky and the lowering sun.

And then Sykes decreased the air speed considerably, and they descended to the darkening brightness of the water below, whizzing along just over the surface of the sea, then finally, suddenly, skipping along over the tops of the waves, splashdown, and the entire cabin was awash and a roar for a frightening minute, and then they were coasting serenely along, skimming across the plane of the ocean with the mountains looming up above them and the sun sinking below the top of the tropical forest beyond. Lights were winking on in the village beyond as the capes of the bay closed in around their flanks. Sykes was speaking into the ship-to-shore phone.

A boat met them about three miles out, and they clambered down awkwardly, passing the luggage from the plane to the boat. Rosalia was worried that they would lose her suitcases in the sea, but soon they were safely stowed, and the lot of them were speeding in towards the shore, the lights growing stronger and beginning to encompass them.

A taxicab awaited them at the dock, and eventually they were on their way once more, winding up the lush hills which stood above the village. Night had fallen, and the only lights they could see were the twin beacons of the headlights. Mr. Sykes had stayed behind, replaced by an hispanic driver who spoke in low, conspiratorial tones with Bobby Lee.

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Billie sat in her room, gazing out the window. She had spent so many hours here in her favorite spot, dwelling on her isolation and loneliness, but for once she had something new to think about. This improbable reversed Rudolph Valentino. She wondered if he were some kind of con man. His suit had seemed somewhat worn to her, a trifle seedy, perhaps a little out of date, but did men's styles ever go out of date? Still, anyone who

could afford a five hundred dollar bottle of wine had to have money. And she had been the one to make the advance, not he, although she had been aware of his covert appraisal, which could in itself be a psychological ploy to attract her attention.

Was he interested in her or her money? She had never been in such a situation before, but considering the much more absorbing dilemma she was already in, it hardly made a dent in her psyche.

A much more interesting question was whether she could use him, either to get a message or herself out. She had sent so many letters and post cards from the small post office in the village, but she was sure by now that they were being held out. There was only the one postmaster and his assistant, who were always so distant with her. It would be so easy for Lars to bribe them. She had tried to find someone in the village sympathetic to her, whom she might draw out, make a confidant of, but everyone seemed to know who she was, and subtly avoided her. Valentin was the first person of any intelligence and education she had met who would talk to her. If he were as wealthy as he seemed to represent himself as being, he would be immune to Lars and his money. And if he really were interested in her as a woman, he might be willing to act on her behalf.

She wondered why she had seen so little of Lars lately. Perhaps he was away on business - his kind of business. His two plug uglies were still wandering about pretending to be doing other things but always with their eyes on her. She had seen nothing of that repulsive Frau Luttmeyer for over a month, now. Perhaps Lars had sent her away, seeing that she was no longer necessary, now that Billie was safely imprisoned here, and didn't need to be doped up all the time. Even Doctor Moritz had reduced his visits to a brief weekly checkup. What an odd man he was. She had asked some of the locals a few discreet questions about him and discovered that he was considered an important man in the community. She wondered how that could be; he seemed so creepy and obnoxious.

She must encourage further acquaintance with this Mr. Valentin Rodolfo, to the extent of boldly approaching him again herself if he made no further move.

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The car had been winding its way for about fifteen minutes before it came to a stop. Rosalia could see only a garage door spotlighted by the headlamps of the car. They all quietly piled out, Bobby Lee motioning them to silence as he helped Rosalia. She heard the knocking on a door, then a shaft of light fell upon them as the door swung open.

They gathered in the living room of the large, spacious house. Sykes was there, already, and two other men were with him. There were no introductions. Rosalia and George sat yawning on the sofa, while Bobby Lee sprawled out on an armchair. The other three men, Sykes and the two new ones, sat in chairs opposite them. Rosalia looked around at the strange decorations on the walls. They looked like antique weaponry, covered with the patina of tarnish and verdigris. The room felt unused, as if its owners had been gone a long time.

Finally Sykes cleared his throat and began talking.

"Just a few remarks before we begin this mission. First, I cannot stress too much the need for absolute secrecy. We are working outside the jurisdiction and knowledge of

the United States Government and its agencies. As such, we are American nationals operating on our own, in a country we have entered illegally, holding false passports. Nobody will come to our aid if we are arrested for improprieties. Do you all understand?" At this point, he was clearly directing his remarks to Rosalia, George, and Bobby Lee.

The three of them nodded. Sykes continued.

"Our purpose here is to accomplish one thing only - to ascertain that one Wilma Cathcart is indeed here, to discover whether she is here under constraint, and if she is, to assist in her escape. We are not here to arrest her abductors. We do not have a warrant for that, and the evidence has yet to be accumulated. We hope that a freed Miss Cathcart will assist us in making a case against her captors, and perhaps at a later date we can return to bring them to justice. But not now."

He paused, looking at the three of them intently. Then he went on.

"We do not know to what extent Miss Cathcart's alleged kidnappers have maneuvered themselves into the local power structure, nor how many individuals we are up against. It is not appropriate for us to simply try to rush Miss Cathcart out of here before we have had a chance to assess the situation properly. Okay? Nobody does any showboating, and all reconnaissance missions must first be cleared with me. Is that clear?"

There was another brief pause while everyone nodded again.

"Finally," he said, looking directly at George and Rosalia, "you two are on your honeymoon. You must look like it. Mr. Acres here will direct your activities, and they will be limited to getting certain basic information. Is Miss Cathcart here under duress? If so, which people are responsible for keeping her here? How is she controlled? Is she watched all the time? Does she have freedom of movement? This is the kind of information we need before we can plan any sensible action. And while you are collecting this information, you must maintain your own personal safety. Do you understand?"

He looked at them a moment longer. Then he seemed to come to a decision.

"Good. Mrs. Anderson - you and your husband will be driven from here to the Las Ondas Hotel. It is simple, but there are no cockroaches and the food is good. Tomorrow morning you should contact your sister, who has been expecting you. Do not do anything until Mr. Acres tells you to."

Sykes nodded, then rose to his feet.

"If I do not see you until the end of this mission, all the best of luck." He held out his hand, and grasped each of theirs in turn, as they arose and filed out the way they had come in. The car was still waiting outside in the darkness with their luggage. Rosalia fell asleep the moment she was inside the car.



## Chapter 45

"Do you mind if I join you?" the voice said behind her. She turned and there was Valentin. He was wearing more casual clothes this time, a simple cloth coat and a sport shirt, socks and sandals. He also looked a little older under the harsh glare of the relentless sun, with a web of fine lines under his eyes, a few permanent wrinkles in his forehead. He was nevertheless quite good looking, in a rugged sort of way, like a man who has been through it all and somehow survived.

"Of course," she said. "I'm just going for my morning walk, down to the waterfront, and along the Via de la Playa."

"It sounds delightful to me. Lead and I shall follow."

"I'm not that liberated. You can lead if you want."

He took her arm, and somehow it seemed natural, so she accepted it. She walked in silence at first, and he did not interrupt. She enjoyed the progression of the houses. The ones higher up, she imagined, were those of the very well-to-do, retired people from Europe and both Americas, desirous of rock-bottom taxes and, for a few, the guarantee of a policy of non-extradition in the areas of economic and business fraud. Lower down one found the homes of the local property owners and businessmen. At the very bottom, she decided, were the small homes of the workers - the waiters and waitresses in the restaurants, the maids in the hotels, the store clerks, the fisherman, and the Creoles who worked the government plantations. She told Valentin her analysis of the inhabitants of the various classes as they made their way slowly down the hill.

"I think you are quite right, Billie. You seem to understand the world well. Are you critical of it? What do you think about tax shelters for the rich, for example?"

"I'm against them in principle," she told him, "but what can I do about them?"

"You are quite right there. But why are you against them?"

"Just a sense of basic fairness. A belief in the equality of people."

"But they are not equal in reality, are they?"

"They are as simple human beings, in the sense that we should all be treated equally, at least in a social way."

"Socially, yes. I must agree with you there, and I think modern society has practically attained that ideal, hasn't it?"

"It pretends to, but I don't really think it has. There's too much egotism in the world. Rich people think they deserve being rich, that other people don't deserve the same rights, nor the same respect."

"Perhaps you are right. There is a lot of pretense in the world. It seems also that you are a little ashamed of being rich."

"But I'm not, really. Maybe compared to the poor, but I'm really just middle class."

"And staying at one of the most exclusive hotels in Central America?"

"But I'm not paying the bills."

"You have a rich boy friend who pays them, perhaps."

"I have no boy friend here."

By this time, they had reached the Via de la Playa, which began at the Yacht Harbor. There seemed to be more boats than usual, but this was, of course, the tourist season, and the only way tourists could get here was by sea. There was a small airport inland, but no international flights landed there. No railroad connected San Marcos with

the rest of Central America, no bus navigated the dirt roads between Dos Rios and the small villages to the West. Only small coastal ships plied their way from port to port, carrying private passengers, and once a week a small passenger ship arrived from Havana, carrying international travelers.

"Which of these boats did you come in on?" she asked.

"None of them," he responded. "I arrived by passenger boat from Panama, after a plane from Cartagena."

"What were you doing there?"

"Buying emeralds."

"It must be a fascinating business."

"It's a business like any other. Supply and demand. The only thing I do not like about it is the constant travel. I seldom have much of a life of my own. I eat the best meals, but at a table by myself."

"And you sleep in the best beds," she said with a grin.

He laughed. "You see through all my innuendos. But it is true, as well. If I cannot have a fine bottle of wine, I would rather have none at all."

"Lucky you're rich. You can always afford a fine bottle."

"Even if one has money, fine bottles, like fine women, are not easy to find. That 1974 Heitz we shared last night was the last one in the hotel cellar."

"I really enjoyed last night."

"And I as well," he told her. "You are staying here long?"

"That depends. How about you?"

"A week, two. I am not sure. I am waiting for a call from Amsterdam."

"More emeralds?"

"Diamonds. Which I will get in trade for the emeralds."

The Café Oskar was full of tourists. They sat in the back drinking wine coolers, getting tipsy."

"Now I know why they're called 'waiters,'" she told him.

"And why is that?"

"Because you have to wait for them."

After swordfish served in a white wine sauce, they took the long uphill trail that skirted the town. Once, when they stopped under a Jacaranda tree, she let him kiss her. It was a long, quiet, sensitive kiss, and when she opened her eyes for a brief moment she saw that his were still closed. It was her first kiss in over three months, and she was somewhat breathless afterwards. She was surprised that she felt no twinge of guilt about Bobby Lee. Still, it was only a kiss. Neither of them said anything for the rest of the walk. They just held hands, and when their glances crossed they did not look away immediately.

"May I see you this evening?" he asked her when they arrived back at the hotel.

"I'll have to check my busy schedule," she kidded.

"How about dinner?"

She nodded yes.

"Eight?"

She said yes with her eyes.

He watched her walk away from him, a slight sway of hips, head held imperiously high, but with just a hint of defenselessness. His testicles twitched. If he had had a mustache, he would have twirled it.

## Chapter 46

Las Ondas was a quiet little hotel with only eight rooms. Like the rest of the town, it was constructed of concrete, with a tile roof. Although there was no air conditioning, it was cooler inside.

One of the first things that Rosalia had done, with her sister's help, had been to make George look more like an Hispanic. As soon as they had him dressed appropriately, Rosalia undertook the more difficult task of making his skin darker. With his extremely pale complexion, he stood out in any crowd, and since he was taller than average he stood out anyway.

"I bought this at the drug store before we left L.A.," she told him, hauling out a large bottle of Man Tan.

"Do you think that's safe?" asked George.

"Safer than a bullet in the back of your head," she said, forcing him to submit to the liberal amounts she swathed over his face, neck, arms and hands. She inspected her work when she was done.

"You never will look like a latino, George, but is the bes' I can do."

She laughed when he put on his straw hat, and when her sister came into the room she laughed as well. George could see they laughed with love in their hearts, so he was not offended. He had no sense of humor, anyway. Life was too tragic to laugh at.

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Something strange was going on. Big Bill and Sly were both mystified, but Sly was shy about revealing his own thoughts, especially when it came to topics like what his bosses were doing. Until he met Big Bill in cell block three at Sing Sing, he had seldom spoken his mind to others. He tried to keep his nose clean and his speculations to himself. Big Bill, on the other hand, had much more difficulty formulating theories and working hypotheses, and had grown to depend on Sly's wits when it came to hard mental labor. Sometimes it entailed considerable badgering to get Sly to open up.

"But why is the boss sittin' out in a ship out in the ocean beyond where anybody can see him when he could be back here, lappin' up luxury?" he asked for the umpteenth time.

"Our's not to reason why . . ." Sly began for the umpteenth time.

"But to do or die," said Big Bill impatiently. Yeah, yeah, I know. But why is he doin it? It drives me bananas. Maybe if we was back stateside it wouldn't maybe bother me, but sittin' here lappin' up luxury like I said in the middle of nowheresville I got nothin' else to think about. There ain't no TV except for those damn Mexican movies, and there ain't no pool except snooker." He spoke the word 'snooker' sneeringly and with great derision. "And there ain't no Chinese food or Italian food. There ain't no hot dogs or hamburgers. Nor movies. Nor porn shows. Even the rock music sounds like Mexican love songs. No shit."

He would have gone on had Sly not shut him up. But five minutes later he was asking the same question. They were standing in front of a stall in the market place trying to look inconspicuous while Billie and her new boyfriend wandered through it.

"So why do we have to talk to him on the phone every afternoon at three and tell him what's going on with Billie and this new fancy guy? Why don't he just come back and punch the guy in the nose? It don't make sense."

"You're just getting tired of this place, Big. You never used to ask why the boss did things."

"But why?"

"How the fuck do I know, Big? The boss doesn't confide in me. Look how tricky he was with Billie's wedding. If I hadn't've read the papers, I wouldn't've known what the hell was going on. He never told me squat. But look how complicated that was! They had the bomb squad and a woman challenging the wedding and a getaway guy waiting in a hot car outside. Plus they bumped off the preacher."

"And that's another thing," Big Bill said aggrievedly. "Except for bumping off the preacher, all those things was my ideas. *My* ideas. I was the one mentioned 'em to the doc and he practicky cut me dead. You was there. An' then he goes ahead and puts all three of my ideas together and pulls the job off. An' he gets all the credit. Nothin' for me. No extra little cash bonus, not even an extra pat on the back. Just dumb Bill alla time. Big dumb Bill."

"I gotta admit you're right for once, Big," said Sly, suddenly lowering his voice because, to his surprise and embarrassment, there were Billie and her friend slowly walking right by them. Big Bill had the sense to avert his face as they passed. Billie might recognize him.

"Boy, that was a close one," said Big Bill.

"I think she knows we're following her by now, Big," said Sly, moving out into the slight tangle of tourists that had appeared out of nowhere. "Come on. You need the exercise."

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Valentin, né Rudolfo, was waiting for her when she appeared. She stood for a moment at the exit door from the salon, faintly silhouetted by the dusky glow from inside. She appeared to be clad in a thin dress which hung to mid-calf, and as she approached with that faint sway in her hips the stationary spotlight caught her for a moment, like a distant star winking into existence, her white dress and low white bodice suddenly reflecting the thin cone of light, then vanishing again.

"Good evening, Val." She sat as he stood.

He held his hand out to grasp hers for a moment. "It's good to see you again, Billie. I enjoyed watching your entrance."

"I was afraid you were going to say it was entrancing."

"Oof. Are you going to punish me all evening?"

"No, I'll be good. So what have you accomplished since I left you four hours ago?"

"Fortunately I am not driven by the American passion for accomplishment. But I do try to keep to a regimen. I napped for a while, then did a little yoga. Then I showered and dressed. But all the while I thought of you."

The waiter came to take their orders. Valentin chose the sole meunière, reasoning that it could never be made better than good, so he could report more truthfully to Francisco on the plebian abilities of the "other chef" in Dos Rios.

"I'll take the same," said Billie, laying her menu down. "How about a nice wine."

"Yes," said Valentin. "A bottle of the 1989 Meursault, s'il vous plaît."

"I am terribly sorry, sir, but we are out of that particular vintage. How about the 1991?"

"It's amazing you are out of it already."

"I'm afraid it was quite popular with some of the other customers as well. Would the 1991' suffice?"

"You don't have any single bottles not on the menu?"

"We do have an 1986 Meursault. But it is very expensive, and a trifle old. I cannot vouch for its excellence."

"We'll take it."

To Billie, the meal went by like a dream. There was no thought of what to say, and the conversation was artless and fun. The food had much to do with it. Even Valentin was forced to admit the simple excellence of the meunière. There was something subtle in the spicing that Valentin could not identify. Poor Francisco.

## Chapter 47

George and Rosalia rose at ten in the morning. Las Ondas did not serve food until noon, so they made do with some instant coffee and water heated with an immersion coil that the hotel had provided them with. Consuela had told Bobby Lee about Billie's eleven o'clock walk, and he had asked them to help by posting themselves along her route. If she were alone, George would approach her and ask her a question which Bobby Lee had prepared for him. If her responses were right, George would give her further information. Bobby Lee was going to be on the same route, only at an earlier stage. They were there only to back him up, in case something went wrong.

At ten forty five they were stationed at the corner of Avenida del Rey and Paseo del Mar. A large walled villa stood behind them, anonymous to all outsiders. Across the street was another large home, landscaped and terraced. The other two corners were groves of trees, with houses hiding behind them. Rosa had brought some burritos in case they got hungry. They had maybe a half hour to wait. Billie was expected to walk past about eleven fifteen at the latest.

They listened to the birds and the insects, but nobody came by. A large white dog stopped and kept them company for about fifteen minutes, hoping to score one of the burritos, then took off. Finally, at eleven thirty, they heard the sound of voices. To their surprise, it sounded like English being spoken. Then two men walked by, one fat, the other skinny. George recognized them immediately and looked away. They slowed down as they passed, looking intently at George and Rosalia standing there. For just a brief moment George's heart almost stopped. Then they looked away and continued on down the hill. George was clutching Rosalia's hand almost painfully. He told Rosalia who the two men were. At noon they wandered back up the hill to where Bobby Lee was stationed. George told him about Sly and Big Bill and they walked back to Bobby's place to talk things over.

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Sly and Big Bill arose at their usual time, nine thirty in the morning. At ten they shuffled down for a leisurely breakfast in the hotel dining room. It was the only place in town where you could get bacon and eggs and toast. Billie usually started on her walk around eleven. At ten forty five, they sauntered down to the veranda to keep an eye out for her when she showed. They had done this now for the last three months. On a few occasions, she had not appeared, rising only later in the day, but otherwise she had been almost faultless in her timing, appearing at eleven or thereabouts almost without exception.

So it was of considerable surprise to Sly and his large companion when Billie failed to appear. Sly returned to her room and found the maid making up the bed. He asked her where madame had gone, and she said she only knew that madame had left her room before ten. Sly hurried back to Big Bill and gave him the bad news. They could think of only one possibility - she must have taken her walk at an earlier time. They hurried down the route that she usually took.

Normally they didn't encounter anybody on the path that led to town. Mainly that had to do with a lack of children in San Marcos. Nearly everybody was old or retired.

But just below the top of the trail, they encountered a tall thin, American-looking guy with cowboy boots who looked at them oddly. Then when they arrived at Avenida del Rei, a local native couple were standing there, apparently waiting for somebody. The man was tall and skinny and the woman was short and fat. Big Bill almost laughed at them, they looked so incongruous. There was something familiar about the man, however, but Big Bill could make nothing out of it.

They hurried on down the trail, keeping an eye out for Billie, quickly retracing her usual route, starting off at the yacht harbor, then continuing along the Via de la Playa past the farmer's market and on to Oskar's Café. But no Billie. No Billie anywhere. They were panic stricken. What would they say to the boss on the afternoon phone call? That they had lost Billie? What would that look like? They took a cab back to the hotel on the off chance she might have gotten back early, but her room was still empty, and she was nowhere on the premises.

It was not until later, sitting in their room waiting for the call from Lars, that Big Bill brought up something that had been rattling around in his unconscious.

"Remember them two funny-lookin' Mexicans we saw when we was lookin' for Billie - the tall skinny guy and the short fat broad?"

"Yeah," said Sly laconically, depressed about having to tell the boss about their latest peccadillo.

"I swear the guy looked just like George."

"I think this job is getting to you, Big. The guy was a local."

"I sure would like to get my mitts on him."

"Who, George?"

"Yeah. The rat filched all my money."

"But you got it back. In fact, you lied about it and told Lars it was fifty-two hundred, so you made out like a bandit."

"Does George know I got it back?"

"I guess not. What's that got to do with it?"

"He still stole it, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

"Then he's gotta pay."



## Chapter 48

Valentin was waiting for her in front of the hotel when she stepped out onto the porch. The birds were chirping and the sun was only a quarter-way up the sky. He was standing next to what looked like an army jeep.

"It's been a long time since I've been up this early," she said. "What kind of car is that?"

"A U.S. Army reconnaissance vehicle from the seventies," he told her. "It belongs to the hotel."

"How in the world did it get here?"

"Somoza probably bought it from Detroit. Who knows how many times it may have changed hands."

Billie's memory dredged up news items about Nicaraguan Contras and Sandinistas, but she was not sure who was who, so she shut up."

"That was a long time ago," she said.

"Not as far as people here are concerned. It might've been yesterday. Get in." He hopped into the driver's seat.

"Where are we going?"

"I told you it would be a secret."

"Will it be dangerous?"

"If it were, I wouldn't take you."

She clambered in. "No seat belts," she said with a grin.

"An American insanity," he responded, setting off down the dirt road which meandered into the forest behind the hotel.

Soon, they found themselves in a different world from the one they had come from. The vegetation was lush, and dozens of insects were visible on every leaf. Fallen trees lay here and there, rotten with mildew and damp, covered with molds and funguses. They were surrounded by the forest now, intruders in an alien world.

"Any wild animals here?" she asked.

"Besides you? A few tigers perhaps. Some mountain lions as well, plus monkeys, anteaters and snakes. But they will not bother us. Unless we run out of gas."

"Is that possible?"

"I had them fill the tank, and we have extra cans of gas. No, that is not possible. I also have a pistol." He patted the holster on his side.

Soon the hotel and its memories were far behind. Billie felt a strange sense of liberation from her captivity. The tropical rain forest around them was a world of its own.

By ten o'clock they had reached the first of the government farms. Yams and potatoes and melons were the main crops, but there were also wheat and corn and barley. Stands of sugar cane covered the bottom lands. All the workers were blacks. The men were well-muscled, shiny with sweat, swinging machetes. The women were bundled up in colorful cotton prints, doing the crop picking. They all wore wide-brimmed straw hats to protect themselves from the sizzling sun. Small huddles of clapboard houses were visible here and there, tucked up almost out of sight. It reminded her of similar scenes in Virginia and Alabama. She said as much to Valentin.

"They are Creoles here, and speak a kind of English patois, derived from their slave ancestors in the United States," Valentin told her.

"I'd love to hear them," said Billie.

"It would not be socially appropriate to approach them," said Valentin. "They might resent it."

"What a pity," said Billie.

"When we are all equal," said Valentin, "then there will be no more workers, no more waiters, no clerks, no civil servants. Society as we know it will collapse. We will all sit around and watch television reruns."

"You really think so?"

"How else will things happen? People need motivation. If there is no social mountain to climb, who will bother to change his circumstances. If there is no money to be earned, or credit to be accumulated, who will bother with accomplishment?"

"Some, certainly."

"Oh, a few, to be sure. But not enough to make a difference. The world will be boring."

"So you think that injustice is necessary in order to have variety in life?"

"I think that is what I have been saying, in essence."

At noon they came to a small natural lake. He stopped the vehicle and looked around them.

"This looks like a good place for a picnic. What do you think?"

She thought it was ideal. A small stream trickled close by, vanishing into a forest of reeds which led down to the lake. A large, flat rock lay close to them, surrounded by twisting vines and lush vegetation. Valentin removed a large picnic hamper from the back of the vehicle and carried it to the rock. He opened it and took out a tablecloth which he spread out over the flat stone surface. She sat while Valentin, on his knees, took the food out of the basket and spread them before her - French paté, German sausage, some ripening cheese produced locally, a box of crackers, fresh fruit. A bottle of nouveau Beaujolais was last. He uncorked it and poured it into plastic wineglasses.

"To us," he proposed, lifting his glass in salute.

"To us," she responded, sipping the wine and enjoying its fruitiness.

After a long, languid lunch, they lay close together on the rock, staring up at an impossibly blue sky. The air was close and hot, and they could hear the buzzing of insects. An extremely large ant was carrying off a piece of cheese.

Afterwards, he picked up the remnants of the lunch, leaving the cheese and paté to the ants, while she continued to lie there, wishing he were not in such a hurry. He packed everything back up to the vehicle, then returned to the rock, standing there above her, looking down into her half-closed eyes. She felt like a cat, lazy, lying on her back, asking him to pet her tummy. She reached up for him so she could pull him down to her, but he stood, aloof, resisting.

"The rock is very hard," he said, "and we must leave if we are to get back by dark."

They drove back in silence. Once they passed a small group of chattering monkeys, but otherwise no sound broke the impenetrable tangle of forest which engulfed them. He reached out for her hand, and held it for a long period. Then he removed it again as they encountered a stretch of difficult terrain, shifting the gears frequently to get over sudden rises.

The sun had long set before they arrived back at the hotel. The headlamps were dim candles against the profound darkness which surrounded them, and they drove in silent intimacy. The lights of the terrace were on, and the restaurant was almost ready to close. The grill had been turned off, but they talked the waiter into serving them soup and salad. She was tired and passionate both. She yearned for the release of sexual intimacy, but she wanted a hot bath first.

“Give me an hour,” she said to him. “Then come to my room.”

He helped her down, then gave her a long, lingering kiss.

“An hour,” he said huskily.

His knock came right on the dot. She went to the door, slipped the deadbolt, and let him in. He held her close and kissed her. She led him to the bed, and he wanted her more than anything he could imagine. He held her close, trying furiously to be logical. It was a dilemma. How could he rouse her and avoid intercourse? How could he drop her if she didn’t succumb to him? She wanted him, he knew that, and he wanted her. He decided to break the rules; he hadn’t cared for them from the start. He kissed her passionately, her lips, her breasts, he was ready to enter her, and then, at the last minute, horrible of all horrors, he went limp.

“My darling,” she said to him, but he could not make himself erect. He cursed himself, he railed at the universe, but it was no use. He lay on his side and hoped that through relaxation he would recover himself, but he didn’t. He hated it. He wanted her, but he could not possess her. He raised himself up from the bed, and she lay there, silently begging him not to leave her, but he did, rising to an ignoble position, the worst in his life, and looked down at her looking back up at him. He could not fathom what was in her eyes. He could not bear what he feared he might find there.

He fled. He grabbed his clothes and stumbled out the door. He thought for a moment that someone was standing there, in the hallway, but it was probably his imagination. It took him an eon to find his room, and he banged the door open and locked it behind him. He lay on the bed and relaxed, allowing his terrors to descend upon him. It was like being on a roller coaster, when it begins its first rapid downward descent, but there was no excitement this time, just a free fall into oblivion. He went into a kind of sleep, but could not entirely lose consciousness, could not find surcease. Over and over, he thought about how much he loved Billie, and how humiliated he was that he could not satisfy her, that he could not express his love for her. It destroyed him. Always before, he had dumped the woman. What could he do this time? Admit to her his duplicity? Come clean for once, and reveal himself? It appealed to him, but he could not do it; he would lose too much face. He tried to make his mind a blank, but it was futile. He shifted from one side of the bed to the other, but it was no use. God was not going to let him off. Good old God, the motherfucker.

He rose in the early hours, collecting his more important possessions in one suitcase, and left the hotel, sneaking out like a cat burglar. He thought about Billie, and he thought about Francisco, and he did not know who he was. He stumped down the trail towards the village, towards his house, his home which he shared with his lifetime friend, Francisco. But he sorely missed Billie, her quiet wit and her elegant body. He wanted her so much, but he could not have her.

For the first time in his life he saw himself and his history in true perspective. He saw how much he had never given up the ideal of the woman. Francisco was his refuge, but that was all. A refuge. His entire life was a pretense, a shambles. His so-called profession was nothing but an attempt to realize his true potentialities. He had never left his beginnings. Never again would Francisco be sufficient, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was stuck, and he hated it.

## Chapter 49

Bobby Lee was feeling frustrated. He had not seen Billie for three months plus, and he had been here for two whole days and still not seen her. He had to find out how things were between them. He determined to visit the hotel tonight and hoped to find her in her room. He returned to his own miserable lodgings to try to talk himself into some kind of optimism. His girl was still locked up, and he still hadn't seen her. On top of it all, Sykes had told him that Billie was dating some foreign guy, different from the one that supposedly had her under lock and key. Maybe Billie had given up on him; maybe she had believed that red-headed liar that had ruined their marriage. Maybe she didn't want to be rescued. He could end up looking like a damn fool. He could imagine Captain Harding saying I told you so. It was depressing.

So, in the early hours of the morning, at the same time that Rudolfo was making his way to Billie's room, Bobby Lee set out along the path to the hotel. The moon was full and the warm night was full of omens. Wild shrieks and cawings punctuated the silence; somewhere a victim screamed. The stones crunched loudly under his feet, traitors to his presence. He navigated by moonlight. When the moon was obscured, he could see the stars. Now and then, with the motion of his stride, the lights from a house would swing into view, blinding him for a second or two, but he would stumble forward, determined to see things through to the end.

Some lights were still on at the hotel, but the lounge had closed. Bobby summoned up what he could remember from what Consuela had told him about the ground plan. There was little to no crime in San Marcos, and doors were often left unlocked. He stepped up onto the porch, listening to the boards creak slightly under his feet. Inside the lobby, there was no one on duty at the desk. He went up the carpeted staircase two steps at a time. Her room was on the first floor, at the end of the hall. Everyone appeared to be sleeping. There was no light to be seen around the cracks in any of the doors. He tiptoed to the end. This was her room. He peered closely at the room number in the dim hall light to be absolutely sure. He was just about to tap lightly on the door when he heard the sound of voices from inside. He stepped back against the opposite wall, wondering what to do when suddenly the door burst open and the dark figure of a man emerged, pulling the door shut quietly, and hurrying down the hallway with his back to Bobby. He was undressed, and was carrying his clothes.

Bobby was in a quandary. This must be the suitor he had been told about. The affair had clearly progressed beyond any initial stages. He felt angry, hurt, betrayed and confused. He had come here from half a continent away, only to find his beloved fresh from the arms of another. He stepped forward to tap on the door once more, but stayed his hand at the last moment. He could not bear to see her now, not with the stink of a rival assailing his nostrils. He turned and walked slowly down the hallway, no longer concerned about secrecy. He left the hotel behind him and trudged down the path to the village, lost and defeated.

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Billie lay in a kind of agony after Valentin left. The entire day had led up to this moment, had built up to this passion, and now he did not want her. Why? She already

had a headache from thinking about it, but she could not escape from reliving her experience again and again. She was more unhappy than when she had been dragged away from her marriage to Bobby, because at least then it had not been her doing.

She tossed and turned for hours, but sleep would not come to her rescue. At last she got out of bed and put on her robe. She could not bear it any longer. She would master her shame and go to him.

His door was dark, and there was no response to her knock. She tried the door and it was unlocked. It swung open to an empty room and an unmade bed whose twisted sheets reflected her own inner turmoil. The small bathroom showed only the moonlight pouring through, spilling onto the white tiles. He had gone. She went back to the bedroom wall switch and turned on the lights. The dresser drawers were empty. She opened the armoire. Two of his suits were still hanging from the rod, and an empty valise lay on the bottom, the only proofs that he had ever been in this room or in her life. She turned off the light and closed the door behind her. Where could he have gone?

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Bobby Lee returned to his room like a lost warrior returning to base, fighting a war he no longer believed in. He lay on his bed without undressing, tossing about in his mind the question of whether he should leave or stay. He felt emotionally betrayed, yet he had conscripted help from so many others in this rescue operation, that he couldn't just quit. He decided to approach her once more, but this time in the daylight.

He hadn't contacted Sykes since the arrival of George and Rosalia two days ago, but he would have to defer it for now, otherwise Sykes would tell him to stay away from the hotel, and he couldn't bear to leave his emotional situation unresolved. He had to know what was going on with Billie.

He did his best to grab some shut-eye while he had a chance. Now that he had decided what he was going to do, it made it a little easier to doze off for a few hours. He set his alarm for nine, and curled up on top of his bed, letting his mind go blank, and then it seemed the next minute the damned thing was ringing and he turned it off in his sleep, thinking it was all in a dream.

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It was still dark when Rudolfo arrived at his small house. He did not enter through the shop in front because he did not want to disturb Francisco. He slipped into the front room without turning on the lights, feeling his way towards the sofa. He wanted to be alone for a while so he could think things out.

The first thing on his mind was his contract with Moritz. He had to try to salvage what he could. The agreement had been for him to ensnare Billie's affections without consummating them, and he had certainly accomplished that. He was supposed to drop her at the point that she desired him. There was no doubt that he had fulfilled that contract to the letter. He would call Moritz later in the morning to tell him that the job had been done. Then he would call the hotel and tell them he was checking out. He could send a man by later to pick up the few items he had left behind. To return to the hotel was unthinkable. To run into her by accident would be agony.

## Chapter 50

Billie awoke at dawn. It was already warm. Tiny beads of perspiration formed on those parts of her still covered by the quilt that lay twisted across her bare body. She glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It was about six twenty. After tossing and turning half the night, she had finally fallen into a dreamless sleep for several hours, and for just a moment she savored the release from concern and depression. Then the moment passed, and the memories of her last consciousness came flooding in to destroy her tranquillity. She had to find out who she was, and that seemed to have something to do with relationship. If she had been a career woman, it would have been a job that she centered her life around. Bobby Lee had been her center for the last year, if you included her first three months here, during which she had dreamed of escaping and returning to him, but Val had put an end to that. She was adrift in an unknown ocean.

When the dining room opened at eight, she ordered soft-boiled eggs and toast with orange marmalade and tea. Sitting there, she suddenly realized she hadn't seen Lars now for almost a week. Strange that he should disappear just when Valentin came on the scene. If Lars had been here, his presence might have interfered with their brief romance.

After breakfast she wandered vaguely about the hotel, thinking about how a wonderful day had turned into a nightmare. The jeep was still parked behind the hotel, a proof that yesterday had happened. She felt restless, and somehow found her feet leading her down the path to the town.

She wandered down to the yacht harbor, and recalled him telling her he had not come to San Marcos by any boat in the marina. She stopped at the tourist information bureau and discovered that no passenger ship had left in the last twenty four hours. She checked with the four hotels in the town, and was told that, except for a newly-married couple from Mexico City, no new guests had checked in in the last two days. Where could he have gone?

She remembered the day he and she had wandered around town, visiting the local market place, looking at the shops. She had had the feeling that he knew a lot more about the town than a casual tourist would. She retraced the route they had followed together, but many of the shops were still closed. She sat on the wharf, watching the morning fishermen until ten, then set out on the town once more. She invented a story about a local man she had met but not learned the name of, and described Valentin. At the first five shops she got negative results, eyes impassive, heads shaking no, but the woman behind the counter at a clothing shop said her description seemed to match one of the two owners of La Caja Roja, a small crafts store two blocks away.

"Do you know the name of this owner, Señorita?"

"Rudolfo. Let me see. Yes. Rudolfo Ortega, I believe he is called, Señorita. He has been here many years now, but he is gone much of the time. His friend, Francisco runs the store. He can tell you where you might find Rudolfo."

Rudolfo. She felt a shiver along her spine. She remembered her remark about Valentin's name sounding like Rudolph Valentino backwards.

"Muchas Gracias."

"De nada."

It seemed to take an eternity to walk the two short blocks. There it was, a small sign with letters styled like Mayan hieroglyphics. La Caja Roja. The Red Box. Bells tinkled as she pushed the front door open. The reason for the name was evident. Carved boxes of all kinds greeted the eye, as well as other art objects. A slim young man entered from the back room. He was handsome in a pretty way, with long black hair tied back in a pony tail, dressed in jeans with a silk sport shirt open at the neck.

“Buenos dias, ¿en qué puedo servirle?”

“No hablo Español. ¿Podemos hablar Ingles?” she asked.

“Yes, madam. What may I do for you?”

“I would like very much to speak with Rudolfo.”

“I am very sorry, but he is not in. Perhaps he will return soon. I cannot say exactly.”

“Would you mind if I waited.”

“This is something personal?”

“Perhaps I could sit down. I have been walking all morning and I am rather tired.”

He looked dubious. “Perhaps madam could come back again in an hour or so.”

She looked through the door by which he had entered. She could see a sofa and some overstuffed chairs.

“Perhaps I could sit in one of those? She walked into the room beyond. The clerk was right behind her.

“Please, madam. This is private, not for customers.”

“I am not a customer.” She lowered herself into an armchair. The man was quite distressed, but clearly he did not know what to do. She looked around herself.

“This is a very attractive room. Did you do the decoration?”

“Yes, madam. But you cannot stay here.”

“You said that Rudolfo will be back soon.”

“But I am not certain exactly when. If someone comes in the shop, I cannot stay to entertain you.”

“Please don’t worry about entertaining me. I won’t be any trouble.”

“Perhaps if you could give me some idea why you are here?”

“I just wanted to see Rudolfo one last time. He had to leave suddenly and I had no chance to say goodbye.”

“Madam is here just to say goodbye?”

She thought about it for a moment. “Yes,” she said. “It wasn’t clear to me before, but that’s exactly why I am here. To say goodbye.”

“Perhaps Madam is unaware of it, but this is also my home. I have something to say about who enters it.”

“Then you will accept my apology and be good enough to allow me to wait in the shop.” She made as if to get up, but he held his hand out to stop her.

“No. That would not be civilized. Please to remain. Perhaps we should introduce ourselves.”

“I’m Billie,” she said.

“And I am Francisco.”

She offered her hand, and he pressed it.

“Madam is here on holidays?”

She nodded. No point in confusing the issue with her abduction and captivity.



"May I offer Madam some tea?"

"Tea? Yes, tea would be nice." She sensed he did not want her to refuse.

He slipped into the next room. She sat, watching his exit. He seemed to move like a dancer. She was glad of his presence. It kept her mind off Rudolfo and what she would say to him.

It was several minutes before Francisco returned. His concern about leaving the shop untended appeared to have been forgotten. She arose and inspected the room. The paintings on the walls were originals. She studied them more carefully. There was a raw strength in them, in the vivid colors that assailed her eye. She heard the sounds of Francisco reentering, and returned to her chair. He removed items from the tray he had just carried in and placed them on the small table next to her, a teapot and two cups, a small plate with some assorted pastries.

"How elegant," she exclaimed. "What a beautiful tea service."

"I got them in Jamaica," he explained.

"And you're also the pastry chef?" she asked, trying to be polite.

"Yes, Madam. I pride myself on my culinary abilities."

He seemed friendlier to this subject of conversation, and with a little encouragement on her part, quite forgot his earlier responses. He spoke at length about the dishes he liked most to prepare, and some of his trade secrets, ways to present vegetables and fruits.

"Who's lucky enough to sample your creations?" she asked him, trying to flatter him with questions.

"Only Rudolfo. I cook only for him and for me, and sometimes close friends."

She remembered Valentin's passion for food. And wine.

"Do you also have a wine cellar?" she asked.

He seemed surprised, then his face cleared and a small frown appeared.

"Rudolfo has told you."

"No. It was just a guess. He told me nothing about his private life."

"It was a good guess. Our cellar is small, but it has an excellent selection. It is very difficult to get European wines here, so we must make an occasional trip to Jamaica for it." A customer arrived to interrupt his discourse, and her thoughts returned to why she was here, sitting in this chair, carrying on this amicable conversation, while at any moment, Rudolfo, or Valentin or whoever he was, would come marching in here to find her usurping his private living room, holding a pleasant conversation with his male lover.

On top of all of this there were her own feelings, her own confusion. She had told Francisco she just wanted to say goodbye, but how true was that?

She had no further time for conjectures. The front door opened and he appeared before her. He looked at her in stunned surprise.

"You are here!" he exclaimed. He shut the door behind him and just stood there, looking at her with narrowed eyes. His face was pallid and emotionless.

"You didn't give me a chance to say goodbye," she said in a voice which suddenly seemed to lose its strength. Then before she could say anything further, Francisco reappeared from the opposite door.

"I see you two have met," said Rudolfo.

"Yes," said Billie. "We have just had a very pleasant conversation."

"About what?" asked Rudolfo in a flat voice. He seemed to be in a daze.

“About food preparation,” said Billie weakly, thinking how pedestrian her answer seemed.

Rudolfo did not answer, and Francisco seemed to be equally tongue-tied.

“I guess it’s goodbye then,” she said to Rudolfo, rising from the chair.

That’s it? his eyes seemed to say, but he said nothing.

“It was nice meeting you,” she said to Francisco, offering him her hand. “Good luck with your life.”

Francisco held out his hand. “It was nice meeting you, Madam,” he said. He stood next to Rudolfo. Now they looked like a couple.

She gazed one more time at Rudolfo. He looked as if he were suffering the torments of the damned. Then she turned and walked back out through the shop. The door tinkled as she closed it behind her. Then she turned and nearly collided with a passer-by traveling in the opposite direction.

## Chapter 51

When Bobby Lee next awoke, it was ten thirty. He forced himself to sit up so he would not go back to sleep again. He felt as if part of him were still sleeping.

He shaved and changed his clothes, putting on a clean shirt. He opened the door and stumbled out into the already-hot morning. He turned in the direction of the road which led to the hotel. He was just passing a nearby shop when a woman suddenly suddenly emerged, running smack-dab right into him.

"Excuse me," he said incoherently, trying to extricate himself from the tangle of arms and bodies and heads and necks.

"I'm so sorry," said the woman. "Are you all right?"

Then she really looked at him.

"Bobby!" she said, gasping. She stared at him like an idiot.

"Billie!" he said with a gulp. "I was just going to see you, and here you are. What a weird coincidence!"

"What are you doing here, Bobby?"

"I came to help you get out of here. That is if you want to."

"If I want to? You big lug." She grabbed him and tried to kiss him, but he held himself back.

"Who was that guy I saw coming out of your room last night?" he asked.

"He was a guy I had just thrown out of my room," she said, shocked that he knew, and marveling once again at the speed and ingenuity of her unconscious mind in coming up with an alibi. She steeled her eyes so they wouldn't betray her lie. "Believe me, he is absolutely nothing to me, and nothing ever happened between us. He was a philanderer who was after my money, and I hadn't gotten around to telling him I didn't have any."

"Everyone told me you were dating him."

"He was pursuing me. I was hoping I could use him to help me out of the country. I've been an absolute prisoner here"

"You really threw him out of your room?"

"Why else do you think he left in such a confusion?"

"He did look pretty confused, at that. Still, he didn't seem to be wearing his clothes."

"Taking them off was all his idea. Believe me, Bobby. I haven't had sex with anyone but you since I met you, not with Lars, not with Rudolfo."

"Is that the guy? Rudolfo? I'd like to knock his block off."

"Don't waste your time, kiddo. He never was a contender. You're the only one for me, Bobbikins. First gimme a big kiss, and then let's get the hell out of here."

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George and Rosalia cut short their visit with Rosalia's sister Consuela. Rosalia would have liked to have stayed longer, but there was too much danger that somebody in the gang might recognize George.

They met Sykes and another man on the beach one evening and rowed out to sea in a rubber boat to meet the seaplane which had carried them there from Kingston.

It was strange and exciting, flying at night, taking off from the smooth glassy sheen of the sea into the night side of an orange sunset. They would connect up in Kingston with another Mexicana flight to Mexico City, where they would spend the last week of their honeymoon.

"Let's not go to any more museums," George said to Rosalia as they sat on the plane waiting for takeoff.

"This time, Jorge," she said, "we are going to visit all the churches, but we got us a whole week, so don't you worry."

Then he looked in her mind and saw that she was kidding him, and he smiled and she gave him a big kiss right on top of his smile.

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Bobby Lee and Billie flew back to Galveston and had a big family wedding, and this time over three hundred relatives, friends, and members of the press showed up. This time there was no bomb threat, nobody contested the ceremony and the minister managed not to get in the way of any errant hypodermic needles. They went to Hawaii for their honeymoon. Bobby finally got his inheritance and bought a string of racing horses and spent all his time at the track. Billie opened up a dress shop in Dallas which did so well in its first year she decided to open up a chain. They had their first child, a little girl with dimples and a world-class smile, six months after the wedding and Bobby became a doting father. After she was five he took her with him whenever he went to the track, and she got her first horse when she was seven.

For the first couple years, Bobby Lee spent a lot of time and money trying to put together the evidence to build a case against Lars Svensen and Dr. Moritz, but evidence was hard to come by. He even made a trip to Idaho to visit Regis McCracken, but Regis' memory proved to be none too good. He had quit the detection business and burned all his records and spent all his time happily hunting elk and moose.

Captain Harding never apologized to Bobby, but he did give him some assistance in running down some leads that led nowhere. Bobby Lee hired a private detective who cost him a lot of money but never managed to track down the phony sister and brother who had stepped forward at the wedding. The only thing Dr. Moritz could be charged with was kidnapping, and it was only Billie's word against his, so it would be difficult to establish his guilt in a court of law. Finally, San Marcos had no extradition treaties with the U.S., so short of a commando raid to spirit the two culprits, Svensen and Moritz back to the U.S., there was no way to get at them. So Bobby Lee gave it up. He and Billie were happy, anyway, and everything had turned out okay, so he went back to spending his time at the track and teaching his daughter, when she was old enough, how to win the daily double.

Lars Svensen bought himself a large, ocean-going cruiser and spent his time traveling from port to port, trying but never succeeding at finding another woman like Billie, filling his life instead with empty parties and empty-headed, long-legged, blond beauties who only looked like Billie on the outside.

Dr. Moritz remained in San Marcos, putting up with the long, rainy months and the never-ending swarms of mosquitoes which came with them, but he enjoyed the summer season immensely, and, until his prostate finally went on him, never tired of the lovely

young señoritas he was supplied with. He continued to have dinners and teas with the small, military ruling caste with which he had ingratiated himself, and with his cronies, with whom he would sit around and rehash the good old days of the Third Reich.

Sly and Big Bill put up with San Marcos until they couldn't stand it any more. Lars was seldom around, so there was nothing for them to do except eat gourmet meals at the restaurant and play gin at the hotel. They finally bugged Dr. Moritz into giving them the money to get back to the States. They took a passenger ship to Panama and hooked up with a cruise ship returning to L.A., where Big Bill got a job as bouncer in a night club, and Sly went back to swindling marks at card parlors.

George and Rosalia fixed up the old Café de Luz, and did so well they opened up a sister restaurant in downtown Glendale. Rosalia bore him a string of boys and girls, all brown like her and tall like George. None of them, however, appeared to have acquired George's psychic abilities, which pleased George no end.