

## Chapter 1

It was a perfect Saturday morning on which to perpetrate a crime. A wet, unrelenting fog hovered low over the City, and he could hear the foghorns baying dismally to one another over around the Marina. The Pacific Heights district was a few hundred feet above the bay, with an ordinarily stunning view which was now entirely obscured beyond the first block. At eight in the morning one expected a few cars. On this morning there were none. Smith liked having the road to himself.

He also enjoyed working alone. For the last five years he had been in his present occupation, breaking and entering. There had been so many previous years of working under other people's supervision, in a string of jobs he had hated but endured, at the beginning for the sake of helping his mother raise his younger brother and sister after his father had walked out on them, and later to support himself - working in a gas station, a shipping department, as a night watchman, electrician, apprentice to a locksmith, and finally as a service repairman for an alarm systems company.

The last job had been the best, and he had done it well, so well that after two years he had been able to call it quits and go into business for himself. Only a different kind of business. Instead of installing locks and alarm systems, he was picking and disarming them.

He had started off doing occasional jobs for people who had become aware of his abilities and paid him sizeable chunks of cash which were not reported to the IRS. All it took was opening a few doors here and there without asking any questions. He made enough money at this clandestine and nefarious activity to retire from his job with the locksmith and spend his days going to baseball games. Then he met Tweeds.

Tweeds was in the art business. The stolen kind, mainly paintings. He was known only to a small circle of East Coast Dealers with rich clients who were willing to ask no questions about the source of their expensive acquisitions.

He operated out of a warehouse in West Oakland with a small staff of well-muscled men who delivered furniture, but only for appearances. Their more important function was the carrying out of selected, de-framed, and rolled-up paintings as they exited. The furniture they left behind was all junk, which Tweeds picked up at sales and auctions. A number of devastated art owners had been aghast at the strange swap the thieves had made, finding their Chagalls replaced by beat-up chaises longues from Good Will.

The largest component of Tweed's business enterprise was a network of informants who kept him apprised of valuable art available in the area. These informants were quite knowledgeable, many of them having worked for art galleries and auction houses, as well as possessing degrees in art and art history. All of them knew what was in demand, and they kept their eyes peeled for the supply thereof. For a generous monthly stipend, as well as a percentage of the take, they spent their time ingratiating themselves with maids, housekeepers, and nosy next-door neighbors in some of the wealthier districts of the Bay Area.

Tweeds had never been caught because he was very careful and hired the best and most reliable people, never making a move until he had an exact knowledge of the movements of the people from whom he was stealing. Most importantly, he was patient, monitoring his greed, never hitting the same area twice within six months. He hired help who hated to work unless they had to, and paid them enough to keep them.

One of the advantages in working for Tweeds was getting the layout of a place beforehand. Smith had spent the previous evening going over the floor layouts. The house and garage were separate buildings, but a doorway had been cut between the kitchen in the main house and the garage, connecting up with an inner staircase in the garage which led up to the maid's quarters which sat above it.

The alarm systems box was reportedly mounted on the wall just inside the front door, obliging the entrant, after unlocking, to walk immediately to the box and key in the override code within six seconds.

Some of the newer alarm systems had motion detectors as well. Fortunately the owner had failed to upgrade his, otherwise Smith's job would have become much more complicated. While he had been in the alarm installment business, he had kept up with information on all the latest makes and models, but in his new profession he had gotten a little out of date. He still dropped in occasionally on a few friends still in the business, ostensibly to share a little small talk, but, more importantly, to pick up on any tidbits on what was going on in the burglar-alarm trade.

But he was getting tired of his work. The challenge was getting stale, and he wanted something more adventuresome. Ideally, it should be something easy and lucrative, with no training necessary. But it had to be soon. Life was meant to be fun. He had been saving money toward a rainy day. Perhaps that day had arrived.

The house Smith had been hired to break into was on Pacific Avenue, on the corner of Scott, just above Cow Hollow. Behind the house was a long back yard that stretched down Scott towards the bay. It was enclosed by a twelve-foot-high wooden fence attached to the house.

Smith slowed down and turned the corner onto Scott, pleased that the parking spot he had reserved for himself the night before was still there. He pulled the panel truck he was driving to a halt next to the orange cones and MEN AT WORK sign, then opened up the back of the truck and threw the cones and sign inside. Finally he got back in and parked the truck in the space he had just cleared.

He hiked up to the front of the house. The chill breeze blowing in from the bay forced him to pull his heavy topcoat a little more tightly about himself as he made his way to the front door, feeling dwarfed by the baronial size of the entranceway. The doorbell caused a faint lonely tinkle in the back of the house. He pressed it again, hearing nothing but silence inside, and, after a few patient minutes, turned and retraced his steps back to the truck.

He flung his topcoat onto the front seat, revealing underneath a faded dark brown workman's uniform with a name patch which said MARTY. A small, false moustache and a pair of dark, tortoise-shell spectacles with clear glass adorned his face. His light brown curly hair was concealed under a Giants baseball cap. A thin pair of gloves and Nike running shoes completed his outfit. He pulled the tool box out from behind the front seat and shut the door.

The fence, which he had checked out the night before, appeared at first glance to be continuous from the house to the back of the lot, but on closer inspection revealed a utility gate. Smith glanced in both directions, more by habit than necessity on a morning this quiet, then laid the tool box on the pavement and opened it to remove a small leather pouch.

He selected a pair of spreaders which seemed to be the right size for the cylindrical lock which confronted him. Inserting them carefully into the keyhole of the lock, he manipulated them until he could feel the tongs engaging the cylinders. Then, holding them in place with his left hand, he chose a thin pick with a slightly elongated head, and inserted it with his right hand, slowly turning the upper cylinders until they matched up with the lower. He heard the familiar click as the lock opened. He returned the picks to his tool chest and swung the heavy gate open.

The garden inside, if such a long-untended patch of soil had a right to be so called, had clearly been on its own for the last decade or two. The grass grew high, almost obscuring the cement pagodas which attested to an earlier period of human intervention. Here and there a rose peeked through the tangle of weeds and hedges gone wild. The remains of a stone path still provided the means of egress through the maze to the house.

The back door of the house led from the garden into the basement, and a staircase led from there up to the kitchen on the ground floor. First he had to get into the basement. He spent a few minutes staring at the outside wall. Only one door and one window, and, even with the most elemental alarm system, it would take at least half an hour to get through either one of them. He was getting tired of doing everything by the book. It was time to become more creative.

He looked at the bare wall itself. The overlapped horizontal siding was eight inches wide, probably three quarters of an inch thick. Where the paint was worn, it looked like redwood. Redwood was soft. He decided to try a different, faster approach.

He walked back to his truck and returned with a DeWalt cordless circular saw he had just bought a few days earlier. He laid it on the ground, then looked at the wall again, to locate the position of the studs. The window had to be framed by them, and the distance between the window and door measured about six feet, so, assuming the studs were equidistant, the minimum distance between was probably about eighteen inches.

He chose a spot a little short of that to the left of the window, about two feet above the ground, then pulled out a cordless drill from his kit. The thin whine of the drill cut through the early morning silence like a giant mosquito dive bombing an ear. The drill bored its way quickly through, and he heard the dull rasp of insulation on the other side. He inspected the edge of the hole to check the thickness of the wallboard. Three quarters of an inch, as he had expected.

Now he picked up the saw again and set the clearance to an inch and a half. He aimed the saw vertically at the wall, starting at the hole he had just drilled. It took less than a minute to make two parallel vertical cuts. The scream of the circular saw was deafening, but Smith didn't mind the racket. He knew that nobody was home.

That was another advantage to working for Tweeds - knowing the movements of all the people in the house as well. In this case, just a guy, his son, and their maid. The guy spent every weekend with his girlfriend, the maid was off on weekends, and the kid was away at some military school, although he was expected home for vacation on Sunday. Tweeds said the job had to be done today, or they might have to wait till the fall.

He pulled a small crowbar out of his tool kit and wrenched out the three pieces of board that lay between the two vertical cuts, revealing torn packages of asbestos. He ripped out the insulation between the risers until he could see the wallboard behind. An Exacto knife made short work of the sheet rock, and a rough square of dark basement stared out at him, two feet high and a foot and a half wide. He hoisted up the saw and his

kit, and carried them back to his truck, then returned to the garden, closing the gate behind him.

Lying on his side, he poked his head through the crude hole he had just made, and looked around at the basement. It was too dark to see much of anything in the gloom. He pulled out a small torch from his side pocket, and turned its tiny spot of light around in a slow arc.

For basements, it was pretty empty. No piles of boxes, no stacks of furniture. A row of dim work benches lined the far wall. He could just make out the large shape of the safe in the corner. He pulled himself further in and, just to make sure, patted the wall behind him with his fingertips. He knew there weren't supposed to be any wires, but it paid to check. According to his information, only the door and window were set up to detect illegal entry. Luckily, Tweeds had assured him there were no motion detectors.

Tweeds ought to know. He had a snitch who worked for Western Vigilance Security, the home security outfit that serviced this place. The alarm made no noise, but an automatic call would be placed to Western, and a couple of roving agents would be dispatched to check it out. A clanging alarm in this situation would be foolish, anyway. The guy breaking in would realize he'd been detected, and the private cops would have less chance at catching him.

Besides, the reclusive neighbors in this area weren't likely to report anything short of a fire, and any passing city cops would ignore the clangor of yet another alarm. In a metropolis like this, false alarms were always ringing, and, for a cop, there was probably nothing more unpleasant than writing another useless police report.

He remembered his first years in the break-and-enter business, entering a stranger's house, and that touch of excitement that used to course through his veins, never knowing whether a place would really be empty, wondering if this might be the first time he would encounter an unexpected occupant. He still felt that same attenuation of his senses, that same inner silence, listening, looking, on his toes, ready for the unexpected, but instead of excitement, he felt only a kind of watchful suspension.

Despite the care that Tweeds took, his inside information could be wrong. In all the houses Smith had illegally entered, it hadn't happened yet, but the law of averages said that someday someone else would be there. He had often wondered what he would do. It was one of the reasons he never carried a gun, although he had a small collection of hand guns at home and knew how to use them. But he also knew that when you had a gun, you had a tendency to rely on it.

The tiny beam of his pocket flashlight was about as effectual as a candle in a tomb. He stood, turning the spot slowly around to inspect the room. Directly behind him were the basement door and window. He walked over to see what he had avoided. The door was equipped with laser sensors, and he could see a thin line of foil wire attached to the surface of the glass. If he were to have broken the glass, the alarm system would have detected it.

He turned to resume his task. To his left was the large, walk-in vault for the owner's painting collection, and just to the right of it Smith could see the staircase to the kitchen. He navigated the staircase quickly. The door at the top had a pane in the upper half, which allowed him to see into the kitchen beyond. The door was not locked on this side. Twisting the small knob would allow him access, but he had a presentiment that the alarm would probably still go off. It paid to be careful.

He pulled out a glass cutter from his kit, and, slowly and deliberately, scored a large circle in the glass. Then, using adhesive tape, he carefully attached the circle to the rest of the pane. He tapped the circle of glass sharply with a hammer, and the piece broke cleanly from the pane with a small ping. He pulled the tape back and removed the piece of glass. Then he stuck his hand through the hole.

On the other side of the jamb, he could feel the small wires which hooked up with the alarm system. They could have no other function. He rummaged through his toolbox and found two tiny electrical clips, which he attached to the wires on the kitchen side of the basement door, with a long length of wire connecting the two clips, which he stuffed through the hole. Then he picked the lock from the other side, which took some doing, and, holding his breath, opened the door.

He walked quickly through the frontroom, noting the paintings on the walls. Inside the front door, on the wall, was the control box to the alarm system. It was a one-by-two-foot gray box with a digital keypad and a row of colored lights above it. Only the green bulb was on, which meant the alarm had not gone off. A small WV logo graced the top. Western Vigilance. Smith had installed a bunch of these in the not-so-long-ago past. He opened up his tool kit.

As soon as he got the cover off the box, he brought out a small meter and checked the voltage levels in the keypad numbers, scribbling them down in his notebook. Soon he had the disarm code. He replaced the cover and snapped it gently into place. Any jarring might set off the silent alarm. Then he keyed in the five-digit code and watched the small green light wink on. He was done.

He went through the house slowly and carefully, looking, listening. He had to make sure everything was secure. A flight of stairs led up to a landing, then turned and continued to the second floor. At the top he paused and listened again. Nothing. The master bedroom faced him, the door partially open. He slipped through and made a quick assessment of the room. A large dressing room off one end, a large bathroom off the other, this bedroom ran the length of the house.

He reentered the hallway and walked to the back, skirting the stairwell railing. A door to his right opened onto an unused bedroom, judging by the lack of personal items as well as the extreme neatness of everything.

On the other side of the stairwell was another bedroom, this one clearly a boy's bedroom, judging by the toys and games stacked on the shelves. It all looked too orderly. Maybe the maid cleaned up after him. He wondered if the kid were at home that often.

Then he heard a small noise. Nothing he could identify, but definitely a noise. He stopped and listened intently. There it was again, a faint stirring or rustling sound. He stepped quickly to the bathroom door and wrenched it open. He saw before him a small but very determined-looking young boy in his pajamas pointing a very large gun at him, holding onto it with both hands for sheer life, just like in the movies, and he was visibly shaking. His face was white and strained, and his lips were pursed resolutely. Smith remembered the faces of his younger brother and sister when his father came home whiskey-mean. The gun was a US Army Colt 45, and if it hadn't been practically in his face, he might not have noticed that the hammer wasn't cocked . . .

## Chapter 2

On Thursday, two days before, the house at Pacific and Scott had been basking under a cool sun instead of being bathed in swirling fog, but Roger Lambeaux had hardly given the weather a glance when he arrived at his doorstep after a short but grueling day on the stock exchange.

It had been a rough week. The Dow had dropped over three hundred points. It had been a week of deals, of heavy trading, of losses, during which a lot of other stock manipulators had probably lost their collective shirts, but he had come out of it like a bandit. He sighed with weary satisfaction as he fumbled through his keys, muttering to himself until he found the right one. He slid it gratefully into the lock and let himself into the house.

The air seemed stuffy, unused, as though the place had been shut up for some time, despite the fact that he had breakfasted there just that morning. He was relieved that the combat part of his day was over, glad to be back in his secure little fortress, safe from the vicissitudes of the dog-eat-dog world outside.

He flipped on the light switch and surveyed the living room approvingly, as he divested himself of his coat and briefcase, his glance flitting lovingly over the Boileau and the Wachtenberg, the Delmonico, the Kathryn Grant. He couldn't see them from here, but in the dining room he kept his serigraphs - the Eyvand Earles and the Kurasovs. Sometimes he felt he liked art better than people. It was always there for you and, although it had plenty to say, it never talked back.

Tossing his coat unceremoniously on the carpet (the maid could pick it up), Roger settled into a modern, form-fitted upholstered chair, appreciating more fully just how tired he really was. The trouble was, tomorrow would be even more exhausting, and, to top it off, his son would be returning from school on Sunday to spend the summer with him. He was not looking forward to three months of baby-sitting. This was one of those rare situations when a relative or two might come in handy, a grandmother or an aunt he could send his boy off to.

He opened up the Wall Street Journal he had brought in with him and peered myopically at the description of the day's latest mergers, wondering vaguely where the hell he had put his glasses. What he really needed right now, he decided, was a nice, tall frozen martini.

"Thelma!" he called out peremptorily. He pulled a pack of Gitane cigarettes from his shirt pocket, yanked one out, stuck it in his lips, and reached for his lighter, but then he realized the lighter was in his coat. He swore softly, then grabbed the ceremonial lighter from the side table, but it was out of fluid. He flicked it uselessly several times, anyway, just for the sheer angry hell of it. He felt hot and sweaty.

"Thelma!" he roared this time. Where the fuck is that god-damned maid when I want her, he thought, and then remembered ruefully that she was taking today off instead of Sunday when his son was due in for the summer.

Otherwise, Thelma, a skinny, awkward-looking, arms-akimbo, eyes-a-popping, live-in black maid would have come skedaddling into the room, trying uselessly to look sharp in front of her employer. Roger had used to tell his wife, back when he had one, that Thelma must have seen "Gone With The Wind" too many times during her formative years.

But there was no longer a wife, and tonight there wasn't even a maid. His momentary torpor was transformed into a fury of action. He arose from the chair like a petulant zombie, treading blindly on his coat which still lay on the carpet, and felt rather than heard the crunch of something under his shoe as he lurched toward the kitchen door. He stopped in utter disarray, then bent over with extreme disgust and picked up the offending jacket. He found both pieces of his spectacles in the breast pocket. The lighter was nowhere to be found.

He somewhat abashedly stuck the two halves of his bifocals into his pants pocket and continued his ill-starred trek to the kitchen. None of this would be happening if the god-damned maid were here. Now, in addition to some matches and a drink, he had to find some tape so he could mend his glasses, at least temporarily. He groped for the light switch, and the kitchen leapt into being. Everything was orderly and in its place. He glanced with grudging approval at the results of Thelma's labors. Now if she could only cook.

The gin was in the back of the refrigerator. He took a clean glass, threw in some ice cubes, then looked for a pack of matches, which got him to thinking about cooking again. That was one area where Cora had really been an asset to him - in the kitchen. More than one promotion had owed a little something to having the boss over for an orange duck or a coq-au-vin. Now he was his own boss, and dined at the best restaurants in town, while Thelma was responsible only with breakfast for the two of them and an occasional dinner when he had to bring his work home for the evening.

He found matches but no tape, settling for a box of band aids, and started back for the front room, arms loaded with his finds. He butted his way through the swinging door, and headed back for his chair, depositing the gin and the glass on the side table. Finally, he could get back to the business of lighting his cigarette. But there was no ashtray on the table, nor did there appear to be one in the rest of the room, at least insofar as he could nearsightedly surmise in the gloom.

And so, once more, he wearily arose and banged his way back into the kitchen. A stack of pristine ashtrays lay in the dishwashing machine where that lazy Thelma had left them. He returned to his chair with one of them, placing it on the side table next to the glass of melting ice, and lit the cigarette, drawing the smoke back hungrily. Then he poured himself a generous slosh of gin and took a long swig, savoring the menthol taste of juniper berries all the way down his throat. He picked up the paper.

Then he remembered that he still had to patch up his spectacles. He slammed the newspaper back in his lap, opened up the box of band aids and impatiently ripped off the paper wrappings of half a dozen of them. Then he peeled off the plastic strips, wrapping the bandages around the two halves of his glasses, holding them together at the break, which was right where the frames lay across the bridge of his nose. They worked for about two minutes, then started sagging. He tried to remold them into a workable shape, but the band aids seemed to have a mind of their own.

"Fuck!" he bellowed forth with all his might, his lonely explosion echoing uselessly through the rooms of his empty house. At this moment, he hated everything and everybody, even himself. If he had believed in God, he would have hated Him too.

He had never had any close friends. Perhaps his mother had loved him, but she had died when he was young, and his father had subsequently divided his time between the golf course and the law office, leaving his son in the care of a maid. There were a few

older sisters who had used to pay him some attention, but they had long ago become too common for him. As well as boring.

At his father's funeral he had made a silent adieu to the entire remaining clan. "So long, you assholes," he had said to them in an undertone that only he could hear. "Nice to be done with all of you."

He found, over the ensuing years, that simple silence worked nicely. The unanswered invitations to family get-togethers and occasional insipid letters had been reduced to a diminishing sequence of Christmas cards with shorter and shorter messages.

An added benefit to this severance of familial ties was that his boy, Reggie, had not been exposed to any of the bad manners and social gaffes his relatives were so ready to display on every wrong occasion. Roger could well remember the driveling droves of snot-nosed brats his relatives had forced him to submit to on so many obligatory family reunions. That was one area in which his relationship with his son fairly shone - Reggie never behaved badly. The boy was properly disciplined, and seldom questioned his father's authority. The few whippings he periodically received were sufficient to keep him in line. Roger and Cora had fought an endless war over the subject of Reginald's training, but Roger had won every battle.

The last he had heard from the private detective who kept tabs on his ex-wife was that she was off in the wilds of Montana, nursing a fragile ego, still recovering from alcoholism, light years away from figuring out how to make it in the adult world. Instead of dealing with problems in a mature way, by engaging, for example, the services of a qualified psychiatrist, she had chosen to throw her lot in with a bunch of hippie rejects who were members of an obscure sect known as the 'Brotherhood of the Braves.' They lived in tents, eschewing most social amenities, spending their days foraging for roots and berries. Roger had fantasies of her tied down next to a campfire, being gangbanged by her male comrades in between readings of Chairman Mao and Jane Fonda.

He lay his wounded spectacles on the table and took another healthy swallow of his drink. Now he had to make an appointment with his eye doctor, who was going to scold him for not having changed his glasses in five years. Troubles came not singly but in battalions.



### Chapter 3

The Commander of the San Rafael Military School for Boys, Colonel Robert T. Reed, U.S. Army ret., stood on center stage of the auditorium, waiting for his charges to quit milling about and find their seats.

He felt old and tired. This would be his last official act at the Academy. He had been officiating assemblies here for over twenty five years. As at all official functions, he was in full dress uniform. It was a bit faded and worn after many years of use, but he had still looked sharp when he posed earlier in front of his large dressing-room mirror. He didn't feel that sharp inside. The years had taken their toll, and now the board was insisting on him leaving. They could have let him work a couple years longer, so he could get his pension, but they wanted this new guy, Jenks, to replace him.

Jenks had only been a captain in the Marine Corps, but he was younger, healthier, more flamboyant, superficially educated, and married. Colonel Reed had never married. He had not been very successful with the opposite sex, having been a shy boy with a dominating mother and a henpecked father. The Army had solved all his problems by replacing his mother with regulations, and offering its own order as a substitute for that which a marriage might otherwise have imposed on his life.

Jenks, on the other hand, had a clever, pretty wife who could preside over the faculty tea parties and social activities. That was one area Reed was glad to be through with - the endless round of ceremonial get-togethers he had been forced for so long to endure.

The bedlam, which had reigned supreme just minutes before had finally been reduced to silence through the efforts of the other faculty members, or at least as much silence as could be expected of a group of nearly four hundred boys looking forward with an almost mindless insanity to two months of vacation. Normally at a general assembly the boys would be wearing the school uniform, but this evening, considering that they were about to leave the premises for an extended period, they were dressed in a wild conglomerate of colors and styles.

One of these four hundred, Reggie Lambeaux by name, and the youngest, in fact, of all the boys in the school, sat and silently figeted with his fellows, suffering his imprisonment in the auditorium, glad only that it was the last boring speech he would have to listen to from Colonel Reed.

"Today," the colonel began, in a strong, no-nonsense tenor which quieted most of the remaining hushed babble, "we are leaving for the summer holidays, putting behind us momentarily the general courses of learning upon which we are presently engaged, and returning to the bosoms of our families, giving us the chance to enjoy a respite from the rigors and disciplines of this institution. I hope you will all behave as if you were still in uniform, and to conduct yourselves in the world outside as you would here at the academy. Our school is a respected one with an impressive tradition, and we are all expected to reflect its high ideals."

He paused, slowly turning his head to all parts of the auditorium to make sure everyone was following him.

"What an asshole," Reggie whispered to his friend, Murphy, whose attentions were devoted to the computerized pocket baseball game concealed in his lap.

“Keep it down,” muttered the cadet standing in the aisle.

Colonel Reed continued his address. “As you know, there has been a last-minute change in plans. Our departure was originally scheduled to begin on Saturday and extend throughout the weekend, but due to a hitch in our arrangements with the company which is redecorating the academy, the painters have, alas, arrived this weekend. Tomorrow they will begin with Nimitz Hall. When you all return, it will be to a bright and shining, newly-refurbished physical plant.”

“Most of you,” he went on, “have been able to adjust to this change and will be leaving this afternoon and evening. Those among you who could not reschedule have been requested to move your gear to Wheeler Hall, where you will report to Mr. Sherman for bunk assignment until your normal departure.”

“Why do I always have to get stuck with Sherman the German?” whispered Reggie.

“Quiet over there,” hissed the cadet standing guard.

There was a brief lull in the auditorium as the audience waited for the colonel to continue.

“As many of you may know, this term is my last one. After nearly a quarter of a century of representing this Academy, I will be turning over the reins of leadership to Mr. Peter Jenks. He comes from a distinguished military background, and should do well in maintaining the standards of excellence this institution has established over the years. I wish to thank the board of governors for having entrusted me with this position, and I want to thank all of you, as well as the countless cadets who have preceded you, for having made my tour of duty here such a pleasant one.”

There was a brief squall of scattered applause, which a few well-intentioned faculty members kept alive as long as they could.

“Other than that,” Colonel Reed continued after silence had been resumed, “nothing remains but for me to wish you all a pleasant and relaxing summer break, and the hope that you will all return safe and sound in two months time.”

He paused, and, as the lull threatened to become a storm, held his arms up for silence.

“Just one last thing,” he told them. “I want you all to leave this auditorium in a sane and orderly fashion. No pushing or roughhousing please. We all have plenty of time to get where we’re going. Let’s try to behave like mature young adults.”

The pandemonium he had been trying to avoid broke out immediately on all sides as the boys, to a man, rose from their seats and began to exit in all directions, yelling and screaming.

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It was late Friday afternoon, and Reggie sat near the front of the bus, sweating profusely in the stiff school uniform he was obliged to wear. His father couldn’t see the point of him carrying a special change of clothes just for traveling. “You look great in your uniform, son. You should be proud to wear it.”

He fingered the small suitcase on his lap abstractedly, wondering when the bus driver would return from the cafe. It was agony to sit still in a stationary bus, while every atom of his being longed to be on the move. He unsnapped the fasteners on his suitcase for the umpteenth time, and opened it slightly so he could peer in and see how his frog

was doing. He had wrapped it carefully in damp leaves and placed it in the middle of the laundry he was bringing home with him. The creature turned one beady eye in his direction, as if to reproach the boy for having bothered him in the midst of an arcane philosophical speculation. He closed the suitcase and fastened it carefully, trying to keep it horizontal on his lap.

He was glad to be getting away from the academy. He disliked the prospect of being with his father almost as much as he disliked the time he spent at the academy, but at least at his father's house he had his own room, and, except for meal times, free run of the house.

He reached in his pocket, pulled out the thick wad of baseball cards from his pocket, and removed the rubber band which held them together, half-heartedly perusing his collection, wondering what kind of reception he was going to get at home, considering that he hadn't told his father he was arriving Friday night instead of Sunday afternoon. The house was often empty on weekends, but it was just the eve of the weekend, so he was pinning his hopes on his father or the maid being there to let him in.

Normally he would have stayed at the school until two o'clock Sunday afternoon, but the unexpectedly early arrival of the painters had changed all that. Under no circumstances would he accept being in the same dorm with the academy bully, Pete Harnack, and Pete just happened to be one of the small group of boys who left late at the beginning of every holiday. On top of it all, it had to be Wheeler Hall where they would temporarily bunk, and Wheeler Hall was run by Mr. Sherman.

Reggie had had few serious problems at the academy, but somehow every one of them had coincidentally involved Mr. Sherman. The prospect of having to tell his father he had lied about having permission to leave school early was nothing compared to the double threat of Pete Harnack and Mr. Sherman.

It hadn't helped much that he had been double promoted from the third to the fifth grade, because it meant that now he was a full year's growth behind the other kids in his class, so he found himself perpetually at the bottom of the totem pole in social importance. He was tired of being a plebe, of always being the butt of their jokes. He had complained about it to his father the last time he had been home for holidays, but his father had only admonished him to learn to take it, that that was the way life was, and he didn't want his son to become a loser. "Quitters are losers," he had told Reggie. "You don't want to be a quitter, do you, son?"

"No sir," Reggie had responded uncertainly but dutifully.

"Right," his father had said. "Now let's not hear anything more about that. Okay son?"

So Reggie had resigned himself to sticking it through until the fall, when he would be in the sixth grade, and then there would be a whole new flock of fifth graders to take the heat off him. He really missed Miss Edison, who had been his third grade teacher at New Horizons. She had been so nice to him while his parents had been going through those icky divorce proceedings. He missed his mom, too, in a vague sort of way. He tried to form a picture of her in his mind, but the image kept changing, and at one point she even turned briefly into Miss Edison.

Finally the bus driver returned holding a styrofoam cup, which he sipped at as he sat down in the driver's seat and turned the ignition key. Reggie felt immediately better as

he heard the encouraging roar of the engines starting up and felt the comfortable rumble in the seat beneath him and knew they would soon be on their way.

## Chapter 4

It was almost seven o'clock by his wristwatch and that goddam Gloria was a good half-hour late again. The dumb broad never seemed to be able to get her act together, which irritated Roger enormously. She should know by now how much he hated to wait for anyone, especially on a busy Friday night.

He could feel the first faint flush of blood in his face and the increase of tension in his jaw. A new headache would soon be on its way. The nap he had had earlier had helped, and he had also had the foresight to order a bowl of soup. He spooned it up appreciatively as he eyed the crowd of late comers, thinking about the arrival of his son that weekend, wondering how he was going to handle the situation.

He was so rapt in contemplation he almost missed her. He watched her slip her way through the knot of new arrivals, and thought about how well she carried herself. She might not have a lot upstairs, but he never tired of looking at her.

"I guess you're mad at me, huh Roger?" she asked as she slid into the chair beside him.

"Yeah," he admitted with a wintry smile. "I guess you could say that. You know how I get migraines on an empty stomach."

"Sorry," she said. "I had to stay and show the new girl the ropes. She's never worked in an office before and I had to practically teach her how to do everything." She paused to peer at him more closely. "Hey, your glasses look kind of funny."

"The frames are broken. This is just a temporary fix until I see the optician tomorrow. He heaved a sigh of frustration. "I wish you'd quit that stupid job. There's no future in it. I really don't understand why you insist on working when I could support you so easily."

"What would I do at home all the time? I'd get lonely. Of course if we were to get married and live together, that might be different. Then I could just look after you."

"Come on, Gloria, we've been through all that before. Weekends have worked out pretty well for us so far, haven't they? Maybe you're right. You do need something to keep busy with, but couldn't you find a job that doesn't involve so much overtime?"

"Like waitressing? That's what I was doing when you first met me, remember? You really want me to go back to that?"

"No, of course not. There isn't anything else that might interest you?"

"Not without going back to school. You want me to go back to school? I hate school."

"No, I guess not. You figured out what you're going to have? I'm starving."

By the time the food began arriving, he had run out of small talk. He sat silently, sipping his beer, wishing the waiter would reappear soon with a nice rare steak and a baked potato. She continued to chatter away, pecking at her salad. She'd be a lot easier to take, he thought, if her conversation weren't so vapid.

"How come you're so quiet?" she asked him between nibbles.

"My son's coming home for the summer holidays. I've got to figure out what to do with him."

"I forget about your being a father. You never seem to talk about him."

"He's away at school most of the time. If I let him come home on weekends, I wouldn't be able to see you at all. But he spends all his holidays with me. It'll be two months this time. Two whole months! God, I hope I can deal with it! What worries me is - I don't know how I can see you next weekend unless I can find someone to babysit for me."

"Why couldn't the three of us do something together? I'd love to meet him."

God forbid, he thought. He could just imagine the silent scorn with which Reggie would treat Gloria. The kid was always comparing Roger's girl friends with his mother. He had to head this idea off at the pass.

"Yeah," he said, improvising rapidly, "I'd really like the two of you to meet, Gloria. The only thing is, I've been having a little bit of a disciplinary problem with him lately, and I'm not sure this is the right time. The boy has had a dream for a long time about his mother and me getting together again. I've told him it's all over, but I don't think he wants to believe it. So if you should come on the scene right now he'd resent you and be angry with me. I really intend to bring you two together. It's just that this isn't the right time."

"Yeah?" she said disappointedly. "I really feel like you keep me out of the rest of your life, like I was just a kept woman or something."

'Kept woman' made him smile, the frailty of the phrase endearing her to him. "No way," he said, reaching out his hand to reassure her. "You are the important part of my life. The rest of it is just what I do in order to be able to spend a few hours with you." He felt for a moment as if he almost meant it.

"I wish you'd talk to me like that more often, Roger," she said aggrievedly. "You really make me feel shut out at times. Well," she said, brightening up. "Enough of that. What do you wanna do tonight? Earlier, that is. I know what you wanna do later," she said coyly, with a little girl's attempt at a leer. "There's a new movie at the Regency II I'd like to see."

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"Jesus, boy. You home early. Your father told me he expect you late Sunday afternoon. Now he gone to his lady friend for the night and I be leaving myself in a few minutes." She stepped aside as he lugged his suitcase and overnight kit into the foyer. He resisted her attempts to take the suitcase from him. "Well," she went on, "your bed's ready and I can fix you a little something for dinner, but you be on your own."

"That's okay, Thelma," Reggie said. "I'll be all right." After having had people around him practically every second, he'd have no problem at all having a whole house to himself.

"Well," said Thelma dubiously. "I think maybe your Daddy going to have something to say about that hisself, but it isn't my place to say."

She suddenly remembered that she was in a hurry. "Okay, hon. Now I'm gonna give you my Momma's telephone number, and I want you to call her if anything at all bothers you. Okay? And I'm gonna call her right now myself so she will know who you are. And before I do that, I'm gonna leave a message with your father's answering service."

He nodded assent and wandered into the living room. It seemed a lot smaller to him. He could hear Thelma talking on the kitchen phone. What a lot of fuss it seemed to him, just because he might be a couple nights by himself. He was almost ten. His friend Jack was ten and he got to go on trips across the entire country all by himself.

Thelma came shuffling into the room. "Here you are, Reggie. Can you read that? You just call that number if anything at all go wrong. Okay? I also left a message with your Daddy's answering service. He'll probably get the message sometime late tomorrow morning. If not, I'll be back tomorrow around noon to make sure you okay. Your Daddy too, if he don't come earlier."

She busied herself with the last of her preparations. He wished she would leave, so he could finally be alone.

"Ordinarily I wouldn't leave you like this, but I got an important date I don't dare miss. Not 'less I want to lose myself a boy friend. You wouldn't like that now, would you, honey?" She smiled at him.

He couldn't imagine having any kind of opinion on something like that. He shook his head with a polite smile. "Course not, Thelma. Don't you worry about me." He wished she would leave.

Finally she seemed to have everything accounted for. She gave him a peck on the cheek and a final admonition to call her parents if anything went wrong. Then they heard the sound of a car horn.

"That'll be my boy friend. Gotta go, honey. You behave yourself now!" She hurried to the door and opened it, giving him a last second glance over her shoulder. Then the door slammed and he was alone at last.

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"Sorry I'm late, hon," Thelma said as she stepped into the waiting car. "Something came up at the last minute and I had to call my momma." She took a well-deserved breath and relaxed into the seat as they accelerated away from the curb, smoothing her skirt out and enjoying the respite from last-minute preparations.

"So how's my man tonight?" she asked, looking at the handsome black man sitting beside her. "You look real elegant."

"You don't look so bad yourself," he said, showing her a full mouth of smiling teeth and letting his eyes travel quickly up and down her torso in a suggestive style.

"You better watch the road, Mr. Dibbs," she said in mock protest, enjoying the attention. "Where we going tonight?"

"I was thinking of the Hayes Street Grill, and then maybe hit Kimballs East for some nice jazz. Chick Corea is playing tonight."

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The first thing Reggie did was take his frog out of the suitcase and find him a nice temporary location in his bathtub. He ran a little water into it so the frog would feel at home. The animal didn't seem too chipper after its incarceration so Reggie let him be. He wandered idly about the house, noticing the few things that had changed. A framed picture of a dopey looking blonde on his father's night stand. He wondered if she were

his father's latest girl friend. He also noticed a new painting in the front room. Thelma had warned him about the new burglar alarm system. He guessed that the electrical wiring in the frame of the door between the kitchen and the garage had something to do with it. He found what he guessed was the off switch in his father's den.

Then he remembered the promise he had made to call Jack. He searched through his pockets until he found the scrap of paper with his friend's telephone number. Then he sat in the swivel chair behind his father's desk and pulled the phone toward himself. He read the number off the slip of paper, pressing the digits on the phone as he did so.

"Hi, Jack. This is Reggie."

"Reggie! Just get in? I can't talk too loud 'cause Mom's in the next room. It's pretty nerdy around here. She's planning some kind of big party on Sunday for her Outdoor Art Club, and I hafta hide out from her if I don't wanna have to do a lot of icky errands. So what's new? I thought you were gonna stay over until Sunday."

"I was till I heard who the headmaster was gonna be."

"Mr. Sherman!"

"Yeah, and guess who I was gonna hafta bunk with?"

"I can't guess. Stinky Meyers?"

"Worse," said Reggie. "Pete Harnack."

There was a moment of respectful silence on the other end of the phone. "Hardass and the German? Both of them at the same time? I don't blame you for cutting out early. How'd you talk your old man into it?"

"I didn't. Wilkins was in such a hurry he took my word for it. Dad would never have agreed, anyway. 'Good for your moral growth, son,'" he said pompously, mimicking his father.

"Your father sounds almost like one of the headmasters. So what'd he say when you got home early?"

"He wasn't here. Thelma let me in. That's our maid. Dad probably won't be back till Sunday. He's staying with one of his stupid girlfriends. I'll probably have the whole place to myself till then. Why don't you come over here? There's even an extra bedroom."

"What would your father say?"

Reggie thought about it briefly. "He probably wouldn't like it," he admitted, "but he'll never even know if you just come over on Saturday night."

"My mom would insist on talking to your father first. She's kinda sticky about things like that. But maybe I could sneak away tomorrow afternoon. I'll let you know."

"Okay," said Reggie.

"Pip pip," said Jack.

"Pop pop," said Reggie.



## Chapter 5

Saturday morning wasn't what Reggie expected it to be - waking up early and languorously going back to sleep. He woke up a whole bunch of times before he finally gave up and got up for good.. He preferred his loony dreams to everyday reality right now, but he could only sleep so long. Besides, there were plenty of noises to stop you from going back to sleep, even on a Saturday. He could hear the high-pitched whine of an electric drill somewhere nearby. The whine of the drill was followed by the screech of a saw. Some people were always up early, doing things

He traipsed down to the kitchen in his pajamas. and checked on his frog, who was looking much better now. The fresh water had probably helped. He looked in the cupboard and found some cornflakes. There was even a half-quart of milk, and it wasn't spoiled yet. The cornflakes were the non-sweetened kind that his father insisted on buying, but without Dad around watching him he could add as much sugar as he wanted. He used too much, but it was kind of nice to overdo on something after all the restrictions of the academy.

After devouring the over-sweet cornflakes, he had another bowlful. This time he cut down on the sugar. He rinsed the bowl and spoon, placed them in the dishwasher, then wandered downstairs. What should he do at eight in the morning? At school he'd be making his bed and pulling on his uniform, shining his shoe tops on the backs of his pant legs, splashing water on his face from the pitcher at his bedside, then rushing off to morning inspection.

But today, instead of doing everything, he was doing nothing. He thought of watching TV, but somehow it didn't appeal to him. He wandered back to his room and sat on his bed.

Then he heard a small noise. Nothing he could identify, but definitely a noise. He stopped and listened intently. There it was again, a faint stirring or rustling sound. He remembered what his father had taught him, and he tiptoed to his father's bedroom, which was opposite his. He pulled open the drawer on the bedside table, and found his father's pistol. He pulled out the clip to check that it was loaded, shoved it back in, then hurried back to his room, and slipped into his bathroom, pulling the door shut after him, and turning out the light. He pointed the gun in the direction of the door, fantasizing about how he would pull the trigger when the door opened. He waited, listening to his breathing and his heart beat.

Suddenly it opened, and a tall man with a Giants baseball cap and a brown workman's suit stood there staring down at him. Reggie dropped his glance to the gun in his hand. Somehow he hadn't pulled the trigger. His finger seemed to have a will of its own. He lowered the gun.

The man looked down at him in a speculative way, then reached down and took it away from him. Reggie looked at his empty right hand, not comprehending why he hadn't fired the gun..

"You get outta here or I'm gonna call the cops," Reggie blurted out, saying the only thing he could think of. "My father will be back any minute and he's got a black belt in Karate!"

Somehow, as he stared back up at the man, he began to feel less afraid. Something in the man's eyes seemed to reassure him.

"The next time you point a gun at somebody," the man said to him, "make sure there's a round in the chamber." He removed the clip from the gun and handed it back to Reggie. Reggie accepted it from him and laid it absent-mindedly on top of the toilet. He felt as if he were in a fog. He was glad to have the heavy gun out of his hands.

"Don't worry about it," the man said. "I'm not gonna hurt you. Not unless you give me trouble. You gonna give me any trouble?" he asked in a casual way.

"N-no, sir," said Reggie, stuttering slightly. "Are you a crook?" he asked after a pause, wondering if it was okay to ask something like that..

"Would you believe me if I told you I worked for the gas company?" asked the man, with a friendly glint in his eye.

Reggie almost smiled, then he shook his head wordlessly. He couldn't imagine anybody asking him anything like that, and he didn't know what to say, but somehow the strangeness of the question put him at ease.

"Why don't the two of us just sit down and think this thing out?" said the man. Okay?" He put his arm around Reggie's shoulders, and led him to the bed. They just sat there. Smith could feel the boy's heart beating through the thin ribs.

"I guess you're Reggie," said the man.

"Yes, sir," said Reggie, comforted by the ordinariness of the conversation. "How come you know my name?"

"That'll have to be a secret right now," said the man. "Is that okay?"

"I guess so," said Reggie.

"The thing is," said Smith, "that the other crooks I'm working with might want to do you in. You know what that means."

Reggie looked at him with wide eyes.

"But they wouldn't do anything at all to you if they didn't know about you being here at all. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Reggie nodded his head gravely

"So why don't you pal around with me today? That way you'll be safe from these bad guys. Would that be okay?"

Reggie nodded even more vigorously. "Yes, sir!" he said. He didn't feel afraid any more, and began reassessing his situation. Just a little while ago he'd been worrying about being bored, and now he might actually be starting out on a real adventure.

"Then let's vamoose," said Smith. "They'll be coming any minute now."

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It was Saturday morning at eleven when Tweeds got the call. He was still in his dressing gown, seated at his desk, finishing a late breakfast when his manservant came in to tell him that a Mr. Luther Dibbs wanted urgently to speak with him.

"I'll take it in here. Clear the rest of this away," he said, gesturing at the remains of his meal. He waited until the man had left and closed the door before he picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" he said with a voice that implied that whatever it was it had better be important enough to warrant interrupting him at that moment.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Tweeds," said a well-modulated voice. This is Luther, Luther Dibbs. I wouldn't be calling you except that something's come up I think you better know about." He waited until he heard Tweeds' grunt of assent before he continued.

"That dumb bitch didn't tell me until just a few minutes ago," he explained, "but you know the son that's supposed to be away at military school? Who's not supposed to be back till Sunday afternoon? Well, he came home last night early, around seven thirty."

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"So this is your so-called office. What a pigsty!" Sheila said. She entered the apartment as he held the door open for her. He pulled her to him for a brief kiss.

"I haven't been here much the last couple years," he told her as he released her. "I used it a lot more before I joined up with Tweeds. To meet associates, mainly."

"And plan robberies," she added with a smile as he helped her off with her coat and threw it onto a chair.

He marvelled to himself as always how she never failed to arouse him. She adhered to no particular standards of beauty. Her nose was thin and aquiline, her jaw was full, she tended towards a slight heaviness in her stomach and thighs, but she had sparkling eyes, a generous mouth, a healthy body, an inexhaustible energy, and a lively intelligence and humor in her countenance. The total package was Sheila. He had known many women in his life, both carnally and otherwise, but the moment he had set eyes on her, he knew that she was somebody special.

"Well, I haven't planned any robberies lately," he said. "Nowadays I just open doors."

"You're a polite guy," she said, throwing herself onto the beat-up sofa. "I thought you only did that for me. So what's up? You were pretty mysterious over the phone. I want you to know I gave up studying Russian History with Mary Jane just to come here this afternoon."

"Sorry about that, but as I told you it's important."

"You're driving me crazy with all this secrecy."

"Okay. Well, I was out on a job this morning - the one I told you about. A big ritsy place in Pacific Heights. Tweeds had a couple guys coming over with a truck to pick up some paintings. Supposed to be an empty house. Anyway, I was there to open the front door. Only when I was checking the place out, I found a boy in one of the upstairs bathrooms. He was home early for the holidays, and I had to figure out in a hell of a hurry what to do with him. I didn't want to leave him to the imaginations of Tweeds' plug uglies. Those assholes might've wanted to kill him. So I decided to abduct him instead. The kid's father is worth at a conservative estimate maybe a couple hundred million bucks. And this is his one and only begotten son, so he ought to be plenty motivated."

"How old is the boy?"

"Nine, ten."

"And you have him here, in this apartment?"

"Yeah. He's in the next room. I kept the door shut so I wouldn't compromise you."

"So you wouldn't *compromise* me?" she said with astonishment. "Aren't you compromising me by just *having* me here?"

"Not yet. It won't be a kidnapping until tomorrow night."

"And how's that?" she asked, disbelievingly.

"I had the kid leave a note for his father, telling him he was spending the weekend with a friend, and that if he couldn't make it back by Sunday afternoon, he'd give him a call."

"Good God! And that makes it not a kidnapping?"

"It's never a kidnapping until the police decide that it is. With the caseload they have to deal with, they need to be convinced a crime's been committed before they move on it."

"They'll know a robbery's been committed! Isn't that a crime?"

"They'll figure the boy left before it happened. I had him put Friday's date on the note. They'll think he took off before the robbery."

"I can't believe this. So when's it going to become official?"

"When I call his father on Sunday evening and tell him the price tag I'm putting on his son."

"That really worries me. Up till now you've only had to deal with the police. Now it's the FBI as well. And they never give up. Have you thought about that?"

"The FBI is inept. They don't have the funds nowadays to properly investigate every case that comes along, and since 9/11 they're really swamped. They'll assign a couple local agents in an advisory capacity, and only as long as the case is in the papers. The moment the boy is returned, it'll become inactive. Once a year, for a few years, they'll reopen it briefly, check to see if anything new has happened, then that'll be it. I've seen 'em in action, and it isn't like the movies.

"A few years ago, a friend of mine was wanted on a federal rap and I hid him out for a while. About four months after he left two agents showed up at my door, pretending to be Mormon missionaries, purportedly trying to locate my friend for his family in Los Angeles. I knew they were phonies because Mormon missionaries are in their early twenties, not their late forties, and they don't look like ex-defensive ends for the NFL. On top of that, they made the mistake of asking for him under an alias his family was unacquainted with. Believe me, people with brains don't go to work for the FBI."

"They were smart enough to show up at your front door."

"Only because he used my address as a mail drop, a fact I made no secret about."

She didn't seem the least bit mollified. "What's the boy doing?" she asked. "You don't have him tied up or anything?"

"No. I've got him checking the police band for anything that sounds like it's related to the robbery."

"Does he realize what's going on?"

"I've explained it all to him. He's an intelligent kid."

"Sounds as if you two have become pretty chummy. I never pictured you as a playground director."

"He's a nice boy. But he's bored to death with his life. He's condemned to a military academy nine months of the year. The other three he's condemned to his father's house. This is the most exciting thing that ever happened to him. He's not about to go anywhere."

"Is his father that bad?"

"His father is a no-show, except for paying the bills. The boy realizes that his old man can easily afford a measly million, and that it's about time his father shows he cares."

"The ransom as a proof of love?"

"Yeah. I never thought of it quite like that, but it's a good way to put it. And since his old man hasn't shown him much attention, the boy looks for it elsewhere."

"So you're his long-lost buddy."

"Yeah, maybe. Anyway, so far he's treating this like a big adventure. He's looking forward to bragging about it to his friends."

"That's a good way to handle him if you can pull it off." She paused for a moment.

"This man you work for - what's his name?"

"Tweeds."

"Right, Tweeds. Doesn't this affect him too?"

"Of course. I actually thought of calling him and letting him know, but should there really be honor among thieves? I'm sure he's going to have some problems disposing of those paintings with the FBI is on his case. That'll put a big dent in his plans. He's going to be hotter than a moth trapped inside an electric light bulb, but we never had an agreement about what to do when something went wrong."

"Does he know about this place?"

"I don't see how. I go to him. He doesn't come to me. He uses a moving company over in West Oakland as a front. I drop in on him there from time to time. Otherwise he leaves a message for me on my answering service. But he doesn't know about this apartment and he's never been here."

"So you're not worried about him? Maybe you should be."

"Oh I *am*. He could be a real pain in the ass if he knew where to find me. He'd want a piece of the action. Maybe even a piece of *me*. He's bound to be pretty sore at me for keeping the kid a secret. There's only one thing that mystifies me, and that's that the maid knew last night that the kid came home early, and in this case her boyfriend is Tweeds' snitch. Yet Tweeds didn't know in advance or he would have cancelled the job. The only explanation I can think of is that the maid didn't tell her boyfriend."

"By 'snitch' you mean inside man?"

"Right. Tweeds has a bunch of 'em. In this case I happen to know that the guy is one by the name of Luther Dibbs. He gets the dope for Tweeds on a lot of the rip-off-able places in Pacific Heights. Besides being an expert on art, he's a lady-killer."

"Not literally?"

"No, just in the vernacular. When the job is through, he'll find some reason to dump her, something that won't arouse her suspicions."

"How awful. Somehow that seems even worse to me than just being after her for physical reasons."

"That's probably because you're a woman. He's really not such a bad guy."

"You can only say that because you're a man. So Tweeds might know already."

"We're probably better off assuming it. He'll certainly know as soon as news of the kidnapping comes out in the papers or on television."

"And as soon as he knows he'll know that you're behind it. How long would it take him to discover this address?"

"Maybe a day or two, maybe never. It's hard to say. It all depends on how successfully I burned my bridges."

"So it's probably not very safe for you to stay here."

"Could you make that us?"

"I'm scared to death, Smitty. I don't want to be separated from you, but I don't want to go to prison, either."

"I could really use your help, Babe, but I can't blame you."

There was a long, awkward silence. Then Sheila sighed.

"Okay, Smitty. I'm a fool, but I'll stick it out with you for a few days, but you have to let me know everything you're doing and you have to promise not to take any unnecessary risks with my safety."

"I promise," said Smith. "Now it's time for action."

He pulled out his wallet, peeled off a thick wad of fifties, and pressed it into her hands. "Go out and get us another place to stay. Don't use your real name. Don't go back to where you live and don't call anyone you know. Plan on being away from school for at least a few days, but don't tell anyone. Find a place with two bedrooms, off the beaten track if you can. Private. That's a lot to ask, but do the best you can. Secure the place, then call me."

He paused, his eyes darting about abstractedly as he tried to think of what he had missed. "And see if you can find a couple masks we can wear comfortably around the house while we've got him in custody, so the kid won't get too used to what we look like."

"This is a lot of money."

"You'll need to buy a temporary wardrobe. Go in for the nondescript. Now what the hell am I forgetting?"

"Food?"

"Right. Trust me to overlook the obvious. Get a week's worth of groceries. I leave it to your imagination. I can eat anything if I have to, and as far as I know, the kid isn't overly fussy."

"I'd better get going, then. What'll I do if things go wrong?"

"Don't call me at home. Leave a message with my answering service. Just a message to get in touch with you. But don't mention your new address. Call Jim Breem, and leave it with him. Whoever they are, they couldn't possibly know about Jim. Then I'll get it from him later, unless Tweeds or the cops already have me. Okay?"

She gave him a worried look and a hurried kiss and was out in the corridor before he got the door fully opened. He closed it and walked back to the bedroom, where Reggie was waiting for him.

## Chapter 6

On Sunday morning about ten Roger locked his car in the garage and strolled around to his front door. He was going to have a thing or two to tell his son, Reggie when he came home from having spent a weekend with a friend. He was also going to call the school and find out why they had allowed Reggie to leave early without parental permission.

The first thing he noticed on entering the foyer was the large ugly chest of drawers. What in the world was it doing here? Roger felt a faint twinge of alarm. Someone must have gotten in, but how? The burglar system had been on. He flicked on the front room lights, and the empty picture frames leered at him like horrible gaping maws. He lurched around, looking at the places where his Wachtenberg had been, his Boileau, his Delmonico. His heart was beating so hard he could barely catch his breath. He collapsed in an overstuffed chair and surveyed the rape of his inner sanctum, breathing heavily. Then he reached for the phone and dialed 911.

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Officers Bleiler and Morgan angled their way past the ratty-looking dresser that partially blocked the entrance, and trooped into the front room, followed by a very anxious-looking Roger.

"Please sit down," Roger told them, seating himself nervously on the arm of the sofa. "You'll have to excuse me if I don't offer you anything, but the maid hasn't arrived yet."

"No problem, Mr. . . ." said Bleiler, the taller of the two policemen, looking down at the report he carried in his hand.

"Lambeaux," said Roger. "Would you allow me to tell you what happened?"

"Sure, sure, Mr. Lambeaux," said Morgan. "Mind if I smoke?"

"No," said Roger. "I think there's an ashtray on the side table there. I don't think the lighter works, though."

"I got my own," said Morgan.

"So you had some valuable paintings stolen, Mr. Lambew," said Bleiler.

"Lambeaux," said Roger testily. "Just let me tell it my way and it'll all go faster."

"You just go ahead," said Morgan, "and I'll try to get it all down."

"Yes," said Roger. "First of all, my paintings were all here when I left on Friday afternoon."

"You absolutely sure of that, Mr. Lambew?" said Bleiler. "A lotta the time, people get so used to what's around 'em that they don't really notice when something's gone. They still got that mental picture of what's supposed to be there."

"I'm very certain," said Roger, refusing to be derailed. "And I distinctly remember turning on the alarm system. Even though it's something I do habitually, I always make a point of noticing it when I do it."

"And when did you first notice that the paintings were gone?" asked Morgan, scribbling things dutifully in his small spiral notebook.

"At ten this morning," said Roger, "when I came home. My son was spending the weekend with a friend and I wanted to be here when he arrived. I reported the theft

immediately. Anyway, as I was saying, the alarm had been on when I arrived, and since the maid came in to check on my son yesterday, I would assume she would have noticed if it had been turned off when she arrived..

"I thought you said your son was with a friend this weekend. Why did the maid come in to check on him?" asked Bleier.

"Well," said Roger, realizing he was going to have to go back to square one with these two, "to begin with, my son, who was supposed to come home today, arrived early Friday evening instead. Fortunately my maid hadn't left yet for the weekend, and I assume she gave him some dinner. Anyway, she left a message on my answering machine telling me my son had arrived and that she would check on him tomorrow morning."

"Where is your son right now?" asked Bleier.

"As I said, he should be home any minute," said Roger. "But let me finish. My maid returned to check on my son and found a note he had left."

"Do you have the note?" asked Bleier.

"Yes, yes," said Roger. "It's still tacked up in the kitchen. Anyway, in the note my son said he was going to spend Friday and Saturday nights with a friend, and that he'd be back this morning." Roger consulted his watch. "He should be home pretty soon. At any rate . . ."

"Do you think there's any connection between your son and these paintings of yours that are missing?" interposed Morgan, looking up from his notes. "And what's the name of this maid of yours? I'd like to question her."

"She'll be here any minute," said Roger, seeing that his train of logic was once more in danger of going off the track. "Why don't we wait. At any rate, as I was saying, it's important that I verify whether the alarm was turned on when Thelma arrived. Thelma – that's my maid. My insurance doesn't cover me for the loss if the alarm system isn't in operation at the time of the theft."

"Could you give us a rough idea of the value of the paintings which were stolen?" said Morgan, looking up from his scribbling.

"Certainly," said Roger, relieved that these two brainless clods were finally starting to get down to important matters. "I had them appraised just two months ago by Martin and Lawrence Galleries. For insurance purposes, you understand. In very rough terms, the Wachtenberg was valued at about 400 thousand, the Delmonico at a quarter of a million, the Kathryn Grant at 50 thousand, and the Boileau at about 100."

"Thousand, you mean," said Morgan.

"Yes," said Roger. "I've got all the documentation here." He picked up a manila folder from the side table and passed it to Bleier.

At his point, the door opened, and Thelma paused in the doorway, peering around the dresser at them.

"Thelma!" said Roger. "Thank God you've arrived."

"What's wrong, Mr. Lambeaux. Is it something to do with Reggie?"

"It's something to do with my paintings!"

"Your paintings?" She looked around the room. "They're gone!" she said.

"Of course they're gone!" said Roger. "Didn't you notice the hole in the door to the basement?"

"A hole?" said Thelma. "I didn't notice, Mr. Lambeaux. Where is this hole?"



“Right in the middle of the window, you stupid woman,” said Roger.

“I think we’re going to take over the questioning, Mr. Lambeaux,” said Bleiler, rising and walking over to escort Thelma to the sofa.

“But they’re *my* paintings,” said Roger.

“And it’s *our* job,” said Bleiler. “Just sit down and be quiet for a moment.”

Roger sat like a ramrod, his face grim and his teeth clenched, as Bleiler had the girl tell them her name and address and describe her household duties. Then she went on to describe the events of the last couple of days. She told them about the boy coming home early and her leaving a message with Mr. Lambeaux, and about stopping by on Saturday morning to check on the boy and finding him gone, and finding the note in the kitchen that said he was spending the next two nights with a friend. She mentioned the second message she had left with her employer. Roger was becoming more and more agitated. Finally he could stand it no more.

“But the paintings, you fool woman!” he shrieked. “The paintings! Were they gone when you were here on Saturday?”

“Be quiet, Mr. Lambeaux. But that *is* a good question, Miss Waters. Were they here on Saturday morning?”

“I, I don’t know,” Thelma stammered out. “I guess I didn’t notice.”

“You didn’t *notice*?” screamed Roger, starting to unravel.

“Mr. Lambeaux,” Bleiler cautioned him.

“It was kinda dim in here,” Thelma said, “with the curtains all drawn and it was a gray day outside, but there was daylight in the kitchen, so I didn’t bother to turn on the lights and I just walked towards the kitchen door, and then I saw the note from Reggie and I left another message with Mr. Lambeaux’s answering service.”

She paused, then went on. “The only thing I noticed was that dumb-looking old bureau or whatever it is blocking the door. I figured Mr. Lambeaux just had it delivered or something.”

“But it wasn’t here when you left on Friday night?” asked Bleiler.

“No sir,” said Thelma.

“So how did it get through the door?” asked Bleiler.

“I didn’t think about it,” said Thelma. “Mr. Lambeaux don’t want me to wonder about what he does.”

“Was the alarm system on when you came on Saturday?” asked Morgan.

“I guess so,” said Thelma. “I pushed those code buttons on the alarm box that are supposed to turn it off, just like Mr. Lambeaux showed me how to do, but I didn’t notice whether the red light was on.”

“You mean the alarm might have already been off when you turned it off?” said Bleiler with a look of enlightenment.

“Yes sir,” said Thelma in a small voice.

Roger started to react, but he strangled whatever he was going to say.

“Did you turn it on again before you left on Saturday?” asked Morgan, making sure he had every question answered before he went back to the station and wrote up the report.

“Yes sir,” said Thelma, keeping her gaze from crossing Roger’s. “I always do that.”

“Then what happened?” asked Morgan, leaving no stone unturned.

"I left," said Thelma. "I don't work on Saturday. I just come in to check on Reggie, like I told Mr. Lambeaux I was going to do."

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It was only Sunday evening and already the new place was beginning to feel like home. Sheila was diligently solving the crossword puzzle, taking a break from her studies, and Reggie was absorbed in his baseball cards. The frog was happily paddling around in a large bowl of water somewhere in the kitchen, and Smith was key entering some text on his laptop. They had just heard another brief item on the kidnapping on the evening news, another twenty second filler right at the end, just before sports. There was little substance to it, being mainly a terse rehash of the salient facts, not very different from the one last night. The television was resting now, at Sheila's ardent request.

"Did you ever see Joe DiMaggio play?" Reggie asked Smith.

"Fraid not," said Smith. "He was a little before my time. Played for the old San Francisco Seals back in 1933. Later on, of course, for the Yankees. Married to Marilyn Monroe for a short time, as I remember."

"How about Ted Williams?" Reggie wanted to know.

"Nor him either," said Smith. "How old do you think I am, anyway?" He was silent for a moment as he typed in a few more sentences. "Why don't you ask me about Kirk Reuter or Rich Aurilia, or J.T. Snow? When's the last time you've been to a local game, Sport?"

"I haven't actually ever been to a game," Reggie said, "but I've seen a couple on TV. My friend Jack gets to go to them all the time, and he tells me a lot about them."

"Never been to a game?" said Smith, looking up from his work. "Something should really be done about that, don't you think, Clytemnestra?"

For the time being, Smith and Sheila were using aliases with each other in Reggie's presence. Sheila had unfortunately not been able to find any masks. Around Halloween, they seemed to be for sale at every convenience store, but in April they were about as plentiful as a cold beer on a hot day in a dry town. So, instead, Sheila was sporting a blonde wig, and he was keeping his naturally curly hair sleeked back and the phony moustache glued on properly, which was no small feat. And, of course, they were using phony names. Smith was getting a little tired of 'Ferdinand', and wished that Sheila would choose a new alias for him.

"Is your name really 'Ferdinand'?" Reggie asked, forgetting his baseball cards for a moment.

"Of course," Smith said. "In actuality I'm the Grand Archduke of Austria, but I'm traveling incognito."

Reggie looked enquiringly at Sheila, who seemed to know what was bothering him. "'Incognito' is Latin for 'unknown'," she told him, "and it means he's using an assumed name. And if you really are the Archduke Ferdinand," she said, turning her attention to Smith, "I hate to tell you, but you've been dead for the last hundred years."

"I haven't heard any complaints from you lately," he said, not looking up from his work.

"And what's 'Clytemnestra' mean?" asked Reggie. "Is that an assumed name, too?"

"You assume correctly, Sport," Smith told him. "Clytemnestra was an ancient Greek goddess or something, if I remember right."

"Not exactly," said Sheila. "She was a queen, the wife and murderess of Agamemnon. What are you working on there, Archduke?" she asked Smith.

"I'm setting up the ransom message," explained Smith. "I first enter it as text over the keyboard, which I have just completed. Then I invoke a voice simulation program which converts the text into a sort of pidgin English. Here, I'll let you hear it." He typed in a couple commands, then a thin, but clearly audible mechanical voice intoned:

"HEL-LO MIS-TER LAM-BEAUX. THIS IS A COM-PU-TER-IZED MES-SAGE IN-FOR-MING YOU THAT YOUR SON HAS BEEN KID-NAP-PED. HE IS A-LIVE AND WELL AND IS IN NO IM-ME-DI-ATE DAN-GER, BUT IF YOU E-VER HOPE TO SEE HIM A-GAIN, YOU ARE IN-STRUC-TED TO PAY THE A-MOUNT OF TWO MILL-ION DOL-LARS."

"PLEASE CON-FINE YOUR-SELF AT THE PRE-SENT TIME TO LI-QUI-DATING WHAT-EVER AS-SETS ARE NE-CES-SARY TO HAVE THE MO-NEY IN AN AC-COUNT REA-DI-LY CON-VER-TI-BLE IN-TO CASH."

"THE NEXT PHONE CALL WILL BE AT THE SAME TIME SUNDAY A WEEK FROM NOW. AT THAT TIME, YOU WILL BE IN-STRUC-TED AS TO HOW THE MO-NEY IS TO BE SUB-MIT-TED, AND IN WHAT DE-NO-MI-NATIONS."

"God that's eerie," said Sheila.

"That's really neat," said Reggie. "I wonder if Jack has anything like that on his PC. Could I type in something for it to say?"

"What d'you do next," asked Sheila, "hold a telephone up to the computer?"

"No to both of you," said Smith. "The next step is to tape this message with my little Sony tape recorder here. He inserted a blank tape, flipped the instrument to record, typed in a symbol on the keyboard, and they heard a rerun of the message. At the end, Smith rewound the recorder.

"Now I just go to a distant pay phone, call up your dad," he said to Reggie, "wait for him to answer, then play the message. Any questions?"

He showed Reggie how to operate the voice simulation program while he struggled into his coat. He consulted his watch. "It's about time to make this whole thing official," he declared, slipping the tape recorder into his pocket. "Can I pick up anything at the store on my way back?" he asked.

"Ice cream," said Reggie. "Double Rainbow Ultra Chocolate."

"Say 'please,'" said Smith.

"Please," said Reggie.

## Chapter 7

Inspector Aldo 'Al' Rivera of the SFPD could feel another headache coming on. He lowered his heavy frame into the upholstered chair Roger Lambeaux directed him to, and gratefully accepted the cup of coffee which the maid placed on the table beside him. He had had a hard day, starting with breakfast with his family and ending with dinner with his family. Sundays were always a hassle at home. If it weren't for the department's being short-handed and him in the position of refinancing a mortgage on his house, he would be sitting in his favorite bar, nursing his approaching migraine with a hot toddy, instead of having to listen to this asshole moaning about his missing paintings when he should be thinking about his missing child.

"Bleier and Morgan got all the info on your missing paintings, didn't they, Mr. Lambeaux?" he asked, trying to conceal his impatience.

"I'd still like to know when the theft was committed," said Roger. "If only that stupid Thelma had noticed whether the paintings were gone when she came yesterday morning."

"What time was that, Mr. Lambeaux?" asked Stan Phillips, a big black man in his late thirties.

"Around eleven," said Roger. "She came to check on my son."

"The paintings were probably stolen earlier," said the black man, pulling a large handkerchief out of his hip pocket and mopping his face.

"How do you know that?" asked Roger, looking around at him.

"After Bleiler and Morgan got through talking to you, Mr. Lambeaux, they questioned some of your neighbors. A guy across the street saw a panel truck unloading what looked like a piece of furniture. Somewhere around nine in the morning."

"How come nobody told me?" said Roger.

"You're being told right now, Mr. Lambeaux," said Aldo. "There's something else – your next door neighbor said she heard someone using a chain saw around eight."

"That's when those butchers cut a hole right through my back wall! What kind of amateurs are these? I hate to think what they've done to my paintings."

"You got a copy of that report, Stan?" asked Aldo.

"Right here, Al," said his partner, pulling a folder out of his briefcase and passing it across.

Aldo spent a few minutes flipping through the folder, whistling under his breath, while Roger chewed on an imperfect fingernail. "Thanks, Stan," said Aldo, handing the report back to his partner. "I'll go through it more carefully later. Right now I would like to forget about the art for a moment and concentrate on the boy." He turned to Roger.

"When was the last time you saw your son?"

"I keep telling you I haven't seen him for months. He was supposed to come home this weekend for the spring recess."

"You never saw him on weekends?"

"He seemed to like staying over."

"In the school dormitory?"

"Yes. He didn't have any friends in the neighborhood to speak of."

"You never visited him?"

"Several times in the past, actually, but Reggie always seemed ill at ease with me there. At home he and I always get along fine, but at school he seemed to have his own social life. I guess it embarrassed him with his peers, being seen acting friendly to his father."

"But he did come home on Friday, didn't he?"

"Yes, yes. That's all been verified with our maid here. My son came home around seven, and he assured her he'd be okay alone for one night. But when Thelma returned late Saturday morning, she found a note from my son on the bulletin board in the kitchen, saying he'd gone off with a friend. I've given the note to Mr. Phillips, here."

"I've got the note right here, Al," said Stan, passing an 8 1/2 by 11 sheet of paper to Aldo, who put the coffee cup down on the table and squinted myopically at the neatly printed message:

DEAR DAD – IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT, AND EVERYTHING HERE  
AT HOME IS OKAY. I'VE GONE OFF TO SPEND THE WEEKEND  
WITH MY FRIEND, PINKY ALLISON - DON'T WORRY, HE'S  
COOL. BACK ON SUNDAY - YOUR SON, REGINALD.

"Would you like some more coffee, Inspector?" asked the maid, proffering a pot.

"No thanks, but I really could use an aspirin or two."

"So how do you know for sure the boy's been kidnapped, Mr. Lambeaux," Aldo asked the father. "Maybe he's still off with this friend of his."

"Because I received a telephone call two hours ago asking for two million dollars for his return," said Roger drily, visibly struggling to keep his composure.

"Have you tried to contact this friend, Mr. Lambeaux?" asked Aldo.

"As I told you before," said Roger testily, "I have no record of such a friend. I've never heard that name before."

"Did you try to contact the school?"

"The school is closed for redecorations," said Roger, barely concealing his impatience. "That's why Reggie was sent home early in the first place."

"They still might have somebody at the desk with the authority to check the records," said Aldo. "Make a note to follow up on that, Stan."

"Getting back to that ransom message," he said to Roger. "It's really unfortunate that you didn't record that conversation," Aldo told him. "I believe you said you have an answering machine with that capability."

"I didn't have time for all of that," said Roger, his voice beginning to slip into a higher register. "As I already told your partner, it all happened so fast."

"And you said the voice didn't sound like that of a human being?" Aldo pursued, trying to keep his own temper under control. In the back of his mind he remembered the dinner he had been dragged away from and he wondered how long all of this was going to take.

"Seems as if it was some kind of recording," interjected Stan. "Mr. Lambeaux says the message was repeated a second time, exactly like the first."

"It was definitely not a human voice," insisted Roger. "There was no rise or fall in inflexion. It was completely monotone."

"I see," said Aldo, who didn't see much, except that his evening was ruined. He had what might be a kidnapping on his hands, and yet it might not, and the only lead so far was that the kidnapper sounded like he came from outer space. Fortunately the maid reappeared at that moment with a bottle of aspirins and a glass of water.

Roger looked sadly at the empty frames on his walls. Gone was his beloved Wachtenberg, his Kathryn Grant, the Delmonico, the Boileau. It wasn't just the money. He would eventually replace the lost paintings, but it would never be those particular ones. He glared at the monstrously ugly Grand Rapids dresser set that still stood next to the front door.

"When can I have that dreadful piece of furniture removed?" he asked Aldo.

"The fingerprint man's already checked it out, hasn't he, Stan?" said Aldo. "You can get rid of it any time you like." he said to Roger.

"I think I might have a suggestion as to how that voice was produced, Al," said Stan. "My nephew has some software on his PC that converts print into speech. He hasn't used it over the telephone yet, but he's been plaguing his parents with it."

"Does *your* son have a PC?" asked Aldo, turning back to the bereaved father.

"He's too young," said Roger testily. "When he's old enough to benefit from it, I'll get him one that's state-of-the-art. I don't want him wasting his time playing mindless computer games, like so many ill-parented children nowadays."

Aldo managed not to wince. "Maybe your son's friend has one, and the two of them thought up the idea of a fake kidnapping."

Roger Lambeaux exploded. "My son doesn't play practical jokes! And if he did, he would never play one on me! Everything he is supposed to have done this weekend is completely out of character!"

"One!" he said with great intensity, grabbing his right index finger with his left hand with such ferocity Aldo wondered if he were going to forcibly remove it. "My son was scheduled to come home on Sunday afternoon, not Friday evening. Two!" he rasped, "he didn't call or write me to say he was coming home early. My son has always been responsible. He lets me know immediately when there's a change in his plans. Three," he continued inexorably, "he went off with a friend without getting my permission, and four - he didn't leave the telephone number of his friend. And there's something else! The message talked about 'liquidating my assets' and 'moving them into a money market account'. Children don't use terminology like that."

"Excuse me, Mr. Lambeaux," said Aldo. "I know you're upset, but we've got a case to solve here and we have to consider every angle. As far as your last point goes, your son has undoubtedly heard you use language like that. It's surprising what mimicry children are capable of. You said you hadn't seen your son in months. Isn't it possible you don't know him as well as you think you do? Maybe he's been going through some changes lately."

"When my son goes through changes, they'll be at my instigation," Roger said, his frown turning into a scowl.

"Do you talk much with his teachers at school?"

"Why should I? He's always well behaved, he makes top grades and almost never gets in trouble."

"Almost?" asked Aldo.

"He had a minor problem with one of the headmasters last year."

"Maybe I ought to have a chat with them," said Aldo, flipping to a blank page in his notebook. "You have their number handy?"

"Don't you see that my son's being kidnapped has nothing to do with his school? He was kidnapped *here*. This whole line of inquiry is a complete waste of time!"

"No, I don't see," replied Aldo, "and I will decide whether something is a waste of time or not."

There was a brief, awkward silence, during which Roger glared, and which Aldo mainly and partly ignored, partly because so much of his attention was focussed on his headache, but also because he had dealt with assholes like this before. When the silence had lasted long enough to put Roger in his place, Aldo broke it.

"Tell you what," he said, speaking patiently and carefully, the way he talked to his fifteen-year-old son when he had gotten a dent in the family car, "just to show you I'm a reasonable guy, you tell me what line of enquiry you would suggest."

Roger was so surprised by his sudden victory that he forgot for a moment to be angry.

"Well, for one thing," he said. "You might try working on the assumption that there's a connection between the theft of my paintings and the abduction of my son."

His beloved paintings again, thought Aldo. "Sure, Mr. Lambeaux," he replied. "I've got nothing against that assumption, but we already have a couple guys working on that, so there's no reason to duplicate their efforts. I will definitely make it a point, however, to make sure they keep us informed of their findings, and I will let them know about the kidnapping of your son. In any case, we'll have a better idea about what's going on when this guy from outer space calls back. You said next Sunday night?"

"Yes," said Roger, swallowing the stomach acid that had suddenly invaded his throat. "The message said it would be at the same time, nine o'clock."

"I wonder why they're waiting a whole week," said Aldo.

"Probably to give me time to liquidate my assets," said Roger with a grimace of pain.

"Well, Mr. Lambeaux," said Aldo. "I guess that's it for now. In the meantime, it would be helpful if you tried to write down as precisely as you can just what you can remember about the message. You might come up with something you've forgotten. If you do, don't hesitate to give us a call."

Roger nodded glumly.

"Okay, Mr. Lambeaux," Aldo said with a sigh. "Let's stay in touch. Stan here will arrange the setup for Wednesday evening." He patted Stan on the shoulder as he rose from his chair. "See if you can wrap this up, Stan. I'll wait for you outside. Good night, Mr. Lambeaux."

Roger grunted something inaudible which Aldo decided to interpret as a polite dismissal. He was lost in thought as he let himself out and walked to his car, which was double-parked outside the entrance. He opened the door and slid beneath the wheel, pulling out the pack of cigarettes he had manfully avoided inside. There were still two cigarettes inside, which meant he had kept himself down to two packs today. He lit one up, and unrolled the window, sucking hungrily and blowing the smoke out into the wet air of the foggy night outside. It seemed only a few minutes later that Stan opened the door on the passenger's side and slipped into the seat beside him. There were a few moments of silence, each waiting for the other to say something.

"Whaddya think, Stan?"

"Same thing you think, Al. Same thing Bleier and Morgan thought. Same M.O. as those art thefts over in East Oakland last year. Junk furniture exchanged for expensive art. The press is going to have a field day with this one."

"They needed to have a reason to walk into those houses," said Aldo. "What better one than to pretend to be delivering furniture. These guys might just be copycats, but that won't stop the newspapers from turning it into a serial crime. I appreciate your not mentioning it to Lambeaux."

"You kidding? That asshole? We would never've gotten around to talking about his kid. He'd've gone on for another two hours about his missing goddam pictures. Forget him. What else do you think?"

"What else do I think?" said Aldo. "Well, going back to an earlier point, it's hard to imagine the kidnapping could have been planned. How could they have figured on the boy getting home a couple days early? And who else outside of the maid could have known about it?"

"The maid's boyfriend," said Stan. "But according to Bleier and Morgan's report, the maid said they spent the night together. He was never out of her sight."

"So we're back to square one. Maybe the asshole is right. Maybe the guys who came for the paintings stole the boy as well."

"What about the note?"

"Maybe they forced the boy to write it," said Aldo.

"Maybe the note was genuine, so the boy wasn't there at all when they broke in. He could've been kidnapped by somebody else, after he left the house on Friday night. Maybe these crimes don't have anything to do with each other."

"You might be right," said Aldo. "Makes me wonder again if the boy's abduction and ransom are just a practical joke. Well, maybe a night's sleep'll throw some light on things. You heading back to the station?"

"Yeah. You?" asked Stan, easing his bulky body out the door and fumbling for his keys.

"Nah, I'm gonna drop by Mickey's Tavern and see if they've got something better than aspirin for this headache."

"Tomorrow morning at nine?"

"Sounds good," said Aldo. "Maybe we can take a drive over to Marin and check out that Military school. Get out of this goddam fog."



## Chapter 8

On Monday morning all three of them were up early. It was cold and damp, but the gas heater had taken the chill off. Sheila was buried in a large overstuffed armchair, absorbed in a text on the Romanovs. Smith was at the table, perusing the morning Chronicle, and Reggie was lying on the floor, busily immersed in *Space Cadet*, a book Smith had brought him.

"Here it is," said Smith triumphantly. "Page two. A couple paragraphs this time."

"What do they say?" asked Sheila. She scanned the article:

"The home of prominent financier Roger A. Lambeaux was struck this weekend by two apparently unrelated crimes, one day apart. On Friday night his son, who had just returned from school and was at home alone, was abducted in the early evening by person or persons unknown. The next morning four rare paintings valued at more than a million dollars were taken from the same Pacific Heights mansion. There were no witnesses to the kidnapping. A neighbor saw furniture being delivered to the house but did not notice anything being removed. It was not until Sunday evening that Mr. Lambeaux received a ransom message asking two million dollars for return of the boy. An earlier note had purportedly been left by the child, informing his father that he was with a friend, but the police now believe this note to have been written under duress in order to delay pursuit. The ransom is one of the largest demanded since the Orange County kidnapping of Mary Jo Fernandez in July, 1997, when the amount of ten million dollars was demanded. That case ended in the recovery of the ransom and the arrest of the kidnappers, when one of Mary Jo's abductors took pity on her and allowed her to escape. Police Inspector Aldo Rivera said no arrests were expected at the present time, but that both the local police and the F.B.I. were actively involved in the case."

"Not a very good likeness of you, Sport," said Smith, tossing him the newspaper section.

"That's 'cause it's a baby picture," said Reggie, looking at it disgustedly. "It's almost two years old." He passed it to Sheila to read.

"Why is it," he asked Smith, "that all your life you think about becoming famous and having your picture in the paper, and then when it finally happens, it has to be the nerdiest awfulest picture they can find?" He marvelled at the injustice of it all. "And then they have to go and say I'm nine years old! I'll be ten in only a month. Why couldn't they say I was ten? Why do they always have to be so exact?"

He subsided into a silent upset, frowning at his book without seeing the print.

"There's something called Murphy's Law that's supposed to explain things like that," said Smith. "Hey, what d'you know," he said, tactfully changing the subject. "Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey is coming to town this weekend! I haven't been to a circus in a long time. You ever been to the circus, kid?"

"No," said Reggie, forgetting his peeve for a moment. "Dad just never seems to have the time. My friend Jack has, though, and he's told me all about it."

"Your friend Jack seems to do a lot of things," said Smith. "Would you like to go?"

"Yeah, sure," said Reggie with enthusiasm, his brief disappointment forgotten. "Is there enough time? I mean before you have to give me back to my father."

"I think you can count on that, sport," said Smith. "It'll take a while for the money exchange. How about you?" he asked Sheila. "You game for a circus?"

"I don't think so," said Sheila. "I'm allergic to elephant doo doo. When were you thinking of going?"

"Maybe this weekend. Depends on when I can get tickets," said Smith. "I'll figure it out later. By the way, you planning on going out today?"

"Sure. I've still got to get together with you know whom. Do you need something from the store?"

"I might. Do you know how long you'll be with her?"

"Fraid not," said Sheila, not looking up from her book. "Too bad we don't have a phone. Then I could call if I were delayed and you wouldn't have to worry."

"You're not still thinking of taking that exam, are you?"

"No, no," Sheila assured him, "but I still have to study for it, just in case the prof lets me do a makeup. Plus, I'll have to know all this for the final."

"Why are you studying Russian history, Josephine?" asked Reggie.

Today they were Napoleon and Josephine.

"No special reason," said Sheila. "Just because it interests me. Don't you like to know things just for the heck of it?"

"Yeah," said Reggie dubiously. "Sometimes. Like wars. I have a book in my locker at school about great naval battles that I like to read sometimes. It's got maps and pictures and stuff. But I get awful bored trying to remember all those kings and queens we have to study in school. And dates. Like 1066."

"What happened in 1066?" asked Smith.

"Battle of Hastings," said Reggie.

"Good for you, sport. So what's the problem?" said Smith, getting up from the table and putting on his jacket. "Be back in a second. Gotta get something from the truck."

"Well," said Reggie, "what good are they?"

"The kings and queens, or the dates?" asked Sheila.

"Any of that. Who needs to know?"

"It isn't so important to know all the kings and queens," she said, putting her book down for a moment, "or even most of the dates. What is important is knowing what was going on, and why. And what things were going on at the same time."

"The more you study history, the more you realize about how we got to where we are from where we started out. The Battle of Hastings, for example, wasn't just any old battle. It was the beginning of the Norman Conquest, when the French ruled England. Did you know that, for centuries, the official language in England was French?"

"No," said Reggie, showing some signs of interest. "Why do they call it the Norman Conquest?"

Before she could answer, the door opened and Smith slipped back inside. He displayed a small cell phone in his right hand. "I picked up a few of these some time ago. Figured they might come in handy sometime, like if I had to be in contact with someone else on a job, sort of like walkie-talkies. This one is for you." He handed it to Sheila.

"And if you want to contact me, you call me on this one." He produced another miniature cell phone from his pocket. "You want to write the number down?" he asked Sheila.

"Sure, let me get my pen," said Sheila.

"You can use mine," offered Reggie.

"Ready?" asked Smith. He read off the number.

"Hey, that's pretty close to my number," said Reggie. "It ends with a '4' instead of a '3', and the first three numbers are different."

"You mean the prefix," Smith said.

"Yeah. The prefix is different."

"That'll make it real easy for the cops to find out who you are," Sheila pointed out, "letting him know your telephone number."

"Aw, come on, Josephine," said Reggie. "I'm not gonna tell 'em. I'm not a stool pigeon."

"You've been watching too many gangster movies," she said.

"Now you're starting to sound like my father."

"Don't argue with him when he expresses sentiments like that," Smith admonished her. "He's been a real trooper. An honorary member of our gang, as a matter of fact. I'm almost sorry we have to give him back."

"Couldn't you just keep me and the ransom both?" asked Reggie.

"I don't think your father would go for that," said Smith. "Besides, when you make a bargain with somebody, you have to keep your part of it."

"Even crooks have to follow the rules?" asked Reggie.

"At least honorable crooks like me," explained Smith. "Maybe later on, if the going gets too rough, we could steal you back."

"Could you really? That'd be *cool*!"

"Don't promise things you don't mean to follow through on," warned Sheila. "Remember all that honor stuff."

Smith made a face at her and Reggie tittered. Sheila pretended to ignore him, so Smith went into his Mongolian idiot routine, while Reggie laughed delightedly. Finally she put down her book in mock severity.

"How am I supposed to do any serious study with you two fools carrying on like this?" she said, smiling despite herself. She rose from her chair and consulted her watch.

"I've got a lot of reviewing to do with what's-her-name, so I'll be busy with her all day. Afterwards I'll drop by the store and pick up some stuff for dinner. How about a big kiss before I go?" she asked Smith, who rose to his feet, still playing Mongolian idiot, shuffling and pawing at the air. He gave her a Rudolf Valentino kiss, long and lingering, and she gasped for breath when he finally released her.

"Do I get a kiss too?" asked Reggie.

"Only if you promise to be a good boy," she said, leaning over and planting a smack on his forehead.

"What're you guys going to do today?" she asked.

"There's a Giant's game this afternoon on channel 4," Reggie told her.

"Remember to pick up some more milk," said Smith. "Not that low fat stuff this time."

## Chapter 9

"Professor Baker, I appreciate your taking the time to see me," said the swarthy, heavy-set gentleman standing on the other side of the desk. He was nearly bald on top, but the hair on the sides was long and slicked back. The suit he was wearing had an expensive look to it, but seemed to fit him poorly, as if he had bought it off the rack in a hurry, without bothering with alterations.

There was something in his appearance that reminded the professor of old Charlie Chan movies, something vaguely repellant and sinister. He was a large man, tall as well as broad, and with him in it, the small office seemed even smaller. His hand, when he extended it to clasp Dr. Baker's, was unusually soft and clammy, almost feminine, and one could not help noticing the heavy silver ring with a large stone encircling his second finger. His eyes were the coldest Dr. Baker had ever seen.

"I couldn't help being a bit intrigued," said the professor, waving his visitor to a chair. "It isn't often I meet a real F.B.I. agent. John Tweedsmuir, is it?" he said, glancing at the calling card his guest had just handed him. "I hope you'll forgive the disarray. This is the last week of finals, and next week will be the beginning of the spring recess, so I'm a bit inundated with paper work. What can I do for you?"

"We're trying to locate one of your students, Professor," said his guest, "a Miss Sheila Grant." His gaze was calm and unrelenting, and Dr. Baker felt almost hypnotized by it.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Tweedsmuir. My classes are rather large, but Sheila is one of my best students. As a matter of fact, she just contacted me this morning to tell me she was ill and wouldn't be able to take tomorrow's final. I hope she's not in any kind of trouble."

"No, no, not at all, sir," intoned his massive visitor. "This is just a routine investigation. We need some information from Miss Grant, but we've experienced some difficulty in locating her."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't be of much use to you there. I don't know the addresses of my students. The Registrar's Office should be able to give you that information."

"Yes, sir. We already have her address. The problem is that she's living with her boy friend, and all we know about him is that his last name is Smith. I guess you can appreciate the problem trying to locate a Smith in a city the size of San Francisco."

"I'll bet. I hate to think how many Smiths there must be in the telephone book."

"Would you believe about sixteen hundred? Not to mention all the unlisted numbers."

"I'm still at a loss as to how I can help you."

"Well, I was hoping you might know the names of any other students in your class who might know Miss Grant."

"Yes, there I can help you," said Dr. Baker. "She often studies with Mary Jane Renselar. As a matter of fact, she asked me to give Mary Jane a copy of the essay portion of the test. I agreed to let her work on that at home. In that way, she only has to do a makeup on the true-false portion of the final. I don't normally permit it, but Miss Grant is an exemplary student, so I felt she merited the exception."

"Mary Jane Renselar? How do you spell that?"

"R-E-N-S-E-L-A-R," said Dr. Baker. I'm sure you can get her address from the Registrar's Office."

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"Mr. Lambeaux, this is Frank Sabella and Vic Jeeter." Roger shook hands with the two men as they were introduced. They were both large, but the comparison stopped there. Frank was dark in complexion, with a thick mop of black hair, while Vic was sallow-faced and prematurely bald, and the cheap blond wig he sported did little to improve his appearance.

"Please come in, Gentlemen," said Roger. He steered them towards the front room, Frank and Vic leading the way, and Al and Stan bringing up the rear. Roger waited until they had all filed in. As a group, he decided, they looked more like the front four of the Forty Niners' defense than law enforcement officers.

The two newcomers seated themselves side by side on the large couch, Frank lounging back in the cushions in a relaxed manner, while Vic sat upright, scanning the room suspiciously, a slight look of distaste on his face, as if he had just smelt something vaguely disagreeable. Al Rivera took the large upholstered chair, while Stan Phillips sat by himself on a Victorian love seat.

"As you can see by the gaping wounds in my walls," said Roger, settling into the remaining chair, a straight-backed antique which Whistler's mother might have found comfortable, "four valuable paintings were stolen a couple days ago." He recovered from his grief in time to remember the social amenities. "I'm glad to see the FBI has taken an interest in the case."

"We always get involved in a kidnapping, Mr. Lambeaux," said Frank, who appeared to be the agent in charge. "Ever since the Lindberg case back in the thirties. Technically the kidnappers have to cross a state line for us to be involved, but in practice we always assume that to be a possibility. Of course, since 9/11 our resources have been more limited. Do you mind if we smoke?"

"Certainly not," said Roger, himself a life-time member of the smoking confraternity. "Thelma!" he called out. As the maid hurried into the room, he told her to bring in some ashtrays.

"Any of you care for refreshments? Beer? Coffee?"

"Not right now, Mr. Lambeaux," said Frank. "So you had some valuable paintings stolen as well?"

"We're not sure if there's any connection with the kidnapping, Frank," Al interjected. "We've got a couple men assigned to the burglary, and if they run across anything that suggests a connection, they've been instructed to let us know. As far as we can tell, the kidnapping happened on Friday evening and the burglary on Saturday morning."

"I didn't realize the crime rate was so high in this district," said Frank. "Have any other incidents occurred recently in this area?"

"No," said Roger. "Not in the twelve years I've lived here. That's one of the reasons I'm convinced the two are related."

"You mentioned in your report, Al, the possibility that the kidnapping might be a hoax perpetrated by the boy and one of his friends," said Frank.

"Yeah," said Al, "but it's difficult to get any line on that. "I talked to a Mr. Sherman at the boy's school this morning, but nearly everybody there is gone for the spring holidays. There's just a skeletal staff, and nobody seems to know which kids Mr. Lambeaux' son ran around with. He seems to be something of a loner. We got a couple possible names, but we haven't had a chance to check them out yet."

"How about the name 'Pinky Allison?'" asked Frank. "I noticed that name in the report."

"Nobody with the last name 'Allison' is enrolled in the school," said Stan.

"I can't believe this is a prank," said Roger. "As I told Inspector Rivera here, Reggie isn't one for practical jokes."

"We'll get a better idea," said Al, "when they call again Wednesday night."

"There's one thing that's been on my mind the last couple days," said Roger.

"What's that, Mr. Lambeaux?" asked Frank.

"What do you think the kidnappers would do if I refused to pay the ransom?" said Roger. There was a brief but uncomfortable silence. Frank cleared his throat and Vic tugged at his shirt collar as if he suddenly found it too tight. Al reached for another cigarette, and Stan looked nervously at the floor. Frank finally found his voice.

"It's a tough position to take, Mr. Lambeaux, but if everyone took that kind of stance, there'd be a real dropoff in kidnappings. It's a federal offence, and if there weren't any payoff, people would think twice. Do you think you could do it?"

"I don't know," said Roger. "Naturally, I love my son, but what kind of guarantee do I have that he would be returned safely?"

"You've got a real good point there," said Frank, "and it's interesting that you should raise it, because it's something I've advised a number of kidnapping victims to consider. I don't want to alarm you, but you might just be saving your boy's life by refusing to come up with the ransom."

"Then you do think there's some possible merit there?" pursued Roger.

"There's no doubt of it. The kidnappers would be taking a certain chance in releasing the boy, since he could identify them, and he could conceivably lead us to the place where he was held, which might result in further evidence against them. The crime has, of course, already been committed, but there's no doubt that we would go a lot easier on them. Do you think you could carry such a stand through to the end?"

"I don't know. I hate to let the bastards get away with it, but at the same time, of course, I wouldn't want to jeopardize my son's safety."

"Well, you really don't have to make any decisions at this point, Mr. Lambeaux. It would be to our advantage in nailing these guys if we went along with the money drop. They'd have to show up to get it, which gives us a much bigger chance to catch them. If you just refused to pay them, they might let your son go, but then our chances of ever finding them would be greatly decreased."

"That's true," said Roger.

"As I said, Mr. Lambeaux," said Frank, "you don't have to decide right now."

"Right," said Roger.

"Let's wait till then, and see how they intend to pick up the money," said Frank. "You say everything's set?" he asked Aldo and Stan.

"Right, Mr. Sabella," said Stan. "We've got a recorder activated by the ringing of the phone. And we've arranged for the phone company to be standing by to help us trace the call. It'll be vital, of course, to keep the conversation going as long as possible."

"Well then, it doesn't look as if there's much more to do until that call is received," said Frank. "Can anyone think of anything we might have missed?"

"How about surveillance?" asked Aldo.

"Sounds like a good idea," said Frank.

"I don't know if the department has the men to handle it around the clock," said Aldo.

"Let me give you a call on that," said Frank. "Maybe we can pool our resources, use mixed teams, one of your men and one of ours on each."

"That might work," said Aldo.

"That's it, then," said Frank. "Let's all meet here about seven thirty Wednesday evening. Okay gents?"

"Right," said Aldo, digging the last cigarette out of his pack. Vic nodded silently, and Stan grunted assent.

"I want to thank you gentleman for coming here," said Roger, as the four visitors rose to their feet. "Is there anything else I can do to facilitate matters?"

"You might have some sandwiches and coffee on hand," suggested Frank. "It could be a long evening."

"No problem," said Roger, as he followed his guests to the door. "It's the least I can do. Thank you all again for coming."

"It's our job," said Frank. "Goodnight, Mr. Lambeaux."

## Chapter 10

Sheila called at six to say she wouldn't be able to make it for dinner. The Giant's game had been over for about an hour, and Smith and Reggie were sprawled on the sofa watching the news on Channel 7. The day had been a bummer. The Dodgers had won five to four, making a clean sweep of the series, and Smith had already been wondering what more could go wrong with the day when her call came.

"We spent too much time on Peter The Great and the Russo-Turkish War," she explained, "and we haven't even started on the Revolution. I can't see us getting through until at least eight thirty. You guys are going to have to wing it without me."

"Well, Sport," Smith said to the kid, "you are going to have a rare culinary treat tonight. I am going to fix dinner."

He looked over the few odd packages and cans in the otherwise empty kitchen cabinets. The week's supply of groceries that Sheila had stocked had dwindled down to a couple cans of beans, a small tin of tomato sauce, a can of tuna fish, a five pound sack of flour, half a loaf of two-day-old bread, and a can of condensed milk.

"Not much to choose from," he told Reggie. "You ever have creamed tuna on toast?"

"No, what's that?"

"Something my mother taught me how to make for my little brother and sister when she had to work late."

"You had a brother and sister? I never had any brothers or sisters."

"They were a lot younger than me, just little kids. When I was your age they were babies."

Reggie watched as Smith heated up some margarine in a saucepan. When it began to melt, he added a tablespoon of flour and stirred the mixture until he had a thick paste in the pan. Then he poured in enough condensed milk to form a thin layer in the bottom of the pan, and he stirred it until large bubbles began to form.

"This is called a 'roux'," he explained to Reggie. He took the pan off the heat and opened the can of tuna fish.

"How do you know how much of each thing to put in?"

"I just play it by ear. It probably turns out a little different each time. Why don't you start making some toast, Sport," he said as he added the tuna to the white sauce. He stirred it until it was even in consistency, squirting in more canned milk to make it creamier. Then he put the pan back on the stove under a low flame.

Reggie looked on with interest. "My father never cooks anything. Thelma always fixes our dinners. Mom used to once in a while, but that was a long time ago."

"Some of the best chefs in the world are men," Smith told him. "Better make a couple more pieces of toast. Do you miss your mother?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I used to miss her a lot, but she's been gone quite a while now. She sent me a postcard once. From Montana. I keep it in my locker at school."

"The Big Sky country. How's that toast coming?" He opened a can of beans and dumped it into another saucepan. "It's kind of a strange dinner. Beans and tuna fish don't exactly go together, but it'll keep us alive."

"It tastes great," said Reggie, devouring the creamed tuna with gusto.



"You can get tired of it pretty quick," said Smith. "Especially if it's the only thing you know how to make."

After dinner they left the dishes on the table and flicked through all the channels, finally settling for an old John Wayne western where the sheriff and his deputies were boarded up in the jail while the bad guys waited outside for them to come out so they could shoot them one by one.

It was pretty late when they heard the key in the lock. The Western was almost over, and they were both yawning through a dumb ad. Reggie started towards the door to help what he thought would be Sheila with the groceries when Big Mac's ugly face peered in through the open door.

"Well, well," he chortled in his deep, rumbling, gravelly base. "Look what we got here, Ernie," he said to an unseen companion on the other side of the door. "Smitty and his little boy scout friend, all comfy watching TV together."

As he moved his sheer bulk into the room, the other half of his conversation made its appearance - a tall, thin, cadaverous creature who pulled a frightened Sheila in after him, her wrist imprisoned in his vise-like grip. Reggie instinctively retreated back to the sofa, putting his hand on Smith's knee for reassurance.

"You got something belongs to us, Smitty." Big Mac's growl filled the small room.

"You got what you were sent to get," Smith told him.

"You was paid to open the place up, not walk off with the merchandise."

"I'm sorry," Sheila said to Smith, rubbing her wrist. "They were waiting for me when I left Mary Jane's."

"It's okay, babe. It's my fault. I should have thought of that possibility."

"You're slipping," said Big Mac. "Maybe it's time for you to retire. Pat him down," he ordered Ernie. "Make sure he ain't carrying. Stand up," he said to Smith. Sheila sank onto the sofa and put her arm protectively around Reggie, who was trembling visibly.

Big Mac stood and watched while Ernie's cold hands frisked Smith from behind. Ernie gave a negative sign.

"You can sit," the big man said to Smith. Then he looked at Ernie. "Check the other rooms to see they got any guns layin' around."

He turned off the television and snooped around, opening drawers and looking under the sofa cushions while Ernie made a quick reconnaissance of rest of the apartment. The silent minutes crawled by as the three captives sat in frozen tension. Then Ernie padded into the room.

"Can't find nothin'," he told his large partner.

"Time to get the show on the road. Let's have him," said Big Mac, motioning to the boy, wagging his big hand in a come-hither motion.

"Leave the kid alone," said Smith. "He hasn't done you any harm."

"We ain't going to do him no harm neither," said the big man, "just so long as he's a good boy and cooperates. Okay kid. You come with us. Ernie!" he commanded. "Grab him."

The one called Ernie wrapped his long, spidery fingers around Reggie's arm and led him away from the sofa, making a wide detour around the others, while Big Mac stood glowering down at Smith and Sheila, silently daring them to take action. He pulled a large automatic from his pocket and pointed it at Sheila.

"Make a move and she gets a new bellybutton," the big man told Smith, then in a different tone to Ernie, "Take the kid to the car and wait for me. I'll be right behind you." They watched Reggie being led out the door.

The big man looked down at Smith. "Looks like we found ourselves a million-dollar baby," he rasped, then added with a hoarse chuckle, "in a five-and-ten-cent store." He slowly edged himself out the door, squeezing his big beefy face between the jamb and the door, then vanished as the door clicked shut.

They heard the crunch of footsteps in the outer hallway and the swish of the front door closing. Then there was nothing but silence.

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Sheila sighed. "It'll be kind of lonely for you now, with the boy gone. You two were sort of hitting it off together."

"You're right," said Smith ruefully. "I'm gonna miss him a bunch. He's a great kid and I'm worried about him. I hope those jerks treat him okay."

"They probably will," Sheila consoled him. "He's worth quite a lot of money to them, and there's nothing like enlightened self-interest to motivate people, even bad ones."

There was another silence.

"What do we do now?" asked Sheila.

"Well, for one thing, we can forget about that trip to Europe."

"In that case, I may as well go back to my place and pick up the threads of my former existence. What are you gonna do?"

"I guess I'll clean this place up and move our stuff out."

"There isn't much to clean up, except the dirty dishes in the sink."

"I thought I'd tidy up any fingerprints we might have left. Not that anybody's gonna look for 'em here, now that the bird has flown the coop, but I like to do things right."

"Where're you gonna sleep tonight?"

"I sort of doubt I'll get much. After I'm through here, I'm gonna stake Tweed's place out and see what I can find out about where he's stashed the kid."

"Isn't that kind of dangerous?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, "but there's still a small chance I can steal the boy back. Tweeds doesn't think I know where he lives. What are you gonna do?"

Well, I'd like to take that exam tomorrow morning, so I'd better get some sleep. You'll have to give me a ride back to Mary Jane's so I can get my car. Also my lecture notes and the exam writeup. I dropped them in the lobby of Mary Jane's apartment building when those two goons grabbed me. I hope they're still there."

"They probably are. Who'd want to steal 'em? Anything else you can think of?"

"Don't forget the frog."

## Chapter 11

Reggie lay in the darkness of the trunk, listening to the beating of his heart against the much larger roar of the engine and the thunder of the wheels against the pavement. At every turn his body was thrown in one direction or another. He used his hands against the rough lining of the floor to break the sudden accelerations and decelerations. Gradually, he became tactilely aware of the few contents of his prison - a lug wrench, a few greasy rags, some torn newspapers that smelled of damp rot. He discovered by feel that he was lying on a kind of hatch cover. Below it, he assumed by analogy with his father's car, lay the spare tire. In the back of the compartment was a wall which he guessed separated him from the rear seats. It felt insubstantial, and if he were a little stronger he thought he might be able to break through it. It was becoming difficult to breathe and he hoped the ride wouldn't last too much longer, but at the same time he felt more secure lying there in the noisy vibrating darkness than having to face his captors. He found that by putting his face close to the thin crack where the trunk lid locked down against the car body he could get a tiny breeze of fresh air.

The car came to a brief stop a few times during the journey, probably at stop signs and red lights, Reggie guessed. The stops were his only respite from the motion and noise of the wheels. He tried to guess where they were travelling, but it was too difficult to keep any sense of direction, with all the twistings and turnings. Outside the City - he was sure they had traveled part of the way on the freeway. Maybe somewhere in the East Bay. He didn't have the feeling that they had passed through any toll gates, so it probably wasn't Marin County.

Finally, after what seemed an agonizing eternity, they appeared to have arrived at their destination, and the sudden silence seemed more ominous yet. He grabbed the lug wrench, the only weapon he could find to battle the forces of darkness.

He lay there waiting for the trunk lid to open. He heard the slams of the car doors and felt the cold chemical of fear trickling through him. Finally he heard the creak of the trunk lid opening and felt the sudden inrush of cold night air. A nasal voice rasped, "is the kid still there?" And a deeper one grated, "where the hell else could he be? He ain't no Houdini." Then hands grabbed him and he was lifted out into the darkness. He struck out blindly with the lug wrench and felt it hit something soft.

"My eye! My goddam eye! He hit me! That sonofabitch hit me!" One of the hands holding him let go for an instant and Reggie could feel the pavement beneath his feet. He felt the lug wrench being yanked from his grasp and he turned his head suddenly in the direction of the hand which cruelly pinched his upper arm and he bit into the alien flesh as hard as he could.

"Sonofabitch!" someone screamed, and then there were no hands holding him and he lit out as if all hell were behind him, running blindly into the cool unknown darkness. He could hear voices close behind him.

"Where'd that little bastard go?" said a deep voice, and then a higher voice answered. "Quick, get him!"

The pound of feet on the pavement behind him and the sound of someone else's heavy breathing. His heart was thudding in his ears and his lungs were on fire, but he ran as if possessed. It was dark and misty, and he could barely make out the middle section of a winding boulevard and the tall black masses of trees on either side with the

occasional hazy hulk of a parked car. A few street lamps hanging above in the swirling fog gave him just enough light to avoid the dark shapes on either side and keep to the middle of the lane. He ran as if he were doing the hundred yard dash in gym class, and if he could only make it a few more seconds he would win the race and beat them all, and when he felt he could go no further, the adrenaline of fear gave him a kind of second wind, but even that didn't seem to help. He could hear the hoarse wheezing of the big man getting louder behind him.

Just then, as his resources seemed to have come to an end, he saw a low hedge on the right side of the road. He had no idea what lay beyond it, but the time for choices was over. He vaulted into the air, feeling the hedge graze his chest as he cleared it, and then he was falling. He hit the ground at an angle, and then he was tumbling down a steep slope. He felt the whip and sting of bushes and branches against his face and body, and he grabbed at them blindly to try to slow his downward rush, but they eluded his grasp and tore at his hands.

And then, with a whop in the back like somebody hitting him with a giant baseball bat, he came to a sudden stop. As his senses gradually returned he found himself lying against a large tree. He lay there for a long moment, gathering his wits and assessing the state of his body.

With the sudden cessation of motion the noise of falling had been replaced by a deep silence, broken only by the slight sound of his breathing, the creaking of the trees and the chorus of branches above him sighing in the wind. Then he became aware of the thin sound of voices, somewhere up around the top of the slope. They were quite clear, but the individual words eluded him. He had no doubt of the identity of the speakers. The two men who had driven him here were clearly looking for him, and he could see an occasional glint of light which he guessed was a flashlight. He could lie there no longer.

The footing was rough and unpredictable, but by holding onto the tree he was able to regain his balance. His back was sore and his arms and face were lacerated by his fall, but he seemed to be generally okay. He had regained his breath, but he felt weary, and it took an effort to get moving. He had one slight edge - he knew where he was and they didn't. He let go of the tree and groped through the darkness with both hands, being careful not to stumble. The slope had given way to an almost horizontal stretch, and he could dimly perceive a house to his left, not more than twenty feet away, its windows unlit, the people inside probably asleep. He made as little noise as he could. A soft bed of pine needles crunched lightly under his tread. He avoided the trees and bushes on either side, feeling his way along with his hands. Now he could see the soft glow of a street lamp through the branches above him, and a fence, ghostly white in the pale darkness. He hurried toward it. It was waist-high, and he clambered over it easily. Now he could see the road beyond, gray against its dark surroundings. He stumbled down a slight incline and finally reached the soft tarred surface of the road. He broke into a light trot, too worn-out to really run fast, but too scared at taking his time either. He could no longer hear the voices of his pursuers, but that gave him small comfort. This road might very well be just an extension of the one above, switchbacking down the steep hillside, and one of the men might have stayed with the car. At any moment he might find himself in the glare of its headlights. He quickened his pace, looking carefully on both sides of the road for some refuge from his pursuit.

Then he saw a tall dark hedge, and a pale white picket fence with a gate, and a dark house beyond it. He decided to take his chances. He reached over the top of the gate and found the latch. He raised it and the gate opened silently to his touch. A flagstone path led to the house, with a lawn on either side.

It was then that he heard the purr of a car approaching. He shut the gate quickly, tiptoed softly across the grass to the dark corner of the yard where the hedge grew tall, and lay down on the thick carpet. The sound of the approaching engine grew loud, and he saw the rays from its headlamps piercing the bushes which separated him from the road. It passed slowly by him, much more slowly, he thought, than just an average car travelling down that road. It was them for sure. He held his breath against the pounding of his heart until the car was past the house and down the road. He could still hear it when it was far away. And then he let his fatigue and soreness overwhelm him, and he passed into a sort of semiconsciousness which became a dream in which dark men as tall as trees and eyes like beacons searched relentlessly for him.

He gradually became aware of something warm and sticky caressing his head, and he tried unsuccessfully to brush it away, and then he felt the same caress on his face. It smelled like the worst bad breath he had ever experienced in his life. He tried to move his face away but it persisted, and then his hands encountered the warm, thick pelt of what seemed like a huge animal, and he heard a small snort. He endured the attention as he gathered his wits, and the memory of the situation he had just escaped came flooding back. He was alone now with this giant beast gently licking his face and hair, with the soft bed of grass beneath him, and he allowed himself to luxuriate in the silence and security. He reached up to trace the outlines of his strange protector and found it to be a dog. He petted the creature back, and heard a rumbling snuffling which he took to be sounds of pleasure. The creature ceased its licking and settled down next to him, allowing itself to be stroked. Only the rapid in-and-out of its panting broke the silence around them. Reggie felt warm and secure, and he gradually drifted off into a kind of sleep.

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While Reggie was drifting off to sleep, Smith was fighting it. His car was parked down on the next road, and he had spent the entire night watching Tweeds' sprawling mansion, hiking around the perimeter, keeping an eye out for activity inside, but so far he hadn't seen a sign. Not even a light going on or off. The sky was lightening, presaging the dawn, and Smith's jaw was developing muscle cramps with all the yawning he was doing. Time to bring his vigil to a halt. It would be difficult to continue his surveillance in daylight.

He pointed his plodding feet in the direction of his car. He felt dispirited as well as fatigued. A few hours sleep would help. Tweeds wasn't an early riser, so Smith didn't expect much activity before noon. It was going on six thirty as he turned the key in the ignition. The whining of the starter rose briefly above the sound of the birds, then the engine took fire with a low roar, and he was off, winding around the road which passed Tweeds' place, skirted Tilden Park, and led on to Grizzly Peak Boulevard and the upper reaches of Berkeley. In another ten minutes he zipped down Marin to the

freeway ramp onto Highway 80. In another five minutes he was past the toll gates on the Bay Bridge, heading for San Francisco.

## Chapter 12

Andrew Garvey liked to get up early in the morning. He had been doing that for most of his eighty one years. There was something magical about the world at five A.M., with the heavy dew on the grass, and the sky still dark with night. The roar of traffic of people going to work and trucks making deliveries would not begin for another two hours, and he loved the silence which surrounded him.

He didn't try to do too much. First he would put on a pot of coffee and finish yesterday evening's newspaper. Then he would wander through his garden to see if any new tomatoes had happened during the night. This would be followed by a stroll out to the ditch in front of his house to pick up any beer cans or garbage thrown there by passing motorists the night before. His wife had complained until the day she died about waking up in an empty bed. She had passed away twelve years ago, and he still maintained his ritual.

Today, however, something was different. His dog, an Irish Terrier, a big brute with a big heart and an even bigger disposition, had not greeted him at the back door, so he walked around to the front yard to see what was amiss. To his astonishment, a young boy, about the same age as his great grandson, Teddy, lay on the ground next to the dog, his arms about him. Big Red, or just Red, as the dog was known, lay patiently, apparently undesirous of disturbing his new-found charge. He looked up at his master, and his tail gave a few wags. Andrew picked the boy up and carried him round to his kitchen, followed dutifully by Big Red.

The boy awoke as he was brought into the house. Andrew sat him down in a chair and inspected him, as the boy rubbed his eyes, stretched his limbs, and looked about at his new environment. His face and arms were pretty scratched up, and his clothes were torn and dirty. His hair was tousled and liberally laced with thistles and burrs.

"Cup of coffee?" asked the old man. The boy nodded and Andrew poured him one from the pot he had just brewed. He made it about a third milk, just as he did for his great grandson, adding three teaspoons of sugar, then stirred it up good, and handed it to the boy.

"What's your name?" he asked his young guest, who was slurping the coffee down with great gusto.

"Reggie," the boy told him when he came up for air.

"Like some more?" Andrew asked, and the boy nodded his head enthusiastically. He made another cup just like the first, and watched the boy drink it down just like the first.

"Looks like you're pretty hungry. How about some breakfast?" The boy looked at him doubtfully, but he could tell that he wanted to say yes. Seemed as if his parents had raised him to have some manners.

"Looks like you got lost in the woods, Reggie," he told the child, who just looked at him and nodded. A quiet boy, probably afraid to talk to strangers. Andrew went to the refrigerator and took a couple eggs out of the carton. He put them in a pan and filled it with cold water. He put the pan on the stove and turned the gas on. Then he opened the bread box and found two slices of whole wheat which he dropped in the toaster.

"You just stay put," he told the boy, "and I'll get something for those cuts and scratches." He walked into the bathroom and found the bottle of Bactine and a package of cotton balls in the medicine cabinet. He searched through the cupboard below and found a clean washcloth and towel. When he got back to the kitchen the boy was petting the dog.

"Looks like you found a friend," he said to the boy, who just nodded again. Andrew got some butter from the refrigerator and spread it on the toast which had popped up in his absence. He put the toast on a plate and placed it on the table.

"Eggs will be ready in just a jiffy. In the meantime let's see about those scratches." He held the washcloth under the hot tap until it was steaming, then gently bathed the boy's face until it was clean, and patted him dry with a paper towel. He held cotton balls to the mouth of the bottle of Bactine, upended to inundate them, and applied the Bactine to the scratches and abrasures. The boy flinched a few times, but otherwise submitted silently to the treatment.

"Lost your way, I guess," he said to the boy, who just nodded earnestly. Then the egg timer chimed, so he removed the eggs from the hot water, and held them under the cold tap briefly to stop them from cooking.

"Best way to make soft-boiled eggs," he told his guest. "They call it the cold-water method." He cracked the eggs and spooned the insides into a bowl, which he set before the boy.

"Eat hearty," he told him. "Eggs don't taste very good when they're cold." He watched the boy avidly wolf down the eggs and toast. He seemed to be a good boy, mannerly but quiet. Just like his great grandson. Still waters ran deep, he thought. He waited patiently until the boy was through and pushed the bowl away. He handed him a paper towel to wipe his mouth with.

"You been out all night?" he asked. The boy just nodded again.

"Guess your folks must be worried about you," Andrew hazarded, but the boy remained mute.

"I guess I might understand you a little bit, son. You might not believe it, but I was a boy once myself, an awful long time ago. I remember on one occasion I got mad at my folks, so I just took off. Ran away from home, I guess you'd say. Stayed away for three days. Couldn't be that you're running away, too, could it?" he asked. To his relief the boy looked up at him and nodded.

"Yes, sir," the boy said. "I guess you could say that."

"And then you got lost in the woods, eh? Again the boy nodded assent.

"Well, don't you think your folks are worrying about you?"

The boy looked a little dubious.

"It wouldn't hurt any, would it, if we just gave them a little phone call to let them know you're okay?"

The boy still seemed doubtful.

"You said your name was Reggie. That short for 'Reginald'?"

The boy nodded affirmatively. "Yes, sir," he said, "but nobody calls me that anymore. My mother used to call me Reginald, but that was a long time ago."

Something clicked in the old man's head. Something he had heard or read. He wasn't sure. "Does your mother still live with you?"

"No sir," replied the boy. "She left a few years ago. I just live with my father now."



Another broken home, thought Andrew. Too many divorced parents lately. Bad for the children not to have both parents.

"What's your last name, Reggie?"

The boy seemed to hesitate a moment. Then his face brightened. "Smith," he said. "It's Smith, sir."

"What's your father's first name, son?"

"He really doesn't use it, sir. Everybody just calls him Smith, or sometimes Smitty."

"Would you mind if we gave him a ring? Just to let him know you're alive and well?"

"Okay," said the boy.

"Fine. What's your telephone number?"

Reggie thought furiously for a moment. A different prefix, that was what Smith had called it, and the last four digits were the same, except for the last digit. He closed his eyes tight and tried to visualize it, and then it came to him. He recited it carefully to the old man, remembering to substitute a '4' for the '3' on the end.

The old man seemed pleased. He walked into the parlor to get the phone, and carried it back into the kitchen.

"Want me to dial it?"

The boy nodded. "Yes sir," he said. "That'd be okay."

Andrew dialed the number carefully, saying the number out loud as he did so, and watching the boy's face to make sure he had it right. He let it ring several times, and then heard a sleepy voice on the other end.

"Mr. Smith," he told the voice. "This is Andrew Garvey. I've found your boy, Reggie. Would you like to talk to him?"

"Here you are, Reggie," Andrew told the boy, handing the phone to the boy. "Now don't hang up when you're through, so I can give your father directions on how to get here."

## Chapter 13

The call came in the early morning. Smith wrenched himself up through layers of sleep, flailing his hand out for the cell phone that was beeping on his bedside table.

At first he had difficulties understanding what the man on the other end of the line was saying, and then he was suddenly talking to Reggie, who was calling him from some place in the East Bay. The man had found the boy sleeping with his dog in the front yard, and now Reggie was sitting in the man's kitchen, eating breakfast.

Smith asked him to put the man back on the phone so he could get directions on how to get there and thirty five minutes later he was retracing the route he had followed that morning, about five minutes from his destination. He was bursting to discover by what miracle Reggie had escaped the clutches of Big Mac and Ernie, but he hadn't wanted to ask any questions over the phone. The man had apparently assumed that Smith was Reggie's father, and all Smith could think about was how inordinately pleased he was that Reggie had called him first. Roger Lambeaux - what a stupid phony bastard he must be - just didn't appreciate what a fine boy he had.

After the boy had left with his father, Andrew went out to the front to get the morning paper, but it was nowhere to be found. He looked in the ditch, but all he discovered was another empty beer can. There was something about a newspaper in the back of his mind. He wandered back to the house, so lost in thought he left the front gate ajar behind him. Somewhere in the immediate past there was something he was struggling to remember, and it had to do with a newspaper article. Maybe in yesterday's newspaper. He found it in the recycle box in the kitchen. On page three of the front section there was an article about a boy who had been kidnapped. A boy whose name was Reginald.

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Smith called Sheila when he returned to the city.

"It was a real pleasant surprise," he told her. I was pretty bummed out, after spending the whole night staked out in front of Tweeds' place, wondering what the hell had happened to the kid. I had barely gotten to sleep when the phone rang. Smart little son of a gun. He was able to remember the number just from our brief conversation."

"He's all right, then?"

"Sure. He's getting a well-deserved rest in the spare bedroom. Outside of a slight chill and some cuts and bruises, he's relatively unscathed."

"You have the boy there, at your place?"

"Of course. He's shown such loyalty, I've got to trust him. Besides, where else could I have gone at a moment's notice?"

"So that means you'll be going ahead with your plans."

"Of course, and it also means you'll be in danger as soon as I make the second ransom call tomorrow night. You'd better plan on moving in with me right away."

"How about tonight?"

"Can't. I've got an important business meeting. How about this afternoon? I don't feel too easy about you being by yourself tonight. It shouldn't be long before Dibbs lets Tweeds know that the kid hasn't returned to the bosom of his family.

"Who's Dibbs?"

"He's the lady-killer snitch I was telling you about. Tweeds won't know for sure where the kid is, but there aren't many places he could be. When Tweeds finds out the ransom is on again, he'll be pretty sure Reggie's back with us."

"When you said I'll be in danger, you were talking about Tweeds."

"Right. Tweeds probably doesn't know your address, but it shouldn't take him long to find out. When's your test over with?"

"I should be through by noon."

"Can I pick you up then?"

"As long as you let me pack a suitcase," she said.

"We can move your whole darn wardrobe over here if you like."

"You really think I'm in danger?"

"You wouldn't care for a repeat of last night, would you?"

"No," said Sheila. "You've convinced me. Pick me up at my place at eleven thirty. That'll give me time to pack."

"So what's this business meeting about?" Sheila asked, after Smith had carted in the umpteenth load from his truck.

"Let me catch my breath first. I never knew a person could wear so many clothes."

"You said I could bring my entire wardrobe. It's your own fault."

"I didn't know what I was letting myself in for. You were never married to Ferdinand Marcos, were you?"

"Who's Ferdinand Marcos?" asked Reggie, who had been relatively quiet after his long nap.

"He was dictator of the Philippines," answered Smith. "His wife, Imelda, had something like a couple thousand pairs of shoes."

"Wow," said Reggie. "How many pairs of shoes do you have?" he asked Sheila.

"Not even a couple hundred," she said, unperturbed. "So tell me about this so-called business meeting, Mr. Chauncey Smith. Or is it just a euphemism for an assignation with your other inamorata?"

"Is that his first name - Chauncey?" asked Reggie, interested.

"No," said Sheila, "it's just what I call him when I need a first name. He's never told me his whole real name, and I can't call him Smith all the time. Sometimes I call him Alphonse. I figure if I can find a first name he really hates, I'll use it to force him to tell me his real one."

"How about Cuthbert?" asked Reggie, joining in. "That's a pretty nerdy name."

"Now you watch out," Smith said to him with mock seriousness, "or I'll make you eat liver and onions for three days straight."

"Ugh," said Reggie. "Maybe Cuthbert isn't so good after all."

"So," pursued Sheila, "what's this mysterious meeting about?"

"Well," said Smith, "I've decided this escapade is a little too much for one person, so I've decided to bring in some high-priced talent to help me pull it off."

"It might not be such a bad idea," said Sheila. "It makes me nervous to think of you duking it out all by yourself with Tweeds, the cops, and the F.B.I."

"Is the F.B.I. after you too?" asked Reggie.

"Fraid so, Sport," said Smith. "They get involved in all kidnappings."

"Wow," said Reggie. "Wait till Jack hears about this!"

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Sheila said pointedly to Smith.

"We're going to have to have a long talk about what you tell your friends, Sport," Smith said to Reggie, putting his arm about the boy's shoulders. "But it'll have to be later. I gotta grab a couple hours sleep before I collapse."

## Chapter 14

Smith's final mission for the day took him to a sleazy pub in the outer Mission called The Castle, which bore no resemblance to its name, except for the phony knight's armor and coats of arms that decorated the wall behind the bar. The barman knew him by sight, and nodded to him as he entered. Smith asked for a beer on tap.

"Seen Jim or Ray yet?" he asked the fat, dour man behind the bar.

"Jim should be in at four thirty. You know how he is. Like clockwork. Ray's here - just went to the head. He's at the back table." He finished drawing the beer, scooping off the excess foam with a wooden paddle.

"Thanks, Lou," said Smith, raising the glass and dipping his nose into the foam. He drank it down with gusto, and set the empty mug back on the bar. "Give me another while you're at it and I'll leave you alone for a while. And another one for Ray. Whatever he's drinking."

"Thirsty, eh?" said Lou, refilling Smith's glass and setting it down before him, then reaching under the bar and, locating a bottle of Glen Fiddich, poured a generous amount into a double shot glass.

"Long day," explained Smith, putting some bills on the bar and grabbing the two drinks. "Keep the change, Lou." He got up and walked to the back table, where Jim and Ray usually held court at this time of day. Jim the Gent and Ray the Rat, as they were universally known, except of course that nobody except Ray's enemies called him that to his face. Jim, however, was inordinately proud of his soubriquet, although, unless one had seen him all dolled up and on the job, he hardly seemed to merit it. The two were a pair of con artists Smith had worked with from time to time, whenever a good lock man had been needed for one of their scams.

"Hey Smitty," said Ray, emerging from the john and walking with quick little steps to the table where Smith sat with his beer. "Got your message. Long time no see."

"It's been a while. Hope you don't mind the short notice."

"Not at all," said Ray. "Good to see you." He extended his hand in a brief, limp-wristed handshake as he sat down. He was nattily-dressed, a small, ferret-faced man with a prominent Roman nose, and large lips which he licked often. His small eyes darted quickly and continuously around the bar as they spoke, returning every few seconds to look squarely at Smith. He raised the glass Smith had just brought him in a silent toast and took an appreciative sip. "What's up?"

"Well," said Smith, pulling another quaff from his beer, and wiping his mouth off with the back of his hand, "I got a game going, and I need a little talent to pull it off right. I was hoping you and Jim might be available."

"Something big?"

"Very big. It might mean a couple hundred thou apiece if you guys are interested. I've got myself in one of those situations where I can't be in three places at one time, and I need some people I can really trust."

"Well, you came to the right place. Jim oughta be here any second," said Ray, consulting his watch.

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Sheila was still awake when he arrived home. She turned on the light as he entered the bedroom, half sitting up in bed, shielding her eyes from the sudden glare.

"Hi, Smitty," she said.

"Hi, Babe. sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't. I've been lying here thinking about things."

"Why don't you turn off the light. I don't need it. I should know my own house pretty well by now." He unbuttoned his shirt in the darkness and felt about with his hands for a chair to hang it on. "Where'd you put the goddam chair?" he asked.

"Where it belongs," she said. "At the desk."

"You've been normalizing my house again. Before I know it there'll be flowerprint drapes and slipcovers on all the furniture. And little china figurines all over the place."

"That's for tomorrow. Why don't you quit complaining and come to bed."

"With my clothes on?"

"If you feel safer that way."

He kicked his shoes off and dropped his clothes on the floor. The sheets felt cool to his body as he climbed into bed.

"You're hot," she said, snuggling up to him.

"Goes along with my cold heart. So what have you been thinking about?"

"What kind of future is in store for me if I stick with you. Somehow I don't much care for the prospect of becoming a perpetual prison visitor. I just can't see myself coming to see you every Sunday, bringing homemade cakes with hacksaws and coils of rope concealed in them."

"I've been thinking about the future too. I didn't realize when I pinched the boy that things would never be the same again. He was just there, like it was the next thing to do." He sighed. "All I know is, I can't go back to doing what I was doing. It was too much like the eight to five. Whatever happens, it's got to be different. I have to do more than just get by."

"You're probably feeling that way because you're nearing forty."

"God, is life that soap-operatic?"

"And what do I do in the meantime? Just hang loose until you decide?"

"I know it's asking a lot, but would you just stick with me until I finish this job? I know I could give you a better answer then."

"How long will it all take? A couple weeks?"

"More like three. I'm planning two money exchanges, but I'm going to let them think there are going to be three."

"What's wrong with one exchange?"

"If we went for just one exchange they might try to wing it without the money, so even if we got away, we could end up with nothing."

"Yes," she said impatiently. "I'm with you so far."

"So we ask for three money exchanges, with the understanding that on the third exchange, we give them back the kid. They'd be willing to bring real money the first two times, because there'd still be one more. It's on the third exchange they get the boy back, and they wouldn't want to jeopardize his safety. If they reneged on us the first or second time, there wouldn't be an exchange for the boy."

"And then you don't show up the third time."

"You got it," he said. "Then there's another factor. The two million. When I hatched this plot, I figured to do it alone, and to hit old Roger for one cool million. But then when I realized I had to bring in some partners, I knew I had to offer them a substantial part of the take, or they wouldn't be motivated enough. So I decided to offer them two hundred thousand each."

"They're that good?"

"They're about as slick as they come," he said. "I've known them for a long time. They could sell cigars to wooden Indians."

"So what's this other factor?"

"Well. So if I give each of them two hundred thousand, and I want a million for myself, it means I have to ask for one point four million. Which means two money exchanges for point seven million each. Now, if I'm going to use this dodge of three exchanges, then for what amount of money would the nonexistent third exchange be for?"

"I give up."

"Point six million," he said dramatically.

"I don't get it," she said.

"What do seven hundred thousand, seven hundred thousand, and six hundred thousand add up to?"

"Let's see. Two million."

"Exactly, and what's so magic about two million?"

"I don't know. What's so magical about it?"

"It's a round number," he said.

"So?"

"Whenever kidnappers or blackmailers ask for money, they ask for it in round numbers. Why bother with one point four when you can ask for two?"

"Well," she said. "I don't think I can argue against such bizarre logic, but I'm still bothered about you taking a chance on your safety twice."

"There're some other reasons for more than one exchange. First of all, there's the sheer weight of two million in cash. Even in hundred dollar bills, do you know what it is?"

"No, what is it?"

"Almost fifty pounds. You can carry a fifty pound bag, but it takes an effort. It's certainly hard to run with it. And it doesn't lend itself to the various schemes I can think of to switch bags without the kidnappee or the cops being aware that a switch has been made. But if you divide that fifty pounds by three, you're down to less than twenty pounds."

"I see," she said.

"But there's still one major reason for the idea of three exchanges."

"What's that?"

"Well," he said. "I've never approved of kidnappers."

"That's a reason for being one?"

"It's a reason for making it more than just a kidnapping. From the beginning I have been struck by what a lousy father Roger Lambeaux has been. And that he ought to pay for it. Remember the line from the Mikado - 'make the punishment fit the crime.' I figured I ought to send him to the places he should have taken his kid to. A baseball

game. The circus. An amusement park. Make these the places where the money gets exchanged."

"That's why three."

"That's why three."

"And the third time," she said, "he gets taken for a ride at the amusement park."

"That's a great line. Now why didn't I think of that?"

"Because you can't think of everything. That's why you took on two new partners. Now how long do you figure all of this going to take?"

"I'll need time to set each scheme up, and to make it poetically appropriate, I'll take Reggie to each of the three events as well, only a week ahead of the exchange with Roger. That'll also give me a chance to fine-tune my plans. Weekends are best for crowds, and to pull off what I have in mind I'll need lots of people around. So maybe two weeks per exchange."

"You're going to drag this out over six weeks?"

"Not really. Since the third exchange is a phony, and the time between the first and second exchanges is only two weeks, that means the dangerous part is going to be over with in fifteen days."



## Chapter 15

When Aldo Rivera arrived at the office on Thursday morning, the first thing he did was to pull out his desk drawer, open up a new pack of cigarettes from his rapidly-diminishing carton, and light one up. He ignored the posted signs banning smoking inside the building. It was all a crock foisted off on the rest of the world by a bunch of controlling do-gooders.

He drew in another lungful of smoke and let it out with enjoyment. He never smoked around his wife. The official fiction was that he had given up smoking, but he knew that Ellen knew better. She could still smell nicotine in his clothes, see it in his yellowed fingers, and taste it in his kiss.

One of the reasons he was always eager to get to the office every morning was to have his nicotine fix. It was almost worth suffering the withdrawal at home when a cigarette was waiting at the office. The hell with them all - his wife and his doctor and all the rest of them, plotting to get him to give up smoking. They had even brainwashed his son at school into asking him to quit.

The second thing he did was glance at the note he had found in his in-box. An officer from the Berkeley Police Department by the name of Jenkins had called with some possible info on the Lambeaux case. Despite the earliness of the hour, he dialed it anyway. He was lucky and his man was in. Judging by his alert, cheerful voice, he sounded like one of that new young breed of cocksure graduates the academies were turning out nowadays, brought up on *Law and Order* and *N.Y.P.D. Blue*. Aldo identified himself and the reason for his call.

"Oh, yeah," he told Aldo. "They said you were in charge of the Lambeaux kidnapping investigation. Something came up that might be of interest to you. You have a minute? Let me find my report."

There was a brief pause.

"Here we go. A Mr. Andrew Garvey called the station on Tuesday morning. Said he might have some information on the Lambeaux kidnapping. We were a little busy at the time, so we couldn't send anyone at the time. We asked the squad car in the area this morning to stop by and check it out. Sergeant Freeman spoke to Mr. Garvey and filed a report when he got off shift. I took the responsibility of getting in touch with you."

"I appreciate that. What sort of information did he have?"

"Mr. Garvey, who is eighty one, but pretty sharp according to Sergeant Freeman, said he found a nine-year-old boy in his front yard on Tuesday morning. He guessed the boy was a runaway. Seems he got lost in the woods, and had a lot of minor cuts and scratches. Mr. Garvey got him to tell him his name, which he said was Reginald Smith, and ultimately talked him into giving him his father's telephone number. They called the boy's father, who came and got him, and that was that."

"Interesting," said Aldo. "How long had the boy been away from home?"

"He didn't say, and the old man didn't push it. Said he guessed it might have been a couple days."

"Probably just a coincidence," said Aldo. "Same age and same first name, but not a particularly common one, at that. Where did the boy live? Did he say?"

"He said San Francisco. Apparently he didn't find out how the boy got over here."

"You say Mr. Garvey called the father himself?"

"Right."

"Did he give you the telephone number?"

"It's not in the report."

Aldo got Andrew Garvey's address and telephone number, thanked the man, and hung up. He pulled out another cigarette from the fresh pack and lit it thoughtfully. Another Reginald, with a different last name, who was also nine years old, or was it the same one? Smith was a pretty suspicious last name. He wondered if the old man would be awake yet. He looked at his watch. Eight fifteen. A little early for a social call. Maybe this afternoon.

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In his dream, Smith was back in high school, failing an important examination. The buzzer sounded, signalling the end of the test, and he had not even answered the first question. Then the buzzer turned into the telephone ringing by his bedside, and he was sliding down out of the dream into a conversation with Jim the Gent.

"You sure you still wanna go through with all of this?" asked his new partner.

"With all of what?" he asked blearily. "Oh, yes, with all of that. Yeah, sure I do."

"I just wanna remind you that there's lots of ways of skinning this cat besides walking up to the cops and saying 'hey I done it, I'm the one'. Goddam it now, Smitty, I know I said okay last night, but you can be pretty persuasive."

"We talked about all those other ways," said Smith groggily, "and they got eliminated."

"Yeah, and you were the one doin' the eliminatin'."

"I'm not the only one taking chances. If things go wrong, you might be left holding the bag. You have a chance to check on a dance studio?"

"Not yet. I'm gonna check in the neighborhood newspapers. I'll bet I can find something in the Mission pretty cheap."

"Get on it, Jim. I want to get an ad in the Chronicle as soon as possible, but before I do that I have to line up an answering service, for which I need the address of the studio. Right now, you're on the critical path."

"Okay, Smitty. You gonna get the tickets to the Saturday ballgame? Time's short on that too."

"Right you are, Jim. There's a ton of things to do. You talked to Ray yet today?"

"Yeah. He's gonna check with the Muni Charter Service."

"How's he going to pay?"

"Cashier's check. Hey, we still gonna meet tomorrow?"

"We have to. At the Castle at two? Check on the costumes if you get a chance."

"This has gotta be the most elaborate con I've ever been a part of, Smitty. You oughta sell the idea to the movies."

"I don't think they'd be willing to negotiate a contract with someone named 'Anonymous.'"

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Luther Dibbs was not an early riser, and he cursed the phone liberally as he fought his way up from the watery depths of sleep to answer it.

"Luther?"

"Yeah," he managed to croak out. What the hell time was it? He looked groggily at his wristwatch. Jesus! One in the afternoon. His hangover had diminished somewhat since he had last checked in with reality at nine in the morning.

"Tweeds here. You still in bed?"

"Yeah, I tied one on last night. What's up?"

"The information you gave me about the boy is what's up. It was wrong, as you know. I appreciate your having told me about the mixup, but now you've got to keep me informed about what's going on. I haven't heard anything from you now in five days."

"What more can I tell you? I didn't hear about it until late Saturday morning, when that dumb bitch decided to tell me. I let you know first thing."

"And I appreciated it. But now I have to know what's going on in that household. And you're the only one who can tell me."

Jesus, back to old skinny, puritanical Thelma! "Sure, I'll get on it right away. What is it in particular you need to know about?"

"I need to know if the boy has returned home, or whether a second ransom call has been made since Sunday evening. Find out as soon as you can. Then call me back. I'll be here all afternoon."

Luther let the phone fall back in the cradle and sank back into the warmth of the bed, massaging his headache. He fumbled in his mind for the number of the Lambeaux house. Thelma would be there alone. Finally it came to him. He dialed the number slowly, not wanting to, but knowing he had to.

"Thelma? This is Luther here. Luther Dibbs."

"I don't know no Luther Dibbs," said the voice on the other end. "I thought I did, but then when I didn't get no telephone calls for four days straight, worrying about what I musta done wrong, I figure Luther, he just off to greener pastures, time to dump old Thelma."

"Now, Thelma, I just got back from three days up in Seattle. Yeah, no kidding. I must have told you about it. No? It must've just slipped my mind. No, just a business trip. So how you doing? The place still swarming with cops?"

"No, it cooled down some, but the police were here on Sunday night, and then they come back last night. Had a big meeting, waiting around for some important phone call. Kept me busy making coffee and sandwiches, emptying ashtrays."

"What kind of phone call? You get a chance to hear any of it?"

"Who, me? I'm just the maid. You think Mr. Lambeaux think I'm important enough to know what's going on in this house? The minute that phone call started, they sent me back to the kitchen. You want to know what's going on, you ask Mr. Lambeaux. Is that what you called me about, to know what's going on?"

"No, no, Thelma. I just wondered how things were with you. I only asked because I know you were pretty upset about the boy and all."

"Well, I'm still upset, but they just keep me in the dark around here. Just like you keep me in the dark. Why you calling me now, after forgetting about me for four whole days?"

"Like I told you, Thelma, I had to go to Seattle for business reasons. I didn't forget you. I was just real busy."

"Well, I'm pretty busy myself, right now. Why you calling me?"

"I was just wondering what you had planned for this weekend. Thought you might like to go out for dinner, take in a movie or something."

"I see. Well, I'm not in too good a mood right now to listen to any sweet talk, Mr. Dibbs. Mr. Lambeaux, he like a bear these last few days. Thelma this and Thelma that. You'd think I was some damn slave. Look, Luther. Why don't you call me again tomorrow? Maybe I be in a better frame of mind to listen to you."

"Okay, Thelma. Take care." Luther eased the receiver back into the cradle with almost a feeling of relief. He wasn't too sure he wanted to call her back tomorrow. He could just tell Tweeds that Thelma was mad at him. He didn't know how much longer he could continue to fake an interest in her. He reached for the phone again. Might as well get it over with.

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Tweeds hung the phone up, and sat back in his chair to contemplate the news he had gotten. The boy had not returned, and a second ransom call had ostensibly been made. There was no other explanation for the meeting the maid had described to Dibbs. Unless the boy had met some untimely end, it meant he was back with Smith. He wondered how it had come about. There was much work to be done.

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Aldo Rivera slowly navigated the curves in the road, keeping a sharp eye out for an address. House numbers were hard to spot in this heavily wooded part of town. He checked the street number Jenkins had given him. Should be soon now. The next house seemed to fit the description - white, with a picket fence and a hedge. He slowed down to five miles per hour and stopped at the gate to peer at the mailbox. An old man opened the gate and stared back at him.

Aldo rolled down the window. "I'm looking for the Garvey residence," he called out.. "It's hard to make out the street numbers around here." He saw the old man cup his ear to hear him better and he repeated the message.

"I'm Garvey," said the old man. "What is it you wanted?"

"Nice cup of coffee you make," said Aldo. "I really shouldn't drink it. Hypertension and all that."

"Yes, I can understand, young man. Want a refill?"

"Thanks. I think I'll make an exception. What's your secret?"

"My secret is living naturally. By that I mean thinking right and eating right. I used to be a Christian Scientist, but I gave all that up. Too much theory, not enough right-mindedness. When you know the truth, you don't go in for bullshit any more, young man."

"Young man," said Aldo. "God, I wish I were. But I appreciate your comment on bullshit, Mr. Garvey. I feel the same way. Still, do you drink a lot of coffee?"

"A few cups in the morning, Mr. Rivera."

"Call me 'Aldo.'"

"Aldo. Interesting name. Italian, I guess."

“Very Italian, Mr. Garvey. I understand you had a boy here recently?”

“Yes sir. Reginald. A very fine boy. His father came and picked him up.”

“Did you notice what make of car the father was driving?”

“All I can tell you is that it was a new model, but what make? All these new cars look the same to me. When I was younger, cars looked different from each other. You could easily tell a Cadillac from a Ford or a Plymouth. But now they all look like they came out of Flash Gordon.”

“Do you remember the color?”

“Sorry. I think it was blue or purple, but it could even have been red. I just wasn’t paying attention.”

“Getting back to the boy, I understand you noticed a resemblance between him and a missing boy you read about in the paper.”

“I did, and I talked to a policeman. A very nice young man by the name of Freeman. But when I thought about it, I realized the boy looked more like my grandson than he did that boy in the picture in the paper.”

“Yes sir. And how old did you say he seemed to be?”

On the drive back, Aldo reviewed in his mind the little bit the old man had added to his scant knowledge of this other boy by the name of Reginald. Outside of what Aldo had known before - age and last name ‘Smith,’ the only thing that had been added was that this ‘Smith,’ according to the old man at least, had acted like a real father, and had seemed genuinely pleased to see his son, and the boy had acted like a real son. And that the newspaper photo of Reginald Lambeaux had not resembled this other boy.

That plus the little the old man had been able to remember about the telephone number the boy had given him, and which he had called. The prefix was still a complete blank to the old man, but he had been able to recall the last four digits. That might be of some help. Frank would definitely be interested.

## Chapter 16

At the end of the second inning, the Giants were ahead, one to nothing. Reggie was in seventh heaven, sitting right behind the batters' cage. He had a large Coke between his legs, leaving his hands free to shell peanuts.

"It's weird just throwing the shells on the floor," said Reggie. "Dad would probably give me a lecture if I did something like that."

"Generally, he's right," said Smith, "but here it's expected, and they have guys who clean up afterwards. If you didn't throw the shells on the deck, they'd be out of a job."

People were getting up during the break, going to the restrooms or getting more beer. Smith and Reggie just sat, looking around at the beautiful blue Saturday afternoon sky, and littered the emptied seats in front of them with more peanut shells.

"Would you guess that Kirk Rueter is a better pitcher than Jose Rijo?" asked Reggie.

"He pronounces it 'Reeter,'" said Smith.

"That's weird," said Reggie. "So which one is better?"

"I'd say that both pitchers are throwing a lot of slop," said Smith. "Their fastballs aren't very fast, but I'd say that Rueter has the edge right now. Rijo's been making a comeback recently, though, so we'll have to wait and see."

"How fast can Reuter throw the ball?" asked Reggie.

"I don't know. Maybe around eighty five miles per hour."

"What's the fastest anybody's ever thrown it?"

"A hundred and two," said Smith. "Nolan Ryan."

"What if both pitchers threw perfect games," said Reggie. "Would they just keep on playing forever?"

"They'd have to," said Smith, but it'll never happen. The pitchers' arms can only last so long, and after they ran out of relief pitchers, the batters would start having a field day."

"It's really awesome," said Reggie, "how close they come to hitting the guy who's up to bat. Does anyone ever get hit by the ball?"

"Yeah, it happens more often than you might think. But those plastic helmets protect them pretty well. They didn't always wear them, though."

"Did anybody get hurt back then?"

"Sure. Over the years, a lot of batters got knocked out or sent to the hospital, but still, in the whole history of baseball, only one person ever died by being hit in the head by a pitched ball. That happened back in the twenties, to a guy by the name of Roy Chapman."

Smith left briefly, having first ensured Reggie had everything he wanted, from peanuts and a hot dog to a game program.

At the other end of the stadium, in the cheap seats, Smith found Jim and Ray. He timed his journey at about ten minutes.

"Hey, Smitty," said Jim as Smith sat down next to him. Ray gave him a cheery nod.

"Nice job on the ad, Smitty."

"I haven't had a chance to buy a paper," said Smith.

“Here you go,” said Ray, passing him the classified section. There it was, under personal services:

WANTED: 50 WHITE MALES BETWEEN THE AGES OF 30-35, HEIGHT 6’ TO 6’1”, WEIGHT 180-190 LBS, PANTS SIZE 38” INSEAM, 34” WIDTH, 42” LENGTH, DARK HAIR, NO FACIAL HAIR. MUST SUPPLY BLACK SHOES, DARK SOCKS, WHITE SHIRT. \$120 FOR 4 HRS WORK. CALL 681-0327 BETWEEN 8 & 5.

“The restrooms close enough?” asked Smith.

“Couldn’t be better,” said Jim.

“Except for watching the game,” said Ray. “You need a telescope to watch the action from here.”

“That’s all right,” said Smith. “They’ll all get a better seat after the second inning.”

“Except for us,” said Ray.

“A hundred grand each should make you feel better,” said Smith. “Plus another hundred grand a week later.”

“You got the next scam figured out already?” asked Ray.

“I’ll tell you about it when we get together tonight. Be sure to check with the stadium manager on the video camera.”

“I’ll go see him right now,” said Ray. “You don’t wanna stick around, do you Jim?”

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Later in the evening, after Sheila and Reggie and he had polished off two large take-out pizzas, Smith drove over to Jim’s in Bernal Heights.

From the outside, Jim’s two-tone Victorian house looked like a lot of other San Francisco Victorians, but on the inside it was an Aladdin’s cave. The entryway was uncluttered, with a park bench against one wall, a giant, gold-framed mirror against the other. One wall of the dining room was covered with African sculptures, the opposite one with religious icons, while the third was devoted to miniature paintings of medieval Europe and the fourth to an array of pipes – pot pipes and opium pipes, peace pipes and pan pipes. The living room was out of the sixties, with framed rock posters and macrame peace symbols, photos of Bill Graham and Mike Ferguson and Grace Slick, a newspaper rack filled with copies of the Berkeley Barb and Ramparts magazine.

“I never get tired of coming over here,” Smith told Jim as he took a seat in the living room. “Nowadays, I’m not entirely enchanted with the directions the world is taking. Here there’s no sense of the present, no sense of the passage of time. Except for Ray over there. He reminds me that things are happening. Hi, Ray.”

“Thanks,” said Jim. “You understand what I’m trying to achieve.”

“He’s full of shit, right Smitty?” said Ray.

“Ray’s the only person in the world who truly understands me,” said Jim, magnanimously. “What’s inside the briefcase?” he asked Smith. “Atomic secrets?”

“My plans for taking over the world,” said Smith. “Actually just my plans for taking two thirds of two million dollars. Voilà.” He unzipped the bag and withdrew a short stack of paper.

“Exhibit number one is the projected cost of money exchange number one,” said Smith, tossing them each a copy..

“Twenty thousand?” said Ray, sneaking a peak at the total on the last page. “How come so much?”

“We have only one more week,” said Smith. “So we have to pay top price for everything. If you’ll note on page two, Jim’s got the auditorium lined up for next Thursday for \$200, and I’ve hired an answering service for \$300 and put an ad in the Chronicle for \$100. Jim’s going to check with a costume shop, and I’m going to try to buy some slacks and bags. The last two items ought to come to about \$10,000. Then there are the tickets for next Saturday’s game. I’ll pick them up first thing Monday morning.”

“Lucky you’re picking up the tab on all of this,” said Jim. “I’m stony broke.

“How’d you do on the video camera?” Smith asked Ray.

“I checked with the managerial assistant in charge of special events at Pac Bell Park,” said Ray, “and after I promised on a stack of bibles that I’d get the camera out of the park before the game started, she gave me a note to show to the guy at the gate.”

“She good-lookin’?” asked Jim.

“A knockout,” said Ray. “I spent the whole time tryin’ not to look at her boobs.”

“Are we a special event?” asked Smith.

“The Santa Clara Junior College Alumni Marching Band’s fifteenth anniversary, I told her,” said Ray.

“Pretty impressive,” said Smith. “I take it the stack of bibles was pure hyperbole.”

“One nice thing about stacks of bibles is that there aren’t many around,” said Ray, “so it makes ‘em kinda convenient to swear on.”

“A hundred years ago they might’ve been able to lay hands on a whole stack,” said Smith. “By the way, how many does it take to make a stack?”

“Ten or twelve,” suggested Jim.

“Seven,” said Ray.

“Would you swear to that on a stack of bibles?” asked Smith.

“Seems like this is where I came in,” said Jim. “Who’s on first?”

“Let me pass around the second of my handouts,” said Smith. “The proposed schedule of events. You will note the extreme erudition of my plan of action.”

After ten minutes or so of silence, punctuated only by Jim’s asthmatic wheeze and an occasional cough from Ray, Jim finally got to the last page.

“Pretty well thought out, Smitty,” he said, “except that you don’t mention how I’m supposed to get the money out of the stadium.”

“I left it unresolved,” said Smith. “I was hoping I might get some ideas from you on that. I had a lot of ideas, like you dressing up like a hunchback, and hiding the money inside your hump, but I was forced to reject them.”

“I’m glad of that, Smitty,” said Jim. “I’m not the Quasimodo type. Bell ringing doesn’t appeal to me, anymore. I guess I did enough of that back when I was selling bibles door-to-door.”

“I’d love to’ve heard your bible spiel,” said Ray.

“You know what kind of suit a lawyer wants the guy he’s suing to wear?” said Smith.

“I give up,” said Jim.



"One with deep pockets," said Smith, significantly.

"Ah," said Jim. "That's an idea. The only trouble is that the cops will really be giving everyone leaving the ballpark a critical look, and deep pockets would attract attention. Especially when they had seven hundred thousand dollars in them. How about a whole lot of little pockets?"

"That's an idea," said Smith. "Let's see, how many would you need to have?"

"A packet of hundred dollar bills has a hundred bills in it, doesn't it?" said Ray.

"Right," said Jim, "and it would amount to ten thousand dollars."

"And there are seventy packets in seven hundred thousand dollars," said Ray.

"Seventy pockets," said Smith.

"How big are the packets?" asked Ray.

"Assuming that hundred dollar bills are the same thickness as one dollar bills," said Smith, "I picked up a pack of a hundred ones the other day at the bank. Just to get a feel for the real thing." He reached into his pocket and tossed a small packet of bills on the table.

"It's a lot smaller than you'd think," said Ray.

"It's actually only a quarter of an inch thick," said Smith.

"So the pockets wouldn't have to be too big."

"How about an array of pockets, seven by ten," said Jim. "Ten horizontally, and seven vertically."

"Inside your coat?" asked Ray.

"How about inside my shirt?" said Jim. "I'd need one a couple sizes larger."

"Okay," said Smith. "That would seem safer."

"You'd need a larger coat," said Ray. "To fit around the shirt."

"I'll make a round of the thrift stores on Monday," said Jim. "Then see if I can find a seamstress who'll do the job. She'd have five days to do it. I might have to grease her palm a little, though."

"No problem," said Smith. "Just let me know how much you'll need. What kind of reason would you give her? It's an unusual request."

"I'll just tell her I'm a stage magician," said Jim, "and I need it for my act."

"You pulled that out of a hat faster than a rabbit," said Smith.

"I was an amateur magician when I was a child," said Jim.

"You should've combined your acts," said Ray, "and pulled bibles out of a hat."

"Religious folks tend to frown on magic tricks," said Jim.

"Any other serious areas that merit discussion?" said Smith.

"I was thinkin', Smitty," said Ray, "that maybe you oughta show up on Thursday with the rest of the messengers. Just act like you're one of 'em."

"Good suggestion, Ray," said Smith, "but I want to watch Lambeaux' house this week. I'd like to see the armored car arrive. I want to know that Lambeaux is serious. I don't want to pull off this stunt and end up with Monopoly money."

"You're sure he's gonna have it delivered to his house?" said Ray.

"It'd be too impractical for him to have to stop at the bank on the way to the ball park. If I know one thing about Roger, it's that he likes his comfort."

"So what's left to do?" said Jim.

"The slacks and the flight bags," said Smith. "I think I'd better handle the slacks myself. It's a lot easier for me, considering it's my size."

"I'll take care of the flight bags," said Ray. "It says here 'sixty.' I thought there were only fifty messengers."

"Fifty five, to take care of no-shows. Plus one extra for the money, and two more for the instructions to Roger, and then two more for the second money exchange."

"Where do you guys think I oughta look? K-Mart? Wall-Mart? Target? So many of those places have gone belly up the last couple years."

"It's the most important thing on the agenda," said Smith. "Get on it first thing Monday morning. Go through the phone book. If you need help, Jim and I will pitch in."

"Macy's might be a good place to look," said Jim.

"That's probably where I'll be going to look for slacks," said Smith. "I guess everything else is taken care of, right?"

"There must be an easier way to get seven hundred thousand dollars," said Jim.

## Chapter 17

The second message came on schedule, at exactly 9:00 P.M.. The phone company technician was on the line, waiting to trace the call. The rest of them were seated in Roger Lambeaux' study. Stan Phillips was at the desk, his finger positioned above the start button of the tape recorder, wondering how the tests on his liver biopsy were going to turn out. Roger Lambeaux was wondering whether he should have called the whole thing off and refused to deal with the ransomers. He was also wondering if he was going to be able to screw Gloria later that night.

On the other side of the room, Aldo Rivera was thinking about the fact that he had just smoked his last cigarette, and that his backup pack was still in his desk at the station. Vic Jeeter was thinking about the fact that his child support payments would soon be coming to an end, while Frank Sabella was wondering how his new girl friend was going to take his wife's coming to town. He was also not entirely convinced that Aldo's suggestion about it all being a prank perpetrated on the father by his son and a pal didn't have some merit. There was something unreal about the use of a computer-simulated voice in a recorded telephone message. And why were the kidnappers asking for a mere two million? Thelma, the maid, was busy refilling coffee cups and emptying ashtrays, wondering why she hadn't heard from her new boy friend.

It was then that the phone rang, rescuing them all from further contemplation of their personal dilemmas. The voice was indeed as Roger had described. They listened intently.

"GOOD E-VE-NING, MIS-TER LAM-BEAUX. IN OUR LAST MES-SAGE, A RAN-SOM IN THE A-MOUNT OF TWO MILL-ION DOL-LARS WAS RE-QUES-TED FOR THE SAFE RE-TURN OF YOUR SON. YOU WERE TOLD TO MOVE THAT A-MOUNT INTO MONEY MARKET FUNDS TO FACILITATE ITS CONVERSION INTO CASH. YOU HAVE HAD AMPLE TIME TO DO THIS.

"NOW IT IS TIME TO BE MORE SPE-CI-FIC. THE RAN-SOM IS TO BE PAID IN IN-STALL-MENTS OF POINT SE-VEN MILL-ION, POINT SE-VEN MILL-ION, AND POINT SIX MILL-ION RE-SPEC-TIVE-LY. THIS WILL NE-CES-SI-TATE THREE MO-NEY EX-CHAN-GES. AT THE SUC-CESS-FUL CON-CLU-SION OF THE THIRD EX-CHANGE, YOUR SON WILL BE RE-TURNED TO YOU.

"THE FIRST PAY-MENT IS TO BE IN THE FORM OF SE-VEN, PLAS-TIC - WRAP-PED BUN-DLES, EACH CON-TAIN-ING ONE HUN-DRED THOU-SAND DOL-LARS. EACH BUN-DLE WILL CON-SIST OF TEN PACK-ETS, EACH CON-TAIN-ING TEN THOU-SAND DOL-LARS. EACH PACK-ET WILL CON-SIST OF ONE HUN-DRED USED, ONE HUN-DRED DOL-LAR BILLS, NO BILLS IN SER-I-AL NUM-BER GROUPS PLEASE. THE MO-NEY MUST BE DIR-ECT FROM THE FE-DE-RAL RE-SERVE BANK, WITH PLAS-TIC BAGS, SEALS, AND GOLD STRAPS IN-TACT."

"ON FRI-DAY OF THIS WEEK A FLIGHT BAG WILL BE DE-LI-VERED TO YOU. IT IS TO BE USED FOR TRANS-PORT AND DE-LI-VER-Y OF THE MO-NEY, WHICH SHALL BE MADE BY YOU,

PER-SON-AL-LY, AC-COR-DING TO IN-STRUC-TIONS IN-SIDE THE BAG.

"A-NY AT-TEMPTS ON YOUR PART TO BE CUTE WILL NOT BE COUN-TE-NAN-CED WITH E-QUA-NIM-I-TY. E-VER-Y EX-CHANGE WHICH GETS FUCK-ED UP BY EI-THER YOU OR YOUR COP COM-PAN-IONS WILL RE-SULT IN THE SUB-MIS-SION TO YOU BY MAIL OF A SE-LEC-TED POR-TION OF YOUR SON'S A-NA-TO-MY."

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence as they all digested the substance of the message. Stan rewound the tape. Vic cleared his throat and Aldo reached for another non-existent cigarette.

"Sounds as if he's got this house under surveillance," said Frank.

"Either that or he's just guessing," said Vic. "It's a sure bet that we would be involved."

"Somehow I think Frank is right," said Aldo. "I think these guys must be amateurs, asking for three money exchanges."

"Do you think he's just trying to frighten me with that threat about sending me pieces of my son's body?" asked Roger.

"Are you frightened?" asked Frank.

"Yes and no," said Roger. "Do you think he's serious?"

"Hard to tell," said Frank. "It's pretty clear that if he kills the goose he doesn't get the golden eggs. Of course he's trying to frighten you, but as to whether he means it or not, I couldn't possibly say. It takes a certain kind of mentality to kidnap a child, and it might be a real mistake to assume this guy is normal. Our best bet is to believe him, and go along as much as we can with his instructions. With three exchanges, we have a real good chance at nailing him."

"So you think I ought to pay the ransom?" asked Roger.

"Yeah," Frank said. "I do. Can you have it ready by Friday?"

"I think so," Roger said. "Dave Duerson over at First National has promised to help me on getting the money together."

"Will you have it delivered here?" asked Vic.

"Yeah," said Roger. "Probably by bank messenger and armored car."

"Where will you keep it?" asked Aldo. "The message didn't say what day the exchange will be set for, though it's a good guess they'll try for Saturday or Sunday."

"I've got a pretty sturdy safe in the basement," said Roger. "It's imbedded in concrete, so it couldn't even be lifted out with a crane. The steel case is two inches thick. Dynamite couldn't open it up."

The phone rang again. A man from the telephone company wanted to speak with Mr. Sabella.

"That'll be the technician tracing the call," said Frank. "May I take it right here?" he asked Roger.

"Sure," said Roger. "Use the one on my desk."

"Yeah," said Aldo, putting the phone to his ear. "Twentieth and Valencia? Which corner? Okay. Right." He hung up and pecked out a number on the phone pad. "Hal? Aldo here. Could you send a squad car out to Twentieth and Valencia? Pay phone on the

northeast corner. Our kidnapper just made a call on it. Great.” He put the hand set back in the cradle and turned back to Roger.

“You know, sooner or later these guys are gonna make a mistake, and we’ve got to help them do that if we can.”

“How can I help them?” asked Roger.

“Ask the kidnapper for proof your son is alive.”

“How can I talk to him? He talks to me. Or rather his fucking robot does.”

“Put a plea in the paper for him to send you proof your son is okay.”

“In the classifieds?”

“No, in the newspaper itself. Call up the Chron and offer them an interview in return for a message from you to the kidnappers. They ought to go for that.”

“You know anybody over there I could call?”

“Sure. Try Ralph Stewart. He’s a senior editor. We’re old buddies.”

“How’s this going to help trap the kidnappers?”

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll be lucky and get a fingerprint. It’s just one more chance for them to screw up, and it might help you sleep better at night if you knew he was all right.”

“Sure,” said Roger, thinking that he’d sleep a lot better if he could sleep with Gloria more often. The kidnappers seemed to like weekends for conducting business, and weekends were the only times Gloria was willing to make herself available.

Smith sat in his panel truck across the street from Roger Lambeaux’ residence. He had watched the arrival of the four law enforcement officers. The two cars double-parked outside the entrance were clearly cops. One was probably local, the other F.B.I.. Right now, according to his watch, Jim would be in a telephone booth playing the message for Roger and company.

They were still keeping the place under surveillance. So far, he had noted three different cars used. They were probably from a federal or municipal car pool, so it would be a matter of chance which was available on a given day. Today it was the 95 Datsun, parked down on Scott Street.

His cell phone rang three times, then stopped. That was a signal from Jim that the message had been sent. There was nothing left to do now except to wait for the cops to leave.

Later that night Smith played a copy of the message to Sheila.

“The last part is pretty gory,” she said. “Which parts of his body were you thinking of sending first?”

“Oh, maybe some fingernail filings,” Smith explained. “And if we ran out of those, maybe a lock of his hair.”

“Just as well you left it to their imaginations,” she said.

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On Monday afternoon, Smith dropped in on Alan Gebhardt. He was the kingpin of a couple auto theft rings. His specialty was preparing stolen cars for resale - repainting, minor repairs, filing off engine numbers, supplying legal plates. He did business with a number of auto wreckers from whom he obtained safe, used plates. He also had an

arrangement with a local dealership which furnished him with new plates at an exorbitant cost. Many of the cars he fixed up were driven to distant cities for resale. Many more were dismantled and converted into replacement parts which he sold to auto repair shops at relatively low prices. He also did customizing on request, souping up normal-looking Fords and Chevies to do a hundred and fifty on the freeway, putting in special suspensions to make them into effective getaway vehicles. He was good at what he did, and had been doing it for a dozen years. Smith had met him through underworld acquaintances, and made it a point to stay in contact with him. Alan operated out of a legitimate business front called California Custom Cars, which did just enough honest work to keep a legitimate profile. He was rather unpredictable, having a penchant for frequent vacations ocean fishing in Florida and Mexico, so Smith had called him in advance, just to make sure he would be in.

"Hey, Smitty," Alan called out to him, his head poking out from under a car. The garage, like most, was ill-lit and grimy, and Smith had to squint to make him out, coming in from the bright day outside.

"Hey yourself," said Smith, walking over to where Alan was sliding out from under a car.

"Come on back to the office," said Alan, wiping his hands and leading the way. "You were lucky to find me in today. Just got a rush job on that Vega. Have to have it out tonight." He plunked himself down behind a filthy, faded yellow desk, piled high with old work orders and vouchers. He motioned to the one other chair. "Have a seat. What's up?"

"I've got a rush job for you myself. Could mean a nice little fee for you if you have the time for it." He described what he wanted.

"That's a strange one," said Alan. "I don't think anyone ever asked me to do anything like that before. When do you need it?"

"A week from next Friday. Think you can do it?"

"Jeez, I don't know. I was sort of thinking of taking off next week. Friend of mine has a yacht down in Lauderdale. Invited me down to see the Florida keys. This really important to you?"

"Very, and I don't know many people I would trust to do it right."

"How much is it worth to you?"

"Ten thousand maybe. That would include the car as well. I'd leave it up to you what make would lend itself best to the alterations I want. Should be a relatively new model, but it doesn't matter that much. Could be as much as ten years old, as long as it's in reasonable shape. It only has to travel a few miles and it'll have served its purpose."

"That important, eh?"

"Very. You'd be doing me a big favor."

"How about twenty thou?" Alan said with a grin.

"How about fifteen?"

"Okay," said Alan. "You got a deal. It's going to pose an interesting problem, though. You want a big trunk?"

"Relatively. But it could be medium-sized. A Bentley, or a Rolls, or even a Mercedes. The important thing is the crawl space. Let me show you. Got a piece of paper?"

"Yeah, sure." He opened the desk drawer and pulled out a disreputable looking yellow pad. "Here you go. Need something to write with?"

"No, I'm okay," said Smith, pushing his chair closer to the desk as he pulled a pen out of his pocket and uncapped it. He sketched quickly, showing a side section of a generalized automobile. He drew the trunk compartment, and then added some body lines. "What I need is this - a passageway, really just a glorified crawl space, extending from the inside of the car to the back of the trunk. Then a panel or door that allows me access to the trunk, but which can't be seen when it's closed and the trunk lid is open. And then I need a hole in the chassis that allows someone to slip under the car. Besides that, the passageway has to be covered from the top so anyone looking into the car through the windows can't see into it. It would be best if the passageway extended clear to the front seats. It's easier with a Caddy, since it's so long in the body. I also need it sufficiently low in the back so a person standing behind it can't see someone emerging from the passageway, but there has to be sufficient room between the bottom of the car and the pavement. You get the idea?"

"Yeah. It poses some unique problems. I might have to cut the gas tank down some. You say it only has to travel a few miles? Well, I don't see any major problems. It'll be a chore, torching through the chassis like that. This passageway, where it runs from the back seats to the front. It's gonna be seen through the windows, no way around it. What do you want the exterior of it to look like?"

"An ordinary cardboard box would do. You'd have to find one just the right size. Make it look like it's sitting on the floor, squeezed between the seats."

"Yeah, that might do it. Would an old Caddy do? I just happen to have one on hand. You might have noticed it on your way in. You want legal plates, I guess."

"Sure, I'll settle for that. And yes, I'll need legal plates."

"What color you want the car?"

"How about something loud? Like pink, maybe."

"You really want it to attract attention, huh? Sure. I can make it any color you want. I've got a Volkswagen pink in stock, as a matter of fact."

"That'll do fine."

"Friday after next, huh? Any leeway in that?"

"None. I plan to use it on Saturday, and I don't want to take any chances on it not being ready by then. I'll leave you my number, in case you run into any difficulties."

"All right," said Alan. "I'll get cracking. That's the Friday after the coming Friday. What time?"

"How about noon?" asked Smith, getting up from his chair.

"Noon's fine," said Alan.

"See you then," said Smith, "although I may drop in on you before then, just to see how you're coming along."

"Feel free," said Alan, following him back out into the garage. "I'm assuming you don't need a pink slip."

"Right," said Smith, stopping to look at the late seventies Cadillac which was parked near the side wall of the office. "So this is the car."

"Yes. Nice shape, isn't it?"

"It'll look classy in pink. What a change in personality for this somber old lady. Well," said Smith, accepting the other's grimy paw, "I'd better leave you to it."

## Chapter 18

Tuesday morning's Chronicle carried a story on page 3 entitled FATHER OF KIDNAPPED BOY MAKES PLEA TO KIDNAPPERS. Smith read it while eating his bowl of oatmeal. Then he passed it to Sheila. Afterwards they let Reggie read it.

"All he wants," said Sheila to Smith, "is proof that his son is safe and unharmed. I'm surprised you didn't think of that before."

"You're right," said Smith. "I've been so involved with this money exchange business it hadn't occurred to me."

"What kind of proof could you give him?" Reggie wanted to know.

"We could send him one of your ears," said Smith with a twinkle in his eye. "You wouldn't miss an ear, would you?"

"Sure I would," said Reggie with a grin. "Maybe you could send him somebody else's ear. Dad probably wouldn't know the difference."

"Isn't this a rather grisly conversation?" said Sheila.

"Ear, ear," said Smith.

"Why don't I just call him up and tell him I'm okay?" said Reggie.

"That's a sensible idea," said Sheila. "Why not?"

"Could you do that, Sport?" asked Smith.

"I'd have to be real careful not to sound too happy," said Reggie. "That would make Dad real mad."

"I could give you a beating just before you call him," said Smith with a grin.

"You're certainly in a sadistic mood today," said Sheila.

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"Hello, Dad."

"Reggie, is that you?" asked Roger. Just a second." He pressed the record button. "Yes, go ahead."

"These people who kidnapped me," said Reggie. "They said I could talk to you and tell you I'm okay."

"Great, son," said Roger, then reduced his voice to a whisper. "Before you say anything else, which day did you get kidnapped on, Friday or Saturday?"

"They're listening in, Dad, and they told me I couldn't tell you anything like that."

"Were my paintings stolen when they took you?"

"I don't think so, Dad."

"I see," said Roger. "Well, how are you?"

"Not so good, Dad."

"What's that mean?"

"I mean they keep me locked up all the time. And the food is pretty awful."

"Do you know where you are? I mean are you in San Francisco?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure. There aren't any windows in my room, so I can't tell."

"Do you know where you're calling from?"

"I think it's a phone booth."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I don't think so, Dad. It's not any place that I recognize. I tried to see the street signs, but they wouldn't let me"



"That's not very helpful, son."

"Sorry, Dad."

"But basically, you're okay, right?"

"I guess so."

"Do they give you anything to read?"

"Just the Bible, Dad."

"That's all you have to read? Have you seen any newspapers?"

"No, Dad. But the Bible's not too bad. I'm already up to Numbers. Maybe by the time you get me back I'll be at Deuteronomy."

"Well, you could do worse," said Roger. "Keep a stiff upper lip, son."

"All right, Dad."

"Goodbye, Reggie."

"Bye, Dad."

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After Roger hung up the telephone, he sat, musing. Maybe he had been a little hard on his son, imagining him to be somehow responsible for the loss of his paintings. Still, it had been a strange coincidence.

He went off onto a fantasy, imagining having a solid rapport with Reggie, the kind of father-son relationship that he had always dreamed of, where he would transmit to Reggie all the principles that had made him, his father, successful in the world, and Reggie would listen, dutifully, and register what he said.

For Roger *was* successful. That was incontrovertible. 58 million in the bank was proof positive. His Econ prof would be proud. Roger regretted not having visited old McKean the last time he had been down to Stanford. They hadn't been particularly close, but McKean had approved Roger's Master's thesis, and that had meant a lot to Roger. He had never experienced approval from his father, and McKean's opinions had been important to Roger. He had even spoken of him occasionally to Gloria.

"Excuse me, Mr. Lambeaux," said Thelma. "Do you want some dinner?"

"Sure, Thelma," said Roger. "Why don't you eat with me tonight?"

"Certainly, Mr. Lambeaux," said Thelma, wondering what was wrong with her boss. She remembered the joint she had smoked the night before with Luther, and wondered what a little weed might do to this stiff, overconventional man who bossed her around like a slave owner. For just a minute, now, he seemed oddly appealing.

"Where should we eat?" she asked.

"How about the kitchen?" he said.

"Okay, Mr. Lambeaux. Why don't you just go and sit down, and I'll join you." My God, she thought. The man is almost human.

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On Wednesday afternoon, around four, a Brinks armored car pulled up in front of the Lambeaux residence. Joe Woods, the driver, filled in the log book and stuck it back under the visor. His partner, Tim Wesley, had already climbed down and was walking

towards the rear. The two of them went through their steps like a drill team. They had been on this job together now for over ten years. They both put their keys in the locks, turned them simultaneously, and the heavy door opened outward. Tim jumped up on the truck bed and passed the money bag down to Joe. Then he jumped down and closed the door. Tim followed Joe by a few paces as they approached the house. He stayed alert. It was very important in a job like his not to become too relaxed, too convinced of the lack of any danger. It was easy to be lulled into a false security by the sheer number of successful operations.

Joe rang the bell. After a few moments the door opened a crack and a black maid stuck her head out. She peered suspiciously at them.

"Yes?" she asked.

"We're here from the bank," explained Joe. "We have a delivery for a Mr. Roger Lambeaux."

The woman's suspicions seemed to be somewhat allayed, but not altogether dispelled. She opened the door wide to admit them, still watching them carefully.

From his vantage place across the street, Smith watched the two armed guards carry the bag of money into the house.

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The ad in the Chronicle had more success than they could have believed. By Tuesday morning alone, over two hundred responses had been logged in by the answering service. As per instructions, the list of applicants had been closed out at seventy.

Smith and his two cohorts were sitting in the only three chairs that had come with the rather dilapidated dance studio they had rented for the week. A couple large wall mirrors with practice bars attested to the authenticity of the room's former purposes. The ceiling was studded with large globes, affording more light than anyone could ever want.

"I wish I could have specified the hat size," said Smith, "but it would have sounded too peculiar. Besides, not too many people are likely to know their head size nowadays. Who wears hats, except maybe when it rains?"

"Well, I got the hats in three sizes, just to make sure," said Jim. "One size goes from six and a half to six and three quarters, the next from seven to seven and a quarter, and the third from seven and a half to eight. Call 'em small, medium, and large. I got ten small, thirty five medium, and ten large. That oughta do it. If it doesn't, I can always make a quick trip to the costume shop."

The back wall of the studio bore mute testimony to Jim's purchases. Fifty five boxes were stacked from the floor nearly halfway to the ceiling. Next to them were sixty flight bags. Ray had been forced to go to five outlets to get them. Against the front wall were eleven large Macy's bags containing slacks.

"Is there a place where they can put their clothes while they're trying on the uniforms?" asked Smith.

Ray pointed to a door at the rear. "There's a big closet back there with about a hundred hangers."

"Well," said Smith. "Everything seems to have worked out really well. The uniforms look great. White hat, with red and gold braid, white coat with red, gold, and blue trim, white slacks. Even the flight bags match."

"We gotta remember to tell 'em to shine their shoes before Saturday," said Jim.

"I hope our applicants don't look too scruffy," said Smith.

"Can't tell that over a phone," said Ray. "If they look bad enough, maybe we could send 'em to a barbershop."

"Are there any nearby?" asked Smith.

"There's gotta be," said Ray. "I'll check it out."

"So what remains to be done?" asked Jim.

"We're all set," said Smith. He looked around the room. "I'll bet this place hasn't been used for thirty years. The name doesn't sound like they taught ballet. 'Jo-Mar Dance Studios.' What a name."

"I imagine it was a ballet studio once," said Jim. "Maybe back in the forties. 'Hence the mirrors and practice bars, but the name probably comes from the fifties and sixties, during the ballroom dancing craze, back when there were more Arthur Murray Dance Studios than MacDonald's hamburger joints.'"

Smith looked at his watch. "It's nearly one. The applicants will be here in an hour, so I'd better take off now. I'll be back around two twenty and mix with the other messengers."

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The applicants straggled in from two until two twenty. Smith showed up at two fifteen, and Jim and Ray pretended not to recognize him. Jim and Ray got the applicants to line up in an array of seven rows of ten men each. Smith stood in the back, and listened to the subvocal comments muttered by the men around him. It didn't take long for ten applicants to be summarily rejected for being too short or too fat, and another five followed quickly for various other incompatibilities. Soon there were just fifty five of them. The rejects were all paid twenty dollars apiece before they left, even though they had misrepresented their sizes..

The first order of the evening was for them to get fitted properly. There were a few bad fits on coats and hats, but Jim managed to soothe their ruffled feathers by pointing out that they only had to wear them for the first inning of the game. After that they'd be back in whatever they'd brought with them, except for the slacks, which they were welcome to keep.

As it turned out, there weren't any big problems with haircuts, although a few applicants looked a bit shaggy. It took almost two hours to get everyone properly fitted. At the end of all this, they lined them up in five rows of eleven men each, all in their new uniforms, and had them practice marching out to their rear, one row at a time, alternating between one side and the other as they exited.

Finally, Jim and Ray had a contest to select a 'number one' messenger and a 'special' messenger. They marched them around and after a few minutes selected the number one messenger as the one in the first row and first column, who had to use the whistle to direct the activities of the other messengers, and the special messenger as one whose role would be explained later on, on game day. The other messengers looked at

Smith, wondering what was so special about him, but not caring, either, since he wasn't making any more money than the rest of them.

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On Friday evening, about seven thirty, a taxi arrived at Roger Lambeaux' house. The driver emerged with a smart-looking flight bag, in white with red and blue trim. He rang the bell, and when the maid answered, gave the bag to her, said good evening, and departed. Before he got to the door of his taxi, two plainclothes inspectors detained him and led him back to the house, where he spent the next hour describing the man who had hired him to deliver the bag.

"He seemed an ordinary guy," the frustrated cabbie explained for the umpteenth time. "Black hair with a little gray, thinning at the temples, large black mustache with a small goatee, glasses, maybe fifty, fifty five, about five nine, maybe two hundred pounds, a bit of a paunch. Well dressed, looked like a five hundred dollar suit. Conservative tie. That's really all I can remember. If I had known I was going to spend the rest of the evening describing him, I sure would've turned down the hundred dollar bill he gave me."

"I'm afraid you're going to have to leave that with us, as well," said Frank Sabella. "We'll give it back to you as soon as our lab is finished with it."

"What a bummer," said the cab driver. "Do you know how much business I'm losing. This is a Friday night, you know."

"It's worse than that," said Aldo. "You're also going to have to come down to the station and work with one of our police artists to put together a sketch of the guy who hired you."

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After the cab driver left, Frank, Vic, Aldo, Stan, and Roger spent some time studying the note which had been left inside the bag:

MR. LAMBEAUX:

GO TO THE GIANTS GAME AT CANDLESTICK PARK THIS COMING SATURDAY AFTERNOON, USING THE ENCLOSED TICKET. SIT IN SEAT 28, SECTION 141. FOUR TICKETS IN ADJACENT SEATS HAVE BEEN PROVIDED FOR YOUR FRIENDS. BRING THE MONEY IN THIS BAG. SOMETIME DURING THE GAME, A MESSENGER WILL APPEAR, SAYING THAT HE HAS COME TO PICK UP THE BAG TO DELIVER TO MR. JONES. GIVE THE BAG TO HIM.

YOU WILL BE UNDER SURVEILLANCE DURING THIS TRANSACTION. ANY ATTEMPT TO DETAIN THE MESSENGER OR PREVENT HIM IN ANY WAY FROM CARRYING OUT HIS ASSIGNMENT WILL ABORT THE MONEY EXCHANGE, AND YOU WILL HAVE CAUSE FOR CONCERN ABOUT WHICH PART OF YOUR SON'S ANATOMY WILL BE RETURNED TO YOU. (DO YOU PREFER FED EX OR THE U.S. POSTAL SERVICE?)

## Chapter 19

Smith awoke early. This was the big day. He arose from bed quietly so he wouldn't disturb Sheila. For the first night in many, his sleep had not been disturbed by troubled dreams. He felt healthy and rested, ready to meet the challenges of the day.

He dressed quietly. The bottom half of him was dressed formally, with white slacks and black shoes, while the top half was clothed in a blue sweater with white stripes. On his head he wore a black GIANTS cap with the name in orange letters.

He tiptoed down to the kitchen, where he heated up some water for instant coffee while he sat on a stool, slowly demolishing a six ounce carton of raspberry-flavored low-fat yogurt, while he meditated on the caper he was going to pull off.

Reggie came wandering into the kitchen, still in his pajamas, clutching Watership Down. Sheila had given him the book the evening before, and he had read it non-stop all the way through dinner and even to bed, falling asleep with the light on, still clutching the book.

"Hi, Smitty. You're up early."

"Lots to do today. How you coming with the book?"

"It's great. I'm already up to page 100. The Story of the King's Lettuce."

"What was the name of the head rabbit in all the old rabbit myths?"

"El-ahrairah," said Reggie enthusiastically. "Yeah, he's neat!"

"Do me a favor, Sport, and tell Clytemnestra I'll give her a call as soon as I can."

"Okay, Smitty. When are you going to be back?"

"Probably around dinner time. What are you going to do today?"

"There's a Giant's game at one. I guess I'll read till then."

"Okay, Sport. I'll see you later."

"Bye, Smitty."

"See you, Reggie."

Fifty two messengers arrived on Saturday morning in front of the Jo-Mar Dance Studio, all in white slacks and black shoes and white shirts, with various kinds of jackets, sweaters, and caps. The Muni bus was waiting in front; the driver, a jovial black man, smiled at all the messengers as they entered the bus. Jim and Ray stood on the sidewalk, directing people onto the bus. Jim looked a little larger than life today, and his coat didn't seem as elegant as usual. Ray was dressed rather spiffily, with a green turtleneck sweater, striped trousers, and a tam-o'-shanter.

When the fifty-second man had been seated, they waited five more minutes for the three missing messengers, then departed.

"Welcome, gentlemen," said Jim as they got rolling. "We're going to begin the day with some sandwiches, sweet rolls, and liquid refreshment for those of you who haven't had a chance for a complete breakfast this morning. I'm going to start off by passing out coffee, milk, Coke, or Sprite. Raise your hands if you want coffee."

"As soon as you've had a little refreshment, we'll pass you your bags by name, but don't change clothes until you're seated. When we get off the bus, follow Mr. Goldman here or myself. Keep your eye out for the giant green Coke bottle."

The bus arrived at Pac Bell Park a good hour before game time, and parked in the red zone, right opposite the entrance to the park.. Fifty four men in street clothes, plus one bus driver in a brown Muni pants suit emerged. The driver locked up the bus, glanced at the number on his ticket, and strode off towards the entry gates. The fifty two passengers, plus Ray and Jim, followed him at a slower pace, talking with one other, and arguing about which section their tickets were in. Ray kept telling them to look for the giant green Coke bottle. They walked around the stadium for some distance until they reached the rear gate, where Jim and Ray made sure they were all accounted for. The two extras left to find their seats in the better sections.

When the remaining fifty had taken their seats, Jim got up and explained to them what they were there for. He told them again that this was an advertising stunt, that some initial camera work would be taken care of before the game, and that they would have to practice some more to get their act just right.

First of all, he had them all swap their street clothes with the coats and hats in their bags. Ray took a lot of shots with the video camera while they did this. Jim told them that this would be part of the ad, having to do with the secret messenger inside every man.

Then he made them all give their tickets back to him, and he passed out a new game ticket to each of them and explained that after they had marched out, they would be expected to go to the seat specified on the second ticket, but for the time being, after each marching-out practice, they would return to their original seats.

While he was talking, Ray checked them out to ensure they were all properly equipped. Jim helped him unpack the video camera and they set it up down in front, at the foot of the aisle. The fifty seats were in five rows together, with two empty seats on the left sides of all the rows.

Jim had them practice marching into the aisle, and up to the promenade above, just as they had done at the dance studio, where they single-filed around past the food stalls to the walkway around the stadium. When they got past the restrooms, he blew his whistle and explained that at this point, when they were doing it for real, they would have to consult their new tickets to see where to go. This, of course, was just a practice run.

After a couple practices, Jim decided they looked pretty good. Now he had them practice a new routine – one they hadn't done before. The entire procedure began with the 'chosen' messenger, the one in the middle of the first row, leaving. They all waited about ten minutes. As soon as the chosen messenger returned, right on the whistle, they rose to their feet at attention, then, marching in place, the left side of each of the five lines moved to the left one position, leaving a column of seats up the middle, continuing to march in place to the 'hup hup' of the number one messenger.

At this point the chosen messenger marched in while they marched in place, entering from the top, and continuing down to the first row. As soon as he reached his original position, the whistle blew once more, and the left sides of all the rows closed in. Now the whistle blew once more, and they began the marching-out procedure.

Ray followed them throughout with the video camera. When they had had enough of this, Ray began packing up the camera.

"Why are we practicing this with the camera, if the camera isn't going to be here when we do it for real?" one of the more perplexed of the forty nine asked Ray.

"This was just for closeups," Ray explained. "The game shots will be taken from the cameras up in the broadcasting booth."

Then Jim returned laden with hot dogs and soft drinks, which he began passing around. By this time, more fans were arriving, and soon the game was ready to start.

Ray left with the video camera. He had promised to get it out of the stadium before the game started. He also had another task.

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Roger just had the feeling that this was not going to be an auspicious day. The sun shone brilliantly through his curtains, and the sky, when he got out of bed to look at it, was an unblemished, unbelievable, cerulean blue. A of couple errant songbirds, unaware of their relative ecological rarity, filled his back yard with unaccustomed music.

He rubbed his eyes, yawned, stretched, and yelled for the maid, remembering only at the last minute that this was one of her days off. Then he further remembered that Gloria had been called away at the last minute to be with her mother at the hospital, so they had to abandon their plans of being together tonight. No wonder he felt so wretched. Then he thought again that today was the day for the first money exchange, and he had to give away seven hundred thousand dollars. That was enough to make anyone feel depressed.

He made do with some cold cereal with canned milk, and two cups of instant coffee. Thelma had not been doing her shopping chores lately, and the larder was bare. He went down to his safe and transferred seven, plastic-wrapped packages to the flight bag. Then he locked up the safe and brought the bag upstairs with him just in time to open the front door for Frank and Vic.

Frank was wearing a loud sportcoat with pink slacks and a pair of Adidas running shoes, and Vic was in a green windbreaker with a pair of beat-up blue jeans and torn tennis shoes. The two of them looked pretty incongruous together. Roger tried to keep the contempt out of his expression as he let them in.

"All set?" asked Frank cheerily.

"Yeah," said Roger coldly, resenting Frank's good humor. It was easy for him to be cheerful. He wasn't giving away seven tenths of a million dollars. "Just let me get my coat on." He strode into the dining room.

"Got the money?" asked Vic.

"It's in the bag," Roger called out. "On the table." He reappeared in a light-weight red blazer with tan slacks and a yellow, button-down dress shirt with no tie.

"Nice," said Vic. "Good color ensemble." Roger was too busy dissembling the sneer on his face to notice whether Vic was putting him on or not.

"Let's go," said Frank. "The chariot waiteth."

## Chapter 20

Aldo met them at the ball park. He was quietly directing a steady stream of subordinates with subtle gestures and inaudible commands. He shook hands with Frank, nodded at Vic, and ignored Roger entirely. Then he strode off, explaining something with great passion to one of his associates. Frank and Vic steered Roger in the direction of the seats.

"We're sitting in the row just behind you," said Frank. "You won't be alone. Just go along with the ransom instructions. Aldo and his men will do the rest."

"And I should just give the money to the messenger when he identifies himself?" asked Roger for the umpteenth time. He gripped the flight bag between his knees, uncomfortably aware of how easy it might be for someone in the seats around him to steal it if it weren't physically touching him.

"Right ho," said Frank. "Somebody's posted at every exit. There's no way this guy's gonna get away. We'll just let him lead us to whoever hired him, then we'll bust the both of them. Two birds with one stone."

The stands were still relatively empty, and nobody was on the field yet, except a pair of groundskeepers wandering about looking vaguely busy. A couple rent-a-cops were chasing after a small dog, who seemed to have no intention of leaving the field.

"I'm gonna go get myself some junk food," said Vic. "Anybody else want anything?"

"Get me a beer," said Roger. It wasn't often he felt like getting mildly drunk, but today was definitely one of those days. He wasn't just giving away a small fortune. He was also being forced to watch what he felt was one of the silliest games grown men could possibly be playing. Football was bad enough, with a bunch of brutes duking it out with each other. Boxing was even worse, but at least it was honest. Baseball was a game intended for boys. They didn't call them 'the boys of summer' for nothing.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Frank.

"I was just thinking what a silly, boring game baseball is," said Roger.

"What's so boring about it?"

"Well," said Roger. Most of these games are just pitching battles, and the fielders are so good that even when somebody gets a hit, the ball's probably going to get caught. So where's the game? Where's the strategy? Choosing your batting order or having somebody bunt the ball so a man on base can score? I don't care much for football either, or even basketball, but in both those games the use of strategy is evident. Most baseball fans seem more interested in statistics."

"Well, there's some merit in what you say. Personally I prefer watching a bunch of kids just playing for fun, but then I'm not a baseball nut. Still, these guys are incredibly good. Just watch the double plays."

"Cold beer here," said Vic, joining them. "Cold beer," he said, imitating the beer vendors of the past. He handed a large paper cup of beer to Roger, then asked Frank to hold his while he took his seat. "What are you guys talking about?" he asked before taking a big guzzle of beer. "Ahh," he said. "Nothing like the first swallow."

"Roger here has been explaining why he finds baseball boring," said Frank.



"Well, we don't want *too* much excitement, do we?" said Vic. "A money change for nearly a million bucks is plenty exciting. Mixing it with a little boredom might be a good thing."

"I guess Rivera and Phillips aren't going to join us," said Roger.

"They'll be too busy catching the kidnappers," said Frank.

"What's the name of this team the Giants are playing?" asked Roger.

"The Tampa Devil Rays," said Vic.

"Jesus, what a silly name," said Roger. "It sounds like one of those stupid rock groups."

"Don't worry," said Vic. "You won't hear that name much longer. A lot of teams, Tampa included, don't have much attendance, and they're soon gonna go under. The Montreal Expos are in a similar situation."

Down on the field the teams were warming up. The Devil Rays would be first at bat, and the Giants were tossing the ball back and forth between the outfielders and the basemen. The stands were filling up more quickly now, and the seat next to Roger was taken by a strange little ferret of a man, with horrible striped trousers, a green sweater, and a Scottish tam. In the past, people had worn clothes appropriate to their social positions and their own national backgrounds. Nowadays they were encouraged to express themselves in the most dreadful combinations of apparel.

The first inning was almost as boring as Roger had expected it to be. He soon found his interest flagging, and glanced idly around the stadium. Despite the fact that the game was in the process of being played, there was a constant movement of people, many returning with stadium food. It almost seemed as if the important thing for many of them was just sitting in the stands, enjoying the sun, eating and talking, happy just to be in the presence of a mob of similar silly people. Like uneducated hordes in earlier times, gathering at hangings and beheadings, bringing their bag lunches. Suddenly a thought occurred to Roger.

"What if the messenger shows up when I'm away from my seat?" he said, turning to his companions sitting behind him.

"I guess you can't leave," said Vic, with a slight smile.

"What if I have to go to the bathroom?" said Roger.

"Just save your beer cup," said Frank.

Roger sat and smoldered. These assholes were going to continue to play games with him. It reminded him of school, when he had often been the butt of his classmates' jokes. He decided, however, not to drink any more beer until after the messenger had come to take away the money bag.

The bottom of the first inning seemed to be coming to an end. Only eight more to go, Roger thought. When would this damn messenger appear and end this torture? It was then that he turned and looked up to see a man approaching him, stepping quickly down the steps of the aisle just to his left.

He was dressed like some sort of messenger, with a white cadet's hat in red and gold braid, and a white coat with red, gold, and blue trimming. He had a sharp look to him, as he stepped smartly along the walkway, looking up at the numbers on the seats. Suddenly he stopped at Roger's seat, looking down at him.

"Mr. Lambeaux?" he asked politely, with a touch of deference.

"Yes," said Roger, confused, and forgetting what the password message was."

"I'm here to pick up the bag for Mr. Jones," explained the messenger coolly, waiting calmly for Roger to react.

"Uh, yes, yes," said Roger. "Here you are." He handed the bag to the messenger, experiencing with a touch of surprise how difficult it was to unclench his fingers and let the bag go. He watched the messenger nod his head in a sort of salute, then saw him executing an about-face, striding off in the direction he had come. All of a sudden, the man vanished down one of the exits and was gone. Roger turned around, and Vic gave him a thumbs-up gesture. Frank was talking on his cell phone.

Roger felt enormously lost without the money bag in his possession. He lost awareness of the game altogether, and just sat, huddled, wondering how soon it would take them to catch this messenger and get his money back.

The man positioned at the exit to the Club Level seats, whose name was George, had been with the agency for a quarter of a century, but he had never become an agent in charge. An unprepossessing manner and a social intelligence unrelieved by humor or imagination had forever relegated him to dancing to someone else's tune. As a result, he was stuck at this exit, unable to actively view much of the game, having to do the dirty work, but, as usual, not reaping any of the glory.

He was standing there at the end of the first inning, silently suffering the ache in his calf muscles, jealous of all these normal people shoving past him in both directions, able to move about, to watch the game from a sitting position, to go out for something to eat or drink whenever they wanted.

All of a sudden he heard the beeper on his cell phone. He put it to his ear, and Frank Sabella was telling him that the guy was passing his position right now. He jammed the device back into his pocket and tried to look unconcerned as the man in the cap and white uniform with red and gold braid stepped quickly by him. He turned and followed, noticing that he was carrying the same bag which had previously been in the possession of Mr. Lambeaux. This was the guy, without a doubt.

He stayed about ten paces behind, keeping up with the messenger with some difficulty. There were a lot of people milling about, getting in his way. At each exit, George saw the other plainclothesmen, the city cops on duty. He nodded surreptitiously to each as he passed, a quick silent recognition between men in the same general profession. They walked all the way around the stadium to the cheap seats in the bleachers near the scoreboard, and George was getting out of breath, but he stayed with the messenger like a hound.

Suddenly his quarry turned to march down one of the entryways to the seats, and George struggled to shorten the distance between them. He hurried to catch up, and when he got to the entryway, he saw the messenger striding across the top of the seats of the top row, which was empty..

Then the most unexpected thing happened. To George's utter horror he saw an entire group of men stand up, all dressed exactly like the messenger he was following, and all carrying identical flight bags. They were marching in place, and as he hurried after the messenger, the entire left side of all the rows of messengers moved to the left one position, and the messenger with the money was marching down the tops of the seats to the first row, and by the time George got to the back of the group, they closed ranks.

George hurried back to the aisle, trying to spot where his man had ended up. He thought it was around the middle of the first row, but before he could get his bearings, he heard a whistle, and here was an entire row of these identical messengers marching right at him, up the aisle. He rushed to the next entryway, and here was another row marching at him. He grabbed the flight bag of the fifth messenger to pass him, and the messenger struggled to hold onto his bag, but George was possessed. He managed to rip the bag away, but it felt enormously light. He held the messenger off while he unzipped it, and he stared at the sport jacket and trousers inside.

It must be said on George's behalf that he did what any normal person would do under such circumstances. He tossed the bag aside, and ran after the entire group of messengers, yelling "Stop them! Stop them!", and it was only after a few confused minutes of this with none of them stopping and nobody lifting a finger to stop any of them, that he regained some semblance of sanity and had the wit to pull out his cell phone and communicate to Frank Sabella what had just happened. By the time he made it all clear to Frank, the messengers were scattered to every corner of the ball park. It took at least an hour for the F.B.I agents and the local police to ferret out the forty nine, innocent men in the white, red-and-blue-embroidered uniforms, and to ascertain that their bags contained anything but seven hundred thousand dollars.

## Chapter 21

After Ray tossed the camera in his car, he hurried back through the entrance gates to the stadium and walked around to section 216 and quickly found his alternate seat, second from the aisle.

It seemed strange sitting next to Lambeaux and the FBI men. He listened to their conversation enough to verify who they were, and when there was a break in the action on the field, he left to walk around the stadium to the bleachers. He joined Jim and Smith just below the cadre of cadets.

"He's there," he said in an undertone to his two partners.

"I guess it's time," said Smith. "Give me about fifteen minutes, and then start watching for me. Things are going to be moving pretty fast from now on."

It seemed like a long fifteen minutes to Jim, but he didn't dare look down at his watch. All of a sudden Smith came striding in through the entry to their section and Jim signalled to the number one messenger to blow his whistle. Now the messengers were on their feet, marching in place, hup-hupping, and Jim could see Smith quickly striding down the tops of the seats to the first row, and now the messengers were closing rank. Ray switched bags with Smith, while Jim signalled again to the number one messenger, who blew his whistle, and immediately the messengers were marching out, row by row, in alternate aisles.

As soon as Smith reached the men's room, he got in line for a booth. There wasn't much to worry about now. The bag he held contained only his street clothes. Inside the booth, he quickly changed the messenger coat and hat for his own jacket and Giant's cap. On the way out of the rest room, he jammed the flight bag into the nearest waste can.

Jim and Ray waited about fifteen minutes for the noise of the cadets departure to subside into the usual baseball park noises. Jim surreptitiously slipped the flight bag inside a black cloth bag he had brought for the purpose. He nodded to Ray, then began his lonely journey to the men's room. He saw neither cops nor messengers in sight.

Luckily a stall was unoccupied and Jim took possession of it. He hung his overly-large coat on the hook, then pulled off his suspenders and removed his shirt. He turned it inside out, revealing an array of seventy small pockets. He opened the money bag and broke open the first of the seven plastic bags inside. Inside that were ten banded stacks of a hundred bills each. He began moving the stacks from the plastic bag and placing them in the pockets of the shirt. It seemed to take forever, and he told himself to slow down. Nobody had chased after him, and presumably nobody had followed him. Even if they had, it would be too late now.

Seventy pockets later, he carefully donned the shirt, careful not to let any of the stacks slip out. He pulled his pants up slowly about the shirt tails, then pulled his suspenders up over his shoulders. He put the coat on gingerly. He crammed the bag under the toilet and exited casually. He glanced in the bathroom mirror as he passed, thinking he looked a little like Sydney Greenstreet.

They split up the proceeds at Jim's. Ray brought out a joint which they passed around, and Jim opened up a bottle of Sekt, a German champagne made from Riesling,

light and airy. It matched the mood they were in. Smith called Sheila and told her everything was okay and that he'd be home soon.

"Back to the wife and kiddie?" asked Jim.

"You know how married life is," said Smith.

Sheila was awestruck when Smith told her about how they had pulled off the job.

"You arrogant asshole! You just walked up to him, with the cops all around, took the money, and walked away? Whose brainstorm was that? You told me your partners were smart. That's not smart! Suicidal maybe."

"The idea was all mine. They did their best to talk me out of it, but I've always wanted to pull off a job like that."

"Well I hope you got it out of your system for the rest of your life! Lucky for me you refused to tell me how you were going to pull it off. I would have died of anxiety the last few days."

"That's why I didn't tell you," he said.

"Promise me you'll never try anything like that again. I don't want to be in a relationship with a fool."

"I promise. That's it for this millenium. I'd be a fool to push my luck twice in a row."

"I wish I felt a little more convinced," she said. "Maybe if you told me how you're going to do the second exchange, I could feel a little more assured."

"Sorry. Telling people how you're going to do something can sometimes put a jinx on it. I'm really superstitious about that."

"Better not break any mirrors, and stay away from ladders, and if you spill salt at the table, remember to sprinkle some over your left shoulder. Don't open umbrellas indoors, and don't let black cats cross your path."

"That's a lot of don'ts," he said. "Speaking of 'don'ts'," he said, "when are you going to say 'I do'?"

"Maybe when I feel a little more secure about my immediate future."

"Just one more time, and then I'll hang up my saddle."

"Just one more time," she said. "My grandmother used to sing that song. When she was cooking or knitting. There was something comforting in it for me as a child. I wish I felt comforted by it this time."

"Is that what you want, security?"

"I like my danger safe. Like roller coasters and horror movies. I want to be able to count on the continued quality of my existence. I don't want anyone making too many inroads on that."

"A little danger in the heart of safety?" he asked. "Well, in the future I will eschew bravado."

"Is that a new brand of macho smokeless tobacco?"

"No, it's an avocado that looks like a bra. "How's the kid?"

"The kid is sleeping," she said. "I wore him and me both out today at the Academy of Sciences. He was a little blasé about the mechanical dinosaurs. Apparently we have a dinosaur expert on our hands. He knows all their names and can tell you their dimensions and when they existed. But the planetarium swept him away. He's never

been to one, and he's been seeing stars since. He's just about exhausted my knowledge of Astronomy."

"I thought your knowledge was astronomical. I really appreciate the baby-sitting, by the way."

"He's any easy child to do things with. He wants to please others, and he's quick, both socially and intellectually. He's very impressed by you, as if you didn't know, and admires you greatly. That's quite a responsibility."

"Yeah," he said. "I'm starting to realize that. I feel as if I have to live up to his image of me."

"I guess that's sort of new to you."

"Not entirely. I practically raised my younger brother and sister from the age of thirteen on. When my old man took a hike."

"So you would like to be a good father in order to make up for his having been a bad one."

"That sounds like one of those sentences that're true even when they're false. I'm starving, by the way. What've we got to eat?"

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Roger Lambeaux was madder than a hornet when Frank finally managed to explain to him exactly what had happened. At first he just went into a fit, yelling and screaming and not making a great deal of sense. Vic was visibly embarrassed by his behavior, and tried to quiet him down, but Roger would not be silenced. He ranted and raved, and called both of them names they had not been called for some years.

"Where the mother fucking hell were you two slime balls when that cocksucker was walking off with my money? Sitting on your collective overpriced assholes playing Elliot Ness with your walkie talkies."

There was little Frank could say to counter his charges. Basically, Roger was right. The kidnapers had made fools of both the Agency and the local police. Still, Frank would have preferred less colorful language. He could see that Vic was starting to get really pissed off, so he dragged Roger away to look over the forty nine messengers they were detaining down on the now-deserted lower deck. They were also holding an irate Muni bus driver, who was demonstrating a vocabulary somewhat akin to Roger's.

## Chapter 22

On Sunday morning Smith woke early. He was still riding high on a wave of euphoria from the success of the day before. He gently disentangled himself from Sheila, and slipped out of bed. She muttered a few unintelligible phrases in her sleep and turned away from him, curling into a fetal position, silent once more, breathing gently with a slight snore. Her face reminded him of the plaster faces of angels in cupolas of forgotten Italian churches.

He donned a robe and slippers and padded out to the front room, where Reggie was lying on the sofa in his pajamas, rapt in *Tarzan and the Ant Men*.

"Morning, Tarzan," said Smith, looking at the title on the cover. "Where'd you dig up that old dinosaur? I didn't even know I had it."

"Morning, Smitty," said the boy cheerily, looking up from the book. "I found it in that box of kid's books in the basement. I hope it's okay."

"Of course it's okay. I just thought it might be a little dated and boring for you."

"It's not so bad when you get into it. It was pretty slow going at first, but I'm starting to like it a little. It's not half as exciting as *Space Cadet*. Do you have any more Tarzan books?"

"I don't know, Sport," said Smith, sitting on the arm of the sofa, with his left hand on the boy's shoulder, idly fingering the boy's hair with his right. "It's been a long time since I looked through that box. I brought it home from my mother's house after her funeral, and I never even gave it a peek. Clytemnestra might have some suggestions about books to read. Why don't you ask her?"

"Okay," said Reggie, laying the book open on his chest and looking up at Smith.

"Have you ever read *The Ring Trilogy*? Or *The Hobbit*?"

"I don't think so," said Reggie.

"You have some great adventures to look forward to, Sport. Had breakfast yet?"

"No. I didn't want to wake anybody up."

"Let's go scramble up some eggs," said Smith.

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Tweeds was not a man who liked to be said no to, and this Luther Dibbs was becoming distinctly uncooperative.

"Really, Mr. Tweeds," said Luther in a conciliatory tone, "this bitch is impossible. I mean impossible. I don't dare ask her a single question about what's going on in that house without her getting suspicious. On top of it all, the dumb broad doesn't know what's going on anyway. During that second ransom call, she didn't hear a thing, because they banished her to the kitchen to make sandwiches. Right now she doesn't trust me at all. I've never had so much trouble with a female. She was an easy mark at first, but now she's like a horse that shies at everything. Impossible to please. She turns everything I say against me. It's getting so I almost hate her."

Luther didn't mention that he also found Thelma Waters singularly unattractive sexually. He didn't think Tweeds wanted to hear that right now.

"Well, do your best, Luther," said Tweeds in a resigned voice. "I've always gotten good results from you. You're a professional, and I expect you to deal with your

emotions. Find out what you can. See if you can dredge up any additional sources of information. I'm willing to pay for it."

There was an uneasy silence. "You still there, Mr. Dibbs?"

"Yes, Mr. Tweeds. I'll do what I can."

At four in the afternoon, Aldo was ready to call it quits. They had kept the forty nine messengers at the station until late the night before, with a staff of men getting all their individual statements. They had also had a police artist do a composite sketch of the two men who engineered the money exchange. None of them seemed to have any idea who the mysterious fiftieth messenger was.

"I thought he was just one of us," said one of the detainees.

They had also dispatched two squad cars to the studio where the messengers had applied for the job. It took them a while to locate the owner of the studio and get the key to the place. A pile of empty hat boxes was all that was found. A couple boys from the lab were out there today, dusting the place for prints.

Aldo spoke briefly with the owner. She was a wrinkled old harridan with a lot of character. She quickly identified the man who had rented it with the help of one of the police drawings. She disclaimed any previous knowledge of her renters, and said she had been paid with cash. She also denied asking for references. She snorted when Aldo questioned her about them.

"References? I'd be happy to rent it to a communist spy ring. That place has been sitting there unrented for the last five years. References!" She laughed to herself as she shut the door in Aldo's face.

So they were back to square one except that they had a better idea of the people they were up against. At least two men, the ones who had organized the messengers. And then there would have to be somebody to watch the boy. Maybe the mother or sister or girl friend of one of the principals.

He gave Frank Sabella a courtesy call before he left for the day. Frank was disappointed at the lack of leads but not surprised.

"Well," said Frank, "there is one question we haven't asked."

"What," said Aldo.

"Why did all those guys have the same physical measurements?"

"So they'd all look the same. So we wouldn't know which one had the money."

"But why those particular measurements? Wouldn't they have had an easier job asking for guys that were five eight instead of six one?"

"You're right," said Aldo. "We've been going on the assumption that the fiftieth messenger was just a hired hand, like all the rest."

"I have a hunch he was one of the kidnappers," said Frank, "and all the other messengers were chosen because they looked like *him*."

"Or at least had the same measurements," said Aldo. "It's not too much to go on, but it's a start."

"It also means he's a Caucasian," said Frank.

"And maybe he likes baseball games," said Aldo.

"You have a chance to check out the local clothing stores yet?"



"I've got a couple men working on that right now," said Aldo. "Also with the Giant's ticket office and Muni. Apparently the kidnappers paid for everything with cash."

"These guys are very organized," said Frank. "We gotta be more organized ourselves next time."

"There are a million ways to be organized," Aldo said patiently. "Which of those million you want to choose?"

There was a moment of silence while Frank decided how to respond.

"Maybe we can anticipate these guys a little better," he said. "Next time we'll arrest the messenger."

Aldo was somewhat mollified by the use of 'we'. It showed a willingness to share some of the blame.

"If there *is* a messenger," said Aldo. "These guys took us by surprise. Maybe they'll surprise us again."

"There's gotta be some kind of message or messenger. They have to give Lambeaux instructions for what to do with the money, and they can't do that in advance. Still, you're right about not being too stuck on how we think they're gonna operate."

There was a brief silence. "By the way, Al, I want to thank you for getting that info from Mr. Garvey. We're checking out all the prefixes in this area with those last four digits. I'll have a report on it soon. But I couldn't help noticing something very interesting about that number."

"What's that, Frank?"

"It's the same as the last four digits of Lambeaux' number, except that the last two digits are interchanged."

"Son of a gun. I never noticed that, and I must've called his number at least ten times in the last week."

"You've talked with Garvey and I haven't. Would you mind calling him up and asking him if maybe he didn't get those two digits interchanged? Also try out Lambeaux' prefix on him. See if it rings any bells."

## Chapter 23

On Tuesday night, Frank Sabella set up a meeting with Roger Lambeaux. Vic and Aldo and Stan were also present. Minutes after they were all massed together in the study, the third telephone message was received from the kidnappers.

Smith, sitting across the street in his truck, had seen Frank and Vic arrive, then Aldo a few minutes later with Stan. He had called Jim, who was waiting nearby in a public phone booth, and told him to deliver the message. It requested Roger to get ready the second seven hundred thousand, and that further instructions would be delivered on Friday.

"They must be watching this place," said Aldo, after the message had been heard by all. "I just barely got here. It was as if they were waiting for me to get comfortable."

"Another third of a million," said Frank. "How do you feel about it, Mr. Lambeaux?"

"How would you feel if you were taking the loss? I didn't mind taking a chance with the first money exchange, because I thought you guys had a fair chance of catching him. What happened to all those plainclothesmen you had all over the stadium?"

"I sincerely apologize," said Frank. "This time we arrest the first contact. We won't let them play any more games with us. Will you be able to have the money ready?"

"Yeah," said Roger resignedly. "Same as before. I'll have Brinks send a truck over on Friday afternoon."

"I wonder where they're gonna try to make the exchange this time?" said Aldo. "What other sporting events are happening this time of year?"

"Tennis?" suggested Vic.

"Any tennis tournaments in the area this coming weekend?"

A couple heads were shaken.

"I wonder why he chose a baseball game," said Aldo. "Maybe there's some significance to it."

"He needed a stadium full of people to carry out a scheme like that," said Frank. "The only other crowds of that size would be at football and soccer games. There aren't many soccer games, and it isn't football season. It might be as simple as that."

"On the other hand," said Aldo, "the scheme might have been suggested by the venue. Maybe the baseball game isn't so arbitrary. Look at it this way - guy kidnaps a man's son, and then he makes the man pay the ransom at a baseball game. You ever take your kid to a baseball game, Mr. Lambeaux?"

"Never," said Roger. "I loathe sports of any kind."

"Does he like baseball?"

"I really don't know," said Roger.

"I remember seeing a bunch of baseball trading cards in the boy's desk," said Vic.

"All boys collect junk like that," said Roger. "That doesn't mean he likes baseball."

"Maybe the kidnapper chose a baseball game because he likes baseball himself," offered Stan, not usually being given to conjecture.

"Could be," said Frank. "But it doesn't narrow down the field."

"Have you checked with the other two officers?" Roger asked Aldo. "The ones who are trying to find my paintings."

"Who, Bleier and Morgan? So far, they haven't uncovered anything."

"What do you think about the coincidence of the two crimes?" Frank asked, turning to Aldo.

"Nobody could have known the kid was going to come home when he did," said Aldo. "The two actions have to be related."

"So you *do* think there's a connection," Roger broke in. "I thought everyone around here supported the two-crime hypothesis."

"Why the note alleging the kidnapping took place on Friday night?" asked Frank.

"I don't have an answer to that," said Aldo. "Maybe the thieves thought they could unload the paintings more easily if we thought there was no connection with the kidnapping."

"Somehow that doesn't sell me," said Frank.

"Me either," said Aldo. "I just can't think of anything else that makes sense."

"How do these art thieves operate?" asked Vic. "Where do they get their information?"

"Probably through neighbors, handymen, gardeners; maybe they pose as door-to-door salesmen," said Aldo.

"I don't have a thing to do with my neighbors, and I've always discouraged salesmen."

"Do you have a gardener?"

"Nope," said Roger. "Nor a handyman."

"There's the maid," said Frank.

"She's been with me ten years. I never had any thefts before."

"Is she here tonight?"

"No, I let her have tonight off. I can't imagine Thelma ever doing anything wrong. She's a lazy creature, but she's not a thief."

"She ever have friends here?"

"Never. I don't allow it. She spends her weekends with her parents, when she isn't with boy friends. She goes out of the house to meet her friends during the week."

"She have a boy friend at the present time?"

"You'd have to ask her that."

"We questioned her pretty thoroughly at the time of the robbery, Mr. Sabella," said Stan. "I thought you'd already looked over our reports."

"I did," said Frank. "I may have to question her again. Will she be in tomorrow?"

"Yes," said Roger.

"Well," said Frank. "That about does it for me right now. Anything else to talk about? No? Until Friday then. Since we don't know when or how the instructions will be sent, we'll get there shortly after noon."

"Most criminals follow patterns. I'll alert the cab companies to report any deliveries to this address," said Aldo.

"Good idea," said Vic, rising and stretching.

Aldo crushed his cigarette out as well as he could in the already full ashtray. Stan put the tape cassette in his pocket. Roger rose and escorted them out.

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Later that evening, Tweeds received another phone call from Luther Dibbs. Luther was very conciliatory, but very firm.

"Mr. Tweeds. You and me, we go back a long ways. Right? And I always did what you told me. I know you want me to keep on dating this Thelma girl so I can go on finding out information about her boss and his house, but Mr. Tweeds, I have reached the end of the line. I go out on a date with her tonight, okay? And I never once say anything about her house, or the kidnapping, but the whole night she keeps watching me, see if I make some kind of slip. I could just tell she was paying particular attention to my words. But that's not what I called to tell you."

"We went to this jazz joint, Kimballs East. Over in Emeryville. You know it? Well, it turns out that my cousin, Jake, Jake Barns, is also there with a couple friends of his. Well, he joins our table, and I couldn't get rid of the guy. And Thelma, in order to get even with me, the bitch, is giving him the eye the whole evening. Finally, this asshole, he asks her for a date right in front of me, and she accepts."

There was a silence as Luther surveyed the extent of the injustice. "I can't tell you, Mr. Tweeds, how humiliating that was. I couldn't just beat the shit out of him right there in front of all those people, and it was too crowded for me to drag him out to the street. And we live, of course, in the age of political correctness. So it would have been bad form to duke it out right there."

"Please get on with it, Mr. Dibbs. What's the upshot of all this?"

"Well, that she seems to be out of my hands for good now. And there's nothing I can do about it."

There was another silence as Tweeds assessed the extent of damage that had been done to his source of information.

"How well do you know your cousin, Mr. Dibbs?"

"Almost as well as my own brother. We were practically raised together. We fought together and we got drunk together."

"Are you on speaking terms with him right now?"

"I didn't punch him out, if that's what you mean."

"I mean, if you called him right now, would he listen to you?"

"Sure. He's not mad at me."

"Is he an advocate of the personal profit motive?"

"Uh, yes. If you mean does he have his price. Sure. I don't really think he had that much interest in Thelma. He and I have always competed. He was only interested in her because she was with me."

"Then perhaps I could talk you into working for me as a manager."

"Manager? Oh, I guess I see what you mean. Manage Jake, huh?"

"It shouldn't be too difficult. Since there's more than one person to pay off, I'm willing to up the price, and you can manage the money as well. You keep the difference. You'll have to pay him enough so he's willing to do the job. The important thing is for you to act as a go-between because then I don't have to deal with him, and he doesn't have to know who I am."

"How much would that amount to altogether?" said Luther.

"Why don't we offer him a hundred as a sort of signing bonus, and half what I paid you for starters. You get what you got before. As always, it's got to be solid information. Okay?"

"I don't mind trying," said Luther. At least I'd have Thelma off my back, he thought to himself.

"Be extremely careful. Don't tell him any more than you need to. If you get the slightest impression that he's thinking of doing anything innovative on his own, cut him off at the pass."

"He's not smart enough for that, Mr. Tweeds," said Luther. "He just runs with the pack. I think I can manage him all right."

## Chapter 24

For the past week, Big Mac and Ernie had been staking out Sheila's apartment. The first few days they had spent all their time in the Cadillac, taking turns sleeping or hiking the two blocks to Burger Boy for cheeseburgers and shakes, but finally they decided to simply move in.

It was a good deal more comfortable, and all they had to avoid was turning the lights on at night. They could still watch TV with the lights off, so their normal life style was only slightly infringed upon. When they weren't eating, sleeping, or watching TV, they took turns tearing the house apart, looking for clues as to where she could be, but to no avail.

If things went according to their plans, she would eventually return home and they would grab her, so they only had to conceal their presence from outside the house. They stayed away from the windows, never turned on the lights or pulled the shades up or down or answered the doorbell or the phone. Otherwise they just trashed the place. When they pulled something out of a drawer, they just let it lie. One night Ernie got a little drunk, and paraded around in some of Sheila's old undergarments. Big Mac was not amused.

Occasionally the phone rang, and once in a while somebody would leave a message on the answering machine. They checked all the messages, looking for clues, but none was to be found. It seemed as if she were on a trip somewhere. They communicated all their guesses and surmises to Tweeds, who was not appreciative of the paucity of their findings.

It was not until the following weekend that they got their first big clue. It was Ernie who first spotted it, and Big Mac felt like an idiot for not having noticed it himself. The message queue would build up to about three or four messages, and Mac and Ernie would dutifully log them, and note down their contents. Then the whole queue would vanish, and a new set of messages would start to build up. This puzzled Ernie, who asked Big Mac about it, but electronics was not Mac's forte. He did, finally, decide that the next time he talked to Tweeds, he would ask him about it. But it was Ernie who unearthed the real reason.

It happened one night, rather late. Big Mac was snoozing in front of the TV, and Ernie was making a late raid on the refrigerator, when he passed the answering machine in the hallway and noticed it doing something peculiar. It was buzzing away, but no caller was speaking. Ernie checked the volume switch to make sure it hadn't been turned down. Always, in the past, when a message came to an end, the little lighted counter on the lower right of the machine, which kept track of the number of messages, would be increased by one. This time, after a certain amount of humming, the number was back to zero again. Ernie had finally witnessed the mysterious process they had wondered about. He hurried back to wake Big Mac up, which was no small task. It was then that the brilliancy occurred to Ernie, which was rare for him, since Ernie seldom cogitated about anything, allowing Big Mac to do the thinking for both of them.

"Maybe the broad is calling in from some other telephone and getting her messages that way," said Ernie. "I remember once on TV they showed some guy in a phone booth calling his own telephone number and getting all the messages people had left for him."

Big Mac was quite taken aback with Ernie's idea. It was surprising for his partner to have any ideas, let alone a good one. It took him a few minutes to digest it, and he quickly saw the merit in it. He even forgot to be angry with Ernie for showing him up, and, uncharacteristically, even complimented him on it. Although it was a little past midnight, he decided to call Tweeds immediately.

"Yes," said Tweeds, after his houseman had answered the phone and woken him up.

"Me and Ernie come up with an idea we thought you should know about," said Mac, never one to hog all the credit for himself.

"Yes, yes," said Tweeds impatiently.

"We didn't say nothin' about it, but a couple times all the messages just went away, and then started buildin' up again. We just figured maybe the answering machine could only hold so many of 'em."

"Of course they went away, you fools," said Tweeds nastily. "It means she's accessing her messages from another phone and resetting the message queue. You can forget about staking her apartment out. Just lock up and leave the place the way you found it, and see me first thing tomorrow morning."

"Okay boss," said Mac, used to Tweeds' ill humor. "About what time?"

"After my breakfast," said Tweeds gruffly. "Make it about eleven."

"Okay if we just stay here tonight?" asked Mac.

"Stay wherever you like," said Tweeds. "Just be here tomorrow."

"Uh, we can't hardly leave this place the way we found it," said the big man. "We been kind of tearing it apart, looking for clues."

"Then just leave it," said Tweeds, hanging up.

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On Friday morning, Thelma got another call from Jake Barns.

"Jake honey, there isn't anything new to tell you. You just called me last night. I haven't done anything in between 'cept sleep and eat breakfast."

"Oh, I was just sittin' here thinkin' about you, so I gave you a ring. See how you are. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. You and your cousin Luther. You're both of you constantly at me about how I feel. You got some doctor genes in your family?"

Now she was laughing at him. At least that was a little better than finding fault with him, which she seemed to be doing the rest of the time. Cousin Luther was right about this bitch. She was a trip and a half. Miss pathetic paranoid pussy of Pacific Heights.

"You in a high risk area, baby. Your place already got hit by two crimes in just the last couple weeks."

"Okay, Jake, now I gotta go back to my job. I'll see you Saturday night. You got my parents' address, right? Seven thirty sharp, now."

"Right, babe. You take care."

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Early Friday afternoon, Frank Sabella gave Aldo a ring.

"Just thought you might like to hear some of the preliminary results we got on the prefixes in the 415 area."

"Very," said Aldo.

"Well, there are 355 prefixes in the 415 area. Not all of them have that particular four digit number Varney gave us. But a good eighty five per cent of them do, leaving us with about two hundred to check out. I can't tell you what an enormous job it would be to match up that name and address list with all the possible government files they might be in. We could reduce the job slightly by restricting ourselves to the San Francisco prefixes alone. That cuts it down to 177, which, with an average of 95 percent utilization, gives us about 168 names."

"I guess you realize I don't have the manpower to do profiles on 168 San Francisco residents, Frank."

"I'm not suggesting it. The funny thing is, if it were their credit card numbers, or their driver's license numbers, we could have a detailed statistical report on them right away, but telephone numbers just don't unlock so many file secrets. A name list is practically useless unless you have a mother's maiden name and birthdate to go along with it. There was one funny thing, however."

"What was that?"

"Out of the entire list of three hundred names in the 415 area code with those last four digits there isn't a single Smith."

"Now that is really interesting. It means the Smith that Garvey met was lying about his name."

"Yes," said Frank, "and it means the boy had to be lying too."

"And if they were telling the truth?"

"Then it means Garvey made a mistake in the number."



## Chapter 25

The armored car arrived at 3 PM. Joe the driver annotated the log book and replaced it under the visor. His partner Tim jumped down from the passenger's seat and walked to the back of the truck. Joe got out of the driver's side and joined Tim at the rear door, which he helped him open. Tim climbed up onto the truck bed and passed the money bag down to Joe. Then he jumped down and closed the door and the two of them marched up to the house.

"This must be the second time in two weeks we've delivered a large amount of cash to this guy," said Joe.

"Yeah, it was just last week," said Tim.

Joe rang the bell. "Wonder what he's doing with all this loot. Wild parties, expensive call girls?"

"How could a wild party cost that much? Besides, I don't think this guy looks the type."

"You think there's a type?"

Tim was saved from further speculation by the appearance of the maid, who opened the door a crack and stuck her head out to examine them carefully.

"Yes?" she asked. "Oh, it's you two again." She opened the door wider and motioned them in.

Smith was watching from his truck as the delivery was made. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number he found in his pocket computer..

"Okay Jim," he said. "The money has arrived. You can send the bag now."

He sat and waited, watching the armored car drive away. His phone rang.

"Cab's on the way," said Jim, signing off.

About forty minutes later, the taxi appeared. The driver had done a pretty good job, considering he had driven all the way from San Jose. He got out, carrying a bag, and walked up and rang the bell. He was quickly surrounded by police, who escorted him into the house. Smith started up the engine and slowly pulled out from the curb. He had a full evening in front of him.

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They arrived at the Cow Palace a full hour early. Smith had driven by Jim's house in Potrero Hill and Jim and Ray had followed them in an old Plymouth that Jim had picked up for the occasion. They wanted to see how easy it was to get two back-to-back parking slots in the lot. Reggie was really excited. He noticed the Plymouth following them, but guessed that Smith didn't want to discuss it.

"What part of the circus do you like the most?" he asked Smith.

"Oh, the clowns, I guess. What do you like the most?"

"I don't know," said Reggie. "A minute ago I probably would have said the elephants, but right now maybe I'd take the clowns too. I've seen them on television a bunch of times, and my friend Jack has told me about them. Why did you pick the clowns?"

"Hm," said Smith, pondering. "That's a tough one. Maybe because without them a circus just isn't a circus. You could do without the elephants, or the tigers, or even the acrobats, but not without clowns."

"Who gets to decide what kind of things are allowed in a circus?"

"Circuses probably go back to the time of the Romans. I would have to ask Clytemnestra about that."

"You mean Sheila," said Reggie. "I heard you call her that the other night, when you thought I was asleep. It's okay. I won't tell anybody what her name is."

"Okay, Sport. I'd appreciate that. Don't let her know you know either, okay?"

They managed to park the two cars front to back in the same block of slots. There were just a few other cars in the lot, and the parking attendants weren't too bossy about it.

The day was just ending, and the evening sky went from a pale turquoise at the horizon to a dark cobalt blue at the zenith. A few electric lights had already winked on, as if in challenge to a dying sun. A chilly wind sprang up from the ocean, and blew over the tops of the nearby hills. The doors to the huge building were just opening, and their yellow light poured out into the parking lot, turning the evening into night.

Inside, the main corridors that circled the building were already ablaze with light, and the hawkers were setting up their wares. Tables and booths were piled high with balloons and clown masks and plastic swords that lit up, and inflatable rubber toys. Smith bought Reggie one of everything in sight, and then, seeing the entry doors to the auditorium were opening up for business, they went on in and found their seats.

It was fun watching the circus warming up, the roustabouts throwing up the ropes, lowering the nets, and fastening the guy wires to cleats in the floor, setting up the three rings, then the clowns beginning their acts, moving about the perimeter of the floor, wearing marvelous costumes, bopping each other on the bean, doing prat falls, and chasing after one another, gesticulating wildly. Reggie was entranced by it all. He was mesmerized by the lights and the sheer size of the auditorium, the excitement, and the expectation of the show to come. It seemed to take ages for the magic hour to arrive.

And then it began, and Reggie was swept away by the constant sequence of act after act. It could have gone on forever for him. He never tired of pointing out the latest high wire act to Smith, as if to ensure that he didn't miss it, or to note excitedly that the animal act in the farthest ring was with Siberian tigers, whereas the one in the nearest ring was with Alaskan wolf hounds. He hardly noticed it when Jim and Ray joined them briefly, a little after the show had begun. Smith conversed with them in low tones, and then they left, and it wasn't until the end of the show that Reggie realized that they hadn't returned. He was much too involved keeping up with all the events going on simultaneously in the three big rings to pay much attention to the comings and goings of Smith's mysterious companions.

He was sound asleep when Smith arrived at his garage in Buena Vista Heights. He carried him into the house in the blanket he was already wrapped in. Sheila looked up from her reading as Smith entered, laden with the boy. She helped him put the child to bed, then walked slowly back with him to the front room, arm in arm.

"How'd it go?" she asked as they sank into the sofa.

"Great," he said. "Next time I come home from the circus, it'll be with another third of a million dollars."

"And that'll be the end of it," she murmured, nuzzling his neck.

"That'll be the end of it," he responded, sliding down and meeting her lips with his.

## Chapter 26

Saturday came and brought a little sunshine to ameliorate the drip drip drip of the last three days of fog, but Roger Lambeaux didn't notice it. The money was sitting in his safe, and the brightly-colored bag was sitting on the dining room table, with a ticket to the circus inside it.

And he was sitting next to the bag, thinking about the fact that for the second weekend in a row he would not be able to sleep with Gloria. Her mother was no longer on the critical list, but tonight was out because Gloria would only put out when she had been properly wined and dined first, which he could not do because this evening was claimed by the second money exchange. Sunday evenings were always out because she had to be at work bright and early on Monday. If they were married, she might see it as part of her wifely duties, but he was not quite desperate enough to give up his freedom for the demands of another full-time relationship.

Perhaps he should give Susan a ring, but he hadn't dated her in a long time, and she was an old-fashioned girl, so even if she were willing to go out with him, she certainly wouldn't be sexually available at such a moment's notice.

Damn these money exchanges! It was bad enough being robbed in broad daylight with the cops and the FBI holding his hand while it happened, but having to give up his weekends like this just added injury to insult. He wished he knew a high-priced hooker who was safe, but who could feel safe with the specter of AIDS lurking behind every casual encounter?

He put together a makeshift breakfast, followed it with a lackadaisical lunch, read both *The New York Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, then took a troubled nap. He had a pizza delivered, but found he had little appetite after a day with no physical activity. When Frank and Vic came to pick him up at seven, he was in a disgruntled mood.

They got to the Cow Palace just in time for the parking lot jam, and it took a good half hour to park the car. Aldo was waiting at the gates, and nodded at them as they drove through. The place was teeming with children, and Roger wondered idly if Reggie might not be one of them. It seemed curious to him, but he didn't miss his son. Reggie was away so much of the time that his being away now, even though it was under such duress, didn't seem much different.

"We'll be right behind you," Frank told him. Somehow that failed to make him feel any better. Frank had been in the seat right behind him at the baseball game, and what good had *that* done?. He clutched the bag, pushing his way through the crowd. His seat was in the third row, one of the best in the house. It ought to be, he thought. He had paid for it. He sat back, glad at least to be out of the crowd, away from other peoples' elbows and asses.

The seats around him filled up fast. He looked around once, and saw Frank give him the thumbs up gesture. The seat beside him remained empty, however, and he wondered how the money exchange would be effected. The instructions this time had been vague.

He paid little attention to the circus which was going on around him. He didn't even notice the teenager who finally took the empty seat beside him. It was only after

considerable boredom that the halfway point arrived, and Roger looked up, wanting to get up and stretch like everyone else, but not sure whether he should abandon his post.

It was then that the boy next to him made his move. "A man asked me to give this to you," he said to Roger, handing him an envelope. Roger stared at it, and when he looked up, the boy had moved into the mass of people squeezing onto the exit ramp. He tore the envelope open and found a key inside, attached to a large tag. On the tag was a message printed in big block letters:

LEAVE YOUR SEAT RIGHT NOW AND TAKE THE NEAREST EXIT  
TO THE PARKING LOT. LOOK FOR A PINK CADILLAC WITH A  
RED BALLOON TIED TO THE ANTENNA. OPEN THE TRUNK  
WITH THIS KEY, AND PLACE THE BAG IN THE TRUNK. SLAM  
THE TRUNK LID SHUT, AND MAKE SURE IT IS LOCKED.  
RETURN IMMEDIATELY TO YOUR SEAT, AND DO NOT TALK TO  
ANYONE.

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It had seemed an eternity since Smith had stationed himself in the tunnel under the seat in the Cadillac. He had driven the monster into the parking lot over two hours before, following Jim in the old Plymouth. They had managed to get two parking places in a row, just as they had the night before, with the Plymouth in front on one aisle, and the Caddy in back on another. Smith had locked up the Cadillac and joined Jim, waiting around for the lot to fill up. They located Ray, who had followed discreetly behind and parked some distance away. Ray was accompanied by a tough-looking boy of about fifteen. He introduced the boy to Smith.

"Smitty, this is Johnny Leonard. He's the kid I was telling you about. Johnny, Smitty." They nodded at one another. Johnny was small-boned, about five six, and could have passed for thirteen except for his hard eyes and confident poise.

"Johnny's gonna deliver the envelope for us. He's done some work for me in the past."

Finally the spaces around the Caddy were taken, and Smith and Jim ambled back to the Plymouth, Jim keeping an eye out while Smith dropped to the pavement and crawled under the car, maneuvering his way beneath the Plymouth until he reached the Cadillac. Then he climbed up into the tunnel, and lay there, waiting for the next phase of their plan. It was about time for old Roger to perform *his* role.

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Roger stood up and looked around for Frank or Vic, but neither was in sight. He moved quickly to the exit ramp and joined the people leaving the auditorium. The corridor outside was jammed, and Roger had to elbow his way to the exit. He suddenly found himself in the half-lit parking lot, and he strode along, looking for a pink Cadillac.

There it was - a couple cars from the near end of the row. Nobody could miss the loud color, even in this poor light. There was even a red balloon, bouncing in the breeze just above the antenna. Roger looked around, but nobody was paying any attention to

him. He walked up to the rear of the Cadillac and inserted the key. It slipped easily into the lock, and the trunk sprang open effortlessly when Roger turned the key. He placed the bag into the empty compartment, pulled the key from the lock, and slammed the lid shut.

He tugged at the handle to make sure it was locked, and then he saw the license plate. He memorized it as quickly as he could, repeating it to himself over and over as he walked back to the entrance gate.

Frank and Vic were waiting for him. He handed the key with its instructions to Frank, pointing in the direction of the car, and robotically recited the license number to Vic. Vic pulled a notebook from his vest pocket and asked him to repeat it. Frank grabbed a couple men and pointed in turn to the Cadillac, and they quickly moved towards it. Roger was told to go inside and wait.

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Smith felt the slight vibration of the trunk lid opening at the same time that he saw the small red light bulb wink on. He tried to envision the physical movements that Roger was going through. It seemed to take forever.

Then he felt as well as heard the dull thud of the trunk closing, and saw the red light blink off. He moved quickly, rotating the two flanges which held the small secret door in place, and pushed it open carefully. He reached to the right with his gloved hand searching for the feel of the bag, and there it was. He pulled it back through the small door carefully, making sure it didn't jam.

Then it was in the passageway with him. He shoved it temporarily under the back seat through an opening in the side of the tunnel wall, and pulled a second, duplicate bag into the passageway. He passed the second bag through the door into the trunk, and placed it as closely as he could in the position which the first bag had occupied. Then he closed the door and moved the flanges back into place.

Now he had reached the critical part of the plan. He had to work fast to get out of there before anyone got suspicious. In just a few moments this car would be surrounded by a horde of F.B.I. agents and cops. He grabbed the first bag, and, using his elbows, backed himself out of the tunnel and down to the pavement below. He moved carefully so the car wouldn't lurch.

Finally he was beneath the car. He yanked a folded-up shopping bag from his pocket, awkwardly opened it up, and jammed the money bag into it as he lay on the cold tar. Then he turned and crawled back awkwardly, dragging the bag along with him, towards the front of the Caddy and the back of the Plymouth. The whole point of the Plymouth was to ensure nobody else parked behind.

He inched his way under the Plymouth as fast as he could. As he neared the front he heard the reassuring sounds of Jim and Ray conversing in muted tones, and he gave them a low whistle.

At last he was rolling out into the narrow space between the cars, and Ray was helping him to his feet while Jim took the bag. In practically no time at all they were strolling casually to the other side of the lot, where Ray's car was parked. They threw the bag in the trunk and piled in.

"Home, Jeeves," said Smith, with a sigh of relief.

They divvied up the loot at Jim's house again. This time Ray didn't drag out a joint, and Jim didn't offer his guests any champagne. It had been a most satisfying evening, however, especially as there had been so little actual work to do, as compared with the ballpark caper. Still, it was late, and they were all tired.

"That was a nice idea of yours, Smitty," said Jim, "to leave that duplicate bag. Even without it, they'd still be out there, with their army of G-men, waiting for us to show. But that duplicate bag will really fuck their minds over. I wonder how long it takes for them to discover the switch."

## Chapter 27

Frank and Aldo stationed agents and plainclothesmen in a rough circle around the Cadillac. One of the agents had followed Roger, seen him place the bag in the trunk, and had stayed where he was, rooted to the spot, until the others had joined him. He was able to verify that no one had approached the vehicle, and that the trunk had remained shut. There was nothing to do but stand and wait for someone to open the trunk or attempt to drive the Caddy away, and Frank was quite determined that neither should happen without someone getting nabbed. This time there would be no slip up.

At last the circus was over, and the crowd came milling out of the building. It was difficult keeping a proper surveillance of the Cadillac, with all the people wandering past and all the cars departing, leaving nothing to hide behind. But Frank, Vic, Aldo, and their underlings persevered. Roger stood some distance away, being consoled by one of the other agents.

"Look at it like this, Mr. Lambeaux. You've done your part, so they have no reason to harm your son, and if they don't show up to take the money, you get to keep it for another week. How much interest can you earn on a third of a million dollars in a week?"

Somehow it didn't make Roger feel any better. It only meant having to do it all over again. They must have been scared off this time, maybe by all the cops in the area. It seemed like a hairbrained scheme anyway. To use the loudest looking car in the lot as a getaway vehicle seemed ludicrous. He couldn't understand how they expected to succeed.

Finally the lot was almost empty. Only the two cars, the Cadillac and the Plymouth, were left, and the men who still maintained their positions watching the Cadillac were growing restive.

"It looks as if the attempt has fallen through, Mr. Lambeaux," Aldo told Roger. "We'd like to have your permission to call it quits and go home. We'll haul these vehicles down to the station and check 'em out, but it looks like that's all we'll be able to do. I'd like you to come and retrieve your money, and then we can all be on our way."

Roger was happy to oblige. He was footsore and weary, and longed to get home to a nice hot bath and a stiff drink. Frank handed him back the key, and he walked up to the pink Caddy and opened up the trunk. There was the familiar bag, in its orange, pink and blue colors, sitting right where he had put it. He started to lift it out when Frank stopped him.

"Better make sure it's still all there," Frank cautioned.

Roger unzipped the bag, and saw inside the seven, familiar plastic bags, and he could make out the hundred dollar bill in the end packet of the top one.

"Looks okay, offhand," he said. "You don't expect me to re-count it all right here in the middle of the parking lot, do you?"

"It's up to you," said Frank. "It's your money. You're the best judge if it's all there or not."

Frank and Vic were tired, so Aldo drove Roger home.

"Put the bag in the safe first thing, okay?" he said to Roger. "I want to be sure everything is secure so I can go home and sleep."

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Before returning home for the evening, Smith drove by Roger's house to check on the surveillance. He found a parking place a couple blocks away and walked back slowly. It was a nice neighborhood for a stroll. He imagined a pipe and a spaniel straining at the leash, a maid to open the door when he got back, and a wife bringing him slippers and a hot toddy as he eased himself into an overstuffed chair and picked up the financial pages to see what had happened to his favorite stocks.

He halted his steps at the intersection of Pacific and Scott and stood leaning against a garden wall. A few minutes later, he saw the Nova draw up to the curb across the street from the Lambeaux residence and park in front of the fire hydrant. The lights went out and the engine was silenced, but the two occupants remained inside. Smith continued on his way, passing the house and continuing on down the block. After five minutes, he reversed his steps. When he got back, he stood again next to the garden wall.

After another ten minutes, the green Vega pulled up and deposited Roger at his front door. Everything was back to normal. Smith jogged back to his car and headed for home.

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After a leisurely breakfast at a restaurant on Union Street, Roger Lambeaux strolled back home to re-count his money. It took him exactly ten minutes to discover that the second money exchange, contrary to popular opinion, had gone through successfully after all.

The first thing that struck his attention were the plastic bags. They didn't seem so tightly wrapped as when he had first handled them, and the bills themselves looked dirtier than usual around the edges. As soon as he examined the bags more closely, he could see where they had been opened and resealed. He ripped one of them open and flipped through the first bundle of bills. The first was a hundred, but the rest were all ones. He checked the rest of the bundles. Except for the top bill in the top bundle and the bottom bill in the bottom bundle, which were hundred dollar bills, the rest were all one dollar bills. All the other plastic bags were similarly tampered with.

Each bag had originally contained a hundred thousand dollars. Now each had a mere twelve hundred and ninety eight dollars, so he had a little over nine thousand altogether, instead of seven hundred thousand. They had made off with approximately six hundred and ninety one thousand.

But how? He telephoned Aldo immediately, but he was off duty. He made them ring him at home, and about a half hour later, Aldo returned his call. He was not happy at being disturbed on his day off, but he listened patiently to Roger.

"I don't know how that can be. We stationed men around the entire perimeter the moment you pointed out the car to us. Frank had a man there continuously from the time you put the bag in the trunk until you took it out. On top of that, you opened the bag yourself and verified the contents for Frank, and then I drove you home. Are you suggesting that one of us switched bags on you?"

"No, no, of course I'm not," said Roger, seeing it all slipping away from him, and knowing he was no longer in a position to demand anything. "I'm just telling you what I discovered."

"Did you open up the bags and count the money when you first received it?"

"No, of course not. It came straight from the bank."

"Didn't they ask you as a matter of course to count it?"

"Yes, they did. I looked it over in general, but it would have been absurd to count it."

"Then I'm afraid you don't have a leg to stand on, Mr. Lambeaux. The money never left your possession except to be locked inside a trunk for a couple hours, a trunk which was watched continuously by both the police and the F.B.I., and you yourself verified the contents of the bag when you removed it from the trunk. As far as liability goes, it's all yours."

"I'm not talking about the liability," screamed Roger, forgetting the fragility of his position in his frustration. "I'm talking about the kidnappers. They switched bags on you under your very noses, and you're never going to catch them if you continue to argue with me!"

"Well, Mr. Lambeaux. I realize that you're upset. I'll pass on your allegations to Frank, and he can take it from there. Sunday is my day to spend with my family, and I intend to do just that. Tomorrow morning I'll go back to worrying about your case. Perhaps we'll discover something when we check out those two cars we towed to the station. Have a good day, sir."

Roger was not pleased with the answer, but there was nothing he could do. Little did he know that the next day would bring a much better explanation.

## Chapter 28

While Roger Lambeaux was discovering that he had once more been taken, Smith and Sheila were having a champagne breakfast at home. They let Reggie have a small sip. He wrinkled up his nose as he tasted it.

"Phfaugh!" he said, grimacing, as he took a big swallow of orange juice to clear his palate. "I thought that stuff was supposed to taste good."

"A little too sour for you, Sport?" asked Smith. "Some day you'll acquire a taste for it."

Reggie didn't seem too sure.

"So what's left, now?" asked Sheila. "You said two money exchanges. I guess it's time to wrap things up, then."

"I've still got to go through the motions of the third exchange," said Smith. "I'll need you guys' help to plan it out, though."

"How do we do that?" asked Sheila.

"By coming with me to Great America for a day," he said.

"Hurray!" said Reggie.

The parking lot at the amusement park was jam packed, as one might expect on a sunny Sunday. Reggie had brought *Watership Down* with him, but was far too excited to read. Sheila, on the other hand, was completely absorbed in Peck's *A Road Less Traveled*.

"You dredge that up from the basement?" asked Smith.

"You guessed it, kid," said Sheila in a Bogart accent, not looking up from her reading.

"That must be a quarter of a century old," said Smith. "It was one of my mother's books."

"Are any of your father's books down the basement?" asked Reggie.

"I don't think so," said Smith. "My father was functionally illiterate."

"What's that mean?" said Reggie.

"It means his father didn't care much for reading," said Sheila, giving Smith a critical look.

Eventually they got the car parked, the tickets bought, and were ready to contend with the mob of children and adults that extended in every direction.

"It looks like everybody in the whole world is here," said Reggie. "What'll we try first?"

"We'll let you decide," said Smith.

"What are we supposed to do?" asked Sheila.

"I want you both to rate the rides for me," said Smith, "on the basis of scariness. Make it on a scale of one to ten. At the end we'll choose the four rides with the highest rating."

"I'm starting to get an inkling of what you're planning," said Sheila.

"What are you planning?" asked Reggie.

"I'll tell you later," said Smith. "Now, let's all stay together. If anyone gets lost, we'll all meet back here at the ticket window."

"Where's that tower thing we saw before?" asked Reggie.

"The one we saw from the highway?" asked Smith.

"Yeah," said Reggie. "I can't see it anymore."

"It's sort of like mountains," said Smith. "You can see them easily from the distance, but you get up close, and they hide behind the foothills. Let's just wander around a bit. I'm sure we'll find it."

The tower turned out to be a ride called the Edge. The lineup was considerable, and it took about twenty five minutes before their turn came. Reggie asked Sheila about Tsars, then he wanted to know what *Tsar* meant, and Smith told him it came from *Caesar*, and Reggie wanted to know if that had anything to do with a Caesar salad. For once neither Smith nor Sheila had an answer.

"Why is everything so complicated?" said Reggie.

"You mean why is everything so connected?" asked Sheila.

Reggie wasn't too sure. "Maybe," he said after some reflection.

"That's because almost everything started out at just one or two places and spread out from there," said Sheila.

By this time they were at the head of the line and were being ushered into a sort of cage which took four passengers. A red-haired boy about Reggie's age made up the foursome and talked excitedly to them as a bar came down from above to hold them in place.

"How many times you been on this ride?" the boy asked Reggie, as the car began an ascent straight up inside the metal structure. Sheila reached for Smith for a little reassurance, but Reggie looked around animatedly.

"Wow," he said. "This is cool."

"Your first time, huh?" asked the red-haired boy. "I've been on this nineteen times."

"Does it get any scarier than this?" Reggie asked.

"Yeah, a little," the other boy said. "You been on the Demon, yet?" he asked.

Reggie shook his head. "This is the first time I've been on anything," he said. "What's gonna happen?"

The red-haired boy smiled mysteriously, and then they came to a sudden halt, and for a brief, frightening moment found themselves high in the air above the park. Then came a sudden descent down a slide to the bottom, which left their stomachs momentarily behind them, and ended up on their backs. Finally the cage tilted them back into a normal position and they clambered out on dizzy legs.

It was all over too fast for Reggie. "Is that the end of it?" he asked.

"Yeah," said the red-haired boy. "Bye. I gotta go now. I wanna get to the Demon, and the line's pretty long there."

With that he was off, disappearing through the crowd.

"I feel cheated," said Sheila. "I wasn't scared long enough."

"It was pretty cool, though," said Reggie. "You think it rated a ten, Smitty?"

"I don't know," said Smith. "Maybe we'd better leave some room for scarier rides. How about eight?"

The rest of the afternoon became a blur of activity. They were suspended upside down in a huge boat fifty feet above the ground with a lot of yelling and screaming and all the change falling out of people's pockets. Then they whizzed around a track in some fast cars which went through wild loop-the-loops and then into a sort of corkscrew

motion, the cars lurching around a lot, with sudden changes in motion. Reggie laughed and screamed, and Sheila joined him once in a while, and Smith grinned at both of them. Reggie dismissed many of the rides as being for babies, but he seemed to enjoy them nevertheless.

"I wonder what jumping out of an airplane would be like," he confided to Smith between events.

"With or without a parachute?" Smith asked.

"Only you could give him an answer to both alternatives," said Sheila.

"C'mon, Smitty. You know what I mean," said Reggie.

"There's nothing like it," said Smith. "Three thousand feet up on a nice day with the whole world beneath you and the wind screaming by your ears and then thunk!"

"You hit the ground," offered Sheila.

"The chute pops open," corrected Smith, "and then it's total silence with the earth below swinging slowly below you, back and forth in absolute silence. It's one of the eeriest feelings in the world."

"Could we ever do that, Smitty?" asked Reggie excitedly.

"We'd have to think about that one, Sport," said Smith.

Sheila told them she'd had enough rides for a while, and was going to track down a seven-up for her queasy stomach, so they arranged to meet her in half an hour at the exit line from the Demon.

The only thing that put a dent in the day, Smith thought, as they waited for Sheila, was standing in the interminable lines, but that was probably just an inescapable corollary to overpopulation. Some day, he mused, when the world has been converted into one vast parking lot, the only way people will be able to get experiences out of the ordinary will be to come to places like this. When there are no more wild rivers to raft down, and no trees to swing from in ropes, no more real danger to make the heart beat more quickly, when all the national parks have been logged off and all the beaches polluted, then Great America and all its competitors will be the only places where people will be able to experience the exuberance of the physical, reawaken their slumbering adrenal glands, and reinvoke those almost lost racial memories of fleeing from dragons.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Reggie.

"I was thinking about how much I hate to wait," said Smith.

"Yeah, me too," said Reggie, tightening his hold on Smith's hand.

"I was also wondering," said Smith, "whether you had ever done any camping out."

"I remember once," said Reggie, his eyes staring off into the distance, "when I was real little, and my mother took me to Yosemite."

"Did you stay in a tent?" asked Smith.

"I think it was some kind of cabin," said Reggie. "I remember a huge bear eating out of the garbage can, and we saw some deer."

"Was your father with you?" asked Smith.

"I don't remember him being there," said Reggie. "He never had time for things like that. He was always working."

Finally Sheila reappeared and said she was feeling better. It was already three in the afternoon, so they decided to take a food break. Sheila was all for calling it quits then and there, but Reggie pleaded with her to stay a little longer. In the end, Smith got them to compromise on one more hour.

At the end of the afternoon it was a very tired little boy who clambered into the back of the car and fell asleep almost immediately.

"God, I wish I could just nod off like that," said Sheila. "I wonder what his secret is."

"An innocent soul, maybe," hazarded Smith.

"And what am I guilty of, pray tell?" demanded Sheila.

"Of eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," said Smith.

"It wasn't my fault," said Sheila. "It was that darned serpent that talked me into it."

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On Sunday evening Roger received the fourth phone call from the kidnappers. He was alone this time, but he went ahead and dutifully recorded it. He knew that if he didn't he wouldn't hear the end of it from Frank Sabella. (Not that their precious recordings had netted them one iota of information about the kidnappers.)

This was the final exchange, and this time it was for six hundred thousand. The message said that the exchange would take place on the following Saturday, and that on Friday evening a bag for the money would be dropped off with instructions for the following day. He tried to call Frank, but he was not available, so he left a message. He had little belief by now in the ability of either the cops or the F.B.I. to catch the kidnappers. They appeared to be far too organized and clever. He was relieved, however, to have the final exchange on Thursday rather than on the following weekend. He was immensely weary of the whole business, and was anxious to have it all over so he could get on with his life. He made a mental note to call Dave Duerson first thing in the morning to arrange for the last money delivery on Wednesday afternoon.

## Chapter 29

Late Tuesday afternoon, Smith paid a visit to The Castle. It was early, but Al, the night man, was already on duty. Smith perched himself on a nearby bar stool.

"Jim or Ray been in today?" he asked the barman.

"Almost four thirty," said Al, looking up at the clock. "Jim should be in any minute. Haven't seen Ray for a coupla days. You want anything?" He wiped the bar in front of Smith.

"Red Hook," Smith said, sitting back for a moment, giving Al the space to go through his little ritual, holding the mug sideways until the spout stopped sputtering excess gas, then drawing a good solid portion, wiping the foam off the top with a paddle, grabbing a beer napkin, and assembling it all in front of Smith with the motions of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

Smith sat, enjoying the slightly bitter taste of the beer. He felt more relaxed than he had in some time. The ransom was almost complete, but there was still one item hanging. He was so rapt in his inner reflections that he didn't notice Jim sit next to him. He felt a poke in the ribs and turned around, unfocussing his eyes to take in the large body with the wide smiling face.

"Hey, bub. Can you spare a dime?"

"Nice variation on 'spare change.'"

"Depression-era style. You watch that documentary on Channel 9 the other night?"

"Too depressing for me," said Smith. "My grandmother told me all about it, anyway."

"I never knew you had a grandmother."

They conversed briefly about the weather and the Giants, and Jim mentioned a case of Chateau Latour futures he had just bought.

"Is there any future in futures?" asked Smith.

He was saved from a dissertation on the merits of the various vintages of Latour by the timely arrival of Ray, who appeared with that same unobtrusive suddenness that Jim did. Now you don't see him, now you do.

Ray was the opposite of Jim, nervous where Jim was confident, solitary rather than social, devious instead of direct. Ray spent hours perfecting fool-proof schemes, whereas Jim depended on brilliancies to help him over unexpected hurdles. Ray had done time, yet Jim had never had a parking ticket. Still these two opposites were as attracted to one another as two magnets, an ex-con and a confidence man.

"What's buzzin', buzzards?" said Ray. He caught the bartender's attention and told him in sign language what he wanted. "This just social, or should we take a back table?" he asked Smith.

"Let's be exclusive," said Smith. He waited until the other two had been served, then gave them the nod. They picked up their drinks and transported them to the large round table in the rear of the bar.

Smith waited until they were all comfortable.

"Gents," he said, in a quiet voice, "I would like to propose that we alter our original plans and go through with the third pickup as well."

The silence which ensued could have been cut with a knife. Then both Jim and Ray began speaking at once. They stopped and laughed, and then Jim continued.

"I haven't been able to think of anything else for the last three days, Smitty. It's been a real torment, thinking about that six hundred thousand smackeroots going to waste." He gave Smith an uneasy smile.

"Same for me," said Ray. "It's been torture."

"Sorry, you guys," said Smith. "but I got so stuck on the idea of the third pickup being phony, I just couldn't think rationally about it."

"But then you saw the light," Jim suggested.

"It was more like the light saw me," said Smith. "I've been thinking for some time about breaking back into Roger's place to see what information I could dig up about his ex-wife. I've been toying with the idea of helping the boy get in touch with his mother. The trouble is that for the last couple weeks there's been a team of agents watching the place around the clock."

He stopped to take a swallow of his beer.

"Except for two occasions, that is. I saw them leave shortly after Roger's departure on the first exchange, and arrive slightly before his return on the second. There didn't appear to be anyone relieving them on the first occasion, nor did they appear to be coming to anyone's relief on the second. I'm willing to bet that they help out during the exchanges and therefore aren't at their posts at such times."

"So what's all this got to do with seeing the light?" asked Ray.

"I realized that if I wanted to break into Roger's house, the best time to do it would be during the phony exchange," said Smith. "But that got me to thinking about what he was likely to do when he got back from Great America."

"And what was that?" prompted Jim.

"Lock up the money in the safe," said Smith.

There was a silence among the three.

"So this is the plan - Roger Dodger spends the day having fun down at Great America, and while he's gone the place is not watched, which gives me a chance to break into his house. Now, by the time he gets through he's gonna be all tuckered out, and will be looking forward to a nice nap. But the first thing he'll want is to put the money away in his safe. That's where I come in. The minute he opens that safe, there I am, pointing a gun at him. He hands over the six hundred thousand, I tie him up and take off with the spoils. There's only one fly in the ointment."

"Besides the gun," said Jim. "I don't like the gun."

Smith reached in his breast pocket and pulled out a small pistol, a squarish shape of blued steel with an overall length of about five inches and a black plastic grip.

"What is it?" asked Ray.

"It's a Sterling .25 automatic. Nice little weapon. It used to have a six-round magazine until it was modified. I picked it up about three years ago, and I never had a use for it until now."

Ray pulled it over to his side of the table and hefted it for weight, turning it over and inspecting it carefully. Then he slid it back across the table towards Smith.

"Nice," he said to Smith, "but you better put it away. I don't think Al would be too comfortable to see anyone displaying a piece in here."

"How is it modified?" asked Jim.

"Somebody - it had to be a gunsmith - turned this baby into a squirt gun. Isn't that a novelty?" He pulled out the magazine and showed it to the other two. "The water goes



in here. You see this little plastic plug." He popped it open. "This is where you fill it. You see the small tube at the top of the magazine? That fits into a pipe which goes up inside the nozzle of the gun. When the trigger is pulled back, it operates this lever which squeezes against the plastic bulb which holds the water. It also releases a little shutoff valve so the water has a clear path to the nozzle. Absolutely watertight. It's the only squirt gun I've ever seen that could fool an expert." He slipped the magazine back into the grip and put the gun back in his pocket. "Like I said, I've been looking for a use for this little baby since I picked it up."

"Where'd you get it?" asked Ray.

"Found it in a cop's apartment."

"You robbed a cop's place?" asked Jim.

"I didn't know it was till I broke in," said Smith. "He probably took it away from somebody else. Maybe a stickup man. The rap is the same, but it might make a difference in the sentence. You could hardly be convicted of attempted manslaughter if you used a squirt gun."

"Cute," said Jim. "So what's the other fly?"

"The surveillance guys will be back on duty, because the bird is back in the coop."

"I see," said Jim.

"So I need a diversion," said Smith.

"To take their attention away from the house long enough for you to get out, you mean," said Jim, never one to let an obvious statement go unsaid.

"Right," said Smith.

There was a small silence while the three of them contemplated the problem.

"That's a toughie," said Jim.

"I am, of course, making an assumption," said Smith. "First of all I'm guessing that they're going to use the satchel full of dollar bills we stiffed them with on the last exchange as a substitute for the real loot. You can bet they'll try their damndest to turn our little joke around and use it against us. So I feel fairly confident they'll go through the little assortment of rides I picked out for Roger. Except the only portraits they'll have to offer will be Washington's instead of Franklin's."

He paused a moment.

"Nevertheless, I'm making the assumption that they'll have the real money delivered to Roger's, even if they're thinking of stiffing us, just in case we're watching Roger's place to see if the money is delivered as before. So if they bring the fake money with them, the real money will be sitting in Roger's safe. Afterwards, Roger will want to stow the fake money in his safe afterwards, because it's over seven grand, but the cops won't come in the house with him to make sure it gets there, because it's *only* seven grand, and not six hundred grand, so when he opens the safe, he'll be by himself, and the real money will be there, waiting for us. But, as I say, it all depends on whether they decide to have the real money on hand. It's easy enough to check out - just see if a Brinks car shows up on Friday."

## Chapter 30

Wednesday was overcast. A stiff cold wind from the Pacific rattled the panes in the windows and sent newspapers scurrying across the streets.

Sheila let out a gigantic yawn. "I've gotta do something or I'm gonna go stir crazy!" she said, raising her book above her head as she stretched her limbs, squeezed her eyes shut, and squinted her face into a frown. She put the book down, got up lazily, and strolled over to the windows, looking out at the ominous sky.

"You could jog around the block a few times," suggested Smith.

"Or go to the ice cream store and bring back a couple gallons of ultra chocolate," suggested Reggie.

"You couch potatoes are no help," she said. "I wonder how safe it would be to pay a brief visit to my apartment. It's been just over two weeks now. Do you think they might still be watching it?" she asked Smith.

"Who? Tweeds or the cops?"

"Tweeds, you ninny. The cops could only learn of it through Tweeds, and he would never report us to the cops for fear you'd give them the scoop on his entire operation."

"True," said Smith.

"Wouldn't they have given up by now?"

"Who knows?" said Smith. "At any rate, it's unwise."

"What if we went in the back way?" she asked. "There's a half alley that goes up to the middle of the block."

"All right, but it's against my better judgement. I hope your reasons warrant it. What are they, by the way?"

"I guess it's just homesickness. A good part of my recent life is tied up in that place, and it seems strange to be gone from it so long. Besides that, there's a bunch of small items I wanted to pick up. You moved me out of there pretty fast, and it was hard to remember everything at once."

"Okay. I'm getting a little claustrophobic myself. Can you hold the fort for us while we're gone?" he asked Reggie.

"Sure," said the boy. "Should I answer the phone?"

"Good question. No, don't answer it. But if the caller leaves a message, then listen to the message. Turn the volume up. If it's me, I'll leave a message. When you hear my voice, then you can pick the receiver up and talk to me. Okay?"

"Okay. When will you guys be back?"

"We won't be longer than two hours. Wait till tomorrow morning. If we aren't back by then, grab some money from the bowl on top of the bureau, and go home to your father. But don't tell them where this house is. Try calling my number a couple days later, if you can get to a telephone by yourself"

"Okay."

"But I don't think anything's gonna happen to us, Sport, so we'll probably see you in a couple hours."

"Right," said Reggie. "I'll just finish *The Hobbit*. I've only got about fifty pages left. Do you have anything I could read after that?"

"*The Lord of the Rings* would be a great follow-up," said Smith. "Maybe one of the greatest books ever written. I don't have a copy anymore, but there must be plenty at the bookstores."

They cruised the area around Sheila's apartment, checking for people sitting in cars or loitering about. When they saw that the coast was clear, Smith did a U-turn and made a right into the alley behind her building. Her apartment was on the ground floor and had its own front and back entrances. He pulled in past the clutter of garbage cans and turned off the engine.

The apartment was dim, and he could see no sign of human presence as he peered through the pane in the back door. Sheila handed her keys to Smith, who unlocked the door and led the way in. The refrigerator was humming away, and, in what would otherwise have been silence, the tick of the wall clock sounded like a bomb ready to go off. It smelled musty, and a dim light filtered through the drawn curtains. Then he stepped on something slippery and had to grab onto Sheila to keep from falling. He fumbled for the light switch, and revelation came crashing in on them as the overhead globe flicked on.

"Holy Jesus and Mary," said Sheila. Her place looked like a war zone. Whoever had trashed it had gone in for thoroughness. The garbage bucket was overflowing onto the floor, the sink was full, and beer cans lay scattered all over. The bedroom looked as if it had been hit by a tornado. Drawers were pulled out of dressers, with their contents scattered everywhere. The bedsheets were mud-stained, the pillows had ketchup and mustard spots, and clothes had been yanked out of closets and dumped unceremoniously on the floor, covered with a litter of empty wire hangers.

The front room was the least devastated, being partially protected by a layer of newspapers. Empty food containers occupied every niche, and any surface not otherwise occupied was liberally overlaid with a patina of cigarette ash. Smith shoved the garbage off the couch and the two of them sank into the cushions, staring around themselves with dismay.

"They did everything but crap on the floor," said Smith. "It looks like they were camped out here for a week."

"God! I really feel violated. Look at that! They even tried my underthings on." She pointed to some brassieres and panties which lay twisted out on the floor, the strap ripped off one of the bras.

"I have a pretty good idea who it was," said Smith, picking up a cigar butt from the floor.

"Tell me his name, so I can put out a contract on him."

"Him is probably plural. Mac and Ernie. There can't be much doubt. The two stooges who grabbed you at Mary Jane's. Nobody but Big Mac smokes such foul-smelling cigars, and nobody but Tweeds has any criminal interest in you."

"What a mess they made of my little retreat. I really can't face it." She was almost in tears.

"You don't have to," he said, putting his arm around her. "We're rich now. We'll hire somebody to clean this place up, put the clothes back where they belong, throw out the garbage, and mop the floors. Okay? Why don't you just gather up those things you'd like to take with you now?"

In the end, it was only a couple bags of essentials that made it back to the car. Sheila was quiet during the drive back, which Smith made as complicated as possible to elude anyone trying to follow them.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Smith, as he pulled into the garage.

"I don't want to go back there again. Ever." Her voice was flat and angry.

"Like I said, you don't have to. After we have the place cleaned up, I'll hire someone else to box up all your belongings and put them in storage. You don't even have to think about it. Okay?"

"I've never evaded responsibility before, but I'll take you up on it."

"There's something else," he said, as they walked up to the house.

"What's that?"

"It's about time for us to start pulling up stakes here as well. I haven't said anything to you, but I'm starting to hear footsteps. I've been concerned for some time about that old man, Varney, the one who found Reggie in his front yard, remembering my phone number and giving it to the cops."

"I thought Reggie called you himself."

"No. The old man asked him for the number, and Reggie told him without thinking about it."

"I see. Is the number registered to this address?"

"No. I gave the phone company my Valencia Street address. But other connections might exist. They'd have to go through several computers to find them, but it's possible."

"So where do we go from here?" By this time they had reached the front door and were trooping in. Reggie greeted them at the door and told them there hadn't been any phone messages.

"How'd you guys like to go camping next week?"

"Sure," said Reggie, enthusiastically.

"Where?" asked Sheila guardedly.

"I was thinking of Russian Gulch State Park," said Smith. "It's just north of Mendocino City."

"How far north?" asked Sheila.

"Of Mendocino City? About five miles."

"Why couldn't you two guys camp out, while I took a room in a local hotel?"

"Why not? Weekends are probably all booked up, so I'll try to get reservations for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. I'll find something in Mendocino City for you, Sheila, and then . . . maybe rooms for all of us on Thursday and Friday. We'll see what's available. Then on Saturday we'll drive over to Sonoma for the Country Fair and take in a rodeo."

"Super!" said Reggie.

"And then we gotta give you back to your father, Sport. We'll invite him up to the rodeo to meet you there. And don't look so downcast. We've got a whole week together up in the wilds of Mendocino."

## Chapter 31

On Friday afternoon, a Brinks armored car pulled up in front of the Lambeaux residence. The driver, Joe Woods, filled in the log book as usual.

"Third time in the last three weeks. Wonder what he needs all this cash for?"

"Ours not to reason why," said his partner, Tim Wesley, climbing down from the cab.

"Seems strange, though," Joe said, as they opened the rear door and Tim jumped up into the truck. "Must be altogether two million in cash in the three deliveries. I can't remember ever delivering this much to a private house before."

"It's pretty unusual," Tim agreed, passing him the bag of money and jumping down to close the door.

"What really gets me is that the guy never counts the money."

"The bank's not gonna cheat him," said Tim, as they walked together toward the house.

"If it was my money, I'd count it."

Smith spotted the truck as he rounded the corner onto Pacific. He slowed his pace to a slow trot, concentrating on his breathing. The two undercover men, sitting in the Datsun, noticed him as he passed them.

"Must be a local resident," said agent Archie Meeks. "That's gotta be the third time we've seen him out jogging."

"Fourth, by my count," said Sergeant John Tubb.

"Funny," said agent Meeks. "You put a man in jogging clothes, and you can't tell if he's rich or poor. The guy probably lives in a million dollar house, and you couldn't tell him from a clerk in an office."

"Except that an office clerk wouldn't be out jogging in the middle of the afternoon," pointed out Sergeant Tubb.

"True," said Meeks. "Any coffee left in the thermos?"

Around dinner time, a cab pulled up in front of the Lambeaux residence and double parked. The driver emerged with a bag and walked up to the door. After the third ring, a maid appeared and poked her head out.

"I'm delivering a bag to a Mr. Lambeaux," the cabbie explained.

"I'll take it," said the maid.

"There's seven fifty five on the meter."

"You'll have to wait," she told him, shutting the door in his face. After what seemed a long five minutes, the door opened and she reappeared.

"You can come in now," she said, opening the door and stepping aside.

"But you've already been paid," said Mr. Lambeaux, after the driver had been ushered in.

"I was told that you would pay the fare," said the cabbie, not about to be intimidated. "No fare, no bag."

"Very well," said a red-faced Roger, digging angrily into his pocket. "There's five, six, seven, seven fifty," handing it to the driver.

"Seven fifty five," said the driver, sticking to his guns.

"There's your damn nickel," said Roger. "I hope you choke on it."

"You guys are all the same," said the cabbie. "You live in a two million dollar house, and you begrudge a lousy nickel to a guy who's just doing his job."

The bag was like the one before - white, with black trim. Inside, Roger found an elastic cord with hooks on both ends, and a lengthy note. The note, like the preceding one, was printed in large block letters:

MR. LAMBEAUX: BE AT THE GREAT AMERICA AMUSEMENT PARK IN SANTA CLARA TOMORROW (SATURDAY) BETWEEN 11 A.M. & 4 P.M.. BRING THE MONEY IN THIS BAG. GO ON THE FOLLOWING FOUR RIDES: DEMON, EDGE, REVOLUTION, AND VORTEX, IN THAT ORDER. BE SURE TO CARRY THE BAG WITH YOU ON ALL OF THE RIDES. A BUNGEE CORD HAS BEEN INCLUDED TO ASSIST YOU IN KEEPING THE BAG ATTACHED TO YOUR PERSON, IN ORDER TO MINIMIZE THE POSSIBILITY OF IT'S LOSS. AS SOON AS YOU COMPLETE ALL FOUR RIDES, REPEAT THE SEQUENCE, AND CONTINUE IN THIS FASHION UNTIL 4.P.M. YOU WILL BE OBSERVED DURING THIS ENTIRE PERIOD.

AT AN ARBITRARY POINT IN THIS SERIES OF RIDES, YOU WILL BE CONTACTED BY A MESSENGER, WHO WILL SAY THAT MR. JONES HAS SENT HIM TO PICK UP THE BAG, WHICH YOU WILL GIVE HIM. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO QUESTION OR DELAY THE MESSENGER IN ANY WAY, ELSE THE EXCHANGE WILL BE ABORTED. YOUR SON WILL BE RETURNED AS SOON AS THE EXCHANGE HAS BEEN SATISFACTORILY COMPLETED.

Frank and Vic showed up an hour later. They were both dressed in dark suits and ties, as if in keeping with Roger's funereal mood. Roger showed them in brusquely, ushered them into the dining room, and waved them to the dining room table, where the latest bag regally sat, the opened note beside it, and the bungee cord lying next to that. Frank picked up the note and read it carefully. Then he read it again, scratching his head and lip reading to himself. Then he passed it to Vic, who scanned it quickly and passed it back to Frank, who put it back on the table.

"What's this?" asked Vic, pointing to the bungee cord.

"That's the 'bungee cord', I guess," said Roger.

"I've seen those damned things for years, and I never knew what they were called," said Frank. "I guess that's to tie the bag to yourself so it doesn't drop out when you're upside down, huh?"

"I'd like you gentlemen to know I'm not looking forward to this at all," said Roger, a dismal look on his face.

"Why's that?" asked Vic. "Nervous stomach?"

"I've had some bad experiences with amusement park rides," said Roger. "I hope I can make it through the ordeal."

Frank shared a little grin with Vic over Roger's back. "Are you thinking of calling it off?" he asked, sobering his expression as Roger turned to face him.

Roger eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then, seeing no apparent evidence of levity, went back to feeling sorry for himself. "No," he said wearily. "If we called it off, he'd only set up something worse. I want to get this damned thing over with so I can go back to the rest of my life."

"And get your son back," added Vic.

"Right," said Roger. "And get my son back."

"When are you going to get him back, I wonder," said Frank.

"You read the note," said Roger. "'As soon as the exchange has been satisfactorily completed' etcetera etcetera etcetera."

"I really would like to nail that guy," said Frank. "He's made us all look like fools twice over already."

"I'd *love* it if you guys could do it," said Roger. "It isn't even the money anymore. I really hate that asshole, the way he's led me around by the nose."

The front doorbell rang, and the maid went to answer it.

"Maybe that's Al," said Frank. "He said he might be a little late."

Aldo came hurrying in on the tail of the sentence. "Sorry if I kept you guys waiting." He nodded in the direction of his host. "Evening, Mr. Lambeaux."

Roger nodded icily to him. He hadn't yet forgiven Aldo for snubbing him at the baseball game. Aldo read the note, subvocalizing it to himself. He was still out of breath and wheezing slightly. He reminded himself for the umpteenth time that one of these days he was going to have to quit smoking.

"Well, I really can't see what'll stop us from nailing him this time," said Aldo.

What do you say we just arrest the god damn messenger this time," said Frank. "We're all of us tired of playing this guy's game. And if Al is right, the messenger will be the guy himself."

"I agree," said Roger. "Those other messengers were pretty stupid. None of them could have been trusted with such an assignment."

"There's an interesting advantage in that suggestion of yours, Frank," said Vic, who had been quiet for the last few minutes.

"What's that?" asked Frank.

"If we're going to arrest the messenger, we don't need to use real money."

"Good idea," said Frank. "In fact, why not give him back those packages of one dollar bills he stiffed us with at the Cow Palace. That is, if you still have them, Mr. Lambeaux. That way, if he got away, we'd get the laugh on him for a change."

"I've still got them in my safe," said Roger. "I haven't even touched them."

There was a pause in the conversation as they all thought about it.

"Just as long as you don't mind taking a chance on the safety of your son," said Frank. "We don't know what this guy is liable to do, but I'm starting to get a feel for him, and I personally don't think he's the violent type. He thinks too much to let his emotions get away with him. He still wants the money, or he wouldn't be going to the trouble of setting up this exchange. What do you think, Al?"

"I think you've got him pegged," said Aldo. "The messenger will be the guy himself. I can't imagine him using anybody else. He thinks he's cleverer than everybody else, and he may try to pull this bluff once too often. I agree with you, Frank. But, as you say, it's up to Mr. Lambeaux here to make that decision."

"I already made it," said Roger. "Let's nail the son of a bitch."

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On Friday evening, Luther Dibbs was awakened from a nap by the telephone.

"Luther Dibbs here," he said into the receiver, yawning and rising to a sitting position on the couch.

"This is Tweeds," the cold voice on the other end of the line said, "returning your call."

"Oh, yeah," said Luther, organizing his mind. "I think I have some news for you for a change."

"Proceed," said Tweeds.

"My cousin Jake gave me a call earlier this evening. He was talking to Thelma on the phone, and for once the broad came across with a few interesting items. First, there was a another money delivery this afternoon. Second, a cab driver delivered a mysterious bag. Seems like on the two previous money drops a bag was delivered first. With instructions inside. Third, the cops paid them another visit. From what she could tell, there's another money exchange tomorrow."

"Your cousin Jake is doing a good job. Tell him that for me, will you? It goes without saying that you also are doing a good job. Anything else?"

"No, Mr. Tweeds. That was it."

"Excellent. There'll be a little something extra for you in the mail. Keep up the good work."

After Tweeds hung up the phone, he sat back and thought about things. The third exchange meant the entire two million was now in the hands of Smith and his mysterious associates. It was time to set his own plan in motion. He reached for the phone again.



## Chapter 32

Roger Lambeaux was having a dream, or rather the dream was having him. It was one of those frustrating dreams, in which everything seemed to conspire against him. He had somehow lost his trousers and was on his hands and knees in the middle of the street in a stiff breeze, clutching a large canvas bag filled with loose hundred dollar bills, which were all falling out, and the zipper was stuck on the bag, and the bills were being blown away as fast as he could cram them back in the bag. To make things worse, a gang of ragged street children were dancing around his perimeter, staying just out of reach, laughing at him, and snatching up the bills which came their way. To compound his dilemma, a pink Cadillac was moving slowly towards him, and the driver, who was wearing a white cadet's hat, was laying on the horn to get him to move out of the way. Gradually the horn turned into the radio alarm next to his bed, and he wrenched himself out of his dream to turn it off.

It took him a moment to orient himself. It was ten minutes to eight, and it was morning. It gradually came to him that it was Saturday, and then, with a sense of foreboding, he remembered that today he had to go to an amusement park in order to give away another large amount of money. He also recalled that it was another weekend he would not be able to sleep with Gloria. He tried to bury himself back under the covers and forget what day it was, but it was no use. The sun had invaded his room, directing clever little beams at him from every piece of glass it encountered. Wake up, wake up, it seemed to say. The sun is shining, the sky is blue, the world outside is waiting for you.

Why was it, he wondered, that every time he planned something pleasant for a weekend, it ended up cold and foggy, but when it came to something unpleasant like these damned money exchanges, it always turned out to be a perfect day. A little cool weather might have diminished the hordes of screaming brats he would have to endure.

He resignedly got up and shaved and fixed himself a simple breakfast of toast, boiled eggs and instant coffee. He remembered from bitter experience the dangers of a full stomach when threatened with the unsettling motion of amusement park rides. He also realized that Frank and Vic would be there any minute and that he had to get the money ready.

It was practically becoming a bi-weekly ritual, padding down to the basement in his slippers and packing the better part of a million dollars into a flight bag, so he could go to some public arena and give it away free to a criminal who got away under the very noses of the F.B.I. and the cops. Only this time it was a little less than seventy two hundred dollars he had to carry in the bag. He finished transferring the money, re-locked the safe, and trudged back up to the dining room.

Frank and Vic showed up around nine, both in Hawaiian sport shirts, Frank in slacks and Addidas, Vic in worn-out jeans and sandals. Roger had decided to dress more appropriately this time, and was wearing his tennis costume.

"You remember your bungee cord?" asked Frank as Roger climbed in the back.

"It's in the bag," Roger said irritably, "along with the tennis rackets and the big game rifles, and the butterfly nets. Let's get all our funny remarks out of the way right now, so we can get on with business."

Frank raised his eyebrows in mock surprise and concentrated on his driving. "I never even thought about butterfly nets," he said, signalling left and moving out into the

traffic. Vic smiled to himself, and Roger realized morosely that these two were going to continue to have their little jokes whatever he said. It was just like high school all over again. The hard-working, serious students like himself, and the wise guys, like Frank and Vic. The world didn't change, and people didn't grow up.

"Might be a good idea to take the bungee cord out of the bag now," said Vic, "so you don't flash that money at the amusement park."

Back to parental now, thought Roger. These assholes never quit. He was also starting to become irritated by the very name 'bungee cord'. It seemed a ridiculous word whose only purpose was to make him look ridiculous. "I'll take it out before we get to the park," he said stiffly.

"Nice day," said Frank, trying to change the subject.

"It sucks," said Roger. "Why couldn't it be cool for once?" he asked.

"It's been cold and foggy all week," Vic pointed out.

"And it's been bright and sunny every money exchange," said Roger.

"That's true," said Vic, trying desperately to be agreeable. "A nice day isn't appreciated very much when you have something unpleasant to do."

Now he's trying to ingratiate himself with me, thought Roger. I wish these jerks would psychoanalyze themselves and leave me alone.

The rest of the drive to Great America was largely silent, punctuated here and there by a brief remark or monosyllabic assent. Roger maintained a strong silence throughout.

A group of plainclothes cops from the Santa Clara Police Department were at the ticket window to greet them. They were all dressed pretty much as Frank and Vic, in loose, short-sleeved shirts and slacks. The only thing they had in common was that most of them had paunches. They shook hands all around, discussed strategy, and then melted into the crowd.

Great America turned out to be even worse than Roger had feared. At first he was merely angry at having to be there, irritated with the droves of people he had to put up with, and bored beyond belief with the length of the line they had to stand in, waiting for their first ride, in a contraption that was called the Demon.

They got into a long car, two in each seat. Roger found himself paired with a friendly, freckle-faced brat of nine or ten who seemed to never stop talking. Roger wondered how in the world the kidnappers were going to approach him. Vic and Frank were in the seat behind him, and smiled at him when he turned to check for their presence. They certainly didn't seem too serious about it all. They just seemed to be along for the ride. He placed the money bag between his feet and twined the elastic cord through the handles and around his legs, finally hooking the two ends together.

"You ever been on this before, Mister?" asked the brat. Roger shook his head rather sullenly. The boy grinned at him.

"This is probably the scariest ride in the whole park," he said, "except maybe for the Edge. You been on the Edge yet?"

Roger was saved an answer by the lurch of the car as it started forward. Soon they were racing down a tunnel with flashing lights. He felt the first faint qualms of uneasiness tightening his stomach, but he bore with them, checking to make sure the bag was secure and the bungee cord still tight.

Then they began a long, slow ascent to the top of the tower. In the beginning Roger was glad of the respite from violent motion, but as they climbed higher and higher, he

gradually became more and more apprehensive, as he realized that every foot traveled upward was one more to come down. The kid was still chattering away, but Roger wasn't paying much attention to him.

"You look awful tense, Mister," the boy said. "Maybe you should just relax a little and enjoy it like me. If you feel afraid, just yell and scream. That's what I do when I get scared."

Roger glared at the boy. For just a moment his anger exceeded his fear. He was about to put the boy in his place, when he suddenly became aware that they had stopped climbing. His anger abruptly left him as they went through a circular motion, and he had an awful inkling of what was coming next.

Then he was falling, and he was falling, and it seemed to never end, and someone was screaming right in his ear, and it took a moment before he realized that it was he who was screaming. By this time they were slowly rising and falling through a series of loops, and sheer terror danced in his head.

The rest of the ride was a blank in his mind, and when the car finally, mercifully, stopped, he sat there in a daze.

"You want to just stay on for another ride?" he heard someone say, apparently to him, and he looked around to see Frank smiling at him, and then Vic was offering him a hand. He dismissed their help, unhooking the bag, and emerged rather shakily from the car.

He was glad that the next line was longer, and for once the interminable waiting seemed a blessing rather than a curse. He didn't even feel like talking, being quite content to let Frank and Vic carry on a conversation between themselves. He tried not to let his eyes wander up the tower-like structure, nor his mind to conjecture what terrifying moments it had in store for him. He could see pretty clearly what it was designed to do.

Eventually the recess was over, and they got to the head of the line. This time, there were only four passengers per car: himself, Frank, Vic, and a fat lady who used too much makeup. They were inside a kind of cage, and the only thing that gave him any sense of security was a bar which was lowered from above, and to which he clung as surreptitiously as he could manage, under the circumstances. He hated to appear so fearful in the eyes of the others. They were all laughing and joking with each other as they rose up the inside of the tower.

There ensued a very bad moment for Roger, as he found himself high up above the park, with nothing beneath him. It was amazing that *not* falling could be almost as awful as falling.

And then they fell. It was almost as bad this time, and it happened so abruptly that he had no time for rationalizations. The horror was upon him with no warning, but before he knew it they were lying motionless on their backs at the bottom, and it was all over. The cage revolved around into a normal position, and that was the end of it. Two minutes altogether, with about half a minute of pure fear. He stumbled forth, an old campaigner, almost ready for the next incursion on his sanity. Frank and Vic seemed to sense his desire for anonymity and didn't press him with any of their usual humor. He guessed that they were still sharing private jokes about him, but he was much too stressed with his situation to be concerned about anything else. The whole question of how the money exchange was going to be executed seemed to be the farthest thing from his mind,

and he dangled the heavy money bag from his wrist as if it contained a month's worth of old gym socks.

The wait seemed a lot less for the next ride. There was going to be no respite. At least it didn't seem as frightening as the first two pieces of torture equipment. It looked like a big boat that held about a hundred passengers with five to a row in about twenty rows. There was a bar at their waist as well as a harness, so he felt a good deal safer. He secured the bag to his right leg, and awaited events. First the boat rocked back and forth, and then it gradually swung through larger and larger arcs, and then suddenly they were hanging upside down looking straight down at the ground which seemed hundreds of feet below them. All the people around him were screaming, and even though he sensed it was in a kind of fearful fun, it made it even worse for him, because it removed the calming effect of being with others. A bunch of the passengers were losing the money out of their pockets, and he flashed on the dream he had had that morning as he felt the bag slipping slowly from the reduced grip of his legs. This ride was unnervingly long, and Roger felt himself close to the brink of a mindless terror. He intoned an unashamed silent supplication to all the gods in the combined Roman, Greek, and Egyptian pantheons to deliver him safely to the security of the solid ground.

Finally it was all over, and Frank and Vic were laughingly comparing experiences with some of the other people as they were all getting out. Roger was beginning to wonder quite seriously if he could continue to go through with any more rides. The only thing that kept him from quitting was the scorn he knew Frank and Vic would hold him in should he seriously suggest aborting the mission. He prayed that the kidnappers would show up and grab the goddam ransom and have it over with. They could even get away clean for all he cared.

The last of the four rides was a thing called the Vortex, and it, thank God, spared him the extreme terror he had felt on the first three. It was pretty fast, and there were a lot of unanticipated sudden changes of motion, but he just hung on grimly, and somehow it came to an end. They were deposited in a room full of video games where people were having their pictures taken as they emerged shaken and dizzy. Roger held his free hand up in front of his face when they tried to catch him with the camera. He almost felt like taking a punch at the cameraman.

And then it began all over again, and what was so dreadful was that it was even worse this time. After a while Roger began to have a hunted feeling, and his stomach was threatening to rebel. He hated the entire experience. He hated the amusement park, and he hated the stupid people who surrounded him with their inane laughter. Most of all, he hated the nasty little episodes of pure fear he was forced to endure. He paid more attention to his watch now, as he realized that four o'clock was nearing, and he had even more reason to want the lines to be as long as possible. He had given up hope that the kidnappers would appear. They probably had no intention of it. This was just another torture they were putting him through for the pure fun of it.

It was finally five minutes to four, and the next line was clearly going to take much longer than five minutes. Even Frank and Vic were tiring of the novelty of it, so they decided to call it quits. They passed the word to the Santa Clara cops that the operation was being closed for the day. They walked back towards the entrance and joined the exodus to the parking lot. It was clear that something had gone wrong, and that the kidnappers had for some reason not shown up. It seemed strange that they should go to

such great lengths to set all of this day in motion for no reason at all, but there were simply no answers at the moment. Roger's sole aim was to get home and nurse his frayed psyche with some stiff drinks, a hot bath, and a long, langorous sleep. For once, he would not even miss Gloria.

## Chapter 33

The ride back was unending and the traffic fairly heavy. Vic was spelling Frank by doing the driving, and Roger chose to sit in the back seat by himself with his eyes closed, his head resting against the cushions. The motion of the car was a luxury after what he had been through, but he longed for all motion to come to an end. And then it finally was at an end, and he was being deposited rather unceremoniously at his house. He mumbled some departing words, grabbed the money bag, and stumped tiredly up to his front door, fumbling for his keys. He had a hard time fitting the right key in the lock, and then the heavy door swung open, and he lurched through, slamming it behind him. At long last he was alone and unmoving.

The hot bath was divine, and the vodka tonic sitting on the edge of the tub was almost gone. He sucked on what was left of the ice cubes, loving the relaxation the hot water was producing, but vaguely lusting for some more alcoholic surcease from the accumulated pain of the day. The money bag lay neglected on the floor next to the bath mat. A trail of clothes led from the tub to the liquor cabinet in his bedroom.

It was considerably later that he emerged from his water world, a duck-billed platypus waddling onto the land. He dried himself at great length and talced his body down afterwards. He loved the sensual feel of the powder on his skin. It was a practice his ex-wife Cora had used to tease him about. He slipped into an extra-large terry-cloth bathrobe and a pair of fluffy house slippers, picked up the bag, and padded down the steps to the basement, so he could lock it up. He didn't bother with the lights, as he felt quite at home in the darkness. He entered the storeroom and set the bag down on the work table. He flicked on the ceiling light above the safe, knelt down and flipped the dial through the combination. He finally heard the little click that released the door. He lifted the handle all the way up and swung the door open wide.

Inside were all his little treasures: his stamp and coin collections he had had since he was a child, his stock certificates, the recent delivery of six hundred thousand dollars in six plastic-wrapped packages, and about sixty thousand in cash he kept for emergencies. There were, in addition, a number of legal papers. He reached for the bag, and as he turned around he saw a man sitting in the chair pointing a pistol at him. He noticed that the man wore white gloves and a clown mask with fake red hair.

"Have a nice bath, Roger old boy?" the man said, in what sounded like a fake British accent, but Roger wasn't sure.

"Why don't you back away from the safe and change places with me," said the man, standing up and moving to the side, towards the door which led into the basement, and shutting it.

"Just be calm and sit down," the intruder told him.

Roger pulled the robe more securely about himself and sat down dejectedly in the hard chair. He felt so vulnerable, dressed in just his bathrobe and slippers.

The man stepped toward the safe, keeping the gun aimed in Roger's direction. He pulled a large, black cloth bag from his pocket, and set the gun down on the edge of the table, tantalizingly close to where Roger sat. He unfolded the bag slowly, keeping his eye on Roger the whole time. Then he reached in the safe and pulled out the first plastic bag, placing it in the cloth bag. He looked at Roger who sat there unmoving. Then he grabbed the second plastic bag, and preceded in the same fashion, darting his eyes up

periodically to check on Roger, until the entire six hundred thousand dollars had been transferred to the black bag.

While all this activity was going on, Roger could think of nothing except the gun which was so close to where he sat. He bided his time, praying that the intruder would give him a chance to grab it. He didn't recognize the type, and he wondered if it had a safety catch.

"We'd better protect what's left, eh old bean?" said his unwanted guest. "I do want you to notice I didn't touch any of your other valuables." He kicked the door shut and clicked the handle down, then picked up the other bag from the table.

"Ta ta, old chap," he said to Roger. "Have a good evening."

"When do I get my son back?" asked Roger. He was concentrating on not betraying his interest in the gun on the table.

"You'll be informed."

"Why don't you tell me now? Let's get this over with. You've got your rotten money. Complete your part of the bargain." The gun was only two steps away. If only his guest would turn away from the table.

"Don't be in such a hurry, old banana peel," said the intruder. "Everything will happen in due time." Then he turned his back to Roger and set one of the bags on the floor so he could remove the key from the unlocked door. Roger leapt towards the table, crashing into it, and, somehow keeping his balance, grabbed the gun and whirled to point it at the stranger.

"All right, you motherfucker!" he screamed. "Now I've got you!" His hands trembled with the effort he was putting into holding the gun straight. "Just put down the other bag slowly. And keep your back turned towards me. Put your hands in the air. Hurry!"

The man with the clown mask ignored him completely, pulling the key from the door, opening it, and picking up the bag on the floor. Roger pulled the trigger, expecting a sizeable noise, but the only result was a thin stream of water which shot out from the nozzle.

The intruder stepped out, shutting the door behind him. Roger could hear the key being turned on the other side, locking him in. There was an intercom to the kitchen in this room, but no phone, and the maid was gone until Sunday night. Unless he could get through the door, he had the choice of sleeping in the hard wooden chair or on the cold cement floor. In a sudden fit of pique he threw the phony gun with all his might at the door.

As soon as he completed locking Roger in, Smith went quickly up the stairs to the front door. He set the bags down and pulled off the clown mask, jamming it in his pocket. Then he removed the phone from his belt. He keyed in the number of Ray's cellular phone, and Ray picked it up on the first ring.

It had been nearly five thirty when the Nova pulled into a parking spot opposite the Lambeaux house. The two agents had sat waiting for Mr. Lambeaux to arrive. They hadn't paid much attention to the tall fat man or the shorter, skinnier one standing on the corner carrying on a conversation, nor had they noticed that the pair left as soon as they arrived. Their purpose was to watch the Lambeaux place, and with their unobstructed view of the front entrance, it wasn't a difficult job. A few minutes later Frank and Vic

had pulled up to the entrance and dropped Mr. Lambeaux off. The two agents in the Vega watched carefully as he entered the house and shut the door. Then they eased back in their seats, settling down for another long stakeout.

As soon as Jim and Ray saw the Chevy Nova pull up to the curb, they discontinued their conversation and walked slowly past the car, checking the license plate to make sure it was the one Smith had specified. They saw the two agents sitting inside, then continued slowly on down the block in a westerly direction to where Ray's car was illegally parked in a driveway, and got in. Ray made a right at the corner, then another right, then drove two blocks east, and made two more right hand turns, dropping Jim off at the panel truck they had stashed a block east from the house the night before. Jim climbed into the panel truck and started up the engine and let it warm up for a few minutes, then turned it off again. Ray continued on down the block, passing the two agents, and circled the two blocks again, ending up just behind Jim. He killed the engine and turned off the lights.

About an hour later, Smith's call came through. Ray picked it up on the first ring.

"The cheese is in the bag, and Cinderella is ready and waiting," said Smith's voice. "Is the golden pumpkin ready to escort her to the royal ball?"

"Everything's set," said Ray. "The cat is sitting in front of the hole, and the mice are ready to roll." He gave Jim a toot, then waited until Jim turned on his lights and slowly pulled out from the curb.

Then he started up his engine, let out the hand brake, and followed along after Jim, staying a few car lengths behind him.

"Starship Enterprise to Captain Kirk," said Ray into the receiver. "Get ready to beam up. Yellow submarine closing in on the blue meanies."

Just ahead of him, Jim was approaching the intersection of Scott and Pacific. Jim kept his eyes peeled for the Chevy Nova, and then he saw it dead ahead. He drove the panel truck right up to it, practically grazing its side, and stopped, walling it in at the curb and completely blocking its view of the house across the street. He turned off the engine, removed the ignition key, and stepped down quickly from the cab.

As soon as Ray saw Jim pulling up to a stop, he yelled "Geronimo!" into the receiver, tossed the phone onto the dashboard, and stopped by the side of the truck. He flung the door open so Jim could clamber in, and while Jim was yanking the door shut, Ray was already hanging a hard U-turn in the middle of the street, tires screaming, coming to a fast stop in front of the Lambeaux residence, where Smith's shadowy figure was running towards the car with the money bags. Jim opened the rear door for Smith, helping him with the bags as he climbed in, slamming the door behind him. Ray jammed on the gas pedal and spun around the corner onto Scott Street, burning rubber the entire way. When he was a block away, he slowed down, and followed a circuitous route until they were sure nobody was on their tail.

They split up the spoils at Jim's house again. This time Smith took a few puffs of the reefer that Ray lighted up and passed around. It was a worthy occasion for celebration. Jim brought out a bottle of 1937 Calvados, and served them some Turkish coffee in demi tassés.

"That's the last year prior to the war in which wine was produced in France," Jim told them. "This is, in fact, the brandy which Charles Boyer drank in *Arch of Triumph*."



"Afraid I never saw the movie," said Smith. How come it tastes so damned good? I've had brandies before, but never like this."

"Because the flavor improves with age, just like wine," Jim explained. "And because it's more aged, it's got less alcohol, so you notice the taste more. A new brandy is about 60 to 70 percent alcohol. After forty years or so, it's down to 40 or 50 percent. Alcohol anesthetizes your taste buds. Less alcohol, more taste."

"Simple," said Smith. "I like things simple. Well, I propose a toast," he said, raising his glass. "All for one," he said with a conspiratorial smile.

"And one for all," the other two added.

Smith left in an exuberant mood. Only one thing remained to be done, but it would have to wait until he could get to a pay phone.

He found one on his way home. He swung the car over to the curb and found a few quarters in his pocket. He dialed 911 and told them about Roger Lambeaux being robbed and locked in his basement room. He told them the front door was unlocked and made them repeat the address he gave them.

"How did you come by this information?" asked the police person who took the call.

"I'm the robber," said Smith, hanging up.

## Chapter 34

Monday morning was bleak and hostile, with a cold wind coming in from the Pacific, and a high overcast that threw a pall over the city. Smith and Sheila and Reggie were up early, having a last breakfast before they set out for Russian Gulch State Park. There was a strange mixture of sadness and excitement in the air. Sadness in leaving, and excitement in going.

"The people who cleaned up your flat and put your stuff in storage," Smith told Sheila, "are going to do the same with this place while we're gone, and, while I'm on that subject, here are the storage receipts for your belongings." He handed them across the table to her. "It's paid up for a year."

"Where are you gonna live after we get through camping?" asked Reggie.

"I guess I'll just knock around until the fall. Then maybe Clytemnestra and I will do a little world traveling."

"What'll I do about the toys and books you guys gave me?"

"You think your father might give you some trouble if you kept them?" asked Sheila.

"Yeah, I kinda think so," said Reggie. "He generally checks out all my presents, and decides whether it's okay for me to keep them or not."

"Maybe I could sneak them to you," said Smith. "We could put them all in one old suitcase, and one of these days I could drive by your house and drop it over the back fence into the garden. With all the weeds back there he'd never notice it."

"Yeah. That might work. How would I know when to start looking for it?"

"You could give me a call when things are back to normal and then I could slip it over your fence. You still remember my number?"

"Sure," said Reggie, "I haven't forgotten it."

"Last chance on the ham," said Sheila. "We'd better get this show on the road."

The Hall of Justice was the same as it was on any other Monday in the year. At least two trials were in session. The other courtrooms were handling endless minor cases running the gamut from moving violations to prostitution. In room 101, long lines of traffic offenders waited to pay overdue fines to clerks seated at computer consoles. The corridors were filled with lawyers talking to their clients, prostitutes arguing with their pimps, parents worrying over their wayward children, and bail bondsmen scurrying towards the elevators to get their clients released.

Aldo stopped at the candy counter to pick up the morning Chronicle and a pack of Marlboros. He and Frank had spent the preceding evening futilely trying to mollify an irate Roger Lambeaux, who was justifiably incensed over being separated at gunpoint from the last third of the two-million-dollar ransom.

The detective's room was as busy as it always was early in the week. There were eight desks in the room, and all of them were occupied. In the past, the walls had been littered with old wanted notices and official pronouncements, but since the room had been repainted last March, all the old stuff had been taken down and nothing had been put up in the way of replacement. As a result, the room had a barren look. Aldo nodded to his cohorts as he entered. Most of them grunted out a cursory hello or nodded at him in reply.

"Ryder wants to see you," said Bert, looking up briefly from his paperwork.

Ryder was the lieutenant in charge of the Aggravated Assaults General Works Section, a group which handled all the cases not dealt with by Arson, Burglary, Fraud, Homicide, Juvenile, Narcotics, Robbery, Sexual Assault, or Vice. What remained kept them extremely busy, mostly with assault cases. Since kidnapping was a federal crime, it fell under the jurisdiction of the F.B.I., but it was his department which dealt with the liaison with that agency. Ryder was a severe taskmaster who had acquired a reputation for toughness on his journey up through the ranks. He and his former partner had been known as Red Ryder and Eager Beaver, a comic-book soubriquet stemming from the gung-ho style of the pair. His partner was long retired, and he was now a lieutenant. His passion for going by the book had, however, not diminished, and behind his back he was referred to as 'Rules' Ryder.

He looked up as Aldo entered. He was a heavy-set, florid-faced man with once red hair now thinning and gray. An unlit stogey graced his face, his way of paying lip service to the no-smoking rule now in effect in all public buildings. He had the good sense not to press this rule on his subordinates, knowing what a dent that would make in their paperwork, an area in which all of them tended to be delinquent.

"Grab a chair, Al." He put aside the file folder he had been poring over.

"How's Stan doing?" he asked, beginning the interview on a personal note.

"Not so good, Lieutenant. I dropped in on him on Saturday. They're talking about chemotherapy now."

"I hate to hear that. Chemo always means the beginning of the end to me. How's he taking it?"

"Oh, you know Stan. He's keeping up pretenses for the wife's sake. Once the liver goes, he doesn't have a chance. The doctors are talking about a laser operation if the chemo works and the tumor subsides somewhat, but that's all pretty speculative."

"Good man," said Ryder. "I'd hate to lose him."

There was a moment of silence, as Aldo waited for Ryder to get around to telling him why he had been called in.

"I got a call this morning from the chief. One of the citizens of our fair city has been raising a ruckus. I guess I don't need to tell you who that was. We're lucky the feds were in charge of the case. I told the chief that we had more than cooperated, but that your role had primarily been one of liaison."

"Yes sir," said Aldo, seeing all the work he had put in on the case going down the drain, as far as material for future consideration of advancement was concerned.

"I just wanted you to know that a complaint was filed, but that it would not go on your record."

"I appreciate that, sir."

"In addition, I'd like you to begin to disengage yourself from the case. Try to give the federal boys whatever they ask for, but don't offer any departmental resources. Leave it to them to decide when the operation should be brought to a close. How's the rest of your case load?"

"Pretty much neglected, I'm afraid."

"Durning's been working on the Williams assault case and he's been pleading for assistance. Why don't you see if you can give him some help on that."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do. Is he going to be in tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow would be fine," said Ryder.

"Very good, sir," said Aldo.

Tweeds' lugubrious manservant brought the phone in to him as he sat in his plush living room, watching reruns of his favorite TV program, *The Price Is Right*. He enjoyed watching people make fools of themselves. He was irritated at being bothered at such a time, but he put a damper on it, bade his man turn down the sound, and nodded at him to vamoose.

"Tweeds here," he said into the mouthpiece.

"Mac here, Mr. Tweeds," said a familiar voice. "This Mary Jane broad hasn't showed yet. Ernie and me finally talked to her landlady. We told her we was relatives, and asked when she was gonna return."

"I see," said Tweeds, a little discomfited at his henchmen displaying initiative. "And what did she tell you?"

"She said Miss Renselar would be back Wednesday night. A real hoity toity dame. She asked if we wanted to get in touch with her before that, and we said no, Wednesday night would be okay."

Tweeds had some private thoughts on how convincing Mac and Ernie were as relatives. Hopefully this landlady wasn't too discerning.

"You think you can break into her apartment without leaving any marks on the front door?"

"Easy," said Big Mac. "I can spring it without nobody being the wiser. It's one of them old Yale locks, and it don't even have a dead bolt. I can just pop the door open."

"All right. Wait until Wednesday afternoon, and then break into her apartment. Then just sit tight till she shows. When she does, grab her and gag her, and don't let her make a sound, but don't hurt her either. Bring some rope with you and tie her up. Don't turn on the lights or answer the door or the phone. Keep her there until it gets dark, and don't try to hustle her out of there while it's still light or if there are people on the street. Think you can handle all that?"

"Easy as pie," said Mac. "Oh, and we checked out Sheila's apartment. They moved everything out, and they really cleaned it up. Musta mopped the floors even. Place looks new, almost."

"Is the phone still there? And the answering machine?"

"Yeah," said Mac. "There was three messages on it, but we didn't listen to 'em. Should we oughta have?"

"Yes," said Tweeds, but it's okay. We might be able to recoup. The important thing is that she probably hasn't disconnected her phone yet. Get back to her place right away, and write down any messages that are still on it. Then call me right back, but don't use her phone to do it."

They drove up coast highway one. It was a much longer way to go, but it was also a great deal more spectacular than highway 101. The road led up over the side of Mt. Tamalpais and down to Stinson Beach, then skirted the shoreline just a few feet above sea level until they got to Bolinas. Then they wound their way through Pt. Reyes Station and up around the rim of Tomales Bay to Jenner, where the Russian River empties out, then

back up onto a steep cliff with one hairpin curve after another, and an angry ocean a hundred feet below them.

The day continued to be overcast, and the sea was rough with big waves slapping at the shore. Huge rocks lay out at sea, paralleling the coast like pieces of shoreline ripped off and deposited a distance away. The coast was rugged and jagged, and the road climbed and dipped the rest of the way. They stopped briefly in Gualala to eat some sandwiches Sheila had prepared, and at four in the afternoon they arrived in Mendocino City. They stayed long enough to check Sheila in at the Mendocino Hotel, then all three of them continued on to Russian Gulch State Park.

The day was growing dim by the time they reached their campsite. Smith was an old hand at camping, and managed to get the tent set up while the other two got the air mattresses inflated. Afterwards Sheila and Reggie were dizzy from all the puffing and blowing and just lay around laughing, and then Reggie stood up and pretended to be unable to keep his balance. It was dark before they started fixing dinner.

Their first meal was extravagant, since it didn't need to be protected from the bears or the elements. They got a good blaze going in the firepit with the wood they had brought with them, throwing on charcoal briquets when the fire began to subside. They put tinfoiled potatoes under the coals to bake, and some ears of corn to boil in a large kettle. Everything got done at different times. They ate the corn while the steaks were grilling, and the steaks were nearly devoured before the potatoes were ready, but nobody minded. Everything tasted great when it was eaten outdoors.

"What's for dessert?" asked Reggie.

"Where do you find the room?" asked Sheila.

"It's going to be toasted marshmallows for dessert," said Smith. "I'll bet it's been a long time since either of you had them."

"I never had any," said Reggie.

"Then we're going to erase another never from your life," said Smith.

After all the marshmallows were gone, and the last sips of wine squeezed out of the bottle, Sheila kissed the two of them good night and drove the car back to Mendocino City. Smith and Reggie sat for a while, looking at the stars. Smith pointed out a few of them, tracing out the constellations they were a part of, then retired into the tent to get the kerosene lamp going. Reggie helped him with their sleeping arrangements. It was too cold to sit around, so they got into their down bags. Smith turned the lantern down to a dim glow, and they lay and talked. Somewhere during the conversation Reggie fell asleep, and Smith turned the lantern off, but it was a long while before he was able to join his young partner. Things were winding down, and it was time for him and Sheila to turn a new page in their book of life.

## Chapter 35

Tuesday morning Reggie woke up early. At first he had a hard time remembering where he was, but then he saw his surroundings and the thread of current events came rushing back. He was amazed at how quiet it was. He could hear the occasional crackle or snap of what he supposed was the sound of an animal or bird. Now and then the raucous scream of a seagull came echoing across the still air. He felt enormously content just to be there, to be alive, to be a part of things.

Smith came ducking into the tent, already dressed in jeans and a Pendleton shirt, looking energetic, and with a faint shadow of a beard on his face. He smiled at Reggie, who smiled back.

"Still lazing about in bed, while all the world around you is up and about, looking for breakfast."

"Do animals eat breakfast?" asked Reggie.

"If they can get any," said Smith.

"What are we going to have for breakfast?"

"I was thinking of pickled fish and cold boiled potatoes."

Reggie got up on his elbows and looked at Smith's face with something akin to alarm until he saw the twinkle in his eye.

"You're kidding, aren't you?"

"Yeah," said Smith, smiling at him. "It's what some Englishmen have, though. They probably even look forward to it."

"Yuck," said Reggie. "If I went to England, would I have to eat things like that for breakfast?"

"No," said Smith. "But in some remote villages you might have to bring your own food if you didn't want to trust in the local cuisine. In any city or town you'd be safe, however. At least for breakfast you could get fried eggs and tea and toast with orange marmelade."

"That would be okay."

"Would you like to go to England?"

"Yeah!" said Reggie, looking up excitedly.

"I didn't mean this minute, Sport," said Smith with a smile. "I just meant it as a general question."

"Sure. I've never been to any foreign country. Is it really different, to be in a foreign country?"

"Sure. Especially the first time, because everything is different - all the little details. Different coins in your pocket, different names for food on menus, different kinds of street signs, different traffic rules. The buildings look different, and even telephones sometimes operate in a different way. And most of the time you have to deal with a different language, as well as a different culture. It's a little overwhelming at first, besides being exciting and fun.

"But after a while, you start to get used to the differentnesses and start seeing the things that aren't different - most people have to get up in the morning and go to work, and everyone thinks and eats and sleeps and plays pretty much the same as we do. They go to bars and restaurants and read books and watch movies and television. Sometimes they even camp out."

"How many foreign countries have you been in, Smitty?"

"Maybe twenty or so, if you include Canada and Mexico."

"Aren't they foreign countries, too?"

"Sure, but since nearly everyone's been to them, they hardly seem to count."

"Everyone except me." There was a pause, then: "You ever been in a war?"

Smith laughed. "That's quite a change in subject. No, I haven't, as a matter of fact. I was just a little late for Viet Nam. Would you like to be in a war?"

Reggie looked thoughtful. "Yeah! Maybe. If I had to, I might go. I like reading about war, and I watch all the war movies on television. Jack's mother never lets him watch things like that. She says wars are wrong. What do you think, Smitty?"

"Well, it's a complicated subject. In the past they seemed to be necessary sometimes. The Second World War was right. Vietnam was wrong. I'm not sure about the Gulf War. But you'll have to make up your own mind. There's certainly nothing at all wrong with watching movies or reading books about war. It's important to understand it even if you don't believe in it. However, my stomach is going to declare war on me if I don't feed it pretty soon. How about you?"

"No pickled fish, though," said Reggie with a grin.

In the late morning, after washing up the dishes from dinner and breakfast and cleaning up the campsite, they took a walk through the woods. The second-growth redwood trees were tall and well-spaced, and the ground underneath was covered with a soft carpet of needles and forest loam. From time to time they encountered wildly-colored flowers, which looked like hot house gardenias and orchids. The sun came out around noon, the rays slanting in through the roof of treetops.

"This is what a forest is supposed to look like," said Smith. "Unfortunately the loggers have ruined most of the forests in this country, and it's only in protected places like this that they are allowed to survive."

After an hour of trekking through the woods they came upon an area which had been clear cut. The trees which remained lay at every angle, small dark pools of dank water could be seen here and there. There was no sound of birds. It looked like a battlefield.

"This is what the loggers do," Smith told Reggie. "This is what all the forests will look like in a few years, unless we change our policies."

They were both quiet until they were once again back in the forest.

They got back to camp around three in the afternoon, and decided to take a short siesta until Sheila joined them at four. It was easy to sleep in the woods, Reggie discovered, with the light breezes dancing along the ground, the buzz of insects in the air, and the chirp of birds declaring their property rights.

When Sheila arrived, Smith gave them each a small cellular phone, exactly like the one he had in his belt.

"I had meant to pass them out last night, but there wasn't much time."

"Cool," said Reggie.

"What are we supposed to do with them?" asked Sheila.

"Use them as walkie-talkies. Whenever you get the urge, give me a call. And if one of us gets lost, he can dial the others."

Sheila left them at six, and drove back to have dinner at one of the restaurants in Mendocino City. Smith and Reggie got out the dried foods and cooked a real camp dinner. It wasn't half as tasty as the night before, but it was still fun, eating out, watching the sun go down.

After dinner, Smith added some more wood to the fire and they sat and talked until late. Reggie imagined all kinds of shapes in the twisting, dancing flames, while Smith told him some stories about Crow Indians that he had learned from his father when he had been a young boy growing up in Montana.

"At the camp that my friend Jack goes to," said Reggie after a while, "they sing songs. Do you know any songs, Smitty?"

So Smith taught him the words to *My Darling Clementine* and *On Top of Old Smoky*, and when Reggie got good enough, Smith harmonized with him. Reggie loved it and pestered Smith into teaching him how to harmonize as well. Finally the last verse was sung, and the fire was reduced to red, glowing embers, and Smith brought up a subject he had been avoiding.

"We've got to have a little talk about what you're going to tell your father and the cops."

"Do I hafta tell them anything?"

"I'm afraid they'll make it impossible for you if you don't."

"I'll just tell them I was locked up in a room the whole time, living on bread and water."

"Except that your skin color shows that you've been outside a bunch," said Smith, "and you look way too healthy for bread and water."

"I remember what Tweeds and his men looked like. I could say they had me the whole time."

"What if Andrew Varney tells the cops about your visit?"

"Who's Andrew Varney?"

"He's the old man whose dog you were sleeping with."

"Oh," said Reggie.

"And if he talked to the cops," said Smith, "he'll tell them you had him call me instead of your father."

"I hope he didn't. Dad would really give me a hiding if he found out."

"Does your father actually whip you?"

"Only when I do something really bad. Then he takes his leather belt off, and he doubles it up so he won't hit me with the buckle. It isn't that often, though, 'cause I'm away at school so much."

"How many lashes does he give you?" asked Smith. Reggie looked at him questioningly.

"How many times in a row does he hit you with the belt?" explained Smith.

"Oh, about five or six times, maybe. It depends on how bad I was."

"I see," said Smith, looking rather severe.

"Do you think that old man will really say anything?" asked Reggie worriedly.

"I hope not, Sport," said Smith.

After the boy had gone to sleep, Smith gave Sheila a call. She was startled by the ringing of the cellular phone, and it took a few moments before she realized what it was. Smith told her about his conversation with Reggie.



"What did you tell him to say?" she asked.

"I told him to tell the truth, except for a few details."

"What details?"

"The fact that we camped out here this week, where my house is located in the city, what you and I look like, and what your name is."

"I figured he knew by now. I never trusted that Clytemnestra routine."

"But it had one good effect. He'll never forget that name. I suggested that if he ever slipped, he could claim your name was 'Sheena'."

"Like Sheena, Queen of the Jungle?"

"Right," said Smith. "It's close enough to Sheila that it should be easy to change it into."

"How will he describe us? As Tarzan and Jane?"

"I would have suggested it if he had any notion what they looked like. I got him to choose a movie actor and actress he liked a lot who didn't look like either of us, and told him to think of them when the cops asked what we looked like."

"Not a bad idea. What were his choices?"

"Timothy Dalton and Meryl Streep."

"Who's Timothy Dalton?"

"He's the latest James Bond. After Sean Connery and Roger Moore."

"Not bad," said Sheila. "It's rather flattering. That's a good idea of yours - keeping him as close to the truth as possible. It'll make the lies easier to tell."

Smith told her about the whipping.

"That's practically medieval!" she said. "I didn't think anyone whipped their children anymore."

"Me either. It's Roger who deserves to be whipped."

"You've kind of done that already, haven't you? Putting him through all those rides at Great America, and locking him in his basement in a bathrobe and slippers. And all those money exchanges. Making him look like a fool."

"I guess you're right. I hope he doesn't turn it all around and make Reggie responsible for my actions."

"That's a dreadful thought. Do you think he would blame the boy?"

"It's possible. I'm starting to get a feel for what the man is capable of, and it kind of fits."

"What's the alternative?" she asked.

"The alternative would be not to return him, but I feel honor bound at this point to give him back."

"It's probably best. So how much more camping out for you guys?"

"Tomorrow will do it," said Smith. "Thursday we'll pack up and join you."

Wednesday went by quickly. Smith and Reggie hiked to the coast, and followed it down to Mendocino City. They tried to call Sheila on their cellular phones, but she either didn't have it with her or wasn't answering it. They looked all over for her, and finally ran her to earth at the book store. They decided to forego another camp meal, and splurged on some trout with rice at the Mendocino Hotel. Afterwards Sheila drove them back to the campground.

Thursday they packed up the tent and folded it back into the trunk of the car. They gave their remaining dried food to a couple teenagers from Portland who were trying to

make it by motorcycle to Los Angeles. They drove back to Mendocino City and took some rooms at the Sea Gull Inn. Reggie got a room to himself, and Smith and Sheila shared a second. They stood on the cliffs above the ocean and watched the sun set, then walked back through the silent town, had dinner at a French restaurant, and went to bed early.

Friday passed even more quickly than Thursday, and all of a sudden it was Saturday morning. They had a nice breakfast and went down to have a last look at the ocean. There were some blowholes in the tops of the cliffs that led down into underwater caves that were emptied and filled by the booming surf. Then they walked back along the river which bordered the town before emptying itself into the sea. The day was bright and blue for a change, and it was almost torment to leave it all behind them and return to their rooms to pack up for their final trip to Sonoma, so Reggie could be returned to his father.

Mary Jane was dog tired when she got back to her apartment on Wednesday evening. The Greyhound bus trip from Bakersfield had been hot and dusty, and the wait below Market Street for an N Judah streetcar an interminable one. She trudged up the steps to her small set of rooms. As she passed the landlady's apartment, that august person, Mrs. Byrnes, stuck her head out.

"Your relatives from Florida stopped by a couple times to see you," Mrs. Byrnes told her in a high nasal whine. "I let them know you'd be back tonight."

"I don't have any relatives in Florida," said Mary Jane. "Are you sure it was me they were asking for?"

"Absolutely. I thought they were rather crass people to be associated with you, but I guess you can't always pick your relatives."

"Did they give their names?"

"No, and now that you ask, I realize it was pretty peculiar for them not to."

"What did they look like?"

"One was heavy-set and tall, a big man. The other was short and chunky, with a neck like a wrestler. Their language was pretty uncouth. They sounded as if they came from the East Coast."

"I haven't the foggiest idea who they could be. If they stop by again, ask for their names."

"I will certainly do that. By the way, will you be wanting to stay on during the summer? I would like to know as soon as possible, so I can start advertising if I have to."

"I'm not sure yet. I'll let you know before the end of the week."

Mrs. Byrne withdrew her head back into her apartment and Mary Jane continued her trek up to the third floor. She would either have to lose some weight or get her next apartment on the ground floor. It was with an immense sense of relief that she reached the final landing. She stopped and took a breather.

The door felt a little funny when she unlocked it. Normally, it didn't fit properly in the frame, so as a result the tongue of the lock didn't mesh right with the slot it fit into. But today the lock offered no resistance, and the door opened without any effort on her part. She stepped into the dark apartment and shut the door. She set her suitcase on the floor and began to remove her coat. It was then that they grabbed her.

## Chapter 36

The road to Sonoma led through rolling hills, brown with summer, great tawny beasts lying upon the land. Green clumps of trees grew in huddled groups, and here and there stood herds of cows, mindlessly resolute against the elements. The road spun past placid reservoirs, flat surfaces of water carved into the landscape, darkly reflecting the azure sky above. All three of them were silent, Smith lounging at the wheel, Sheila staring out, her book lying closed in her lap, Reggie feeling as if he were in a dream from which he would shortly be awakened. The future was zooming in on him at sixty miles an hour. That tiny dot in the distance would soon be a tiny dot far behind them.

Sonoma was first the name of a wide, hot, flat valley surrounded by hills, then of a big town which was not a city, with a leisurely main street bustling with activity. They stopped in a clothing shop and bought a cowboy hat for Reggie. The head size was perfect, and he looked like a desperado. He was absolutely charmed. He stood looking at himself in the mirror with that big, black five-gallon hat with the big brim, and he felt like a new boy. An adventurous boy. Then Smith had to go see a man about a horse, and Reggie and Sheila found a nice restaurant just off the beaten path, and he had a fettucine alfredo with scallops, and Sheila had a shrimp louie and let him try a little. He tried to pretend to himself that he didn't have a care in the world, and that the future didn't exist. There was just a sort of happy now. He almost believed it.

"When were you the happiest in your life?" he asked Sheila.

"When I was a little girl growing up in Kansas," she said. "I had a lot of good friends and we had a lot of great times together. It was just a small town and it was so safe that nobody ever locked their doors. Then when I was thirteen my mother died and I went with my father to live in Chicago."

"Did you ever do anything you weren't supposed to?" Reggie wanted to know.

Sheila laughed. "I wasn't always the goody-goody I am now. Once time a friend and I sampled a few bottles of beer her father kept in the root cellar. Then we went skinnydipping in the river."

"What's 'skinnydipping' mean?"

"It means we went swimming in the nude."

There was a moment of silence.

"Jack and I drank a can of beer once," said Reggie.

"How did you like it?"

"Oh, it was kind of disappointing. It sure tasted bitter. I got sort of dizzy and we went to class afterwards and everything seemed funny to me. The teacher got mad at me and sent me back to my bunk on report and gave me a demerit."

"Do you like military school?"

"Oh, it's okay, but there's always someone trying to pick a fight, and the teachers are pretty boring."

She went back to her salad and he went back to his fettucine, and then Reggie suggested they try to guess the I.Q. of the other people in the restaurant. It was a game he and Jack liked a lot, and he managed to talk Sheila into it.

"The waiter," he said to her in an undertone, when the man was safely on the other side of the restaurant.

"A hundred and five," said Sheila.

"I figure maybe eighty seven," he said. "Do you remember how we had to tell him twice everything we ordered. He seems like a real nerd." He chuckled. "He reminds me of Frankenstein. Did you ever see him in a movie? He walks around sort of stiff-legged. And he looks like he's always afraid something bad is going to happen the next minute." He laughed a little louder.

"The monster wasn't Frankenstein," she said, trying to steer him away from too overt a commentary on the waiter's mannerisms. "The mad doctor who created him was Frankenstein. He's Frankenstein's monster. How about that man over there?" She pointed at him with her eyes.

"The guy in the gray suit? He's a ninety five. Notice how he sticks some food in his mouth, and then, before he even has a chance to chew it, he sticks some more food on his fork, and he holds it up there, waiting until he can gulp the first mouthful down. I remember my Mom talking about that once.

"Maybe he didn't get enough to eat as a child," suggested Sheila. "Although I must admit he looks pretty moronic. Let's change the game and guess people's age and weight, okay?"

They played that game for a while, though it wasn't as much fun, and then Reggie asked her what she was going to do when she quit going to school. And then lunch was over, and they were paying at the cash register and hurrying off to meet Smith.

Jim was waiting for Smith at the Adobe Inn, a modest eating and drinking establishment which Jim knew about and had therefore suggested as a meeting place. They had the restaurant to themselves, and took a table in the rear.

"Here's the ticket," said Jim, handing Smith a small envelope.

"How'd the delivery go?" asked Smith. "Roger get the instructions okay?"

"Like clockwork. Ray made sure the cab arrived at the other end. I still had one of those flight bags left over from the exchange at the ball park, so I put the instructions you gave me inside."

"Great. How about Roger's ticket?"

"It's being kept for him at the ticket window. I bought both tickets early, so I could get adjacent seats, and then I paid a cabbie a few bucks to return one of them to the ticket office, with a note to save it for Roger Lambeaux. I also gave them a call with a phony cover story to explain it all before the cabbie arrived. They promised to deliver the ticket to Lambeaux when he enquired at the window, as per the instructions."

"Perfect. How was the lineup at the ticket window?"

"Light," said Jim, "but busy enough."

"Did you spot any of the other guys?"

"I didn't notice anybody obvious, but I had that old clammy feeling I always get when I'm around cops or priests."

"I really want to thank you and Ray for handling all of this for me."

"Our pleasure. I'll be moseying back to the city as soon as I finish this brandy."

So it was almost all over, thought Smith as he hurried to meet Sheila and Reggie. The act was almost played out. He was going to miss the boy a bunch, but they had to bring this whole operation to a successful conclusion.

Smith gave Reggie a big hug when they arrived at the entrance to the Wild West Rodeo. Reggie was crying, and he wouldn't let Smith go. Even Smith had a lump in his throat.

"I don't want to go back," Reggie sobbed. "Can't you just take me with you?"

"I wish I could, Sport," said Smith, "but I've made an agreement with your father to give you back. We all have to keep our agreements, whether we like them or not. Come on. Cheer up. You've got a whole rodeo to see yet, and think about all the adventures you'll be able to tell your friend Jack about when you get back home. This isn't the end. We'll be seeing each other again."

Reggie wasn't too sure, but he bravely wiped his tears away. Then Sheila gave him a hug, and there were tears in her eyes as well.

"Remember," said Smith. "If your father doesn't turn up by the end of the show, go to a phone and call him. Here are a few quarters. If you can't reach him, then call the police, or ask some responsible-looking adult to find a cop for you. Tell the police who you are and that you've been kidnapped and want to be returned to your father. They'll ask you a lot of questions, but you'll be able to answer them. We talked about all of that. If all else fails, call me. Okay, Sport?"

"Okay, Smitty," said Reggie. "Bye, Clytemnestra."

"Bye bye, Reggie," said Sheila. "Good luck."

The Rodeo was really super. They started off with the bronc riding, then they had the bull riding. The part Reggie really wanted to see was the calf-roping, which was coming up in the second half, after the intermission.

It was just before intermission that Roger appeared. He looked grim.

"Where the hell have you been?" he wanted to know.

"Right here, dad," Reggie protested. "They said you were going to meet me here."

"We've had men posted at all the gates watching for you," said Roger. "How the hell did you get by us?"

"I just walked through, dad," said Reggie.

"Let's go, son."

"But it's not over yet. The calf-roping is coming up. Can't we stay just a little longer?"

"Come on, son. I don't want any arguments. Now!"

Reggie got up, disappointed, and let his father drag him out of the stadium. Roger was pulling him along a little faster than he could walk, and he kept stumbling and tripping, coming close several times to falling.

Frank and Vic were waiting for them at one of the exits. Some local cops were standing nearby. Frank told them the boy had been found and to call off the operation.

"How the heck did he get through, I wonder," said Vic.

"It's the cowboy hat, I'll bet," said Frank. "It really makes him look different."

"Give me the god damned hat," Roger told Reggie.

"Aw, dad," protested Reggie.

"I said give me the god damned hat!"

Reggie started crying and dutifully began untying the chin strap.

"Please let me keep it, dad," he said through a blur of tears.

Roger grabbed the hat from his head and threw it into a nearby garbage can. Frank looked a little disgusted and Vic averted his glance to hide his embarrassment. Reggie stood there, unabashedly bawling.

"Will you please shut the fuck up!" yelled Roger. "You've been the source of enough trouble to me."

"It isn't the kid's fault he was kidnapped," Frank remonstrated with him.

"Isn't it?" asked Roger. "You can damned well bet he had a good time out of it all."

"Let's go somewhere where we can talk," said Frank, nodding his head in the direction of the parking lot.

They drove to the local police station, where Frank called his superiors, and put in a courtesy call to Aldo. They borrowed one of the interrogation rooms, and Frank asked Roger to wait for them in a visitor's chair in the squad room.

"He's my goddamn son and I demand to be present at the questioning!" said Roger in a loud voice.

"The way you're yelling at him, we'd be lucky to get anything coherent out of the boy," said Frank in a firm voice. "Please wait out here. We'll let you know what we find out."

"I'm the one who paid two million dollars just to get him back, and I insist on hearing what he's got to say for himself!" yelled Roger.

"And I'm the one who's in charge of this case," said Frank in a steely voice, "and I'm telling you to sit right here, in this chair. If you don't cooperate, I'll have them put you in a holding cell. Is that what you want?"

"I'll have your fucking job for this," said Roger. "I know a lot of influential people, and they're going to hear how you bungled this whole case."

"Are you going to sit down?" asked Frank, "or do I have to put the cuffs on you? Your choice."

Roger sat. His face was red and ugly, and he glowered at Frank and Vic.

"You be here when I get back," Frank told him.

Reggie stopped crying when they reached the interrogation room. Vic put a hand on his shoulder to comfort him, and led him to a chair. The three of them sat down.

"Just start at the beginning, son," said Frank, "and tell us everything that happened. Take your time. Would you like a coke or anything?"

So Reggie told them everything he knew, in an extremely altered version. He told how he had held the gun on the intruder, who he said, called himself 'Smith'. He explained that he had been locked up in an apartment the whole time, but that he had been allowed out in the backyard a few hours each day. When Frank asked him why he didn't try to escape, he told them that there was always someone with him, and that brought him to Clytemnestra, who he said was Smith's girl friend.

Then they asked him for a description of Smith and his lady friend. He gave them as detailed a picture as he could of Timothy Dalton and Meryl Streep, and they dutifully recorded it on a little tape machine that Vic kept in his pocket.

They asked how he had been treated, and he told them that the people had been really nice to him, and brought him books to read, and cooked nice dinners. He said he had watched an awful lot of TV when he wasn't reading. He told them he had been

required to go to bed every night by nine, but that he had been allowed to sleep in whenever he wanted.

Then they got to the difficult part, but Smith had prepared him well.

"Did you ever try to escape from them?" Frank wanted to know.

So Reggie told them about Tweeds and Big Mac and Ernie, but he didn't mention that he knew their names. He was afraid they might implicate Smith. He told them about the old man and his dog.

"Mr. Varney told us you gave him your father's telephone number," said Frank. "But it wasn't your father who came to pick you up, was it?"

Reggie remained silent. He kept his eyes averted from them.

"Look son," said Frank, "Whatever you tell me will be kept confidential. Do you know what that means?"

Reggie shook his head.

"It means that we won't tell anyone else what you tell us," explained Frank. "What you tell us will help us catch this Mr. Smith, but we'll keep it to ourselves. We might need you to identify him in court, as the man who kidnapped you, but that's the extent of it."

There was another silence.

"That includes your father," added Frank. "What you tell your father is *your* business. What you tell us is *our* business. He only has to know the main facts of your incarceration. If you don't want him to know something, we won't tell him. Okay?"

"Okay," Reggie mumbled, looking up timidly.

"These people treated you pretty well, didn't they?" asked Vic.

"Yes, sir," said Reggie.

"If you were given a choice right now of living with them or with your father, which would you choose?"

Reggie looked up at them. For just a mad minute he had the fancy that they were offering to return him to Smith, if that were his choice.

"Them," he blurted out.

"So when Mr. Varney asked you for your father's telephone number, you gave them Smith's, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Reggie in a low voice.

"Now, I know these people were nice to you," said Vic, "but they *did* break the law, and it's our job to catch them. We have to uphold the law whether we like it or not. It's a law enforcement officer's job to catch crooks, and Mr. Smith is a crook. He's a nice crook, but he's still a crook. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Reggie.

"So we have to ask you for Smith's telephone number."

"Oh, that wasn't Mr. Smith's number," said Reggie.

"What do you mean?" asked Vic, thoroughly confused.

"That was the number of the people who used to live in the first apartment we were staying at. Before we moved to the house."

"Which apartment was that?" asked Frank.

"I don't know," said Reggie. "It was where Smith first took me. The people who used to live there hadn't turned off their phone yet, so we used it."

Frank gave a silent expression of disappointment to Vic.

"So you shouldn't mind telling us what that number was," he said to the boy.

Reggie was silent for a moment. "The last four digits are the same as the telephone at my father's house. That was what made it so easy to remember. But I forget the prefix." He looked up at Frank. "I just knew it that one day, and we never used it again, so I forgot it. I'm sorry."

"Well, son," said Frank, "I think that'll do it for now. We'll probably have some more questions later. You're not going to leave town, are you?"

Reggie darted a glance at him to see if he were serious, and when he saw the big smile on Frank's face, gave him a weak little smile in return through what remained of his tears.

"No sir," he said.

Frank kept an irate Roger quiet enough to listen to the main thread of Reggie's captivity. True to Frank's promise, nothing was said about Andrew Varney.

"As far as I can tell," said Frank, "they treated him okay, but he was imprisoned most of the time, so I don't think it was any kind of party for him."

Roger's silence made it clear that Roger wasn't buying this theory. He had driven up by himself, so Frank and Vic were able to take their leave of him.

"We'll keep in touch," Frank told him.

"Let's go," Roger told Reggie.

The drive back was deadly silent the entire way. When they got home, Reggie was sent to his room. There was no mention made of dinner, and Reggie had the wit to keep his mouth shut. He could see the anger in his father's face.



## Chapter 37

Mary Jane Renselar was fighting mad. For the last three nights and days she had been locked in the guest room of Tweeds' multi-level mansion. This room occupied the lowest level of the stack of boxes that sat precariously on the tree-covered hillside. She had only the fuzziest notion of where she was, since so very little had been said to her since her arrival. She also had no idea why she was being held captive, and this concerned her a great deal. At first she had feared sexual molestation, especially from the leers she intercepted from Big Mac, but it was gradually becoming clear to her that the two men who had captured her were under orders from someone higher up not to touch her in any way. She had met no one but Mac and Ernie, but she had the impression of others in the house.

She was somewhat self-sufficient, barricaded into her room, as there was an attached toilet and a bath with a jacuzi. Her only dependence had to do with the three meals a day which were brought to her like clockwork, and whose culinary excellence was readily evident. Tweeds had a good cook, although she had no way of knowing it except to know that the food was good. She also lacked for books, and when she began to understand that her jailors had orders to keep her happy, she demanded that Big Mac furnish her with adequate reading material, and she specifically let him know what she wanted. She also asked for a deck of cards.

So Big Mac made a trip to the book stores on Telegraph, and came back with a pile of books on the former Soviet Union. Mary Jane was an ardent Russophile, and an omnivorous reader on the subject. It mattered little to her that Mac had shown little discrimination in the titles he had selected. It was all grist to her mill.

Mary Jane was a real novelty to Big Mac and Ernie. They had never met anyone like her, and Ernie, at least, was beginning to develop some real respect for her. He had, as a matter of fact, fallen for her, hook, line and sinker. Up to this point in his life, dames had been dames. But Mary Jane was something else. Ten years before, she had taken a few courses in self-defense, and although her musculature was not overly impressive, she had put on considerable weight in the interim, and so she could use it to some advantage. What made it unfair to Big Mac, who could have stopped her in her tracks with one punch of his brawny fist, were the strict orders from Tweeds not to touch a hair of her head. When she discovered that Mac and Ernie were not allowed to hit back, she began to bully them. Mac's shins were getting pretty battered up from her kicking, and he had at least one fairly sore rib from one of her elbow slams. Ernie was not prone to violence towards ladies, so he fared better in the bruise department, but his amorous feelings had no chance to be expressed. She allowed neither of them conversation with her, being content to read, sleep, and play solitaire for hours on end. They quietly brought her meals and left her alone. If it hadn't been for the tedium of incarceration, she almost might have enjoyed it.

From time to time, she studied what little could be seen from her windows of the layout of the place. The wall which surrounded the property was higher than the top of her window, so she couldn't see what lay beyond. Between the wall and the house was a narrow corridor which was policed by a trio of silent Dobermans, who growled and snarled up at her whenever she opened the window. She could see a forest of treetops

beyond the wall, with tall eucalyptus trees and redwoods. She spent a lot of time wondering what was going to happen to her.

Sheila got around to checking her telephone messages on Sunday evening.

"Why don't you just pull the plug on it?" asked Smith. "Most of the people you know in this area are short timers."

"It's because of my father. As long as there's an answering machine to take his telephone calls, he feels he hasn't lost touch with me."

"Your rent's up at the end of July, isn't it?"

"Right, and I'll spend the month of August with him. Maybe you could pick up the answering machine when I leave, and stick it away somewhere for me."

"Glad to. Keeping something that belongs to somebody else helps ensure their return. That must mean you're coming to Europe with me in September."

"Why don't you come and visit me and Daddy the last week of August? I could give you my answer then."

"If your daddy is willing to put up with me. I might not use the right fork."

"I'm willing to chance it. Maybe you could read up on Emily Post before you came."

So Smith went back to his National Geographic, and Sheila punched in her telephone number, and then her secret access code, and settled back to listen to the queue of messages. Only four this time. The first was from her dental hygienist, reminding her that her teeth were due for a cleaning. The second was another funding plea from the Sierra Club. The third was a wrong number. The fourth was of another order entirely, and made her sit up and take notice. She listened to it carefully from beginning to end, and then called Smith over.

"This one is for you," she told him. She entered a code to repeat the message queue. She skipped past the first three messages and handed the receiver to Smith. The last message was just beginning as he put the phone to his ear. He immediately identified the speaker.

"Mr. Smith," said the caller. "You will undoubtedly recognize my voice. You still have something that belongs to me, and in order to get it, I have taken someone near and dear to your friend Sheila."

It was Tweeds. Who the hell had he taken? The voice continued.

"This person is one Mary Jane Renselar, a classmate and friend of your inamorata. She is now enjoying the dubious pleasure of our company. The cost to you for her safe return is one million dollars. I could have asked for the entire two million, but I am willing to be fair-minded about the matter. Since you know who I am, you also know how to get in touch with me. I would strongly suggest a speedy response."

Smith retired early Sunday night, intending to arise early Monday morning to begin his surveillance of Tweeds' mansion, but he slept only fitfully, waking every two hours or so. At 3:30 A.M. he gave it up, and slipped quietly out of bed, dressing by flashlight, so as not to waken Sheila, who was in the midst of a dream, judging by the fluttering of her eyelids and the slight articulation of her lips. He quickly donned denims, sweatshirt, pendleton jacket, tennis shoes, gloves, and a knit cap. He moved silently and quickly, leaving the lacing of his shoes until he got outside the door. He scribbled a short note

and left it on the bedside table. As he passed by the dressing mirror he saw a cat burglar staring back at him. He waved to it and it waved back.

The front desk was unmanned as he passed it by, the lobby empty, and the street outside devoid of people or cars. It was chilly and the slight wind damp and bracing as he strolled down to the parking garage where his rentacar was stashed. A few figures lay huddled, motionless in doorways. He wondered how many nights they could survive, exposed to the weather. He remembered reading Xenophon, who slept out of doors even at home so as not to lose his conditioning, but these few piles of rags and bones were probably more helots than zealots.

His car was the only one on the road, as he buzzed down Bush Street and up onto the Bay Bridge on ramp. The bridge was nearly deserted. There was something special about being up and about when the rest of the world was sleeping. There was a fascination for him in the hours between midnight and dawn. These were the uncivilized hours, the hours not accounted for in the diurnal scheme, when demons were loosed upon the dreaming minds of men, and ancient horrors still roamed the earth.

There was also a keen sense of being utterly alone, which was not possible during the more mundane hours, when the roar of the city was a constant background sound, and every niche and cranny was filled with the din of human activity.

But most of all he felt the excitement of beginning a new exploit, a new adventure. He thrived on adversity, and the last couple weeks of relative inactivity had gotten him in a funk. Even though it was a nuisance, the challenge of rescuing Mary Jane from the evil clutches of Tweed made him feel alive again. Except that in this case the knight who saved the maiden from the castle wasn't in the least interested in the maiden.

When he got to Berkeley, he took the Gilman exit off highway 80 and made his way up the steep incline of Marin Street. He glanced at his watch. It was just going on 4:30 A.M. as he made a right onto Spruce.

A few hundred yards from where Spruce ended on Grizzly Peak Boulevard, a meandering road named Mulberry began its tortuous descent down the eastern side of the Oakland hills. It seemed highly doubtful to Smith that any Mulberry trees had ever grown there, the name more likely arising from the fertile mind of one of the first residents. 50035 Mulberry was about five hundred yards from where the road ended on Grizzly Peak. A smaller, subsidiary road named Acacia Terrace bordered one side. The houses were set some distance apart, some as much as a quarter of a mile. All the trees were second growth, so a fire must have ripped through this area about fifty years ago or so, judging by their height. Smith turned on Acacia Terrace and drove down past the bottom of the hill, continuing on another hundred yards before parking off the road. He dug a pair of binoculars out of the glove compartment and began a slow walk back on foot. He consulted his watch. It was about a quarter to five. There was no light as yet from the east. The near forest around him shielded off any starlight or stray glow from the city just over the rise. The road had long ago been tarred, but with erosion had almost reverted to a country lane. There was no other building between where his car was parked and where the back wall of Tweeds' property stood. He dared not use his flashlight; it was too apt to draw attention to him. When he got close to the wall, he found a place where the ground was level, and sat himself down with his back to the wall, awaiting the day.

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Reggie's bedroom was on the second floor, facing the street. He was used to rising early, so he never bothered pulling the blinds. When he woke up in the middle of the night, it was comforting to be able to look at the sky over the rooftops. If his father had permitted it, he would have had his bed right next to the windows. Somehow his father was always against anything he wanted.

The night before he had dutifully gone to bed promptly at 9:30 P.M., but he had spent so much time in his room the last two days that sleep had been impossible to come by. He had tossed and turned so much that his sheets and blankets had become separated, with the blankets bunched up against the wall and the sheets lying on the floor. He pulled them back together as best he could, and lay there, mulling over his problems. He was dead sick of being stuck in his room all the time, and he was tired of being constantly in his father's bad graces. To top it all off, his friend Jack was up at some dumb summer camp his mother had decided at the last moment to stick him in, and he wouldn't be back for two whole weeks. And here Reggie was, back from the most exciting episode in his whole life, and there was nobody to share it with. Jack would have wanted to know all about it, and it would have been so much fun to tell him. It was depressing.

His thoughts turned to Smith, and he wondered what he was doing. Saving the life of some princess, he fantasized. But he guessed Sheila wouldn't stand for that, because when you save the princesses life you had to fall in love with her and marry her. So he'd have to be doing something else. Perhaps operating a super boy's home, sort of like the Academy, but nice. Good things to eat, any time of the day or night. Smith could spend his week days rescuing boys from bad fathers, taking them to live with him in his castle on the hill. The boys could learn to be knights, and they could help defend the castle. Maybe the boys could help Smith, and they could start their own country, peopled just with boys, and Reggie would be the president, and Smith could be the commander in chief of his army, as well as his advisor. Gradually the fantasy became a dream, and the dream became sleep.

## Chapter 38

The hills in the distance precluded an early dawn. Sunrise should have been about a quarter to five this time of year, thought Smith. The longest day of the year was a little over a month ago, but his watch showed it to be almost five, and it was still dark. He heard the birds stirring, and from the distance came the sound of another cock crowing. He sat and watched the day begin.

As the light increased, he could see the shape of things about him. Paralleling the wall which was behind him, the bushes and small trees had been cut back and all the lower vegetation pruned to a distance of two yards from the wall, creating a mini firebreak all around the house, skirting the wall. Just beyond the firebreak from him stood a giant eucalyptus, partially uprooted and tremendously atilt, threatening to come crashing down upon him and the house behind him. Tall young redwoods stood on the slope beyond, some of them almost fifty feet in height, perhaps an equal number of years old. In the vicinity it was mostly bushes and ferns, manzanita, tall meadow grasses, an occasional eucalyptus. In the distance were more redwoods, sugar pines.

He examined the firebreak he was sitting in. It had the appearance of being only sporadically maintained. It would be only the sheerest bad luck to have a gardener suddenly appear, so Smith was probably safe where he was. At the same time, he was not in a position to observe anything, as he was at the very bottom of Tweeds' property. He needed a better vantage point. He looked about him, estimating his chances of scaling any of the trees in the near distance. A telephone lineman might have a good chance, but without proper gear, it looked to be an impossible task. He had almost given it up when he saw the solution, right in front of him. The massive eucalyptus looming in the foreground. From its top branches he would be high above the house which was now above him. It would be worth the climb, and although the bark was slippery, the cant of the trunk was so extreme as to make climbing much easier. If it hadn't been for the fact that the tree was actually falling up hill, it would have toppled long ago.

The third branch up put him about level with the second floor of the house, and he could see the roof of the bottom floor, as well as part of its exterior, although the sides of the lower part of the house were partially concealed by the wall. A space about two yards in width, the same size as the firebreak on the other side of the wall, separated the wall from the house, creating a passageway all around, except for the front. He could see only the bottom of this passageway on the side of the house nearest to him, but he kept the corner of his consciousness on it, and his patience paid off. Two or three times he caught glimpses of dark moving shapes. Dogs. Big ones. Maybe Dobermans.

The house was built on four levels. The topmost fronted the road above. It probably contained the kitchen, the dining room, and the front room, which in this case faced the back of the house, away from the road. Large view windows spanned the back of it. The next level down underlapped the top, in the same manner as it overlapped the level below it, perhaps to allow an inner staircase connecting all four levels. This next level might be Tweeds' inner sanctum, his own private apartment. The one below that could be bedrooms for his staff, and the bottom one could contain guest bedrooms. If there were any part of the house that looked most likely to contain Mary Jane, it would be the lowest level. He could see the windows on the side toward him, but they were obscure and dark.

His limbs grew cramped maintaining his position, and he was forced to free up various parts of him to keep the blood flowing. A chill morning breeze sprang up, raising goosebumps on his upper arms and the backs of his legs. He was aware of the glancing rays of the rising sun piercing through the green canopy about him, and he heard the chirp of birds heralding the encroaching light of day. Time to be up and about, they seemed to say. Time to nail a bug for breakfast. He caught a glimpse of a pair of mule deer, slipping like ghosts through the trees, making their way downhill. He saw the dark shape of an owl gliding through the forest. He had been watching the house from this vantage point for about three and a half hours now, and in that entire time there had been no sign of activity from the house below. No lights had gone on or off. Unless they were all expert at pissing in the dark, nobody had even gotten up to take a whiz. This was a late-arising crew.

His last act was to estimate the relative heights of the back house and the back wall. He climbed down slowly until he was level with the roof of the lowermost section. It was about three feet higher than the wall which surrounded the house, and the wall was about twelve feet high, just even with the tops of the windows. A thin wire, strung from brackets about ten feet apart, ran along the entire wall about two inches above its top. If disturbed, it presumably set off an alarm.

He quietly descended from the tree, and examined the ground at the base of the wall, doing some rough calculations. Then he retraced his steps back to Acacia Terrace, and hiked back to his car.

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Late Monday morning Durning finally showed up. Aldo had been shuffling papers, staring out the window. He was at loose ends since he had been told to lay off the Lambeaux case. It just wasn't that easy to flip the off button.

"Hi, Durn," said Aldo, stubbing out a cigarette and sitting back in his chair.

"Heard you were going to give me some help with the Williams case," said Durning, a heavy-set, but active-looking young man with an intelligent, clean-shaven face framed in a mop of prematurely graying hair. "I can sure use it."

"When can we get together?"

"How about now?"

"Your desk or mine?" asked Aldo.

The Williams assault case was a complicated one. It had to do with the beating of a Charles Williams by two brothers later identified as Isiah and Jeremiah Jackson. The beating had been unusually severe, and it had been linked to a family dispute. The victim's assailants turned out to be cousins. What complicated the case was the possibility that the beating was drug-related. What gave Durning the suspicion of drugs was that Mr. Williams had been found with a cellular phone still hooked onto his belt, and that the incident had taken place on a street corner known to be a place where junkies found connections.

"They use these phones like walkie-talkies. A lot of drug dealers use them nowadays. It's become a real problem."

"Tell me something. Do they have normal telephone numbers?"

"Yeah, they're the same. They have their own set of prefixes, but otherwise they operate the same way."

"Their own set of prefixes! Excuse me. I need to make a quick call." He picked up the phone on the desk and dialed Frank's number. He was lucky; Frank was in.

"Frank? Aldo here."

"What's up?"

"It was a cellular phone."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The phone Smith used was a cellular one,"

"Why do you think that?"

"Because cellular phones have their own prefixes. Want to bet they're not in your list of San Francisco prefixes?"

"I see," said Frank. "I didn't think of that. It's a distinct possibility."

"It also would explain why it took Smith only fifteen minutes to get to Varney's place from San Francisco. He was already in Berkeley when Varney called him."

"Good thought, Al. I'll check those cellular prefixes out right away. By the way, if what you say is true, it means the kid lied to us about the phone belonging to the apartment that Smith took him to."

"I wonder what else he lied to us about? Smith could hardly have prompted him on that one, considering he couldn't know that Varney contacted us."

"Smart little bastard. It was me he lied to on that one, and he had to have done it on the spur of the moment."

"Could I get together with you later, Frank? I've had a theory on the back burner for some time now, and it's starting to take shape. I'd like to run it by you."

"Okay by me. I'm open this evening. Any special time?"

"How about eight. After dinner. You mind dropping by my place?"

He gave Frank his address, brought the conversation to a close, hung up, and apologized to Durning.

"That's okay," said Durning. "Now, where were we?"

After Smith left Tweeds', he drove over to a bar on Broadway in Oakland called Frankie & Johnny's, which had been gay in the sixties and seventies, but was now habituated by retired people, mostly straight, and still mostly men. Smith was hoping that Vince Morrow still bartended there. Vince was an ex-movie star of the seventies who had never made it big. He had gone on to mild repute as a syndicated gossip columnist for a while, until his former acquaintanceships had worn thin under the knife of notoriety. When there was nothing left to do, he had become a bartender, but his nose for news and his eye for celebrities had never atrophied, so he knew a great deal about people of any importance in the community around him. Smith happened to know that Vince knew Tweeds. He also knew that Vince detested him.

The man on duty told him that Vince no longer worked there.

"Try the Hideaway over on College Avenue."

"Is that where he's working now?"

"I don't know anything more than that, bud. Take it or leave it."

"You know the shift?"

"When he first got the job he was on the late shift. Tuesdays through Thursdays. The boss man always takes the late shift on weekends. I oughta know. I worked there long enough."

"So he got the job there through you?"

"You want a drink, or are you gonna waste my time with a lot of silly questions?"

"This is such a friendly place, I was thinking of opening up a charge account."

"Hey, buddy. I really didn't have to answer your questions in the first place. You're not a customer, so why the hell do I have to be friendly? In fact, whyn't you just take a hike?"

"If you stopped beating your wife," said Smith, "you might get laid once in a while and then you wouldn't have to go around being angry all the time." He smiled pleasantly at the other man's glare.

"Thanks for the info and have a good day," Smith said to him, feeling the bartender's eyes boring holes in his back as he strode out the door.



## Chapter 39

Frank arrived at Aldo's house promptly at eight. Aldo introduced him to his wife, Maria, who left them alone in the front room after serving coffee and some cookies the children had somehow overlooked.

"That was a productive thought you had, Al," Said Frank. "The cellular prefixes weren't on the list, as you guessed. There are only a few, so we were able to check them out pretty quickly. One of them was a Smith, with an address on Valencia. We have a stakeout on the place. Landlord says he's an unpredictable character, few visitors, comes and goes at odd hours, gone for weeks at a time, with mail and newspapers piling up."

"Did you try to get a description of Smith out of him?"

"He doesn't see him that often. It was a little vague, but it sounded a lot like the messenger at the ball park. I was thinking we could get a police artist to do a composite on him with the help of the Lambeaux kid, but now I'm starting to doubt we can rely on the kid that much."

"How about credit references, bank accounts?"

"We've got some people working on that right now. We're also trying to cross index with other government files. That's about all I have for you at the moment. What've you got for me?"

"Just an idea, Frank. What you might call a theory. I've thought a lot about this case, and there's a great deal that hasn't seemed to make sense, starting with both a theft and a kidnapping at the same address, a day apart. Then there's the phony note, and the Varney incident. But now you have the boy back, with a story about a second group of bad guys stealing the boy from the first group of bad guys. On top of which all these bad guys seem to know each other."

"Yes," said Frank, "and the boy spoke of one of the second set of bad guys as a boss of some sort."

"Right. So let's say we start out with one gang, of which Smith is a member. Maybe this is the gang that Bleier and Morgan were talking about that operate the alleged East Bay art ring. That would, of course, suggest specialization. Maybe Smith is their B&E man. He opens up the place so the other guys can walk off with the art."

"So he has to show up first."

"And he's the one who discovered the kid."

"Who is home two days early."

"It really makes a lot of sense, doesn't it?" said Aldo. "It even explains the phony note?"

"How?"

"You have to realize who the note was really written to."

"Roger Lambeaux, ostensibly."

"Yeah, but only ostensibly. The real recipient of that note, according to my theory, was the gang boss. He had to have a snitch to know about the paintings, and Smith, being a member of his gang, would know about the snitch. He had to be hoping the snitch would hear about the date of the note and report it to the boss, who would then, Smith hoped, believe that someone other than Smith was the kidnapper."

"It's a bit convoluted, but it's the only explanation I've heard yet that makes any sense," said Frank. "Keep coming up with ideas like that, and we'll be forced to find a place for you in the agency."

"Tell my boss, or better yet write him a letter. I'm not looking too good right now after the complaint Lambeaux turned in on us."

"Did that asshole really do that? Sure, I'd be glad to write him a letter. Let's see, I'm afraid I've forgotten your lieutenant's name. Something to do with horses, doesn't it?"

"Robert J. Ryder." He pulled a business card out of his wallet and scribbled the name on the card. "I really appreciate this, Frank."

"No problem. You deserve it. Your theory seems to answer a lot of questions. Except who Smith's other mysterious partners were."

"Hired talent. Brought in for that particular job. Smith is a subcontractor himself, so he has the wit to hire other subcontractors. That's the advantage a specialist has. He knows how much more he knows than others about his specialty, so when he compares his area of expertise to other areas he realizes the mass of information and understanding he probably lacks. Bosses and owners make the reverse error. They tend to think they did it all and forget the contributions made by their subordinates. They think they can do anything without anyone's help."

"You're brimming over with insight, tonight, Al," said Frank with a friendly smile. "Perhaps you have some ideas about Smith. What he's like, what makes him tick, what he might overlook."

"He's a tough one," said Aldo. "He seems so careful most of the time. Everything is planned out to a gnat's eyebrow. Including that fake money bag at the circus. It wasn't necessary."

"But it helped. It gave them time before we knew we had been taken."

"That's just my point. The thoroughness with which he does things. And yet he is stupid enough to do three exchanges."

"If your theory is true, maybe it's because, in this area, he *is* an amateur. So far, he's just been a member of the gang. He hasn't done anything on his own. So when he accidentally becomes a kidnapper, it's all new to him."

"I think there's more to it than that," said Aldo. "I brought up the idea before, but nobody thought much of it then. That's the thought that the places where Lambeaux was forced to go to are all places where a father would take his son. I'm sure Lambeaux must have noticed that, and must realize the implied rebuke in it all."

"That Lambeaux is a lousy father."

"Exactly. So this accidental kidnapper decided that if he were going to go through with it, he would do it in style, and even make a statement out of it."

"The boy obviously liked Smith. The story he gave us left a lot out."

"There's another corollary to that theory."

"What's that?"

"If it were wrong for the father not to take his son to those events, then it must be wrong for the boy not to have gone," said Aldo. "It therefore seems possible that Smith himself took the boy to all those events. At another time, conceivably."

"It all hangs together," agreed Frank. "He's certainly made the lot of us look like fools. If I weren't one of those fools I could almost cheer him on. Especially when he's

stiffing an asshole like Lambeaux. It must have been downright funny when old Roger got home from the circus and opened up his bag to find a bunch of one-dollar bills."

"It wasn't funny to me. I was the one he called when he found out."

"He certainly can be a nasty son of a bitch when he wants." He went on to tell Aldo about the cowboy hat incident at the rodeo.

"Sickening," said Aldo. "Guys like Lambeaux shouldn't be fathers. Oh, by the way. Should we continue to keep his house under surveillance?"

"Let's keep it up for the time being. There's a certain chance Smith might try to steal him back. Think how foolish we'd look if we stopped surveillance the day before a repeat of the kidnapping. Think how many letters Lambeaux would write."

"That's a pretty scary thought."

"Well, anyway," said Frank, wrapping it up, "we seem to be closing in on the mysterious Mr. Smith. If we nab him soon enough, we can keep the surveillance costs down."

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Mary Jane was beginning to experience a little difficulty remembering what day of the week it was. She made a little joke to herself about writing x's on the wall to keep track of the length of her incarceration. Her imprisonment was starting to get to her. One of the things that made it worse was not knowing the reason for it. At least that was cleared up late Monday evening.

She had just finished an excellent dinner - crab curry with rice and vegetables with a nice glass of chardonnay, followed by a chocolate mousse with decaffeinated coffee. She had brushed her teeth and was ready to turn in early when Big Mac came to summon her.

"The boss wants to talk to you. Now!"

She got up without protest and followed him, for once too curious to complain. He led her up three flights of stairs. The rooms they passed were dark. At the top of the third flight, she was brought into a huge frontroom, a hundred feet on a side. It was dimly-lit, and all the shades were drawn, but she could still make out the shadowy shapes of couches and cushions. Big Mac steered her to a sofa, and stood just behind her. She could hear his heavy breathing. As she sat down, she gradually became aware of the presence of the other man, sitting on the sofa opposite her.

"Good evening, Miss Renselar," said a strong, self-assured, well-modulated voice. "I trust you have had a comfortable stay with us."

"I guess we're sitting in the dark so I can't see you," she said. Somehow I am going to find out who you are, and then I am going to prosecute your ass," she added nastily, forgetting in her passion her normal disapproval of such language.

"You are correct as to why you are being kept in the dark," said the voice, "but your intentions will never come to fruition, Miss Renselar. You will have no chance to prove any assertions whatever. Where are your witnesses? Even if, at great effort, you were to learn my identity, what could you do with that information? No, you are powerless both within and outside my custody."

"I'll get you somehow, you creep."

"I can appreciate your feelings, and I am sorry we have had to detain you, but you are my only connection with, and only hold over Sheila Grant."

"Sheila has something to do with all of this!?"

"Her boy friend, a Mr. Smith, has something to do with all of this. To be more particular, he has something which belongs to me, and I want it back. I'm hoping he'll be willing to accept you in trade for it."

"Oh, brother. Are you up the wrong tree! Sheila and I hardly know each other. Really. We're in the same class and we studied together a few times. That's the extent of it. She certainly doesn't have any particularly good reason to save me."

"Then you had better start praying she does. Because that's the only way you're going to walk out the front door."

"Does your elevator go to the top floor, birdbrain? I don't think you've heard a word I've said. Sheila hardly knows me, so all these threats aren't going to get you anywhere. If you do want to get somewhere, you asshole, go out and kidnap someone Sheila knows a little better."

"Miss Renselar, your charm is beginning to wear a bit thin. The main reason I called you in here was to give you a chance to tell us what you know about Sheila. The sooner we find her, the sooner we can let you go."

"Look, buster!" said Mary Jane, beside herself with impatience and disbelief. "The only thing I know about Sheila is her phone number. Outside of that - zilch! Nothing. We took one class together, and I'll never see her again. She doesn't live in this area, and I don't have a clue where she can be found. I think her father lives somewhere in the midwest. And she likes pizza. That's it. You can put bamboo splinters under my fingernails, but you're not going to learn anything else, because I don't know anything else. Will you let me go now, please!"

"No, Miss Renselar. You're not leaving until we get back from Smith that which rightfully belongs to us. And that's final."

"Then I'm going to be here forever," she said, halfway between anger and tears.

"So be it," said Tweeds. "Take her back," he said to Big Mac.

## Chapter 40

Sheila was anxious to find out what Smith had learned about the plight of Mary Jane.

"Nothing," he told her. Nothing at all. I hope I'll learn some more tonight."

"You're going back there?"

"I have to. There are two things to find out - where Mary Jane is stashed, and whether the dogs bark."

"The dogs," she repeated. "There are dogs?"

"Unfortunately. I think they're Dobermans. At least three."

"So there's a twelve-foot wall with an alarm wire on top, separated from the house by a six-foot passageway which is guarded by police dogs."

"I don't know if it's proper to call them police dogs when they belong to crooks," he pointed out. "Otherwise, you summed it up nicely."

"So you have to get over a twelve-foot wall, duke it out with a gang of vicious dogs, then get Mary Jane out through a window, and back through the dogs and over the wall. Either that, or shoot it out with Tweeds and company and walk out the front door."

"That sums up all the methods I ruled out from the start."

"I can't think of any other way. Do you intend to do it with mirrors?"

"No. I was thinking of setting up a platform outside the wall, fifteen feet in height, and maybe four feet by four on the top. Then we could lay planks across the eight-foot gap between the platform and the top of the roof. That would give us clearance over the wall with three feet to spare, and the dogs would be far below. We could lower a rope ladder down from the roof, and spirit Mary Jane out through the window, up to the roof, over the planks onto the platform, and down from the platform by a ladder. The ground outside the wall at the lowest part of the property is pretty flat."

"Where are you going to get this platform?" she asked.

"You name it, there's probably somebody who makes it."

"What's the fourth?"

"What to do with Mary Jane when we free her."

"Why do we have to do anything with her?"

"Won't we have to protect her from another kidnap attempt by Tweeds?"

"Oh," she said. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Also, she might want us to help bring him to justice."

"You do have a lot of problems," she said. "Are you going to expect any help from me on any of this? I'm not very adept at unkidnapping. Or going over walls. Although you have driven me up a few of them."

"I'll need your help with Mary Jane. You're the only one she knows. Do you think she'd allow herself to be rescued by absolute strangers?"

"Not Mary Jane," she agreed with an amused smile. "You're right there. I hope you don't expect me to do anything too dangerous."

"I'll try to keep the danger down to a minimum. I'm seriously thinking of hiring a new hand for this operation. An old buddy of mine, Billy Joe Douglas. I don't think you've met him."

"Is he an old guy, bigger than you? Graying blond hair in a ponytail? Sociopathic life of the party?"

"Sounds as if you've met him, but where?"

"Tiffany's wedding," she said.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot he knew Tiffany."

"So why him?"

"Because he's the best man for the job. You have to see him at work to appreciate how good he is. When he's straight and sober he's something else. You could never find anybody more resourceful. He can handle any kind of violence, and he has no compunctions about doing the bad guys in when it becomes necessary. If I were to be dropped anywhere in the world with just the clothes on my back, I could choose no better ally."

"That's high praise," she said. "It's just about what I'd say about you, except that unless it were Tahiti or the Riviera, I'd want to take along a larger wardrobe."

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Billy Joe Douglas was a character Smith had known on and off for about fifteen years. An ex-Georgia cracker, ex-Green Beret, he had come back from the war a dooper and perpetual hippy. The army had been a pivotal experience in his life, introducing him to social amorality, a supreme distrust of all authority, and a lifelong penchant for drugs. He had grown up in the army, and he had grown away from all the values he had brought with him. He thrived on the schizophrenic life style, whoring one day, warring the next. He was a natural-born fighter, soldier and lover. When his final tour of duty ended, he had gone on permanent R&R. In some dim, forgotten part of his psyche, he was waiting for the next war to begin so he could go back to work. Until then, nothing mattered very much. That included jobs, education, life purpose. Nothing mattered, that is, except getting stoned and getting laid. He was in his fifties, but he had never gotten past fifteen in his social development.

Smith had met him through poker-playing friends, and although he and Smith generally traveled in different crowds, they found a one-on-one relationship agreeable. Billy Joe liked to hunt and fish and camp out, so he took Smith along with him when he went hunting for elk in Montana and wild pigs in Arizona, or fishing for steelhead on the Yuba or trout on the Yellowstone, or camping out in high mountain valleys in the Sierras or dry washes in the desert. Other than these periodic excursions into the wilderness, Billy Joe spent hours polishing his motorcycle and tinkering with the engine. When he got tired of that he would go down to the local pub and spent hours unveiling his solutions to all the world problems before an unwilling but socially timorous crowd, who longed for him to spirit off one of the local ladies and leave them in peace. Everyone liked him, but they all wished he would just shut the fuck up.

Smith hadn't seen much of Billy Joe for some time now - it was over a year since they had done anything together. Sheila had been a factor, having made a dent in Smith's social life.

Billy Joe lived in a cottage back of a rooming house just off Clifford in West Oakland. The rent was low, and it was the sort of neighborhood where being a perpetual boozier and pothead was almost in the acceptable category.

It was a few minutes after nine, much too early for a late-nighter like Mr. Douglas to be up and about, but Smith didn't want to take a chance on missing him. After banging

uselessly on the front door, the back door and the windows, he decided on more direct methods. It took a moment of do-jiggering with the lock and the door opened smoothly. Fortunately there was no chain inside to impede it. Smith stepped inside and softly shut the door. He felt about for a light switch, when suddenly he found his chin being wrenched from his neck, in the vise of a hammerlock. Then the lights went on.

"Okay, buddy," said a familiar voice, "now suppose you just tell me why you're trespassing on my property. Take your time and tell it straight or else."

"Friend," Smith gritted out between clenched teeth.

"What friend?"

"Smith," he managed to wheeze out.

"Smitty?" asked the voice which belonged to the arm around his head which suddenly let him go. He felt himself being spun around, and saw the big friendly face of Billy Joe staring at him with concern.

"You okay, Smitty?"

"Yeah," said Smith, massaging his sore head and neck, "but no thanks to you."

"Sorry, but you couldn't expect me to know it was you."

"Why the hell didn't you answer the door?"

"There's some people looking for me I don't want to talk to."

"I hope I'm not one of them."

"No way. Mind if we go somewhere else to talk?"

Billy Joe's choice of a place to talk was a pizzaburger joint just a few blocks away. They sat over steaming bitter coffee, while Billy Joe chomped on a wilted raisin snail.

"What's up, Smitty?" asked Billy Joe between bites.

"I gotta rescue somebody," said Smith, "and I need some help."

"No shit," said Billy Joe.

## Chapter 41

"Reggie, quit toying with your food. Eat it or leave it alone," said Roger, drumming his fingers on the table cloth.

"God knows how they train them at that so-called Academy," he said, turning his attention to his sister-in-law, Betty Siddons. They were having lunch at Grey's Grill on Grant. Betty was in town on family business matters, and was trying to talk Roger into letting Reggie stay with his mother for a couple weeks.

"Jonathan thinks she's a lot better now, and we feel maybe it's time we get her visiting rights reinstated." Jonathan was Betty's husband and a practicing psychologist who had taken a special interest in his wife's sister Cora. "She seems to have a firm grip on reality now." Betty chose her words carefully. She wanted Roger to think she felt the same way he did about his wife's condition.

Roger snorted. "She's adept as hell at faking it. I oughta know. I lived with her. She knows what she's expected to say."

"Now, Roger, that isn't fair. She's been through a lot, and she really has improved. She can carry on a lucid conversation, now."

"In five minutes she can go from lucid to science fiction."

"You really shouldn't talk that way about her in front of Reggie."

"I'm pretty used to it," Reggie chimed in, emboldened by the presence of his aunt. "He's always putting Mom down."

"I have never spoken ill of your mother in front of you," said Roger reprovingly, with a mean look in his eye.

"How about when you called her a dipsomaniac?" asked Reggie, knowing a whipping was probably in store for him, but saying it anyway.

Betty raised her eyebrows at Roger.

"I was using it in a clinical sense," Roger explained. "He doesn't even know what the word means."

"Yes I do," said Reggie. "It's a person with an ab . . . abnormal, irresistible, . . . and . . . and . . . insatiable craving for . . . for alcohol. I looked it up in the dictionary." Betty smiled to herself.

"Well, just butt out of the conversation right now, mister know-it-all, and eat your lunch, what little there is of it. Betty and I have got to talk about your future."

"We were thinking," said Betty between bites, "that maybe with all that Reggie's been through lately, maybe he ought to spend a little time with his mother. Not for a real long time. Just a week or so. She's up to it, and it would do her a world of good. She feels pretty guilty about the past. That Indian thing has been over with for a long time now, and she's been in Doctor Langhorn's clinic for the past month."

"That's a surprise. Nobody told me. How come I haven't received a bill yet?"

"We're paying it. Well, what do you think?" Betty fought to keep the irritation out of her voice. The only way to deal with this ridiculous man was to keep him thinking you were on his wavelength.

Roger grimaced. "Frankly, he's had a lot of excitement lately, and it might be better for him to lead a quiet, disciplined existence at home for a bit."

Betty was peeved, but she kept it to herself. "Well," she said, "you just think about it, but not too long, because I'm returning to Sacramento on Saturday, and I'll be speaking



with Cora's attorney on Monday, so I'd like to know soon." She hoped the threat of a lawyer would make him more pliant. How had Cora put up with this petty tyrant for so long?

The silence was unbroken except for the sound of Reggie absentmindedly toying with his knife against his bread plate. Roger was about to reprove him for it but the waitress arrived to clear the table and the headwaiter approached Roger.

"Will there be anything more, sir, or do you just want the check?" he asked.

"I think that'll be all," said Roger.

"Just a darned minute," said Betty. "I for one would like a touch of something sweet. Bring us the dessert menu, please," she said to the waiter.

"Very good," said the man, and trundled off.

"Can I have some dessert too?" asked Reggie, looking up from his plate.

"Say 'may I,'" said Roger.

"May I?" asked Reggie.

"No, you may not," said Roger.

Early Tuesday afternoon, Frank gave Aldo a call.

"We're really closing in on this Mr. Smith," said Frank. "He's apparently not been at the Valencia Street apartment for some time. All the mail is two months old, and the rent will be up at the end of this month. He pays in quarterly installments, in person and in cash, so we're staying in touch with the landlord, with instructions for him to call us the minute Smith shows up unexpectedly, just in case he decides to renew his rent."

"But there's more. The Smith that rents the Valencia Street apartment as well as the cell phone has a couple bank accounts with close to thirty grand in them. His full name is Robert James Smith, born in Wichita Kansas in 1961. When we checked on him further, we found a very peculiar anomaly. We found a credit record with two different names attached to it. The Smith I just mentioned, plus a Robert Kenneth Smith, born in Westchester Massachusetts in 1962. And the Robert Kenneth Smith happens to rent a house in the Buena Vista Heights area. We checked him out, only to find that he moved out just a week ago. Getting close, eh? We've got some lab people dusting the place now. I haven't been able to get hold of Lambeaux, but I want to get his son out there and see if he recognizes it. I have a strong feeling it's where they kept the boy."

"Did you check with the owners?"

"The rentals are handled by a property management firm. The owner lives in Jamaica, and has nothing to do with his tenants."

"The owner's name isn't Smith as well?" asked Aldo.

Frank laughed. "No. As a matter of fact it's Jones. Alias Smith and Jones, maybe?"

"You've really made some progress," said Aldo.

"Thanks to you, buddy, we finally got some information we could get our claws into."

Late Tuesday afternoon, Smith drove across the bay and paid a visit to the Hideaway. The bar was fairly busy for what was normally the slack time of the day. Smith spotted Vince busily mixing drinks. He found an empty stool and made himself comfortable until Vince got around to waiting on him. He had the Examiner sports section folded up in his coat pocket, so he got it out to kill a little time.

"You want something, or did you just come in here to read that newspaper?" said a familiar voice. Smith looked up to see Vince grinning down at him.

"Hello, buddy," said Vince. "Long time no see. Is this just a cosmic coincidence or did you know I was here now?"

"A guy who used to work here and who now works where you used to work told me. But only when I beat it out of him with a baseball bat."

"I hope you did!" said Vince with a laugh. "That asshole! He didn't know when he had it so good. He didn't like what he saw here as the pseudo-intellectual type. He fancies himself as smart, but he isn't, so he feels uncomfortable around people who are. I'm dumb, myself, but I like being around smart people, and I was getting bored with that other place."

"What makes them so smart here?"

"Oh, a lot of them come over from the College of Arts and Crafts, plus we get a group of older students from U.C.. It's a nice bunch of kids, quiet and no trouble. There's plenty of neighborhood people who come in here too, and, since this is a better area, the level of education is higher than average. As well as the manners."

"Sounds as if that other fellow got the short end of the stick."

"I happen to know there was more to it than that. He got a woman in some trouble, and the boss was up tight. It's not that easy to get a good job right now, so he probably saw it was better to trade something he had while he had it. He never liked me, but we happened to run into one another one night and got to talking and he came up with the proposal and I accepted. I didn't care what his reasons were, so I didn't ask. I learned all this stuff about him after I came to work here and everybody told me how glad they were to be rid of him. But enough time wasted talking about that jerk. What's up?"

"I need information about somebody," said Smith. "An old buddy of yours, as a matter of fact."

"Oh, yeah?" said Vince. "Who's that?"

"Tweeds," said Smith.

"Yeah, I remember you asking about him, Jesus, it must have been two years ago. At one of your all-night poker games as a matter of fact. You still have that place on Valencia?"

"Yeah, but I probably haven't played any poker since I last saw you."

"You got married or something?"

"Or something. You know how women are about all-night sessions with the boys."

"Sounds serious. Tweeds, huh? What kind of info were you after?"

"Something about his private life. I need some sort of advantage over him, an edge."

"Something about his private life. Hmm. Let me go take care of my ravening customers and I'll get back to you. Want anything?"

"A beer when you get through with the other guys. Make it a Heinekens."

Smith completed the sports section before Vince brought him his beer.

"Sorry, Smitty. Pretty thirsty pre-dinner bunch tonight. Where were we?"

"Personal. As in Tweeds."

"I don't know if this is any use to you," he said to Smith, "but I happen to know that John Tweeds has a penchant for sex with children."

"Boys or girls?"

"Little girls, I've been told. Nubile nymphets, nine to twelve," said Vince. "All I can tell you is that every Tuesday night he has his chauffeur drop him off at eight and pick him up at eleven from a certain rather exclusive house in a better section of town."

"How exclusive?"

"A specialty place for those who like them real young, like under sixteen. I don't know how or where they get the children. I do know the patrons put out big bucks."

"Why hasn't it been reported?"

"My guess is it's mob-related. They got a fix in as high as the D.A."

"Nobody has that kind of fix anymore. This isn't the twenties."

"All I know is that I talked to two or three people in Vice and Juvenile over a year ago, and that place is still in business. Of course, they were just casual conversations. I wasn't turning in a complaint, and they probably didn't have enough information to act on."

"Where is this house?"

"A fairly high address up on Trestle Glen Road."

"I wonder if he keeps to that same schedule. Every Tuesday night at eight?"

"At least for the last three years."

"Do you remember who told you in the first place?"

"Yeah. It's somebody I know real well, but I can't out of concern for that person let you know who it is. Let me ponder on it while I deal with my thirsty patrons."

Smith nursed his Heinekens for the next twenty minutes as Vince made his rounds, refilling drinks, listening to anecdotes, telling a few of his own.

"Sorry, Smitty," he said on his return with a fresh beer for Smith, "it's part of my job to keep everyone happy. So where were we? Oh, yeah. You gotta promise me on a stack of fifty thousand fuckin' bibles you don't say nothin' to nobody."

"I got this friend who works there. She's just a receptionist, but the pay is good. In fact, the pay is spectacular, but she doesn't wanna know about what goes on, because the little she does know scares her and even her bosses as a matter of fact scare her."

"Why doesn't she quit?"

"Because she has such a hard time holding down jobs. She used to be a model, but she didn't get much work, and she doesn't have the brains to be a cocktail waitress, which is what she was doing when I met her."

"Why did they choose her?"

"Probably because she's a little on the naïve side. She's a fine person and I love her dearly, but she just isn't too swift in the social intelligence department. That's why she's ideal for them, because she wouldn't think to ask questions about anything."

"Could you do me an enormous favor, Vince?"

"You can ask, but I can't promise I'll come through."

"Find out from her if Tweeds still has the same schedule. That's all. Tell her that the information will be used in a worthy cause, and that she will not be involved in any way at all. My interest right now is solely in Tweeds, not in the establishment your friend works for. I also need to know soon. Like by Friday at the latest."

"I'll see what I can do," said Vince. "Where can I reach you?"

Smith gave him his number. "If I'm not there, leave a message. The answer might save somebody's life."

## Chapter 42

The twilight was deepening as Smith's panel truck topped the rise, coming up Spruce Street. When he turned onto Mulberry Road, he could already see that the lights were on in the upper floor of Tweeds' residence. As he turned down Acacia Terrace, he could see lights on every level.

He parked his truck at the usual place, just around the bend from the back wall. He carefully pressed the door shut without slamming it, and went around to the rear of the truck and unlocked the back end. He drew out an aluminum ladder, hoisted it onto his shoulders and made his way quietly uphill through the underbrush, low-lying branches whipping his head and upper torso. He cursed under his breath and forced the ladder through the snags. At last he was to the wall. He edged forward with care. The moon was full, illuminating the clearing, the wall, and the house beyond with a soft, ethereal glow. He placed the ladder against the wall, slowly sliding the extension upwards until the total length was about fifteen feet, keeping the foot of the ladder as close to the wall as possible, to avoid tripping the alarm wire with the top of the ladder. He tested the solidity of the ladder until it was right. So far he had heard no sound from the dogs. He took a deep breath, then softly stole up the ladder, pausing at each rung to listen for sounds. Finally his face reached the top of the wall, and he inched upward, until a sliver of light from the top of the window in the house beyond sliced across his eyes, blinding him temporarily. He paused a moment, then rose another few inches to find himself staring at an enormous bare ass. The person attached to this fulsome fanny was a woman, standing with her back to the window, in the process of raising her skirt over her head. There was little to attract him in the elephantine thighs and pendulous breasts that came into view as the woman turned round, throwing her head back, tossing a mane of thick black hair cascading down over her shoulders and back. Smith had never met Mary Jane in person, but from the rough description Sheila had given him to work with, he had no doubt it was she. His first question had been answered.

His second question was answered a moment later in a sudden explosion of frenzied and vicious barking, as if Cerberus and all the dogs of hell were at the gates. He slid down the ladder like an acrobat, and as soon as he hit the ground he inched the ladder into a vertical position and let the extension fall down into the bottom section. He lowered the ladder to the ground, grabbing it in the middle, and sprinted away into the underbrush, picking a perilous path in the moonlight. He was out of breath when he got to his truck. He slid the ladder inside, stepped in after, and pulled the doors shut. Then he sat against the inside wall of the truck, breathing hard, listening to the dogs' dying din. He waited until it was quiet once more before he climbed into the front seat and started the engine.

It wasn't until later that night when Smith was lying in bed talking to Sheila, that he had a breakthrough on the dog barking problem. Sheila had been talking about how a man had whistled at her as she was walking down the street.

"It's been a long time since anyone's given me a wolf whistle," she said.

"Given you a what?" said Smith, a wild idea suddenly fulminating in his brain.

"A wolf whistle. Surely you know what a wolf whistle is."

"A dog whistle. Of course, a dog whistle. But a dog whistle doesn't make a dog bark."

"Are we back on the barking dogs again? It's really unsettling when you go off on a tangent like that in the middle of a conversation."

"Sorry. Wolf whistle reminded me of dog whistle. A sound dogs can hear but humans can't. Excuse me a second." He turned on the light and picked up the telephone book from the night stand. He thumbed through, searching for a name.

"Here it is," he said. He picked up the phone and entered the number. He listened to the phone ringing, hoping his man would be there.

"Hello," said a bleary voice. "Why is whoever you are calling at such a time?"

"Dr. Rasmussen? This is Smith."

"Do you have to call so goddam late? Jesus, it's after midnight. Well, what is it?"

"Do you know anything about a dog's sense of hearing? Like the range?"

"Yeah, some. It's a lot more acute than a human's."

"Like what, in round figures?"

"A human being's hearing goes from one to about fifteen thousand vibrations per second. Most of our conversations involve sounds down around the two to four thousand range, so three thousand is a rough average. A dog, on the other hand, has a much higher upper end to its hearing. A dog can hear beyond fifteen thousand, maybe up to as much as a hundred thousand vibrations per second."

"A dog whistle operates in that range, then?"

"It's generally just above the upper limit of human hearing."

"Is a dog whistle liable to make dogs bark?"

"Not intrinsically. No more than any other sound. It's just that a dog can hear it and we can't."

"I was afraid of that. Just what does make dogs bark? I notice that police and ambulance sirens do a bang-up job of it."

"That's because a dog's hearing is so much more acute."

"How come they bark at a siren?"

"Because the sound is loud, and because of a dog's sensitivity, it can become painful. When they bark and howl, it relieves the pressure built up in the inner ear."

"I see," said Smith. "So if I could produce a loud sound at about twenty five thousand vibrations per second, would it make dogs bark?"

"I couldn't guarantee it," said Dr. Rasmussen, "but I wouldn't be a bit surprised. Do you have neighbors with dogs you want to torture?"

"Nothing like that, Dr. Rasmussen. Thanks a bundle. I owe you one."

"Just make it earlier next time."

Smith hung the phone up and turned off the light.

"What was all that about?" asked Sheila. "Why do you want the dogs to bark? I thought you wanted to keep them quiet?"

"Well, if I can't stop them from barking, maybe I can encourage them to bark. Around the clock. Maybe I can discredit them."

"Like the boy who cried 'wolf' too often?"

"More like the wolf who cried 'boy' too often."

The next morning Smith phoned an acquaintance of his who ran an electronics specialty shop in the Marina. Dan sold parts to hobbyists, and built customized equipment to specification. He had put together some items for Smith in the past. Although it was just a little after nine, Smith was lucky and Dan was in the shop.

"What's up, buddy? A little early for a social call," Dan said when Smith identified himself.

"I need your help," said Smith.

"Always glad to oblige a friend. What kind of help are you after?"

"Something special. I need a device to generate high-frequency sound waves, in the 25,000 vibrations per second range. I was thinking of a unit consisting maybe of a battery-powered AC generator coupled, say, to an audio frequency generator, which would then be hooked up with an amplifier and a tweeter, although I don't know if they make speakers that operate in that range."

"Yeah, they do. High-frequency sound is used in all kinds of operations nowadays, from mixing paints to cetacean research. As far as the rest of what you outlined goes, it sounds fairly easy. I'm pretty sure I've got all the parts on hand, and if I don't, I can obtain them at a moment's notice. What the heck is all this for?"

"Making dogs bark."

"You got neighbors you want to get even with?"

"Something like that. Can you do it today?"

"Gee, I don't know. I've got several jobs already in progress. Can you give me a little more leeway than that?"

"I wish I could. I don't like last-minute things, but I can't see my way out of it."

"So this is more than a prank."

"It might be a matter of life and death. I'll tell you all about it when it's over and done with."

"I'd like that. You've got me intrigued. Today, huh? By what time?"

"How about six P.M.?"

"I guess I can do it. You gonna pick it up?"

"In person," said Smith.

"Okay," said Dan. "See you then."

At noon, Smith gave Billy Joe a call. He answered on the third ring, and sounded as if he were in pretty good shape, which seemed to imply he was laying off the sauce.

"I'll pick you up at seven fifteen this evening," Smith told him. "I can show you the layout, and maybe I'll have a secret weapon to test out."

Over poached eggs on toast from room service, Smith perused the yellow pages. The section under Scaffolding listed several promising ads, and the second place he called seemed to have what he wanted.

"Sounds like you need a stationary tower," said the man on the other end of the line. "A Sturgis model 111A should do the job. Adjustable from ten to fifteen feet, base is six by six."

"How am I going to fit that in my panel truck?"

"It's completely disassembleable. Comes in a box eight feet by two feet by nine inches."

"You have any on hand?"

"Let me check." There was a brief delay. "Yes sir, we have three in stock."

"Put one on hold for me. When can I stop by?"

"How about now?"

"Great. You're out on South Van Ness near Mission? Give me about twenty minutes."

## Chapter 43

On Wednesday afternoon, Frank Sabella and Vic Jeeter drove over and borrowed Reggie for a couple hours.

"We think we've found the place where your boy was kept during the ransom proceedings," Frank explained to Roger. "We'd like to verify it."

"You tell them the truth," Roger admonished Reggie. "None of your goddamned lying this time."

"He hasn't lied to us, Mr. Lambeaux," said Frank. "Reggie has been very helpful so far." He kept to himself the fact that the boy had misinformed them about Smith's telephone number. There was no point in alienating the kid any more than his father already had.

The drive to the house in Buena Vista Heights was conducted in near silence. Frank tried to draw Reggie out with some friendly conversation, but the boy was subdued and morose. Frank figured he was worried about his friend Smith getting caught. When they reached the house on top of the hill, Reggie answered all their questions with apparent honesty, but little new was learned. The boy identified the house with no hesitation, and showed them the room where he had been kept, but, other than that, the day was a bust. The drive back was another silent one. Frank figured he couldn't blame the kid for being depressed. Coming home from the academy to live with his father was probably like escaping from a prison into a holding cell. The few weeks he had spent with Smith had very likely been the most exciting time of his young life. Frank felt a little guilty returning him to his father.

Afterwards, as they were getting into the car, Vic turned and looked at Frank.

"By the way, how's the phone tap going?"

"Nothing yet. It doesn't appear as if the boy ever uses the phone. Maybe his father has made it off limits in order to punish him."

"I'd think he'd try to call Smith. The poor kid sure looks down in the dumps. Maybe you should let his father in on it."

"Only as a last resort. Lambeaux is such an asshole, he'd inadvertently tip the kid off. Or maybe make a wise remark about it, out of jealousy. He must be aware the kid prefers Smith to him."

"I guess either he or the maid is around all the time," said Vic. "Maybe if we got the two of them out of the house at the same time, the kid might feel free to call Smith. I sure hate not capitalizing on the fact we know his number and he doesn't know we know it. We'll never catch the guy at the rate we're going."

"You're right," said Frank, as he started up the car. "I'll put some thought into it."

After an expensive but miniscule dinner at the Hayes Street Grill with Sheila, Smith dropped her off at the hotel and drove over to the Marina to pick up the gadget he had ordered that morning. He double parked in front, one of the nice conveniences afforded by commercial license plates. Dan was ready for him.

"Here you are," he said, carrying a medium-sized assembly up to the counter. He showed Smith how it operated.

"Move this lever back and forth to set the frequency. The lower end starts at about twenty thousand vibrations per second, the upper goes to about seventy thousand, so that



ought to do the trick for you. If you move the lever up and down in a continuous fashion, you should get a siren effect. Except that you won't hear it, of course."

"Terrific. Nice job with the packaging."

"Well, there is one drawback. You have to turn on every unit individually. If I had had more time, I'd have set it up with a single control unit to take care of them all."

"That's no problem. The only thing that matters is that it works. What does all this come to?"

"Well, the parts were only a few hundred. Make it five hundred for the parts and two fifty for labor. Seven fifty altogether."

"Let's make it a thousand even," said Smith. "I appreciate your dropping all your other work just to accomodate me."

At seven ten, Smith arrived at Billy Joe's. The day had gone well, and everything was on schedule.

Billy Joe saw Smith's truck pull up and was already out the front door before Smith could give him a honk. Smith unlocked the passenger door and Billy Joe climbed in. He wore a sweat shirt under an old leather jacket and a faded pair of jeans. His feet were shod in mocassins, and he sported a beat-up Oakland A's baseball cap.

"Ready, Teddy?" he asked, with a smile on his face as Smith took off from the curb.

"You look pretty chipper," said Smith. "You just win five bucks on the lottery or something?"

"I always feel good when there's some action in the offing."

"There won't be much action tonight. Mostly reconnaissance. It'll be a fairly quiet evening, except, hopefully, for a lot of barking."

"Who's gonna do all this barking?"

"It won't be us," said Smith. "This isn't our night to howl."

They arrived at the top of Spruce Street just as the sun went down, the horizon ablaze in gaudy shades of yellow, pink, and orange. The sky was still light, but the darkening city below was already spangled with the twinkle of street lights. Night was falling as they crossed onto Grizzly Peak Boulevard, and when they turned off onto Mulberry Road and dropped down into the dark forest below, the only lights visible were the twin beacons of the headlamps, the misty sparkle of the first few stars above the treetops, and a few lonely lighted windows here and there, peeking out from between trunks and branches.

Smith made a left onto Acacia Terrace and drove slowly down the hill past Tweeds' rambling mansion, and pulled into his usual parking place just off the road, barely out of sight of the house. He turned off the engine and extinguished the headlights. Except for the dull, dying roar of the city just over the rise, the silence around them was profound, broken only by the occasional whine of an automobile in the distance.

Smith had gone over his agenda for the evening with Billy Joe during the ride over. He had explained, to his partner's infinite amusement, the purpose of the device he had brought with him.

"You think that son of a bitch will work?" asked Billy Joe.

"If it doesn't, I'll have to dream up something even more preposterous," said Smith.

They circumnavigated the property stealthily. The dogs barked a few times, but only when they got close to the wall. Smith showed Billy Joe the layout of the place. The moon was nearly full, so there was enough light to make out the shapes of things. Most of the rooms on all the levels of Tweeds' house were lit, except for the bottom level, where only one of the guest apartments had any lights on. When they got back to the truck, Smith sat in the passenger seat and asked Billy Joe to drive. He got the box out on his lap and flipped all the switches to the on position. He set the frequency generator to 25,000 vps. Billy Joe started up the engine and turned on the headlights.

"Just drive around to the upper end of the property and park about a block away," he told Billy Joe. "If this damned thing works, they may bring the dogs outside to investigate, and they might follow my scent to the truck. This is my usual parking spot, and I've already left a trail between here and the house. I want these people to think the dogs are barking at nothing.

They drove back up Acacia onto Mulberry and parked the truck down the road from the front entrance so they could see if anyone emerged. Smith increased the power on the amplifier. The dogs immediately started barking. He moved the lever on the frequency generator from 25,000 vps to 50,000, and back again, trying to achieve a siren effect. He could only imagine what it sounded like to the dogs, but it obviously worked. They were going crazy now, howling and screaming. He reduced the volume on the amplifier and the barking gradually died down. He turned the generator off and, except for some occasional yips and yelps, the dogs were silent once more.

Then he repeated the process twice, with about ten minutes in between. He increased the length of each session until the dogs were going berserk again, and then he turned off the mechanism.

Finally the front lights of the house came on, and the dark figure of a man appeared, holding the straining dogs at leash. Another figure joined him, and the two of them slowly made their way around the perimeter of the property. The dogs whined and yelped, but they were otherwise silent. At long last the small party reappeared, moving up Acacia Terrace to Mulberry Road and back to the side entrance on the front of the house from which they had emerged. Quiet reigned once more.

"Let me try," said Billy Joe.

"Hang on," said Smith, unwilling to relinquish the controls. He allowed a full fifteen minutes to pass, while Billy Joe smoked a cigarette and he sipped some still-hot coffee from the thermos. Then he began the process all over again. This time it took only a half hour for the search party to reappear and go through the motions of re-checking the property boundaries. After the men and dogs had returned to the house, Smith handed the box to Billy Joe.

"Your turn," said Smith. "Then I'll drive you back. There's no point in both of us staying up all night."

Billy Joe was like a kid with a new toy. He ran the frequency up to 70,000, then down to 20,000, then back to 70,000. The dogs went bananas. This time nobody appeared. After another half an hour of intermittent barking, Smith called it quits. He stowed the box behind the seat, switched places with Billy Joe, and started up the engine. After three hours listening to barking dogs, it was pleasant to hear only the low rumble of the truck's engine and the swish of tires on the road.

"Tomorrow night you can come back and repeat the whole performance," he said to Billy Joe. "Then I'll do it again on Friday, and so on. My hope is that by next Tuesday morning, the dogs will have been thoroughly discredited. Tuesday night will be the big night."

"What if your plan doesn't work, and they keep mindlessly coming out to check?"

"I'm hoping to create a diversion on Tuesday morning that'll keep them busy most of the day," said Smith. "That way when Tuesday night rolls around they'll be too tuckered out to search for nonexistent trespassers. My hope is that they'll be so low on sleep they'll ignore the dogs altogether."

"What kind of diversion?"

"It hasn't come to me yet. I'm still waiting for some info on Tweeds that might help. In the meantime, if you get any bright ideas, let me know."

He dropped his comrade off around midnight. "Stay on the wagon," he told him. "We need you in top shape tomorrow night."

"I only hit the sauce when there's nothing happening," said Billy Joe. "This is the most fun I've had in years. Have you figured out yet how we're gonna get over that damn wall?"

"I'll fill you in on all the details when I drop La Machine off with you in the morning."

"What are you gonna do now?"

"I'm going to drive back and keep those assholes up all night," said Smith. "We've got to have them primed for the next week."

## Chapter 44

On Sunday morning, Tweeds sat in his living room, yawning loudly, the breakfast on the tray in front of him untouched except for the coffee, of which he had already had four cups. His manservant, looking somewhat unkempt compared to his usually immaculate appearance, knocked on the door and entered a bit unsteadily.

"Telephone for you, sir."

"I'll take it in here," said Tweeds.

"Very good, sir," said his manservant, picking the phone up from the side table and carrying it over to the coffee table, where he set it down in front of his boss, who dismissed him with a wave of his hand, picking up the receiver and sitting back in the sofa.

"Tweeds here," he said grumpily.

"Mr. Tweeds, this is Luther Dibbs. Hope I didn't call at a bad time."

"It's a dreadful time, Mr. Dibbs, but it isn't your fault. The dogs kept us all awake most of the night again. What do you have to report?"

"Well, Mr. Tweeds, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. You know my cousin Jake. Jake Barnes that is. Well, Thelma ditched him last night. Seems she saw him out with another woman this last weekend and she's madder than a hornet. He tried to sweet talk her out of it, but she wasn't having any of it."

"Perhaps she will cool down in a few days. Women are irrational creatures."

"I'm afraid it isn't going to make much difference, Mr. Tweeds. I said pretty much the same thing to Jake, but he wouldn't listen. He said he was sick to death of the dumb stupid bitch, and he didn't care how much money he was losing out on, he was so tired of her sharp tongue and her skinny legs, he didn't want to see her any more. He said he had a job offer from a cousin in L.A. who's opening up a pizza joint down there, and he said he was splitting this weekend. I tried to talk him out of it. I even offered him double what I was giving him, which would have left me with nothing, and he still wouldn't change his mind. I know Jake when he gets his mind made up. He's stubbornner than a mule. I can't say as I blame him. I know what that bitch can be like when she gets on your case."

"Perhaps she would be willing to see *you* again, Mr. Dibbs, now that your competition is out of the running."

"I even tried that, Mr. Tweeds. In fact, I just got through talking to her. She was pleasant enough to me when I asked her how things were, but when I sort of hinted at taking up where we left off, she cut me dead, said she had had enough of both me and my cousin, said we were both psychos, and she was going to have a vacation from men for a while. I did learn an interesting thing, though, that I thought I should pass on to you."

"What's that?"

"She said life around the Lambeaux residence has been pretty unpleasant lately. She said her boss has been in a terrible mood for the last couple weeks. I would guess he's mad as hell with Smith for all the games he's been playing with him on those money exchanges. He hasn't been going to his office much, and he lies around the house a lot, giving Thelma and his kid a bad time."

"I see," said Tweeds, an idea beginning to percolate in the recesses of his mind. "Well, Mr. Dibbs. You seem to have done your best, and there's no use crying over spilt

milk. Why don't we take a break from this business for a while. Call me in a couple weeks or so. I might have something else lined up by then."

He hung up the phone and sat there for a moment. Mr. Lambeaux and he appeared to have a common enemy. Perhaps something might be made out of that. In the meantime, he had to follow through on his attempt to get to Smith through this Mary Jane Renselar, although so far Smith had refused to answer his messages.

On that same Sunday morning, on the other side of the bay, and after only a few drugged hours of sleep, Smith was awakened by Sheila handing him the phone.

"I told him you were sleeping, but he insisted it was important."

"Smith here," he said, holding the receiver to his ear with his left hand while rubbing his face with his right, having some trouble giving up the dream he had been in.

"This is Vince," said a voice. "Sorry to wake you, but you mentioned it was important."

"Vince, Vince, oh yeah Vince. Thanks for calling back. What did you find out?"

"My friend says nothing's changed. Tweeds still shows up every Tuesday night at eight, like clockwork. Drives up in his big Cadillac, chauffeur and all, like a visiting diplomat. His man stops back about midnight to pick him up."

"Thanks a million, Vince, for being so prompt. I owe you one."

"No problem, Smitty. Glad to be of help. Drop by again when you have the time."

"Okay, Vince. Talk to you later."

"What was that all about?" asked Sheila, after he handed the phone back to her.

Smith told her about Tweeds and his sexual proclivities.

"God, how awful," she said.

"Exactly what I thought when I heard about it," said Smith. "It means, however, that Tweeds will be out of our hair on Tuesday night, while we ferret Mary Jane out from under their noses. Now I know exactly what kind of diversion to create."

"You're such a mysterious man. Aren't you even going to give me a hint?"

"Well, the gist of it is this. Tweeds always travels to the place I told you about in his chauffeured limosine. It's part of his ritual."

"So?" she asked.

"I'm going to block his garage."

"What if his car isn't in the garage?"

"It's his pride and joy. It's been inside his garage every night this week."

"Why wouldn't he just take a cab?"

"Because cab drivers keep records of where they pick up and drop off passengers. They're called 'trip' sheets, and they're made available to the cops when they want to check up on someone. I figure Tweeds prefers to keep a low profile."

"So he'll just unblock his garage."

"That's what I expect him to do."

After a pleasant breakfast with Sheila in the hotel coffee lounge, Smith drove his rentacar over to the East Bay and stopped at a nursery in West Berkeley.

"I notice you have a special on steer manure," Smith told the salesman. "Do you deliver?"

"Sure," said the man behind the counter. "Just as long as your order is two hundred dollars or more."

"I need a whole bunch. I've got some pasturage out in the valley I'm thinking of making productional."

"If it's over a hundred sacks, we can offer you a ten percent discount."

"Great. I'll need about five hundred bags."

"You must have quite a spread." The man looked at him in astonishment. "I can't remember ever selling that much before."

"A couple thousand acres. The farm's been lying fallow for some time now, and the land is pretty depleted."

"I see," said the clerk, mastering his surprise, and remembering that his job was to sell merchandise to people who wanted to buy. "Anything else you might need? We've got a whole range of soil reconditioners and additives. What kind of crops were you thinking of planting?"

"I don't think I'll need anything else. It'll be mostly alfalfa for starters. With all the wet winters we've experienced the last few years, a lot of the topsoil has been run off, and I'd like to reverse the situation. It'll be some time before I think of going productional."

"And where would you like it delivered?"

"You can just drop it off at my town house. I've got a half-ton truck, so I can handle it from there. Do you know where Mulberry Road is?"

"Sure. We've got several customers up in that neck of the woods. What's the address?"

"50035. There's one other thing. I need to have it by early Tuesday morning. Say about nine."

"How about ten? Our delivery people don't show up until eight thirty, and it'll take 'em a while just to load up."

"I can live with ten. Oh, and I do have one other slight problem. I won't be in at the time, and I don't want the servants bothered. I've also got an older brother staying with me right now who thinks he owns the place. So if it's okay with your delivery people, I'd just as soon they don't bother ringing the bell or asking for anything to be signed. Is that possible?"

"No problem at all. I'll simply make a note of it on the work order. Why don't I write one up right now. Excuse me a second."

Smith looked around while the salesman filled out the form. The store was pretty busy, with chubby matrons in slacks looking at flower pots, young men in jeans and sweatshirts carrying lumber, and old men in windbreakers buying nails.

"Any special instructions?" asked the salesman.

"Yeah. Stack it all in the driveway right in front of the garage doors, and high enough so it doesn't project out into the road. The garage is just to the right of the front door, so your delivery man can't miss it."

"I'll make a point of that," said the man, writing down what Smith had told him, carefully and at some length. After a moment he looked up again.

"And what's your name?"

"Tweeds," said Smith slowly. "T-W-E-E-D-S. John Tweeds." He waited until the man had it written down. "What does all this come to, now?"

"Let's see," said the manager, entering some figures on the form and performing some sleight of hand with his calculator. "That comes to twenty five hundred minus ten percent, which makes twenty two fifty, plus tax. Altogether twenty three hundred and eighty five dollars. Since it's such a large sale, we'll throw in the delivery for free. Will that be cash or credit card?"

"Let's make it cash," said Smith, pulling out his wallet and counting off twenty four one hundred dollar bills."

"Nothing like crisp new hundred dollar bills, is there, Mr. Tweeds?" said the manager, ringing up the sale. He put the stack of bills underneath the tray, and counted out fifteen dollars change."

"Just printed them off fresh this morning," said Smith with a smile.

## Chapter 45

On Monday morning, bright and early, Billy Joe called to give Smith a progress report.

"They must've come out at least six times," said Billy Joe. "The dogs are still going crazy."

"Great," said Smith.

"What time you gonna stop by to pick up the gizmo?" asked Billy.

"About five thirty. What're you gonna do today?"

"Don't worry. I'm too tired to party. I'll probably sleep all day."

"Set your alarm for five thirty so I don't have to break in again."

After hanging up the phone, Smith turned over and went back to sleep again until two in the afternoon. He was in that luxurious state of half drowsing and half dreaming, half in one world and half in another. The room was bathed in the golden glow of indirect sunlight and the dim din of industry from the world outside. At the same time he was an actor on another stage, a captive character in a comic strip dream. He was talking with an ostrich-like creature about some incomprehensible subject, and slowly the comic creature transformed itself into Sheila, smiling down at him. He had a pleasant sense of the weight of her body sitting on the bed next to him, and he moved himself instinctively towards her. She tousled his hair.

"Rise and shine, sleepy head. You're not going into hibernation, are you? It isn't winter yet."

"I only hibernate in Hibernia and East Anglia," he proclaimed sleepily. "What happened to that ostrich I was talking to?"

"I think he just left. He was muttering something about being late to an appointment with a white rabbit."

He rubbed the sleepy sand out of his eyes and blinked his eyes into focus. He rubbed his face and yawned, and then reached out to take her hand lying on the coverlet. He put his other arm about her waist.

"So how'd it go last night, she asked."

"Great," he said, "Billy said they came out five or six times. The phone wake you?"

"I guess not. I got up about ten. When did he call?"

"Around eight, I think."

"How's the master plan going?" she asked, looking at herself in the mirror.

"Everything's gone without a hitch, so far. The dog-barking machine is working well. I think Billy and I've got them softened up by now."

"The poor mutts must be pretty hoarse after all that barking."

"We only keep them at it for about five minutes at a stretch, sometimes ten. It isn't non-stop, and we give them plenty of rest periods. Billy said they didn't seem to have lost much volume last night, and they've been going strong for two nights running. Besides that, they get all day to sleep."

"So the dogs aren't on duty during the day?"

"No. There's a small building next to the main house where they're kept. They bring them out about six, and bring them in about eight or nine, depending on when the staff gets up. Tweeds seems to run a late house, judging from my observations."

"I wonder how he's doing, with all that barking."



"I'm rather curious about that myself. I doubt if the poor bastard has been able to sleep at all. I hope not. I want him and his cohorts to be dog tired."

He pulled her down to him and gave her an affectionate but playful smack on the lips. She wriggled out of his grasp and sat up straight, out of his easy reach.

"Careful. You'll mess up my makeup. You hungry? I had a continental breakfast earlier, but I could have another cup of coffee and watch you eat. Want me to call room service?"

"Nah. I'd rather go out. Maybe some Mexican food. How about Sancho Panza's. Think you could take all that chicory in your coffee?"

"Sure," she said. "I'm a chicory chick."

"Cha-la, cha-la," he said. "Check-a-la Romy. In a banana-ka."

"Bollicka-wollicka," she said. "You'd better get up, Rip Van Winkel, before you sleep your life away."

He shaved and dressed while she pulled on a sweater and brushed her hair.

"The vet's through now, boss," said Big Mac, poking his head around the corner of the vestibule. "You want I should send him in to talk wit' ya?"

"Please," said Tweeds in a somber tone. He was sitting disconsolately in the middle of his large couch in the middle of his large living room. The coffee table in front of him was still littered with the remains of a very late breakfast. He felt exceedingly tired. When he had glanced at himself in the mirror earlier he had hardly recognized himself, with his eyes looking like empty caverns, and the usual circles below transformed into gullies and ravines. His hair, which was normally well-behaved, had now taken on a life of its own and was sticking up in back no matter how much water he plastered it with. He was pouring himself another cup of coffee as his guest was ushered into the room.

"I hope you'll forgive the mess," he said to the cheery-faced, energetic young man who stood in front of him, "and me for not rising. We've had two bad nights in a row this week because of the dogs. My manservant has caught a bad cold, what with having to get up every twenty minutes to help the chauffeur find out what was disturbing the brutes. Please sit down, sit down." He waved the young man to the chair next to the couch.

"Your man's been telling me about it," said his guest, "but if there are any problems, it certainly isn't with your dogs. They seem to be in fine shape. They had their annual blood and urine tests just a couple weeks ago. I didn't see a thing wrong with them then, and just a few minutes ago I gave them a thorough going over - as much as I could without x-rays or sophisticated equipment, and I still couldn't see anything amiss. They seemed healthy and happy."

"Well, something has to be wrong."

"Do you think prowlers might be lurking about?"

"Perhaps, but it seems unlikely. These dogs have a reputation for being particularly sensitive with respect to smell, and we've checked, as I said, time and again, and the brutes just don't seem to pick up the scent of any trespassers. The first night they led my men down beyond the bend in the road, but last night they didn't seem to pick up any clues at all and just wandered around aimlessly."

"Could a family of coons have moved into the area? That could presumably set them off."

"It doesn't seem to explain the repeated sessions of barking. We just get to sleep and they start up again. I would think that if racoons were stirring about it would be a more continuous phenomenon."

"I really don't know what to say."

"And it doesn't explain to me why they carry on so. I've never heard them bark like that. Practically howling and screaming, as if they were deranged."

"Hmm," said the vet, removing his eyeglasses and polishing them on his shirt. "I've heard reports about mountain lions in the area from time to time. If they picked up the scent of one it might make them a little more animated. They might not hear him but only smell him. That might explain why the barking wasn't continuous."

"Maybe. It makes more sense than anything else my staff and I have been able to dream up, but if this keeps on, I'm going to have to get rid of them. I need my sleep."

"By the way, I neglected to ask about your neighbor's dogs? Have they been barking as well?"

"It seems my neighbors don't have any dogs. At least I haven't heard them, although I've heard a lot from my neighbors in the way of complaint."

"Well," said his guest, "I really can't think of anything else to suggest. Let me know if you want me to bring them in overnight for examinations and tests."

"How much notice would you require?"

"None. We've got about twenty empty kennels right now. Would you like me to take them tonight?"

"Please. Even if you didn't locate any organic problems, we could all of us here get a decent night's sleep for a change."

"Consider it done," said the vet, rising from his chair. "Well," he said, consulting his watch, "I've got a couple more calls to make. Why don't I drop back around four o'clock when I'm through with my rounds and pick them up."

"Wonderful," said Tweeds, forgetting his fatigue in his gratitude, and rising from the couch to see the young man out. "Just ring the bell at the side entrance, and my man can help you put them in the truck."

## Chapter 46

Tuesday morning was overcast and damp. The dawn had been grim and gray, and the birds twittered as if it were going to rain. The only precipitation, however, was a heavy dew from the night before, augmented by a thin layer of moisture deposited by a retreating, low-lying fog. By the time Tweeds arose, the day had brightened somewhat, but the high clouds still relentlessly blocked the sun.

Nothing, however, could dampen the good spirits resulting from his first full night's sleep in several days. Tweeds' craggy countenance, which seldom betrayed any mood other than a dispassionate disposition at best, came as close to a benevolent cheeriness as his staff had ever witnessed. He almost smiled at his manservant as his breakfast was brought to him. It wasn't until he neared the end of his repast that the first portent of potential peril appeared. It took the form of a query from Big Mac.

"What are those guys dumpin' in the driveway, boss?" the big man asked, his large head poked in through the half-opened door.

"What guys are you referring to?" asked Tweeds mildly, unwilling to abandon his ebullience so soon to the vagaries and whims of an unpredictable external reality.

"The guys who are piling all those sacks in the driveway," explained Big Mac. "They been at it for over an hour now."

"I have no idea what you are prattling about," replied Tweeds ponderously, his good mood rapidly deserting him, "but I will certainly find out." He shoved the tray away from him, and rose, gathering his robe about him to cover his protruding tummy, and, retying the sash tightly around his middle, jammed his bare feet into his slippers and shuffled irritably after Big Mac. If there was anything he hated, it was being disturbed at breakfast.

Outside, a big, two-ton truck was parked. The driveway was stacked six feet deep with sacks all the way from the garage doors to where the driveway met the road. Two men were still unloading bags from the truck and adding them to the pile, while a third stood overseeing their work. He was dressed, like the other two, in jeans, a plaid shirt, and boots. He had a clipboard in his hand, and was busy scribbling something on it when Tweeds approached him.

"Morning," said the man busily, pushing the visored cap back on his head, and looking up from his clipboard.

"What's all this?" Tweeds rasped in an ominous voice, gesturing with one large ham of a hand at the long pile of bags which completely filled his driveway.

"It's an order that we're delivering," said the man calmly, looking back at the progress his two men were making.

"Hey Bart!" he called to one of them. "How many bags are left in the truck?"

"That's it," responded the one called Bart. "We're done." The other man completed what he was doing and stood where he was, wiping his brow with his sleeve, awaiting the head man's instructions.

"Let's move it," said the man with the clipboard. The man called Bart jumped up onto the truck bed and began rolling the galvanized rear door down. The other man walked over to the truck and started to get in on the driver's side.

"Just a goddamn minute!" raged Tweeds. "I want a full accounting of this, right now!"

"Yeah?" said the man with the clipboard. "Well, I got two tons of steer manure here that's bought and paid for. I have a work order here says to make the delivery to this address - see right there? Corner of Mulberry and Acacia. That's here. This is the place. The guy said he'd be out of town and that there'd be nobody here except the servants. So who are you?"

"My name is Tweeds and I own this place!" screamed Tweeds. "That's who I am! Who the hell are you?"

"I'm the delivery man for Horton's Nurseries," said the man patiently, as if he were speaking to a slightly demented child. "See the sign on the side of the truck? Look at my instructions. Says here the owner is out of town and not to bother anybody. See the address? 50035. That's the address on the door." He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "Tell you what, why don't you talk to the boss about this. You straighten it out with him."

With that, he hopped up into the cab and stepped down a moment later with a cell phone in his hand. He keyed in a number, waited a few seconds, and was soon talking rapidly to someone on the other end. Then he handed the phone to Tweeds.

"Hello?" said Tweeds in a loud voice. "Would you please tell your man to clear my driveway?"

"Would you mind telling me your name, sir?" said the voice on the other end.

By this time, Tweeds had had quite enough. "Tweeds!" he yelled, "TWEEDS!"

"Let me look at the work order. Just a second," said the voice.

Tweeds stood and fumed, his ear glued to the phone, his eyes glaring at the giant pile of manure in his driveway. True to the man's promise, he was soon back on the line.

"Mr. Tweeds? The salesman made some notations on the work order. Your brother seems to have anticipated some problems from you and told us for that very reason not to ring the bell."

"I HAVE NO BROTHER!" Tweeds screamed into the mouthpiece, and with that he threw the receiver to the ground and began stomping on it. The truck driver watched him with incredulity for a frozen moment, then moved quickly forward and pushed Tweeds to the ground, retrieving the remains of the cell phone. Mac stared in disbelief, then strode forward himself and grabbed the driver by the front of his shirt.

"You shouldn't oughta done that," he ground out between gritted teeth, and pulled his free mitt back to deliver a lethal blow to the driver, but he had not reckoned with the driver's partner, who had grabbed a large wrench from the back of the truck at the onset of hostilities, and by this time had circled around Big Mac's backside, and, seeing his workmate in imminent danger, delivered a blow with the wrench before Big Mac could finish his windup. He caught the big man on the back of the head, and just as Tweeds was fumbling his way to his feet, Mac landed on top of him.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" yelled the driver, running around to the other side of the truck. His partner needed no encouragement and jumped up quickly into the passenger's seat. The truck started with a roar, and the driver, after jamming it into gear with a thunk that nearly dropped the transmission, burned rubber for the first fifty yards up Mulberry Road. Tweeds regained his feet as the truck vanished around the bend, so angry he was trembling, and, when he turned back to the house, he did so with such abruptness that his slipper came off. He cursed vehemently, picked up the errant slipper and threw it at the front door. He followed after it, opening the door and kicking the

slipper inside, completely ignoring Big Mac, who sat in pain next to the mass of manure, slowly massaging the back of his head.

On the other side of the bay, the Lambeaux household had just finished a late breakfast. Reggie's aunt Betty was winding up her visit. Thelma was clearing off the dining room table, Roger was in his study, and Betty was packing her suitcases. Reggie was in his room lying on his bed looking at his dinosaur book when his aunt came in from the guest bedroom.

"Hi, Reg," she said to him, sitting on the bed next to him. "Sorry we didn't have more time to visit, just you and I. Before I go, I have something for you, but I think you'd better not say anything to your father about it."

Reggie looked at her enquiringly. "Sure," he said. "What is it?"

"Your mother asked me to give you a letter she wrote to you. I didn't dare say anything to your father. You know how he is on the subject of your mother. I was afraid if he knew about it, he wouldn't let you have it, and it would just break your mother's heart if I failed to give it to you." She handed him a large envelope.

He sat up and took it from her. It wasn't sealed. There was just one page inside, and it was hand-written:

Dear Reggie -

I hope your father will let you read this. I guess he is still very angry with me, but I so much want you to know how very much I love you and miss you, and I look forward to the day when we can get together again. I carry your picture with me always, although I know you must be so much more grown up by now. Do you know it is almost two years since I saw you last?

I don't know what your father has told you about me. I haven't been very well the last couple years, but I am a lot better now, and I hope to be able to see you again soon. I think of you every day, and wonder what you are doing.

No matter what happens, I want you to know that I never wanted to leave you. Whatever happened was between your father and me.

I would so much like to know what is going on in your life. I wish I could talk to you on the telephone and hear your voice again, but I know your father would not approve. Please write to me when you can. I would love to hear from you. My address is below. Remember again that you are always with me in my thoughts and prayers. All my love,

Your mother, Cora

c/o

Albert J. Langhorn Psychiatric Clinic  
1045 Redwood Street  
Shasta, California 92104

## Chapter 47

At four in the afternoon, Smith pulled his panel truck up to the curb in front of the house behind which Billy Joe's cottage stood. Billy Joe appeared from around the side of the house. He was dressed in camouflage fatigues, with a billed cap pulled down over his eyes.

"You'll really blend into the landscape in that outfit," said Smith as Billy Joe climbed in the back, hunkering down to introduce himself to Sheila.

"Hi, Billy," said Sheila, turning to smile at Billy and grasp his hand. "I haven't seen you since Tiffany's wedding."

"Grab a pillow," said Smith. "Sorry it's so crowded. What with a partially-assembled fourteen-foot Sturgis model 111A tower with a six-by-six base and extendable ladder, four six-foot planks, rope netting and rope ladder, there isn't much room left." He pulled the truck out into the street.

"So that's how we're going to go over the wall," said Billy Joe.

"That's it," said Smith.

"You tested it out?" asked Billy Joe.

"Sheila and I put it together and took it apart a few times."

"Where?"

"Dolores Park."

"Isn't that where all the dope dealers hang out?" asked Billy.

"Yes," said Sheila. "They stood around and made suggestions."

"How'd the dog duty go last night?" Billy Joe asked Smith.

"The dogs didn't show," said Smith. "I stuck around for a few hours. They weren't there."

"Maybe the machine's not working."

"I doubt it. I climbed up the giant tree in back. Great view of the property. No sign of the dogs."

"So they got tired of all that barking."

"Looks like. So it ought to be clear sailing."

"Goddam!" said Billy Joe.

"No," said Smith. "Doggone!"

Smith parked the truck on Mulberry, just down the road from Tweed's place, where they could see the front entrance. Two giant piles of sacks sat in front of the house. The smaller one was stacked neatly in front of the garage. The larger one was off to the side, practically encroaching upon the road, and it was piled helter skelter. Four members of Tweed's staff were busily hauling bags from the smaller to the larger. Tweeds himself was seated in a deck chair, supervising the operation.

"What the hell is in the sacks?" asked Billy Joe. "Cement?"

"Steer manure," Smith told him.

"What's the point?" asked Billy Joe, a disbelieving smile on his broad face.

"Every Tuesday night about seven thirty, Tweeds has his chauffeur drive him in style to a certain private house in Oakland," Smith told him. He went on to explain the nature of Tweed's business there. Billy's disgust was similar to Sheila's.

"Anyway," Smith continued. "I figured he'd have his people try to move the stack so he could get his car out of the garage. Looks like I was right."

"Why do all of that," asked Sheila, "when Tweeds is going to be gone, anyway?"

"To make his staff tired and help them sleep better," said Smith, "so if they hear a few noises, they'll be too conked out to bother investigating."

"I got an idea that'd distract 'em even more," said Billy Joe. "Just before we begin the rescue operation, let's light that goddam pile of shit. It'd really guarantee their attention would be off us entirely."

"Wouldn't that be dangerous?" said Smith. "These woods are pretty dry."

"Well, that pile is smack dab in the middle of a large open space, and it probably wouldn't burn that well. Probably mainly smolder. Just how fresh is it, Smitty?"

"It seemed pretty ripe to me when I was at the nursery. You could really smell it."

"Then it isn't gonna burn very well," said Billy Joe, "which is good. All we have to do is douse it with a couple gallons of kerosine to get it going. After that burns off, it would be just like a giant smoke bomb. It wouldn't do any damage, but it would make a hell of a stink. It would certainly attract their attention."

"I don't know," said Smith.

"If we could count on the neighbors calling the fire department," began Billy Joe.

"We could call them ourselves," said Smith.

"Got a cell phone?"

Smith patted his pocket.

"That's it, then. All we need is the kerosine. We got a good three hours to kill yet. What do you say?"

"All right," said Smith. "It's against my better judgement, but it doesn't sound all that dangerous, and if we called the fire department right away . . ."

"Right," said Billy Joe. "Why don't we go pick up some kerosine right now. There isn't anything particularly important to do here."

"Sounds good," said Smith.

At ten of seven, they came up the top of the hill and turned down Mulberry Drive. They could see that the manure had all been moved and the driveway was entirely clear. Smith turned on Acacia Terrace and drove slowly down the hill, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. He parked the truck around the bend of the road from the back wall of Tweeds' property. He doused the lights and climbed out, followed by the other two. There was barely enough light for their first operation. Smith opened the back of the truck and, with the help of his companions, hauled out the pieces of the platform. They clambered up the slight path to the base of the wall, where Sheila started setting up the platform, while the two men turned back down the trail to get the remaining parts of the tower assembly.

By fourteen minutes after seven, the three of them stood back to admire their work.

"Not bad," said Smith in a loud whisper. "Let's go get the planks, then you guys can bring up the netting while I hike up the hill and check on Tweeds."

At twenty after seven, Smith sat back on his heels, catching his breath. From his vantage point he could see the front of Tweeds' house. Everything seemed to be right on schedule. Seven twenty five rolled around, and, true to form, the front door opened and the great man himself strolled out, nattily dressed, preceded by his chauffeur. They skirted the huge pile of manure and made their way to the garage, the chauffeur raising the garage door while Tweeds waited. After about a minute, the black Cadillac



majestically backed out and stopped. Then the chauffeur emerged and held the back door open as Tweeds regally got in. He shut the door, returned to the driver's seat, backed the behemoth out into the road, narrowly missing the pile of manure, and slowly drove off into the sunset. Smith rose and moved quickly down through the woods.

They didn't have to wait long for it to get dark. When the last light faded out over the crest of the hill above them, Smith climbed the ladder up the side of the tower. He knelt on top and peered over the wall. The light in the back apartment was on, but all he could see was the floor and the door beyond. It was possible that Mary Jane was reading in bed, or in the bathroom. They would have to take their chances that she was in the room. The time had come to set the final phases of their plan in motion. He told Sheila to sit on top of the platform and keep an eye out for Mary Jane, while he and Billy Joe went up and started the fire.

The pile of manure was pretty imposing. Tweeds' men, in order to clear the driveway and not block either entrance to the house or encroach upon the road in front, had been obliged to heap it up fairly high, and it was no small feat to climb to the top of the small mountain, but with much grunting and slipping, Smith finally made it. He signalled to Billy Joe to pass him up one of the gallon tins of kerosine. He had to lie on his belly and reach down to grab it, which put his face practically in the stuff. The stench was pretty foul, and he could only dimly guess how dreadful it would become when it was lit. He stashed the container by his side and reached for a second gallon. By great effort he managed to stagger to his feet, maintaining a precarious balance long enough to thoroughly wet the top of the pile. Then he slid down and helped Billy Joe slosh the sides down with the other two gallons. Then Smith hiked down the hill and deposited the empty containers in the truck. Best not to leave any evidence for the fire department. He waited down below with his cell phone while Billy Joe torched the pile. Smith didn't see the flickering light from the blaze until he heard the returning footsteps of his companion in crime. He held the truck door open so he could see the numbers on the phone by the dome light, then entered the number of the Berkeley Fire Department. He gave them Tweeds' address and told them it was a big blaze, that the whole area might go up any minute. By the time he and Billy Joe had rejoined Sheila back at the platform, they could already hear the faraway wail of approaching fire trucks. Zero hour had arrived.

## Chapter 48

The lights from the fire engines on top of the hill lit up the sky. They could hear the shriek of the sirens and the rumble of the trucks as they approached. It sounded like a four alarmer. They laid the planks across the eight-foot gap between the platform and the top of the roof. When the planks were all in place, Smith, then Billy Joe, then Sheila, one by one, picked his way carefully along the board bridge until they were all on top of the flat gravel roof beyond.

"Did you catch sight of Mary Jane?" Smith asked Sheila in a whisper as they unrolled the rope netting.

"Yes. She was wearing nothing but a nightie and a robe. I think she got up to go to the bathroom. She was carrying a book, so I would guess she's reading in bed."

"Damn! I hope we don't have to wait for her to dress."

"Can't she just grab her clothes and dress in the truck?" asked Billy Joe.

"She'll have to," said Smith. "We don't dare take any more time than absolutely necessary. We don't want to have to duke it out with Tweeds' henchmen. They undoubtedly have guns and we don't. Help me secure this end of the netting to the chimney pipe over here," he said to Billy Joe.

"Where'd you get this?" asked Billy Joe.

"Army and Navy Store. It was made for use as a landing net. Let's keep the talk to a minimum. Tie the other end around the cornice over there." He turned and put his lips to Sheila's ear.

"You'll have to go first," he told her. "We don't want Mary Jane to scream."

"I have to climb down that?" said Sheila.

"It's perfectly safe. Even if you fell, the most you'd get is a broken leg."

"That makes me feel lots better."

"Just don't look down," said Smith. "Feel for the next strand with your foot, and try it out before putting your weight on it. Keep your eyes on the window. If you see Mary Jane, tap on the pane and wave or something. Get her attention. If the window's locked, have her unlock it. Let's go!"

Smith and Billy Joe grabbed Sheila by the shoulders, one on each side, and lowered her down carefully. She felt for the strands in the rope netting and found a footing. She reached out to grip one of the strands with her right hand as Billy Joe let go of her shoulder. When she was secure, Smith relinquished his hold on her. Now her eyes were almost level with the top of the window. She climbed down slowly and carefully, keeping her eyes on the room inside. All she could see was the bottom half of a closed door opposite her, which she assumed led to the corridor beyond, and a small table next to it with a stack of books. A dresser was to the right, littered with combs, brushes, and cosmetic containers. To the left she could just make out the headboard of a bed. She climbed down further and to the right so she could peer in to the left side of the room, and finally there she was - Mary Jane propped up against a pile of pillows with a book in front of her. Her hair was up in rollers and her face was plastered with skin cream. Sheila tapped timidly at the window, but Mary Jane didn't budge. She turned a page slowly, then her head swerved slightly to the left to look at the beginning of the next page. Sheila tapped again. This time she had Mary Jane's attention. Mary Jane laid her book down, and sat, looking in the direction of the window. Sheila waved to her and the

motion caught Mary Jane's astonished eyes. She sat up straighter and stared at the window, gaping at Sheila, who continued to wave at her. Finally she seemed to recognize her former study partner. She threw the covers back, heaved her bulk up from the bed, and hurried over. She unfastened the lock and threw open the window.

"Sheila!" she whispered loudly with wide-eyed astonishment. "What are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you," Sheila whispered back. "There's no time to explain. Grab some street clothes, but don't take any time to dress. Hurry!"

She watched as Mary Jane moved her ungainly bulk about the room in a confused panic. She opened some drawers and got out some underclothes. Then she hurried to the closet, and stood there in a daze, apparently not knowing what to select. Finally she grabbed a bunch of hangers and hurried back to the window.

"I'm in such a mess!" Mary Jane hissed. Her hands went up to her head with alarm, as she remembered that her hair was in rollers.

"Just forget all that," Sheila said in an intense whisper. "Do you want to be rescued or not? Come on! You only need a pair of slacks and a blouse and coat. And a pair of walking shoes. Move it!"

Mary Jane let the hangers drop to the floor. She reached down and disentangled a pair of slacks from the pile of hangars, and then a blouse. She ran on tiptoes to the closet, and came back with a pair of shoes.

"Just pass them out to me," Sheila instructed her. "Hurry!" She snatched the shoes from Mary Jane and handed them upwards without looking, hoping one of the two men lying on the roof above would see the gesture. An instant later she felt the shoes being removed from her grasp. She took the slacks, blouse and sweater as Mary Jane held them out to her, and passed them up to the men above. Then Mary Jane dashed back to the bed and returned bearing a book.

"Forget it," Sheila said impatiently.

"But what'll I read?"

"Okay, okay. Is that it?" Sheila grabbed the book and handed it up as well.

"I guess so."

"Then move! Grab a chair and climb up to the window. We'll help you out."

"There's somebody else out there?" asked Mary Jane.

"Yes," said Sheila. "Just forget the damn decorum and climb out here. Do you want to stay there forever?"

The prospect of being a perpetual prisoner seemed to overcome Mary Jane's fears. She stepped dutifully up onto the chair and placed her bare foot on the window sill with trepidation. She looked wide eyed at Sheila as if to ask what she should do next.

"Just climb out here with me. As soon as you're out here I'll tell you what to do next."

Mary Jane gradually transferred her bulk to the rope netting. She clambered around precariously until she was on the same side as Sheila.

"Now climb!" said Sheila. "I'll stay here and help keep you from falling. Hey!" she called in a loud whisper to the two above. "Help her up!" She stood there, holding on with one hand while she tried to assist Mary Jane to ascend. She hadn't realized before just how massive the woman was. Maybe Tweeds had fattened her up a little. Three weeks of incarceration with no exercise might have boosted her weight considerably.

She watched the heavy legs and thighs struggling up the rope ladder, and she could hear the grunting of Smith and Billy Joe working to help haul her up. Then one of her heavy bare feet stepped on Sheila's fingers, and Sheila grimaced in pain, struggling not to cry out, until at last the pressure of the foot was released, and Sheila realized, by the cessation of sounds of struggle, that Mary Jane had finally made it up to the roof.

"Okay, Sheila!" said a voice from above. "You're next," and she found herself scaling the rope netting like a midshipman rushing up the mainmast. After Mary Jane it was nothing. In a trice she was on the roof with the others.

Getting Mary Jane across the board bridge onto the platform was no small feat. Her eyes had not yet become accustomed to the dark, and she lumbered about like a drunken bear. The planks, moreover, had not been secured in any way, and when one of them slipped slightly she started to freak out. Billy Joe grabbed her and put his big mitt over her mouth to prevent her from screaming and propelled her from behind with his other hand, while Smith stood on the platform and pulled her in his direction. She was in considerable disarray by the time they got her to the bottom of the ladder. Her bathrobe was twisted around her upper torso, and her big butt was exposed to the moonlight. Smith thrust her clothes into her arms and told Sheila to lead her down the trail to the truck. Then he darted up the ladder and crossed one more time over the wall. Billy Joe heard the sounds of him scurrying around on the roof, and the scrape of a window closing. Then he cringed involuntarily as he heard the thud of the planks as they dug into the soft earth just a few yards from where he was standing. A second later Smith was clambering down the ladder.

"What the hell were you doing back there?" Billy Joe asked him in a hushed voice.

"Straightening things up so they won't notice anything amiss from inside," Smith breathed back at him. "It might buy us some time if they don't figure out right away that she's escaped. Let's go!"

He ran back down the trail and Billy Joe followed close after him, warding off the branches that whipped back into his face from Smith's precipitate descent.

The road above was still blocked. The fire itself was clearly out, but the hoses were still trained on the smoldering pile. Searchlights swept back and forth, lighting up the house and the somewhat diminished manure heap. Only a couple of the trucks were still there, but a large crowd had gathered, and a number of firemen stood around the periphery, directing people and cars to return the way they had come. Billy Joe turned the panel truck around and headed back down Acacia Terrace. Smith was next to him in the passenger's seat. Sheila sat on one of the sleeping bags in the back, next to Mary Jane, helping her to dress in the dim glow of the dome light.

"That's gonna be a sea of shit tomorrow with all that water they're pouring on it," said Billy Joe. "Tweeds is gonna need a boat to get to his front door!"

"How uncouth," muttered Mary Jane under her breath, and for once Sheila found herself siding with Billy Joe. It really didn't matter, however. The job was over. A sense of deep satisfaction stole over her, and she accepted with gratitude the half-empty flask of brandy that Smith passed back to her. She drank straight from the bottle, and could see that Mary Jane was a little taken aback, but Sheila didn't really care. She knew it was irrational of her, but she held it against Mary Jane for being such a job to rescue, and she mildly enjoyed shocking her.

"Care for a swig?" she asked with a piratical leer, before passing the bottle back to Smith.

Eventually Acacia Terrace meandered into another road which linked up with Grizzly Peak Boulevard, and in no time at all they were in Oakland. They dropped Billy Joe off at his place and Smith took over the wheel. Soon they were on the MacArthur freeway, heading for the Bay Bridge.

Smith had reserved a room just down the hall from theirs for Mary Jane. Sheila found Mary Jane a scarf to cover her curlers, and they got her through the hotel lobby with minimum embarrassment. Sheila loaned her some of her cosmetics, and as soon as Mary Jane had had a chance to make herself look presentable, they held a meeting in her room to discuss the situation. They were hard pressed to keep her from calling the police.

"Those creeps infringed on my civil rights," she said with determination. "Why should you want to protect them?"

"What are you going to tell the police?" asked Smith. "Tweeds is only going to deny anything you say. How are you going to prove it? Did anyone see his cohorts abduct you?"

"No," she said, "but . . ."

"And why did he kidnap you in the first place? The police are going to want to understand why."

"He explained that to me. He said you had something of his that he wanted back, and that he was holding me as ransom to force you to return it."

"Did he say what it was I had of his?"

"No," she said.

"Well, that's going to sound pretty complicated and vague to the cops, and they won't be able to act without more concrete evidence. In fact, they aren't going to understand it very well at all, and if there's one thing I know about cops, it's that they like to understand what they're getting into."

"But you guys rescued me! You can certainly attest to that, and you can tell them whatever it is he wanted you to give him. You can explain it all, can't you?"

"Yes, we can, but we aren't going to."

"But why?" she asked, exasperatedly. "Why do you want to protect them?"

"I don't. I want to protect myself."

"I see," said Mary Jane, as enlightenment slowly dawned on her. "So you're just another crook yourself, and that's why you rescued me instead of going to the police."

"You finally get the picture. But the main reason I didn't go to the cops is that they might not believe me either. I could have just given them a call, explained things in general terms, stayed out of the picture entirely, and let them rescue you. But I figured I could do a better job than the cops. If I just sicked them on Tweeds, they'd tip their hand by confronting him directly. They couldn't just march into his place, because nobody could show them any proof that he had you, and without a search warrant they could only ask. And as soon as they did that, Tweeds would have spirited you off to Timbuctoo. Or done you in and dumped your body in a garbage can somewhere. He's a desperate character, and there's no telling what he might have done."

"What if I just went to the police myself right now, and told them everything you just told me?"

"We'd say you're suffering from delusions of persecution, that you have a history of it. As far as any involvement on my part, I'd simply deny it. The cops don't know me from Adam. I have no record whatsoever, and you don't know what kind of crook I am. You don't even know what I have that he wants so badly. There's nothing at all you could prove. They'd simply tell you to quit reading lurid romance novels."

"I could prove I knew what his place looked like. I could describe the room to perfection. They'd find my fingerprints all over it."

"Not any longer. If I know Tweeds, that room is already in the process of being scrubbed down. Tweeds is no dummy. He could always claim that you were a willing guest of his, maybe that you were even one of his lovers, that you had had a spat, and that you threatened to go to the police with a cock and bull story just to get even with him. And we, as a matter of fact, might even back him up on it. There's nothing to prevent me from calling Tweeds up right now and fabricating a story between the two of us you couldn't break in a million years."

"I see," said Mary Jane in a dull voice. "Are you in on this with him?" she asked Sheila.

"A thousand percent," said Sheila.

Mary Jane's face turned beet red, and for just a moment resembled a large stick of dynamite. Her face was contorted into a silent scream, with her eyes tightly wrinkled like an angry prune, and then she broke down and wept silently for a moment.

"It's not fair! Here I've been locked up for three weeks by a gang of criminals, and I'm not allowed to do anything about it."

"There is one real problem you haven't considered," said Smith.

"What's that?" She looked up tearily.

"If you go back to your apartment, Tweeds will send his boys around to kidnap you back. And this time, I'm not going to rescue you."

"Then what am I going to do?" she cried with alarm.

"I've got one suggestion."

Mary Jane just looked at him.

"How about taking a trip to Russia? You're always reading about it. Have you ever been there? This would be an interesting time, with the new regime and so forth."

"How could I afford it? I can just barely make my rent."

"I'd pay for it."

"And why would you do that?"

"To get you out of my hair. Because, even though you are a pain in the ass, I care about what happens to you, and after spending a good week plus maybe twenty thousand dollars out of my own pocket just to steal you back from Tweeds, I'd hate to have it all go for nothing."

Mary Jane was lost in thought for about two minutes.

"For how long?" she asked.

"For how long what?" said Smith.

"How long could I stay in Russia?"

"How about six months? That'd be long enough for Tweeds to forget about you."

"You'd pay for my air fare as well?"

"I'd pay for the whole kit and kaboodle."

"All right," she said at last. "I accept. How do we arrange it all?"

"First of all, we have to get you moved out of your old apartment without Tweeds getting at you. You could stay in this hotel until we had everything arranged. I'd take care of the bills. As far as the rest is concerned, I could just give you a lump sum, and you could handle it yourself."

"How much?" asked Mary Jane, her eyes starting to look like dollar signs.

"Forty thousand ought to do the trick," said Smith.

"How about fifty?"

"How about an indefinite vacation in Tweeds' guest room?"

"All right, twenty. When do I get it?"

"As soon as we get you moved out."

"Okay," she said. "It's a deal." She sat back and looked at the two of them for a minute or two. "I really thought better of you, Sheila," she said, "than to travel around with a crook."

"What do you think about people who make deals with crooks?" Sheila retorted.

"We've had a tough week," said Smith, "and we're all tired. "Don't leave the hotel without telling me," he said to Mary Jane, "or the deal is off. Let's all have breakfast together tomorrow morning, and we'll discuss your flight plans."

## Chapter 49

Life at home for Reggie had gone from boring to miserable. He had gotten to the point of hating his father. He had tried for so long to please him, but no matter how hard he tried, his father just seemed to think that Reggie owed it to him. He had looked forward to coming home from school for summer vacation if for no other reason than that he could get away from the spit and polish of the academy. Now he wished he was back at the dumb academy. His father seemed to think he had chosen to be kidnapped, that it was somehow all his fault, and now he had to be punished for it. He couldn't go out, not even to the back yard, he couldn't watch TV by himself, he couldn't use the telephone, and he couldn't be left alone. When his father wasn't keeping an eagle eye on him, Thelma had strict orders about what he could and couldn't do. He had run out of books to read, and all his toys seemed like baby things to him. He thought a lot about how much fun he had had with Smith, and he made up a lot of imaginary adventures that included him. He wished that Smith would come back and kidnap him again and take him away from all this.

Today was different, however. His father was spending the whole day with his girlfriend, and since Thelma was off on weekends, Reggie had the run of the place to himself. He had already done several forbidden things, but there wasn't much fun in them. He had watched some TV, but there wasn't much on Sunday mornings except religious programs and dumb old movies. He had spent an hour in the back yard, but that too had lost its charm. There was only one thing he hadn't yet done - to give Smith a call. He had been planning on it for a long time, but this was his first opportunity. He knew that Smith liked to sleep late, so he had waited until now to call him. He went into his father's study, which was normally off limits, and sat behind his father's desk. He thought of putting his feet up on the desk, which would have practically given his father a heart attack, had he been present, as well as him a sure beating, but he couldn't do that and reach the phone at the same time. It had been a long time since he had used Smith's number, but he had no problem remembering it. It was with a sense of real excitement that he picked up the receiver and got the dial tone. He hoped with all his heart that Smith would be there, and that those F.B.I. men hadn't captured him yet. He dialed the number carefully, saying the digits out loud as he pushed the buttons on the touch tone pad, to make sure he didn't make a mistake.

Smith had just awakened and was sitting on the edge of the bed staring at the clock and realizing he had to get dressed and have a late breakfast with Mary Jane, when Sheila called in from the adjoining room to tell him that his phone was ringing. He looked at the phone on his bedside table, but no sound issued from it. He picked it up but it was silent. Then he heard the ring himself, but it was coming from the next room, and he realized it was his cell phone. He got up and strode into Sheila's room and she handed the instrument to him. It was still ringing.

"I didn't know whether I should answer it or not," she told him as he pressed the button for receive and placed it to his ear.

"F.B.I. headquarters," he said. "Agent Smith here."

"Smitty!" he heard a young voice exclaim.



"Hey, what's happening, Reggie?" He felt a flush of pleasure as he sat down on the edge of Sheila's bed.

"I hope it's okay for me to call you," Reggie said. Smith could hear the excitement in his voice.

"Sure, Sport. Why the heck not?"

"Oh, I don't know. Because those FBI. agents are after you, I guess. I didn't want to do anything that would get you in any trouble."

"You're not going to get me into any trouble I'm not already in. I'm glad you called. I've been wondering what was going on with you, but I couldn't call you at home very easily. I knew your father wouldn't appreciate that very much. So what's going on? You been doing anything exciting?"

"No," said Reggie sadly. "It's really boring at home. Dad won't let me go out, I can't call my friends, I can't watch TV or anything."

"How come? You do something to make him mad at you?"

"I don't know. He just seems to be mad at me all the time, no matter what I do. It's really a drag."

"Gee, that's too bad, Sport. I wish I could do something about it, but I don't know what to suggest."

"They took me to your house the other day. They asked me if that's where you lived when I was staying with you and I said yes. I hope that was all right. They were pretty sure about it and I thought they might've found my fingerprints there. I hope it was okay. You told me to tell them the truth, but I wouldn't have if I thought it would help them catch you."

"You did the right thing, Sport. Don't let that bother you. They're never going to catch me, because I'm too smart."

"That's what I thought. They told me it was only a matter of days maybe before they brought you in."

"Who's this 'they'?" asked Smith. "The police, you mean?"

"No. It was the FBI. agents. They're the only ones who've talked to me. They're pretty good guys, actually. They kept it secret from my father that I called you instead of him when that old man found me and I gave him your telephone number. Dad would have absolutely killed me if he knew about that."

"That probably means that they're listening in on this call, but don't worry about it. It does mean, however, that they're going to have this number discontinued pretty soon. The only reason they probably haven't so far is that they hope I might make a mistake over the phone and tell them something that lets them know where I am. That's unfortunate, because it means you won't be able to call me at this number very much longer."

"Gee, that's too bad," said Reggie, a note of sadness creeping into his voice.

"But don't you worry about it, Sport. I'll find some way to get in touch with you."

"Gee, do you really mean it," said Reggie, betraying a trace of newfound optimism and excitement.

"You bet. We're buddies, aren't we? Good friends always find a way to get together. It might take a while, though, and you're going to have to be patient."

"When I was in the basement of your house I looked around for that suitcase that had all the toys and books you guys gave me, but I didn't see it. I wondered if you still had it around some place."

"Sure I do, Sport, but I haven't had a chance to return it to you. I would have had it delivered, but I figured your father wouldn't let you keep it if he knew about it."

"Yeah. Dad won't let me keep anything unless he thinks it's okay. You know the cowboy hat you gave me at the Rodeo?"

"Yeah?"

"He threw it away. Right into a garbage can. It was totally gross. That was the neatest hat I ever had." There was a brief silence as Reggie contemplated the hat.

"That's too bad, Sport. I'm really sorry about that."

"And he didn't let me see the rest of the Rodeo."

There was another brief silence as the two of them considered the injustice and unfairness of it all.

"Well, I don't know what to say, Sport. I guess your father was pretty upset about it all. Maybe when this all blows over he'll start being nicer to you."

"Yeah, maybe," said Reggie doubtfully. "Anyway, I know you probably have a lot of things to do, but I was thinking if you had the time some night you could just drop that suitcase with my toys and books over the back yard fence, like you said. Dad wouldn't notice. He never looks at the back yard, and it would be completely hidden by all the weeds and bushes. I could sneak my stuff into my room when he wasn't looking. He doesn't remember very well what I have anyway, and I could just act as if I had those things all along. I'd really like to read *Watership Down* and *Tarzan and the Ant Men* again. There's not very much around here to read."

"I'll be pleased to return that suitcase to you, Sport, but it might be a while. The FBI is still watching your house, so I can't do it right now without getting caught. Just keep an eye out for it though. I won't forget."

"Gee, thanks Smitty. Don't take any chances, though. I'm not in any big hurry."

"You have a chance to talk to your friend Jack, and tell him all the things you did?"

"No. His mother sent him to some dumb summer camp. It'll be another week before he gets back. It'll be fun to tell him, though. I'm really looking forward to it. Jack's the only person I can really talk to. Besides you and Clytemnestra, of course."

"Well, you take care," Smith told him, "and don't let things get you down. Remember that what you're going through is just temporary, and things will get a lot better. And remember that no matter what happens, I'll always be on your side. Okay? And Clytemnestra sends her love."

"Thanks, Smitty."

"Somehow we'll get together again, Sport. Don't you ever doubt it. Okay? I gotta hang up now. Call me whenever you want to."

"Bye, Smitty."

"You really miss him, don't you," said Sheila, after Smith had laid the phone down. "Do you think you ever will kidnap him back?"

"I don't know," said Smith. "At least I'd like to take him on another camping trip or something. I haven't made up my mind yet whether I'd want the responsibility of having him on a full-time basis. He certainly is easy to be with, though. It's tempting."

"You do realize, don't you, that every time he goes off with you, his relationship with his real father is going to deteriorate just that much more. If you're really concerned about his happiness, you'll either abandon him for good or take him away for good. This back and forth stuff will ultimately hurt him."

"I hadn't thought about that. You're right, though. How come you never went into psychology? You'd be good at it."

"You forget I have a master's degree in it."

"I did forget that. How come you never went into practice?"

"Because I'd need a Ph.D. in it if I ever wanted to really do anything in it. Otherwise I'd just be a flunky, working at a low-level job under somebody else's guidance."

"And you aren't motivated enough to go for the doctorate?"

"It takes quite a lot of motivation. Master's degrees are like merit badges. You just have to do the course work and turn in a Mickey Mouse thesis. Anybody who's got a modicum of intelligence and is willing to put in the time can get one. Ph.D.s are a different kettle of fish. The standards for theses are much higher, and there are orals, language exams. You generally have to be lucky enough to establish a good working relationship with one of the professors in the department who's willing to show you the ropes and help you choose the right thesis topic. And it takes two or three years more of course work. After that you generally have to go through some kind of internship. And you have to publish. It's a big commitment."

"How about becoming a therapist?"

"Pretty much the same. On top of that it really helps to go through medical school as well."

"I see. Why is it there are so many so-called therapists out there who aren't Ph.D.s or medical doctors?"

"Most of them only make a marginal living at it."

"I still think you'd be good at it."

"I think you'd better get dressed," she told him. "We have to meet Mary Jane for breakfast."

"Yeah," he sighed. "It's time to face the music."

## Chapter 50

It wasn't until Sunday evening that Ernie began to express his concerns about Mary Jane to Big Mac.

"She's always been a big eater," he told his fellow henchman as they sat in the kitchen gorging themselves on lamb in Madeira sauce. The cook had prepared enough for seven people, but the butler was still ailing, and Tweeds' appetite was effectively destroyed by the lingering stench of smoldering manure that had so overwhelmingly permeated the house and grounds. Mary Jane's door was still locked on the inside, and as she hadn't yet responded to any overtures from outside since the night before, it was naturally assumed that her hunger as well had been temporarily derailed.

As a result, there were three extra portions still in the pot, and Big Mac and Ernie, no doubt still affected by the distant memory of parental reminders about starving children in China, were endeavoring to save what remained of one of the best recipes in the cook's repertoire from the garbage can and the dogs.

"So?" responded Big Mac with a full mouth. Maybe she ain't hungry. There's no place the broad could go. I can't hardly see her sproutin' wings and flyin' over the wall. They don't make wings that size in the first place." He laughed heartily at his own humor.

"But she didn't have no breakfast either," explained Ernie. "A woman of her proportions don't live on air." His eyes drifted heavenwards as he again contemplated the pristine pulchritude of Mary Jane.

"You still got the hots for that tub of lard?" asked Big Mac with obvious disgust, mopping up what was left of the Madeira sauce on his plate with a large piece of French bread.

"She isn't no tub of lard," said Ernie aggrievedly, wiping his mouth with his sleeve and peering into the pot to see if anything remained of the lamb. "She's a well put together lady, as my father used to say. Not one of these modern, skinny broads with no meat on their bones. My mother used to be a big woman before she got cancer and shrivelled down to nothing. I like big broads."

"You sayin' you liked your mother?" asked Big Mac with a chuckle and a leer.

"You shut your fuckin' face about my mother!" said Ernie with some heat.

"Okay, okay. I was just kiddin'. What's got into you? This Mary Jane broad ain't gonna die just because she misses a coupla meals. She's got enough meat on her to cross the Sahara desert."

"There's somethin' else that's kinda funny. When I checked on her at lunch time I noticed the light in her room was still on. I could see it by the crack under the door. She don't normally have the lights on in the daytime."

"You're sure you wasn't lookin' through the keyhole?"

"I can't see through the keyhole cause there's a key stuck in the other side," said Ernie. "But ain't it kinda odd havin' the light on in the middle of the day?"

"Well, go tell the boss then," said Big Mac, tired of the subject, "and quit botherin' me about it."

And so it was that the usually reticent Ernie, ordinarily content to let his cohort handle all verbal communications with Tweeds, found himself being ushered into the great man's presence. Tweeds was seated in the living room, spooning up what remained

of a large serving of chicken soup. He looked up morosely as Ernie entered, letting him know by his scowl that he was in no mood for anything trivial. Ernie stood there for a moment, not knowing how to begin.

"Yes," said Tweeds in a booming voice. Ernie stood there transfixed.

"Will you please stop standing there gaping at me like an idiot, and let me know why you're wasting my time."

"It's . . . it's about that Mary Jane person," Ernie stuttered. "She's been locked in her room all day with the lights on and she hasn't had nothing to eat since yesterday." He stopped and gave his mind a brief respite. Two sentences a day in Tweeds' presence were about the most he could muster.

"So," said Tweeds ominously. "What's so strange about that? I myself have had nothing today until this bowl of broth. Who could eat anything with that disgusting odor in the air?"

"Well," hazarded Ernie, but sticking to his guns, "usually she yells at me to get lost or something when I knock on her door. She ain't usually silent like this." He stopped and looked forlornly at Tweeds.

"Well, check it out then," snapped Tweeds with irritation. "Why bother me with this trivia?"

"I can't. She's got the door locked from the inside."

"Well, break the damned door in, and leave me alone until you have something substantial to report."

"Yes, boss," said Ernie, cringing from the verbal onslaught, and backing out the door, unknowingly emulating that ancient custom of courtiers the world over when taking their leave of kings and emperors. "Sorry I bothered you."

It wasn't too much later that he knocked trepidatiously once more on Tweeds' door.

"Yes?" said Tweeds ominously. Ernie opened the door a crack and fearfully peered in.

"She ain't there, boss," he said, when he finally managed to unfreeze his paralyzed vocal chords.

"She's not where?" asked Tweeds forebodingly.

"She ain't in her room, boss. I looked all over," he explained. "Even in the bathroom."

"And the door was locked from the inside?" asked Tweeds incredulously.

"Yes, boss," said Ernie, standing there helplessly.

"Well, this had better be for real," said Tweeds, getting up angrily. "Let's go," he said to Ernie.

Tweeds looked with disbelief at Mary Jane's room. He saw the bedclothes thrown back, and the litter of hangers and clothes on the floor. He saw the chair next to the window, and strode quickly over to the window and threw it open. He stuck his head outside and peered in every direction, but he could see no avenue of escape. There was the wall opposite, a good four feet away, and the top of the wall was at least two feet above the top of the window. And the ground below was at least an eight foot drop from the bottom of the window. How had she gotten away? Mary Jane was no Houdini. It was not until after he had roused everyone in the house and had it searched from top to bottom that he willing to admit that his bird had indeed flown the coop, and it not until he had his men and dogs check out the grounds surrounding the house that the fifteen-foot

Sturgis model 111A tower was discovered standing behind the rear wall, and he knew how that flight had been effected. In his wrath, one word rose unbidden to his lips.

"Smith!" he screamed with all his might.

## Chapter 51

On Wednesday morning, bright and early, Tweeds made his move. He had been too upset to sleep much the night before, what with the mysterious disappearance of his former house guest and the accompanying futile search, following as it had upon a week packed with so many upsetting and disrupting events - the dogs keeping them up night after night, the delivery of the manure which had blocked his garage and kept his staff deployed for most of a day in its removal rather than attending to their normal duties, followed by that dreadful fire and its watery aftermath, choking his house and grounds with a noxious odor, and creating a mess that would take weeks to clean up. He had no idea yet how the dogs had been induced to perform as they had, but he could make an educated guess as to who had so induced them, and he had no doubt whatsoever as to the identity of the culprit who had ordered the manure and set it ablaze. It had all been a strategy to divert the attention of him and his staff from the rescue operation which had been going on at the rear of his property. He had lain and simmered for hours and hours. Events had surpassed the mere bounds of profit and loss; they had graduated to the realm of revenge. He no longer cared about the paltry loss inflicted upon him by his inability to fence the paintings. Even the million dollars he had hoped to pry from the greedy fingers of his former employee paled to insignificance compared to the immense anger and frustration he now felt. He cared not a whit what costs might be entailed. He was determined to get even with the man who had so successfully crossed him and made him look an absolute fool.

When his anger had subsided sufficiently for his rational processes to reassert themselves, he began to formulate a plan. He remembered what Dibbs had told him a few days before about Roger Lambeaux' hatred of Smith, and he resolved to make use of that emotion toward the realization of his own ends. He considered what might further fan the flames of that animosity, and he also considered what other forms of psychological inducement might be brought to bear upon the psyche of Mr. Lambeaux. He knew the man was cupidinous and vain, and not overly given to self awareness. Those were three excellent qualities to find in any man one wished to manipulate, and when he chose to, Tweeds could be a master of manipulation. He decided to contact the man by phone, but he chose to call him at his office rather than at home. There was just the outside chance that the F.B.I. had placed a wire tap on Lambeaux' home phone.

And so it was that Roger Lambeaux, having just arrived at work, a little glad to be away from the vicissitudes of home and family, but at the same time possessed of a vast and unrelenting irritation, and undesirous of accomplishing anything particularly worth while that day, had turned over to the secretary he shared with three other businessmen who occupied the same office suite those trivial matters which formed the entirety of his in-basket, and was practicing his free-throw style with the waste paper basket as a target, using as missiles those items in his out-basket which seemed to have the least relevance for his future, wondering how he was going to continue to justify to himself the point of remaining at his desk. It was almost with a sense of relief that he answered the secretary's intercom telling him he had a call on line 3. The caller, who introduced himself as a Mr. Green, explained to him at some length the reasons for his call.

"I know that you are not acquainted with me, Mr. Lambeaux," said Mr. Green, "but I also know that we have a great deal in common. Most especially, we have an enemy in

common, a man whom we both know simply as Smith." He paused for a moment, letting the significance of that name register with Roger.

"I'm afraid I know a number of Smiths, Mr. Green," replied Roger, wondering in his heart of hearts if his caller could possibly mean the Smith who had so completely filled his waking moments with such hatred and loathing these last several weeks.

"There is only one Smith to whom I allude," said Mr. Green, "and he is the Smith whom you suspect I might mean. I happen to be well acquainted with him myself because I am the person who stole your paintings, and he is the man who kidnapped your child." He paused again, knowing full well the impact this identification would have on Roger.

"I see," said Roger, blinking rapidly, and thinking a thousand miles a second. He was torn between cooperating, or keeping this man on the line while calling the F.B.I. on another, but after considering the difficulties of the latter maneuver, decided to just sit back and let his caller have his say.

"I would advise you strongly," said Mr. Green, correctly reading the brief silence, "not to try to alert the authorities to this call. Any undue delays on your part and I would simply hang up. What I have to say is in your best interests to hear, so please bear with me until I arrive at the gist of the matter."

Roger had not listened to such erudite circumlocution since his old economics professor so many years before at U.C. Berkeley, but he recognized a well-trained brain when he heard one, and he cooled the chatter of conflicting suggestions coursing through his mind, and concentrated on what the man had to tell him.

"I mentioned that Mr. Smith was a common enemy," said Mr. Green. "Let me amplify that. Up until about a month ago, when your son was kidnapped, Mr. Smith was simply a paid employee of mine. I happen to deal in rare art, and you possessed some pieces in which I was quite interested, as they promised me a pretty penny if I should turn them over to buyers who were willing to ask no questions. Mr. Smith at that time had the responsibility of breaking into your house and opening up the front door, while other employees of mine walked in and removed the particular pieces I had selected. In your neighborhood little attention is paid to men in working costume operating calmly and in broad daylight, and in a manner which suggests that everything is above board. My success in such matters depends, however, on receiving information on the household in question which is inclusive and accurate. My information on your house was that nobody would be at home on that particular Saturday morning. Little did I suspect, and I understand from further developments that you were as ignorant as I, that your son would be returning home from school a day early. That was the minute accident which led to the extraordinary sequence of events which has transpired the last several weeks. Mr. Smith, not content with the generous pittance which I pay him for his services, chose to freelance on his own, and, confronted with the presence of your son, decided to kidnap him."

There was another pause, as Mr. Green allowed Roger to assimilate what he had so far communicated.

"I would judge from the sound of your breathing that you are still there, Mr. Lambeaux," he said.

"Yes, yes," said Roger, a little taken aback by the candor and content of the call and the caller. "Please go on."



"It is not my purpose," said Mr. Green, "to paint myself as a good guy in your eyes. I will freely admit that I am a crook, but I should like to submit that my variances from the common code of conduct are usually of a minor nature, and that I ordinarily cringe from the prospect of greater infringements. In keeping with the openness I have so far exhibited, I will not conceal from you the fact that I tried unsuccessfully to steal your boy from Mr. Smith."

"Reggie didn't say anything at all to me about that," said Roger, trying to keep the surprise out of his voice, and resolved that Reggie was going to say plenty when he got home that evening. "Could you tell me some more about it?"

"Gladly. It was just a few days after the kidnapping. My employees had just located Mr. Smith's girl friend and had followed her from a friend's house back to where she and Smith were holed up with the boy. I was particularly irate with Smith because his action had made it impossible for me to unload the paintings because the kidnapping had brought the federal agents into the case, and I was resolved to recoup my losses by taking the boy away from him and carrying out the ransom attempt myself. It was foolish on my part to associate myself with such a crime, but, as I say, my ire had been aroused and I was not acting rationally. At any rate, my employees were successful in removing the boy from their custody, and they were in the process of transporting the child to a safer location when he managed to escape from their hands."

"When did all this happen?" asked Roger, all ears.

"About the eighteenth of June. It was on a Tuesday night."

"Then how did this Mr. Smith get hold of him again?"

"I can only surmise that he returned freely to Mr. Smith. This happened in the East Bay, and Smith was in San Francisco. I don't know if the boy found some means of transportation back to the city by himself and located Smith on his own, or whether he telephoned him and Smith came to pick him up, but one or the other of those two possibilities must be what happened. I can think of no alternatives. I have given it much thought, and it is difficult for me to believe that the boy made his way back by himself. I doubt he knew his whereabouts when he was in Smith's hands, so I can only surmise that he knew a telephone number where he could reach Smith. I know that the ransom was back in effect a few days later, and that your son was ultimately returned to you by Smith, so what other explanation is possible?"

Roger was beside himself with anger. That little shit, he thought. He was going to get it before, but now he was really in for it. He was so transported by his intense emotion that he was unable for a moment to speak.

"Mr. Lambeaux? Are you still there?"

"Yes, Mr. Green," said Roger in a thin voice. His throat was still constricted by anger.

"I can tell you are upset. I'm sorry if I am the bearer of unpleasant news."

"No, sir. I'm glad that someone around here is willing to tell me the truth."

"Do you mean to imply that the police have not been entirely candid with you?"

"I do. And I am going to find out why!" His voice squeaked slightly as he said this.

"Mr. Lambeaux," said Mr. Green, sounding even more ingratiating than before, and his voice becoming soft and silky, "I think we are two individuals who have both been badly mistreated, and I should like to suggest that we pool our resources in an attempt to put an end to the high-handed actions of this Mr. Smith. I do caution you, however, not

to say too much to the police about their failure to communicate vital information to you. I'm not entirely sure that their ends and yours are necessarily in harmony. Judging by your success in the business world, I would assume you to be a man of high intellectual capabilities. It would be a pity for your emotions to rob you of the possibility of really getting even with this Smith. Consider the inability of the police and the F.B.I. at nabbing him, even given all the information and resources at their disposal."

"Yes, that's true," croaked Roger, still choked up with emotion. "Those bastards have sat and held my hand while that supercilious asshole has walked up and brazenly made off with my money right under their noses, and they have been unable to do anything about it."

"Then consider what I have suggested. If you and I were to team up together on this thing, perhaps we could succeed where they have failed. Certainly it could do no harm to try. It would certainly do me a world of good, personally, to feel there was some real hope of putting an end to his egotistic enterprises. I would judge by your reactions that your feelings are similar."

"They are," said Roger, beginning to recover a little from the intensity of his emotion. "Just what do you suggest?"

"An excellent reaction," purred Mr. Green. "First of all, in the furtherance of our partnership, I should like to offer to return your paintings to you free of any future obligation on your part towards me, as a bona fide on my part, a token of my esteem towards you, and to demonstrate my sincerity in any future dealings between us."

Roger was so taken aback by the suddenness and generosity of the offer that it took him a full half-minute to find his voice.

"That's terrific," he finally managed to blurt out weakly.

"Why don't we set a date for delivery right now," said Mr. Green, aware that he had struck a rich vein, and desirous of capitalizing on it immediately. "Today is Wednesday. How about Friday? Would that be convenient?"

"Friday would be great," said Roger with enthusiasm. "What time?"

"How about noon?"

"Noon would be fine," said Roger, beside himself.

"You must make me one promise, however," said Mr. Green. "Please don't allow the delivery man to be harassed by the police or the F.B.I.. He won't know anything about me, and it would be interpreted by me as a hostile gesture on your part, and detrimental to any future dealings we might have."

"I'll be as silent as the tomb. You have my word on that."

"Good, and although I can hardly attempt to restrain you from eliciting further information from your son on the incident we discussed, I would prefer that you say nothing about me or my call to the authorities."

"No problem. Those assholes haven't leveled with me. Why should I level with them."

"An admirable sentiment, Mr. Lambeaux. I think this might be the start of a very profitable relationship. I have at the moment no particular agenda in mind, but it strikes me that we have one small weapon at our disposal."

"What's that?"

"We know that your boy is able to get in touch with Smith, and he doesn't know that we know. Since we have so little leverage over Smith, it is clearly to our benefit to make use of this little fact to the utmost."

"I see," said Roger, starting to understand what Mr. Green was driving at.

"So in your remonstrations with your son, it might be advisable not to harp too much on this particular fact. It should be sufficient to the purposes of your parental discipline to chide him only on the fact of his return to Smith rather than to you, and not to overly question him as to the method of that return. Namely, don't acquaint him with the fact that we know he is in apparent communication with Smith."

"Okay," said Roger, somewhat grudgingly.

"And if you have further conversations with the police on this matter, let them draw the conclusion that you came by this information as a result of communications with your son, and not with me. As a matter of fact, say nothing to them either about me or about the return of your possessions. As far as anyone else is concerned, and that includes the insurance company, the delivery on Friday will be that of some recent purchases you have made as replacement for what was stolen. It should go without saying that they must be kept out of sight until all of this blows over. Is all of this acceptable to you?"

"Yes of course," said Roger, secretly sorry to have to give up this golden chance at flaunting his success at getting his paintings back in the wake of the failure of the police, but aware of the wisdom of Mr. Green's advice. "So when will you get in touch with me again?"

"Soon, Mr. Lambeaux, soon. Will you be in your office again early next week?"

"I can arrange to be. Tuesday or Wednesday mornings might be best."

"Let's make it Tuesday morning, then, and I think at that time I will probably have something fairly definite to suggest to you. Goodbye till then."

"Goodbye to you, Mr. Green," said Roger, extremely cheered by the conversation, and happier than he had been now for several months. Sometimes, he thought, I almost believe in God.

## Chapter 52

At the same time that Roger and Tweeds were having their tête á tête, Smith was seeing Sheila off at the airport.

"Don't forget to reserve the last week in August," Sheila told him, as the passengers filed out of the waiting room to board the plane."

"I won't," said Smith, "and I'll call you often," he promised. He grabbed her and gave her a hurried but passionate kiss. She gave him a last, soulful look before she turned and joined the rest of the passengers. He watched her until she was out of sight. Then he walked over to the large view windows. He stood there until the collapsible tunnel severed its connection with the airplane, and the big jet slowly wheeled about and taxied toward the runway. Then he turned and walked slowly away.

He felt tremendously at odds with himself. He had been so involved in constant action for the last month that the sudden cessation of activity made him feel like a shipwrecked sailor trying to regain his land legs. He had little left in the way of responsibilities. On Sunday evening, Sheila and he had helped Mary Jane pack up her few belongings from the furnished apartment she was vacating, and just this morning the two of them had seen her board a plane, scheduled to fly to London by the polar route. After three days there, she would catch another flight to Moscow. They had been lucky in snagging a last-minute cancellation. Otherwise she might have been on Smith's hands for another week or two.

Only Reggie remained as a problem for Smith to solve, and he wasn't sure yet what he wanted to do about him. He remembered Sheila's warning on the matter, and he was unwilling to act until he had thought it out thoroughly. The boy was on his mind much of the time, and he realized how much he missed him. He cared a lot about what happened to him, and he was starting to realize that it was a great deal more than a passing fancy. He would just have to wait until he was more certain of the substantiality of his feelings.

In the meantime, he had decided to keep his rooms at the hotel where he was staying. He had a few odds and ends to clean up before he moved on. He would have to give up the garage where he kept his panel truck, and sell the vehicle. He still owed his landlord on Valencia Street a month's rent, and he was resolved to get a money order and send it to him. He was prudent enough not to attempt to see him in person.

He also had to fulfill his promise to Reggie to drop off the suitcase of toys. He could easily hire someone to do that for him. But what bothered him the most was the boy's situation. He saw no way of dealing with it outside of stealing him back and taking responsibility for his education and well being. At the very least he would like to have one more conversation with the boy, but he couldn't decide yet how to manage it without jeopardizing the boy's position with his father.

On Wednesday afternoon, Frank made a call to Aldo.

"The phone tap finally paid off," he told him triumphantly.

"In what way?" asked Aldo.

"The boy put in a call to Smith."

"That's great news. What did they talk about?"

"Nothing we didn't know about, unfortunately. Lambeaux appears to be punishing his son for having been kidnapped. The poor kid was telling Smith about it. He's been

restricted to his house. No TV, can't even go out in the back yard. Can't use the phone, except when his father's out and doesn't know about it. It was interesting listening to Smith. Up to now he's just been a mysterious figure. He sounds like a decent sort, pretty moral for a criminal. The boy reiterated the fact that Smith had told him to tell the truth. I couldn't help liking that about Smith. He realized, actually said it in so many words, that we were probably listening in on the call, and he warned the boy that we might discontinue the number any day."

"Are you going to do that?"

"Not on your life," said Frank. "Smith told the boy that the only reason we hadn't done so was so that we might catch him making a mistake over the phone by revealing some item of information that would lead us to him. He's right, of course, but what do we have to gain by cutting off the only source of information still left open to us?"

"I can't argue with you about that. It's too bad you didn't learn anything, though. It would be a real feather in our caps if we could nab the guy."

"We did learn something actually," said Frank, "but I don't know if it will help us. The boy asked for a suitcase of his. Full of the toys and books that Smith and his girl friend gave the boy. He asked Smith to drop it over the back yard fence some night."

"We'll have to keep an eagle eye on that back fence. Did he give any indication when it might be?"

"No," said Frank, "and it probably won't be soon. Smith realizes the house is being watched, and begged off for a while."

"Well, it's something anyway," said Aldo. "I can see why the boy idolizes this Smith."

"That's so," said Frank, "and after having heard Smith talk to the boy, I can really understand why. It's obvious he really cares for the boy, and the boy knows it."

At four in the afternoon, Tweeds made his second move. It had become increasingly clear to him that Mac and Ernie, dependable though they were at handling routine assignments, were not adequate for the plan he was formulating. Smith was too enterprising an individual to be dealt with routinely. The time had come to bring in some outside talent. He dug out a little black book he kept in his desk, and looked up a number he hadn't called for a long time. He thought about the time zone differential and decided he had better place the call immediately. He retired to the living room and dialed the number.

After a rather grim dinner, Roger directed Reggie to accompany him to the basement. Reggie followed him with considerable misgivings. That was always the place where he received his whippings, but he was confused as to why he should merit one, as he had done nothing in the last several days which should cause him to deserve punishment. Except of course for his telephone call to Smith on Sunday morning, but he could not imagine how his father could know about that. Thelma raised her eyebrows as she watched the pair of them troop silently down the stairs. She, too, knew the significance of trips to the basement, and had heard the cries of several whippings over the last few years. Mr. Lambeaux, she thought, had been getting much too liberal with his strap lately. She guessed that some of it had to do with the pressure put on him by the money exchanges, but it was difficult for her to accept that as justification for

punishment. She wished Mrs. Lambeaux were still part of the household. There would be no whippings with her here. She wondered vaguely if they were even legal, in this modern age. She remembered hearing about parents being prosecuted for child abuse, but she wasn't certain just what it took to prove such a thing. Her cousin Connie's husband was a lawyer. Perhaps she would give him a call and find out if there were anything she could do. She didn't want to take a chance on losing her job, but at the same time she had to live with herself. She walked into the kitchen and shut the door so she would be less likely to hear the sounds of anguish. As a further precaution, she turned on the radio and tuned it to a golden oldies station, and tried to put the situation out of her mind for the moment.

"Well, young man," said Roger in a severe tone of voice when they reached the cellar. "I understand that you got away from your kidnappers, and chose to go back to this Mr. Smith instead of calling me. What have you got to say for yourself?" He was almost yelling by the time he got to the end of his short speech. Reggie said something in a voice too inaudible for Roger to hear.

"Speak up, god damn you," said Roger.

"I said they promised not to tell you," wailed the boy.

"Who is this 'they'?" Roger thundered.

"The . . . the F.B.I. agents. They told me if I told them the truth, they wouldn't tell you," he blubbered.

Even in his rage, Roger saw the value of misinforming the boy. Mr. Green had strictly enjoined him to say nothing of the source of his information, and if the boy made the mistake of thinking the F.B.I. agents had told on him, so much the better. It would be a good object lesson to the boy. He filed away the realization that the agents had misled him. Mr. Green could have no objection to his lambasting Frank and Vic for keeping the facts from him. They would simply assume the boy had told him, which, in a sense, he had.

"Well, that'll teach you to try to keep things from me," he said, "when you're willing to share them with the remotest stranger. Now let's get down to what really matters. If you had returned home as you should have, when you got away from the kidnappers, or simply called me, as you should have, instead of going back to that Mr. Smith, you would have saved me two million dollars!" His voice rose again to a crescendo as he returned to the subject of the money he had lost.

"Two million dollars you cost me just because you wanted to have a good time!" he raged. "Did this Mr. Smith take you to the baseball game and the circus and Great America?" he screamed. "Did he? Answer me, god damn it!"

In his utter confusion and disarray, Reggie had no artifice left.

"Yes," he sobbed. "Yes, yes, yes!"

"I'm going to take that two million dollars out of your hide," he grated at the boy in a strange, twisted voice that had been reduced in volume to a kind of queer calm which was absolutely devoid of all humanity, and which was twice as terrifying as the screaming and yelling had been a moment before. Roger's face was deformed into a terrible mask with dark, bottomless holes for eyes, and a thin, bloodless mouth which looked like a razor gash.

"You're not ever going to go to college," he told the boy grimly. "You're going to make up that two million dollars in every way I can think of before you reach a legal age.

You'll never get any presents, you'll never go to a movie, you'll never be taken out to dinner, and you'll never ever go to a baseball game, or a circus, or an amusement park. I'm going to feed you the cheapest, nastiest food I can think of. You're going to wish in a thousand ways you had never chosen that Mr. Smith over me. And now you're going to get a licking you'll never forget!"

He removed the leather belt from his trousers as the boy cringed in absolute terror from this maniac who had once been his father.

Once having set a plan in motion, Tweeds was not one to tarry. He had accomplished the first part, that of enlisting the cooperation of Roger Lambeaux. The second was to isolate the boy so that a trap could be set for Smith. The friendship between him and the boy was the only leverage Tweeds had to work with. The F.B.I. were undoubtedly watching the Lambeaux residence, and Smith would have to know that, so it was necessary to have the boy moved to a place the F.B.I. didn't know about, so that Smith would be free to attempt a visit. With Lambeaux' help he could manage it, and Tweeds knew just the place. He picked up the phone and called a man he hadn't spoken with in two years.

When Reggie awoke in the early hours of the morning, he could remember nothing of the end of the evening. He tried to reconstruct what happened. He remembered his father removing his belt, but everything after that was a blank. He didn't remember the whipping at all, and he wondered if he had fainted or something and been spared his punishment, but when he moved his body experimentally, he could feel the searing pain in his back. He tried to get out of bed, but his muscles seemed unable to obey him. He couldn't even rise to a sitting position. Finally he managed to roll over onto his side, and he let himself slip onto the floor where he lay for a while. After a time he gathered the strength to rise to his knees and stagger to his feet. He stumbled to the mirror in the corner. The room was dark, but the shades had not been drawn, and the light from the streetlight outside was bright enough for him to see his image in the mirror. He was wearing his pajamas, and it still took an immense effort to crane his neck over his shoulder and raise his pajama top enough to see his back. It was crossed with deep red welts where the leather strap had cut into the flesh. He whimpered a little with concern as he saw the damage his father had done, but he was still in a state of shock. He hobbled painfully back to his bed and crawled under the covers, staying on his stomach in order to keep the pain to a minimum. He cried himself to sleep.

## Chapter 53

On Tuesday morning, Roger made a call to Frank Sabella. It took a while to get him, but he was in no hurry. He had been angry the night before. Now he was determined. He had been given the runaround long enough by these guys. Now it was his chance to get even.

"Mr. Lambeaux," said Frank, when he got to the phone. "Sorry to keep you waiting. What's up?"

"I'd like to know why I wasn't told about my boy escaping from the gang boss and returning to Smith. You told me you'd let me know everything my son told you, and you didn't. In fact, you even made a bargain with him not to tell me certain information. If it weren't for Reggie's honesty, I'd still be in the dark."

"I see. I'm surprised he told you about it. He seemed pretty frightened about you finding out. It was important that we know what went on, and it was the only way we could get the information from him - by agreeing to keep it confidential. I'm sure you can see what our position was."

"You could have subsequently told me."

"Not without alienating the boy and losing him as a source of information."

"You promised me prior to questioning him that you would inform me of everything he said."

"I couldn't keep that promise and find out what we needed to know. My job was to find Smith, not keep promises to you. I had to put first things first."

"And have you found him?" said Roger, feeling the control of the conversation slipping from his grasp, and driven to obloquy as a last resort.

"No, but we're getting pretty close. It may be a matter of days or weeks. It's hard to say."

"Well, I'm pretty pissed off at the way I've been treated. I'm the one who paid out the two million on your advice, and now I'm being kept in the dark."

"What good would all this information do you?" asked Frank, manfully suppressing his irritation. "You aren't a law enforcement officer. It's only as a courtesy that we keep you informed at all. And as for acting on my advice, that's all it was - advice. You were always the one who made the decisions."

"Well, I'm not so sure you're much of a law enforcement officer either," said Roger, losing his cool. "I'm pretty dissatisfied with the way you've screwed up this case. You may think you can ignore me, but I know people in high places, and I'm going to let them know about the piss-poor job you've done."

"You just do that, Mr. Lambeaux. I hope you write so many letters you get writer's cramp," said Frank, hanging up the phone.

He sat there for a while, then picked the phone up again.

"Hi, Vic," he said, when the call had gone through. "I just had a call from our buddy Roger Lambeaux. It appears he's learned about the boy's escape, and was quite irate at our not having told him about it. Short of torturing his son, which I wouldn't quite put past him, I can't imagine how he elicited that information from the boy. He seemed quite frightened of his father finding out."

"What do you think, Frank?"



"I know this sounds far-fetched, but I wonder if Roger Dodger has discovered another source of information."

"Now you've really got me on the edge of my seat. Who in the world could that be?"

"Tweeds," said Frank.

"That does sound far fetched," said Vic. "How d'you come up with *that* brilliancy?"

"Just assume that I'm right - that the boy would never tell his father. Who else would know about him calling Smith?"

"It's a long shot," said Vic.

"We may have been somewhat remiss in just bugging Lambeaux' home phone," said Frank. "He has a phone in his office as well, and I think it's about time I made a call to a certain Federal judge."

"It can't hurt to try, Frank. I hope something comes of it. I'd love to get something on that asshole. Still, how do you know he hasn't got a cell phone?"

"How would he get the number? On the other hand, Lambeaux' business phone is probably listed. I'd like to get something on that asshole myself. I'm really tired of hearing about 'friends in high places,'"

After he put the phone back in the cradle, Frank sat and thought, and the more he thought, the more he was convinced he was right. There was only one person who could be the source of that particular piece of information - the gang boss whom the boy had identified as 'Tweeds'. It was a fascinating development. Sometimes it wasn't only politics which made strange bedfellows. He was going to have to pay particular attention to Roger in the future. As Vic had said somewhat more crudely, it would be extremely gratifying to catch Mr. Lambeaux in any kind of legal irregularity.

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Around noon on Wednesday, a UPS van pulled up in front of the Lambeaux residence and double parked. The driver went around and opened up the back, emerging with a large, round cylindrical package. Roger answered the door, as Thelma was busy preparing lunch, and there was no point in derailing her train of concentration.

"Mr. Lambeaux?" asked the driver. "Would you please sign here, please."

The men on duty watching the house noted the event in their log. Later in the day one of them walked to a phone a couple blocks away and called Frank Sabella.

"You asked me to tell you about anything happening that was out of the ordinary. I don't know if the delivery of a package is unusual, but I thought I'd give you a ring anyway."

"What'd the package look like?"

"It was about four feet long and cylindrical, maybe a couple feet in diameter."

"Just about the size of four rolled-up canvases," said Frank.

"Exactly what I was thinking," replied the man on duty.

After he received the call, Frank sat and thought about it for a few minutes. Then he picked up the phone again and put in a call to Aldo Rivera. Luckily, Aldo happened to be in the office, planning on a late lunch after a full morning spent with Durning on the Williams case, and he answered the call on the third ring.

"Rivera here," he said into the receiver.

"Al, this is Frank. This is a little out of my jurisdiction, but I thought you might be interested. It has to do with our buddy Roger Lambeaux."

"Yeah? What's he done now?"

"I don't know for sure, but there's a good chance he may have broken a law or two. Do you have a list of the paintings that were stolen? And the sizes?"

"I don't, but I can probably get that info from Morgan and Bleier. Why?"

"I can't prove it, but I think old Roger Dodger may have just gotten his paintings back, and I don't think he plans on telling anyone."

"That's extremely interesting. I'd love to stick that asshole with any kind of malfeasance."

"I don't know how long he has to report it to the insurance company, but it might be worth our while to find out."

"Yeah. How can we possibly prove they're the same paintings? We'd need a search warrant."

"See if you can find some kind of basis for a warrant. Know any friendly judges?"

"I'll look into it," said Aldo. "Do you have any reason to suspect the package he received as containing the stolen canvases?"

"Maybe UPS can help us. They're sure to be insured. They also will have the name of the insurer."

"Great idea," said Aldo.

"Check it out. I suspect that our old buddy Roger has made some kind of unholy deal with Tweeds, but don't say anything to anyone. There are more important irons in the fire right now, but I think it'd be wise for us to lay the groundwork for some kind of action in the future."

"It would be a labor of love," Aldo told him. "I'll let you know as soon as I have any information. I also happen to know a couple of judges who are up for reelection."

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After the traumatic whipping on Monday, relations between Reggie and Roger appeared to revert to what they had been prior to the beating - Roger back to his position as wronged father, clinically detached from the situation, assured that he knew what was best for his son. He treated the boy as if Reggie had been responsible for the fact of the punishment, and added another role for himself in the sinister play he was directing - that of stern nurse, by coming to Reggie's room each night to apply lotions and salves to his son's back, in an apparent attempt to portray himself as a caring and adequate parent. Reggie was not equipped to analyze this bizarre turn of events, but he was confused and distrustful. He sensed that his father did not care for him, but in his need to feel loved he concealed it from himself. Still, he did not altogether buy his father's new role, and he began to distance himself psychologically if not physically from this creature who masqueraded as a father. He bore his father's ministrations with an outward show of calm, but inwardly he kept his own counsel. His fantasies about running away with Smith proliferated, and he bided his time for the next occasion when both his father and the maid were absent so that he could try once more to communicate with his friend. It was almost as if his father could read his thoughts, however, and there seemed to be no moment when both his captors were gone. He waited impatiently for the weekend, when

the maid was off, hoping that his father would also want to be off with his girl friend. If he had suffered from boredom and dissatisfaction prior to his recent beating, he was now beleaguered by them, and longed for a reprieve. He sometimes remembered with astonishment how he had, not so terribly long ago, wished to be away from the severities of the academy, and back home to taste a little freedom. Now the situation seemed to be reversed, and he almost longed for the summer to be over so he could be back at the academy.

On Thursday morning, his father returned once more to his office, and Reggie tried once more to call Smith. He had not been downstairs for the last several days except for dinner, having been banished to his own room for that period of time, and he chose a moment when Thelma appeared to be busy washing dishes to sneak down the staircase and into his father's study. He had seen the package being delivered the day before from his window, but he had not thought much about it. But now he saw that same package lying behind his father's desk, next to the waste basket, only now it was an empty shell. The shape, however, suggested what might have been inside it.

A couple years ago, his father had shown him where a set of spare keys was located, just in case something happened to him, and one of the keys was to the art vault in the basement. Reggie had a strong feeling that what had been inside the empty package was probably right now in the vault. The alarm system to the house wasn't on, so Reggie figured that unlocking the vault wouldn't set anything off. He felt sufficiently angry with his father that for once he wasn't too concerned about being in the wrong. He remembered which painting in his father's bedroom had the key taped on the back side.

The art vault had a musty smell in it. Reggie slipped inside. On the table inside lay a roll of canvases. He unwound the end of the roll, and saw the right side of a familiar painting – a hand grabbing the mane of a horse. He recalled which wall of the living room it had graced. He unwound it further and saw another piece of canvas he had seen before. The third and fourth canvases were equally familiar. He rerolled the bundle of paintings and tried to lay it in the same position he had found it. He let himself out and relocked the vault.

Back in his father's study, he picked up the phone, seeing Smith's number in his mind. He had just dialed the first three digits when the door opened suddenly, and there was Thelma, hands on hips, regarding him sternly.

"You know you aren't supposed to be making any telephone calls, young man," she said to him, staring at him with a combination of disapproval and concern. "I don't want to be the one responsible for you getting whupped again by your daddy, so I'm not going to say anything about this, but you get yourself back up to your room right this minute, you hear?"

So Reggie resignedly set the phone back in its cradle and walked back disconsolately to his room. Life was sometimes very unfair.

## Chapter 54

At the same time that Reggie was trying to make a phone call, Roger was receiving one. He had gotten to his office early, and had spent the morning shuffling and reshuffling the few papers on his desk. There had been a time when every moment in his office had been packed with things to do, when his days had been so jammed with events that he had had little time for much of a home life. It had been Cora's constant complaint that he was always home late from the office. For a long time now, but especially since the kidnapping, his involvement with his work had been considerably altered. The small group of individuals whose investments he had been managing so well the last several years had left him one by one, and the people to whom he had acted as advisor had gravitated to other stock management firms. He was still eminently successful, and owned a prestigious portfolio of prime stocks. Although he had played fast and loose in his early years, he had, over the last ten years, gradually moved his investments into blue chip stocks, with a lower yield and a safer position. His risk-taking in recent years had mostly been relegated to other people's money. As a result, he was sitting pretty, as far as his net worth was concerned, but he had precious little to do. He had realized for some time that he had no real need anymore for an office, but it had given him something to do, a pretense that he was still viable and active. Little by little, however, the few things he found to busy himself with each day had dwindled, and now he found himself pretending to be busy. It was therefore with a sense of relief that the intercom buzzed and he was rescued from his ennui by his secretary informing him that he had a call on line 2.

"Mr. Lambeaux?" said a familiar voice. "This is Mr. Green. How are you today, sir? I trust you received the items."

"Yes, yes. Thanks very much. I was very pleased to get them back."

"I have been thinking at some length about the things we discussed the other day, and I think I may have some ideas to try out on you."

"I'd like to hear them," said Roger.

"Well, I was thinking about the problem of your boy being constantly under the eagle eye of the agents who are keeping your house under surveillance, as that is probably serving as a deterrant to any efforts Mr. Smith might otherwise make in an effort to communicate with your son."

While Mr. Green was speaking, Roger realized that he as well was a deterrant to communications between his son and Smith. But Mr. Green continued to speak, and Roger went back to listening.

"A secondary problem is the likelihood of your home phone being tapped, as an endeavor on the part of the F.B.I. to intercept any attempted communication between the two. The only potential leverage you and I have over Mr. Smith is the relation he has with your son, and the only way we can manipulate that leverage is to isolate the boy in a place known to us and not to the F.B.I., and to allow the boy access to a telephone from which he can communicate with Smith, and which we can listen in on. It is my belief, as I mentioned to you in our last conversation, that the boy knows how to get in touch with Smith. I think I have come up with an ideal location to move the boy to, and would like to suggest it to you.

"I have an acquaintance who runs a psychiatric clinic for disturbed children. It is located in the northern part of the Napa Valley, in Helensville, which is a very small town

not far from St. Helena. This clinic is a relatively small one, with a staff of about twenty people and a capacity for about fifty children. It is properly registered with the state, has been active for about fifteen years, and is well-known and respected by the psychiatric community. The staff is composed of properly-trained and qualified psychiatrists and psychologists, as well as resident teachers for the children, and a small but effective nursing component. My reasons for suggesting it are twofold. First, that it could be seen as logical and appropriate for you to avail yourself of its facilities, in that your boy could be said to have suffered some trauma at the hands of his kidnappers, and to therefore need guidance and analysis to return to a normal life. Secondly, and more importantly, the man who runs this establishment is, as I have stated, a personal friend of mine, and one who would permit me to tape all calls made from, say, the one telephone which could be made accessible to the boy, perhaps in an adjoining room to the one where the boy was kept. This would allow us to set a trap for Smith. I had an amicable and fruitful conversation with this friend yesterday afternoon, in which the main lines of the idea were gone over, and there seemed to be little in the way of impediments. The clinic is a non-profit one, and normally accepts referrals from state agencies as well as poor families, but it does take private patients as well, at a substantial fee of course, which I would be willing to discreetly take care of. If you were to sign him over to their care for a brief period, say for a few weeks, we should be able to begin to lay our trap for the elusive Mr. Smith."

While Mr. Green was speaking, many thoughts flashed through Roger's mind. It would be a real solution to his problem of what to do with Reggie while spending entire weekends with Gloria, and it would make his week nights so much more pleasant not to have to deal with a recalcitrant child. His only concern was putting Reggie in a clinic before the welts on his back had gone away. The boy had certainly deserved the treatment he had gotten, but Roger was aware that child protection laws did not allow parents the latitude they used to, and he was concerned about being judged unfit. The marks had healed considerably already, however, and by this weekend should be greatly reduced. In another week, they would be completely healed. Time was on his side. Besides, Mr. Green's plan might result in the capture of Smith, which appealed to him immensely, and, what made it especially attractive, wouldn't cost him a dime.

"What's the next step, after you catch Smith?"

"Retrieve the money he stole from you and reimburse myself out of it for the expenses and grief he has caused me. He will have spent some of it, to be sure, but two million is a lot to spend. Since he doesn't believe in paying taxes, you can be sure it isn't in a bank account. What would you say to splitting what he has left? That would certainly represent a substantial loss to you, but, I assure you, it is a lot more than you could expect to get were the police to catch him."

"It sounds fair to me," said Roger, his spirits beginning to perk up at the thought of getting back at least some of what he had thought to be irretrievably lost. "What makes you think you would be more successful than the police?"

"The police are bound by an endless number of laws which protect the guilty as well as the innocent. I am not. I may also avail myself of a myriad of proven techniques for extracting information from unwilling people which the police are enjoined for various sentimental reasons from using. The sophisticated use of pain can achieve results which the traditional avenues of police inquiry cannot."

"What would you do with him after getting my . . . uh . . . that is - our, money back?" Roger's concerns about Smith were minimal. He was, however, fearful about being associated with murder.

"Let him go. I would have no further use for him. This was his one big chance to break out of the economic situation he was otherwise trapped in, by virtue of his background and limited talents and education. He is like a little fish one throws back into the water. He would go back to what he was doing in the first place, before he was fortunate enough to enjoy the security and guaranteed employment that came with being part of my organization. He would return to working as a freelancer for nickels and dimes, and eventually, as is the fate of all freelancers, he would be caught by the inefficient but inevitable net of circumstance and police procedure, and eventually brutalized by the system of criminal prosecution and punishment which poses as social correction. He would lose that virginity of which he is so inordinately proud, of never having been caught."

Roger thought about it all for a minute. He obviously had nothing to lose, and Mr. Green did not sound as if he were going to murder Smith. He liked the idea of recouping some of his losses, and it was obvious that half a partially-eaten loaf was better than none. He especially liked the idea of getting even with Smith.

"Well, I can't think of any objections to what you propose. When would you suggest we start?"

"How about tomorrow? I realize that is somewhat short notice, but we have no guarantee Mr. Smith will stay long in this area. I believe in striking while the iron is hot."

"Okay. I have no outstanding commitments right now. All I need to do is pack a small suitcase for my boy. You will have to give me instructions."

"Certainly. I assume you know how to get to Napa Valley. Highway 29 for starters. I suggest you consult a road map on how to get to Helensville. Do you have a pencil and paper? It is called the Marjorie Dowling Clinic for Pediatric Behavioral Modification, and it is located at 5414 Laney Drive, Helensville. It is about a mile from town. Once you are there, anyone can tell you how to get to the clinic. It is a very small town. The main street is only four blocks long. If you would like, I could arrange reservations for you at the Admiral Benbow Inn. It is quite close to the clinic. I plan on staying there myself, and we could get together for some in-depth discussions."

"Yes. That appeals to me. I don't care much for long drives, and I would like very much to meet you. What time should Reggie be delivered to the clinic?"

"How about four in the afternoon? That would give them time to register him and assign him a room, and he would be able to join them for the six o'clock meal in the patient dining room. After dropping him off, return to town by the same route, and you won't be able to miss the Benbow Inn. It's also on Laney Road, about a quarter mile from the clinic. They have an excellent restaurant, and we could meet for dinner, say about seven. I'll call ahead and make reservations for both of us. There should be no problem. They are seldom full, and I know the manager well. Is all of that acceptable to you, Mr. Lambeaux?"

"It sounds great. Frankly, I'm really tired of all this waiting around I've had to go through with the police, especially since it doesn't look as if they'll ever catch Smith, with all their bungling. It would be nice to have some real action for a change."

"I'm pleased we could see eye to eye on these matters," said Mr. Green. "Until tomorrow then."

"Until tomorrow," echoed Roger.

## Chapter 55

Late Tuesday afternoon, Tweeds had his chauffeur drive him to the Oakland airport. The day had been slightly overcast, but moderately warm and a trifle on the humid side, so Tweeds had his man turn on the air conditioning. If there was anything he hated it was sweating.

The plane from New York was on time, and he stood at the gate, watching the passengers emerge, keeping an eye out for the man with the pink carnation in his lapel. He was also looking for slightly oriental features, as he had been told his man was half Korean. There he was, striding towards him, tall, with a muscular build, short hair, intelligent features, with a small carnation gracing a well-made suit which was a size too small, carrying a small bag. Except for the ill-fitting suit, he could have been a businessman on vacation.

"Mr. Tweeds?" the man asked, looking at him with keen, cold eyes.

"Mr. Parker?" asked Tweeds. It seemed strange that a person who was so obviously oriental would have a name like Parker. "Should we go pick up your bags?"

"This is it," said Mr. Parker, motioning toward the flight bag with a nod of his head. "I believe in traveling light."

"I trust you had a pleasant journey," said Tweeds, leading the way down the long, nearly-empty corridor.

"We had a good tail wind, so it wasn't quite as long as I had expected. It only took about five and a half hours."

"A long trip," said Tweeds.

"In my business, one becomes accustomed to flying," said Mr. Parker pleasantly, showing all his teeth when he smiled.

Later that evening, Frank and Vic listened to a playback of the conversation between Roger and Tweeds. They had invited Aldo to join them, but he was busy visiting his ex-partner Stan at the hospital, and had promised to call them later to hear what particulars they had to offer him. Frank found the conversation fascinating. Afterwards, he and Vic retired to a local coffee shop for hamburgers and a discussion of what they had heard on the tape.

"Seems as if Tweeds is doing all our work for us," said Frank between bites.

"Yes. I doubt if we could have arranged it as well ourselves."

"We'll have to reassign some operatives. I suggest we call off the agents watching the house. We could also use some help up north."

"Aldo will be happy. He's been asking subtle questions about the surveillance teams for some time now. I guess his boss has been putting a little pressure on him. How much help do you think we need?"

"Two agents ought to do it. Besides ourselves, that is. You and I could almost handle it alone, but then we wouldn't get any sleep. This is liable to become a round-the-clock operation. Perhaps we should try for some accommodations at this Admiral Benbow Inn. It sounds as if it's well located if we're to keep an eye on the Dowling Clinic. We'll have to be careful, however, if we arrive on Wednesday. We don't want Roger to see us. With Tweeds we're safe, as we haven't yet encountered him. Or rather he us. That name Admiral Benbow sounds familiar, but I can't place it."



"Treasure Island," said Vic.

"You mean as in San Francisco Bay?"

"No. I mean as in Robert Louis Stevenson."

"Oh. No kidding. Jesus, I must have read that when I was ten years old. I don't remember any Admiral Benbow Inn."

"It was where the story started out. I probably have a slight advantage over you. I read it to my son Terence when he was six, which is about fifteen years ago."

"Well, anyway. About getting some extra help, I was thinking about Bob Randolph and Tom Spiers. I talked to Bob yesterday and he's between assignments. I don't know about Spiers. I'll have to check with Johns on that."

Johns was the Agent In Charge for the six western states. He was responsible for making all the assignments in the area.

"Yeah. I've worked with Randolph before. He's pretty sharp. I've never heard of Spiers, though."

"I worked with Spiers on an L.A. assignment once. He's not brilliant, but he's thorough and painstaking. You can trust him to carry something through."

"It's too bad we won't be able to listen in on that Friday night conversation between Tweeds and Lambeaux. I'd love to know how Tweeds plans on capturing Smith."

"Me, too. I'd suggest bringing the manager in on it, so we could have the ma'tre de escort them to a bugged table, but it sounds as if the manager is pretty chummy with Tweeds, and we couldn't risk tipping him off."

"Yeah. but we can at least bug their rooms."

"Right. I'll have to get an electronics man up there as soon as we've established ourselves at the inn."

"Perhaps we should arrive there before Lambeaux gets there. Maybe in the early afternoon."

"Not a bad idea. It might give us a head start on them. You gonna be at home tonight?"

"Yeah. They're rerunning the old Streets Of San Francisco on channel 40. The new series doesn't interest me so much since they got rid of Michael Douglas."

"You're kidding. You really watch crap like that?"

"Just for fun. It's kind of nice seeing justice triumph for a change."

"I guess. You figure on picking up some tips on police procedure?"

"Come on, Frank. You know as well as I do that television script writers don't know beans about real police work. It's just as well! Think of all the criminals who sit around watching crime dramas on the boob tube."

"Good point. Although I've often wondered how many bright ideas by script writers actually do get carried out by real criminals."

"I'll bet it's happened more than once. It's one of the shortcomings of the dissemination of information in a free society. There are several books on the market right now describing how easy it would be for a third world nation to assemble an atomic bomb and transport it in pieces to any city in the world. All they need is a mechanism to fire a uranium bullet into a block of uranium just below critical mass."

"Jesus. That is a scary thought. Well. I'll give you a call around nine or ten then. In the meantime, I'd better get hold of Johns."

"Right," said Vic, signalling to the waitress.

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On Friday morning, Tweeds arose somewhat earlier than was his wont. The day was overcast and the house chilly. Instead of his usual practice of parading around for half the day in his pajamas and dressing gown, he dressed in warm clothing and slippers and padded down to the dining room, where he found that his house guest had already preceded him, with a cup of coffee in front of him, and busily reading the front section of the morning Tribune. Tweeds concealed as best he could his irritation toward someone taking his paper before he had first had a look at it. He reminded himself, however, that this was a temporary situation, and that, although he had hired the man, he was by no means an ordinary employee.

"Good morning," said his guest, showing his impeccable set of teeth once again.

"Morning," responded Tweeds, struggling to contort his countenance into the facsimile of a smile. "I trust you slept well."

"Yes, I did," said Mr. Parker. "It's unusually quiet up here in the woods. I went out jogging earlier, a good way to build up an appetite."

Tweeds shivered inwardly at the thought of being out in the damp and chill.

An enormously fat man entered, wearing a cook's hat, and bearing a steaming plate of food, which he set down in front of Mr. Parker. Tweeds had been very firm from the start that the cook must wear this hat at all times that he was engaged in his duties. One of Tweeds' greatest phobias was discovering an errant hair in the midst of an otherwise elegant omelet.

Mr. Parker placed the newspaper to the side, and, seeming to forget Tweeds, attacked the food with great gusto. The cook, having discharged his first obligation of the day, turned his baby blue eyes in the direction of his employer. He never knew how exotic Mr. Tweeds' culinary requests might be, but he had a well-stocked larder, and there were few dishes he was not prepared to serve up at a moment's notice. Fortunately, breakfasts in the Tweeds household tended more towards the mundane.

"The usual, Mr. Tweeds?"

"Yes, but make it a brie omelet, and perhaps you could include some of that smoked salmon, if there is any left over from yesterday. And let me have raspberry pancakes instead of blueberry."

"Two or three?"

"Make it three. And brew up a fresh pot of Kona. I've got a busy day ahead of me."

The cook nodded silently and retired to the kitchen. Tweeds had been lucky in getting him. He had been one of the more talented graduates of the San Francisco Culinary Academy at the time of his hire, and could have made a name for himself at one of the better restaurants. The possibility of immediate employment at a high salary had wooed him away from the seductions of public success and a claim to fame.

While Tweeds was drinking his morning coffee and reading the financial section of the newspaper, which his guest had been kind enough to share with him, he took time out to ring his valet, who also subbed as butler on those mornings that Tweeds breakfasted alone.

"Pack my bags," he told the somber and lanky individual who appeared as if by conjury from the dark recesses of the house beyond. I'll be gone for about a week. Use your judgement. I'll be wearing the gray worsted suit. You can lay that out for me.

"Yes, sir. Ought I to include a top coat as well?"

"No. It should be fairly warm in the wine country at this time of year. Oh," he added as the man turned to go, "and when you have everything packed, put it in the car. We'll be leaving in about an hour. By the way, have you seen George this morning?"

"Yes, sir. I believe he's having breakfast in the kitchen."

"Excellent," said Tweeds. George was his chauffeur, and the kitchen was the place where all his hired help ate.

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On the other side of the bay from Tweeds' residence, it was also cold, and it was foggy as well. Reggie lay on his bed, dawdling over The Great Dinosaur Atlas once more, and listening to the voices of the foghorns, plaintively booming across the wet spaces of empty air. He liked to pretend that it was the Mesozoic age, and that they were elasmosaurs, calling to each other. He had just finished breakfast, and had come up to his room immediately afterwards. His father had fortunately forgotten his vow to feed Reggie nothing but cheap nasty food. Reggie guessed that if Thelma weren't around, he might have made good on his threat.

He was getting extremely bored with the reading material at his disposal. When his mother had lived with them, there had been periodic trips to the library, but his father was not much of a reader, except perhaps for the business section of the paper, which he zealously studied every morning at breakfast, or the Wall Street Journal, which he devoured every evening. Reggie's mother had also bought him books, many of them beyond his age level, so that even though she had been gone for a couple years, he had been able to eke it out. But now he had grown too sophisticated for them, and even his childrens' encyclopedia, of some twenty slim volumes, had become too simple for his enquiring mind. He longed for something to get his teeth into. Something more like Watership Down, or Tarzan and the Ant Men. He was looking forward to Monday, when his friend, Jack would be back from summer camp. He hadn't figured out yet how he would manage to call him. His father didn't seem to be at work as much lately. Today he was down in his study.

It was shortly after lunch, when he and his father were still sitting at the dining room table, and Thelma was just clearing away the dishes, that his father told Thelma to pack Reggie's suitcase for him.

"Better include at least ten changes of underwear and socks. He'll also need a couple light jackets, and maybe a sweater or two. You'd better include five pairs of denim pants, and an equal number of sport shirts. Also a couple pairs of shoes, and maybe his tennis shoes as well. I don't think there'll be enough room in his suitcase for all that, so take one of his mother's old suitcases from the guest room closet as well."

"Yes Mr. Lambeaux. You want me to make a list? I'm not sure as I can remember all that. And do you want me to do that right away, or should I finish the dishes first?"

"That won't be necessary." Thelma's small attempt at irony was completely lost on him. "Just do the best you can. And yes, finish the dishes first. We won't be leaving right this minute."

"Where are we going, Dad?" Reggie asked his father.

"We aren't going anywhere," said Roger, emphasizing the 'we'. "You're the one who's going."

There was something vaguely nasty in his father's tone of voice that warned him not to continue his questions.

"You can pack your toilet kit," Roger told him, as if to imply that Reggie wasn't old enough or sufficiently competent to pack the rest of his things, which he had been doing now by himself for the last couple years, every time he had to prepare to return to the academy. "Make sure you include your toothbrush and toothpaste. Better do it now. You've got to be ready in an hour."

Reggie was besieged by concern and curiosity about where his father was going to send him. He sensed that under his father's apparent calm was a great deal of unexpressed anger, and he wondered what kind of penance he was going to be obliged to pay to assuage that anger. He fantasized about being sent to a prison for children, but he was old enough to know such places didn't exist. Perhaps he was going to be sent back to the academy. Somehow he didn't think so. He brushed his teeth before putting his toothbrush in the small leather toilet kit. Brushing his teeth after every meal was something his mother had always strongly impressed upon him. Then he went into his bedroom to help Thelma with his stuff. They didn't say anything to each other. They both knew by Roger's mood that he wouldn't like it, and he had been so unpredictable lately, appearing suddenly to check up on one or the other of them, that they both instinctively refrained from unnecessary conversation. There was one thing that Reggie wanted to bring with him. He went to his desk and got the letter from his mother. He folded it up small and stuck it in his back pocket where it wouldn't be noticed.

## Chapter 56

At noon, Tweeds had his chauffeur drive him and Mr. Parker up to Helensville, and on to the Admiral Benbow Inn. The high overcast above the Bay Area gradually thinned out. By the time they reached the Napa Valley, the sky was an uninhibited blue, and the sun shone hotly, converting what would have been a monotonous landscape into an intense riot of color. Row upon row of grape vines opened up as the car sped past, like the pickets on a fence, overladen with a rich crop of fruit. Soon they would all be picked and sitting in large vats, waiting to turn slowly into wine. Mr. Parker sat silently, absorbed in everything he saw. Once he pointed to some balloons in the distance, rich blobs of color moving serenely together against the blue background. He turned and smiled at Tweeds, still pointing, as if Tweeds might not have seen them also.

They reached the Benbow Inn a little before two. Tweeds had reserved rooms for them both, as well as for the chauffeur, and they dropped Mr. Parker off, while Tweeds continued on by himself to the Dowling Clinic.

Dr. Mueller was sitting behind his desk when the secretary showed Tweeds in. He was a large man, but he sat in a hunched fashion, and his entire being seemed to be focussed through an extremely thick pair of eye glasses. A mane of white swept from a receding hair line down to his shoulders. He rose to his feet and waved his visitor to a chair.

"Please sit down, John. It's been what - only two years since I last saw you? I was hoping it would be a little longer."

"Hello, Carl. It's good to see you." Tweeds offered his large hand which was ignored by Dr. Mueller. "You always have to have your little joke." He looked around as he sat down. "The office has been redecorated since I was last here. You must be doing well."

"We had it repainted, that's all. And yes, we're doing all right. But that isn't why you're here, is it? To tell me my office looks nice." He removed his glasses and polished them with a piece of tissue paper from a box on his desk, squinting blindly at his visitor.

"I explained the situation to you on the phone," said Tweeds. "A man by the name of Lambeaux will be bringing his son here today for a short stay - three weeks at the most. For examination and treatment. He's the boy who's just been recovered from his kidnappers. You told me you'd find room for him."

"Yes, yes," said Dr. Mueller, breathing onto his spectacles, and pulling out another piece of tissue paper to have another go at polishing them. "You said you wanted something special in the way of accommodations. Just how special?"

"I need a room which is close to a telephone. And I also need a second room where a subordinate of mine could be temporarily housed."

"You didn't say anything to me about this subordinate," said Dr. Mueller, finally satisfied with his cleaning job, and replacing his spectacles on the bridge of his nose, peered intently at his visitor, as if seeing him for the first time.

"He'll just be staying nights. The rest of the time he'll spend at a local motel. He'll report at eight each evening, and leave at eight the next morning, so he should be no trouble."

"What would be the purposes of his being here?"

"To keep watch over the boy, and to intercept any attempt to illegally remove the boy from the premises."

"So you think someone might try?"

"I'm counting on it," said Tweeds, with a sparkle in his eye.

"Would there be any violence? You know I abhor violence."

"I can guarantee that it would be extremely minimal. The subordinate to whom I am referring happens to be a five-degree black belt."

Dr. Mueller arched his eyebrows. "So there would be no firearms involved."

"I doubt it. The man for whom I am setting the trap is well-known for his aversion to such things."

"So the whole purpose of this setup, from start to finish, is to catch a particular man whom you know, at least by reputation."

"He's the man who kidnapped the boy in the first place,"

"How unusual. Wasn't the first attempt successful?"

"It was. To the tune of two million dollars."

A brief pause ensued, as Dr. Mueller assessed the situation.

"So the kidnapper wants more money?"

"No. He wants the boy."

"This is all highly irregular. If the man is a malefactor, why not use the services of the police?"

"Because the police have tried and failed. And because the man has something that I want."

"The two million dollars, I dare say," said Dr. Mueller rather sternly. "I was hoping," he went on with a note of sadness in his voice, "that that little favor I did for you two years ago would have squared accounts between us. Will your hold over me never stop? I have established a legitimate, respectable business here. How much longer must I be subjected to requests from you for these little favors?"

"The little favor you refer to was very much appreciated by me, but it was gratuitous on your part. I hope you do not regret it."

"No. Of all the questionable things I've done I probably regret it the least. The boy was a natural, and he was so inculcated in his behavior patterns there was little we could do to alter them. When he was arrested by the Los Angeles police he had already been soliciting sex for a good two years. When his parents brought him here I made it clear to them that there was little we could do. It was only a question of time before he escaped to go back to the life he had created for himself. I felt I was, in a way, only doing him a favor in directing him towards an establishment which would protect him to a degree, and at the same time offer him something in the way of security and medical care, not to speak of a lucrative salary which would enable him to pursue his career in the arts. There was also the consideration of saving him from further indoctrination into drugs and street crime."

"It was a wise decision on your part. I hope there has been no unpleasant aftermath."

"No, not really. His parents kicked up a little fuss at first about his supposed running away, and they hired a local detective who pestered us for a while, but it's all died down by now. The police gave us no trouble."

"Then it was a salubrious gesture all around."

"I had hoped it would be your last request."

"Would it make you feel better about things, Carl, if I told you this would be the last?"

"If I truly believed you, I'd take the day off and celebrate."

"Then believe me."

"Is that a promise?"

"On a stack of Bibles,"

"I don't think the Bibles would reassure me particularly," said Dr. Mueller with a wry smile. "The promise all by itself will have to do. To return to the business at hand, you mentioned a need for a room close to a telephone. How about the room which adjoins this one?"

"Certainly. What's it used for presently?"

"Just a place for me to nap. I slept there nights when we were first getting started. Now that I live in the area, I don't use it much. You think it might do?"

"Let's see it," said Tweeds, getting up from his chair.

Dr. Mueller arose and walked over to a side door. He opened it and motioned his visitor inside. A small room lay beyond. Its furniture was sparse - a bed, a dresser, a sink against the wall. A further door opened onto the hallway.

"Bathroom?"

"Just down the hall. It's for the entire staff. We don't have too many frills here."

"It's ideal. Could you leave the connecting door to the office open at night?"

"No problem. Just so long as he doesn't go through my files."

"He's a fairly honest boy, from what I can tell. You should have no problem on that score. There's just one other thing."

"What's that?"

"We'd need to record all outgoing calls made at night."

"It's set up for that already. There's a tape recorder in the right-hand desk drawer which is activated when the phone is picked up. I like to record all my phone conversations."

"Better and better. I've seen what I need to here." He followed his host back into the office, and the two of them resumed their seats.

"You mentioned a subordinate staying here as well. Does he have to be located near the boy?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, this seems to be your lucky day. There's a room on the other side which is a mirror image of the one you just inspected. They were both meant for live-in staff, but neither has been used as such for several years. Right now it serves as a storage room for files. There isn't much space left, but it still has a bed and a washstand."

"Fine. I'll send him round this evening about eight. Will there be anyone on duty who can let him in?"

"I'll give his name to the night nurse. She can have one of the orderlies bring him up here and show him to his room."

"It's ideal. His name is Parker. Gordon Parker. No, no, don't get up," he said to his host. "I can find my way out."

## Chapter 57

During the entire drive, Reggie was eaten up by a terrified curiosity about their destination and what was going to happen to him. His sporadic attempts to elicit information from his rather grim-faced father didn't satisfy him much. The answers, when his questions did not meet with silence, were mostly non-committal. He sat back and surveyed the scenery with an edgy equanimity. Every so often, he would forget himself and try another question.

"Did I do something wrong again, Dad?"

"Have you done anything right, lately, son?"

"Where are you taking me, Dad?"

"You'll see when we get there, son."

"How long will they keep me there?"

"Until you learn to be a good boy again and stop lying."

So Reggie relapsed into a scared silence, watching the rolling yellow hills and small housing tracts turning into flat green vineyards and farmhouses, the sky gradually becoming transformed from a high overcast into a deep blue. It started to become hot, so he removed his sweater. It was strange to feel so awful on such a beautiful day.

He noticed the signs as they passed them. Highway 101 to 116 to 37 to 29. He knew they were in the Napa Valley, but not sure exactly where. Finally they came to the outskirts of Helensville, where they slowed down, and stopped briefly at a gas station, where his father had the car gassed up while he got directions, and Reggie used the restroom, which was around in back. For just a crazy minute he thought about running, but there was nowhere to run. In every direction were empty fields, with nothing to hide behind, and his father could run a lot faster than he could. He was hypnotized with terror. He walked as if he were in a weird nightmare back to the waiting car where the door stood open. He pulled the door shut after himself and fastened his seat belt while his silent father got in on the other side.

The grim journey continued. They wound their way up a narrow road through more vineyards, passing a few farm houses and a large motel. His father was looking carefully at the numbers on the mailboxes at each intersection as they passed. Finally one of the numbers seemed to be the right one, and they made a left turn off the road they had been travelling, passing between a pair of large gate posts with a sign stretched between them. He started to read THE MARJORIE DOWLING CLINIC FOR PED . . . , but they left it behind a little too quickly for him to make out the rest of the name. The car drove up a winding, paved, one-lane road for a quarter of a mile, with more grape vines on both sides. There were a few glimpses of a giant, ominous stone building in the distance, and as they got closer, it seemed to become still larger. Finally it was right on top of them. It looked like it was more than a hundred feet high, at least two hundred feet wide, and maybe three times as long, and it looked like a scary place to be locked up in.

In front was a small parking lot with individual stalls on one side and public parking on the other. Roger pulled the car into one of the public slots, set the handbrake, and got out, motioning for Reggie to accompany him. Reggie unfastened the seat belt in a dream, stumbling out of the car toward his waiting father.

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"Roger Lambeaux, this is Gordon Parker. Mr. Parker is an associate of mine. I've told him about our situation." Tweeds sat back, allowing his two guests to size each other up.

"You are a businessman, I understand," said Mr. Parker, his expansive smile exposing a large set of gleaming white teeth. "Just what kind of business are you in?"

"Investment. Stocks and bonds. I was in corporate management for a while. Now I'm just a consultant. What line of work are you in?"

Mr. Parker hesitated a minute. "Mousetraps," he said enigmatically, with another brilliant smile.

"Are you in the production end, or research and development?" asked Roger, trying to keep his end of the conversation up, but having a strong feeling Mr. Parker was pulling his leg.

"Like you, I am a consultant," said Mr. Parker, the radiance of his smile somewhat abated, but his eyes still gleaming. "Right now I am doing a little field testing." He took a sip from his wine glass. "This is an excellent wine, Mr. Tweeds," he told his host.

"Thank you, Mr. Parker," said Tweeds. "Silver Oak has won many prizes. This is an especially good year. More wine, Mr. Lambeaux?"

On the other side of the dining room, Bob Randolph and Rick Schoonover had joined Vic and Frank. Bob and Rick had just been assigned by Johns to assist them. They were huddled around the table, poring over the menus the waiter had just given them.

"That's sure a great beard and moustache you're sporting, Frank," said Bob Randolph with a grin.

"I hope so. It would ruin everything if Lambeaux recognized me. Tweeds has never seen me, so as soon as Lambeaux leaves I'm gonna remove all this goddam fake hair. It's really uncomfortable."

"I wouldn't worry about it. Lambeaux has his back turned towards us, anyway. Who's the oriental-looking guy sitting next to Tweeds?"

"I've never seen him till today," said Vic Jeeter, sporting a red beard and dark glasses, his normally blond hair dyed the same color as the beard. "Maybe he's some outside talent Tweeds brought in to handle Smith. He looks lethal to me. I sure wish we could listen in on their conversation."

"When are the electronics guys showing up to bug their rooms?" asked Rick Schoonover.

"Johns assured me they'd be here tonight," said Frank. "You sure Lambeaux can't see us? I'm really hungry, but the minute I go to order, they're going to take this menu away from me, and I'll have nothing to hide behind." He smiled to show he was kidding.

"In that getup your own mother wouldn't recognize you," Bob Randolph assured him.

"That oriental guy is quite the athlete," said Vic. "I was watching him working out with the weights earlier today."

"They got a gym here?" asked Bob.

"Sure," said Vic. "They've also got hot springs as well as indoor and outdoor swimming pools."

"I'm gonna really enjoy this assignment," said Rick. "Last gig I was on I spent the whole time in a crummy basement, fighting off the rats and cockroaches."

"Where was that?" asked Frank.

"Down in Frisco," said Rick. "We were checking out a drug ring operating out of the Mission."

"How long is this assignment likely to last?" asked Bob.

"Probably not more than a week," said Frank. "Maybe as much as two max. You guys better get in all the swimming you can in the next couple days. Tweeds' purpose is to catch Smith, this other crook we've been telling you about. He's using Lambeaux' kid, Reggie as bait. He had Lambeaux put his kid in the Dowling Clinic for observation, but the real reason was to freeze us out of the picture and set a trap for Smith. Everybody's waiting now for the kid to call Smith. That's when Tweeds and his new guy will set their trap, with the boy as cheese. The whole thing depends on whether Smith bites."

"So the kidnapper and the kid ended up becoming buddies," said Bob.

"In addition to the thief and his victim," said Vic.

"Right," said Frank. "It's a strange world, isn't it?"

"You can lower the menu now, Frank," said Vic. "Looks like their dinners have arrived. They'll be too busy eating to notice us."

"Somebody catch that waiter's attention," said Frank. "I'm starving."

## Chapter 58

Before the age of automobiles, Helensville was what they would have called a one-horse town. It had one principal thoroughfare, appropriately named Main Street, with four cross streets - First, Second, Elm, and Fourth. The three blocks of Main Street between First and Fourth had approximately ten business establishments - a post office, a variety store, a small movie theater which had been converted into a church, an ice cream parlor, a real estate office, two bars, and three restaurants. One bar was at one end of Main, the other on the other end. This ensured that motorists travelling in either direction had an equal chance of getting picked up for drunk driving, although that chance was minimized by the presence of only two police cars, one of which periodically cruised the main streets in a leisurely style, keeping an eye out for malefactors who kept different hours from the cops, while the second was out near the intersection with the main highway watching for speeders to supply the necessary funds to keep the city treasury from going into bankruptcy. There were also two gas stations, but they hardly counted, being as they were some distance away from the center of town.

Like St. Helena, Helensville was named after Mount St. Helena, but it was a good deal smaller. Like St. Helena, it, too, was surrounded by vineyards. There the comparison stopped. St. Helena was a tourist town. The only tourists in Helensville were people who had gotten lost and were trying to find their way back to highway 29, the main thoroughfare through the wine country. There was an Admiral Benbow Inn, a few miles out of town, where tourists did go, for the hot springs, the swimming pool, and the three star restaurant.

Smith pulled his rentacar up to the curb when he passed Fourth Street. The commercial part of town apparently ended there, as he could see nothing but a few blocks of old residential section up ahead. He got out and stretched his limbs, feeling the heat in the air and the hot sun on his back. He had to find out what he could of the Marjorie Dowling Clinic, and he hoped he would find someone who could give him some information without asking why he wanted to know.

He walked slowly back toward the few blocks of shops. Few in the way of local residents were present, except for a couple smart dogs lying in the shade and a couple dumb people standing talking in the sun. There were few passing cars. Movement was at a minimum. Smith took off his coat and slung it over his shoulder, futilely mopping the sweat from his face with an increasingly soggy handkerchief.

The Two Ball Inn was the only place which promised a little local activity inside, judging by the number of cars parked out back and the muted thump thump of a rock group on the jukebox. The thrift shop next to it was boarded up, and two teenage girls in jeans and skimpy halters were in Harmon's Variety Store sampling cosmetics. The small hotel had been converted into rented rooms for retired folks, and the real estate office had a small sign which said the agent would be back in fifteen minutes. The first block ended in a couple private houses. On the corner of Elm Street was an ice cream shop, which seemed to be doing a small but brisk business with a group of overfed, local youngsters licking away at double-decker cones with seventeen flavors running down the backs of their hands.

A couple old people sitting over tepid cups of coffee stared suspiciously out at him through the dirty windows of Elmer's Cafe as he passed. Then he came to a ramshackle

old building whose rooms had been let out to small businesses. The ground floor contained Karen's Kopy Shoppe and Ray's Barber Shop. The second floor offered Madame Sousa, who specialized in the Tarot and Palmistry, and to his great surprise there was also the office of a one-man detective agency. What unfathomable crime wave in this crossroads corner of the world could keep a private eye sleuthing for more than twenty minutes a day? Nevertheless he directed his feet up the dusty set of stairs which led to the second floor.

At the far end of the dark upper hallway, a window had been left ajar, which created the barest of breezes and made it just slightly cooler than the insufferable heat of the street outside. Madame Sousa seemed to be closed for the day, presumably having already had her quota of sweaty palms, but Howard Berman, Private Investigator was, from the look of things, ostensibly open for business. A small scrap of paper taped to the door said BACK IN FIVE MINUTES. Smith tried the door and found it unlocked. Inside was a small, single room with a desk and two chairs. He chose the soft chair behind the desk in preference to the hard one reserved for guests and sat down. It was stuffy. There was no air conditioning in the building and no windows in the room. Smith sat and sweated, thinking about what had brought him to this rightfully-neglected part of the world.

It had been just the night before that he had received the call from Reggie. He had been up late reading and had just fallen asleep when his cell phone rang.

"Smith?" asked a familiar voice.

"Is that you, Sport?" said Smith, laying his book open face down on the bed in the way that Sheila was always nagging him about.

"You gotta help me get out of here, Smith!" said Reggie, in an urgent, anxious, terrified whisper.

"Whoa, there," said Smith. "Slow down and tell me first where you are."

"I'm in some kind of mental hospital, I guess. For kids."

"How'd you get there?"

"Dad brought me here. He was real mad at me and wouldn't tell me anything about it. It's a real weird place, I mean the other kids here are pretty weird. The teachers and nurses are all real nice to me, but they won't tell me when I am going to be let out."

"Tell me where you are."

"It's, it's the Marjorie Dowling Clinic for something or other. I can't remember. Just a minute, I think there's a letter on the desk. I'll have to light another match." There was a moment of silence.

"I found some more matches in the desk drawer. It took almost a whole pack of matches just to find the phone and dial your number. I don't dare turn on the lights. There's some strange oriental guy who sleeps at night in the room opposite mine. I think he's supposed to keep track of me or something."

There was another pause, and then Reggie was back on the line. "It says the MARJORIE DOWLING CLINIC FOR PEDIATRIC BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION." He stumbled a little over some of the words. "The address is 5414 Laney Drive. It's in some place called Helensville. I'm scared of where Dad might send me to when I get out of here. He's been so mad at me."

"What did you do to make him mad at you?"

"The FBI agents musta told him about me calling you up instead of him when I got away from those guys who took me away from you and Sheila. He was awful mad. He gave me a real whipping for it. I really hate him, Smitty." The boy was clearly in tears.

"Tell me about this place they're keeping you at? Did you see it from the outside?"

"Yeah, when Dad drove me up here. It's in a big building that looks like a castle."

"What's around the castle?"

"Vines for growing grapes. They have them tied to sticks so they won't fall down. They're planted in rows. There's hundreds and hundreds of them growing around here. But I just saw them from the car when Dad was taking me here. He wouldn't tell me why I was coming here. He kept saying I was a liar and liars had to be punished, over and over again. He acted kinda scary and I was afraid to find out more about it."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm in some kind of office next to the room where they keep me. I sneaked in when everybody seemed to be asleep."

"You're in a room by yourself?"

"Yeah. Most of the other kids live in the dormitory."

"Which floor are you on?"

"There's a first floor and a second one, and I'm on top of the second floor. Dad told me that the first floor is always the ground floor, so I don't know whether I'm on the third floor or not."

"You're on the third floor. Are there any windows you can see out of?"

"Yeah, but it's dark, and I haven't ever been in here in the daytime. There aren't any windows in my room. There's nobody on this floor at night except me and the oriental guy. It's really creepy. I don't like it here, Smith." He started blubbing again, quietly.

"Hey, Sport. You gotta help me so I can help you. Okay?"

"Okay, Smitty." He was snivelling now, but a little over his momentary hysteria.

"That's the boy. Remember - I'm your pal, and together we can lick this thing. Just don't forget that."

"Oh, and Smitty. You remember those paintings that got stolen?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, they're back. I found them in my father's art vault down in the basement. A guy from UPS returned them the other day."

"That's really interesting. Well, look, pal. I'm gonna get you out of there as soon as I can. Remember that. It's Sunday now. You sleep in the same room every night? No exceptions?"

"Yeah, all the time, Smitty. At nine o'clock every night."

"Okay. Do they check to make sure you put on your pajamas?"

"No. They never come up here at all. I have to be dressed and in the cafeteria every morning at eight o'clock, and I'm not allowed downstairs at night. They got some guards who walk around, checking up on things."

"Could you sleep in your clothes?"

"Sure. They'd never know."

"Can you change your clothes every morning so they won't notice you're sleeping in 'em?"

"Sure. I could do that, Smitty."

"And keep a pair of shoes handy. And a coat. Don't lie awake waiting for me. I can't tell you when I can rescue you. It might be in the middle of the night. It's gotta be while you're in that room, though. You gotta buck up now. It won't happen for a few days yet, but it won't hurt if you start getting ready for it now. In the meantime, however, you gotta hang in there. You're the man on the spot. Pretend like you're a secret agent who's been captured by the Nazis and I'm gonna come and rescue you. Okay?"

"Okay, Smitty," Reggie told him, sounding a lot more confident now.

"And now you better hang up, pal. Don't try calling me again unless your really have to. All right?"

"All right, Smitty."

So the next day Smith had checked out of his hotel, and driven up to Helensville, looking for some information about this Marjorie Dowling Clinic, and the little boy who was being kept prisoner there.

"Hello, there," said a woman's voice, and Smith awoke from his reverie to see a heavily-rouged, middle-aged lady with her hair wrapped up in a bandana, peering in through the door.

"It's funny," she said. "I just had this strong psychic sense of somebody being in this office. I'm Madame Sousa. My office is just across the hall."

"Hi. My name is Jones. I'm waiting for Howard Berman, but I'm starting to think he isn't going to show up soon. Do you know where I might find him?"

"You're a Libra, aren't you?"

"You're a pretty good guesser."

"That's one of my special talents. And maybe near the cusp with Scorpio, around the end of October. Say the twentieth."

"That's pretty impressive," Smith said. "You're right on target. Can you do that with most people?"

"Not always. Usually to within a few days. You ever read Linda Goodman?"

"Afraid not. What does she write about?"

"Signs, sun signs, rising signs, houses of the zodiacal. I'm an astrologer, although I do a lot of work with the Tarot as well. I just mentioned Linda Goodman because she's pretty accessible to the layman and her books are around."

"I'll have to make it a point to keep an eye out for one of them. What can you tell me about Howard Berman? How can a hick town like this afford the luxury of one whole private detective?"

"Maybe because he's a hick dick." She smiled at him. "Actually, and this is just between you and me, you understand, but you seem to be a gentleman of discretion. Howard's a Gemini, you see. Air sign. Nothing fazes him, and he'll never get anywhere. He's got his disability pension, Ex-Vietnam vet, and the rent on his office isn't much. He came into a little money when his wife died, so he plays at being a detective. Once in a while he gets a client. It's been quite a while now. You'd most likely find him this time of day down at the Two Ball Inn. That's where he spends most of his time. When he doesn't have clients, that is."

The woman opened the door a little more as she talked, and Smith could see that she was in her late forties, a little on the pudgy side, but with a nice face and a pleasant appearance.

"Thanks for telling me," said Smith. "I guess I've been waiting here quite a while, but I dozed off. If you hadn't shown up I might have been here a lot longer."

"It was no accident. I showed up because I sensed that you were here. I was doing my meditation. I'm particularly receptive then to the presence of others. I meditate every afternoon. You were coming in real loud and clear in reds and oranges. Are you a violent man?"

"Sometimes," admitted Smith with a faint smile. "But not right now. I'm looking for somebody, and I was hoping Berman might be able to tell me."

"Maybe I could help you."

"Maybe. I think I'll try Berman first. If that doesn't work, maybe I'll try your services. You around most of the time?"

"Except when I'm meditating, or when I have other clients. It's better to call for an appointment, but you're also welcome to take your chances." She smiled at him with a faintly seductive look. "You wouldn't like your palm read, would you?"

"Well, not at the moment," said Smith, rising from his chair and smiling back at her, "but I certainly know where to come when I do."

"Any time," said the lady flirtatiously, eyeing him with a tiny moue of regret, and letting the door swing shut.

He opened it after her, and saw her fulsome fanny disappearing into the door across the way. He descended the stairs to the street, glancing briefly at his watch. It had been two when he arrived, so he had been waiting more than half an hour.

## Chapter 59

The Two Ball Inn seemed to have become a trifle busier than when he had first passed it. The parking lot in back was full now, and a group of five or six people were walking up to the front door as he arrived. He followed them in, and stood looking at the place from the inside as the group in front shuffled up to the bar to pay their respects to the bartender, who had the look of an owner. They ordered some drinks and grabbed a big table in back. Smith sauntered up to the bar, chose an empty stool with nobody on either side, and waited for the barman to notice him. That took a while, as a number of other customers were waiting for their orders to be filled. The small flurry of business finally came to an end, and the barman walked slowly down to where Smith sat.

"What'll it be?" he asked, with a mean, non-committal look to his face.

"How about an Oly?" asked Smith.

"Haven't got any Oly. Bud, Schlitz, Millers, Lite. That's all that's cold."

"Any foreign?"

"Becks, Pauli Girl."

"I'll take a Becks."

The barman walked casually down to the other end, exchanging a few quips with his regulars on the way, and finally made it back. He banged the bottle down on the bar, making the foam come up over the top. He didn't bother to offer a glass.

"That'll be two fifty."

Smith laid three ones on the counter and the barman scooped them up with his big paw. He had the look of a pugilist.

"You new in town?" asked the barman, looking him up and down suspiciously, as if he might be a child molester, an escapee from Napa State Hospital, or perhaps an agent from the Alcoholic Beverage Control.

"Just passing through," said Smith. "Looking for Howard Berman. Lady told me he might be here."

Some of the suspicion vanished from the barman's face.

"Yeah," he said. "Howard's always here. Y'might say it's his office. Hey, Howard!" he yelled. "You got a customer!"

He turned back towards Smith. "You're lucky you come early in the day. Later on he's too drunk to talk to. Here's Howard."

Smith turned to see a large, florid-faced man with a suit and tie. The coat didn't look as if it could still make it around the entire perimeter of the bulging stomach, the top button of his shirt was undone to provide a little more room for breathing, and the tie was askew. What he could see of the shirt, and it was a lot, looked as if it hadn't been laundered in a week, and the coat and pants were stained and wrinkled with use. Still, the man had a certain pretence of elegance about him, something that set him apart from the rednecks who made up the bulk of the clientele. Maybe it was the suit, or the class pretense that the suit implied.

"You lookin' for me?" asked the big man in a quiet voice. He didn't seem in the least bit drunk. Perhaps that was a joke of the bartender's.

"I am if you're the Howard Berman who runs the detective office up the street."

"You interested in my services?"

"It's the god's truth," said Smith. "You have any time to talk?"



"Time's all I got," said the big man. "Whyn't we take a table in the back so's we can get away from this nosey bartender."

"Okay," said Smith, grabbing his bottle and following after him. He noticed that the barman hadn't bothered giving him his change. Perhaps he regarded it as a finder's fee.

Smith waited until they were both seated and comfortable.

"I need some information about the Marjorie Dowling Clinic. You know anything about it?"

"Before we start, I better tell you my rates. I charge a hundred dollars a day plus expenses. You want to hire me, you got to pay something down. I don't give out information for nothing."

Smith pulled out his wallet and counted out two hundred dollar bills.

"That do for a down?"

"That'll do just fine. I hope you'll forgive my acquisitorial zeal, as you might call it, but times are bad, and I been fucked over just once too often. Getting back to what you were asking, I know pretty much everything you'd prob'ly wanna know about the Marjorie Dowling Clinic. You got anything particular in mind?"

"Just how legitimate is the operation?"

"That's a question I've been trying the better part of two years to answer, Mr. . . ."

"Jones," said Smith.

"Nice name."

"I've always found it so, Mr. Berman."

"Make it Howard."

"Friends call me Jonesy," said Smith.

Howard stuck his big mitt across the table and they shook hands again.

"Okay, Jonesy, I'm gonna lay it on the line with you. I took on a case a couple years ago. A young kid whose name I can't for professional reasons reveal to you of course was placed in the care of the Dowling Clinic by his parents, who live in this county. When he was eleven years old, he run away from home. Six months later he was picked up by the cops in L.A. for soliciting sex. He was remanded by the court to the custody of his parents, on condition they put him under the care of a psychiatrist. They decided to stick him in the Dowling Clinic." Howard paused to collect his thoughts.

"At first he did pretty good, there. At least he was willing to communicate with his parents again. Then, six months after he had been there, he ran away again. This time they heard nothing further from him or about him, so they hired me to see what I could find out."

He paused to pull a crumpled pack of Marlboros out of his breast pocket, jogged a cigarette out, and lit it with an old zippo from his coat pocket. He puffed meditatively for a minute or so.

"I flew down to the L.A. scene where he had been picked up by the cops. I spent a lot of time checking with the local talent, and I did actually find a few denizens of the streets who had known him slightly, but they all claimed he hadn't returned. I checked with the San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and Marin Police departments. No dice. No runs, no hits, no errors, nobody left on. A big nada."

He took a few more drags from the cigarette, staring off into space.

"So I started checking up on the Marjorie Dowling Clinic. The parents were well off, so they didn't mind me nosing down every possible lead. Dr. Carl Mueller, who runs

the place, was the guy I put the most time in on, and he turned out to have quite an interesting past. Never could find out anything really incriminating, though. He started out in the late fifties as a bright young psych resident at a posh hospital down in West Hollywood, made quite a name for himself, published a few papers in the right journals. After a few lucrative years, he decided to go big time on his own. Started a clinic in Burbank in the early sixties. Got a bunch of rich old dames to put up a couple million to get started on, did pretty well for some time."

He took another smoke break, had a slug of the drink in front of him, and continued.

"Then he gets involved in some kind of scandal. Accused of mishandling funds. Nobody can prove anything. A lot of shit swept under the carpet, people in high places like they say talked to the right big shots in the police department, and he gets off with a slap on the hands and they ask him to resign, after which he disappears. Then about twenty years ago he pops back up in this area, gets himself in good with a rich old broad by the name of Marjorie Dowling, and whammo." He snapped his fingers as if to illustrate the suddenness of the event. "She dies and leaves him the dough to start the Marjorie Dowling Clinic For Pediatric Behavioral Disorders. A fancy name for a loony bin for kids. He bought an old winery and had the inside rebuilt as a clinic. It's a huge, silly old building. The front of it was put up by French stone masons or something back around the turn of the century. Impresses all the tourists, but they don't allow no visitors. Looks like a European castle or something."

He paused again to stub the cigarette out, pulled another out of the pack in his pocket, and lit up a fresh one. He noticed Smith watching him.

"Yeah, I know I smoke too much. I keep promising myself I'm gonna quit one of these days." He paused to take another drag before continuing with his story.

"Well, I never did find anything incriminating about the old guy. He may be a crook, but I can't prove it."

"How about his staff?" asked Smith.

"Well, he's got one tough-looking old biddy that's been with him since the beginning. Name of Bella Weisz. She and him are thick as thieves. She does something kinda vague, like administrative work or something. Maybe she's got some kinda hold over him. Who knows? But outside of her, the rest of the staff is as high-quality as you could ask for."

"How many children can they handle?" asked Smith.

"Fifty tops," said Howard. "Sometimes a few more. They get a few private patients, but most are referrals from State agencies. They have a clean bill of health. Everyone seems to think well of them. There doesn't seem to be any hanky panky."

"So did you ever find this boy?" asked Smith.

"Never did," said Berman. "But I still think something fishy happened to him. The runaway theory just doesn't seem to hold water."

"Why not?" asked Smith. "It seems offhand a reasonable hypothesis. He had run away before. What makes you doubt it?"

"I don't know," said Berman. "Call it intuition. The boy sounded like he was convinced that going back to the streets was a dead end for him. He was already thinking about going back to school and majoring in art. He really wanted to become an artist."

"You say his parents were rich."

"Yeah, but there was a real problem there. The father is a successful engineer, just as his father before him was, and he's pretty stuck on the idea of his kid following along in the family tradition."

"So why would his desire to become an artist keep him at the clinic?"

"Because he was getting a first-rate education in art right there. One of the teachers specializes in art therapy, and she had a good rapport with the boy. He was making some real progress. That's why I can't understand why he should run away right then. I've talked with the woman, and she can't understand it either."

"I see," said Smith. "So they never found the boy."

"Nope. Vanished into thin air. I need another drink. How about you?"

## Chapter 60

Access road No. 1185 on the local surveyor's map would have shown an unimproved surface road, used only by farmers and viniculturists. During the daytime hours, at certain times of the year, an occasional piece of farm equipment or truck might come trundling by, and during the harvest, both pickers and equipment used this road for accessing the vineyards. At night, however, only the occasional creatures of the night ventured forth. It was still as a tomb.

"God, this is a boring surveillance job," said Rick Schoonover over the walkie-talkie.

"Be glad we're only doing four-hour shifts," Bob Randolph reminded him.

"It's easy for you," said Rick. "You're sitting in a comfortable car. I'm sitting in a patch of dirt between two fucking grape vines, feeling like Adam with no Eve."

"Late tomorrow morning you'll be sitting poolside with a Bloody Mary in one hand and a blonde on the other, waiting for lunch," Bob told him, "and tomorrow night you'll get to sit in this cramped little economy car fighting to stay awake, while I get to lie back among the nectared blossoms of vinicultural delight, gazing up at the starlit sky, reciting to myself verses from Keats and Shelley."

"Didn't I see them once at Madison Square Gardens?" asked Rick. "Junior Flyweight Division. TKO awarded posthumously in the tenth?"

"Keats and Shelley are some pretty heavyweight dudes," Bob protested. "Hail to thee, blythe spirit, bird thou never wert."

"That's what the two-hundred-pound bluebird of happiness tells you just before he lays a fifty-pound turd in your left ear."

"I hope the next agent I have to share a surveillance job with has a more extensive cultural and intellectual background," said Bob with a Tallulah Bankhead sigh. "We'd better get off the airways and get on with this surveillance."

"What's your bet as to how soon he bites?" asked Rick.

"He just got the call last night," said Bob. "You'd think he'd want to case the joint first."

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"Dr. Mueller. So kind of you to take time off from a busy schedule to see me," said the bearded visitor, hooking his cane on the desk top to free his right hand to grasp the one being proffered him by his host, who rose momentarily from his desk to do so. The visitor was dressed neatly in a blue, pin-striped suit with a maroon tie. He was tall and muscular, but his face was pale, and he had a nervous habit of readjusting his glasses and smoothing his moustache. A thin scar on his right cheek rose up from under his beard to meander across his face and vanish under his sideburn. He seated himself with some difficulty.

"It's no trouble, Mr. Johannes," said his host, swivelling around on his chair to face his visitor. He sat hunch-shouldered, peering up at his guest through thick bifocals.

"I hope you enjoyed your tour. Was Nurse Brown able to answer all your questions?"

"Yes, sir. It's quite an establishment. Are there just the three floors? From outside it looks so much bigger."

"Yes," said Dr. Mueller, removing his glasses so that he could polish them as he talked. "There's far more space than we could possibly use."

"So there's just space above this floor?"

"Right. This is just a false ceiling. There's another fifty feet to the roof above."

"It looks like a glass roof from the distance," said his visitor conversationally, "the way it reflects the sunlight."

"There's a raised skylight in the center. It sometimes gives us problems when it rains. Otherwise it's a slate roof." The intercom buzzed and Dr. Mueller picked up the phone.

"Yes, Maria," he said. "No, tell him I'll be right down." He turned to his visitor.

"I hope you'll excuse me for a moment. A slight problem has come up. He rose from his desk and hurried out the door.

Mr. Johannes glanced at the desk. A telephone number locator lay on the side next to him. He pulled it towards him and reversed it so it faced him. He moved the lever to the letter T and pressed it. The book popped open. Near the bottom of the page he found the name 'Tweeds', together with a familiar telephone number and address. Just beneath it he found another notation. No name. Just an address and telephone number. The street name caught his attention. Trestle Glen Road.

He squinted hard, trying to remember a comment a bartender had made to him a couple weeks before. "A fairly high address up on Trestle Glen Road" had been the exact words.

He pulled a pad from his breast pocket and jotted down the information. Then he closed the book and hurriedly moved it back to its original position.

A moment later, Dr. Mueller came bursting back in.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Now, where were we?"

"I was just getting around to telling you why I wanted to see you. I wanted to enquire about the possibility of a private room. Miss Brown indicated that the few you have on the second floor were all taken. The problem is that my son, George, has had some bad experiences sleeping in the dormitory at the last school he was at, and I'm afraid he might be unhappy having to share a large room with a bunch of other boys. I understand that this floor is devoted strictly to staff."

"Generally it is, Mr. Johannes, but since most of our staff live off the premises, there are a few rooms that could be made available. As a matter of fact, the one to your right is presently occupied by a private patient."

"Is that another private room to the left?"

"No. That's just used for storage at present, but there are other rooms on this floor which could be made available, and I'm sure we could accomodate you. Are there any other questions?"

"No, Dr. Mueller," said his guest, rising with some difficulty, and holding out his hand to grasp the doctor's once more. "That should do it. I want to thank you for your indulgence."

"Not at all, Mr. Johannes. I hope we've passed muster. When would you like your son, George to begin his stay with us?"

"Your secretary indicated that next Wednesday would be acceptable."

"Yes, of course. We'd like him here by two in the afternoon at the latest, so we can check him in properly."

"I understand. I'll see you then, perhaps."

"Perhaps so, Mr. Johannes. It was good to meet you."

His visitor nodded goodbye, grabbed his cane and hobbled to the door. As soon as the door was shut, Dr. Mueller picked up the phone and dialed the desk at the Admiral Benbow Inn. It took a few minutes to locate the person he wanted to talk to.

"John? Carl here. I just had a brief chat with a potential client. Said he wanted a private room for his boy, and he asked a lot of questions about the layout of the place. I have no particular reason to be suspicious, but something seemed a little wrong about him. What was the name of the man you were after? I see. No, he said his name was Johannes. Does this Mr. Smith have a scar on his right cheek? No? Well maybe I'm jumping to conclusions. No, he didn't leave any address or telephone number with me, but everyone has to fill out an application form. I'll have my secretary check on it and I'll call you back. Right. Talk to you later. Goodbye."

Back at his motel, Mr. Johannes looked round to make sure the manager wasn't in the vicinity before letting himself into his room. Inside, he threw the cane on the bed and walked into the bathroom. He flicked on the light and went to the sink. He turned on the hot water and let it run. He picked up the bottle of makeup remover and plastered his face with it, then wiped it off with toilet tissue. He dampened the beard with hot water until it got soft, then slowly peeled it off, and the moustache as well, and placed them in a plastic bag. Then he peeled off the scar, and added it to the bag as well. He rinsed the gray out of his hair as best he could. Then he soaped his face and hands, and rinsed them off, toweling himself thoroughly dry.

When he felt that he passed inspection once more, he turned off the water and went back into the bedroom. He opened his grip and jammed the plastic bag inside. He sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the telephone, dialing the number of the Two Ball Inn.

"I'd like to speak to Howard Berman," he said when the barman finally got around to answering. He waited a few minutes.

"Howard?" Smith said into the mouthpiece. "Jonesy here. I think I know where your missing boy might be."

## Chapter 61

Billy Joe was right on time. He rode up on a big Harley in fire engine red. He had a cowboy hat on top of his head and a scarf around his neck. Under the black leather jacket he was bare-chested. He sat there in the motel parking lot revving up his machine for a minute, then idled over to where Smith was sitting on the fender of his car, waiting for him. He greeted Smith with a big grin.

"So what's up, Smittie? You were a little mysterious over the phone."

"Why don't you tie your horse up to the hitching post and come on in out of the hot sun and have a cold beer," said Smith. He slid to his feet and walked over to the door of his room and opened it with his key. He left it open behind him for Billy.

"I'll need you at your best," said Smith, after Billy had gotten settled in the one comfortable chair with a beer in hand. "I have another rescue job to pull off."

"Another maiden in distress?" asked Billy.

"More like a junior knight, this time," said Smith. He went on to explain the situation to Billy.

"So the kid is locked up in a big stone building with guards," said Billy Joe, trying to sum it up. "Are the guards on duty during the daytime?"

"Twenty four hours. But it's more complicated than that. There are several other players in this game. The FBI for one. Tweeds for another. There's also a mysterious oriental guy Reggie described to me who sleeps nights in the room on the other side of the office from him. Mueller lied to me about the room being used only for storage. That's why I figure this guy is probably somebody Tweeds brought in specially just to deal with me. I suspect he might be a hit man. Tweeds is bound to be pretty pissed at me for our last job."

"That sounds like a tough bunch to be up against. Why did the boy's father put his kid in there in the first place?"

"To set a trap for me. When Reggie called me, he mentioned that jolly old Roger has his beloved paintings back again. That can only mean one thing - that Tweeds has made a deal with him. Tweeds is a buddy of Carl Mueller, who runs the clinic, and probably suggested Roger bring him there. They know the boy is in contact with me, and counted on his calling me."

"How'd they set it up?"

"By putting Reggie in a room next to the office, and leaving the door between unlocked. The office has a telephone. They probably have the phone bugged, so they undoubtedly listened in on the call that Reggie made to me the other night, asking me to come and rescue him."

"How do they expect to catch you?"

"I guess they figure I'll try to break into the place one of these nights, and they'll nail me when I try it."

"How did Tweeds know in the first place that Reggie knew your number?"

"The Feds told Roger and Roger told Tweeds. That's my best guess."

"And how did the Feds know?"

"Reggie called me some time ago from his father's house. The phone there is probably bugged. Besides that, they know from an earlier incident that Reggie knows my number."

"I see. How do you know for sure the Feds are onto this scheme?"

"There's a posh spa down the road from the Dowling Clinic called the Admiral Benbow Inn. I stopped by on my way back from the clinic yesterday and took a quick little tour of the garage. I recognized at least three license plates. One was Tweeds', the other two I had seen before in front of Roger's house during the delivery of the ransom messages, so they've gotta represent the Feds. The SF cops wouldn't be this far afield."

"Weren't you taking a chance you might be recognized?"

"I was traveling incognito."

"I'd like to have seen what you looked like. You go as a nun or something?"

"That'd be the day. No, I visited the clinic as a prospective client."

"If you walked in once, why couldn't you walk in again?"

"Because the rescue attempt has to be made either in the early morning or late at night, when I know where Reggie is, and that's just when they expect me to try it. I don't want to tempt fate twice. I had to take a chance on the first visit, because I had to see what the setup looked like."

"And what did you see?"

"I saw that the roof was made of glass, and that the distance between it and the top of the third floor of the clinic was about thirty feet, and that the third floor ceiling was composed of a composite material through which I could cut a hole wide enough for somebody even as big as you with a boy scout knife in about three minutes."

"Do you know where to cut that hole from above?"

"They gave me an extensive tour of the clinic. I've made a rough diagram of the layout, and I've estimated most of the dimensions. I'm pretty sure I could find it fairly easily."

"And how do you intend to get onto the roof? With a helicopter?"

"No," said Smith. "A helicopter makes too much noise. I was thinking of a hot air balloon."

"You know anything about balloons?"

"Not a thing. I was hoping you might know somebody in the business."

"I just might. I'll have to make a few calls."

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Reggie was worried. The Dowling Clinic seemed a harmless enough place, but it wasn't one he wanted to be in for very long. What bothered him most was the feeling of being a prisoner. Nobody said you had to do this or that, but it was sort of understood. He had seen the guards at the front entrance, the locked doors, the constant containment. The teachers and nurses were nice, but they had little time for him, and the school part of it wasn't very demanding, but there was no sense of class participation, partly because so many grade levels had to be dealt with at the same time, and partly because the other children seemed unhappy or depressed, and weren't very communicative, either with him or with the teachers. As a result, he found himself with five other children in a grouping of chairs on one side of the classroom doing low sixth grade work. There were a number of groups of this sort, and the three teachers were kept busy shuttling back and forth between them, keeping the children busy with self-study projects.



There were maybe about fifty children altogether in the clinic on any one day, but some of them were just daytime visitors, and at least ten of them never joined the rest except at meals. They had private rooms, and seemed very withdrawn and uncommunicative. They also sat by themselves in the cafeteria. There were two large dormitories, one for the girls and one for the boys, each of which slept about twenty kids. Reggie would have been happier in the boys' dorm, and wasn't too sure why he was being kept by himself. He asked one of the nurses, but she told him that was the way his father had wanted it.

Three times a day they all trooped to the cafeteria for meals, and twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, they pushed all the desks against the wall on one side of the room and played organized games, run by the nurses. Most of the games were a little too simple to be much fun, and they weren't very successful, since the majority of the children didn't seem too happy being there. Some of the kids were rather mean, and more than once Reggie found himself being pushed or struck by one of them, but he was adept at handling this kind of situation, since it wasn't so awfully different from the Academy. He had to ask one of the nurses, however, to do something about one of the smaller boys who insisted on punching him every time his back was turned.

Twice a week he spent an hour with one of the psychologists, a Dr. Drake, who seemed really nice, and Reggie didn't mind the kinds of questions he was asked, or the play therapy he was encouraged to participate in. Miss Larsen, the Art teacher he found very sympathetic, and he enjoyed some of the projects she gave him to do. The welts on his back from his whipping had almost cleared up, but one of the nurses noticed them and had him stop by her office once a day before bedtime to have ointment applied.

Altogether the clinic wasn't that bad a place, but he didn't want to be there forever, and he was concerned about what his father had in store for him when he left. He was extremely bored most of the time. He spent a lot of stolen minutes looking out through the windows at the sky outside, as if he were half expecting Smith to come gliding in on a magic carpet to spirit him away to some faraway Eden, where he could be safe from his angry and implacable father. In his worst moments, he feared that Smith might not come, and that he would either have to stay here forever, or go back to living with his father. He didn't know which was worse. Maybe if he had to go back to his father, he might be allowed to return to the Academy. That wouldn't be so bad. The summer was almost over, and school would be starting again in September, which was less than a month away. But he was afraid that his father would sense that he wanted to return to the Academy, and would choose, therefore, to send him to some even more awful place. It was strange that the Academy had used to seem so dreary, and now, by comparison, almost appeared desirable.

He thought about Smith a lot. It had been such a stroke of luck that the door between his room and Dr. Mueller's office was always left unlocked. It had taken a lot of courage to sneak in and call Smith that once, but he was so glad he had. Otherwise Smith would never have known where he was or what was going on, and he would have had no hope at all.

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It was about seven o'clock when Smith heard the roar of Billy Joe's cycle pulling into the parking lot. A minute later and he was at the door, yanking it open and throwing his cowboy hat at the bed. Smith waited until Billy had got himself a cold beer from the ice bucket Smith kept in the bathroom.

"What's the verdict?" he asked Billy.

"Just as you expected. They showed up at six on the nose. One car, two guys. Here's the license number. Does it look familiar?"

Smith took the note pad from him. It was one of the numbers he had seen in the garage at the Admiral Benbow Inn.

"Where are they stationed?"

"One dropped the other off on a side road that meets up with the main highway further north. Then he drove back to the main road and parked just before the turnoff to the winery."

"How'd you see all this?"

"I was lucky. I hit the side road just as the car was taking off. I couldn't help noticing the guy sitting between the vines. When I got back to the main road, the car was already parked and the lights were off."

"I'm going to have to think of some distraction," said Smith.

"Why?" asked Billy Joe. "How are a couple guys on the ground gonna pose a problem with an escape from the air?"

"They might have an arrangement with the highway patrol and have a helicopter waiting in the wings."

"True," said Billy Joe, "but not too likely."

"A good craftsman prepares for every contingency," said Smith.

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Frank and Vic were sitting in their room, sipping some coffee from a thermos Frank had filled earlier from the pot brought up by room service. Vic was still rubbing his eyes.

"It's been a week already," he said to Frank. "You think this Smith is gonna make his move."

"Let's give it a few more days. My intuition tells me that something's gonna break soon. We know that Smith got the message from the boy."

"I sure hope so. This surveillance is getting to be a pain."

## Chapter 62

The day was brilliant with sunshine and color. The sky was intensely blue, and the scandalous neon pinks and yellows of the balloons in the distance dazzled the eye. Two or three of the balloons were already wafted skyward, their baskets of passengers waving excitedly at the people left below, and at least four or five other balloons were in the process of being inflated. A large crowd of twenty or thirty people stood around, watching the sky circus.

"Smitty, I'd like you to meet Michel Lefevre. Mickey, Smitty," said Billy Joe as the two shook hands. "Mickey and I used to have some good old times while we were in Special Forces together. Mickey was a chopper pilot, and he pulled me and my buddies out of more than one tough situation. We used to go on some great drunks together afterwards."

"Nice to meet you," said Smith. "Billy Joe here has been singing your praises about your balloonsmanship. Says you could land one of these contraptions on a dime, if you had to."

"That might be overdoing it a bit," said the man called Mickey, "but it's essentially true. I'd probably miss the dime, but not by more than ten feet in any direction. Provided I knew the wind currents and the typography of the area. Just what was it you had in mind?"

"Well," said Smith, "I was thinking about a particular landing spot in Helensville which probably measures about twenty feet in one direction and a hundred in the other."

"What kind of a spot?"

"The top of a building," said Smith.

"I see," said Mickey. "Sounds like an unusual request. Just what building were you thinking of? Anything illegal involved?"

"Yeah, but I could set it up so you'd be in the clear, and I probably could make it worth your while."

"It'd have to be quite a lot for me to take a chance on my professional license. Just how much were you thinking of?"

"Would twenty grand tempt you? It'd be in cash, and under the table, if you're not averse to a little unreported income."

"I don't know. It is tempting, I must admit, but what's the point of all this? What are you trying to accomplish? What kind of danger would I be submitted to, and how would you set it up so I would be in the clear?"

"You ever hear of the Marjorie Dowling Clinic?" asked Smith.

"Yeah," said Mickey. "Isn't it in an old converted winery or something?"

"Right," said Smith. "Well, I have a nephew who is being kept there. His father's a prime grade A asshole, and there's nothing wrong with the kid. None of the rest of the family are behind the father on this, and his mother would like to get him out of there, but the father is the legal guardian, and there's nothing legitimate we can do about it."

"Just how do you expect to go about it?" asked Mickey, a look of suspended unwillingness on his face.

"The roof is glass, so we remove one of the panes and go down by rope, cut our way through a false ceiling above the boy's bedroom, spirit him out, and hoist him up to the roof. Then we take off the way we came."

"Is there likely to be any opposition?"

"A couple night watchmen, who probably won't even be aware of what's going on. It'll take about ten minutes to cut through the skylight, and I can pretty much guarantee it won't make any discernible noise. Then another two minutes for Billy and me to lower ourselves with separate ropes to the false ceiling. I've got pretty exact measurements figured out on the entire structure, so there'll be no problem about finding the boy's room from above. I've personally inspected the ceiling, and I'm sure I can make a hole in it without arousing anyone. Then I can lower myself into his room and pass him up to Billy. I secure the boy to the rope while Billy shinnies his way back up, then Billy hauls him up with one rope while I climb back up the other. We all jump in the basket, you inflate the balloon, and we take off. I figure the entire operation could be done in under half an hour, perhaps less."

"You intend to do this at night?" asked Mickey.

"Early morning," said Smith. "Maybe about six A.M.. Just after sunrise."

"I don't know," said Mickey. "Twenty grand is very tempting, but it isn't much if it comes with a kidnapping charge."

"How about fifty?" asked Smith.

"Fifty grand?" asked Mickey. "How would I be paid?"

"How about half in advance, half when the mission is accomplished?"

"Is this guy as good as he says he is?" Mickey asked Billy Joe.

"Better," said Billy Joe. "He's a real pro."

"Well," said Mickey, "if anyone else told me that, I probably wouldn't believe him, but if you'll vouch for him, I guess I gotta believe it. You really think you can get through that skylight without making any noise?" he asked Smith.

"Positive," said Smith.

"There's another problem. All balloons have identifying serial numbers on them. Sort of like license plates. It's unlikely that anyone would notice it early in the morning, but if anyone did, it would be the end of my career."

"Why don't we report it stolen? Where do you normally keep it?"

"In my garage."

"I'm an expert at breaking and entering. I could make it look pretty convincing. We could arrange to have it found later on."

"It would also be nice to have some sort of alibi during the rescue operation."

"Why don't we have Billy Joe spend a week with you? You two are old buddies. It would be a natural. I could drop over on Tuesday night, bust into your garage, and transport the balloon to a spot closer to the clinic. Would it fit in a small panel truck?"

"Sure."

"Then you two could report the theft to the cops, and when they came out to make a report, Billy Joe would be there, and the cops themselves could verify that you two were together, which would help to substantiate your alibi. Maybe over the next couple nights you could make a tour of the local bars, introduce Billy to some of your friends and acquaintances."

Mickey looked a bit dubious.

"That means we need to find a field in the vicinity of the clinic where we could take off from, and, what is probably more difficult, a place to land where we could trust someone to report it in time to the cops to guarantee I'd get it back."

"I have a detective friend who owes me one. I think I can handle both those items."

"Okay," said Mickey. "It's against my better judgement, but fifty grand of unreported income is too tempting for me to pass up. When do you want to pull the job off?"

"Let's see," said Smith. "Today is Friday. How about next Thursday morning? That'd give us time to set it all up. What do you need to do in advance?"

"I'd like to attempt a trial run. One of my balloons is a Raven. The other is a Thunder & Colt. Either one would serve the purpose. Both of them have about seventy thousand cubic feet capacity. With two propane tanks on board, we'd have about an hour's flying time available. I don't know how much you know about balloons, but you know we can't actually steer the damn things. We just have to pick the right altitude that has air currents going in the direction we want to fly in. The best times for flying are morning and evening, so that part of it is all right. I've been in the business for about five years, and I know the wind patterns in this valley like the back of my hand, so I have a lot of confidence in being able to pull it off, but I'd still like to have a little leeway."

"What would be wrong with trying it on Thursday morning, and if it fails, trying again on Friday morning?" asked Smith.

"Okay," said Mickey. "I've got some government topographical maps in the office. Let's go look at them."

## Chapter 63

At eleven o'clock on Monday morning, Smith parked his car on Ninth Avenue in the Sunset. The fog was thick, almost misting like rain as he got out of his car. He had timed his arrival fortuitously; this side of the street was scheduled for cleaning every Monday from eight to eleven, so he had his choice of parking spaces. Normally he would have been lucky to find one so readily.

Fred Fremdenhoff, better known as Fred Friendly, occupied a small second-floor flat in a newly-painted Victorian which he owned. Smith had taken the precaution of getting in touch with him the night before, so he knew that Fred would be in.

Fred had started out life as a clothing salesman. Then he had gotten involved in a clothing heist, spent a year in the cooler, and had come out slightly older and much wiser. He had discovered that prison life need not be so dreadful as he had once thought. With the right connections it could become almost bearable. One of his former prison buddies had turned him on to the rather profitable business of doing time for others. His second hitch was for five years, and he received a cool hundred grand for his time. He also got special privileges. He put his money in the bank, and by the time he was out, his one hundred thousand was worth nearly two hundred thousand. His third stint was only for three years, and by this time he was able to buy a house and invest some money in the bank.

Fred answered the door on the second ring.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he told Smith. "I was out on the back porch watering my plants."

"No problem," said Smith as Fred led him into a very warm, humid living room. The ceiling and walls were covered with heavy plastic, and the furniture smelled of damp rot. All the walls of the room were partially hidden by fish tanks. Fred switched on the lights, so Smith could admire the decor. Smith sat down gingerly on the sofa. He glanced into the next room. It, too was loaded with fish tanks. Between the fish tanks were potted plants that looked like ferns.

"Why don't you just move to the Caribbean, Fred. It would save you a bunch on heating bills."

"Actually, it saves money," Fred told him. "The plastic keeps the heat in. But I will admit it does get kinda drippy sometimes. It's absolutely necessary for the orchids and the bougainvillea, however." Fred told him the Latin names for them as well as for several other plants in the room. "So what's up?"

"Did you get a chance to check your calendar for those three dates?" asked Smith, sitting down in the beatup armchair he was offered.

"Yeah, let's see. The twenty third and the twenty ninth of June, and the sixth of July. That right?"

"Those are the dates. So were you able to find out where you were?"

"Only on the twenty third of June and the sixth of July."

"Got any witnesses?"

"The twenty third was a Sunday. I was at Bay Meadows."

"Got any witnesses?"

"Sure, the whole gang was there. Like every Sunday at the track."

"Will they remember that?"

"For sure. I checked with two of the guys. They're willing to swear on a stack of bibles."

"How about the sixth of July?"

"I was at my nephew's Bar Mitzvah."

"Great. That puts you in the clear," said Smith.

"For what?"

"You told me last night you were free this week."

"So?" said Fred.

"So that means you ought to be free tomorrow night - Tuesday, right?"

"Right. What's up?"

"I got a little job that ought to be right up your alley," said Smith.

"I don't live in no alley anymore," said Fred, with a feeble attempt at humor. "What kind of job is it?"

"A pretty simple one, actually, and one you won't even have to do time for. Except maybe for about three days."

"My rates have gone up. How sure are the three days?"

"Dead certain. All you have to do is dummy up. Then on the morning of the fourth you spill your guts and they gotta let you walk."

"Do they know that?"

"Guaranteed," said Smith.

"What do I gotta do?"

"Just drive up to a winery late at night, hang around the front entrance for a few minutes, then wander around the building with a flashlight for another twenty minutes."

"Then what happens?"

"Hopefully the cops will bust you."

"For what? Trespassing?"

"For impersonating me," said Smith.

"Why will they think I'm you?"

"Because you're around my height, pretty close to my age, and because you're almost as good looking as I am."

"That can't be enough. There's gotta be more."

"Not really," said Smith. "I'll supply you with the car to drive, and you have to make sure you have no identification on you. I'll even supply you with the clothes to wear. They'll find one of my business cards in the glove compartment."

"The car hot?"

"Nope. I rented it under my own name. You gotta return it when they let you go and release the car."

"What makes you think they'll release me?"

"Because you'll tell them the truth, or almost the truth," said Smith.

"What is this almost-the-truth stuff?"

"You tell them that a stranger - that's me - asked you to pick him up at midnight at the Marjorie Dowling Clinic for Pediatric Behavioral Disorders."

"Say that last again."

"It's a fancy name for a psychiatric hospital for kids, and it's built inside a winery."

"So what's so illegal? I don't gotta break in or anything?"

"Nope," said Smith again. "You just have to keep mum about who you are. For three days you don't utter a word. Then on the fourth day you sing. You tell them that you didn't let them know earlier who you were because you have a record."

"That's all?" asked Fred incredulously.

"That's all," said Smith.

"So I'm takin' them off your back for three days by lettin' them think I'm you."

"Exactly," said Smith. "And you never let them know that you know me. I'm just a stranger who asked you to play taxi driver for him. Tell 'em I offered you two hundred for a night's work."

"Sounds easy. What do I get for my trouble?"

"How about five grand?"

"How about ten?"

"Done," said Smith.

"When do I get the dough?"

"Half now, half later."

"How can I trust the later part?"

"You remember Jim the Gent?"

"Sure. Haven't seen him in a coon's age. He still hang out at the Castle?"

"Every afternoon at four thirty. He'll give you the second half. I'll have him give you a ring tomorrow noon to verify it. That okay?"

"That's good enough for me. Where's the first half?"

"Right here," said Smith, handing him an envelope. "And here are the car keys."

"There's five grand in here?" Fred asked, opening the envelope and eyeing the wad of money inside.

"You can count it later."

"What if I had settled for five altogether?"

"I knew you wouldn't settle for five."

"Where's the car?"

"I drove it over here. It's right out in front. A '91 Ford Escort. GT. With a sunroof. You'll find a suit hanging inside, fresh from the cleaners. Hope it fits okay. You'll find two hundred-dollar bills in the vest pocket. Leave it for the cops to find. Tell 'em the suit's yours, but that I provided you with the car."

"What's wrong with wearing my own clothes? I ain't broke, you know. I can dress up nice if I want."

"I don't want to take any chances on the cops finding out too quick who you really are. Remember, don't carry any identification. don't even carry anything in your pockets except maybe a little cash."

"Not even a driver's license?"

"Not even that."

"But what if I get stopped?"

"Don't get stopped. Don't break any laws getting there."

"But later on, when I spill the beans."

"Just tell them you forgot to bring it. That isn't any major crime. But don't tell them that until three days have passed. In fact, don't even let 'em know you have vocal chords until then. They've heard me speak, so they'd know you weren't me."

"Three days. That'd be Friday."



"Right. Make it noon on Friday. That way they'll have to serve you breakfast. You got a taste for jail food, anyway, right?"

"So I gotta do this on Tuesday?"

"Right. Tomorrow night. At midnight. Here's a map. Look it over and make sure you can follow it."

Smith showed himself out. The blast of cool air that awaited him on the doorstep was revivifying, after the sultry oppression he had left behind. He walked up the street with a bounce in his stride. He was on a roll. Now all the steps in his procedure had been set in motion. It only remained to carry them out.

## Chapter 64

At the same time that Smith and Fred Friendly were making their arrangements, Parker was beating Mr. Tweeds once more at checkers. They were sitting in Tweeds' room at the Admiral Benbow. Tweeds hated to be beaten at anything. But he bore up with it manfully. He was much more concerned about what might be his last chance to nab Smith and recover whatever remained of the ransom.

Mr. Parker was oblivious to both the game and Tweed's somber mood. His mind was on more practical things.

"It's been twelve days I've been here, Mr. Tweeds, and, to be quite honest, I'm getting a little bored with the lack of action. How long has it been now since the kid called this Mr. Smith?"

"Just a week now, Mr. Parker," said Tweeds. "I can't imagine Smith taking much longer to make his move. Can you manage another week?" He despised having to plead with Parker. In a rightful universe, people like Parker did as they were told.

"It's not as if I don't appreciate what you're paying me, Mr. Tweeds, but I do have another potential contract coming up in a week or so, and I'm sort of anxious to get back to my old stomping grounds. It's awfully quiet here, and though I rather liked it at first, it's starting to get to me. How about another four days, and then let's call it off. That'd make it eleven days altogether. If this guy is going to try to rescue the kid, I'd have thought he'd've done it by now."

"I'm inclined to agree with you there, Parker," said Tweeds rather reluctantly. "Are you sure the side entrance has been kept unlocked at night?"

"Every night I've checked it now, Mr. Tweeds, and there's nobody between him and the kid, ever since you called Mueller and told him to keep the guards off the second floor corridors."

"I really can't explain the delay, Mr. Parker, and I don't blame you for being restless. Let's make it another five days. Can you manage that? That'd bring it to the weekend. I could drive you back on Monday. Would that be okay?"

"Sure, Mr. Tweeds. Let's do that. Did you notice what the special was tonight? I never thought I'd say this, but I'm getting tired of filet mignon and lobster tail."

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Frank and Vic had just replaced Rick and Bob for the second four-hour shift, ten at night until two in the morning. After four hours' sleep, Rick and Bob would be back for the two-to-six shift. Tomorrow night, Frank and Vic would do the first and third four-hour shifts, and Rick and Bob would do the second. It was hard to get much sleep in the four hours in between, but it still beat eight hours straight. With only four agents, it couldn't be arranged any other way. They had been doing this for six nights now. It would be nice if Smith would only cooperate soon. It was doubtful that Johns would countenance more than two weeks on this assignment.

It was just going on midnight when Frank heard the faroff hum of an approaching car. Not too many people traveled this road at night. It was used mainly by locals, so just about every passing vehicle made him sit up and pay attention.

"How you doin', buddy?" he asked Vic over the walkie-talkie.

"Okay, except for extreme boredom and an aching backside. What's up?"

"I think I hear somebody coming," said Frank.

"Me too," said Vic. "I hope to God it's him, and not another false alarm."

The sound of the approaching vehicle grew louder and a pair of headlights appeared in the distance. As the car drew near, Frank ducked his head. He heard the vehicle pass him, and when he looked up he saw the brakelights flash on as the driver slowed down, and then the headlights swerved to the left as the car turned slowly onto the access road to the Marjorie Dowling Clinic.

"Get ready," Frank muttered to Vic. "Looks like we have a bite. Let's hope it's a nice fat fish by the name of Smith. I'm going to follow him in with my lights off and block the road. I'll go the rest of the way on foot. Why don't you high tail it to the winery and I'll meet you there. We want to nab him before he breaks into the clinic."

"Roger and out," said Vic.

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Fred Friendly had no trouble following the directions Smith had given him. It was a moonlit night, and he had made pretty good time. It was just going on midnight when he spotted the access road to the winery. He slowed down to look for the sign, and there it was. THE MARJORIE DOWLING CLINIC FOR PEDIATRIC BEHAVIORAL MODIFICATION. He turned off the paved road and followed the gravel road that led between the dark rows of grapevine trellises. After a quarter of a mile he saw a massive building looming above him, dark against the bright night sky. He slowed down as the sound of gravel beneath the tires gave way to the blacktop of the parking lot. He parked the vehicle in one of the slots, turned off the lights and the engine. The silence around him was absolute. He opened the glove compartment and took out the flashlight Smith had provided. Then he opened the door and stepped out quietly. He walked towards what appeared to be the front entrance of the huge stone building and waited for five minutes, as Smith had instructed him. He kept an eye on his wrist watch. As soon as the five minutes were up, he began a slow tour around the building. There were no bushes or trees in the immediate vicinity of the structure to impede his progress. The ground was bare, and except for the crack of an occasional twig breaking beneath his foot, he heard no sounds. He flashed the beam of his torch about him as he walked, inspecting the building as Smith had told him to. It was kind of eerie, knowing that at any minute the cops would come busting out of the bushes.

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The drive back to Helensville was uneventful. Vic and Bob sat in the back, with a handcuffed Fred sitting between them. Frank drove, and Bob followed behind with the other car. They drove him to the Helensville Police Station, where Frank had called ahead for an interrogation room. They all felt good to have the operation come to a completion. Now all they had to do was tie all the ends together. The only thing that was bothering them was that their prisoner refused to talk to them. They had read him his rights, and he hadn't said a thing. Frank and Vic had searched his car, and they had found a business card for Robert James Smith, the owner of the cellular phone whom Reggie

had called. He bore a strong likeness to the composite drawing the police artist had done of Smith from the few witnesses who had seen him, and he fit the general description in terms of age, weight, height, and build. Frank and Vic had both seen the messenger who had taken the money bag from Lambeaux at Candlestick Park, and this guy looked like a dead ringer for him. They had put in a check on the license plate, and the car was an Avis rental. Fortunately for them, Avis had twenty-four-hour service, and they had been able to verify that the car had been rented to one Robert Kenneth Smith, the owner of the house in the Buena Vista Heights area where Reggie Lambeaux had been kept prisoner. On top of that, in all the money exchanges, Smith had been directly involved. He didn't seem like the sort of guy who left the dirty work to others. It all seemed to hang together pretty nicely. There was little doubt that they had finally gotten their man. It was a real relief to be able to call off the surveillance. Tonight they would have a good night's sleep at the Benbow Inn, while Smith cooled his heels in the Helensville Jail. Tomorrow they would drive him back to San Francisco, where they could grill him more extensively.

## Chapter 65

Thursday morning was cool and misty, with a light tule fog rising from the vineyards around them, but the fading night sky above was clear of overcast. The low hills in the background were darkly silhouetted against the gathering glow from the east. A gentle breeze had sprung up from that direction, seeming to herald the dawn which was just on the verge of breaking. A few faint stars were still to be seen. The three men worked slowly but intently, their gloved hands awkwardly pulling the huge canopy out of the canvas bag it was stored in, at the same time unfolding and spreading out the voluminous nylon fabric on the ground about them. Mickey went to the truck and brought back a portable fan. The basket was attached to the mouth of the balloon by strong ropes, and the two stainless steel propane tanks were already in place. The tops of the tanks were surmounted by heating coils, which vaporized the liquid propane prior to its being ignited at the jets by a pilot flame. Mickey had hooked up the fuel lines from the burners to the tanks, and the basket was lying on its side facing the open mouth of the balloon.

They were at the trickiest part of the operation now, as Mickey used the fan to inflate the giant carcass. Smith and Billy Joe assisted him, keeping the mouth of the balloon raised up, and shaking out the folded panels until the monster swelled up to about three quarters size. Billy Joe held tightly to a rope secured to the crown of the balloon to keep it from twisting sideways. Then Mickey started one of the burners, and it made a roaring sound like a jet plane taking off as it directed a hot flame into the open mouth of the balloon. Smith and Billy Joe struggled to keep the mouth fully open, and the fabric of the canopy away from the flame. Then Mickey turned off the burner, as the balloon lifted gently off the ground, pulling the basket back into an upright position. He placed the portable fan inside the basket, then climbed in himself, motioning to the other two to join him. Smith ran to the truck, and came back bearing a wooden rod, slightly longer than a broomstick, and wrapped with friction tape. He also carried a large coil of rope, which he tossed into the basket before climbing in himself. During this brief interval Mickey had been turning the flame on and off in short bursts, keeping the balloon vertical, but not enough to lift them off the ground. Finally everybody and everything was aboard. Mickey ignited the burner again, this time allowing it to blast for about ten seconds, and the basket slowly lifted off the ground, gathering speed as it rose, and began to move in a westerly direction.

The first thing that struck Smith was the silence. Before, there had been the sound of the wind, but now they were moving with it. There was something unreal about it, this eerie calm, interrupted only by the brief loud bursts of flame.

The second thing that Smith noticed was that there was no sense of motion. It was as if the balloon were stationary and the ground instead which was moving beneath them. It was only when the propane was turned on or off to change the altitude that he experienced any movement. Mickey was an absolute master. He appeared to know intuitively as well as through experience how to gradually guide the balloon in a particular direction by selecting the proper altitude. The world below seemed ghostly in the early dawn, lying in shadow as the three of them were caught in the first slanting rays of the rising sun, as it peeked over the dark hills behind them, lighting their way.

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Gradually, the fields below were awakening to the new day. The long shadows cast by the oblique angle of the early rising sun were shortened as it rose, the last demons of night sent scurrying away to the west. Thin columns of mist rose from the vineyards around them. The large stone building which was once a winery lay dead ahead, the balloon rising and falling with the short bursts of flame that kept them on their course. Billy Joe was transfixed by the scene below. Smith kept his mind on the sequence of actions he must perform on landing. Mickey was oblivious to everything but his task of guiding them onto the roof of the structure which grew ever larger and closer. The windows of the winery were ablaze with fire, reflecting back the glory of the dawn behind them. They were still too high. As they drew nearer, Mickey pulled the line to the maneuvering vent, causing their descent to accelerate. Then he fired several short blasts of flame to level them out. They were too low to use the variometer, so he was forced to estimate visually. They were traveling about fifteen miles an hour. Their speed relative to the ground seemed to increase.

Suddenly the building was upon them. They felt the jar of the basket hitting the roof as Mickey pulled the cord which deflated the balloon and sent the hot air spilling into the atmosphere above them. At the same time he turned the valve to the fuel tank off. And then the basket was sent sprawling, and them with it. And then they stopped. There was a brief moment of confusion, then Mickey and Billy Joe sprang out and hauled the carcass of the envelope in toward them. Smith felt for his bag of tools and the coil of rope and stumbled out of the basket. The thick glass panes beneath his feet seemed firm enough. He separated himself from the other two and began his operations. He selected a pane of glass that was about dead center, opening up his canvas bag and spreading out his tools. He picked up a rubber suction cup that slightly resembled a toilet plunger, opened a small tube of vaseline, and smeared it over the inside of the cup. Then he placed the cup in the middle of the pane and pressed it firmly to the glass. He unscrewed a plug from the middle, which allowed the air to escape fully, and when the cup was fairly flat, screwed the plug back into place. The back of the cup which surrounded the plug was circular, and contained a groove around its perimeter, into which he fitted a loop of cord two feet in circumference, at the other end of which was attached a small semi-circular sleeve of metal which housed a thin steel disk which rotated within it. Billy Joe stood watching him with fascination as he worked.

With the cup firmly attached to the center of the pane of glass, he rotated the sleeve of metal about it at cord's length, grinding the steel disk into the glass in a wide circle about a foot in radius. After several minutes, a thin circular groove was etched in the glass, forming a circle about the rubber cup. When it was deep enough, he replaced the cord and disk in the bag, and removed a small vial from his shirt pocket. He held it carefully, removing the stopper, and cautiously poured a thin trickle of liquid into the groove, all the way around. A tiny wisp of smoke arose from the groove as he sat and watched. Satisfied, he picked up a rubber hammer and gently tapped the glass all the way around, just on the inside of the groove, all the while keeping a firm grip on the rubber cup with his left hand. On the last tap, the pane gave a sudden ping, and he carefully lifted out the circular piece, placing it to one side. He rose to his feet and brought back the taped rod and the coil of rope. He tied one end of the rope to the middle of the rod,

and laid the rod across the hole in the glass, making sure the ends of the rod were resting on the enclosing metal frame. He dropped the coil into the hole, and tugged at the tied end, making sure it was fastened securely. He motioned to Billy Joe.

"Let's go," he said in a whisper. "Wait until I'm standing on the ceiling below, then follow me down." He picked up a coping saw and stuck it in his belt, then sat down at the edge of the hole with his feet dangling inside. He gave Billy Joe a thumbs up, then grabbed the rope with his right hand and the rod with his left, and with a sudden jerk he straightened his body as he dropped into the hole, letting himself down hand over hand, braking his descent with his shoes which cupped the rope between. The thirty feet seemed endless, and then he felt beneath him the soft squunch of his shoes as they hit the insulation paneling on the ceiling of the clinic. He looked up at the glass roof above, where he could just make out the dark shape of Billy Joe at the hole. He gave the rope a tug to signal that he was free, and stood back while his friend made the descent.

As soon as Billy Joe was safely beside him, Smith pulled a piece of paper from his back pocket and unfolded it under the small spot of his penlight, studying the measurements he had previously written down. He brought out a tape measure and crawled to the edge of the clinic roof, secured the end, and crawled back, drawing out the tape to its limit of twelve feet, then rewound the tape and made a second measurement, marking the spot with a slash of the coping saw in the soft insulation material. Then he crawled to the other end, about thirty feet away, and repeated the same procedure for a second measurement at right angles to the first. He estimated the intersection of the two by eye, squinting in the darkness at the small spot of his penlight as he moved it back and forth across the ceiling. Finally satisfied, he took the saw and jabbed it in at the point of intersection, sawing up and down until the saw broke through the panel. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath, perspiring heavily in the damp semi-darkness, then awkwardly hacked out a rough hole. He pulled out wads of the material until by the aid of his penlight he could see dimly into the room below. He moved the small beam of light about. He could just make out the dim outline of a desk.

"Right on the nose," he whispered exultantly. "Look," he said to Billy Joe, who crowded in to see what he was whispering about. "This has got to be Mueller's office. The boy's room will be just to the right. We may as well drop down right here. Grab the end of the rope, so we have something to climb back up with."

There was a moment's silence, while he could hear Billy Joe scuffling in the dark. Then his companion was back, jamming a handful of rope into the hole.

"Let's go," said Smith, lowering himself by his hands and dropping to the desk below. He heard the jangle of the telephone as he kicked the receiver off the hook with his foot. He slipped down from the desk to make room for Billy Joe, replacing the receiver on its cradle and moving it out of the way. He swung the spot of his penlight in a circle about him, noting with satisfaction that he was indeed in Mueller's office. Then he heard the thud of Billy Joe's feet hitting the desk, and suddenly the room was bathed in light.

## Chapter 66

Reggie awoke with a start. He had been dreaming of a battle, with the clash of arms and the din of tumult, so at first he thought the noise coming from the adjacent room was an extension of that dream. He threw back his covers and ran to the door. Ever since his conversation with Smith, he had been wearing his clothes to bed. He heard the thump of what sounded like bodies hitting the wall, but there was no sound of voices. It was weird. With great trepidation he turned the doorknob slowly and opened the door a crack to try to make out what was happening. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the light. The first person he recognized was the Chinese man who slept nights opposite him. His eyes were fierce and the expression on his face was terrible. There seemed to be two men battling him, but he seemed to be winning. Then Reggie saw Smith, and his heart was in his mouth. He watched with great fearfulness. Smith had come to rescue him, but would the Chinese man win? Then there came a resounding crash, and there was silence. Reggie opened the door wider, and he could see someone's feet on the other side of the desk, someone lying down. There was one man with his back to Reggie, and another one facing him, who was holding his arm as if he were in great pain. And then Reggie heard Smith's voice, and he knew everything was all right.

"Are you hurt?" said Smith.

"The son of a bitch must have broken my arm" said the other man. "Did you kill him?"

"I don't think so. He's still breathing. It's a miracle, though. There's nothing left of the chair."

Then Reggie rushed into the room and Smith turned to face him. Reggie threw himself into Smith's arms.

"Smittie," he sobbed. "I was afraid you weren't going to come."

"But I did, old sport, I did." Smith held him in a tight embrace.

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It was a subdued group that reconvened on the roof of the winery. They could hear noises and shouts below them, and they could see people on the grounds outside the building pointing up at them. There were the sounds of sirens approaching. Billy Joe was still holding his arm, his face creased in agony, while Smith was doing his best to help Mickey get the giant carcass of the balloon inflated again. The morning was bright by now, a full forty minutes having elapsed since they had landed on the roof. Billy Joe tried his one-handed best to assist Smith in keeping the mouth of the balloon raised as Mickey used the portable fan to blow air into the collapsed panels. The clamor from below seemed to be increasing. Suddenly a new sound could be heard, the sharp crack of what sounded like gunfire.

"Jesus, are they shooting at us?" asked Billy Joe. Smith peered down to try to make out what was happening.

"I think they're trying to hit the balloon," he yelled over the drone of the fan and the din from below. "We'd better get this goddam show on the road."

It seemed a small eternity before the balloon was erect, and they were all clambering into the basket as Mickey adjusted the flame, and they felt the weight of all



their recent exertions lifted from their shoulders as the balloon gently lifted off the glass roof and they accelerated upwards with the roar of the burners deafening their ears. Gradually the winery diminished in size until it looked small and insignificant in the distance. Far below them they could see a police car speeding along highway 29, the distant wail of its siren barely discernible.

"Is the balloon all right?" Smith yelled at Mickey, trying to make himself heard above the roar of the flame, pointing at the giant shrouds above them.

"I think we got hit!" Mickey yelled back at him. "But don't worry about it. We'll lose some lift, but we can make up for it by keeping the burner blasting. Thank God we have more fuel than we need!"

As their altitude increased they caught a strong westerly breeze that carried them up over the hill and out of sight of the winery. Now a line of low hills lay between them and the Napa Valley. Before them, in the distance, were the foothills which separated them from the ocean. In the near distance, the thin line of a highway running north to south could just barely be seen, tiny toy cars moving at a snail's pace.

"That's highway 101," Smith said to Reggie. Reggie looked excitedly up at Smith, who grinned back at him. Side by side they hunched over the edge of the basket, looking down at the scenery which unfolded before them. For the first time in months neither one of them had a care in the world. It was good to be alive.

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On Friday morning Fred Friendly broke silence and asked for a lawyer. Frank and Vic went over his story with him time after time, but he told it the same way on each repetition. They asked him where he was on June 23, June 29, and July 6, and he told them. It took most of the day to check out his alibis, but they held water. Finally, reluctantly, they let him go. Later they made a routine call to the Helensville Police Department and learned about the extraordinary events at the Marjorie Dowling Clinic the day before. It was very depressing. Especially since Johns insisted on pulling everybody off the case. Randolph and Spiers were reassigned to the L. A. area to help out on a counterfeiting case. Vic took a couple weeks off to take care of family matters, and visit his son, who had just begun his freshman year at Washington State. Frank was given a few days to wrap up the case and put it in the pending file. He called Aldo to let him know.

"It would be nice if we solved even a quarter of our cases," Aldo said commiseratingly.

"Yeah, you're right," said Frank. "I still wish we could show something for all the time we put in on this one."

"Well, I turned over the information you gave me on this Tweeds character to Bleier and Morgan. Sounds like he might have been behind the art-for-furniture ring they were trying to break. And I gave a call to the company that insured Lambeaux' paintings to let them know we thought something funny might be going on there. So maybe we can still catch a few of the smaller fish."

"How's your partner, Stan doing?"

"He passed away Friday."

"Sorry about that."

"Yeah, me too. Thanks for asking. And thanks for the information. Guess you'll be reassigned to another case."

"Soon as I wrap this one up. Still a lot of paper work. You know how it is."

After he had hung up, Frank sat and thought. If he had a little more time, he might check up on the kidnapped boy's mother. This Smith seemed to genuinely care for the boy, and, according to what the boy's father had told them, Reggie hadn't seen his mother for some time. However, he had no time for such things. Johns wouldn't countenance any more field work on this case. He reached for the folder, still lying open on his desk. He hated documentation, but there was no time like the present.

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It was a very irate Dr. Mueller who called Tweeds late Friday afternoon. He had just finished an exhausting session with the local police, and was in no mood to bandy words.

"You should see what a terrible mess has been made of my office. And my favorite chair just smashed to smithereens."

"I'll pay for it," said a despondent Tweeds, who had been paying for quite a lot lately, and expected to be paying quite a bit more yet for the hospitalization and care of Parker, who was lying in a coma at Sonoma General Hospital.

"I hope you'll also pay for the large hole in my roof," continued Mueller. "The rains may be coming soon, and it's a real job finding someone who's willing to climb up there and fix it. It's also not easy to obtain a sheet of glass that thick. I may have to put in a special order for it."

"I'll pay," repeated Tweeds, his patience starting to wear thin. "Just let me know how much it costs."

"I think you should pay some of it right now," continued Mueller. "If the next scheme you get involved with is as harebrained as the last, you might be locked up somewhere where you can't pay any bills at all."

"Yes, yes, Carl," muttered Tweeds, gnashing his teeth and glaring at unseen gods. "Just figure out what the total cost is going to be and let me know."

He hung up the phone in a pet. Carl was beginning to sound like a nagging fishwife. He reminded Tweeds of the impatient elderly aunt who had raised him. He sighed. He thought about how much Parker would cost him for all the days he spent in the hospital.

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The end of the balloon ride had not gone quite as successfully as they had planned, but it had come out all right. They lost a lot of altitude due to the punctures in the mantle, and barely made it over the low foothills that separated them from the sea. Strong northerly winds had forced them to land considerably to the south from the truck which awaited them. They touched ground on a steep hillside which was too barren for cattle. A moderately-sized summer house sat perched above the road just below them, a rough-timbered affair with odd angles and large panes of glass. It looked as if it had just been finished, and was sitting waiting for a rich buyer from San Francisco. They peered in

through the French doors in the back and saw bare floors and no furniture. Smith jimmied the lock open, and they sat around in an empty room, crosslegged in a circle, Billy Joe still clutching his arm with some pain, while Smith opened up a small bag which contained a thermos of coffee, some paper cups, and four flattened sandwiches which they ate with considerable relish. Reggie was still very excited by the events and had a hard time sitting still.

"You guys gotta get me to a hospital," said Billy Joe between clenched teeth.

"First we have to make contact with Ray," said Smith. "He's up the road a way with the truck. I wouldn't want the lot of us trying to hitchhike back from here."

"What about my goddam balloon?" asked Mickey.

"I'll have a couple friends of mine wander up this way on a hike. They can find it and report it to the police. You'll get it back."

"What if I don't?"

"Then I'll pay you what it's worth. Meanwhile you can hang on to Billy Joe for collateral. He's not going anyplace soon."

One hour and three car rides later, Smith made contact with Ray, who was cruising up and down Highway One, keeping within five miles of the agreed-upon meeting place. Ray drove back to the Seaside Motel where Jim was waiting with another car. When they got to the house where the others were waiting impatiently for them, Mickey and Billy Joe climbed in the truck, while Smith and Reggie joined Jim and Ray in the car.

"What d'you think is the closest hospital?" Mickey asked Smith just before they parted company.

"Better make it Sonoma General. That's close to where you live."

"That's a good hour away," complained Billy Joe, sweating profusely and looking uncomfortable in the crude sling Mickey had fixed up for him.

"How'll we say he broke it?" asked Mickey.

"Tell 'em he fell off the top of your shed," said Smith. "The cops have no way of knowing he broke his arm in the scuffle, so they won't be scouring the local hospitals. Especially not in the immediate area. They'll figure us to be miles away by now."

And so it was, by one of the more curious absurdities of fate, that Billy Joe and Mr. Parker shared beds in the same wing of Sonoma General Hospital. Mr. Parker had just arrived in a coma a few hours before, and was still in Intensive Care, while Billy Joe was lying in a comfortable bed with a warm cast encasing his upper arm and shoulder, a lovely shot of morphine quieting the throbbing pain which had dominated his mind for the last five hours, and a pretty nurse to flirt with as she propped up the pillows behind his head so he could watch television more easily.

"You should have seen this Oriental gentleman they brought in this morning," the nurse told him. "Broken collarbone, two broken arms, and a cracked skull. Compared to him, you're pretty darned lucky." Billy Joe agreed with her, and wondered bemusedly if by any chance of fate it could possibly be the same guy who had put him in here. If so, politics wasn't the only activity that made strange bedfellows.

## Chapter 67

"Daddy was very impressed with you," Sheila murmured in Smith's ear as they lay in bed together.

"He's not a bad guy," said Smith, nuzzling her neck, "as far as financiers go."

"And how many financiers have you known?"

"None in person," said Smith, "but I've seen a few on television, and I've read the remarks of quite a few in news magazines. They seem like a stuffy bunch, full of themselves, positive that they did it all, taking all the kudos for what the thousands of sweating peons who work for them did, not always recognizing that all they did was put up the dough and take the risk."

"You're not giving them much credit for all the management decisions they made, the good choices they made in hiring the people who carried out their policies."

"True," said Smith. "Did I ever tell you what a delightful left ear lobe you have?"

"Now you're changing the subject," said his lady, turning toward him so she could find his lips with hers.

"You never told me what finally happened with Reggie," she complained twenty minutes later, as they lay breathing heavily after another bout of love-making.

"Well," said Smith. "He kind of wanted to see his mother, and he just happened to have her address with him on a letter she smuggled to him via his aunt. Anyway, she was an outpatient at a psychiatric clinic in Shasta. That's in northern California. So we paid her a visit. She wasn't at the clinic, but I managed to wangle her address from the head nurse. She was staying with her sister Cora and her husband. They were responsible for getting her in the clinic in the first place. She was in pretty bad shape after all the games jolly old Roger had played with her."

"Was she glad to see him?"

"Reggie? Very," said Smith. "There's no doubt she really cares for him and vice versa."

"Is she in any shape to be a proper mother to him?"

"Not yet. She's starting to make a real comeback. She's got a part-time secretary's job at a local furniture factory, and she's beginning to make real headway in the treatment program at the clinic. She was a secretary before. That's how Roger met her in the first place."

"So you left the boy in her custody?"

"Not quite. First we had to return the boy to his father."

"You gave him back? After all the trouble you went to to get him away from him in the first place?"

"Well, the situation was changed considerably by then. He stayed a few days with his mother and aunt and uncle. While they made some circumspect inquiries. They got in touch with one of the nurses at the Marjorie Dowling Clinic, and she's willing to testify about the welts on Reggie's back he got from the beating his father gave him."

"His father beat him?"

Smith told her about the boy's treatment from his father.

"How awful? So they're going to try to have him declared unfit?"

"They were planning to, in case it became necessary. In addition to the nurse they contacted the maid, Thelma, and she's willing to come forward as well. She personally

witnessed a number of beatings Lambeaux gave his son, or I guess I should say heard. She said she didn't care if she got the sack for it. Said she was tired of working for a Nazi."

"Good for her. Do you think they have a good case?"

"Yeah, but now it'll never get to court. They sweetened the pot by offering Roger an end to the alimony. He'll still be stuck with child support, but nothing's perfect. I think he'll be glad to see the end of his son. The maid said he saw as little of the boy as he could, and begrudged the time he was forced to spend with him because it kept him away from his girl friend."

"But why did you return the boy to such an awful father?"

"It's the law. You can't start one action until the preceding one has been finished. You can't take the boy away from his father until the father has been declared unfit, and if the boy has been kidnapped he has to be returned. It would have been illegal for them to keep him at the time."

"Will he have to stay long with his father? I mean before they bring up the court action?"

"He was already back with his mother before I left. The uncle had a long talk with his father and told him what he intended to do. I guess Roger could see the handwriting on the wall and was tired of trying to make his son into a little replica of himself. He knew the boy hated him, and he realized he would lose in court. So he decided to save the legal costs and accept the end of the alimony. Roger is the type of person who is best gotten to through his pocketbook. I think he was personally relieved to be done with it all."

"So everything turned out happily in the end. Will you miss the boy. It seemed to me that the two of you had something going."

"Oh, I plan on seeing him again soon."

"Don't you think that might be a little dangerous? Won't the F.B.I. still be looking for you?"

"Oh, I won't take any undue chances. I know how the Bureau works. They'll reopen the case from time to time, maybe try to do a little surveillance on the boy and his mother, watch their mail, things like that. But they'll just be going through the motions. They can't spend a lot of time or money on it, not with all the problems of national security, so as long as I remain careful I don't foresee any problems."

"So everything seems to be pretty well wrapped up. What ever happened to that dreadful man who tied us up and turned on the gas?"

"Tweeds? Well, you remember that place I told you he went to on Saturday nights?"

"Some sort of place of prostitution, wasn't it?"

"Sort of. Young flesh for old bones."

"Something ought to be done about that."

"It has." Smith told her about the chain of circumstances that led from a detective looking for a lost boy, who turned out not be be lost at all, and how the detective had teamed up with a cop on the Oakland Vice squad.

"Just a few days before I left, an article appeared in the Oakland Tribune. 'Vice Squad breaks kiddie porno house.' They gave it a front-page spread."

"Do you think Tweeds may have been caught in the raid?"

"I have no way of knowing, since they didn't publish any names. But it did my heart good to notice that they made the bust on a Saturday night, so it's entirely possible."

"So there might be a little justice in the world."

"I'd like to think so."

"So what's next in your life?"

"You mean our life."

"Okay, our life."

"First, that long-awaited trip to Europe."

"And then?"

"Then's a long time away."

"When are we going?"

"Right away. Like we decided."

"I'd better tell Daddy. He might have other plans for my social life. He doesn't see me this often and he still has some friends he wants to show me off to."

"You've been here a full month already. Sounds like he has a lot of friends."

"It's nice to feel wanted by him. I didn't get much of it as a kid."

"You told me."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry if I sound like a recording. When do we leave?"

"On Monday. We'll be catching a flight to Kennedy Airport at ten in the morning. Then we make connections later in the day with Icelandic to Shannon."

"It's exciting."

"Think you can wind things up with Daddy by then?"

"I think so. Why are we stopping in New York? Couldn't we go direct from Chicago?"

"Reggie will be meeting us in New York."

"What!? I thought he was back with his mother."

"He is right now. But she's not really in shape yet to put up with the energies of a ten year old boy. Plus he needs a fatherly type. Like me."

"He's got his uncle."

"Yeah, and his uncle's an okay guy. Might do for a father in a pinch, but he couldn't offer Reggie enough scope for development."

"Like you could."

"Right."

"So you're going to have him full time?"

"Except for summers. Summers he will spend with his mother. And his aunt and uncle. Plus he will write to her regularly."

"And how is he going to become educated? Are you going to have to accept responsibility for that as well?"

"He doesn't really need formal schooling. To get into college all he has to do is pass the High School equivalency test. I'll get him tutors from time to time. There's a lot of education to be had in the world out there as well. Traveling. Learning languages. Learning how people in other cultures think. He's a natural-born reader. I don't think there'll be any problems."

"So you did end up with him after all. Why all this charade about him being awarded to his mother?"

"To take the cops off the case and Roger off his back. And to set it up so he could spend summers with his mom. This way it's a lot more legal, and it's easier all around."

"Speaking of legal, are you going to give up your life of crime?"

"I don't know. But I do know one thing. I'm not going back to what I was doing before. I gotta set a better example for the kid."

"That's good to hear. It's nice that you finally have some motivation to go straight."

"The only thing is, I'm blamed if I can think of any line of work I could stand doing that isn't at least a trifle shady."

"I have given it considerable thought", said Sheila, "and I have a shady suggestion which might appeal to you."

"'Shady' sounds good."

"Well, first of all, as we said, it would have to be something legal. Then I'd stand a better chance in planning our future, and I wouldn't have to go around being worried all the time."

"I can understand that. But legal never interested me much."

"I know. But let me continue."

"Okay."

"And it's obvious you'd never settle for a desk job, or anything that's eight to five, or anything that's safe."

"That's two 'ors' in a row."

"It only takes two oars to row," quipped his lady.

"Let's not turn this into a row," said Smith.

"And to wrap it all up, it would be nice if it could utilize the experience you've had in the past."

"It sounds absolutely idyllic. If I were a cat I'd have used up my nine lives already, just out of curiosity."

"How about becoming a private detective?"

There was a brief silence while they listened to the sound of the clock on the bedside table.

"Why do they have to make electric clocks tick?" asked Smith irrelevantly.

"It's for tick-headed people like you, who refuse to answer questions."

"Well, I must admit that detecting is a creative idea. I certainly would never have thought of it by myself. In fact, it might actually have some merit. I'll have to meditate on it one of these days. After we spend our million dollars, that is. There's only one thing that bothers me."

"What's that?"

"Well, in addition to getting a marriage license, I'd be obliged to get a detective's license as well. It all sounds pretty licentious."

## Chapter 68

It was the last day of November, and the air was cold and crisp, with a chill wind blowing down from the north. The snowpack was dry and powdery. Perfect weather for skiing. Smith wore a fur-lined parka, heavy mittens, and dark glasses to keep out the glare from a late-afternoon sun that bore down relentlessly from a steel-blue sky. Below him stretched an Alpine valley with a small frozen lake in its center. All about him were snow-covered peaks with bare granite spikes jutting out defiantly. He was glad he had taken Sheila's advice and worn the panty hose under his woolen ski pants. He watched the small figure below him become larger as it struggled up the steep embankment on the clumsy cross-country skis. Bundled in similar manner to Smith, the figure slowly puffed up to where Smith was waiting, the small face framed by hood and goggles gradually becoming life size. Reggie grinned up at Smith.

"Which one is Mont Blanc?" he asked.

"I don't think you can see Mont Blanc from here," said Smith. "It's a few hundred miles southeast. It's in France. This is Austria, and that's Italy to the south, and these are the Hohe Tauern Alps. I'm pretty sure that mountain over there is the Grossglockner. It's over twelve thousand feet high."

"How high is Mont Blanc?"

"Well, it's not exactly a mountain in itself. It's what's called a 'massif'. It's a cluster of mountains that stands by itself, and the highest peak in it is just a little less than sixteen thousand feet."

"How many kinds of Alps are there?"

"There are at least fifteen different varieties, but I couldn't tell you all of them. Mont Blanc is in the Savoy Alps, and I've heard of the Pennine Alps and the Maritime Alps and the Ligurian Alps, but you'll have to hold your questions on that until we meet Sheila at the lodge."

"I hope we get there soon. I'm starving."

Smith consulted his watch. "Well, if we can keep up our present pace, we should make it in about forty five minutes. You up to it?"

"Sure," said Reggie. "What kind of food will they have?" He struggled to keep up with Smith, who slowed down to accomodate his small charge.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe some weird combination of strudel and spaghetti. It'll be Tyrolean, which is kind of both Austrian and Italian, so I'm not sure. Whatever it is, you can bet it will taste pretty good."

"And then where are we going?"

"Rome," said Smith simply, as if that one word were enough.

It was enough for Reggie. Rome conjured up the sound a giant bell might make. He saw a vast city of churches and museums and popes and dark men with moustaches and fat mamas with many children. And bicycles and beggars and fountains. And Smith and Sheila and him sitting in a sidewalk restaurant under an umbrella eating a giant pizza and a plateful of spaghetti with a big flask of red wine at a table with a red-checked tablecloth. And maybe they would let him have a little wine, too, with water added to it like they let him drink it in Paris. He would have so many things to tell his friend Jack next summer.