

he youthful head of a successful Internet company is confronted with the disappearance of his wife and the murder of a colleague. The City Different of Santa Fe provides the backdrop for this tale of love, murder and betrayal.

City Different

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City Different

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To

Harry and Daisy
for getting me started,

and to

Christa
for all her love and support

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Stephen Hazlett

A note from the author

Santa Fe, New Mexico is obviously a real city, but I have taken certain liberties with its geography and that of the surrounding area. There is no hilltop overlooking Canyon Road as described in the book, and a place called the *Canyon Waves Health Spa & Resort* does not exist in Santa Fe or anywhere else as far as I know. There is no *Tecolote Pueblo* north of town, nor is it intended to represent any other Indian Pueblo of the area. The disputed land grant and the aquifer of water beneath it are similar inventions of my imagination, although land grants and aquifers do exist in New Mexico, and they are sometimes subject to dispute.

Likewise, *ERO*, the Internet company depicted herein, and its innovative *database search technology* are also creations of my imagination and are not intended to represent any part of the history of California's Silicon Valley.

Chapter 1

The two detectives trudged up the stairs, single file, while I sat watching. I wasn't going anywhere, not with the uniformed policeman standing near the front door occasionally flicking his eyes toward me and then looking away. He was one of the two who had originally responded to my call. His partner was still upstairs in Joe's bedroom, apparently preserving the crime scene.

Flashes of light came from the bedroom at the top of the stairs. It took a minute for me to realize they were taking flash pictures up there—apparently recording the scene now.

The flashing eventually stopped and I waited, looking up, hearing mumbled conversations coming from Joe's room. After a while, the two detectives emerged and came down and took seats across from me. I still sat on the couch, where they'd told me to wait, my hands hanging between my knees. They stared at me for a few seconds.

"Did you touch anything up there, Mr. Collins?" one of them asked. Earlier, when he'd arrived with his partner, he'd told me his name. I was having a hard time concentrating, but I remembered now that it was Ryan. I looked over at the other one, trying to remember his name too. He stared back at me, sitting with his hands folded in his lap.

The first one, Detective Ryan, was waiting for me to answer. He looked up as a man came in through the front door carrying a hard-side case in one hand. The door was still open from when Nina had run through it earlier, and that bothered me for some reason. I wanted to go close it. The detective whose name I couldn't remember stood and went over to talk to the man with the case. They spoke in low voices for a minute.

"Mr. Collins, did you touch anything up there?" Detective Ryan asked again.

I turned back, trying to make sense of what he'd said. He was asking: did I touch Joe? Why would I do that? Or he was really asking: did I shoot Joe? No, he wasn't asking that.

"No," I finally told him.

The man with the case, what I thought must have been some kind of evidence kit, went up the stairs, and the other detective came back and sat down again and continued his staring at me. The evidence kit must have been

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to capture fingerprints and whatever else they looked for in a crime scene. Blood, probably. There was enough of that.

Detective Ryan looked down at the notebook in his hand. "You said when you came in, your wife was running out the door."

"Yes," I said.

"Why was she doing that?"

"I don't know."

"Did she say anything?"

"She said my name." It was still in my head, the way she'd said it

"That's all? Just Edward?"

"Eddie," I said. Nina had practically knocked me over when I'd opened the door, coming in. She'd looked at me, her eyes wild, and said, "Eddie," in a strangled voice before running past me out the front door and jumping into her car and driving off, squealing the tires all the way up the long driveway. The way she'd said my name sounded as if she'd been gasping for air.

"Do you know where she is?"

"No."

He waited for a few seconds. "You have no idea?"

I shook my head.

"And you don't know why she ran away?"

I turned to look at him. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Not really, Mr. Collins," Detective Ryan said.

"She was scared. What else?"

"Of you?"

I didn't know how to answer that.

Detective Ryan stared at me for a few seconds and then looked over at his partner, and then back at me. "So your wife ran out the door, after saying your name," he asked. "What did you do then?"

I remembered standing in the open doorway, looking up the driveway for a minute after Nina had gone, but I didn't mention that. "I went upstairs," I said. "I found Joe in his bedroom lying there. There was blood all over his shirt and all around him on the floor."

"What did you do next?" Detective Ryan asked.

"I'm not sure. I must have called you people."

Detective Ryan looked again at his notebook. "The dead man's name was Joseph LaFont, correct? He was a houseguest?"

The word, houseguest, didn't seem to fit. "He just lived with us."

The detective looked around. "Well, you got enough room, it looks like. There's how many bedrooms, seven or eight? Maybe more than that." He

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turned his head one way and then the other appraising the place. “But he wasn’t a houseguest, you say.” His eyes came back to me. “He just lived here.”

“He worked for me,” I said, with the thought that what I was saying wasn’t making much sense to these detectives. It was disconnected and not making much sense to me either.

“He worked for you in that big office complex of yours over in Cupertino.” Detective Ryan jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “What did he do for you there?”

It felt like I had to filter my answers through some thick substance in my brain. “He was my Chief Financial Officer,” I told Detective Ryan. The words came out like they were sticking to my tongue. I sounded like a drunken man trying to act sober. The two detectives traded looks.

It’d been Nina who had first brought up the subject of Joe going to work for me. It seemed like a long time ago, but it was only a few months back, a time when I was having trouble getting control of my own company. We’d grown too fast with no decent fiscal control, and I was hopeless when it came to matters of money. The fact was I had no respect for it. Joe LaFont was an accountant, working for Nina’s Aunt Helen in Santa Fe, and Helen had brought it up to Nina that Joe might be able to help straighten out my books. Joe made a trip out to California to see me and to look over the situation. Within a week he’d impressed me enough that I convinced him to stay at least semi-permanently. I made him my acting Chief Financial Officer, or CFO, reporting to me.

“And Mr. LaFont lived with you,” Detective Ryan said, looking around again. His eyes followed the stairs leading to the second floor where Joe’s body still lay. “He lived here with you and your wife. Nina, isn’t it?” He waited for a minute. “And nobody else lived here, right?” He waited again. “Mr. Collins, was anything going on between Mr. LaFont and your wife?”

It took a minute for me to answer. “That’s impossible,” I finally said. “Joe didn’t like women.”

Ryan glanced over at his partner again. “You mean he was gay?”

We both turned to watch two men enter the house pushing a wheeled gurney. They lifted the gurney and carried it upstairs and disappeared into Joe’s room.

“So Mr. LaFont was gay,” Detective Ryan asked, his interest up now. “How did you know that?”

“Everybody knew.” I shrugged.

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The detective seemed to consider this, tapping the end of his pen on his notebook.

A little later, the two men emerged from Joe's room pushing the same gurney, lifting it at the top of the stairs, struggling with the weight that was on it, and carrying it down the stairs and then continuing, wheeling it out the door. A large black bag with a formless shape inside it and a zipper running its length was strapped onto the gurney. The shape inside the bag was Joe LaFont.

After more questions that I had a hard time remembering, I was driven to the Los Gatos police station, where I had a gunshot residue test administered on my hands. Detective Ryan called it a GSR. It consisted of having my hands wiped with a swab, and then having the swab tested. I was told that the test showed my hands were free of any residue, which I already knew. Then I was left alone for a while, seated at a table in a small room.

When Detective Ryan returned to the room, he came back to the same question as before, and he kept coming back to it: Was anything going on between Joe and Nina? He also told me that no gun was found anywhere in the house. Powder burns on Joe's shirt indicated that he'd been shot at close range. They'd recovered the bullet, Ryan told me, from inside Joe's chest. The gun used was a twenty-five caliber. At the time, I wondered why he was telling me all this. He asked if I owned such a gun, and I told them I didn't, nor any other kind of gun. It was a small-caliber, he said, not real common, but small enough that a woman could carry it in her purse. He asked if Nina owned a gun, and I told them that Nina didn't own a gun either. He asked a lot of other questions that I couldn't remember later, leaving me fantasizing that the scene was being filmed for an upcoming episode of a TV cop drama.

Finally I was released because of the negative GSR test and the fact that I could account for my whereabouts. I'd been at work all day until going home and seeing Nina run out the door and finding Joe lying on his bedroom floor. Detective Ryan issued what I figured was the standard admonition for all good TV cop dramas, using a deadpan delivery and a monotone voice to tell me not to go anywhere.

The following day I was told that Nina's dark-green Porsche was found at San Francisco Airport's short-term parking lot. By then, I was pretty sure where she'd gone. I took off after her.

Nina had always insisted on taking the drive from California to New Mexico in one long shot of about sixteen hours. This time, alone, I did the same, a long night of driving in the dark. Another thing: Nina had a favorite

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way of approaching Santa Fe, on old State Road 14, bypassing the Big I interchange in Albuquerque. Of course, I drove Nina's back way this time as well, through a gritty spring snow blowing across the two-lane road. It was early morning by then, and I knew the exact spot where I would first see Santa Fe in the distance. It was as if I expected to find Nina there too, wandering the highway ahead of me.

Finally I pulled up to the big house belonging to Nina's Aunt Helen. I thought I could feel Nina's presence inside, waiting for me. It was probably just wishful thinking, I knew. It had been two days since I'd seen her running out the door saying, "Eddie," in that way I couldn't get out of my head.

The blacktop lot where I parked was mostly empty at this early hour. The Canyon Waves Health Spa & Resort that Helen owned, where Santa Fe's finest went to be poked and prodded and massaged and wined and dined, was obviously not open yet for business. The spa occupied most of the land up the hill from Helen's house.

The snow that had earlier accompanied me into the city had stopped by then, and sunlight slanted in shafts through the clouds. The pavement was wet, but snow clung in patches to the grass that was still shaggy and brown from the winter that hadn't quite ended here. I made my way downhill from the lot on a brick path through gardens partially covered with the thin snow. Some hardy species of early spring flowers showed themselves through the white stuff. The path led to a portal formed by dormant wisteria hanging from a trellis, enclosing a space around heavy front doors, making a dark tunnel where I stood waiting.

Helen's maid or domestic, whatever she was, a young girl with dark hair and dark eyes, answered my knock. "Como esta?" she said with a wide-eyed look at me. She wore a long colorful skirt, beneath which peeked her bare toes.

I spoke passable Spanish but decided to answer in English, slowly enunciating the words, "I'm here to see Helen Rodriguez. My name is Eddie Collins."

She apparently understood enough, maybe just Helen's name. She nodded and then retreated back inside and closed the door. I stood there alone for a minute. A cold wind came down the hill at me, reminding me that my jacket was still inside the car. The door opened again and Helen looked at me, apparently not that surprised to see me. "Nina's not here, Eddie," she said.

"How do you know I came for her?"

"What else would you be doing here?" she said. "Besides, the police have already been here asking about her. They asked about you too."

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I looked behind me, as though they might be hiding in the wisteria.

“Santa Fe police,” she said. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Where else should I be?” I answered.

Helen shrugged, still standing in the partially open doorway. She was a large, handsome woman on the wrong side of middle age who liked to dress in the local style—at least one of the local styles—long colorful skirts and loose peasant blouses to hide her generous figure, and a lot of turquoise jewelry. She was barefoot like her maid. In fact, she was dressed enough like the young girl that she probably supervised her wardrobe. Helen’s long, gray-streaked hair was pulled straight back and gathered at her neck, showing off her dark, handsome face.

“How did they know to come here?” I finally asked her.

Raising her eyebrows, she answered, “They have their ways.” She opened the door wider and motioned me inside. “You better come in. At least for a while, until you figure out what you’re going to do.”

I walked in past her and she closed the door, shutting off the cold wind.

“You look tired, Eddie,” Helen said, glancing at me over her shoulder as she led me inside. “I suppose that’s understandable under the circumstances.”

“Yeah,” I said. Now that the adrenaline rush of the long drive was running down, the weariness from the lack of sleep was beginning to hit me. What had it been, two days now?

She led me inside and sat on one end of a ten-foot couch in what she always called her great room, with a view of the city below as a backdrop. I took a seat on the opposite end of the couch, instinctively looking at the table next to Helen, and then at the one next to me. One of them had always displayed a framed photo of Nina and me. Both were now empty. I looked around, searching for the picture.

Helen’s house was light and airy, done in the southwest style, with traditional vigas—heavy, dark beams strung across the high ceilings—and Mexican tile floors and dark-wooded furniture. The local pottery and the Navajo rugs hung on the walls and thrown carelessly on the floors added to the flavor of the place. Windows ran along one side of the house revealing the gardens and the wood and stone structures of the spa up on the hilltop. On the opposite wall, more windows overlooked a city view starting at the top of Canyon Road and continuing down toward the roundhouse of the state capital building. Beyond that were brown hills surrounded by juniper-dotted mesa, and further on, were mountains appearing gray in the distance.

I finally spotted the photo across the room, placed on a stand between two pieces of Mexican pottery. It was set back, it seemed, so as to be

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inconspicuous. Staring at it, I had to briefly close my eyes. It was a picture I'd seen a hundred times: Nina, her dark hair framing her face, her white skin and blue eyes and her pink mouth curved into a saucy smile. The picture was from our wedding, so next to her was, of course, me. I suppose I wasn't that bad looking if you looked at me a certain way and if I could remember to comb my hair out of my face and if I could invent a cooler smile than the one I always displayed for the camera. "What did the police say?" I finally asked, turning my attention back to Helen.

"Not much, as usual. They only said Nina's wanted for questioning. And so are you."

"She didn't do anything. She was just in the wrong place and time. Christ, Helen, what a mess." I rested my head in my hands and then looked up. "She's been here, hasn't she?" I asked.

"What makes you say that?" she answered.

"Because she wouldn't know anywhere else to go." That much was obvious, at least to me. Santa Fe was the logical place to look for Nina, where she always came there whenever life became too much for her. She would come home to the home of her Aunt Helen's, east of the Old Town area. I didn't think Nina would have the imagination to change her old habits.

The girl who had answered the door earlier, the barefoot Mexican girl with no English, entered the room with a pitcher of what looked like iced tea and two glasses set on a tray. She placed the tray on the heavy table that was nearly the length of the long couch. I watched the girl, but she never looked my way. After she left the room, I turned to Helen and said, "Always a different one, but always the same." I nodded toward the door where the girl had disappeared. "Where does she come from?"

"She's from the village where my mother was born. I don't forget. I give her a life here, her and others like her."

I had heard the story of Helen Rodriguez, although I only got the sketchiest of details from Nina, who was an indifferent storyteller. She never saw significance in other people's lives, even her Aunt Helen's. But once, when I'd asked out of curiosity, Helen herself had filled in the details—born of illegal immigrant parents from Mexico, Helen grew up poor in a small adobe house that occupied the hilltop where her Canyon Waves Health Spa & Resort now stood. As a young woman, Helen met and married the state senator from Estancia, John Baca. "John Baca's family made money in oil and cattle," she had told me. "I went from a poor Mexican girl to the wife of a rich politician."

John Baca's wealth wasn't enormous, but he was more than just well off. After the marriage, Helen had started buying up acreage around the adobe house. By the time of her husband's unexpected death, she had transformed the location into the place that was to become, probably, the most fashionable health spa and resort in New Mexico.

"So what happened, Eddie?" Helen asked in a flat voice that told me she already knew.

"Joe LaFont was murdered," I said anyway. "You know that. Nina must have told you about it. She was here, wasn't she? Maybe she's still here." I began to stand, but Helen held up her hand.

"She's not here, Eddie. Besides, it was the Santa Fe police who told me."

"Well then, you know the whole story." I sat back.

"No I don't know the whole story," Helen said. "Why don't you tell it to me?"

I told her essentially the same story I'd told the Los Gatos Police: After Nina had run out past me and I'd closed the door, wondering what her rushing out like that was all about, I became aware of a burnt smell that definitely didn't belong, like the smell of exploded firecrackers. The smell became stronger as I went up the stairs, and it was strongest at the open door of one of the spare bedrooms, where Joe LaFont had been staying for the past few months.

"I went in his bedroom and saw him lying there," I told Helen. "There was blood all over his shirt." For some reason, I thought to add, "You know how he always wore those Hawaiian shirts."

I didn't know why I was mentioning that now. Joe had been wearing a loose Hawaiian shirt, which wasn't significant, because he almost always wore them. Maybe he'd thought they flattered him somehow, or they were just part of his lifestyle. I must have stared at him for a long time, though in reality I don't know how long I stood there.

"Then I heard a noise downstairs. I thought it was the front door, that maybe Nina had come back. So I went down to look." I didn't mention my state of mind at the time, how one second I was staring at Joe and the next I was downstairs.

"I didn't find anybody. The noise must have been the wind blowing tree branches against the side of the house. Nina was always after me to have the trees on that side of the house trimmed." Again, I wasn't sure why I mentioned that small detail.

After a minute, Helen asked me, "Do you think she killed him?"

"They were friends," I said.

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“Friends sometimes kill friends.”

I looked at her, wondering how she could say that. “She didn’t do anything. It obviously happened not too long before I arrived home, because of the gunpowder smell in the air. I found Joe in his room surrounded by all this blood. Nina probably walked in on him just before I did. And then she ran.”

“The police think she killed him,” she said. “Otherwise, why run the way she did?”

“She panicked. You know how she is. Maybe she thought she would be blamed. I don’t know.”

“Were she and Joe having an affair?”

“You know Joe was gay,” I said, giving her a sour look.

“Sometimes that means bisexual. The police think they were lovers.”

“Helen, Joe and Nina weren’t lovers. That would be ridiculous. And she had nothing to do with killing him.” Though I wasn’t aware of doing it, I found myself standing.

“You never see clearly when it comes to her,” Helen said, motioning me to sit. “Eddie, what are you, thirty years old? You’ve done nothing but play with computers since you were what, twelve? Did you ever even have a serious girlfriend before Nina? What have you done in life except invent, what was it, a new search technology, or whatever, and make a lot of money?”

“Maybe I did a little more than that,” I said without much conviction.

“You have no experience when it comes to people. You think they’re all predictable like your computers. But you can’t account for what they’ll do in a given situation. Sometimes we don’t even know ourselves why we do the things we do.”

I couldn’t believe she saying all this. “What are you saying, Helen?” I asked in amazement. “That you think she did it?”

“It wouldn’t make any difference to me if she did,” she said, throwing a hand out as if flicking away a fly. “I’d still love her. She’s my niece.”

“And she’s my wife. I love her no matter what. But she didn’t kill him.”

“Of course she didn’t,” she said. I had the sudden notion she’d just been pumping me for information in some oblique way.

The thought that Joe and Nina might be having an affair, as the police and Helen kept suggesting, was absurd to me. In truth, however, Joe did love Nina. That was obvious when you saw him around her. We had that in common. Poor Joe, I thought now. It was the first time I’d felt anything for him since his murder.

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But Joe's love for Nina was more like puppy-ish variety than anything else. The matter of his sexual orientation was apparently known back in Santa Fe. He must have talked about it to Nina, because she'd told me of the places he would frequent alone on the nights he went out, like the gay hangout called the Feline Club up the hill from Los Gatos on Highway 17. How clever, I always thought sarcastically, of whomever owned the place, to call it the Feline Club, since it resided on the wooded edge of Los Gatos, city of The Cats. Anyway, my theory of Joe's murder was that it was some jealous lover who'd killed him, just like in some bad mystery movie, and Nina had stumbled on it shortly thereafter. And then she ran, of course, because that was what Nina did when she was scared or hurt or confused; she ran and it was always back to Santa Fe and Helen's. Where she was now was another matter.

"So where is she, Helen?" I asked. "I have to find her."

"Have you thought of what you're going to do when you do find her?"

"Where is she?"

"Do you plan on just taking her back home? Because you know that won't work." She leaned forward and spread her hands. "You can't just take her back without thinking this through. You have to have a plan."

She was right, of course. I hadn't thought of that part yet: what to do after I found her. I rubbed my hand over my face, tired from the drive and the lack of sleep the past few days. "I just want to find her for now. That's all I'm thinking of. We'll figure the rest out later."

Helen held up one hand, ticking off the points she was making on her fingers. "The police think she committed a murder. They're looking for her in at least two states. We have to somehow convince them she didn't do it." I thought she'd continue, but she sat back, looking at me.

I nodded. "So, is she here or not?" I asked.

"She's not here, no. The truth is, I don't know where Nina is."

I felt like what she was telling me only went so far. "There's more to it than that, though, isn't there?" I said.

"Like what?"

"Like you tell me." I waited. "She was here, wasn't she?"

She took a moment before nodding briefly. "She was, but I don't know where she went," she said. "We'll find her, though. I just don't know how yet."

As I drove the winding road that led back down from Helen's house to East Alameda Street, not sure where I was going next, a city police cruiser

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pulled up close behind me, its revolving roof lights telling me to pull over, which I did. I watched in my side-view mirror as the city cop exited his car, adjusting his belted holster so the gun he wore didn't droop too far south of his belly. He approached my car, stopping short of being adjacent to my seated position, being careful to stay behind my natural line of sight out the side window. The heel of his hand rested on the butt of the pistol jutting from his hip. When I pushed the button to retract my side window, he said forcefully, "Sir, is your name Edward Collins?"

"Yes," I said, being careful to keep both hands on the steering wheel within his sight.

"You're under arrest," the cop said.

"What for?" I shouted, though I already knew the answer. I twisted my head and poked it out the window to confront him, at which he pulled his large pistol from its holster and pointed it directly at my nose, so that I was cross-eyed looking into the dark hole of a pistol barrel, visualizing the lead projectile at the other end that only needed a twitch of a finger to send it into my brain. I pulled my head back into the car. "What made you stop my car?" I asked, feeling foolish as soon as the words came out of my mouth.

"How about we have a description of the car and your license plate number?" he answered.

Oh, the little things like the license plate number. It's not like I didn't know that law enforcement agencies had computers and an Internet to communicate to one another, since I was in the Internet business myself. It was a wonder I hadn't been picked up before even arriving here. I could have come here in one of my own company cars rather than my own conspicuous Mercedes. But that hadn't occurred to me.

Still pointing the gun at me, he said, "Keep your left hand on the wheel and open the door from the outside with your right hand."

"I can't open the door from the outside," I said. "It's locked from the inside. I have to unlock it down there." I nodded down at the door's interior where the lock lever was positioned.

The cop drew closer without lowering his gun and reached inside, tripping the lock, and then opened the door. "Step outside," he barked.

As I did so, I noticed the scene had already attracted onlookers: a guy walking his dog and an old couple living in a nearby house. The police cruiser with the lights revolving on its roof was right up against the rear of my car. While I stood with my hands on my head, another two cruisers came screeching up with lights flashing, and now my car was surrounded. Two cops from each cruiser jumped out with guns drawn, though pointing down. My

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cop was a loner apparently, maybe working traffic, while these guys represented the cavalry. The dog-walking guy was gawking at the scene from the sidewalk while his dog sniffed at a bush prior to watering it. The old couple stood on their porch checking out the action and whispering to each other. When I looked their way, they retreated back inside. I stared at the guy with the dog, who stared back for a moment before finally resuming his walk with an indifferent air. Then the first cop holstered his weapon and pushed me against my own car, spinning me around and pulling my arms behind me to shackle me with his cuffs.

As I was shoved into back of his police cruiser, I was wondering how the cop had picked me up so soon after leaving Helen's place, not a quarter mile away. Helen couldn't have called them; she was with me the whole time. Maybe it was the Mexican girl with no English. Maybe she had enough English for this.

Chapter 2

I was taken to the police station on Cerrillos Road and placed in a holding cell. After that, there was nothing else for me to do but wait for Santa Fe police to contact Los Gatos police about me. Taking stock of my situation didn't help much. I considered putting in my one allowable call to company headquarters in California, but I knew they wouldn't be too happy with me, the way I'd just disappeared, leaving them the Joe LaFont mess to deal with. It never looks good when the Chief Financial Officer of a company is murdered and the Chief Executive Officer disappears. Even as CEO, I still had to answer to our board. In my mind I could see Sam Kinnick, our Chairman of the Board, looking unhappily back at me. You never wanted to make Sam Kinnick unhappy.

We'd been lucky with Sam, I had to admit. The three of us, Rick Evans, Oliver Villa and me, hadn't been long out of college when we went to Sam's investment firm, Kinnick and Dunn, looking for venture capital. We'd created a search technology that we knew was dramatically more sophisticated than anything else out there, but we didn't know if the world was actually ready for it. Sam, being a smart businessman, understood the potential of it right away. He knew, with the rapidly improving disk technology of the day, that computers were able to squeeze more and more data onto smaller and smaller storage devices that could hold many gigabytes of data, a gigabyte being 2 to the 30^{th} power, or 1,073,741,824 bytes. He also knew that the immensity of the data being collected and the effort of organizing it intelligently were beyond the abilities of the Management Information Systems (MIS) organizations of most large companies. These organizations were typically staffed by COBOL business programmers who were universally scorned by most of the hacker community, which had spawned people like Rick Evans and Oliver Villa and me. On top of that there was the Internet, which, in the early 1990's was just getting started in a commercial way. Sophisticated search engines extracting data for analysis from huge databases accessed through the Internet were the coming thing, and Sam Kinnick understood that.

When Sam asked us to demo the software on a 200-gigabyte database to show that it could scale through a sufficiently large index to be useful, we had to admit that we didn't have a disk drive big enough. So Sam arranged for us to borrow a mainframe drive from a local manufacturer and we proved our point.

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Kinnick and Dunn provided a million dollars of startup money and we moved into our first modest office suite on Sandhill Road in Palo Alto, California. The name we chose for the company was *ERO*, which was an acronym of our first initials, Eddie, Rick and Oliver. Of course Sam, having put up the money, owned more shares of *ERO* than anyone else, which, by default, made him Chairman of the Board. I became CEO of the company, while Rick Evans and Oliver Villa were in charge of software development. Rick and Oliver were typical hackers. If they hadn't become wealthy Internet innovators, they would probably be trying to invent the ultimate computer virus so they could play the cool chess game of invading host computers and wreaking havoc.

With Sam and the other members of the board making the business decisions, the company went from a small software firm to, in 1998, a \$1 billion dollar Internet Service Provider, or ISP, a public company with hundreds of employees and a listing on the NASDAQ stock exchange. Nothing like what the original *ERO* gang of three had ever dreamed of.

But now I was in a Santa Fe jail cell, with a cellmate to share the time with, the guy already being there when I was led in, which I thought was odd because there were other empty cells. But I had other things to worry about as I settled in, sitting on the thin mattress of the cot-like bunk and slumping back against the wall. The guy was lying across from me with his arm shielding his eyes from the light. He glanced at me as I was ushered into the cell and then covered his eyes again. Fine. I wasn't in the mood for conversation anyway. I had to make myself reason out what was going on with Nina and Helen.

I thought it was a given that Helen was hiding Nina somewhere. It didn't make sense that it would be at the big house, because the police might search it. It stuck in my mind what Helen had said about coming up with a plan to make the police think that Nina wasn't the one, even if it hadn't really registered at the time. So, maybe Helen was hiding Nina while working on clearing her. But how? I couldn't see that. My plan would be to find Nina and get her to describe what happened, which was that she probably stumbled on Joe's body just before I arrived home and ran like hell out of fright, not knowing what else to do, almost knocking me over as she bolted from the house. After that, I got a little vague. Some plan I had.

By now my cellmate was stirring a little and even peeking at me slit-eyed from beneath his arm, which still partially covered his eyes. From what I could see he was a little younger than me, maybe mid-twenties, and it looked like he'd slept in his clothes. He also smelled of liquor, so I figured he was

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probably in here on a drunk and disorderly charge from the previous night. It was still morning, so I guessed he'd been thrown in here to sleep of the prior night's activities. I tried to ignore him, but he finally sat up with a little groan and smiled shyly at me, holding out his hand. I stared at it for a moment.

"How ya doing?" he said when I finally took his hand. "My name's Billy Hayes. What's yours?"

"Ed," I finally answered. "Eddie."

"Well, how ya doing, Ed, Eddie," he said, stretching. "You don't look like you're in here for the same reason as me." He waited for an answer. "Well, anyway, if you are, you probably did better than me. I got in a fight in a bar not too far down the street from here. I could have picked a better place, you know? Anyway, I think I won, but I'm not too sure." He grinned. "I was pretty drunk."

I noticed a small cut alongside one eye, and his lower lip appeared swollen. I shrugged and said, "You don't look too bad off. You either won, or it was a real short fight."

"Yeah, I don't know. It could have been short. I'm a little hazy on that." He looked down at himself. "It was one of those typical bar fights, what I can remember. Starts with name calling, then some shoving, then somebody finally throws a punch. I think the other guy threw the first one." Gingerly he touched the cut next to his eye. "Then people try to break it up, then you go at it again. I'm pretty sure I got in a few licks before the cops showed up."

"What about the other guy?" I asked. "Where's he?" I looked around at the other cells, which were all empty.

Billy Hayes shook his head. "I don't know. He got away I guess. He aint here anyway. So what about you? What did you do?" He grinned at me in a friendly way.

I gave him my shrug again, but when he continued to look at me with the same grin I finally answered, "Evading, I guess you'd call it."

"Evading what?" Billy asked.

"Maybe it's not called evading. I witnessed something and then left the state after being told not to."

"Left what state, New Mexico? Then they brought you back?"

"No, it was California. I left California."

He nodded. "Yeah, you don't look like a local. Unless you're a tourist. You're not a tourist, right? It makes sense you wouldn't be a tourist, coming here after whatever you witnessed just to play tourist. So what did you do? Out in California I mean."

"I didn't do anything."

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“So what was it you witnessed out there?” He was looking at me, his face still wearing the same friendly grin.

“I’d rather not say.”

He nodded. “I can understand that.” From his seated position on the bunk, Billy leaned back against the wall, mimicking my position. “So why did you come here anyway?”

I wasn’t sure if I should even answer. But Billy seemed friendly enough. “My wife is from around here,” I finally answered.

“Your wife,” he said, closing his eyes as he said it. “Who is she? Maybe I know her.”

“I don’t think so. Her name was Nina Rodriguez.” I didn’t mention that it was now Nina Collins. “She used to be Nina Kelly.” From what Helen had told me right after we were married, Nina had started using Helen’s surname rather than her father’s name of Kelly when she was barely in her teens. Though Nina had never mentioned him, I had heard the story of Bert Kelly, Nina’s father, from Helen. No wonder she’d changed her name from Kelly to Rodriguez.

But I didn’t find out any of that until later. When I’d first met her in San Francisco, about three years ago, she was just Nina Rodriguez from Santa Fe. She had a job as a tour guide with a company that conducted bus tours of Chinatown and Broadway and the Haight-Ashbury. Rick Evans, one of my ERO partners, and his wife, Cindy, knew Nina from somewhere, and they thought it was time I stopped spending my life alone. They arranged for me to come to dinner one night. Not knowing Nina was going to be there, and she not knowing about me, it was a little delicate at first. But somehow Nina must have liked what she saw in me, which was a tall, shy-looking guy with barely combed hair. For my part, I was in love with her from the first. I had to agree with Rick and his wife: it was time I stopped spending my life alone. We were married within three months. I was twenty-seven at the time, and Nina was twenty-two. We bought the big house in Los Gatos, and suddenly I was living with someone for the first time since I left my parent’s house in Sacramento after high school.

Of course, one of the consequences of all that was that the business was being ignored by me. Even though it was mostly controlled from on high by Sam and the board, and it continued to grow, the day-to-day operations, which were my responsibility, were suffering. The spending was out of control, partly because of my lack of caring but also because I was not there constantly as in the old days to try to put a curb on the techno-geeks who thought that if the money was there, it should be spent. That’s when I brought

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in Joe LaFont, on Helen's advice, and ordered that all spending decisions be cleared through him.

I noticed now, at the mention of Nina's name, Billy opening his eyes and smiling, but in a different way than before. "Nina," he said, a grin spreading across his face and his eyebrows arching roguishly. "Sure, I know Nina. She was a year or two behind me in high school. We didn't hang out together or anything, but everybody knew Nina. She was a real popular girl." Again, the roguish look crossed his face. "So you're Nina's old man," he continued, shaking his head. "Wow. She's a real looker." He gave me an admiring glance. "You're a real lucky guy." Again he reached across and held out his hand, which I limply shook for a second time. "I hope you don't think I was showing any disrespect just now," he continued, lowering his voice. "Nina's a good girl. It's just, everybody knows everybody in this town, that's all."

"How well did you know her?" I asked, my interest aroused.

"Well, like I said, we didn't hang out or anything. I guess I knew her well enough to say hi. I probably saw her from time to time at parties."

"What kind of parties?"

"Oh, you know, nothing much. Just high school parties, you know? Nothing went on or anything, if that's what you're thinking." He held up both hands, as if warding off any bad thoughts. "She was a good kid. But you know, actually she didn't hang out with any particular crowd at school, if I remember correct. She hung with an older crowd. She always seemed like she was older than other kids. She just looked like a woman ever since she was about thirteen."

There must have been a strange look on my face because Billy again held up his hands as if to reassure me. "Hey man, please don't think I'm disrespecting Nina. I liked her a lot. Hey, when you see her, ask her if she remembers Billy Hayes. I'll bet she does."

"So what kind of an older crowd did she go with?" I asked, hungry for any information about Nina's past.

He gazed off with a faraway look. "I think they were mostly the artists crowd. But not really the artists as much as the gallery crowd. You know, the ones that run the galleries or work in them, like on Canyon Road. I think she was dating one of them when she was in high school. Guy's name was Klaus something. He owns his own studio down on the Road now. He was just a photographer then."

"Do you know the name of the place, this Klaus's place?"

Billy closed his eyes, looking like he was thinking. "King-something or something-King. Something like that. Sorry, I can't remember." He looked

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genuinely regretful and then he brightened. "So where's Nina now? They didn't lock her up too, did they? I hope not."

"No, she wasn't locked up."

"So it was you witnessed something and then you came here with her when you weren't supposed to. Was that it?"

I looked over at him. "I really don't want to say, okay?"

"Yeah man, I can dig it." He paused and then asked, "So she's waiting for you someplace, is that right?" When I didn't answer, he continued, "You look like you have money." He eyed me appraisingly. "Your clothes and all. Those shoes look like they cost \$500 alone. Probably each shoe." He grinned. "You wouldn't have any problem making bail, right." Again he paused. "So Nina's gonna get you out, right?"

"I don't know," I answered.

"Man, you don't know? Come on, she's out there someplace arranging it now, isn't she? Where is she, at the LaFonda or one of those fancy places around the plaza?"

I finally answered, "Look, I can't talk to you about that."

"Sure, I understand," he said. "So how long are you two married?" He shook his head again, as if in amazement. "Nina, man. You sure are a lucky guy. Did you meet her here or what?"

I took my time in replying. "No, I met her in California. We've been married about three years."

"No kidding. Well, like I said, you say hello to her and tell her it's from Billy Hayes."

"I'll do that?" That seemed to be the end of it as he closed his eyes again.

After a minute, I asked, "Do you know Nina's aunt, Helen Rodriguez?"

He opened his eyes and looked at me. "I know of her. She runs that resort or whatever it is up on the hill, right?" He shook his head. "I never met her though. But I hear she's important person around this town. You know, money, lots of influence with the right people." Again, he closed his eyes, and I was left with my thoughts.

Helen was one of the right people herself, I was thinking, and Nina had been lucky that she'd come along when she did. Helen had essentially adopted Nina after Nina's own mother had died. Helen herself had revealed Nina's story to me in bits and pieces over time.

Nina was the daughter of a childhood friend of Helen's. This first part of the story Helen recited to me just after my marriage to Nina, on our first visit to Santa Fe. "Even back then, as a little girl, men couldn't help staring at her," Helen had told me. "But that kind of thing can be a burden just like anything

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else. She learned early she could use her looks to get what she wanted. I'm not sure she ever learned anything else." It seemed Helen had told me that as a kind of warning.

Nina's mother Rae Ann was married to a happy-go-lucky soul named Albert, or Bert, Kelly. Bert drove a truck for a living and sometimes he drank to drown his troubles, and sometimes when he drank he beat up Rae Ann. Since she was a friend of Helen's, and Helen was the wife of the state senator from Estancia who had influence with the local police, Bert had his truck stopped a number of times for minor, or nonexistent, traffic offenses. He was made to understand that his wife would appreciate better treatment from him. When that did no good, he was hauled in for drunk driving by two police officers, who were also friends of Rae Ann's. "Rae Ann's son-of-a-bitch husband, it seems, must have tripped between his car and the police cruiser," Helen had recounted to me. "After he got his face sewn up and his broken ribs set, he never touched Rae Ann again."

Rae Ann just wanted to get rid of Bert the truck driver and get on with her life, but the little girl, Nina, didn't feel the same. When Bert finally disappeared from their lives, she and Nina went to live at the house of Helen Rodriguez. As Helen told it, Rae Ann was ecstatic, but Nina wasn't. She missed her father. She never saw the bad side that her mother did.

When Rae Ann died of cancer at the age of thirty-eight, Nina was only ten years old. The only person Nina had left in the world was Helen Rodriguez. Of course, there was also Uncle John Baca, but he apparently didn't count for much in Nina's eyes. When he died of a stroke, leaving all his cattle and oil money to Helen, Nina was seventeen. She hardly noticed his death any more than she noticed him when he was alive, as I found out when I asked about him. She couldn't recall when he died. I had to find out from Helen. "That's just Nina," Helen related. "Most people don't count for much with her, except for you and me, I suppose." Thinking back on that now, I had to wonder if even I counted for much with Nina anymore.

I turned my thoughts to Helen and how she could use the influence that Billy had mentioned to try to clear Nina. By now, Billy had roused himself again and was intermittently eyeing me, but he seemed to sense my silence as a signal. He lay back on his cot and folded his hands behind his head. We were both lost in thought for a while when the outer door to the tier of cells opened and a uniformed officer entered, walking up to our cell. He looked at me through the bars for a minute and then turned to Billy.

"We got your paperwork processed," the officer said. "You can go now."

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Billy grabbed his jacket and stood up in one motion. "That's my cue," he said, smiling. He offered his hand again. "Hey man, it was nice to meet you. When you get out," he said with a grin, "look me up at The Chili Pepper bar on Cerrillos Road. You can buy me a drink, if they haven't banned me yet." He winked at the officer, who gave him back a sour look. "And like I said, say hi to Nina for me." I looked over at the officer then, who was studying me again with narrowed eyes.

After that I was left to wonder why Billy had been in the same cell as me, when there were other cells around that were empty. He had seemed interested in Nina's whereabouts, at least more than what should be normal interest. He could have been placed in with me just to see if he could find out where Nina was.

On the other hand, I could be just paranoid. He wasn't that insistent or anything. Maybe he was just what he appeared to be, a not too bright guy who once vaguely knew Nina, maybe even had the hots for her, and was just being chatty and curious in a friendly way about my good fortune with her. Maybe he was just in here with me because the police didn't want to get more than one cell dirty if they could help it. I sighed and closed my eyes, leaning my head back uncomfortably against the concrete wall.

It wasn't long before the same officer entered the tier and approached my cell. He unlocked the door and then opened it with one hand while holding on to the opposite bars with the other, as though he meant to block my way. He stared at me with the same narrow-eyed look of before. "Come with me, sir," he finally said.

I was led back down the row of cells and through the door to a small room with a plain table and a few straight-backed chairs. It looked like it was right out of the same TV police drama I'd fantasized about back in Los Gatos. A guy that I hadn't seen before was seated at the table reading from a magazine. Even seated, he seemed lanky, with a build like an athlete's. His hair and features were dark, and he was dressed in suit pants and a dress shirt with the sleeves carefully rolled up two turns. A tie hung loosely around his collar and his feet were shod with expensive-looking cowboys boots that had fancy stitching curling around each toe. His legs were stretched out under the table, with the boots daintily crossed one over the other. My eyes couldn't help being drawn to the gleaming leather jutting out from beneath the table. In this place, though, and on this guy, the boots looked right. He glanced up as I was led into the room, and he watched me for a few seconds before speaking.

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“Have a seat, Mister Collins,” he said, drawing his legs back and motioning me to a chair opposite him. “I’d offer you a cigarette but there’s no smoking in the building.”

“I could step outside,” I responded and was immediately sorry as the guy’s look turned serious, almost regretful.

“Now that wouldn’t be a real good idea, would it?”

“I was just joking. I don’t smoke anyway.”

“Just joking?” He raised his eyebrows. “Eddie, do you think you’re in a position to be joking?”

“No. Sorry.”

He nodded slowly. “I’m Detective Ray Sanchez. I just got off the phone with Los Gatos Police about you.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“They seem to think that you came here with your wife,” he continued. He waited for an answer and then went on. “I think that makes sense.” He paused again. “So where’s Nina, Eddie?”

“I don’t know.”

Detective Sanchez considered for a moment. “You were just talking to Billy Hayes. You told him you know where she is.”

“He said that?” I sat forward. “If he did, he’s lying.”

“Didn’t he tell you, ‘say hello to Nina,’ just before he left?”

“Yeah he did. He said he knew her from before. My wife is from here and he knew her slightly from years ago before I ever met her, when they were both in high school. That’s it.”

“He knew her slightly?” Sanchez said, raising his eyebrows again.

“That’s what he said. Look, he seemed like just some kid who was maybe high on something.”

Sanchez nodded thoughtfully. “He seemed like a kid to you? Funny, that’s what he said about you too.”

“What, that I seemed like a kid?”

He waved his hand. “Forget I said that.”

“Sure, I’ll forget it. He works for you, right?”

“He works for us?” Detective Ray Sanchez smiled, like he might be thinking I was putting him on. “What makes you think he works for us?”

“You put him in there with me to see if I’d say anything.”

He dropped the smile. “I think maybe you watch too much TV.” Then he shook his head and his smile returned. “But who am I to talk? I sound like my ex-wife. *You watch too much TV.*” He said this last mock-scoldingly, wagging his head. “No. Billy Hayes doesn’t work for us. Like you said, he’s just some

kid. He's *still* a kid, even though he's, what, twenty-six, twenty-seven years old. And yeah, maybe he was a little high. Or still a little high from last night." He stood then, an action that accentuated his athlete's build, like the build of a middleweight fighter. He placed his palms into the small of his back and leaned back as if trying to relieve a backache. "I sit too much on this job. Don't get enough exercise anymore. So explain to me what happened out there in California." He slowly sat back down and leaned forward, resting his arms on the table.

"You said you talked to the police out there. They must have told you."

"Only the circumstances. A Joe LaFont was found dead in your home. Your wife disappeared. Then you disappeared after they told you to stay put. But I don't know what really happened. So what did?" He spread his hands.

"That's all they said?"

Looking back at me, Sanchez tilted his head, and I got the feeling that he knew more than he was letting on. "They mentioned they want Nina for questioning," he said. "They've already questioned you, and they apparently don't think you killed Mr. LaFont. They think it was her. Why do you suppose that is?"

"I don't know. Did you know my wife too?"

He shook his head. "Not really, but I knew of her. I heard she was pretty wild."

"What do you mean by wild?"

"I don't know, just things you hear. She ran with a fast crowd, even when she was still in high school. She got in trouble a few times, so I understand. But she has a very influential relative, so nothing much happened."

"You mean Helen Rodriguez?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"You know Helen too?"

He regarded me for a moment. "I don't know her all that well, but I know of her. Anyway, you didn't answer my question. What happened out there?"

"I have a feeling you know as much as I do," I said.

Again he shook his head. "What do you mean, Eddie? I don't know anything. Do you think Nina killed Joe LaFont?"

"No, she didn't kill him."

"You know that for sure?" He raised his eyebrows looking at me. "Why did she run away then?"

I wasn't about to share my thoughts on the subjects with this detective, even if I actually knew what they were.

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“What was it, was it over money?” he asked. “Or was it sex? It couldn’t have been a sex thing, could it? Joe was gay. She couldn’t have been balling him, could she?”

It occurred to me he was probably saying this just to see my reaction. Again, just like back in Los Gatos when I was questioned there, it began sounding like a TV cop drama. “She didn’t kill him,” I said. “There was no money thing or sex thing.”

“You know,” he said, “I believe you’re telling the truth. You think your wife is innocent, when everybody else believes she isn’t. That’s a natural thing. Especially with a beautiful wife like I hear yours is.” He was watching me with a mild expression, like he was waiting for me to say something. Again, maybe he wanted to see my reaction.

But I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know how to explain how certain I was that Nina was innocent. I simply said, “I know my wife.”

“Yeah, I bet you do. Besides, I hear you’re loaded.” He nodded, looking me over. “What are you worth? I hear it’s a lot. So it probably wasn’t over money.”

I ignored his question. “Did you know Joe LaFont too?”

Detective Sanchez looked at me as if considering whether to answer. “I knew him, just slightly. He used to work for the state. A lot of people knew Joe. He was a nice enough guy. It’s really too bad about him.”

“Am I being held as a suspect?”

“No, not really. Los Gatos police don’t seem to think you had anything to do with it. I’m not sure why. Maybe it’s the money, huh? They were curious why you’re here though. They figure you came here with Nina.”

“Didn’t they tell you they traced her to the airport where she left her car?”

Sanchez nodded. “Yeah, they mentioned that. But that could have been a decoy, just to make them think she flew out of there alone. Although why you two would want anybody to think that hasn’t occurred to me yet. So if you didn’t come here with your wife, why are you here then?”

I lowered my head and stared at the floor. “I thought I might find her here. I guess I was wrong.”

“Why is that?” he asked, sounding genuinely interested.

“Helen’s is the only place she would have come to. She wasn’t there.”

He nodded at that. “Of course, we already checked that out.”

I looked up at him. “So if my wife isn’t here and I’m not a suspect, why am I being held? Maybe I should get a lawyer.”

“So you really think Nina’s not here?”

“Yes,” I lied. “So, do I need a lawyer?”

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“That’s up to you. You can hire one, if you think it’s best. You’ve been read your rights, so you know you don’t have to say anything. Is that what you want to do, hire a lawyer?”

“Can I leave if I want?”

“You did leave a murder investigation after being told not to,” he said. “Don’t you think Los Gatos Police are going to want you back?”

“So you’re holding me until they come and get me?”

“You’d have to be extradited. That could take a little while.” He looked at me as if he were really sorry.

“In that case, I do want a lawyer. And I don’t want to say anything more.”

“Of course, that’s your right.” He nodded. “So you want to arrange for a lawyer?” At my nod he rose again and spread his hands. “Do you know any lawyers here in Santa Fe?” When I shook my head, he asked, “So who you gonna call?” He flashed a grin at his Ghost Busters joke.

“Can I have a phone book? There must be a listing for lawyers.”

He nodded. “Sure there is. I’ll tell you what, though.” Sanchez pursed his lips and rubbed his chin as if considering. “I’ll have the officer take you back to your cell first. Then we’ll arrange for you to make that call.” He opened the door and stuck his head out and said something. The same officer as before came in and escorted me back to my cell. He opened the door and I entered and sat on the same bunk, and then he went away, leaving me alone.

But I wasn’t there more than about twenty minutes when the same officer came for me again, taking me back to the same room where Detective Sanchez was waiting.

“I just talked to Los Gatos police again and they said we should just let you go.” He shrugged elaborately. “I guess they don’t want to bother about you. Extradition is a bitch, I guess. Too much trouble. What do you think about that?”

Chapter 3

I signed for my possessions, and Detective Sanchez ushered me to the double glass doors leading to the parking lot outside. He informed me that my car was still where I'd left it when the arresting officer pulled me over. Then I was outside the police station, squinting in the waning light of the sun setting in my face and looking around as if I thought I might find Nina waiting for me. I had to get my bearings so I could find my car, and I almost went back inside the station to ask them to take me there. On second thought, that didn't seem like such a good idea. What I thought was that they probably let me go on instructions from Los Gatos Police to see if I could lead them to Nina. The less they saw of me the better.

I knew the town from previous visits. Even though Santa Fe is not that big a place anyway, at least not the center of it radiating outward from the old town plaza, which is really like a separate town from the rest of Santa Fe, I wasn't about to walk the four or five miles up Cerrillos Road in the gusty spring winds, and me with only a thin jacket. I crossed the road to a large mall and found a pay phone and called a cab, which arrived within a few minutes. It took me back the same way I'd come earlier that day, to the town plaza. From there I located my car. Neither the old couple nor the dog-walking guy were in sight, and I made my getaway from that neighborhood before even thinking about where to go. My weary state, a slightly punchy vagueness in my brain making me feel detached from what I was doing, such as driving the car, told me I had to find a place for the night. And something told me to avoid the pricey and conspicuous places around the plaza. I found a bed and breakfast about a mile away. The place was on a side street off Paseo de Peralta with a gravel lot along one side that had enough space to park maybe a half-dozen cars. The lot was empty, which was perfect as far as I was concerned. A wide porch led me to a door with etched glass windows covered inside by lacy curtains. There was an old-fashioned ringer with a key-like handle you had to turn to cause a metallic ring inside. An elderly woman answered, first peering at me from behind the curtained glass of the door and then opening the door with an owlish look at me through thick glasses. When I asked for a room, she ushered me into a large front parlor and sat me at a desk, handing me a card on which I recorded the usual name, address, make and model of car and license number. While I sat and filled in the card, beginning to feel the built-up stress of the trip and the long day radiating

weariness out to my limbs and up the back of my neck, the woman sat smiling at me. She had a tight cap of graying curls on her head and wore a long dress that looked like it was out of the forties. The overstuffed furniture in the parlor had the same old-fashioned look, like it was preserved from the past.

The woman finally spoke. "You're the first visitor we've had in a week. It's still a little early in the season for tourists."

"That's fine," I said, handing her the card.

She glanced down at the card, focusing through the reading portion of her bifocals. "Oh, California," she said, looking up at me. Her eyes, seen through the glasses, seemed too big for her face. "Have you been to Santa Fe before?" She glanced down again. "Mister Collins?"

"A few times." For some reason I felt the need to explain. "I have some family here, but I thought I'd find a nice quiet place for a night or two just to rest up."

"Oh, well, I know how families can be. Always putting demands on you. You came to the right place. If there's one thing we have, it's quiet."

She showed me to my room at the back of the place, with me shouldering my bag, nothing more than a gym bag I'd hastily packed before I left California. Opening the door, she stepped aside for me to enter and handed me the key. "Breakfast is from eight to nine in the dining room just off the parlor."

"Thanks," I said. As she turned to go, I asked, remembering something Billy Hayes had told me, "Do you know the galleries on Canyon Road?"

"Well, some of them I suppose," she answered.

"Have you heard of one called King-something or something-King?"

She looked at me for a few seconds. "That could be Kingfisher Galleries."

"Do you know the guy who runs it?"

"Well, I couldn't tell you his name. He must be German, he has a German accent. I was in there once when my sister visited from Minnesota."

"And you know where it is?"

"It's almost at the end of Canyon Road, on the left, I think. Up a ways from the swankier places, if you know what I mean."

"Thanks." As she turned to go a second time, something else came to mind. "Do you know that spa on top of the hill above Canyon Road? Canyon Waves Spa?"

"I know of the place. I've never been there though."

"I've never been there either. I wondered if you could recommend it. I did meet the owner, Helen Rodriguez I think was her name, a few times."

"Is that right?" she said, studying me.

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“Do you know her?” I asked.

The corners of her mouth turned down slightly. “I’ve met her. This is really a small town you know, when you get right down to it. The old part, anyway. People tend to meet people.”

“I suppose. I just wondered. I hear she’s very influential.” I made a vague gesture indicating the town at large.

“Oh yes.” The corners of her mouth were pulled down a little further. “She was married to Senator Baca, but then he died. I don’t know why she doesn’t call herself Helen Baca, but I suppose that’s her business.”

“She’s a pretty popular person, so they say.”

“Maybe with some people. Some people who might call what she’s doing progress.” She shook her head. “I don’t know, maybe it would happen anyway. If she wasn’t doing it, someone else would be. But Lord knows, there’s a lot of us that wish it had never happened.”

“What had never happened?”

“All the development. All those big homes marring the hills and scattered across the mesa as far as the eye can see for all the rich Californians to move into, so young people can’t afford to live here anymore.” She sighed. “It started a long time ago, but I can remember what it was like here just after the war, before it really began. That’s when my husband and I first moved here. Santa Fe was such a lovely town then. It had real charm. Now it has charm with dollar signs attached to it.”

“I think it still has charm,” I said.

“Maybe to you, being from California. But I can remember when Canyon Road was just homes where ordinary people lived. There were even orchards up there. Now look at it. All those million dollar galleries. Nobody can afford to live there anymore. The real artists who used to live there have been forced out.” Then she shook her head. “Oh, no offense. I’m sorry. It sounds like I have something against Californians, doesn’t it? A lot of people who stay here are from California. But there are lots of others too. When my husband and I bought this place, Santa Fe still was a quiet place. That was over forty years ago. We remodeled it into what you see now, for our retirement. We used to get a lot more people from New Mexico and Arizona staying here. Texas too, but that’s another story.” A corner of her mouth turned down again, and I took it that she didn’t think much of Texans. I’d heard that attitude before, it occurred to me, from Nina. Something must have shown on my face, because the woman peered at me. “Anyway,” she went on, “my husband died. Now it’s just me. We get people from all over these days, New York, Florida, Europe, and California, of course.” She laughed, a brittle sound.

“Well, some of us aren’t so bad,” I said, giving her a smile. “But what does Helen Rodriguez have to do with all the development?”

“Of course you wouldn’t know.” She reached out and gently touched my arm. “She and her partner, some furniture salesman named Garcia, are buying up land just north of town. Part of it borders the National Forest out there. Anyway, the land belonged to three or four families that used to ranch out there, but you know ranching isn’t very profitable anymore. Not when you can sell it for real estate development. And the families that owned it wanted to sell, but all that land was also claimed by the Indian Pueblo out there. They say it was given to them by the Spanish way back when. So the sales are now pending an appeal on the pueblo’s claims. The families couldn’t sell if it turned out the pueblo really owned the land. Of course the lower court ruled against the pueblo’s claims, even though they seemed to be legitimate. I think there was something shady going on there. Some people think Helen got them to rule in her favor. Anyway, the pueblo is appealing the case, but most people think it will be turned down there too. Helen Rodriguez draws a lot of water in this state, apparently, even up to Washington, some people say.”

I wondered if this tale of shady land dealings and political influence was really true, or was just the nattering of an old woman with too much time on her hands. I did know something about what this woman was talking about, namely the transformation of Santa Fe brought about by the influx of money from other places. I’d learned that from Helen’s own story.

Helen’s parents had been Mexican born illegals. “They were wetbacks,” Helen had told me once, humorously. “They got tired of the life in the fields of northern New Mexico and settled in Santa Fe before World War II and opened a taco stand not far from Old Town.” After that, she’d explained, they created a Mexican restaurant in the front part of their adobe home overlooking Canyon Road. That was before real estate prices shot up to levels that would keep a poor Mexican family from even considering living there. “Canyon Road was where poor people like us lived back then,” Helen’s said. “Most artists were poor in those days as well, so they lived there too.”

The rest of the story, of Helen marrying Senator Baca and transforming the site of the adobe house into the resort and health spa overlooking Canyon Road, herself becoming an important person hereabouts after John Baca’s death, seemed like pretty standard rags-to-riches stuff. But maybe there was more to Helen than that.

“And Helen and her friend want to buy this land to build homes on?” I asked.

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“That’s it.” She sighed. “It’s so pretty out there, just mesa and forest rolling right up to the mountains and the National Forest. And it’s going to be full of big homes nobody who lives here now will be able to afford.” She shook her head.

“For the rich Californians and New Yorkers and such.” I smiled at her. “Well, I promise I won’t be one of them.”

“Oh, I run off too much sometimes. It comes with old age.”

“It sounds like you don’t like Helen Rodriguez much.”

“Don’t mind me. I like Helen okay. It’s just what she’s doing that I don’t agree with. A lot of people around here feel the same way, too. It’s just that us old-timers don’t seem to have much influence anymore. It’s the ones with the money that have the government’s ear. But that’s always the way, isn’t it?”

I’d been staring at her through this whole conversation, this old woman I’d never met before and might probably never see again after tomorrow, as she told a story that included tiny bits of her life. She was stating her attitudes for a past that would never be here again, for a simpler time here in Santa Fe that she could still remember. But it was more than that too. She reminded me of someone, but a someone I couldn’t place. She was like a person I’d seen in a dream, one of those people that pass through our sleeping lives that we’ve never seen before in the waking world, but there they are anyway, each seeming to have a history that occurred before appearing to you in your dreams. I continued staring at her, no doubt with a tired smile on my face, until she began to fidget. “How old are you dear?” I finally asked her.

“I’m eighty-three,” she answered.

“And what’s your name?”

“It’s Marie Gustafson.” She smiled at me, and elaborated. “We came here from Minnesota, my husband and I, more than fifty years ago. My husband had asthma, and his doctor advised us to go west where the air was drier and not so full of pollens. But we didn’t reckon on the altitude. You know it’s seven thousand feet here. There’s less air and less oxygen. It’s drier here, but the altitude didn’t help Lyle’s asthma. We made out anyway, though. Then Lyle died almost fifteen years ago.”

“Well, I’m glad to meet you Marie Gustafson. You seem very nice.” I held out my hand and she took it in her own, a surprisingly soft, though wrinkled and age-spotted hand.

“Thank you,” she said simply. “Now I’m going to let you go so you can get some rest. You look like you could use it.” She reached out and touched me again on the arm and then turned for a third time and walked stiffly down the hallway toward the stairs.

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I closed the door and turned to survey the room, which continued the old-fashioned theme of the parlor with some dark furniture I barely noticed and a double bed covered with a chenille bedspread. Flinging my bag on a chair, I undressed and crawled into the bed, even though it was barely dark, covering myself to the chin with the blanket and the spread and fell immediately to sleep. I slept in a dreamless state for the first time since Joe LaFont's murder, a sleep without disjointed dreams of Nina for a change. Maybe, in my subconscious, I thought didn't have to dream of her now that I believed she was somewhere close

In the morning, after I woke, my first thought was to go back to Helen's.

Marie Gustafson was in the dining room in a plain dress and a sweater against the coolness of the morning, appearing a few seconds after I entered. The room fit the theme of the rest of the place: curtains filtering morning sunshine through the windows; two large round tables covered with tablecloths of the same material as the curtains; a half-dozen chairs of dark heavy wood surrounding each table. There was no one in the room except for the two of us. On each table sat a folded card with a typewritten menu of breakfast selections: oatmeal, cold cereal, eggs with toast, coffee and choice of juices, sides of ham, bacon or hash. Marie waited, as I looked the card over. Normally I take only coffee in the morning, but I hadn't eaten since the previous day.

"I'll have the works, starting with the oatmeal. Scrambled eggs, bacon and wheat toast."

"Coffee and juice for you this morning?" she asked.

"That too."

When she brought the food in on a little cart, I helped her set the plates on the table. "Do you have a fulltime cook for this?" I asked.

She folded her hands in front of her. "In the busy season I do, and we serve breakfast and dinner then. People have to fend for themselves for lunch. But now it's just me in the kitchen. I only do breakfast."

"This looks like it should last me till tomorrow."

Something of what Marie told me yesterday about Helen Rodriguez had been swimming around in my consciousness since I awoke, and it was beginning to register as something other than mere facts. I asked Marie, "Yesterday you said how Helen Rodriguez used her influence to get a ruling against an Indian Pueblo in the courts. I wonder how did she could do that?"

"You seem to be real interested in Helen Rodriguez," she said.

"Just curious is all."

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She pulled back a chair and sat next to me. “Oh, I’m just an old busybody who hears things. But people say Helen is very friendly with the U.S. Congressman for the district.” She made a little frown. “And with one of our U.S. Senators. He’s a Republican from Hobbs. A lot of oil money in his family. Of course, I’m just telling you what an old busybody hears.”

“You said she had influence all the way to Washington. That’s what you meant, then. She *draws a lot of water*, all the way to Washington, you said.”

She laughed. “That’s an old expression of Lyle’s, my husband. Anyway, that’s what people say. But what do I know?” She rose. “Will you be leaving today?”

I was spooning hot oatmeal into my mouth and had to swallow first. “Actually, I was thinking I would stay a few days, if that’s okay.”

“Of course, dear.” She reached down and touched my arm. By now it was a familiar gesture. She left the room, walking in the halting way that old people have, leaving me with my farmer’s breakfast and new thoughts of Helen Rodriguez. If what Marie said was true and Helen had that much influence, maybe she could see Nina clear of all this. Maybe that was what she’d been alluding to yesterday.

Later, in my room, I looked over the few clothes I’d packed, which consisted of sweats, Levis and running shoes, baseball cap and two golf shirts, and decided I needed something other than these and the ones I still wore from yesterday. Before going up the hill to Helen’s, I would need to do a little shopping. Driving to the old town plaza to look for a clothing store, with a more Santa Fe look in mind, I found a men’s clothing store off the plaza that specialized in western wear and bought several pairs of dark, jean-cut trousers, some western shirts, a jacket with piping around the pockets and a pair of understated black boots. I checked myself in the mirror, not sure of my new look, before leaving the store all spiffed out like the modern-day Santa Fe man of leisure.

At least the weather was nicer than when I’d first arrived. The spring snow of yesterday had given way to bright sunshine, and only a few clouds scudded across the sky. Driving up the hill, I couldn’t help but admire Helen’s place shining in the sun ahead of me. Along with the big house, the multiple buildings that comprised her spa and resort occupied a terraced hillside that looked down on Canyon Road, the artistic center of Santa Fe. Most of the city’s important art galleries resided on and around Canyon Road, and Helen’s spa and resort looked down on it all. The adobe house, where Helen grew up, had been left intact. It still stood just up the hill from the place, like a monument.

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Again the blacktop parking lot was almost empty, since it was still early. I parked and walked down through the gardens, which showed some new plantings from yesterday. Helen must have kept her gardener busy.

The dark-haired Mexican girl answered my knock once again. She nodded when she saw me and began to retreat back inside to get Helen, I assumed. When she tried to close the door, I pushed it back open with my hand and followed her in.

“I’m part of the family, right?” I said to her. “You don’t mind if I wait inside.”

Today she was dressed in Levis rolled halfway up her calves and a checkered shirt hanging free, making her look more like a local teenager. She was still barefoot. A rag hung from one hand and I figured she had been cleaning. She turned to go, casting a look at me.

“You speak English, don’t you?” I asked her.

She stopped and turned again. “Yes, I do, but I think it’s not so good,” she said with an accent, though not that much of one. She smiled then, and I decided I liked her, even if she did call the police on me. It was probably on orders from Helen, before I’d even entered the house yesterday.

“Did you make a phone call yesterday?” I asked.

“No,” she answered.

“It doesn’t matter. You were only doing what Helen told you.”

She gave me a strange look and a different smile, uncertain.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Maribel Orozco,” she said.

“That’s a pretty name. Does anyone ever call you Mari?”

“Sometimes.”

“You know who I am, right?”

Again, she peered at me.

“Have you seen my wife?”

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“She has dark hair and she’s very pretty, like you.”

She smiled. “No, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think you saw her or you don’t think she’s pretty?” I looked down at her with a disarming smile of my own. “How old are you Maribel?”

“I’m nineteen,” she said, her wide-eyed expression not changing. Her face was the kind that seemed plain, while being pretty at the same time, with arching brows that gave her a quizzical look. Her mouth naturally turned down at the corners and her eyes slanted down to match. Then she smiled briefly and her face took on a wholly different look, her mouth surprisingly

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reversing its downward trend and her eyes closing to slits. Her black hair hung loose around her face and her dark skin had that soft glow that dark skin sometimes has. "How old are you?" she asked me in what might have been a teasing way.

"I'm thirty." I said, continuing to watch her until she dropped her eyes. She left the room then, padding away in her bare feet, her cleaning rag trailing out her back pocket.

A moment later Helen entered, looking me up and down. "Eddie, what are you dressed for?"

"I thought I'd try to blend in a little," I said, looking down at myself.

Helen shook her head. "Nobody dresses like that, except the old men at the Elks Lodge. You should have called me." Helen, herself, was dressed almost formally, but in the casual Santa Fe manner. She wore a long black skirt, a rich cream-colored silk blouse and a waist length jacket stitched with a brocade pattern up each sleeve. Her jewelry consisted of a matching necklace and bracelet of silver and turquoise, representing money in an understated way. On her feet were plain black, zip-up boots.

"Well, at least you look nice Helen," I said.

"I was just going out," she said. "In fact you just caught me. I have some business meetings." She turned and motioned me back inside. We sat on the long couch with the city view as backdrop. Again she took a seat at the opposite end. I stared at her, noticing the morning light slanting through the window and highlighting her features, her forehead and high cheekbones accented by gray-streaked hair swept away from her face and carefully pinned up. She looked every part of what I imagined to be the successful Santa Fe businesswoman. I found myself remembering what Marie Gustafson told me yesterday about Helen's land dealings.

"I suppose you know I was arrested just down the road from here yesterday," I said.

"I heard that, yes," she said.

"You probably hear everything. Did you know about it before it happened?"

"Eddie, don't let your imagination run away with you. I have a way of knowing what happens in this town. But I didn't have you arrested, if that's what you're implying. Why would I, or how, for that matter? I was with you the whole time you were here."

"You could have had your girl call them."

Helen frowned and shook her head. "Eddie, it didn't happen."

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“Okay, maybe not.” I looked around. “So I’m just paranoid. It just happened. That’s not why I came here anyway.”

“Why did you, then?”

“Something you said yesterday. How we had to make the police think Nina is innocent.”

She returned my look for a few seconds. “It’s not like some mystery novel. We don’t try to point the blame toward someone else, whoever that might be. We simply find out what really happened.”

“What did really happen?”

“I don’t know Eddie. I wasn’t there. You were.”

“Of course.” I looked away. “Have you done anything then? To try to find out?”

“I’ve hired a private investigator,” she answered.

“What, here?” I said.

“In California, where it happened. It wouldn’t do much good here, would it?”

This wasn’t what I’d imagined, which was Helen sitting up here and pulling long strings of influence from on high. “So what did the guy have to say?”

“How do you know it’s a guy?” She smiled. “Well, anyway, it is a guy. He hasn’t said anything yet. I just hired him a few days ago.”

“This is after Nina came here. Before I showed up, obviously.”

She didn’t answer.

“Can you at least tell me where she is?” I asked. “So I can at least see her.

Her expression softened. “Eddie, I admitted she was here. But I also told you I didn’t know where she was currently. That’s the truth. She just left suddenly. I was prepared to hide her. But she just left on her own.”

“What did she say about Joe? Does she know who did it?”

“She didn’t say anything,” Helen said, looking at me with a level gaze. “She was semi-hysterical when she got here. All she told me was that Joe had been shot. That he was dead. When I asked her what happened, she just shook her head and cried. I didn’t push it after that. I could see she was afraid to talk about it. After a while I went to the kitchen to get her some tea. She was gone when I came back.”

“What was she driving?”

“I didn’t get a look.”

Nina had come here by plane—she had to after leaving her car at San Francisco Airport. She must have flown into Albuquerque’s Sunport and then either caught a commuter shuttle from Albuquerque or drove a rental car. My

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bet was the rental car, which would mean there'd be record of it. She would have had to use her own name and credit card and shown her own driver's license. Of course, the local cops would have thought of all this too.

"You have to have some idea of where she might go," I said. "You know her better than anyone."

She smiled a sad smile. "No one really knows Nina, do they? Do you know her?"

I ignored the question. "Tell me, at least, where to look."

"I'm sorry Eddie. I wish I could." She rose and approached me where I sat. "On second thought, I'm glad I can't tell you. You'd go after her without thinking what you were doing." She stood over me, this large, more than middle-aged woman who still presented a striking figure, and she reached down and gently placed her hand on my face. "I think you should just not do anything for a while. Don't try to find her. Let's wait a few days and see what this California investigator finds out."

I slumped back. "Maybe you're right. But I think the cops let me out just so I'd lead them to Nina." She raised her eyebrows, and I explained: my incarceration with Billy Hayes was probably just to get whatever information he could. The local police had talked about returning me to Los Gatos police and then abruptly let me go after talking to them. It could only mean they wanted me to lead them to Nina. Helen's face grew more skeptical as I talked. When I was done, she said in a flat tone, "They're not that smart, Eddie. What did you say this guy's name was?"

"Billy Hayes, he said it was."

"I never heard of him. He's not a cop, or at least I don't think he is. I know most of them. That doesn't mean anything though. Look." She started walking toward the front door, gesturing to me to follow. "I have to go out for a while. I have some business meetings. I assume you found a place to stay. I would put you up here, but I don't think that's a good idea. So why don't you just go back to your place, wherever it is, and stay there? Call me in a few days, and we'll see where we are. And if anything comes up, I'll get in touch with you. Okay?" I had a card from Marie Gustafson's B&B and I handed it to Helen. She glanced at it and slipped it into her purse. "You could have done better, Eddie," she said. "At least I know where it is."

There was one other thing I thought to mention. "This guy I told you about, Billy Hayes, mentioned a photographer Nina used to see. Klaus something. Do you know him?"

"Klaus Meyer?" Helen turned to look at me. "Nina did some modeling for him when she still in high school. Why?"

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“I don’t know, I just wondered. I thought I’d go talk to the guy.”

“I don’t know that it will do you any good. Why not just lay low for a few days and then call me?” She turned and plucked a narrow-brimmed, flat-crowned hat from a peg near the door and set it on her head, cocking it slightly forward, completing her dressed-for-Southwest-success look. Opening the front door, she motioned me to go ahead of her. Outside, we climbed the path through the gardens to the parking lot, and she pointed to her car off to one side, a cream-colored Mercedes convertible. Even her car matched her outfit. She opened the driver-side door and stepped in, fiddling with a latch and pushing a button to turn down the convertible top. She turned and looked up at me. “Like I said, call me in a few days, okay?” She donned a pair of sunglasses and started the motor. “About the clothes,” she said, looking at me through the dark glasses so that I couldn’t see her eyes. “The pants and boots are okay but lose the shirt and jacket. Get yourself some plain dress shirts, blue or beige. And a plain tweed jacket, and you’ll be okay.” She drove off.

Who was Helen Rodriguez, I was thinking as I watched her sail away in her big convertible with her matching outfit, her forward-tilting hat riding high as the car disappeared from view? She was a conniving land dealer, according to Marie Gustafson, maybe a wheeler-dealer. With my built-in contempt of most Californians for the small town, I thought of her as a big fish in the little pond of Santa Fe. Or maybe, again according to Marie Gustafson, Helen was a power in the state, with influence all the way to Washington. Of the two portraits, I was inclined to believe the first. In any case, I wasn’t about to take her advice, except about the clothes. At least she had fashion sense. But I had no intention of waiting to see what would develop. I knew Helen wanted to run things; that was always her way. But I also believed she knew where Nina was. As I got into my own car, I recalled one thing Helen had said that was true: who really knew Nina?

As I’d intended all along, I drove down the hill the few blocks to Paseo de Peralta so I could swing back up the mostly one-way Canyon Road, driving slowly along the narrow incline of galleries and restaurants, looking for the Kingfisher Galleries. Marie had said the place was at the end of the road. I spotted it, seeing the sign, and parked where I could around the corner and walked back down the narrow sidewalk. The sun was warm and I peeled off my jacket with the piping around the pockets and slung it over my shoulder. I’d taken an immediate hatred for the thing after Helen’s words.

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The sign announcing Kingfisher Galleries hung in a weedy attempt at a rock garden at the front. The place looked like an old house that had been converted into a studio, with a dirt drive on one side and a side street on the other. It was an older building in contrast to most of the other places along the road. It had a small porch and a few small windows flanking the entrance. Fronting the place was a low wooden fence with a listing gate that didn't latch, leading to a gravel path. A sign in one window read *Fine Arts—Indian Art & Artifacts*, and beneath that it read, *Klaus Meyer, Photographer*. I entered through a low door, ducking my head.

Chapter 4

The old building had low doorways and narrow windows that didn't admit much light. The front door led to a foyer and then to a large room, with the only natural light provided by two tiny windows at the front. Two smaller rooms, also with low, narrow doorways flanked the main room on either side. The place was barely furnished with just a few chairs and mostly lit with small spotlights hung from ceiling tracks. A collection of small-to-medium framed photographs was highlighted on one wall. On another wall hung a huge abstract painting, lit with two of the spotlights. The painting was of something, I supposed, though I didn't know what. It just looked like different sized, overlapping red and black squares of to me. Squeezed into one corner of the room was a desk where a middle-aged guy sat looking at me with raised eyebrows and a smile. I returned the smile and moved toward the painting of the red and black squares. Not sure where to start with whatever it was I was doing here, I said, "I suppose this means something."

From his seated position, he looked at the painting. "It is subjective of course. The artist is quite famous. And he's also dead which always seems to increase the value of an artist's work. Unfortunate for the artist." He shrugged and gave another smile.

He had an accent, though not much of one, an inflection placed on the wrong syllable, the swallowing of certain vowel sounds. He stood, a tall thin man with erect bearing, and approached. His features were evenly tanned, and he had slightly longish gray hair. He was handsome on some level, I thought. His clothes represented what I took to be Santa Fe casual: neat but worn blue jeans and a loose white shirt made of linen, with fancy stitching on the front. Looking at him, I was pretty sure I wasn't going to like him.

"I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd browse," I said.

He smiled and inclined his head.

A table off to the side held several bronze castings, which at least looked like something recognizable. I wandered over there as if I was interested. One of the castings was quite beautiful, though I didn't know whether it was art or craft. It was a pair of hands entwined at the wrists, with the palms facing away from each other. Looking down at it, I asked what seemed like an appropriate question for a browsing tourist, "Are these all done by local artists?"

"Mostly."

“Do you know the artist?” I said, pointing down at the pair of entwined hands.

He stared at the sculpture for a moment before answering, “It was me.”

I lifted the card that was propped against the base. Seeing that the price was \$15,000, I raised my eyebrows and looked over at him.

“Unfortunately, or not, bronze sculpting is a long process,” he said. “A lot of time and effort. Are you familiar with it?”

“Afraid not,” I said.

He reached over and ran one hand around the casting, almost caressing it without touching the surface. “There are many different steps. The sculpture goes from a clay form to silicon, then to wax, and then the kiln form is made and the wax is melted away. That’s what is called the lost wax process. Maybe you’d be interested in some of the smaller ones. They are not so expensive.” He spoke in a careful way, choosing his words.

I turned my attention to a life-size wooden sculpture of a reclining woman set on the floor near the entrance. The figure was lying back, propped on her elbows, with her head turned to one side and her feet crossed at the ankles. The face was featureless and the whole thing was rough-hewn, yet I had the impression, the way her head was turned, that she was caught halfway in the act of looking behind herself wistfully. Maybe she had just made love.

“It’s quite beautiful, isn’t it?” he said.

I studied the rough surface of the thing. You could clearly see the chisel marks.

“Do you like sculpture?” he asked.

“I’m not sure what I like, if you know what I mean. Maybe something will catch my eye.” I wandered off, saying, “the photographs are great,” pointing to the wall where they hung. They were mostly landscapes in black and white, scenes of rocky canyons, a snowy forest in winter, a river meandering through a desert landscape. “Who’s the artist?”

He looked them over before shrugging. “Most of them are mine.”

“So you’re the proprietor then.” I pointed to the sign that hung in the window. “Your name’s on the sign.”

“I’m Klaus Meyer.”

I looked over the photographs again without really seeing them and then turned to him. “The sign outside said you also have Indian artifacts.”

“In the next room.” He gestured, holding an arm out. It occurred to me that he probably got a lot of people in here wasting his time.

I had to duck my head going through the next doorway. There were woven rugs hanging on the walls above tables that held an assortment of

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pottery and baskets. A glass-enclosed cabinet contained shelves of small baskets and a few small pots that looked like antiques. The room had a musty smell.

A large book lay open on a table in front of the cabinet. I moved to scan the book, aware of Klaus Meyer a few feet behind me. A large picture of a plain basket with a few dark designs woven into its sides took up most of the open page. There was a brief text paragraph beneath the picture that I didn't bother to read. "Do you have this basket in your shop?" I asked, pointing at the picture, wondering if he minded my calling his gallery a shop.

"It's right here." Klaus moved next to me and pointed to the first shelf of the glassed-in cabinet where a small basket sat on the shelf, listing crookedly from its own warped shape. His back was half-turned to me so that I was standing slightly behind him. I studied him briefly, noticing the gray hair hanging just so over his collar as if it were cut with this shirt in mind. The slightly frayed cuffs of his evenly-faded jeans caressed a pair of soft leather boots, and the loose shirt he wore, which looked like it had been washed many times, was bloused neatly at the waist, with the same fancy stitching on the back as on the front.

"How much is that?" I asked, nodding at the small basket.

"It's sixteen thousand," he answered, looking back at me. Perhaps this was the time when he decided whether I was a serious buyer or just wasting his time. When I returned his look without comment, he continued. "It's pre-Columbian. That makes it a bit expensive."

"Is it the most expensive piece you have?"

"No." He pointed to another basket that was at least not listing to one side like the first. "This one is twenty-two thousand. And we had one that was forty thousand earlier this month. It was sold," he added after a minute of looking at me.

"Do any of these pots sell for that much?" I nodded my head toward several of the clay pots.

"We have a piece here that is fifty-thousand." He pointed to the glassed-in cabinet again. I could sense in his disinterested though still polite tone that he was beginning to size me up as a not-so-serious customer. He added, "And several others ranging from fifteen to about twenty-five. Also pre-Columbian. We keep the more expensive pieces here, under lock and key."

"Makes sense," I said. I stepped back through the doorway leading to the main room, with Klaus behind me, and sauntered over to the other small room that was on the opposite side from the Indian Artifacts room. Through the

doorway I could see a dozen or so nondescript paintings hung on the walls. “What do you call this room?” I asked.

“Well, it doesn’t have a name,” he said with the slightest of smiles. “These are our fine arts. You’re welcome to browse, of course.”

Without entering the room, I nodded. “Are any of them priced higher than that fifty-thousand dollar pot?”

“Certainly,” he said. I could tell I was beginning to annoy him. But, when I turned to look at him, his face wore the same expression, benign politeness with a polite smile.

“Actually I didn’t come here to see fine arts either,” I said. “I came to see you.”

He gave me a different look now, and a sudden picture flashed in my mind of he and Nina together. I felt my face flush. This guy must have been at least twenty years older than Nina, and if she dated him when she was in high school, she was maybe seventeen to his late-thirties.

“How can I help you?” he asked.

I hadn’t concocted a story. What was I going to say: *I’m Nina’s husband and she’s been accused of murder and I heard you used to screw her?* I decided on the simple approach. “My name’s Eddie Collins. My wife used to know you, so I’m told.”

His smile turned quizzical. “What’s your wife’s name?”

“It was Nina Rodriguez. Now it’s Nina Collins.”

The smile faded. “Are you a policeman?”

I didn’t have to ask why he said that. He obviously knew about Nina too. Maybe the whole town knew by now.

“Can I see some ID please?” he said.

I slipped my California driver’s license from my billfold and handed it to him. He studied it. “I heard about Nina,” he said after a moment, handing the license back. “I heard something about you too.” He studied me some more. “Come in the back,” he said then, leading me through a curtained doorway to a cluttered room in back. Boxes were scattered around and stacks of large folders leaned against the walls. Several tables were crowded with various photography equipment—what must have been an enlarger, several cameras, lenses, stacks of prints. One wall of the room had a curious rounded structure jutting out, made of some flat, black material that looked like a combination of plastic and metal. The thing resembled a giant beer can, only it was black, and it was embedded upright into the wall. It had to be some kind of doorway.

“What did you hear about Nina?” I asked.

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“That she’s in trouble. That you are too, or you were. I heard you were arrested yesterday. Obviously they let you out.”

“Does everyone hear everything right away in this town?”

“It’s really a small town, even though it doesn’t look like it anymore,” he answered, what was becoming a familiar theme. “I hope you didn’t come here to see if I knew where she is.”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure why I came here. Just that I heard you knew Nina. You used to date her.”

“Date?” He managed to look surprised. “I wouldn’t have called it that. But she did model for me, years ago. And I haven’t seen her since then. I can assure you of that.”

“Actually,” I said, “I didn’t think you knew anything in particular. I just wanted to talk to you.” I studied this handsome, graying German, whose features were smooth and suntanned, standing out against the gray hair over a high forehead and a long nose. One eyebrow seemed to be permanently cocked, giving him an ironic look, even when smiling.

“You wanted to talk to me about what?” he asked.

“I’m not even sure. Maybe just to learn something about my wife.”

“You want me to tell you something about your own wife?” He seemed to think about that. “Okay, maybe so. You didn’t know her back then. I can understand.” He paused. “She was my model about eight years ago. She was very beautiful. But you know that.”

“What was she like then?” Again I was hungry for any new knowledge about Nina.

“Probably not much different than now. She was seventeen, I think. I had to get permission from her aunt so she could work with me, because she was underage.” He held up both hands. “Everything was strictly business between us.” He stopped, regarding me. “Do you want me to show you some photos?” he said and turned to a stack of large folders propped against the wall, leafing through them and pulling out a single folder, holding its stiff cardboard beneath one arm while he cleared one of the tables. Laying the folder on the table, he opened it and began turning over the enlarged photographs inside. “Here,” he said. “This is a series I did when she first started with me. She had no experience, but she was what you’d call a natural. And she had a look. Very lovely, but more than just that.” He laid a photograph of Nina in front of me. She was dressed all in black with her back to the camera, as if she was walking away. Her head was turned so that she was looking back at the lens. A smile I recognized, her teasing smile, was on her face. Klaus placed several more in front of me, slowly laying them down one by one while I stood

looking at them, at Nina in different poses, always dressed in the same all-black of the first portrait, Nina sitting or standing or leaning against a tree with her hands in her pockets. He laid another photo down, saying, "This one's different, but the same, if you know what I mean."

In this portrait, Nina was straddling a turned around chair, with her arms propped on the back and her chin resting on her arms and the same smile on her face. Her shoulders and arms and her legs jutting out sideways from the straddling pose were bare, while the chair back shielded the rest of her obviously nude form.

"I was young myself then," Klaus said. "At least as an artist. Still, I was old enough to be her father." He shrugged and closed his eyes briefly in what I thought was a peculiarly European gesture. "I did this series with the thought in mind that the appreciation of beauty is something that we inflict on ourselves. We become addicted to beauty, beautiful people, beautiful women." He seemed almost sad, saying this. "You know, a beautiful person is accidentally given a certain power at birth, whether they want it or not. The more beautiful the person, the more power they seem to have. It affects everyone who comes in contact with it in some way. Often, if the beautiful person is also intelligent, then the beauty can be a burden." He gazed at the stack of pictures. "We favor the beautiful people automatically, starting when they are very young, and they learn early in life how to use that. Sometimes they don't learn anything else. I was trying to show that in this series. I'm not sure I did."

Klaus leafed through some more photos and extracted one, larger than the others, and laid it out. "Here's one. It wasn't part of any series, just a beautiful shot. Probably my favorite of her."

She was lying nude on a beach, propped up on her elbows with her face turned halfway from the camera's eye, but I could see it was Nina. Sunlight slanted over her form, casting long, angled shadows on the sand beside her of her breasts, the swell of her thighs, of her feet crossed daintily at the ankles. The look, not so much on her face, which was half-hidden, but in the languid way she lay, gave her the appearance of a woman wanting to make love, or perhaps of one having just made love. Her skin was tanned all over, with no visible lines to show what might otherwise have been covered, and it had a glow that I remembered. The wispy triangle of pubic hair and the dark brown nipples were the same in this picture as all the times I'd seen them. But I was looking at a seventeen-year old Nina.

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I forgot Klaus beside me as I stared at the picture. Several times I slowly closed my eyes and opened them again. Finally I turned and looked at Klaus, who was watching me. "Where did you take this?" I managed.

"This was on a beach near Los Angeles. We went there once. She wanted to see Disneyland instead." He laughed. "It was a nude beach. We were just laying about soaking up some sun. I remember the day was getting late, the sun was low in the sky and I looked at her and immediately grabbed my camera before she moved." He looked at it fondly. "Do you recognize the pose?"

I looked down at it again.

"It's the sculpture I have on display out front," he said.

I could see it then. "You did the sculpture yourself?" I asked.

"A friend made it from this portrait. He was quite taken by it." He was gazing down at the photo. "I hope you are not offended by this," he said. "She is nude of course, but I am a photographer. Nudes are common subjects. This is just a beautiful portrait to me." He looked up at me. "I'll give you this copy if you want."

I shook my head.

"I think I have offended you," he said. "You love your wife, of course."

Of course I loved Nina. Why else was I here talking to this smooth German who probably banged her when she was seventeen? I wondered what his face would look like if I smashed it. I didn't want the portrait, though. "Maybe another time," I said.

"Of course." Klaus slipped all the photographs back into the folder and turned back to me formally. "What are you really doing here? You are looking for your wife, of course. But why did you come here?"

"I don't know."

He shook his head. "She's in a lot of trouble, isn't she? It's so sad. I loved Nina. Not in the way you do, of course. Everyone loves Nina who ever knew her. I hope you find her."

"Thanks." I made to go and then stopped, turning to the flat black, rounded structure, the giant black beer can embedded in the wall. "What is that," I asked. "Is that a doorway of some kind?"

"Yes, it leads to my darkroom."

"What's in there?" A crazy notion flashed through my mind.

He shrugged. "A darkroom. Would you like to see it?"

The thought was in my head by then that Nina might be in there, crouching in the dark interior. I knew it was absurd, but still I had to see for myself. I nodded.

Klaus was looking at me as if he sensed what I was thinking. Then he approached the structure, motioning me to follow. I could see on closer inspection that it was a sort of revolving door with a narrow portal open to the room. He stepped into the portal and said, "You just walk through it and it revolves." Then he disappeared. I followed suit, stepping into the portal and pushing, causing the thing to revolve in front of me as I moved through it. The beer can was actually in two sections, one of which rotated inside the other, with a cutout in the inner can so that when it revolved, the portal on one side was completely blocked before the cutout opened onto the other side. Clever, I thought. Nevertheless, it was disorienting to revolve inside of it and be completely enclosed in darkness, even if for just a split second. I emerged on the other side into a small room with a single light hung from the ceiling. There was equipment lying about and trays for developing, I supposed, set on metal folding tables. The place had an acrid chemical smell about it. "As you see, a darkroom," Klaus said. "Not much to look at." I nodded, scanning about for a moment, feeling in some way that Nina was here, in the chemicals that created an image that made you want to smash the one who made it—the smooth German standing there watching me. My eyes began to water from the chemicals and I felt strange, as if I was hallucinating while watching myself from outside. In the dimness of this workroom, I could see her face in front of me, first with a teasing smile and then with the look of the reclining nude on the beach, the seventeen-year old Nina that Klaus had probably had. I looked over at him. "The smell's a little strong in here," I said and stepped back through the revolving door. Klaus followed a few seconds later.

I took a moment to breathe the relatively clean air of the outer room before asking, "Do you do other things besides photography and sculpting?"

He nodded, seeming to be glad to have something else to talk about. "I do some painting."

"Are any of the paintings out front yours?"

"No. I'm not good enough. That doesn't matter to some people, if you have a name. It does to me." He shrugged in what I thought of again as a peculiarly European way. "Everyone around here is some kind of artist. You'll see more bad stuff than good, though you won't normally hear anyone say so."

I looked out through the slits of the hanging curtain. "Does everyone around here take themselves seriously?"

He looked at me, his eyebrows raised, obviously waiting for me to explain.

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“It’s all about image, isn’t it?” I said, feeling tired again, a vestige of yesterday’s weariness. “If you can get everyone to agree that something is great, like the red and black squares, then no one will really know whether it is or not, will they?” I wasn’t sure I was making sense, though he looked as though he was giving it some consideration.

“What do you do?” he asked. “Your profession.”

“I run a computer software company.”

“Do you take yourself seriously?”

“I thought I did.”

He nodded. “Well, anyway, I know what you mean. I hope you find your wife.”

Walking back up the incline of Canyon Road I kept flashing on the image of the nude, seventeen year old Nina, except that she wasn’t alone in this mental picture—her head was thrown back, and there was a smiling Klaus looming over her. The other thing running through the background of my thoughts, so to speak, was the question: could Klaus Meyer know where Nina was? Otherwise, why would he have to act so suspicious? I squinted up at the bright sky. Maybe it was my own paranoia again, believing that everyone was conspiring to lie to me? It was like when I was a boy and I would imagine that people were secretly laughing at me behind my back, conspiring together to make me look foolish—the other kids, the teachers, sometimes even my own parents—though I could never quite catch them at it, so that when I spun around to look, they would be acting as if nothing much was up. In my car, gripping the steering wheel tightly with both hands, I decided to drive back up the hill, hoping Helen would still be gone to whatever business she had and I would find Maribel alone in the house. Maybe she was another one who was hiding what she knew. If Nina had been there at the house, then Maribel had probably seen her. I decided to find out.

I parked in the blacktop lot, seeing that Helen’s car wasn’t there, and walked down to the heavy double doors enclosed in the wisteria-hung space. Maribel answered my knock, looking surprised. “The Señora is not here,” she said, peering out at me.

“Oh, sorry. Can I come in and wait for her?”

“I don’t think she is coming home too soon.” She stood holding the door half-ajar, with her hand resting along the edge, dressed this time in black pants that ended in mid-calf and a white blouse with the collar turned up. Her feet were still bare and I noticed for the first time that her toenails were painted a bright turquoise color.

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Shrugging and half-turning to look back up the hill at my car, I said, "Well, that's too bad. I guess it'll just have to wait. Hey, look." I turned back to Maribel. "It's a little late for lunch but I haven't eaten anything. How about if I take you to lunch?"

"I don't know," she said, staring back at me.

"Just lunch. Have you eaten yet?"

She shook her head. "Maybe it is not such a good idea. If the Señora comes home."

"She lets you eat lunch, doesn't she?" I said. "I'll bet you haven't eaten yet."

"No," she admitted. "But I am supposed to be doing some things."

"Doesn't the Señora let you go out?"

"Sure, I'm going out sometimes."

"Then how about going out to get some lunch?"

"I don't know," she said again, leaning against the edge of the door.

"Well I don't know about you, but I'm hungry." I couldn't tell if my version of charm was working on her.

She brightened then, like a little girl. "I guess I am too."

"We'll only be gone a little while," I said.

"Why not, then. I will just be a minute." Leaving the door open, she walked back into the house, reappearing a moment later. A small leather purse hung from her shoulder. On her feet was a pair of open-toed sandals with an elevated, wedge-shaped heel, and I couldn't help but stare for a moment at her dark toes with the turquoise-painted toenails peeking out the front of those sandals. They were very sexy somehow. She looked like a typical American teenager.

Chapter 5

Maribel had a long-legged stride for a girl six or seven inches shorter than my six-two height. She walked ahead of me up the path to the parking lot, her pants hugging her form from the way she was bent slightly forward. Her bag was hung by a chain from her shoulder, swinging free from the movement of her stride, and her hair moved from side to side. And, though she was a thin girl, she had some jiggles in the right places. I caught up to her and matched her gait, aware of her alongside me, the top of her head just above my shoulder height, about the same as Nina. But this wasn't Nina. I watched her without turning my head, forming a mental picture of her face, the way her mouth turned down at the corners and the way her eyes slanted down, matching the downward trend of her mouth, all in a way that was oddly attractive.

At the top of the path she turned to me with a smile that again reversed her down-turned mouth. "Which car is yours?" she asked, looking around.

I pointed to my smoke-gray Mercedes, which I suddenly noticed was badly in need of a wash. The windshield and the entire front of the car were bug-splattered from the more than eleven hundred mile drive from California. Approaching it and opening the passenger-side door for Maribel revealed that the floor and the seat were strewn with the remnants of several fast food meals I'd eaten along the way, burger wrappers and french-fry bags, several empty soda containers. "Sorry about the mess," I said as I scooped up the litter and threw it in the back. Maribel just shrugged. "Nice car," she said, stepping in.

Driving down the winding road to East Alameda Street, I was aware of her close beside me. After getting in the car, she had immediately slipped off her sandals and now sat like a little girl, her arms straight along her sides, her smile staring straight ahead through the windshield and her turquoise-painted toes digging into the carpeting.

Turning onto East Alameda, intending to head toward the plaza, I noticed an old Cadillac, probably seventies or early eighties vintage, parked by itself along the curb just ahead of us. It immediately registered with me that I had seen it before, once on Canyon Road when I'd gone to see Klaus and a second time on my way up the hill to Helen's place. Maybe it caught my attention now just because it was a battered and faded old Cadillac. But I'd been

looking for signs of somebody following me since being released the day before from the city jail.

As we drove by the Cadillac I noticed a man sitting behind the wheel, and I glanced over at him. He kept staring straight ahead. About a block further along, I looked in my mirror and saw that the car had pulled away from the curb and was following behind us at a distance.

Despite what Helen said, I still expected that the police would put some kind of tail on me. An old car like this didn't make sense, though. But on the other hand, maybe it did. No one would suspect a police tail to be a twenty-year-old Caddy. I sped up a little, heading down the street and then cutting over toward the plaza, checking my rearview as I drove and seeing that the old Caddy was still there, keeping pace with me at a distance.

One of my favorite spots from previous visits for lunch was the La Fonda Hotel. Swinging through the plaza with all the slow-moving tourists browsing the shops and bartering with the Indian vendors in front of the Palace of the Governors, I pulled up alongside the La Fonda and turned into the hotel's parking garage. I'd been slowing down for the traffic and pedestrians around the plaza, and the Caddy had closed the distance between us. Waiting to enter the garage behind another car, I watched in my rearview as the Caddy passed behind us, and I got a better glimpse of the driver, before he drove out of sight up the street. He looked to be late forties or early fifties with slicked back hair and a craggy face.

Inside the hotel, there was a small crowd waiting to be seated in the main dining room, which was okay by me. I preferred the lounge just off the lobby anyway. There were only a few tables, but there always seemed to be one or two open, and they served a buffet lunch of Southwest Mexican food. Entering the place, I steered Maribel by the elbow over to a table against the wall, with a little more privacy than the others. "They have great Mexican food here," I said, before it dawned on me that she might not think it was so great, being used to the real thing. "At least to a gringo."

She smiled at me in that same way that reversed her downcast mouth. "You're funny," she said.

"I just thought, maybe it's not that good compared to what you're used to."

"I like the food around here," she said, looking around. "It is different from home, but that's okay."

I pointed her toward the buffet table and followed her over there and watched as she loaded her tray, spooning an enchilada, a Chili Relleno, a tamale, an assemble-your-own taco, along with beans and rice onto her plate

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until it threatened to overflow. This thin girl seemed to have an appetite. For myself, I settled for the enchiladas and some rice. I figured Maribel's nineteen-year-old metabolism must have been racing along at a thoroughbred pace to burn up all those calories.

After we'd eaten, she sat back in her chair with a sigh, placing her napkin next to her plate. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you for bringing me here. I like it."

"Have you been here before?"

"No." She shook her head, looking all around.

I studied her, remembering Helen's words about Maribel when I first arrived yesterday: "She's from the village where my mother was born." Now I tried to imagine her in a rural Mexico setting, whatever that was—a dirt street, crumbling adobe houses, Maribel with a water jug balanced on her head. Detective Sanchez was probably right, I watched too much TV, or my imagination was too active. But I imagined her nevertheless, barefoot and wearing a peasant dress, with her down-turned look and arched eyebrows lending a sadness to her face. She turned to meet my gaze and stared back at me, her dark brown eyes luminous. The corners of her mouth turned up slightly then and the seeming sadness went away.

"How long have you been in the States?" I asked.

"I am here a year now."

"Your English is good for only a year."

"I think it is not so good." She made a face. "But anyway, we learned English in school in Mexico." She slurred over the *X*, though she didn't quite pronounce it *Mehico*,

"I suppose one way to learn would be to hang out with American kids your own age. Do you have many friends?"

"No. Not many. Not any, really. But the Señora makes me practice my *Ingles*." She corrected herself. "English. We always speak it in the house."

Small talk wasn't one of my strong suits, and I smiled at her while I thought of what to say next. "What did you do in Mexico?"

She shrugged. "I went to school. I did things with my friends. I worked in a store sometimes, after the school finished. Then I graduate." She shrugged again and returned my smile. "Then I come here."

"Did you live in a small village?"

"It was not so small. It was outside a city, so there was things to do."

"And now you work in the house for Helen."

"Sometimes."

This was harder than I thought. "What else does she have you do?"

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Maribel was starting to look distracted. "I am sometimes working up the hill. Sometimes I am helping in the office, and sometimes I clean. They have the private baths, you know? Have you ever been in the private baths?"

She smiled and I thought she might be flirting with me now. But I knew what she was referring to, eight or ten private structures set away from the main building of the spa. A separate gravel path led to each bathhouse and each structure was set apart from the others, lending an air of seclusion. Each of the baths contained a hot tub, a shower stall and a massage table, while a few of them also contained small saunas.

"I've seen them," I said.

"They are very nice. I try one once but I am by myself. Do you ever try them?"

I nodded. "They're nice. Do you work the private baths?"

"What you mean, work them?" she asked.

"I don't know. Bring towels or drinks, give massages."

"No, I don't do that," she said, sitting up straighter.

I wondered if I'd just offended her. "You probably think I'm being nosy."

"Nosy?"

"Prying into your business. Being a busybody."

"Busybody?" She stared at me.

"You know, asking all these questions."

Then she reached across and touched my hand briefly. "I don't mind. I like talking to people. I don't get too much of a chance to do that."

"You had lots of friends back home?"

"Sure, I had a lot of friends that I grow up with."

"But not so many here."

She shook her head.

"Do you know why I came here?" I asked her then.

"To Santa Fe? Yes, I think it is to find your wife." She gazed back at me.

Maybe she thought I was just being nice, bringing her here. But I needed to know what she knew. "Helen said my wife came to the house. You saw her, didn't you?"

"I don't know."

"Remember I told you her name is Nina? Did you see Nina?"

"Did you ever go to the private baths with your wife?" she asked, smiling now, a little saucily I thought. But maybe she was just trying to change the subject.

"What? Sure." It stopped me for a few seconds. "Did you see her when she came to the house?"

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“It must have been nice. I like to try it with a friend.”

“It was nice, sure. Did you see her?”

“Maybe I did, just for a little.”

“Was she alone when she came there?”

“I don’t know.” She made a vague gesture, sort of a half shrug, flipping her hand over.

“Did Helen tell you not to say anything to me?”

“No,” she answered, her jaw jutting forward a fraction.

“She didn’t say anything?”

She shook her head.

“Maribel,” I said. “Somehow I think you know more than you’re saying.”

She didn’t answer.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, narrowing her eyes while looking away.

Maybe she was getting annoyed. I wanted to cut this short and take her back home, but I went on with it anyway. “If Helen didn’t say anything to you about it, you should tell me what you know.”

“I don’t think she wants you to know.” She leaned back in her chair.

“Why not?”

“I heard what she say to you yesterday. I could hear from the next room. And then when you come back today.” She seemed embarrassed now. “I think she is trying to protect your wife.”

“Not from me,” I said.

“No. Not from you.” She shook her head. “I’m not sure.”

“I’m sorry about all this, Maribel. You probably don’t like me much right now, do you?”

“Sure I like you,” she answered, looking surprised.

“So tell me what you saw. What did Nina say?”

She looked down. “I saw her, sure. She is coming to the door and asking for the Señora. I do not know who she is at first.”

“Did you hear what she said?”

She shook her head. “When the Señora came out and sees her, she is looking surprised. Then she is hugging her and telling me to go up to the office to help out. When I come back later your wife isn’t there. I still do not know who she is until when you come and I listen.” Again she appeared embarrassed.

“That’s all you saw?”

“I think so.”

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I wanted to end this now, but I still had to ask, “Do you know that Nina is in trouble?”

“I hear that when I listen. I hear that someone is dead.”

“And my wife is being blamed.”

“I am sorry.” Her hands were at her sides and she was looking up at me from beneath her arched brows, and she suddenly looked like a little girl again.

“What else do you know?” I asked.

“I am not so sure.”

“You saw something else, didn’t you?”

She cocked her head awkwardly. “I see her when she leave the house. I am in the office up the hill where I can see the cars parked and I see her.”

“What was it you saw?”

“She is getting in the car and they are driving away.”

“Was she with Helen?”

Maribel shook her head. “No, the Señora stayed in the house.”

“Who was Nina with then?”

“There was a man, I think.” She took a breath. “It looked like a man. He was driving the car.”

“What did the man look like?”

She shook her head. “It was too far away and I could not see too good. I could see that it looked like a man, I think, but that is all.”

I looked in her eyes and decided that I believed what she was saying. I took a deep breath, not liking myself much at that moment.

When we left a while later, instead of going directly to the parking garage, I walked outside with Maribel beside me. I wanted to look along the streets surrounding the hotel for the battered Cadillac, but after a short walk with Maribel around the plaza, strolling along like sightseeing tourists, I didn’t see it. And when I drove Maribel back home, I looked for it in my rearview or parked again in the same spot on Alameda as before, but there was no sign of the car.

I parked in the lot above the house, seeing that Helen’s car still wasn’t anywhere around, and I walked with Maribel down the brick path to the front door. She turned to me, and I suddenly felt like an awkward teenager, returning my date to her home and wondering what to do next. Maribel smiled and held out her hand and I took it in mine, feeling the softness of it. “Thank you for the lunch,” she said. “I enjoyed it a lot.” Then she opened the door and disappeared inside.

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The old Caddy was there in my rearview mirror again as I drove back down East Alameda, appearing from somewhere and tracking me again. I watched my mirror more than the road as I drove aimlessly around. The Caddy always kept the same distance, about a block behind. There was nothing I could do about it, and I was suddenly tired anyway. I decided to go back to Marie Gustafson's B&B for a while and not worry about it. Reversing my direction with a U-turn, I watched in my mirror as the Caddy duplicated my about face. Parking in the gravel lot next to the Marie's place, I exited the car and walked up the front walkway, watching without appearing to look as the Caddy rolled slowly past and disappeared from sight down a side street. Then the nose of Caddy reappeared at the junction of the two streets, and he parked it there where he could watch Marie's place, apparently. To hell with him, whoever he was.

When I opened the door, Marie appeared from the back, walking in her stiff way. "Well hello, dear," she said. "You're back early."

"I'm a little tired and thought I'd lie down for a while. That's okay, isn't it?" For some reason the words came out with a sarcasm that I didn't feel.

"Oh, my yes," she answered. "I didn't mean anything by that."

I smiled at her. "I know you didn't."

I went up to my room, closing the door, and I tossed my new jacket with the wide lapels and piping around the pockets into a corner, intending never to pick up it up again except to throw it away. I kicked off my new boots, relegating them in my mind to the same fate as the jacket, and lay down on top of the chenille bedspread and immediately fell asleep.

When I woke few hours later I could tell it was late afternoon by the light filtering into the room. I lay there staring at the ceiling and went over in my mind what I knew, which was not much. For one, Nina had been here, but not alone as Helen had told me. So who was the man Nina came with, if Maribel was right? It had to be a man, because Nina could always find a way to manipulate men. And if it was an old boyfriend and Nina had come to him for help, of course he would accommodate her. The thought of Klaus Meyer, with his handsome looks and European manner caused a wave of loneliness to sweep over me. What was I doing here in this place? I was certainly out of my element in this city of contrasts, the City Different, I thought sarcastically, and somewhere in it was Nina. I tried to imagine her situation, scared, running from the law, maybe even from me, not even being able to trust her own Aunt Helen, apparently. Or was that apparent? Maybe Helen had her tucked safely away somewhere. Maybe even Maribel's story was a lie. Which all led me back to the fact that there wasn't a lot I knew.

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Of course, none of that thinking was getting me anywhere. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat up. There were a lot of things to find out. Looking at the jacket and boots lying in a heap in a corner, I decided on the same slacks from yesterday and one of the golf shirts I'd packed. I slipped on my running shoes. Some dinner was in order and then a visit to the shopping center out on Cerrillos Road for some more reasonable clothes. That would put me in position and at about the right time to look someone up. But first, I wanted to see if the Cadillac Man, as I'd started to think of him, was still parked outside.

I went downstairs and found Marie staring at a television in a back room, her feet up on a sagging hassock. She looked up at me as if she didn't know who I was.

"Sorry to disturb you," I said. "Is there a back way out of here that I could use?"

"Certainly." She started to rouse herself, and I held up a hand. She sank back down in her chair. "Whatever for?" she asked, squinting up at me.

"I just felt like going for a little walk out that way." I pointed toward the back of the house. "Up the street there, and I thought it would save a few steps going out that way rather than going all the around from the front."

Again she swung her legs off the hassock and this time she slowly stood, stiffly pushing herself up using the arms of the chair.

"You don't have to get up," I said, too late.

"I have to show you," she said and scuffed off past me in her slippers, shaking her head. "I need to get out and do some walking myself, or one of these days I won't be able to get out of that chair. I used to keep busy in my garden out back," she called back over her shoulder as she led the way through the kitchen at the back of the house and onto an enclosed porch. "I don't even do that anymore, as you'll see from the state of it. Here we are." She pushed open a screen door leading to a short set of steps down into the back yard. To my eyes it looked fairly well tended. "Just go through the yard there and you'll see a gate off to the side." She pointed the way and I moved past her, waving back at her. She watched me, still holding the screen door open, as I stepped through the gate and onto a narrow sidewalk running next to the side street.

I walked up the street and turned onto a street paralleling Peralta, and then proceeded for a few blocks before making a couple of turns back toward Marie's. I was a block from where I'd seen Cadillac Man park. In the twilight I could see the car, still parked in the same spot. Inside, there was the silhouette of a head and a pair of shoulders, with the head lying back on the

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seatback as if the guy was sleeping. Not entirely sure what I was doing other than the fact that I wanted to get a better look at him, I got a little closer to the car. I was on the side away from the direction he would be looking, toward Marie's, and maybe he was asleep anyway. But it turned out he wasn't. He turned his head and looked right at me where I stood about fifty feet away. There was nothing left for me to do, so I approached the car as if I'd intended that all along. The driver's side window was open. I leaned on the roof, looking down at the guy, who was staring back at me. I asked, "Is this your idea of a disguise?"

"What do you mean by that?" the guy said. He wore a leather coat and had a rough face, dark bags under his eyes and slicked-back hair that was beginning to gray.

"Was this car Detective Sanchez's idea?" I asked.

He looked around himself at the interior and then stared back at me. "No, it was mine."

"It didn't work."

He frowned. "Where's Nina?"

"I told you guys before, I don't know. If I did I'd be with her right now."

"Yeah, she's a looker, isn't she? And I happen to know who she was screwing in California." He smiled up at me in a nasty way.

"What are you talking about?" I moved back then, still looking down at him.

"Never mind about that. Tell me about Klaus Meyer? You went to see him." He smiled again in the same way. "Is Nina with him? You wouldn't like that much, would you?"

Something was all wrong about this guy. "Are you a policeman or not?"

"Yeah, I'm a cop. What did you think?"

"Let me see some identification."

"I don't have to show you shit. This isn't California."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I started to turn away and he opened his door and stepped out, grabbing my arm and spinning me around. He was about my height and he was thin and lanky, but when he grabbed the front of my shirt in both fists and pulled me to him I could feel his rawboned strength.

"Where the hell is Nina?" he said. "I know you know where she is or that Meyer does, or you both do."

"You're not with the police," I said through clenched teeth as I was being jostled. "Who the hell are you? I'm calling the cops."

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“You think they’ll help you?” He shoved me back and I stumbled and fell hard on my rear end. As I was getting up, with my instinct telling me to run, he got back in his car and drove off, squealing his tires, a cliché getaway.

I brushed myself off, none the worse for wear, except for my pride. But what the hell was going on?

If Cadillac Man was a cop, which now seemed unlikely, they had a different kind of cop here in Santa Fe. And what did he mean by that crack that he knew who she was screwing in California? If he was just trying to get under my skin, he did a good job. And if he wasn’t a cop, then who the hell was he? The only thing I could think of went against everything I’d previously thought: that Helen was thinking I knew where Nina was and not the other way around. Maybe Cadillac Man really was a cop, but working for Helen on the side, and she put him onto me to see if I could lead him to Nina. One thing was certain, though: nothing was making much sense.

By the time I arrived back at Marie’s place, I was limping from my fall. But I decided to go ahead with what I’d planned anyway, which was to find Billy Hayes.

First I drove down Cerrillos to the shopping center, where I found a men’s store. Figuring I would be in town for a while, I bought several pairs of slacks, a half-dozen shirts and a pair of loafers. I found a plain jacket that didn’t have the piping around the pockets nor the wide lapels. I changed in the dressing room and went back out to my car with the armload of new clothes. Then I went back toward the plaza and had dinner, with a bottle of wine to help sooth my pride and my sore rear end. After that I located the address of The Chili Pepper Bar in the phone book and drove over there looking for the place where Billy Hayes had told me he hung out.

I really wasn’t sure why I wanted to go there, other than the fact that Billy Hayes had known Nina. I was hungry to hear anything about her, even casual conversation. I was already partly oiled by the bottle of wine at the restaurant. If I was going to continue drinking, I didn’t want to do it alone.

The Chili Pepper Bar was located off of Cerrillos near a strip of auto repair shops, tires stores, insurance agencies and motels. The place had a gravel lot in back, about three-quarters full when I got there at around nine. I parked at the back of the lot and entered the place through a rear entrance.

A bar took up one wall, and about a dozen tables and a few booths were scattered around the room. There was a pool table in a raised alcove off to the side. I ordered a beer, and when the bartender brought it, complete with a lime wedge on a toothpick, I asked if he knew Billy Hayes.

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“Sure, I know him,” the guy said.

“Has he been in tonight?”

“It’s a little early for Billy.” He wiped around my glass with a rag. “You might find him at Flanagan’s though.”

“Where would that be?”

“Just a few blocks south.” He pointed over my head, indicating the general direction, and then walked away. I finished my beer, looking around at the mostly young and predominantly male crowd. The smoke in the place was thick and the talk was loud, competing with a jukebox near the front. It looked like the kind of place where fistfights were not uncommon, started inside then carried out back to the parking lot.

Back outside, after the smoke of the place, I breathed the cool air, thinking now that this wasn’t such a good idea. Maybe going back to my room was more in order. But I decided to at least go to Flanagan’s for a look.

Billy was there, sitting at the bar and talking to a female bartender. When he saw me enter, a surprised look replaced the smile on his face, and he flashed me a big grin. “Hey, Mr. Nina, what do you say?” Then the grin faded and he shook his head. “Hey man, I’m sorry. I heard about her.”

“Join the crowd,” I said, pulling up a stool next to him.

“Hey, I’m sorry, man.” He turned on his stool, almost as if formally greeting me, and held out his hand.

“Thanks,” I said, feeling grateful and realizing that the earlier bottle of wine and the beer I had at the Chili Pepper had relaxed me more than I’d thought.

“There’s no way she did it,” he said, shaking his head.

“How do you know?” I asked, curious to hear.

“Well,” he replied. “She didn’t, did she?”

“Of course not?”

“That’s settled then.” He nodded and turned to the female bartender, who was standing back watching us. “Right?” he asked her, at which she shrugged, obviously not following the conversation. “So.” He turned back to me. “What brings you into this joint?” He winked over at the bartender.

“Just out to have a few drinks.” I looked around the place. It seemed to be a cut above The Chili Pepper.

“Well, what a coincidence, us running into one another. Let me buy you one.” He turned to the woman behind the bar. “Give him whatever he’s having. And another Dos Equis for me.”

“Two Dos Equis,” I told her, holding up two fingers. She went off, and I turned back to Billy. “And I’m buying. As a way of apologizing.”

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“Apologizing for what?” When he looked up at me, I noticed his eyes were bloodshot and watery. I wondered how long he’d been there.

“For thinking you were a cop,” I said.

He leaned way back on his stool and gave me a long look. “You thought that?” He turned and looked all around himself at the few other patrons of the place and then turned back to look at me, leaning toward me and saying in a soft voice. “I’m a cop? That’s what you thought? I look like a cop?”

“No, as a matter of fact,” I said. “I just thought, it was pretty convenient they put me in the same cell as you when all the other cells were empty.”

“It never occurred to you they do that to save on cleaning?”

“I guess I just have an active imagination. Sorry.”

“So what made you change your mind?” He settled back then, a smile spreading across his face.

“Well, anybody looks at you can see what you are.” I was beginning to be sorry I’d brought the subject up.

“What’s that? A bum?” he said, grinning at me now.

“Not that, no,” I protested. “Just not a cop.”

“That’s settled then.” He nodded. “So let’s do a little drinking. You’re my kind of drinking partner.”

“What kind is that?”

“The kind who buys,” he said, slapping his hand on the bar.

“Have you gotten into any fights tonight?” I asked.

“No, but the night is young.” The female bartender returned with the two frosted bottles of Dos Equis and Billy grabbed his and raised it in toast, giving her a wink.

Chapter 6

Billy was looking at me through watery eyes. “Man, I feel for you.” He shook his head. “Nina, man.” Perspiration gleamed on his forehead and his smile was unfocused. A similar smile began to spread across my own face and an agreeable warmth was relaxing my neck and shoulders and moving down my arms. I began to assume the same slumping position on my stool as Billy’s.

I decided that Billy Hayes could be a fine drinking partner, if he weren’t so far ahead of me. It was obvious that he’d been at it for a while.

“Thanks,” I answered, eyeing him. His hair was hanging across his forehead and he kept brushing it away. “I feel for me too,” I said.

“Nina, man. She couldn’t do that.” His face took on a look of amazement. “How could anybody that looks like that kill a guy? Especially that guy.”

“Why especially that guy?”

“Man, I had nothing against the guy. He was what he was, so what? But why would she shoot him? Over that? No.” He emphatically slapped the bar. “I could see her doing it to some guy was beating on her. Or other things, you know?”

“Yeah. How about we drop this subject?”

“Yeah, okay,” he said. “So what’s going on? You got her stashed someplace?”

“That’s the sort of question made me think you were a cop,” I said.

Billy chuckled. “Man. A cop,” he said. “I can’t believe it. A cop.” He shook his head, laughing at the obvious ridiculousness of it. “Okay, we won’t talk about that anymore. What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know.” I cast about in my mind for another subject, but found nothing there.

“Hey, did I introduce you to Doris?” Billy said. “Hey, Doris.” He nodded to the female bartender, who walked over with a cool smile in her eyes that didn’t quite include her mouth.

“Two more?” She pointed toward the empties in front of us.

Billy looked down surprised, as if wondering how his bottle had gotten into this empty state. “Yeah, sure. Hey Doris, I want you to meet my friend Eddie. Eddie, this is Doris. A man’s best friend.”

“You sound like you’re describing your dog, Billy,” Doris said, smiling the same way, just with the eyes. “Nice to meet you.” She reached across the

bar and offered her hand, which I took. Doris was probably in her late thirties, with red hair fluffed around her face to give her a softer look, probably to make her look younger, and smiling eyes that looked you over like they'd seen it all. "I'll get those beers." She walked off.

"Doris is a good girl," Billy said in a near whisper, watching her. "She gets off at ten tonight and I hope to be in her pants sometime after one." He leaned forward on his stool to get a better look at her as she bent over and reached into the cold chest for the beers. "Look at that ass."

I glanced in that direction. She wore tight slacks and a little pullover blouse that left a small section of her flat midriff exposed, probably standard wear for female bartenders. "Yeah, I guess it's a nice one."

"You guess?" He looked at me indignantly and grinned

"You're a lucky guy," I said.

"Hey man, I'm sorry," he said, obviously referring again to the Nina situation. "Hey, I got an idea. Why don't you go with us?"

"Go where with who?" I asked.

"Doris gets off at ten. She told me she's going over to The Chili Pepper to meet her girlfriend for a few drinks. I thought I'd tag along, though I haven't told her yet." He winked. "Why don't you go too? That way, it'll be boy-girl, boy-girl, and I won't feel like a third wheel."

"You want me to go for this girlfriend of Doris?"

"It won't mean anything, man, it'll be fun."

"Billy, I'm not looking for a date."

"It wouldn't be like that," Billy said, holding out his hands in a calming motion.

"What would it be like?" I tried to conjure up an image in my mind of Nina, but all I could see was that nude photo that Klaus Meyer had showed me. "I just came out for a few drinks. Anyway, maybe I should go home in a little while." *Home*, I thought sarcastically, already beginning to think of Marie's B&B as passing for my home in these parts.

"Hey man, I didn't mean anything. I'm not trying to fix you up or anything. I just thought it might be fun." By that time Doris was back with two more Dos Equis. I shoved some money her way and made a motion with both hands like an umpire calling a runner safe, signaling that I didn't need any change. She smiled at me with her eyes and picked up the money and walked away.

"Besides," Billy continued. "You look like you could use a little relaxation." At my look, he held out his hands in the same way as before. "I didn't mean that way. I know what it sounded like. All I'm saying, it would

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be a strictly social situation, you know? Have a few drinks, a few laughs, that's all." He wiggled his eyebrows and grinned in an arch manner. "Until it's time for old Doris to go home, which is usually after about one, at which time I bum a ride from her. Then we two split and I get lucky, I hope."

"Isn't she a little old for you?" I asked.

"Doris? Nah." He looked down the length of the bar at her as if considering that. "She's older than me, but so what? She's still looking good."

"So what do I do when you and Doris take off and I'm left with the girlfriend?"

"That's up to you, man." He turned and stared at me. "What I mean is, you can split at that time or hang out or whatever. So what do you say, man? You'd be helping me out."

I just stared back at him.

"What we do is, I suggest to Doris that the two of us join the two of them," Billy explained. "That's a little less awkward than me tagging along on my own, which was my original plan. Then, I go with you in your car. That way, I don't have my own ride, see? I'll just leave my car here where I can pick it up anytime, hopefully tomorrow. Then when Doris leaves, you act like you want to stay, and I ask her for a ride home. Then nature takes its course, me and Doris." Doris came sauntering past toward the other end of the bar, where two young guys had just pulled up stools. She smiled in our direction as she passed. "Man, she's a hot number," Billy continued, watching her. "I've been working on her for weeks now, and she's finally beginning to come around. Anyway," he said, "once I leave, you can do what you want." At another look from me, he added, "Which of course is to head home yourself. So what do you say?" Then he added, grinning. "Besides, you owe me."

"How's that?"

"For thinking I was a cop." Playfully he poked me in the side.

I shrugged, having no enthusiasm for Billy's venture, but also having no better options except to go back *home*. "Okay."

"Good." He took a swig from his beer and nodded at Doris, who was returning from taking the two guy's order. "Hey Doris, did I tell you that Eddie's a famous Hollywood producer?"

"No you didn't tell me that," Doris said, stopping and looking at him, obviously knowing her leg was being pulled, looking at him with her cool half smile.

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“Well, he isn’t,” Billy said. “But he’s a nice guy. How about we two go along with you to The Chili Pepper when you get off? We’ll take Eddie’s car and meet you there, okay?”

“Sure, why not?” Doris answered, lifting a shoulder and letting it drop.

“You’re meeting Norma Rae over there, right?”

“Yeah, like I told you.”

“Okay, good.” He rubbed his hands together. “It’ll be fun.”

“Sure, okay,” Doris said and walked off.

Her relief bartender didn’t show up until about 10:15, and by the time she went to the back and got ready to go it was almost 10:30. She emerged from a back room and walked by on our side of the bar, a big purse hanging from her shoulder. “See you over there,” she said in passing, at which Billy bobbed his head at her and grinned.

“We’ll wait a few before heading over ourselves. Give the two girls a chance to get settled and talk over their strategy, like which one of them will get lucky with me tonight. Maybe they’ll decide both.” He winked and I returned him a weak smile.

My thinking was that he was probably too drunk to succeed with Doris and was deluding himself into believing he had a shot. But he walked steadily enough ahead of me as we headed out to my car. Outside, he took some deep breaths, ran his fingers through his hair and seemed none the worse for wear.

“My old buddy Wendell will probably be there too,” he said, settling in to the leather seat of the Mercedes, looking around appreciatively. “Wendell’s an old drinking pal. Comes from Tecolote Pueblo just north of town. He’s a Pueblo Indian.”

At the Chili Pepper, as we entered into the noise and smoke of the place, Billy spotted Doris and steered me in her direction, following along behind. She was sitting with another woman, the two of them seated across from one another in a booth. They both turned their heads as we approached their booth. “Hi, Norma Rae,” Billy said looking down at the other woman, who was probably about the same age as Doris. She had an agreeable face and, like Doris, a lot of hair casually tossed about on her head, framing it. It was probably the look, I was thinking now, for thirty-something women on the make in Santa Fe. She smiled up at me and then turned to Billy. “Hi,” she said.

“This is my good friend Eddie,” Billy said.

“Hi,” I said, beginning to be sorry that I’d come here. I held out my hand and took the other woman’s, Norma Rae’s, soft hand in mine.

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“Just call me Norma, so you don’t confuse me with Sally Field,” Norma Rae said. “Sit down.” With one hand, she rubbed a spot on the bench seat next to her, and I slid in, leaving a space between us. Billy sat next to Doris. “So what do you do, Eddie?” Norma asked.

Everyone was suddenly watching me. “I work with computers.”

“You must do more than *work with computers*,” Billy said and turned to Norma. “You should see this guy’s car.”

“What kind is it?” Norma asked, looking at me.

“A Mercedes, brand new,” Billy answered her. He noticed me frowning at him.

“It’s just a car,” I said.

“I love Mercedes,” Norma said, smiling at me. “BMW’s too. So you work in computers. I tried taking a computer course down in Albuquerque once, at the technical-vocational school. I couldn’t handle it. Too much math.”

“I guess it’s not for everyone,” I said.

“I’m a hairdresser now,” she said.

“You’d make more money tending bar,” Doris, on the other side of the booth, said. “Or waitressing at the right place. On the tips,” she explained to me. She turned her attention back to Norma. “With your looks, you’d do real well.” To me, she added. “Don’t you think Norma is attractive?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Thanks, doll,” Norma said. “You’re both good liars. But anyway, I don’t have the temperament for waitressing. I’d always be telling guys putting the make on me to fuck off. Excuse my French.” She gave me an arch look.

“Your French is fine,” Billy said. “How about us getting a couple drinks?” He started to get up but I beat him to it. “I’ll get them,” I said. “Dos Equis, right? How about you ladies? Can I get you two refills?”

They both nodded affirmatively, Margaritas on the rocks for both. I went to the bar to retrieve the drinks, wondering how I could make a tactful exit. I considered simply walking out, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

When I returned to the booth, both hands carefully wrapped around the four drinks, and set the wet glasses down on the table, Billy said, “There’s my buddy Wendell. You should talk to him sometime.” He nodded toward the raised alcove off to the side of the room where two guys were shooting pool

I followed his gaze. “Why is that?”

“Just some things he told me about Helen Rodriguez,” Billy answered. “Nina’s Aunt.”

“Who’s Nina,” Doris asked.

“Somebody that Eddie knows,” Billy said. “Never mind.”

“Like what things about Helen?” I asked.

“Just some stuff that’s going on out there by where Wendell’s from. I told you he’s from Tecolote Pueblo, didn’t I?”

“I think so?” I said. “What kind of stuff’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Hard to say. Mainly because I don’t remember exactly what he told me.” He grinned. “But anyway, I was talking to him last night. About that thing.” He signaled me with his eyebrows and I knew he meant Nina; he’d been talking about Nina. When I gave him another look, he mumbled, “Sorry, man. Anyway, you should talk to Wendell sometime.”

“How about now?” I said, seeing a chance to get out of this situation, at least temporarily, with the two women, one of whom was Billy’s target for the evening and the other of whom, for all I knew, might be targeting me.

“Well, I didn’t mean now,” Billy said, wiggling his eyebrows at me again. “How about some other time?”

“I’d like to hear what he has to say,” I said. “Maybe I’ll play a little pool.”

Billy must have read the expression on my face, because he sighed and rose from the booth, looking down at the two women and saying, “Okay. We’ll be right back. We’re just going to say hello to Wendell.” I nodded pleasantly to the two women. Doris returned me her eyes-only smile. Norma stared at me and then looked away. I decided that at least I liked Doris.

“Like I said,” Billy told me as we approached the pool game. “Wendell’s from the pueblo just north of town. He’s full-blooded Pueblo Indian, as far as I know.” We stepped up into the alcove that held the pool table. There were two young guys there, one leaning over a shot and the other standing back with his pool cue held in front of him with both hands. They both ignored us. “Hey, Wendell,” Billy said to the one about to take a shot.

The guy didn’t look up but kept concentrating on his shot. “Hey, Billy,” he said. He appeared to be about Billy’s age or even younger, with a short, muscular build, like a weightlifter, and a flat face. His skin was dark and he wore his short, jet-black hair in a brush cut, looking like he was trying to grow it out from a crew cut. He missed the shot, a long, angled cut from one end of the table to the other, and made a face.

“Hey, man,” Billy said. “This is Eddie, the guy I was telling you about. Eddie, this is Wendell Ayeta.” Wendell took my hand without looking at me, sort of deflecting his gaze down. With his muscled body covered by a tight tee shirt, I expected a crusher grip, but all I got was a limp hand. Looking at him, at his downward look, I realized he was probably shy. I also realized, from his unfocused eyes, that he was probably drunk. He was shorter than me by about six inches, and he wore faded jeans torn at the knees and dusty work boots.

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His eyes flicked up at me and took me in with a sliding motion across my face. "Sorry about your old lady," he said and turned his attention back to the pool game where his opponent had just disgustingly missed an easy shot.

"Wendell, tell Eddie what you were telling me before. You know, about Helen Rodriguez and the water."

"I'm shooting pool," Wendell said, chalking his stick and bending over a straight-in shot to the side pocket. I watched him make the shot, noticing that he seemed to have a good stroke but hit the ball too hard, a common problem with many otherwise good pool shooters, making it harder for them to gain position on a follow-up shot. Though I was generally clumsy at sports, the one game I had picked up in my younger days of high school and college was pool.

"Yeah well, maybe later then," Billy said, turning to go back to the ladies.

"What about Helen Rodriguez?" I asked Wendell.

"I don't much like your aunt," Wendell answered softly, without looking up from an attempt at a bank shot, which he missed. "No offense."

"She's not really my aunt," I said. "She's my wife Nina's aunt."

"I guess I still don't like her." He stood up grasping his pool cue in front of him. "But I am sorry about your old lady."

"Thanks," I said, believing him. "Did you know Nina too?"

Wendell shook his head. "I never met her." He glanced toward Billy with the same sliding look he'd given me. Billy stood there with his arms folded, watching.

"Maybe we'll talk to you later then," Billy said to Wendell. He turned to me. "Maybe we shouldn't keep the girls waiting."

I glanced back at our booth where both women were leaning toward one another and talking while trying not to appear to be looking our way.

"You shoot pool, man?" Wendell asked me.

"I used to," I said. "It's been awhile."

"Why don't you play next game?" Wendell said, looking down with his unfocused eyes at the table. "Nobody else is up."

"Sure," I said. Billy looked at me, frowning. I said to him, "I'll be along in a little while". He shrugged and returned to our booth, now having both women to himself, which was okay by me.

I had picked up pool playing when I was about thirteen, learning at a friend's house. The game came naturally to me; it was nothing but plane geometry, with one angle formed between the target ball and the pocket and the other angle formed between the cue ball and the target ball. I could always see the angles at a glance, and I became a deadly shot, amazing my friends

with acute cut shots I sometimes liked to come up with just to show off. The other thing I picked up was using the right touch when shooting. I learned that the most important aspect of shooting pool was not so much making the shot—that should be a given, in most cases—but leaving the cue ball in good position for the next shot. A good pool shooter always plays position pool, sometimes figuring the lie of his next four or five shots ahead. By the time I was in high school I'd become an ace pool shooter.

On the other hand, Wendell's opponent was not a good shooter, seemingly never in a good position and always trying for what I call the atomic shot, where you blast away with the cue ball at a cluster of balls and hope one of yours goes in. They were playing eight ball, and he made the eight out of turn, meaning he made it before he had sunk all of his own balls. His were the striped ones, so he lost the game. I placed some coins into the slot at the end of the table and pushed the plunger in, causing all the balls that had been sunk to roll down into the tray at the bottom. Then I made a rack of the fifteen balls, with the eight in the center, by pyramiding my hands and forearms into a triangle and rolling the triangle of balls into position with my fingers, without benefit of the wooden rack. I was showing off, probably because I was a little drunk.

Wendell looked with raised eyebrows at my little trick with the balls before taking aim at the rack from the other end of the table. "We usually play for a beer," he said. "Okay?"

"That works for me," I said, grabbing a stick from the cue holder on the wall. When I sighted down the stick, I could see that the thing was warped. I tried a few more until I found one that was the least bent. In the meantime, Wendell had slammed the cue ball into the rack of balls, scattering them and sinking a striped ball. "You got solids," he said. He proceeded to make two more stripes and then missed a difficult shot because he'd failed to play position on it.

Discretion in a strange house made me resolve not to make more than three shots in a row. After making my three, I missed a not-too-difficult shot. Wendell relaxed. "I thought you were going to run the table," he said and proceeded to miss his next shot. From the state he seemed to be in, I was wondering how he could even see it. I made three more before another miss, and then Wendell sank a pair but left me with an easy shot at the five ball. I made that and the eight and turned to Wendell with a shrug.

"I guess I been hustled," Wendell said. "What are you drinking?"

"Why don't you let me get it?" I said, reaching in my pocket.

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His eyes went flat for an instant and then slid away as if searching the room for something. “I lost, I’m buying. What are you drinking?”

“Dos Equis,” I said, withdrawing my hand from my pocket. He walked off toward the bar and returned with two bottles and handed me one.

Wendell studied me, frowning. “So what did Billy tell you?” he said, sipping from his beer.

“Not much. Something about Helen Rodriguez.” I was remembering what Marie Gustafson had told me about Helen and her supposed shady land deal involving the Indian Pueblo. “I heard a similar thing from somebody else, but I didn’t know whether to believe it.”

“Believe what?” he said.

“Like Helen’s got some land she’s developing out by the national forest north of town.” I shrugged. “That’s all.”

“She’s trying to steal it first,” he said, racking the balls at the end of the table. “It’s your break.”

I eased up on the atomic break, but still made the twelve ball. “I guess you got solids this time,” I said. “So you live at the pueblo?” I asked, lining up my next shot.

“I used to. I live here in town now.”

It took a few seconds for me to recall his last name, the way Billy Hayes had said it introducing him. “So what does Ayeta mean in Pueblo?”

“Not a thing. It’s my slave name; it’s Spanish.” He shrugged. “The blacks got nothing on us. The Spanish gave us our names. You ever hear of Don Juan de Oñate?”

I shook my head.

“He was a Spanish conquistador,” he said, twisting down his mouth, “who brought his army and conquered these parts for the Spanish around 400 years ago, to bring us enlightenment or something. He’s a big hero around here now. To some people anyway. For bringing culture to New Mexico. The father of New Mexico, like George Washington, you know? They even put up a statue of him someplace.”

His glance wandered toward me as if to judge the effect of his words. I made two more balls and then missed, turning the table over to him. But he ignored the table, continuing to stand there. I noticed he was weaving a little.

“Oñate, you know, the first governor of New Mexico. You know why the Spanish came here back in the sixteenth century? They found silver in Mexico earlier, so they figured there’d be more of it here. So they came and brought their religion and their Spanish names. They tried to make us Pueblo Indians into good little slaves.” He laughed in an oddly polite way. “But we got ‘em

back, at least for awhile. We revolted and kicked them out, for about twelve years. They came back though and whipped us misbehaving redskins back into shape.” He glanced down at his muscled arm, which was browned from the sun. “Do I look red to you?”

“No more than I look white,” I said.

“That’s right man. You white men are more pink than anything. Some of you are orange though.” He chuckled and glanced at me, maybe to see whether or not I was offended. “Anyway, the Spanish never really found the silver they were looking for. We got ‘em there.” He finally hoisted his cue and bent over the table for a shot and then he stood back up. “You know what kind of culture the Spanish brought? They made us start wearing clothes, they made us pray to their God on our knees, they cut Kokopeli’s pecker off.” At that he chuckled again. “You ever hear of Acoma Pueblo man? Nah, you probably never heard of it. On one of his expeditions, Oñate’s men ran into a bunch of Acomas who wouldn’t give Oñate everything they had. So Oñate attacked them. He got reinforcements and went to the pueblo and slaughtered a lot of the people. He brought some back to San Gabriel for trial. And you know what they did, Oñate and his men? They cut off a foot from each of Acoma man over twenty-five years old as punishment.” Wendell stared down at the table for a moment, preparing again to take his shot. “When they put up that statue of Oñate recently, you know what happened?” he said without looking up from his shooting stance. “They woke up one morning and found out that somebody went down there and cut off one of the statue’s feet. Pretty good, huh?”

“Yeah. Pretty good,” I said, watching Wendell miss the shot. I surveyed the table, seeing all my balls pretty much lined up for the taking. The beer Wendell had bought me had hardly been touched, and I wasn’t ready for another. I decided to throw the game by making one of my balls and caroming the cue ball into the eight, sinking it out of turn, which I did, groaning. “I got this one,” I said, moving to the bar and returning with a single bottle for Wendell. I picked up my own mostly full beer from the edge of the table.

“So how is Helen Rodriguez stealing the land she’s developing?”

“The land belongs to Tecolote Pueblo. It always has.”

I bent over and racked the balls, this time using the wooden rack.

He chalked his cue and let fly with a break shot, sending the cue ball bouncing off the rack of balls and completely off the table. “Shit,” he said. “Sorry. I can’t even see straight anymore.”

I retrieved the ball and set up at the other end of the table. From the lay of them, I could see a fairly easy run of solids. At the same time, I was

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wondering again what I was doing here. But at least Wendell was an interesting guy, with his weightlifter body and polite manner. He seemed like a decent enough guy who really didn't take himself too seriously.

When I glanced back over at the booth, I spotted Billy looking my way and giving me the high sign with his eyebrows. He undoubtedly wanted me to return so he could work things out prior to his conquest of Doris. Norma Rae was watching me as well. I gave her a fake smile and bent over my cue, seeing a mental picture of the succession of solid balls I could sink, if I wanted. I said to hell with it and proceeded to run all the solids and the eight ball. It obviously impressed Wendell. He whistled soundlessly.

"Hey man, you better watch it. Some guy's going to break your thumbs, like they did to Paul Newman in that pool movie way back when." But he smiled, flashing white teeth against his dark face. "Hey, you're pretty good. Too good for me."

"Thanks," I said. "One of my few talents. A product of a misspent youth. But anyway, I think I've had enough of pool."

"Me too man," he said, leaning on his stick. "Besides, I'm too drunk."

I nodded toward the bar. "How about we grab a couple of stools. I really would like to hear about Helen. Besides, I'd rather not join Billy and his two lady friends. He's probably trying to set me up with the one."

"What's the matter, you don't like girls?" Wendell said, his eyes sliding toward the booth where Billy sat with the two women.

"It's not that at all." I shook my head, and it felt loose on my neck, starting an ache behind my eyes that was probably the beginning of a headache I would feel tomorrow morning. "I like my wife just fine," I said. "I just don't want the complications. Besides, the one he's got picked out for me is a barracuda."

"Who, Norma Rae?" Wendell said, again looking over at the booth. "She's okay."

"Not my type then," I said.

Wendell shrugged. "Okay, whatever you say."

We adjourned to the end of the bar. "I'll buy the beers," I said. "You tell the story."

"No, man," Wendell said. "I lost, I buy. At least this one anyway." He grinned.

I still had the bottle of Dos Equis from the first pool game, now turning warm. Another fresh one, dripping condensation, was set on the bar in front of me.

Wendell took a long drink from his bottle and set it down with a long “aahhh” of satisfaction. “You know, us injuns can’t drink. Something about absorbing the alcohol at an abnormal rate. Makes us crazy.” He smiled. “Anyway, so your Aunt Helen, man.” He held up his hand. “Sorry. Your wife’s aunt. Anyway, she’s trying to build a new city of immigrants out there, right east of the pueblo next to the national forest. She can do it too.”

“Immigrants?”

“Yeah, people like you man.” He averted his eyes, as if he was afraid he’d given insult. “You know, people from somewhere else. Anywhere else, as long as they have money. No offense.” When I looked at him, he gave me his shy smile. “I like you man,” he said. “At least I feel sorry for you anyway. About your wife and all. Anyway, so they’re buying up this land out there. But it don’t really belong to the people she’s buying it from, and it don’t belong to her now. It belongs to the pueblo, and always has, ever since the Spanish got sick of us and granted our land holdings in perpetuity. In perpetuity, man.” Wendell jabbed his finger at the bar as he said this. “Then the U.S. of A. signs a treaty with Mexico to end the Mexican War. Mexico turns over land, including New Mexico, to the U.S. of A. and the U.S. of A. gives them some money. But the treaty was also supposed to protect the Mexicans and Indians, who suddenly found themselves living within the new boundaries of the U.S. of A.” The emphasis he put on *U. S. of A.* made it clear Wendell felt no love for this country, or at least its government. “The treaty was supposed to protect the land and water rights that were originally granted to us by Spain and Mexico.” Wendell looked around the bar, as if he too suddenly wondered what he was doing here. Then he sighed and made a face. “Let’s have another beer,” he said.

“I still have this one,” I said, holding up my beer, “not to mention the other one you bought me.”

“Yeah well,” he said. “Where was I?”

“The treaty. Why didn’t it work?”

“The problems were,” he said, “well, a couple of things. First, the original land grant documents could be vague enough to be interpreted by smart lawyers to their own advantage, or their client’s advantage. Like the grants might fix boundaries markers to be large rocks or trees. Trees die, one rock looks like another. Then the second problem is that documents can get lost. And the third is that Indians who were ignorant or mistrustful of the white man didn’t take in the papers to the new government of the U.S. of A. to receive new patents on the land.”

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“But other than that, everything was fine,” I said, trying for a joke that fell flat with Wendell.

“Right,” he mumbled. “Then when we hired lawyers over the years, we had to pay them. All we had was the land, so we paid these lawyers with parcels of pueblo land. Some lawyers became rich over the land they got. And finally, the courts didn’t protect us from our own ignorance. Some of the land that was owned in common by all the people was sold illegally by individual members of the pueblo.” He drained what was left of his bottle of beer, and I gratefully slid my full bottle toward him. “Man, I’m getting dry from all this talk,” he said. “Anyway, all those stolen claims were ruled illegal by the courts of the good old U.S. of A. back in the 1920’s.” He gestured with his hand as if flinging something behind his head. “But proving the false claims and recovering the land were two different things. There was the problem of the vague documents and the missing documents, and then there’s your wife’s aunt, who has a federal judge in her pocket. But,” he shrugged, “we’re still trying. We’re gonna get back the land, including what she’s trying to steal. We got our own lawyers, you know? And we got a token gringo lawyer in town. He’s also a part-time law professor at the university. You should go talk to him, you don’t believe me. His name’s Roy Wyman.”

“Maybe I should,” I said, watching the booth where Billy and Doris had their heads together. Norma Rae’s expression was becoming more bored by the minute. I was beginning to feel sorry for her.

“I’m serious,” Wendell said, leaning forward on the bar. “You probably don’t believe anything I’m telling you anyway. Go see Roy Wyman. He’ll set you straight.”

“I’ll do that man,” I said, not really meaning it.

“Just tell him you’re a concerned citizen and a friend of the pueblo. Ask him about it.”

“What’ll he tell me?”

“What I been telling you, man. He’ll tell you there’s gold out there and your wife’s aunt is trying to get all it for herself.”

“Gold?”

“That’s right, man. Might as well be gold anyway. It’s water, which is like gold around here. There’s water out there that most folks don’t even know about. And Helen’s already got permission from the State Engineer’s office to take as much of it as she needs.” He looked over at me. “Who do you think the State Engineer is? Some political appointee, right? Helen’s got him in her pocket too, you know what I mean?”

“How do you know about the water?”

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“Our people have known about it forever. But we can’t get the geologists to document it while the ownership is still under dispute. We will though.” He turned to me suddenly. “Hey, you want another drink?”

Chapter 7

Disjointed dreams flashed through my head all night and I awoke the next morning still tired. The dreams were already fading, but I could remember Wendell being in them minus one foot, crazily limping around, his body tilting each time he took a step with his bloody stump. He was trying to tell me something, but it kept coming out gibberish. In one dream, something else was going on that I couldn't see because a crowd in front of me was deliberately blocking my view while I shouted at them. Somehow I knew it had something to do with Nina, and I struggled to see her but the crowd was always in the way.

I lay there, trying to recall, but the dreams faded as quickly as I brought myself painfully into the new day. Trying to postpone the inevitable sick headache that lay in wait at the back of my skull, I closed my eyes, hoping to gain sleep again, but all I could do was review the previous night in my head.

At least Billy's plans for Doris had apparently worked out, though not quite in the way he'd expected, namely with me as his accomplice. At some point in my conversations with Wendell Ayeta, I'd glanced over at the booth and saw that Norma Rae was gone, and Billy and Doris were huddled together laughing. Later, when I'd excused myself from Wendell, shaking his hand and getting another limp handshake in return and another sentiment of regret about Nina, his eyes sliding away from mine, I went by the booth to tell Billy I'd had it for the night. He nodded and smiled in return. "Don't worry about me," he said, winking. "You look beat, man. Doris here will give me a ride home, right babe?"

"Sure," Doris replied, her former eyes-only smile being replaced now with a beaming grin up at me. The Margaritas had obviously worked their magic on her.

I left Wendell in a morose state. After his tale of the screwing of the Pueblo people, we had made desultory conversation for a while. His mood became more depressed by the minute. Wendell's weightlifter's body encased like a sausage in his tight tee shirt might have looked threatening, if you hadn't met him and seen the shy manner and the way his eyes never quite focused on you. There was a gentleness to Wendell that I liked, and it left me wondering if it was a cultural trait. Even though he was drunk and got drunker by the minute as we talked, he never lost the diffident politeness. His brief history of *Everybody Stick it to the Pueblos* had touched me.

I'd never put much thought into how to feel about this country. It was just there. The flag burners or the ones who automatically put down all things American had always left me cold. But I understood Wendell's words now, or at least I thought I did, the screwing he was describing for me, at least as he believed it, first from the Spanish and then the Americans, and now, allegedly, from Helen. I lay there trying to imagine the city of homes that Wendell described dotting the slopes out there north of town, most of the homes built for people, as Wendell had said, from somewhere else, anywhere else, as long as they had money. That I was one of those people made me feel worse. In contrast to that was the Santa Fe of the time just after World War II that Marie Gustafson had described to me, when the place was just a small town with a bohemian reputation. But I couldn't hold either image in my mind for long, and the headache at the back of my skull was beginning to move its tentacles out to claim new territory. I needed to get up and out, eat some breakfast and breathe some fresh air. Reluctantly, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood, and was immediately rewarded with a feeling that my brain was squeezed into a space that was too small for it. A sick sensation descended into my stomach.

Splashing some water on my face in the tiny bathroom helped some, but when I straightened and looked at myself in the mirror over the sink, I immediately became depressed. My face was rumpled, there were bags under my eyes, and my hair was matted on one side and sticking up on the other.

I stood under the shower for long minutes, adjusting the water to as hot as I could stand it and then slowly turning it to cool and then cold, until I couldn't stand that anymore. That helped. Toweling vigorously, I dressed in clean clothes, making me feel almost human.

I went down to the empty dining room and seated myself. Marie Gustafson entered right after, carrying a pot of coffee. Her face took on a sympathetic look when she saw me.

"Good morning," she said. "You look a bit tired. Did you sleep all right?"

"I'm fine," I mumbled. "I guess I just had something on my mind."

"You need a good breakfast," she said.

"Yes ma'am, I do."

Filling my stomach made me think I just might make it, and I turned my attention to the business at hand, which was another visit to Helen's to find out about Cadillac Man. If he wasn't a cop, then I figured she probably had something to do with him.

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Marie entered the dining room again to clear my empty dishes. I helped set them on the cart, moved to go and then turned back. She looked at me expectantly.

“Do you know where Tecolote Pueblo is?” I asked.

Maybe it was a whim or just curiosity, or maybe Wendell’s words last night made me want to see for myself. Maybe I was just hung over and needed to drive somewhere to clear my head. So why should I care about any of the real estate dealings, shady or otherwise, of Santa Fe versus an Indian Pueblo I’d never heard of? Still, I found myself detouring from the road up to Helen’s and heading over to St. Francis Drive, which turned into the state highway leading north, while I kept an eye on my rearview mirror for Cadillac Man. He didn’t seem to be on duty today, whatever that duty was.

The road headed out past the opera house with signs pointing toward Española and Taos and, eventually, Colorado. Tecolote Pueblo, according to Marie, was about five miles or so past the opera.

A sign announced the turnoff to the pueblo a half-mile ahead, and, as I drove on, another small sign pointed to the turnoff itself. I made the turn, leaving the busy main highway behind. The road to the pueblo was a two-lane blacktop heading east, disappearing from sight, and then reappearing further up as it climbed through some hills toward the mountains. I pulled over onto the shoulder to take in the sights of the place. First the road headed over a dry ridge, sculpted by wind and rain into folds and buttes and gullies; next it climbed a wall of green foothills, acting as a preview to what followed, which was, finally, the range of the Sangre de Cristos looking down on it all, about five or six miles distant. From the road, the trails of the Santa Fe Ski Basin were visible like ribbons winding through the dark slopes of the fir and spruce forests. Just to the right of that was a lighter green forest, what I remembered from past ski trips up there as vast stands of aspen, standing out against the darker green. The whole picture, with each ridge succeeded by a further and higher ridge provided views for which Wendell Ayeta’s *people from somewhere else* would pay dearly.

I drove on. Tecolote Pueblo itself came into view after about two miles as I drove over a rise. It appeared in a flat basin ahead with the backdrop of the foothills just beyond. The pueblo was a dusty collection of dirt streets and weathered mobile homes, adobe structures and rows of newer houses, all identical, obviously government built and having a built-by-the-lowest-bidder look. A visitor’s center of adobe, surrounded by a mostly empty parking lot, was just off the road. The visitor’s center looked new, in contrast to the rest of

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the pueblo, with lacquered timbers holding up the roof of a broad veranda. I slowed the car to take in the look of the place, spotting a group of boys playing a baseball game on a diamond with no grass in sight, watched by an old dog. Pickup trucks and old cars were parked next to some of the structures. There were TV antennas on most of the roofs and a few satellite dishes set in the dirt yards of a few others, all pointing in the same direction. I didn't stop.

Just past the pueblo, the road climbed another ridge spotted with piñon and juniper trees. Once I topped the ridge, the views opened up and became increasingly greener. The land rose gently, and the piñon and juniper forests were thicker here. The foothills, perhaps another mile or two further east, were more forested yet, with the taller Ponderosa Pine beginning to mix in with the smaller trees. Beyond that on the ridge of the Sangre de Cristo range, I could begin to pick out individual stands of spruce and fir, and I could see the contours of the ski slopes. Almost immediately, the blacktop road ended, becoming a graded dirt track less than two cars wide heading toward national forest land. Wire fences flanked both sides of the road, and old tires were periodically hung on the fences stating "Keep Out-Private" in white letters painted on their carcasses. Signs began to appear behind the fences—practically small billboards. One read: "Future Site of Canyon Creek Estates." Another stated: "Coming: Canyon Creek Country Club." Another sign read: "Canyon Creek Phase One, Starting Soon." Printed in smaller letters at the bottom of the signs were the words, "Rodriguez-Garcia Enterprises, a City Different Corporation." Most of the signs were riddled with bullet holes. There were a few dirt tracks leading off from this road behind the fences, and I saw a few weathered structures in the distance. I drove until the foothills blocked the higher ridge further on from view, and then the road ended at another wire fence, hung with a National Forest sign, also bullet-riddled.

At first, after pulling over and stepping out of the car, silence seemed to envelope me. Then I became aware of the faint roar of wind blowing through the trees of the forest above. The view looking back in the direction I'd come from seemingly went on forever. The pueblo was hidden from view behind a ridge, but I could make out, in the distance, the thin strip of the state highway. Beyond that was rolling mesa sloping up toward the Jemez Mountains surrounding the city of Los Alamos. Space and quiet and endless vistas were the commodities here. Cooler air came down from the slopes above me, bringing the smell of the forest and causing me to shiver. The only problem I could see to developing this place was getting water out here. But Wendell

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had said there was a source of it here, though I couldn't see any from where I stood. There was not a stream or a pond in sight.

This place would become another extension of Santa Fe, like the luxury homes along the road to the ski basin or the sprawl along the interstate northeast of town, on the road to Denver. It had nothing to do with me, but I didn't want to see it happen anyway.

I climbed back into my car and headed back, past the sleepy pueblo, back out onto the highway, turning south toward Santa Fe again. This had simply been a curiosity to satisfy. I had other things to think about, and I needed to see Helen and settle the question of Cadillac Man.

Driving over the hill just south of the opera house brought Santa Fe back into view again, and it brought a wave of depression over me. From the hilltop, the town sprawled out in front and on both sides of me, creeping its way up the slopes of the mountains in one direction and across the desert in another. I wondered about Marie Gustafson's Santa Fe of fifty years ago, wanting to see it now instead of what it was turning into, an urban sprawl. I decided to make one more stop before going to see Helen, if I could find Wendell's token white lawyer, whose name I couldn't quite recall now. Then it came to me as I remembered that when Wendell had mentioned it, I'd taken note that the guy's last name was the same as an old-time movie actress—Wyman, as in Jane Wyman. The first name was easy: the same first name as a famous movie cowboy—Roy. At least my computer nerd's ability to search and find data in my memory bank of old movies was still working.

Roy Wyman, Attorney, was listed in the business section of the phone book. The street name was unfamiliar, so I called the number, and a female voice answered. When I asked for directions, she told me that it wasn't far from the old town plaza in a small office building around the corner from the Georgia O'Keefe Museum. I asked if Mr. Wyman was in. She answered that he was.

Roy Wyman's suite of rooms occupied a corner on the second floor of a new-looking building. A woman, seated behind a desk facing the door, greeted me as I entered. She was apparently the one who had provided the directions over the phone. When I said I'd like to see Mr. Wyman, she asked, "What is this pertaining to?"

"I understand he's representing Tecolote Pueblo in a land grant dispute," I answered.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to get some information on that."

She stared at me for a moment. “What is your name, please?”

When I told her, she picked up her phone and punched in an extension and spoke briefly. I heard my name mentioned, and thought, *here we go*. Everybody else apparently knows about me? Why not Roy Wyman?

A few seconds later the door to an adjoining room opened and a ruffled man appeared. He was short and balding, about fifty years old, wearing a wrinkled white shirt and a tie at half-mast, his shirttail hanging out on one side and a generous belly rounding the shirt out at the front. He approached me and said, “I’m Roy Wyman. What can I do for you?” He peered at me with his head tilted back.

“I understand you’re representing Tecolote Pueblo in a dispute about land east of the pueblo,” I said. Then I remembered what Wendell had told me to say. “I’m just a concerned citizen and a friend of the pueblo,” I repeated, thinking that it sounded foolish.

But Wyman apparently took me seriously. “A friend of the pueblo,” he said, still looking at me in the same way. “That’s good, a good thing.” He waited for me to go on.

“I wanted to find out for myself what was happening out there.” Then I added, “Wendell Ayeta told me to look you up.”

“Ah, Wendell,” Wyman said. “What did you say your name is?”

“Eddie Collins.” I expected the usual response to that, which would be that he’d heard of me and my problems. But instead, he simply offered his hand and a brief smile. “Come inside,” he said, ushering me into his office and closing the door. “Grab a chair.” He sat heavily behind his desk and let out a long breath, as if he was tired of standing. “Sure, I know Wendell. How is he?”

“He’s fine, sir, the last time I saw him.”

“When was that?” he asked, looking at me keenly.

“Last night.”

“He drinks too much, doesn’t he?” He eyed me as if expecting an objection. “But he’s a good kid. Where do you know him from?”

“Just around,” I said. “We shoot pool sometimes.”

Wyman raised his eyebrows. I probably didn’t look the part of a potential friend of Wendell’s. “And what did Wendell tell you?” he asked.

“Something about some real estate developers trying to develop land that really belongs to the pueblo.”

“Yes, indeed,” he said.

“I wanted to find out more. Like, how can a thing like that happen?”

He sighed. “It can and does, unfortunately.”

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“Can you tell me anything about it?” I asked.

“Yes, I could. I suppose I could.” He hesitated. “Was there something specific you wanted me to do for you?”

“No, not really. I’d just like some information.”

“Because you’re a friend of the pueblo and a concerned citizen.”

I had the impression he was beginning to not believe me. “Yes, sir.”

“Well,” he said, idly tapping his fingers on his desk. “It is true that I am involved with others in a suit brought by the pueblo. You probably know that.” He looked across his desk at me. “From Wendell, of course. It’s also true that I don’t usually discuss ongoing cases.”

“I can understand that. Privileged information.” I started to rise. “I don’t mean to take up your time.”

He held out a hand, motioning me to sit back down. “It’s not that. It is a matter of public record, after all. The pueblo’s case was denied in U. S. District Court.”

“That’s not all there is, though,” I said.

“No, of course not.” He grinned. “There’s never a decision without an appeal.”

“And that appeal’s been made?”

“Yes, indeed,” he said. “Yes, indeed.” He seemed fond of that expression.

“And where does it go from there?”

“Well, that’s the question, isn’t it? But there is another thing. What is it exactly that I can do for you?”

I began to get up again. “As I said, maybe I shouldn’t take up any more of your time.”

“It’s just this is a law office and we usually do bill for services, you understand.”

“I’d be willing to pay you for your time,” I said, beginning to think that coming here was quite a lame idea.”

Wyman smiled, placing his hands behind his head and leaning back in his chair. “I’ll tell you what,” he said. “It’s a little early for lunch. I usually go at about 12:30.” A brass clock on his desk read 11:45. “But I can go now, if you’d care to join me,” he continued. “We can talk there. Just talk. After all, the pueblo needs all the friends it can muster.” He chuckled and gave me a grin, rising and grabbing his suit jacket from a coat rack by the door. I followed him as he bustled through to the front office, saying to the woman there, obviously his secretary, “Going to lunch with Mr. Collins. I’ll be back after one.”

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“I’m going to insist that I pay for lunch,” I said, hurrying after him down the stairs to the street.

“Of course,” he said, smiling back at me.

We walked a few blocks to an Italian restaurant on Palace Avenue. Wyman didn’t say much as we walked, only commenting on the weather, which, he stated, was a little warmer than usual for spring. He said hello to several people that we passed on the sidewalk.

The restaurant was just beginning to fill up, a fact that made Wyman remark, “Maybe I should come to lunch this early every day. It’s always packed when I get here my usual time.” A man wearing a white shirt with old-fashioned sleeve garters led us to a table. As we were being seated, Wyman said to me, “I hope you like Italian. The food’s pretty good here. A little overpriced though.” He wrinkled his nose. The man, who was shaking out a linen napkin and placing it on Wyman’s lap, smiled without looking up. Wyman winked in my direction. “George, can you bring me a Bombay Martini, straight up. And whatever my friend is having.” I thought of a Dos Equis, shuddered, and ordered an iced tea instead.

“So, other than hearing about it from Wendell, you’ve no doubt heard of this case or read of it in the local papers,” Wyman said, after George went off to retrieve our drinks.

“Actually I haven’t.”

“Don’t you read the papers?” he said. “What do you know about it at all, other than what Wendell told you?”

“That’s about it. I’m not much for following the news. I just know what he said. And what I picked up from other folks,” I said. “I drove out there earlier looking around.” He cocked his head, and I added, “Out to the pueblo and east of there.”

“And what did you see?”

“Not much really. The pueblo doesn’t seem to be much of a place. Just a few houses and trailers scattered around, plus the visitor’s center. It doesn’t seem to amount to much.”

“And there’s also the land leading from the main highway, and about two miles south and two miles north,” Wyman added. “That’s all pueblo land. How far east of there did you go?”

“I drove to the national forest boundary.”

“Then you saw all of it. Did you notice where the eastern boundary of the pueblo is?”

“I noticed private property signs out that way.”

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“And there’s the problem,” Wyman said.

George arrived with our drinks. Wyman sipped at his martini and I took a long, grateful swallow of the cold iced tea. It felt good going down.

“How far east did you go before you started to see the private property signs?” Wyman asked, setting down his drink.

During my drive out there, I hadn’t really been paying attention. “Maybe a half mile,” I said.

“That’s very good,” Wyman said, as if complimenting my sense of geography. “It’s just about a half mile, when it should be more than two miles. Do you know why that is?” He didn’t wait for to reply. “It’s because that land, which is the best of the land out there, was sold off over the years during the last century.”

I waited for him to go on.

“It was sold by individual members of the pueblo,” Wyman said. “The courts didn’t protect the pueblos in those days, so there was nothing to stop individuals from selling land that was owned in common by the pueblo. Also, land was used as barter when the tribe had to defend it rights. It was the only thing they had to pay with. Consequently, the best land of the pueblo, this pueblo and others too, passed into non-Indian hands, and the government did nothing to stop it.”

Wendell had said something similar last night, I was thinking as George stopped by our table again to take our order. Wyman ordered the veal scaloppini. I wasn’t that hungry and ordered a pasta salad. “There was a treaty, wasn’t there?” I asked, when George was gone.

“Sure there was,” he said, sipping again from his martini. He smacked his lips and set the glass down. “The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in the Mexican village of the same name in 1848.” Wyman sat back with his hands folded in his lap, appearing to be enjoying himself. “It ended the Mexican war, after the Mexican government collapsed. What it did was to cede the land of New Mexico, Arizona and part of California to the U.S.A. and fix the boundary between Texas and Mexico.” Remembering Wendell’s sarcastic *U.S. of A.* made me grin, causing Wyman to look curiously at me.

“Sorry,” I said. “I just remembered something Wendell said.”

“Yeah, Wendell’s a character,” he said. “Anyway, we got all that land and the Mexican government got \$15,000,000. But,” he added, “the citizens of those territories became U.S. citizens and we assumed all their prior rights and claims. Said citizens, whether they were Mexican or Indian, could choose to stay within the new boundaries of the U.S. or they could go back to Mexico. Those that chose to stay were guaranteed their rights to any land

grants made by the Mexican and Spanish governments, among other things. And there's the crux of it. The pueblos were granted land by those governments, and the treaty guaranteed those same grants.

"Now as I said," he went on, "the governments, specifically the courts, didn't deem to protect those grants. They ruled at first that the Pueblo Indians were an advanced culture and didn't need the courts to protect their rights. The consequences of that, as I mentioned, were that individual Indians and, in some cases, the tribe collectively, sold or bartered off some of their best lands, and the government didn't prevent it. Some of the best lands belonging to the pueblos passed into non-Indian hands, including the land east of Tecolote Pueblo." He looked across at me, pausing. "Then something significant happened. The courts reversed themselves." Wyman finished his martini and set the glass down. Almost immediately, George, our waiter, was there to whisk away the glass. Wyman told him, "Bring us a bottle of Pinot Noir with the meal."

"So they reversed themselves," I said.

"That's right. In 1913 they declared that the government *was* responsible for Indian welfare, including the pueblos. Of course, that included Tecolote Pueblo. They also declared that this responsibility should have been continuous since 1848 when the treaty was signed. And finally, they declared that all the losses of Indian lands, whether they were bought or bartered or stolen, were illegal."

Wyman had a flair for the dramatic story, and I played along. "So, don't tell me. That was obviously not the end of it, was it?"

"Correct," he said. "Declaring the land to be pueblo land that was illegally obtained and proving it were two different things. There were a lot of claims and counter-claims, and courts often move slowly. The Pueblo Land Act was passed in 1924, and that set the terms for eviction of the illegal squatters, if you will, including compensation for those evictions. But the claims, in some cases, dragged on and are still being contested, including, as you probably guessed by now, the claim by our own Tecolote Pueblo.

He leaned forward and fixed me with a piercing look. "The problem with that particular claim is in the language of the Spanish grant itself. You drove out that road, so you said. Did you notice where the private land starts, which is, of course, where the pueblo land ends?"

"Right about where the road tops a ridge about half a mile east."

"Right. And what's beyond that ridge?"

"Some pretty country," I answered, beginning to feel like Wyman's straight man. "Leading all the way up to the edge of the national forest."

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“That’s right. And the Spanish grant states, the wording is in there, that the land from the original center of the pueblo, which is right about where it is now, east to Bosque de la Sierra, which means forest of the mountains, is Tecolote Pueblo land. The Bosque de la Sierra may even include some of the national forest land. Of course there was no national forest in those days, but that’s beside the point.”

Our food arrived and Wyman took a break while the plates were set on the table and the wine bottle was gazed upon and appreciated and an initial splash was poured and approved by Wyman. Then he had a few bites of his food, as if he’d forgotten the discussion.

“So what was the problem, if the grant defines the boundary?” I finally asked.

“The problem was that the U. S. District Court judge ruled that the Bosque de la Sierra was actually referring to that first ridge where the current pueblo boundary lies, about a half mile from the pueblo center, and not to the forested slopes further east. Now you looked at that land out there. Does that first ridge look like Bosque de la Sierra, forest of the mountains, to you?”

I thought of the dry ridge with the stunted piñon and juniper trees scattered across it. “Not really.”

“Right. But District Court Judge Archuleta thinks it does. And his ruling would exclude all that private land that they’re trying to make into Santa Fe North from being returned to its rightful owners, the people of Tecolote Pueblo. The current boundary to the pueblo, and what Judge Archuleta believes is the real boundary, is that ridge a half-mile from the pueblo. The boundary according to the land grant is on the actual mountain slopes. And whether that should include part of the national forest or only up to the forest boundary doesn’t even matter that much. What does matter is that the richest part of the pueblo land, which is all that beautiful country up to the national forest, is free to be sold and developed. That’s what the problem is.”

I asked then, toying with my food, “If they got the land, what would they do with it?”

“That hardly matters,” Wyman said. “But, in fact, they would live on it, that’s all. They sure as hell wouldn’t develop it for a bunch of other people to live on. Also, that land has religious significance to the Tecolote people. The forest up the slopes is a place where they’ve hunted and held ceremonies and prayed for hundreds of years. And it’s being denied to them.”

“But hasn’t it been denied to them since they lost it originally, whenever that was?”

“Not really. They’ve had access to that land until just recently, even though it was in the hands of those ranchers out there. It’s only a recent thing that it’s been denied to them. That’s when this development company started buying it up. Did Wendell tell you about the aquifer?”

“He mentioned something about water out there.”

“Well, it’s there all right, under that land between the current pueblo boundary and the national forest. The Tecolote people have always known about it. They tell me it’s so and I have no reason not to believe them. It’s what made that land so valuable in the first place a hundred years ago, and it’s why they lost it back then, because it was the best land. There’s a large aquifer under that land that’s fed by melting snows from the slopes and held in underground fractures. Nobody really knows how big it is, except maybe Rodriguez and Garcia Enterprises.”

“And if it is there,” I said, “then that’s what makes that land so valuable for development now.”

“You said it.” Wyman had his fork, laden with veal, poised in mid-flight to his mouth. “Water is what makes things go ‘round in this part of the country. Without it, that’s just some pretty country out there, nice for looking at and not much else. With it, you got Rodriguez and Garcia Enterprises about to cash in for millions, a lot of them. You better believe they’ve had their geologists out there doing their tests, and they’ve sunk their test wells. They know what’s there, and it’s my guess it’s a big enough source to support thousands of homes. And that’s what’s the matter.” He continued his earlier motion, forking the veal into his mouth.

“What about the illegal sales of all that land, or whatever happened?”

Wyman, chewing now, made a face. I waited for him. “The problem there,” he finally said, “is that there’s no documentation that’s worth anything in a court of law. The sales or barter or the outright thefts out there, including those by the United States Forest Service, were not documented, or were documented after the fact. The only thing the pueblo has is the wording of the original Spanish grant, and so far the official position of the U.S. courts is that that the pueblo’s position is not valid.”

It all made some kind of sense, dovetailing with what Marie Gustafson and Wendell Ayeta had told me. What was it Wendell had said, that Helen had a federal judge in her pocket? This must have been the Judge Archuleta mentioned by Wyman, if it were true.

“What about an appeal?” I said instead.

“It’s been filed,” Wyman answered. “In the U.S Circuit Court of Appeals. It’ll be heard in a couple of months.”

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“What are the chances? Is the pueblo going to win?”
Wyman’s face crinkled into a smile. “Hopefully.”

Chapter 8

Driving up the hill to Helen's again, I checked my mirror several times for the Cadillac Man. There was nothing but the road behind me. I turned up the curving driveway and drove past the sign announcing Canyon Waves Spa.

Helen answered her own door this time, dressed in what I must have been her stay-at-home look: a long skirt reaching to the floor and a peasant blouse. She regarded me with a blank stare that I couldn't tell was unfriendly or just plain tired.

"You're becoming a regular here," she said, stepping aside to let me enter. She closed the door and walked past me into the *great room*, seating herself on the long couch. I followed behind, but preferred to stand, looking down at her. She really did look tired. Her eyelids were half-closed and her face was pale and covered with fine wrinkles in the light from the window behind her. I found myself wondering how old she actually was.

She said, looking me over, "At least your fashion sense is better today."

"My other clothes are making some garbage man the envy of his Elk Lodge buddies," I said, looking down at myself, holding my arms out.

Helen gave me a tired smile, closing her eyes for a second. "I hear you were busy yesterday," she said.

When I didn't answer right away, she said, "You went to see Klaus Meyer."

Helen did have the capacity to surprise. "How do you know that?" I asked.

She didn't respond. Instead she said, "Do you think that was a good idea?"

I offered a half-hearted shrug.

"Meyer doesn't know anything," she said. "He hasn't seen Nina in years. And it would only get people thinking."

"What people?" I asked, wondering if she might be obliquely referring to Cadillac Man. He had mentioned Klaus Meyer during our brief confrontation.

"The police," she said. "They might start looking at Meyer too."

I had to admit she could have had a point there. "How do you know he hasn't seen Nina in years?"

She didn't respond to that either. "So, what brings you here this time?"

I decided to go with my original instinct about Cadillac Man. "There was a cop on my tail yesterday."

She turned her head and stared at me. "That sounds pretty melodramatic, Eddie. What makes you think that?"

"Because somebody was following me."

"And you think it was a cop?"

I nodded in an exaggerated, wide-eyed way.

She frowned and then her face composed itself into a waiting-to-be-amused look. "Well, what makes you think anybody was following you, Eddie?"

"It became pretty obvious when he parked and waited for me outside Marie's B&B," I answered.

"Pretty obvious," she repeated. "What did he look like, this guy that was following you?"

"He was maybe fifty. Graying hair, slicked back. He wore a leather coat."

"What else?" Her amused look faded.

I had in my head a mental image of Cadillac Man up close, him grabbing me by my shirt. "Tall and lanky," I said. "Kind of a rawboned strength."

By now she was staring intently at me. "How do you know that?"

"Maybe he just looked like it." I didn't care to mention the part about being shoved down in the street.

"What else?" she said.

"He drove an old Cadillac, beat up looking. At first I thought, what kind of car is that for a cop to be driving? But maybe it's exactly the kind of car they'd use, because nobody would suspect it."

Helen leaned forward on the couch. "Was there anything else?"

"I talked to the guy." I described to her what had happened, leaving out the physical parts, saying only that he seemed to think I knew where Nina might be. I added, without using the guy's exact language, that he made a remark about Nina. All the while I was watching for a reaction. She only blinked at the last part and then turned her head and stared out the window.

"Did he say he was a cop?" she asked, not looking at me now.

"Actually, he did."

"He didn't show any ID though, did he?"

"How do you know that?"

"And he asked where Nina was, that's all?" she asked.

"That's right." I waited for her to say something else.

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“What did he do after you talked to him?” Her voice had taken on a flat tone by now. It was obvious she knew something, though I was beginning to think it wasn’t what I’d been expecting.

“He didn’t do anything. He drove away like he was in a hurry.”

She continued her gazing out the window.

“Helen, you know this guy, don’t you?” I said.

“I think so. And he’s not a cop.”

“Does he work for you?”

She turned to give me a look that seemed part regret and part sorrow before answering. “No, he doesn’t work for me.”

“Who is he then?”

“I didn’t think he was that stupid,” she said, shaking her head, the look still in place.

“Who is he, Helen?”

“He’s bad news,” she said. I was still standing over her and her expression became annoyed. “Would you please sit down? You’re giving me a stiff neck.” When I complied, she went on, “If you see him again, let me know right away. And don’t tell him anything, if he approaches you. In fact, avoid him if you can.”

“What would I tell the guy anyway? I don’t know anything.” I waited again. “Are you going to tell me who he is?” I asked.

“Never mind who he is. He’s just somebody you don’t want to get involved with.” She turned and stared pointedly at me. “And what are you doing running around like Joe Detective?”

“I just want to find out what’s going on.”

“Look, I told you Eddie, just don’t do anything. Keep out of sight.” She made a pushing motion with one hand as if to put me in my place. “Go back to Marie Gustafson’s B&B and stay there, okay?” Then she turned away, gazing out the window again.

After a few minutes of silence, while Helen sat there looking away, like her mind was somewhere else, I said, “You’re not telling me everything you know.”

“You’ll just have to trust me, Eddie,” she said without looking at me.

“Are you saying this guy is dangerous?”

“Yes, he is. Just don’t have anything to do with him.”

“Why did he ask me about Nina?” I said.

Her eyes narrowed as if she was puzzling that out herself. “That I’m not sure of.”

“Who is he?”

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"I'm sorry Eddie. I can't tell you." She shook her head.

"Look," I said, standing and approaching her. "I think you know where Nina is."

Helen sighed. "No, I really don't. Like I told you."

"I don't believe you." I reached down and grabbed the sleeve of her blouse to get her attention. She pulled out of my grasp.

After a minute, she said in a patient tone, "You'll just have to believe me. It's like I told you before, Nina did come here. She wasn't here for long, and I didn't get much out of her. I went to the kitchen for a minute and when I came back she was gone. And I don't know where she went. That's all I know, and it's the truth."

"I think you're lying to me," I said, grabbing at her blouse again. She suddenly pushed herself up from the couch so that she was practically on top of me, and I pulled back, putting me off balance. She shoved me then, not all that hard, but it sent me, in my off-balance state, tumbling backward over the coffee table. I wound up on my rear end on the tiled floor looking up at her, the second time in two days that I'd taken an embarrassing fall. She stood over me, a surprised look on her face.

"Get up from there, Eddie," she said like a mother admonishing her son.

I picked myself up, brushing the imaginary dust of the spotless tiles from my pants.

"You're going to have to believe me when I tell you something," she said, her look softening. "I know this is rough for you. But we'll figure something out. We'll find Nina, Eddie."

It hit me all at once then, all the uncertainty from the time I'd walked into my house in Los Gatos and seen Nina run past me and I'd smelled the firecracker smell in the air. The palpable loneliness was there again, the depression at being questioned about my wife and subjected to tests by Los Gatos police. A feeling came over me that I'd been trying to push away ever since Nina had disappeared, the odd notion that she'd just been a brief dream in my life, and that I'd never have that dream again. An image of her came into my head that immediately began to dissolve like a movie fadeout. I shut my eyes, trying to push the image from my mind. I could feel Helen putting her arms around me and drawing my head down to the great shelf of her bosom. I pulled away, more roughly than I meant to, and Helen stepped back.

"Sorry," I said. "I have to get out of here." I turned to go.

"What are you going to do?" Helen asked, following me.

"I don't even know," I said. "Look." I turned back and she almost ran into me. "You know who this guy is, right? So at least tell me that. Who is he?"

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She stared back at me.

“Does he work for you?”

“Not anymore,” she said.

“But he did, right?”

“He worked for me once.” At least she admitted that much.

“Helen, what’s the guy’s name?” I bugged out my eyes at her. “At least tell me that.”

“Marvin Kainz,” she said after a minute, finally giving it up.

I didn’t even like the sound of the name. I preferred Cadillac Man. “So what the hell is going on? Why is he following me around asking about Nina?”

“As I said, I really don’t know.”

“Why doesn’t he work for you anymore?”

“It’s a long story.” She sighed. “I suppose I fired him.”

“You suppose you fired him. And what, now he’s trying to find Nina for you to get back in your graces? Is that what this is?”

“I don’t know that that’s it,” she said, looking tired.

“Then what?” I said. “Why did you fire him in the first place?”

She sighed again. “He was unstable. Let’s just say that.”

“You’re a wealth of information,” I said. “So I suppose I should go to the cops about him. He’s going around impersonating a policeman.”

“I wouldn’t Eddie,” she said. “The less they know, the better.”

“You said he’s dangerous, didn’t you?”

“I said that, but I don’t really think he’s a danger to you.”

“But you’re saying he’s a danger to Nina.”

“Not if he doesn’t know where she is. Look, why don’t you let me handle it, okay?”

I turned to go again, frustrated and still angry with her at the things she knew and wouldn’t let go of. I turned at the door, wanting to say something more. “What can you tell me about Canyon Creek Estates?” I asked, a shot in the dark, but something that might at least get a rise out of her.

“What do you know about that?” she answered, her eyes widening.

I at least got some small satisfaction that she seemed surprised. “I’m like you, Helen. I hear things.”

“Like what did you hear?”

“I heard you’re trying to cheat some Indians out of their land and turn it into a little bit of California.” I didn’t care to spare any feelings at this point.

She reached out, taking hold of my arm. “Who told you that?” Her eyes narrowed, searching my face. “Did Marvin Kainz mention any of that?”

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“He didn’t mention it, no.”

“Where else could you have heard it then?”

“It’s the talk of the town, Helen.”

“Maybe.” She released my arm, seeming to relax then. “So what is the town saying?”

I opened the door and turned back to her. “Just that you’re planning to put a bunch of homes out there next to the national forest and spoil the views. And make yourself rich in the process.”

“People talk, don’t they?” Her eyes had that half-closed look again, like she’d heard it all before.

“They also say you found enough water out there to build a city.” This one, too, surprised her, though I could see her trying to hide it.

“Where did you hear that one?” she asked.

“Like I said, I hear things.”

“You hear things,” she repeated. She took me by the arm again. “Come back inside and tell me what else you heard.”

I allowed myself to be dragged back in, maybe because I sensed a small advantage here, knowing something about Helen that she didn’t want me to know. On the other hand, maybe there was something else, like the shady political dealings that Wendell flatly believed and that Roy Wyman at least alluded to. She led me back to the couch and sat me down and took her usual seat at the opposite end.

“So tell me what you’ve heard and I’ll tell you whether it’s true,” she said.

“That you’re planning on building homes out there on that land east of the pueblo. That much I could see for myself because I drove out there and saw the signs: *Coming Soon, Canyon Creek Estates; Canyon Creek Country Club*; all that.”

“How do you know it has anything to do with me?”

“The signs said Rodriguez-Garcia Enterprises.”

“There are lots of people named Rodriguez.”

“Sure. But it’s you, isn’t it?”

She hesitated for a minute. “And so?”

“And it’s true about the water, isn’t it?”

“What about the water?”

“There’s an underground source of water there.”

“And who told you that?”

“An Indian who used to live out there at the pueblo.” I began to realize that I was coming down on the side of Roy Wyman and the pueblo and

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against Rodriguez-Garcia Enterprises, recognizing that I'd been feeling that for some time. I didn't think it was a good idea to mention Wyman's name. "This Indian claims the pueblo has always known about it."

Helen tilted her head at me. "You get around. Where did you meet *this Indian* who told you that?"

"Just around. It's not important."

"Well, for his information, it's true about the water. There's a lot of it out there, under the ground."

I waited for her to go on.

"We had geologists in to run some tests," she said. "We had a few test wells sunk. We need a few more to get a better idea of just how much is really out there. But we're sure it's a lot." She seemed impressed at her own words.

"What about the fact that the pueblo claims that land?" I asked.

"That was decided in court in our favor" she replied, saying it as if that was the end of that.

"And now it's under appeal."

"So you heard that too."

"This judge that ruled in your favor," I asked. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"What are you saying?" she asked.

"It's something I heard."

"Like what?" Her eyebrows knitted together, giving her the look, with her sharp nose, of a bird of prey.

"That you used your influence to get a ruling in your favor."

She laughed suddenly. "Eddie, did your Indian friend tell you that? What does he think I am, the local Mafia? I'm just a small businesswoman trying to do something for this community."

"A lot of people don't want what you're trying to do. A lot of them would rather not have any more *progress*. They'd like Santa Fe to be more the way it used to be."

"Well, that's not going to happen," she stated. "Progress is inevitable, whether it's by me or someone else. Besides, *a lot of people* don't stop to consider what growth can do for this town. It can create jobs, it can bring in tourist dollars, and it's made a lot of people rich over the years. I remember Santa Fe like it used to be too. It was a poor town fifty years ago. Is that what a lot of people want it to be again?"

"What about those Indians out there?"

"What about them? That land doesn't belong to them."

"Their grant from the Spanish seems to say it does."

She waved that away. "It doesn't say anything of the kind. It's vague. It's open to interpretation. We had an expert witness, a Santa Fe historian who specializes in land grants. He testified that, in his opinion, the current boundary is correct. The language of the grant refers to the hillside where the current pueblo boundary is." She paused, looking at me. "Besides, what do you think their interest is? It's the same as ours. They want that land so they can build a big casino and hotel complex out there. That's something your Indian friend probably didn't mention. They're not any different than we are."

"I don't believe that, Helen," I said.

"Believe it or don't, it's true." She sat back, crossing her legs beneath her skirt and gazing across at me with a smile. "But I'm glad you brought all this up anyway. I didn't want to mention it to you before. You had enough to think about without me complicating your life. But now." She turned her head, looking almost coy, raising her eyebrows and giving a little shrug. "We're looking for investors and it would be a good opportunity for you."

"What?" I said, hardly believing what I was hearing. "You want me to invest in your land scheme?"

"Well, I don't refer to it as a land scheme," she said. "It's a business venture, and we need investors. Frankly we don't have near enough money ourselves. We're looking for capital, and we have a number of people interested. I just thought you might consider it as something to invest in besides that company of yours."

"You have a partner in this, don't you?" I asked.

She nodded. "Frank Garcia. He's a minority partner. Why?"

"Nothing. Look, Helen, I have no interest in this. I just want one thing, and that's to find Nina and clear that whole mess up about Joe. And even that aside, your business venture, or whatever you want to call it, is the last thing I would want to put money into."

She stared at me for a moment and then nodded. "Okay, Eddie, fine. I just thought I'd offer you the opportunity, since you brought the thing up."

"I don't even know why I brought it up," I said, my anger returning.

"Okay, okay. Let's forget it then." She rose heavily. "I have some things I need to do. You should do what I advised, which is to stay out of sight for a few days. And quit playing detective." She ushered me to the door. "And remember, avoid Marvin Kainz, but let me know if you do see him again." She shook her head again. "I can't believe he's that stupid."

Approaching my car in the parking lot, I spotted a young woman coming from the main building of the club. She wore dark glasses and she came

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toward me, half skipping and smiling, and I realized it was Maribel, wearing a pair of pink shorts fashioned like bib overalls, with the bib and straps covering a loose tee shirt. The cuffs of the shorts were turned up a few turns and she wore white sneakers and ankle socks, rolled down. An enormous pair of sunglasses complimented her big grin. She looked altogether cute.

"I see you from up there going in the house," she said, pointing back toward the main spa building, where the windows of the office overlooked the parking lot. "So I watch for you to come out. How are you?"

I shrugged, and her grin faded slightly.

"I just come down to say hello and see how you are doing," she said.

"I'm okay," I lied, with a fake smile.

"You look tired." She removed her sunglasses, letting them dangle from her fingers, and looked closely at me. "Have you been getting sleep?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." I was standing there fidgeting with my car keys like I was anxious to get going, which I wasn't now. I grabbed the keys in my fist to make me stop.

"But you look nice anyway." Her grin returned.

I liked listening to her way of speaking, the way she carefully sounded out the words in her cute little accent.

"I was disappointed when you didn't answer the door for me," I said with a teasing tone in my voice, nodding down the hill toward the house.

"I am working in the office today," she said. She turned her head then and looked at me out of the corner of her eye, acknowledging my teasing with a smile of her own. "But I am glad I saw you so I could say hi."

"Me too. Hi. You're looking very nice." Our banter was beginning to sound a little foolish.

She grinned again and her dark skin took on a rosy hue that made me realize she was blushing. "Have you had your lunch yet?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I have."

"That's too bad," she said with another smile.

"Maybe we can go again next time I'm here," I said.

"I would like that very much." Her smile faded. She said, "There was something else I wanted to tell you anyway. The day your wife was here, I said that I saw her in a car with a man."

"What about it?" I asked.

"I think about it." She twisted her mouth. "I should have told you before, but I don't remember. The man, he's older than her and has gray hair."

"Oh?" I looked at her carefully. "Anything else?"

“Well, he was an older man, that’s all. He was gray and he was a little, I don’t know. “ She was obviously groping for a word. “Mean looking, or something.”

“Mean looking? In what way, mean looking?”

“I don’t know.” She passed her hand across her face, as if wiping a serious look into place, lowering her brows and pouting out her lips. “Like very, I don’t know, angry or something. But I only see him for a minute when they were driving away.”

Her attempt at a serious, mean look was actually a little comical. “You saw all that while they driving away? Did this man get out of the car at all?”

“No. But I see him pretty good because they drive right by the office window where I’m sitting.”

“But yesterday you said you were too far away and didn’t get a good look.”

“I know.” She looked away.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’m just glad you told me now.” Something else occurred to me. “What about the car? What kind was it?”

“I don’t know kinds of cars. It was old, that’s all.”

“An old car? Was it beat up looking or dented. Did it have faded paint?”

She looked doubtful. “Maybe. It just looked old.”

I watched her closely. “Did the Señora tell you to say all this?” It really didn’t make sense that she would, but what else was making sense in all this?

“No,” she said. “Why are you asking me this? Yesterday you ask if she tell me to lie to you. And you ask me if I call the police to arrest you.”

I instantly regretted that I’d said it. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I don’t know what to think anymore. Maybe it’s just paranoia.”

“What?” she asked.

“It’s just when you think everybody is against you.”

She nodded. “I am not against you. I want to help you find your wife.”

“I know you do.”

From Maribel’s description, it seemed logical to me that she’d seen Marvin Kainz’s Cadillac, with Marvin driving. He probably brought Nina to the house and took her away on Helen’s orders. I believed Maribel’s story, but where did that leave me? What sense did it make that Helen had Marvin take Nina to some safe hiding place, if was he looking for Nina now? For that matter, if it hadn’t been him in the car, why was he looking for her at all? What was he to her, or she to him? None of it made any sense.

City Different

Of course, it could have been anybody with Nina in that car. It could have been Klaus Meyer. He was gray-haired, though he didn't necessarily fit Maribel's description of being *mean looking*. But he could have been just a little put out that day at Nina showing up on his doorstep and involving him in her troubles. Or he could have been a little annoyed at her dropping in on him after all these years and using him for a taxi service. And maybe he drove an old car too.

What I decided was not to decide anything for now. It was only early afternoon, but I felt like I'd put in a full day playing Joe Detective, as Helen had put it. I was tired, and I wanted to lie down and close my eyes. I headed back to Marie Gustafson's B&B. Again, Marvin's Cadillac didn't show up in my rearview.

Chapter 9

The next day I took Helen's advice to keep out of sight, as she'd said, while I played with the possibilities of Nina's mysterious, graying companion. It had to be either Klaus Meyer or the Cadillac Man, Marvin Kainz. Neither made much sense, but at least Klaus was halfway plausible. With nothing much else to do but dwell on all of this, my depression of the previous day returned, and I understood why—I could feel Nina slipping away from me.

What always seemed to help whenever my mood took a nosedive was work. If it wouldn't change anything, at least it would take my mind from it. I never went anywhere without a laptop computer, so I'd automatically brought one along when I'd hastily left California. Now I borrowed a downstairs sitting room with a phone jack from Marie Gustafson and dialed in to the office. Marie gave me a little look, but I assured her with a tired smile that I would be calling a toll-free number.

My email had piled up in just the few days I'd been away. A lot of the messages were notes of sympathy for me. No doubt, everyone in the company knew of it by now. I answered each note with a polite thank you, and dove into the mass of business related items. Turning on my cell phone for the first time in days, I made some calls. Obviously, nobody could know where I was. Oliver Villa, who was in charge of our Internet software division and was one of the original partners, was a workaholic and usually in his office. I called him.

"Jesus, Eddie," Oliver said when he heard my voice. "We were all worried here. We tried to get in touch on your cell number. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I had it turned off, and I haven't checked my incoming calls yet. How's everything there?"

"Okay," he answered. "Are you still in Santa Fe?"

That stopped me for a few seconds. "How did you know that?"

"The cops were here a few days ago. They had a subpoena to seize some things. They took some stuff from your office, and they went to finance and took some things of Joe LaFont's, records and things. And they told us you were picked up in Santa Fe." His voice took on a glum tone. "Did they arrest your wife too?"

"No. Nobody knows where she is, including me."

"Are you still in jail?"

Stephen Hazlett

“They let me out. They know I had nothing to do with Joe’s death.” I couldn’t bring myself to use the word *murder*.

“Jeez, I’m sorry about all this, Eddie,” Oliver said.

It seemed almost funny to hear it for the umpteenth time. “Yeah, Olly. I appreciate it. It’s all I’ve been hearing. I just wish everybody would skip it.”

“Sure, I understand. So what are you going to do?”

Ignoring the question, I asked, “What did they take from my office?”

“Well, different things. They took some of your files and some pictures of Nina.”

“What did they take from Joe’s office?”

“Like I said, financial records mostly. They took his desktop computer, so they got his financial database, his spreadsheets, all that. There’s backups of all of it on the LAN, but still.” Sounding like he was apologizing, he added, “I guess I don’t really know much about what Joe did anyway.”

That made two of us. But I wondered what the police were after. It could be just routine. Putting the thought aside, I said, “How are you holding up?” I knew, with my absence, that a lot of the administrative tasks I would normally handle would naturally fall to Oliver. Rick Evans, our other startup partner, was still mostly a hands-on guy in the enterprise software division and was pretty hopeless when it came to anything to do with administration. For that matter, Oliver Villa wasn’t much better, but he would at least try. Of course, who was I to talk? I had been running the business before we had to bring in Joe LaFont to straighten my mess out.

“I’m fine,” Oliver said. “No big catastrophes yet. I’m just relying on the finance guys when I’m not sure of something. I think I’ll be all right.”

“How about everyone else? What’s the general mood?”

“It’s hard to say,” he said in a lowered tone. “Maybe it’s just my imagination.”

“What is?”

“I don’t know.” He hesitated. “Maybe it’s just vibes or something. The way people look at you when you see them in the halls. Maybe it’s just me.”

“Has any of my situation been in the papers?” I didn’t know what else to call it.

“Yeah it has,” Oliver said. “The Mercury News had it on the front page for a few days. You know, Silicon Valley Murder Mystery.” His glumness was coming across clearly now.

“I haven’t been paying attention,” I said, seeing the headline in my head. It didn’t help my mood any. “Has this thing affected the stock price?”

“I guess it has.”

City Different

I was almost afraid to ask. “What’s the latest price?”

“It’s down about 28 points the last I checked,” he said.

The last time I’d looked, it had been at about 102 a share. That meant my net worth had dropped over twenty-five percent. Now I had something else to sigh about.

“How much of that do you think is the market in general?” I asked.

Oliver made a noise, like a mumbling sound. “Not much, I’m afraid. The market has been generally up for technologies.” Like most of the tech stocks, the analysts usually lumped us together with the other dot.com companies, whether they were on the New York or the NASDAQ exchange.

It was my turn for regrets. “I’m sorry about that, Olly.” The knowledge that Oliver, along with every other major shareholder, was affected by my *situation* wasn’t something I even wanted to think about.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. Just worry about yourself. It’ll come back. It always does.”

“What about Sam?” I asked referring to Sam Kinnick, our major venture investor and Chairman of the Board. “I haven’t talked to him yet.”

“Yeah, he’s been calling every day since you disappeared. He doesn’t sound too happy. You should probably call him.”

“I’ll do that. Listen, Olly, I know this has been hard on everybody there, and for that I apologize, but it couldn’t be helped. I’m going to start keeping in touch from now on. I’m staying here a while longer, it looks like.” Right now it felt like forever that I’d been here, and I had no idea, really, when forever would end. “I’m going to keep in touch every day. I know you’ve done a great job, but I’m going to start picking up my end as of it as of right now. Whatever I should normally handle, you email me the details, okay? If there’s anything I need to sign, FedEx it, next morning priority.” I gave him Marie’s address, feeling energized by thrusting myself back into my work. In the back of my mind, though, I had the nagging feeling it would only last the length of this phone call. “Was there anything else?” I asked. “I mean, anything else I need to know right now.”

“No. Just call Sam right away.” He paused and cleared his throat. “And be well and get back here when you can. We all miss you.”

Like me, Oliver had never been comfortable expressing his feelings. “I’ll do that. And I’m calling Sam right now.”

I made a call to Kinnick and Dunn, knowing San Kinnick, who spent at least ten hours a day in his office, would probably be there. His secretary asked for my name and then passed me through.

“Ed,” Sam’s deep baritone voice said when he came on. “How are you?”

“I’m okay, Sam. Look, I apologize for not getting in touch sooner, but it’s been rough these past few days.”

“Why did you take off like that?” Sam was never one to mince words, always getting straight to the point.

“I’m sorry. I can’t explain that. I just hope you can understand.”

“Well, whatever you say. But there’s something you have to know. The board had an emergency meeting about this *thing* of yours. They want you to resign outright. I persuaded them to make it a leave of absence. So the board is requesting you to take a leave, effective immediately. When your situation is resolved, you might be able to come back.”

“Might be?”

“Right. Look, you know the reality of it. A thing like this is terrible for business. You know the stock is down, right? And that’s not even taking into account our customers and how they feel about the whole mess.”

“Sure, Sam. But I’m coming back to work as of right now.”

“You’re coming back here? When?”

“No, I’m staying in Santa Fe for awhile. But I can handle everything I need to from here.”

“That doesn’t even matter. Whether you’re there or here, the situation is the same. You have to take a leave and you have to do it right away. And we’ll have to announce it to the shareholders and the media tomorrow morning. We were getting ready to do that anyway, in a day or two, even if we didn’t hear from you. You just made it easier.”

I was at a loss for what to tell him. After a pause, I said, “Sam, what if I won’t?”

“You know that doesn’t matter either. The board can vote you out, and they will. They wanted to do that, anyway. I’m sorry if I sound harsh.” His tone softened then. “I talked them out of that too, at least temporarily. I wanted to wait until we at least heard from you.”

I was stunned so that I couldn’t think straight. My face flushed and I could feel the arteries in my neck pulsing. This was my company and Sam was talking about taking it away from me. I could see the faces of the board members discussing my future as if it was a journal entry that needed to be cancelled out with an offsetting entry somewhere else. I sat there, thinking of nothing, concentrating on just breathing, and the moment passed. They were right, of course. In my Nina myopia, I hadn’t considered the situation and how it would affect business. Regrettably, they were right.

“What about if I sleep on it, Sam? I can give you a decision tomorrow.”

City Different

“No good, Ed. It’s going to happen today, now that I’ve heard from you. With or without you. Sorry. That’s the way it is. You know that.”

After hanging up, I sat there for a long time, staring into space. Finally I roused myself to type up the request for an indefinite leave of absence on my laptop computer, giving as my reason the need to clear up pressing personal business, and sent it as an email attachment to Sam. I would send a signed hard copy later. Then I sat motionless, not thinking, staring out the window at the street alongside Marie’s B&B, seeing the occasional car sliding by and listening to birds chirping in the yard.

The house was dead quiet behind me, and then soft footsteps sounded and I turned. Marie Gustafson was there in the doorway, smiling uncertainly. “I’m sorry if I disturbed you,” she said. “I didn’t hear anything and I thought you’d gone out.”

“That’s okay, I’m almost finished here. I just need to make one more call.”

Oliver answered on the first ring, as if he had been waiting for me. “Olly, I just got off the phone with Sam,” I said. “I’m taking a leave for awhile.”

“Yeah, I figured,” he said, continuing his glum tone of before.

“You knew about it, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did. I’m on the board too.” He let out a sarcastic laugh. “But I didn’t vote for it. I might have been the only one. Sorry, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell you. Besides, I hoped you could talk Sam out of it.”

“Don’t worry about it. It makes sense anyway. I’m okay with it, and I’ll be back before too long, when everything is resolved. But there’s something else. I want you to do a couple things for me.”

“Anything, Ed.”

“Okay. First, please keep me in the loop on things. You’ll be acting CEO, I assume. Just keep me informed on what’s going on. Keep my email account active, and keep in touch. And I’ll call you from time to time too, okay?”

“Uh, that’s another thing I didn’t tell you. I don’t know how long I’ll be acting CEO. Sam’s already mentioned making Charlie Morton the acting.” Along with Sam, Charlie Morton was also at Kinnick and Dunn as their chief of finance.

I thought about that one for a minute. “Well, okay. I guess that makes sense in a way.” It was another blow, the final taking of operational control away from the original founders and placing it in the hands of the finance people, the final move from the entrepreneurial spirit to the strictly business bottom-line. “Keep me informed anyway, okay?”

Okay, Ed, I’ll do that.”

I finally did spot Marvin Kainz, only he wasn't the Cadillac Man anymore. He was now the nondescript Japanese sedan man. I couldn't decide if it was a Toyota or a Honda or what it was he was driving now, but there he was anyway. So maybe he had been following me again yesterday and I just hadn't realized.

It was when I pulled my car out of Marie's gravel lot, automatically checking my rearview for anything, that I saw the car pull out from the same spot where Marvin had parked his Cadillac before, on the same side street a few blocks from Marie's. Driving slowly, I watched the car as it kept pace with me, and I tried remembering if I'd seen it at all before. I couldn't tell, but it might explain why I thought Marvin had given up the hunt or whatever it was. I pulled over suddenly, when the car was less than a block behind me, leaving the driver no choice but to pass me by, so I could get a look at him. He sped up to go by as fast as possible and slouched down, trying to hide himself from my view, but I could see it was Marvin. I recognized the graying hair and the rough, pockmarked face. Maribel had been right, if it was Marvin she'd seen: he was mean looking. I watched him go out of sight around a corner with a chilling thought in mind: what if he'd been following me the day before when I went out alone to Helen's Canyon Estates? I didn't want to think about what might have happened, being alone out there with Marvin. I decided to put that thought out of mind, making a quick U-turn and heading for Canyon Road. I was going to pay another visit to Klaus Meyer.

Parking on the street near Klaus's gallery on Canyon Road, I waited a minute to make sure that I'd lost Marvin. When I didn't see the car, I walked down the sidewalk and entered Kingfisher Galleries.

Klaus was there alone, sitting behind his desk in the corner of the main room, making me wonder how much business he actually did. He looked up and frowned when he saw me.

"Hello," he said. "I suppose you came back to buy something you saw the other day." His tone, in his slight accent of swallowed vowels and harder than normal consonants, belied the obvious fact that he was being sarcastic. He didn't get up.

I nodded in greeting. "No, not exactly." When I approached his desk, he stood and stepped around to the front and faced me.

"What can I do for you?"

I mulled it over in my mind how to address it and decided that a direct approach was best. "Do you know where my wife is?" I asked.

He stared at me. "I thought we settled that when you were here before."

City Different

"I thought so too. Maybe not. What kind of car do you drive?"

He shrugged. "I drive a BMW, if you really want to know."

"Is it an old one?"

"Yes," he answered. "It's a '72 2002 model. A classic. Why does that interest you?"

"My wife was seen driving away from her aunt's place in an older car with a gray-haired man, that's all."

He chuckled. "So of course, it must have been me."

"I thought of the possibility is all. Was it you?"

"What do you think? Do you think I'm hiding her somewhere?" He spread his hands and looked all around himself. "You even looked in my darkroom. Were you looking for her in there?"

I went along with his little pantomime, looking around myself. "But you wouldn't keep her here, of course."

He rolled his eyes. "I could be hiding her in my home. I live in Tesuque; did I tell you that? Do you know where that is? Maybe you should look there. Or maybe I have her stashed in a motel somewhere, under an assumed name of course. Or maybe I did away with her and buried her body in the desert." He stared at me for a few seconds and then held up both hands. "I'm sorry. I apologize for saying that. One shouldn't joke about such things." He took a deep breath. "No, Mister Collins, I don't know where your wife is," he said in a formal way. "I haven't seen her. As I told you before, I haven't seen Nina in some years, and I was telling the truth."

I nodded, not happy with the answer.

"Now the question is, do you believe me?" he said.

"I don't know."

"Well, I can understand that, but there's nothing I can do about it. Besides, who told you your wife was seen with someone?"

"It doesn't matter."

"No, it probably doesn't. But maybe you should get a little more information than *an older car and a gray-haired man*." His look softened then. "You are having a rough time, I know." He appeared to be thinking something over. "Look, why don't we go someplace for some coffee and we can talk? There's a place not far from here with some tables outside. It's a nice enough day for it, don't you think?" He looked at me, waiting. When I nodded, he motioned me toward the front door.

He locked the door behind us, first setting a cardboard clock face in the window to read four o'clock, a little over an hour from now. "I probably

won't have any more business today anyway," he said, not sounding that unhappy about it.

Instinctively checking up and down the road for Marvin's new car, I spotted it up the road about a half block ahead of mine, and I stopped in mid-step. Maybe my detective senses weren't so sharp, I thought. Then I decided, to hell with him, and I moved off, catching up to Klaus who was walking down the narrow sidewalk. The narrowness caused us to walk along in single file.

The restaurant was a few blocks away. It looked to be another old home, refurbished, with a freshly painted front porch the width of the place. Flowering baskets were hung along the porch, and a half-dozen tables occupied what must have formerly been the front yard. Klaus seated himself at one, and I sat across from him.

Picking up a menu, he said without looking at me, "The coffee here is good. Strong, like European coffee. I think you'll like it."

"You're being sociable, given the circumstances."

"The circumstances of you accusing me of taking up with your wife, you mean?" he said, oddly cheerful. "Or the one of me helping her to evade the law?" He looked at me over the top of his menu.

"Something like that." I gave him a grin, which then faded with the mental image of Klaus's photograph of the nude, seventeen-year old Nina lying on the California beach.

"Let me assure you you'll be the first to hear from me if I do happen to run into her," he said. I looked across, thinking he was being sarcastic.

A young waitress came and took our order. When she was gone, I turned to Klaus. "Were you in love with my wife?" I asked.

He considered this for a moment and then showed a smile. "Of course, I think any man who is a normal man loves beautiful women. It is human nature to love beautiful things, is it not?"

"Speaking in the abstract."

He gave a little raise of the eyebrows. "Of course."

"But what about the real Nina? She was seventeen, eighteen. You were what, twenty years older?"

"I am still twenty years older," he said. "But, yes, to answer your question." He paused. "I did love her in a way. But not in the way you do."

"What way then?"

He held up his hands. "I think you are maybe trying to be confrontational. Of course, you are upset with your wife's situation. Maybe you are angry.

City Different

And you are wondering if we were lovers.” He looked me in the eye and said, “She was with me for a while, but we weren’t lovers.”

I figured he had to be lying, but, strangely, I didn’t care now; I let it go. It was out of the realm of imagination now, because I’d already felt with some certainty that he had been Nina’s lover. Now he was probably trying to spare my feelings. I always knew Nina had had lovers. Rationalizing that it was before I’d ever met her, I tried shrugging it off. But I wondered: was doing that another way of letting go of her?

Meyer seemed in a mood to explain. “She was very young then, and I think I was an experiment for her. I believe she wanted to see what an older man was like. But I also think I was a test for her, if you know what I mean. Young boys her age, or even a bit older, were like children to her.”

“And what were you like with her?”

He shrugged. “I have to admit, Nina got her way most of the time with me. But please don’t think it ever meant anything. We were both young. Sure, I was older than she was, considerably older. But I never felt like an older man with her. She has a way of bringing you into her world. I think you must know what I mean.”

As he talked I had the same mental image of before, of me smashing the face of this smooth German who’d probably banged my wife. At the same time, I felt no real hostility toward him. It was a very strange feeling.

The young waitress brought a tray with our coffee, placing it on the table and setting out the cups and the cream and sugar bowl, and then she left. It was when I looked up at her moving away that I spotted Marvin Kainz walking down the sidewalk toward the restaurant. He walked slowly, almost seeming to hesitate a few times, sliding his eyes toward us at our table. He looked like he might pass the place by, but then he suddenly veered right through the front gate and approached our table. He stopped and looked down at us and nodded curtly to me and then to Klaus. “I wanted to talk to you,” he said, looking at me.

“About what?” I stared back at him.

“I think you know what. But actually, it’s good I got the two of you together, because it also concerns Mr. Meyer here.” Marvin jerked his thumb toward Klaus, who was staring up at him wide-eyed.

I spread my hands as if to say, *what next*, but kept silent. I wanted to hear what Marvin had to say.

He looked down at both of us with a serious expression. “I think you probably know, both of you, that harboring a fugitive is a serious crime. I have a notion that one of you, or maybe both, know where Nina is hiding.”

Klaus then gave me an incredulous look and turned to Marvin. "Are you a policeman?" he asked.

"That's right."

"He's not a cop," I said, and then looked up. "Are you, Marvin?"

Marvin's serious expression turned into a sly grin. "Who have you been talking to, Eddie?" I figured he had to know, though.

"What about impersonating a policeman?" I said, ignoring his question. "Is that a serious crime too?"

"I told you," he replied. "I don't have to show you any identification."

"Yes you do," Klaus said, sitting up straight as if about to stand.

"What do you want with Nina?" I asked.

"There's a fugitive warrant for her in California," Marvin said. "And we're cooperating with California police in apprehending her. And I think this guy knows where she is." Again he jerked his thumb at Klaus.

"What is this?" Klaus demanded. "You're obviously not a policeman. I know most of the detectives in Santa Fe and I never saw you. And if you don't know enough to show your ID." Klaus didn't finish the sentence.

Still sitting, I looked up at Marvin and said, "Who do you work for?"

Marvin leaned closer to me. "Did you know this guy and your wife were an item when she was just a kid? What kind of stuff do you think he taught her, an older guy like this? What are you two doing now anyway, comparing notes?"

Klaus started to get up out of his chair. There was an astonished look on his face. "Who the hell are you?" he said.

"Never mind, you just sit back down," Marvin said. "I have an idea about you now. You're reliving old times with Nina, is that it?"

"This is ridiculous," Klaus said. "I'm calling the police right now."

"No, don't do that," I said, remembering Helen's admonishment about not involving the local police. I motioned for Klaus to sit back down.

By now the scene had attracted the attention of the young waitress. She stood off to the side with her tray under one arm and a curious expression on her face, mostly watching Marvin. He noticed her too and quickly leaned close enough to me to whisper, "Your wife was screwing that fag accountant out in California. What do you think about that?" His face was close enough to mine that I could see every pockmark, and he gave me the same sly grin as before. Then he turned and quickly walked away, going back up the road toward where I'd seen his car parked.

"What was that all about?" Klaus asked after Marvin had disappeared. His face was red. "Who was that idiot?"

City Different

“I wish I knew,” I said, realizing I still didn’t know much, even after what Helen had told me.

“He’s no cop.” Klaus gave a short, humorless laugh, shaking his head. “Could he be a private detective?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And you haven’t called the police about him? Why not?”

“I just don’t think it would be a good idea.”

Realizing it was a little reckless, I decided anyway to play a game with Marvin after leaving Klaus back at his gallery. Marvin’s car wasn’t in sight, but I actually found myself hoping that it was around somewhere. I drove up Canyon Road and around to East Alameda and headed west for a few blocks before Marvin’s car showed up behind me, keeping its usual distance.

Alameda crossed St. Francis Drive and continued generally west, heading out of town. I even made sure not to leave Marvin behind by slowing a little approaching the lights and stopping like a good driver when they showed yellow, just hoping that he wouldn’t catch on. When the landscape started to turn rural, mostly scattered homes out there, and I wasn’t even sure if we were still in the city proper, I began to slow periodically and look around, as if searching for a place or an address. Marvin was a trooper, keeping his distance. At one point I stopped the car and leaned out the window, studying a big adobe place, and noticed that Marvin ducked his car up a side road so as not to drive by me. I tried the same thing a few more times, stopping and leaning out the window as if searching for something, and each time Marvin either stopped his car well back of mine or made a quick detour. I wondered if Marvin thought he was fooling me with his maneuvers. How dumb was he? I thought. For me, this was beginning to be fun.

The road merged with another highway and curved around until it connected with the I25 freeway south of the town, now apparently outside the city limits. From there I headed back north along Cerrillos Road, driving back toward the plaza. Marvin hadn’t grown tired of this yet. Driving all the way up Cerrillos until I took the turnoff to Paseo de Peralta, it must have looked to him like I was heading back toward Klaus’s Kingfisher Galleries again. But I passed Canyon Road by and kept going until spotting the sign that pointed the way to the ski area. I decided for a scenic drive, turning up Artists’ Road and climbing out of the city in that direction, past the housing developments that cut into the foothills and spoiled Marie Gustafson’s views from below.

Leaving the houses behind, the road began to climb more steeply through the Santa Fe National Forest. Marvin was with me all the way. I had the crazy

notion that I should stop at the ski slopes and walk up through the trees, wondering what Marvin would do and what he would think of that. Would he follow me, believing I had Nina stashed away in the forest somewhere? I began to feel a giddy sensation at all this.

But it was beginning to feel like a dangerous game, alone on that road with Marvin. After accelerating through a sharp curve that hid my car from Marvin's for a few seconds, I quickly pulled over onto a clearing and spun around, pointing the car back down the hill, and waited for Marvin to pass me. But he didn't. When he saw me waiting on the side of the road, he veered his car over and pulled up in front of me, blocking my way. A thrill of fear shot through me.

He got out of his car and sauntered over. "What kind of game are you playing, Eddie?" he said, trying to sound friendly.

I had the driver's side window open and I looked up at him. "I was just out for a drive," I said. "Where did you come from, Marvin?"

He passed his hand over his hair, smoothing it down. "I was just out for a drive too. What a coincidence."

"Right. Could you move your car so I can get by?"

He turned to look back as if he wasn't aware he was blocking me. "Sure." he said. "You know, I think I believe you when you say you don't know where your wife is. But you know somebody's hiding her."

"I have no ideas on that score." I said.

"Helen Rodriguez told you who I was, didn't she?" He had a smile on his face, and I began to relax just a little.

"She told me," I said.

"You figure she knows where Nina is, Eddie?" He casually leaned against the roof of the car.

"I don't know. What do you think?"

He shook his head, showing me a doubtful expression. "Nah. I might have thought so at first. It seemed like it was a good possibility, you know? But then all that coming and going you've been doing up there made me think different. Then I saw you with that little Mexican girl having a good time. And you went to see that Klaus Meyer. What about that?"

"You used to work for Helen, right?"

"She probably told you she fired me. I quit though."

"Why?"

"Never mind. That's not important. Let's say we just had a little disagreement."

"What do you want with my wife?"

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“I’m just a good citizen Eddie. I’m just trying to help out the local police here.”

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Trying to get back into Helen’s good graces by finding her niece for her?” My car was still running and I slipped the gearshift into reverse, preparing to back up so I could maneuver around Marvin’s car. I had enough of him on this lonely road.

Marvin had other ideas. Before I’d even started to back the car, he casually pulled aside his jacket and revealed a handgun stuck into the waistband of his trousers. “Don’t go anywhere just yet, Eddie,” he said, edging closer with his hand on the roof of the car. “Tell me about Klaus Meyer.”

“What about him?”

“Do you think he might know something? You know what? I think he might know something too. What did he tell you?”

I weighed my chances of backing out and reversing direction fast enough to get by him. My hands gripped the wheel and my foot lightly touched the accelerator, prepared to try. “He told me he hasn’t seen Nina in years.”

“And you believed him?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Maybe.”

He let his jacket close, hiding the gun from sight. “Eddie, there’s something about you that I almost want to believe. Me, I wouldn’t trust Meyer as far as I could throw him. All them German bastards.”

That last remark seemed weirdly out of context. I decided Marvin really was unbalanced. I took a breath, preparing to make the getaway. Then Marvin backed away from the car, saying, “He’s got Nina stashed somewhere. Maybe you both do. Is he sharing her with you?” He showed me a grin “You want to know something else? You probably won’t believe this, but I really am sorry about all your problems. It’s bad enough what happened. But then, your wife banging that queer accountant. That must be hard to take.” He turned then and walked back to his car, saying over his shoulder, “Have a nice day.” Then he drove away, leaving me there alone.

Chapter 10

Returning to my little room just to be alone, I finally had to face another possibility: something was happening that was different from my simple version of things. It was like having a bizarre dream that somehow made sense because the dream master of your subconscious willed it that way. Then, waking in the clear light of day, you can see it was all gibberish.

In my old version of things, someone had shot Joe, and Nina had stumbled onto the scene shortly after. Seeing what she'd seen, she ran in a blind panic, not knowing what else to do, and went to New Mexico to Helen's, where she'd always felt safe. Once there, she was taken away and hidden from the world, and even from me, while Helen worked behind the scenes to clear her niece—the how of it wasn't clear, but I couldn't let myself think about that. Helen's cover-up probably could have included some others. Marvin Kainz might have been one, though that didn't seem likely. Maribel could have been another. Then there was Klaus, of course. Maybe he really was Maribel's mysterious gray man, Nina's ex-lover doing Helen's bidding. And there I was on the outside, bumping around like the fool who crashes a party and doesn't have the good sense to leave.

Now I had to consider another version, central to which was Nina acting out a different scenario, starting with Marvin's bizarre accusation at the restaurant: *your wife was screwing that fag accountant*. The Los Gatos police had thought the same thing; they asked me repeatedly if Nina and Joe were having an affair. Even Helen asked me that the first day I went to her. How many times did I have to hear it before I began to believe it? The only problem I was having with it was, how was it possible?

The carefully constructed picture I had in my mind of what had happened began to blur and fade, becoming distorted like a wet painting left out in the rain, the images sliding down the canvas and turning into weird caricatures. Did I choose to believe Marvin? Not really. But the strange image of it wouldn't leave me alone, the image of my wife with Joe LaFont, with his narrow shoulders and little hands. It was worse than the earlier picture I'd conjured of the nude, languorous Nina with Klaus.

So what was my new version? If Nina went from Helen's shortly after arriving, if she was driven away by someone with gray hair driving an old car, maybe Helen had nothing to do with it, just as she'd told me. Maybe Nina ran

from Helen because she became afraid of her too. Maybe that's the same reason she'd run from me. But why would she be afraid of me?

My new version considered a different possibility—that Nina had committed the murder, as the police thought. Even if it wasn't a murder in the strictest sense, she could have done the shooting anyway. It could have been self-defense or an accident. Then she ran from me because she was afraid of what she'd done, or she was afraid of what I would find out—maybe both. She came to Helen's, but something Helen said or did made her run again. Now she was somewhere hiding from everyone, maybe not even here anymore. But the one thing that still didn't make sense, in this new version, was what did Marvin Kainz have to do with any of it? Trying to think all this through, I could feel, out there somewhere, Nina's loneliness matching my own. I cried real tears for the first time since this began, alone in my room in Marie Gustafson's B&B.

None of that changed anything: I still needed to find Nina. Marvin was still out there, doing whatever he was doing, and doing no one any good. Maybe Helen could deal with him. The next morning I collected the pieces of myself and drove up the hill once more to Helen's, to tell her of Marvin's resurfacing in his replacement for the old Caddy. I was beginning to think of Helen's as a regular stop in my aimless comings and goings.

Maribel, back at her usual station, answered the door. "Hi, Eddie," she said, swinging the door wide to let me enter." It occurred to me dimly that it was the first time she'd called me by name.

Her big smile turned serious. "I think I should tell you something," she said.

I entered, my eyes drawn downward at her, seeing that she wore a halter-top and a black, French-cut bikini bottom. "Were you swimming?" I asked, pulling my eyes up to her face, thinking that the weather had begun to warm up, but not that much.

"I was just out in the back sunning myself," she said with a bright look.

Helen was nowhere to be seen behind her. I turned my attention back to Maribel, who stood, still holding on to the door, her weight on one leg and her hip cocked, while her other leg was relaxed, with only the toes of resting on the tiles. A part of my mind noticed that she'd changed the color of her toenails to a bright red, and it registered in me that I liked the turquoise better. My eyes traveled up to the black triangle of her bikini bottom and on up to her halter-top, which was simply a thin band of crinkly material. I looked back up at her face with its arched brows, my inner voice telling me: *you shouldn't be*

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thinking what you're thinking. But I was thinking it anyway. She gave me back a smile as if she was reading my mind.

"Is Helen here?" I finally asked.

She nodded. "I should tell you something first." She closed the door, finally, and faced me.

I waited, looking into her eyes, with the image of her halter-top at the edge of my vision.

"I am not so sure what it means, but I hear the Señora on the telephone. She is calling someone and telling them about this man who is following you."

"You mean Marvin?"

"I think that's who she say. She say something like, 'He is back in town driving his old car'."

"His old Cadillac, yeah," I said. "But he's apparently parked it."

"What?"

"Never mind. Who did Helen tell this to?"

"I don't hear her say a name."

It didn't matter anyway, since it wouldn't have meant anything to me if she had. "Well, that's good information at any rate."

She made a curious face. "I am not so sure what it means, but I thought I should tell you anyway. I want to help." She reached across and briefly touched her fingers to my arm.

But why, I wondered? "Would you help even if Helen told you not to?" She seemed to stiffen, drawing back, and once again I was sorry for what I'd said.

"She would not tell me that. But I would help you anyway."

I nodded, distracted. "This Marvin," I said. "Do you know what he looks like?"

"I see him here sometimes."

"Was it recently?"

She seemed to consider that. "No. Not for a while. But he used to come here."

"Was he the man you saw driving my wife away that day?"

She shook her head. "No, that wasn't him."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I see him good enough. It was not him."

"Okay." I duplicated her earlier gesture by touching her arm. "Can you get the Señora for me?" She returned a smile my way and walked off in an angular, hip-swinging way that drew my eyes to watch her retreating form. As

she disappeared through a doorway, the last thing I was focused on was her bottom in the french-cut bikini. Apparently, I was unable to help myself.

Helen appeared wearing a long robe, with her hair pinned straight back. She gave me a heavy-lidded look and I waited for her to say something about the frequency of my appearances here. Instead she said, "You're a little early, Eddie. I was just having my coffee out on the patio." She made a gesture, like a good hostess, for me to follow her out there.

The patio was at the back of the house, opening out onto a gentle slope of grass surrounded by bushes beginning to show new, green growth. A covering shaded the patio from the bright sun. Maribel was lying on a towel on the sunny grass, stretched out on her stomach. She smiled when she saw me and raised herself up on her elbows, causing her halter-top to sag downward, revealing the shapes of her small brown breasts, not quite up to what I imagined would be her dark brown nipples. I felt the urge to move my head for a better look. Instead, I smiled at her and looked away.

"Mari," Helen said, seating herself heavily at a table in the shade and motioning me to sit across from her. "Would you get Eddie some coffee please?" Maribel pushed herself all the way up and walked inside past us. A few minutes later, she emerged with a steaming mug. When she set it down in front of me, she turned her face toward mine and smiled from a few inches away and returned to her spot on the grass.

"I came to tell you something," I said to Helen. She waited. "That guy that was following me is still around."

"Marvin."

"Only he's not driving his old Cadillac anymore. I didn't spot him right away because of that. He's driving a newer model, probably Japanese."

"Like what kind?" Helen asked.

"I'm not sure. It could be a Toyota or a Honda or one of those others."

"That doesn't exactly narrow it down," she said, the corners of her mouth compressing.

"I'm not all that familiar with the newer cars."

"That'll happen," she said after a few seconds, giving me her heavy-lidded look again. "Could it have been a European make, a Volvo or an Audi, for instance?"

"I don't think so. But I'm not sure"

After another minute of staring, she said, "So he probably switched cars to go incognito, or something." She made a disdainful face. "Anyway, he's still out there, still following you, driving something."

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“He also approached me at a sidewalk place on Canyon Road.” I decided not to mention my other encounter with Marvin, my escapade up near the ski area.

“What did he say?”

“He’s still pretending he’s a cop.”

At that she made a surprised face, looking a bit theatrical. I still thought there was something about this that she wasn’t telling me, as if I was a child who couldn’t be trusted with the truth. By this time it was beyond getting on my nerves.

I added, “I let him know I knew who he was.”

“Maybe that wasn’t such a good idea.” She paused for a minute. “So he followed you in some kind of car and he approached you and he played cop.”

“That’s about it,” I said. “I think the real cops need to know about this guy. Have you told them about him, Helen?”

“Not yet,” she said.

I looked over at Maribel, who was maybe twenty feet away, her eyes closed against the sun. From the way she was lying there, her head cocked toward us, I could tell she was listening.

“You didn’t call them and tell them about this guy?”

“I thought I’d wait,” Helen said.

When I glanced again at Maribel, she had her eyes open squinting in my direction. Helen’s back was to her, and Maribel gave me an exaggerated frown. “Wait for what?” I asked. “Do you understand what this guy wants?”

“Not really. But don’t worry about it too much.”

“Yeah, I gave up worrying,” I said, giving her a sour look.

Helen looked curiously back at me. “Eddie, you seem different today.”

“Maybe I am different. Maybe I’m thinking I don’t know anything anymore.”

“Maybe none of us do,” she said.

“I feel like I don’t even know who I’m married to.” When I looked over again, my eyes met Maribel’s, still staring in my direction.

“What are you saying?” Helen asked.

“Tell me something. Tell me something about Nina,” I said, not sure what I was asking.

“Tell you what about her?”

“I don’t know.” I cast about in my mind. What did I want to hear? “How was she when she was a little girl, for instance?”

She laughed suddenly, and the effect was jarring. “She was a handful then. Real stubborn. She always had to have her way.”

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“At least that much hasn’t changed,” I said.

“No, I suppose not. But she had a good heart, always. She still does.” Helen had a faraway look on her face, remembering. “She would bring home poor kids from her school, give them her clothes, her toys. I remember her clothes were always disappearing and I would have to buy her new ones. I couldn’t figure that one out for a while.”

“Did she ever get into fights with other kids?”

“She did sometimes,” she said, nodding, seemingly surprised at the recollection. “But with boys, not with girls. She came home a few times with a bloody nose.”

“Did she win?” I asked, curious at this new image of Nina forming in my head.

Helen shrugged. “I don’t know. She was maybe nine or ten. It was her temper, that was it. I think the boys used to make remarks about her, you know? Boys that age, they don’t know how to act with girls, so it comes out as teasing. She never liked being teased. She used to get furious at me if I teased her about anything. She still has a temper, you know? Eddie, what are you getting at?”

“I don’t know. Yeah, she sometimes has a temper.”

“Did she ever take a swing at you?” Helen asked, a playful look on her face.

I ignored that. “When she got a little older, what was she like?”

“You mean when all the boys started flocking around?”

“Like then, yeah.”

“I don’t know Eddie. It seems like they were always there. But she could always handle them.”

That sounded like Nina. I felt a sudden sadness at this conversation. I went on anyway. “What about Klaus?”

“What about him?” she asked.

“Was she sleeping with him?”

“I never asked her,” she said impatiently. “I suppose she was. So what? You didn’t even know her then.”

I stared back at her for a minute. “Helen, what do you think happened?”

“With what?”

I wasn’t even sure what I was asking. I said, “With Joe LaFont. What do you think happened with Joe?”

“You’re asking me?”

After a minute, I answered, “I am.”

“Somebody shot him.”

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It had sounded as though she were speaking to an idiot. I ignored that and asked, "Who was it?"

"I don't know Eddie. You'd have a better idea than me."

"Do you think it was Nina?"

She turned her head to look at me, her answer coming right away, "Of course not. I thought we already went over this."

"Maybe I've changed my mind," I said.

She sat up a little straighter then, leaning toward me. "And what are you thinking now?"

"I think maybe Nina did it."

"Eddie, maybe you think too much. It wasn't Nina."

"Nothing else makes sense."

"Maybe that's because you don't know the whole story," she said, sounding mysterious now.

"What is the whole story?"

She shook her head in a way that said she was feeling sorry for me. "You're having a rough time, I know," she said, reaching across the table and placed her large hand over mine, patting my hand gently.

"Yeah. Look, I have to go." Abruptly, I stood. "I have some things to do. I just came up here to tell you about Marvin"

"All right, Eddie," Helen said looking up, squinting from the sun that was now directly behind me. "Just don't do anything stupid."

I didn't even want to know what she meant by that. Maribel pushed herself up into a kneeling position, for an instant causing her halter-top to sag again. She stood straight up in one motion and walked over. "I'll see you to the door," she said.

She walked alongside me, her height just at my shoulder level, her bare feet making small slapping noises on the tile. She opened the door, but I was reluctant to leave just yet. She looked up at me, waiting.

I said to her, "She calls you Mari."

"Yes?"

"Do you mind that?"

"Is not so bad." She shrugged one bare shoulder and cocked her head at the same time. The effect of her standing there that way while wearing that bikini was appealing in a way that made me uncomfortable.

"When Nina came here, what did she say? When you answered the door. What did she say?" I still wasn't sure what I was asking, but I was asking anyway, maybe just to prolong the conversation.

She narrowed her eyes. "She just ask for the Señora. Like I say before."

I nodded. "You like my wife, don't you?"

She turned her head and gave me a sideways glance. "Sure."

"And you want to help me find her."

"Yes."

I wasn't sure if I should ask the next question, but I asked it anyway. "Tell me why do you want to help me."

She touched my arm in a way that was becoming familiar. "I feel sorry for you."

It wasn't what I wanted to hear. I turned to go then.

Behind me, she said in a half whisper, "Listen, Eddie, I don't know why the Señora said what she said. I heard her. I think it is the police she talk to."

I shook my head, looking down at her, this girl with the turned-down mouth and plain face that managed to be pretty anyway, who was looking up at me, making me want to believe her. "I don't know why Helen does anything." I said.

Maribel gave me her smile that reversed her turned-down mouth. "Bye, Eddie."

Driving back down the hill, half expecting it this time, I picked up Marvin's tail, though I hadn't spotted him on the way up. How did he do it? He must have been splitting his time between watching Helen's place and following me.

This time I didn't even mind it, though. In fact I was hoping that he did follow me because I had a surprise for him later today. Besides, it would only be a matter of time before Helen's police friends picked him up, if Maribel was right. Watching in the rearview, I tried identifying the make of the car as he followed, but I couldn't really come up with anything.

I parked in Marie Gustafson's gravel lot. Before I got out of the car, Marvin's nondescript ride sped past behind me and disappeared around a corner. Maybe he was back on his way up the hill to his other watch station.

To occupy my mind until later that afternoon, I spent the morning reading email and working on some private projects. My user account was still active, and Oliver had passed all correspondence through the CEO's office to me, even though all I could do was scan it without doing anything about it. Of course there was a message to all employees concerning my leave of absence, though it didn't explain my official stated reasons. One message concerned an internal audit that was to be conducted. Since Joe LaFont had been the acting Chief Financial Officer, and he was obviously being replaced by Sam's man, Charlie Morton, I figured this to be pretty much routine.

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There were several messages concerning an Internet software project that was falling behind schedule. I still had access to the corporate Local Area Network, or LAN, and I located the project directories on the development server and started scanning the correspondence. I jotted down some suggestions, which I would pass along to Oliver later, since the project officially came under his domain, and even downloaded a few of the programs onto my hard drive. I made some coding changes to the programs, enjoying myself for the first time in what felt like months, and emailed everything back to Oliver, telling him to say the suggestions and code had come from him.

Around late afternoon I figured it was about the right time. I signed off and disconnected from the phone and packed up my laptop, had a quick shower and a change of clothes and headed out. I scanned the street, not seeing Marvin's car at first. Within a few blocks, though, he popped up in my rearview, making my scalp tingle in anticipation.

I led Marvin out to the Santa Fe airport on the southwest edge of town and parked the car in the small lot in front of the place, wondering what must be going through his mind. Maybe he thought I was leaving town. Marvin parked his car across the road from the main lot in front of a hangar.

About fifteen minutes later, I exited out the side of the one room terminal building, out of sight of where had parked. I was wearing my old baseball cap low on my forehead, and got into my own nondescript gray sedan, a four-door Pontiac that I'd just rented from Avis, and drove away, noticing Marvin's car still in the same spot. Watching in the rearview mirror, I saw Marvin's car still not moving. I congratulated myself; my subterfuge had fooled him.

It was approaching dusk, nearly six o'clock, when many of the Canyon Road galleries and shops closed. I parked about a block down the road from Klaus's place and waited, slumped down in my seat with my hat low on my forehead, in my full Joe Detective mode.

It wasn't long before I saw Klaus locking the front door of the gallery and heading around the back of the place. A minute later an older BMW sedan, painted in gray primer with one fender covered in red primer, pulled out onto the road. It wasn't the kind of car I would've expected the owner of an upscale gallery to be driving, but at least it was a vintage model. He drove around the block to East Alameda and headed west, driving fast and passing cars, with me following and having some trouble keeping up. Immediately I was two blocks behind, afraid I would lose sight of him; then I sped up recklessly and was right behind him at a light. This wasn't as easy as it appeared.

But my amateur status probably didn't matter, as Klaus couldn't be expecting this. He pulled onto a busy street and then turned abruptly into a restaurant parking lot. Yanking my cap lower down on my forehead, I drove by, watching him out of the corner of my eye as he entered the place. I parked up a side street, within sight of the restaurant, and waited. Patience never having been one of my virtues, my waiting lasted about twenty minutes before I decided to get out of the car and walk by the restaurant to see if I could get a glimpse. I almost blew it right there. Klaus was sitting at an outside table of a large patio that faced the sidewalk, not fifty feet from me as I passed. A woman sat across from him talking and smiling at him, while he calmly listened to her. He never looked my way. Besides, it was twilight, and the patio was lit up, making it difficult for anyone to see beyond its edges. At least I hoped that was the case as I hurried on, walking completely around the block and approaching my car from the opposite end of the side street.

It was fully dark and another two hours before Klaus and the woman finally emerged from the restaurant. He walked with her to where she'd parked and they talked briefly in the parking lot and then he kissed her on the cheek and she drove off, heading south. He got into his car and headed north, making a few turns and merging into the traffic of Saint Francis Drive, apparently heading home, which he'd said was in Tesuque. I was discovering things about this surveillance business, namely that it was actually easier to follow someone in traffic for two reasons: one, you could hide among the other cars; and two, the traffic tended to regulate the target's speed. The darkened highway didn't hurt either.

Near the opera house, Klaus's right signal blinked his intent to turn, just as he passed the sign showing the way to Tesuque. Slowing so I wouldn't be too close behind him when we left the traffic, I actually lost sight of his taillights a few times on the dark road driving down into Tesuque village. There was no other car in sight, and if he did disappear up one of the side roads, I should be able to spot his car when I passed the road. But he kept heading straight through the village, finally turning while still in my sight about a quarter mile ahead. When I came to where he had turned, I pulled over, giving myself a view down his road. His car wasn't in sight. In the darkness, with no streetlamps, I could see the lights of several houses scattered among the trees. I drove slowly, aware of the sound of my tires crunching on the gravel road. After about a quarter-mile, I was thinking that I might have lost him, that he might have pulled into his garage. Then I saw the old BMW parked in front of a large adobe house. I drove past the house and pulled my car off the road, parking under a tree and turning off the engine,

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wondering what I would do next. I supposed that this was getting exciting, I could tell from my dry mouth.

What if Nina was actually here? That didn't seem likely, but why else had I followed him? I rolled down the driver-side window. It was dead still outside, except for some cricket sounds. I could hear the sounds of my own breathing and the ticking noises of the cooling engine. I waited, not sure what my plan was.

After about fifteen minutes I opened the car door, lighting up the car's interior and causing a loud buzzing noise, making me realize that I'd neglected to remove the key from the ignition. Snatching up the key, I pocketed it and stepped out into the night and gently closed the door behind me to shut off the dome light inside the car. That left me standing in almost complete darkness, and I had to wait for my eyes to adjust. After a minute, I could make out the dark shapes of the trees against the stars, and slowly I began to pick out the shapes of trees and bushes surrounding the house. Lights from several rooms inside the house cast a glow out into the front yard. My heart was pounding as I stepped carefully along the edge of the road, avoiding the gravel, walking instead along the grassy verge. A few dogs were barking in the distance, and I could only hope that Klaus didn't have a dog roaming outside.

Scattered trees surrounded the house, probably thirty yards from the road. A few looked like fruit trees. There were some low bushes I could make out that I skirted slowly around. Here the ground was mixed rock and weedy grass, and I couldn't avoid crunching my footsteps, no matter how carefully I stepped. I winced, half expecting an angry dog to leap at me out of the dark. My face was taut, and I realized how foolish this business was. At the same time I was excited at how daring I felt.

Just then, a car approached from the direction of the village. I watched it for a few seconds before realizing that its headlights were on me, and I ducked behind a tree. The car drove slowly past the house, and I watched the lights receding down the road from my hiding place. Then I had to wait a few minutes to let my eyes adjust to the dark again. Another car came along from the opposite direction. This time I had the good sense to avoid the lights.

Barely breathing, I approached the house a step at a time, wondering what I would do or say if I were caught. I approached a window and peered inside at the edge. It was a kitchen, and no one was in sight. Klaus must have been something of a gourmet cook, from the way the kitchen was equipped, with a huge, double-door refrigerator, a sleek, modern-looking stove, an assortment

of pots hanging from hooks over a food preparation island containing a spice racks and a butcher block that held a collection of knives.

I crept over to the next lighted room, which was a living room. It too was empty. Moving further along the front of the house brought me to another room. The light from it shone outside, and I skirted that and peeked through the window from behind the branches of an apple tree, finally seeing Klaus. He was slouched in a chair with a beer bottle in his hand, facing a glowing television set, staring at it. The room was apparently a den, with a big fireplace and overstuffed furniture. I spotted two rifles mounted over the fireplace. I became aware that I holding my breath.

Resolutely, I decided to make a slow circuit of the perimeter of the house, still wondering what I would say if I were caught. There were two other rooms lit up on one side, both bedrooms, with no one occupying them. The other rooms were dark. At the back of the house, from a vantage point behind an adobe wall that surrounded a large patio, I could again see Klaus through the open doorway of one of the darkened rooms. He was still in the same position, watching television from his overstuffed chair, his chin on his chest.

Completing my circuit, I moved away from the house to the front yard, breathing heavily now, collecting myself and wondering what I'd accomplished and just why I'd done it in the first place. But there was no mistaking the exhilarating thrill of danger I'd just experienced, and was still experiencing, for that matter. I walked quietly back to my car parked just up the road.

Wincing at the sound of the engine starting, I jammed the thing into gear and made a quick U-turn, driving back down the road toward the highway while trying not to spray gravel. I began to breathe normally and pushed the buttons on the door next to me to open all the windows, letting in the night air. At the intersection with the main village road, I had to wait for a car coming from the direction of the village. It turned, without giving a signal, at the same intersection where I sat waiting, its headlights striking me full in the face as it went around the corner. I was momentarily blinded and then the car slid past me and I froze, looking at the driver of the car as it slowly passed by me not six feet away. It was Marvin Kainz, heading up the same road toward Meyer's house, and he was looking back at me.

Chapter 11

Events of that evening led to my being arrested again, though I couldn't have known it at the time. It was the next morning and I was still in bed, lying there staring at the ceiling, reliving my surveillance of the previous night, when Marie tapped on my door.

"Mr. Collins," she called, a muffled sound through the closed door that might be saying she was sorry for disturbing me.

"I'm awake," I called, getting up and pulling on my pants. Holding the pants closed at the front, I opened the door and half-stood behind it, only showing myself from the waist up. Marie averted her eyes at my bare chest.

"You have a phone call downstairs," she said.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"I don't know. A girl. A woman," she said and then turned on her heel and stumped away.

Marie seemed disapproving, if not downright pissed, maybe at having to be my messenger so early in the morning or maybe at my near nakedness. "Okay, I'll be right there," I called after her. I threw on a shirt and slipped on shoes without socks and went downstairs. The phone was in the front parlor. Marie handed me the receiver and went off toward the kitchen.

"Hello?" I said.

"Eddie," the voice said. "I thought I better call you and tell you." It was Maribel, sounding a little out of breath.

At the back of my mind was the thought: how did she know where I was staying? I put the thought aside. "Tell me what?"

"A man is killed last night, and I think the police are coming to arrest you."

"What man?" I said, feeling a disorienting confusion.

"I hear his name, Meyer. He was shot last night."

"Klaus Meyer?" The picture of Marvin's face looking at me from his car window last night flashed in my mind. "Klaus Meyer was shot? He's dead?" I stared at nothing and tried to concentrate. "How do you know?" I asked.

"The phone rings and wakes me and I answer it. It is very early, six o'clock I guess. It was a man's voice. He ask for the Señora."

"Who was the man?"

"I don't know, Eddie."

On a hunch, I asked, "Was it Marvin Kainz?"

“No, not him. I know that one. But this one I don’t know.”

“What did he say?”

“He asks for the Señora, so I go wake her. Then she talks to him and I hear.”

“What did she say?”

“She say like, ‘Are you sure it is Meyer? Are you sure he is dead?’ Then she say, ‘Are you at Meyer’s house now?’ Then, ‘How many times was he shot?’ Then she listen and she say, ‘Eddie didn’t do it.’ Then she listen more and say, ‘I suppose you have to pick him up then.’ Eddie, they were talking about you. I think the police will arrest you.”

I knew I had to think but I couldn’t. I dropped my arm holding the receiver, hearing the faint sound of Maribel’s voice coming from the receiver now at my side. Of course, Marvin must have shot Klaus. But why? Helen had been deadly serious when she said he was dangerous, apparently more than she could know. But I couldn’t fathom it. Random thoughts ran through my head. Maybe Marvin confronted Klaus over the whereabouts of Nina, and they fought and Marvin shot him. Or maybe Marvin just shot him, thinking that I would be a logical suspect, just to get rid of me for some reason. In each scenario, I was a logical suspect because I was there last night, though nobody knew I was there, except Marvin, who’d seen me driving away. I didn’t like where that thought was taking me. I lifted the receiver to my ear.

“I’m still here,” I said, still trying to collect my thoughts.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe you should get out of there and hide someplace.”

I thought of that for a moment, feeling the instinct to bolt and run. I pictured it for a moment and then put it aside. “No, I don’t think so,” I finally said. “I didn’t do anything.”

“I know you didn’t,” she said. “But maybe they think you did. Why don’t we meet someplace and we can talk?”

“Meet where?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere. Maybe the plaza.”

“How would you get there? You don’t even have a car, do you?”

“I can walk.”

“So I meet you in the plaza in the middle of town while the police are out looking for me.”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“I don’t think so.” A sense of inevitability came over me. I reasoned that if they were coming for me, it was probably just for questioning anyway. I’d

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been seen earlier with Klaus. That was probably all it was. “You believe me when I say I didn’t do anything wrong, don’t you?”

“Sure I do, Eddie.”

After we hung up, I went back up to my room and finished dressing and then waited, sitting on my bed.

A single, unmarked police car pulled up outside. A portable, revolving light perched on its roof, flashing light outside my window, alerted me. It seemed a hopeful sign that they hadn’t used their siren. On the other hand, though, maybe they just hadn’t wanted to warn me.

Looking through the gauzy curtains covering my window, I recognized Detective Ray Sanchez from my arrest that first day. He emerged from the car, while another man in plain clothes, apparently a detective too, appeared from the other side. I thought of Marie Gustafson, picturing her opening her front door to see the police car. I took the stairs down from my room two-at-a-time and answered the front door at the first sound of the old-fashioned ringer.

Detective Sanchez gave me the smallest hint of a smile. “Good morning, Mister Collins,” he said, sounding almost apologetic. “I’m afraid you need to come with us for questioning.” For some reason, I took stock of how he was dressed in a plain gray suit and a white shirt and his tie again at half-mast. The boots he wore could have been the same one as last time. His partner was dressed in a similar fashion, though with plain, black shoes instead of boots. I also took note of the fact that Sanchez’ suit hung better on him than his partner’s.

Of course, I was going to play it dumb. “You’re here just to ask me some questions?” My voice felt constricted in my throat.

“No. You need to *come* with us for questioning,” Sanchez said again, emphasizing that any questioning wouldn’t take place here.

By now, I heard Marie behind me making some distressing noises. I turned to her and said, “It’s okay, Mrs. Gustafson. These men are just here to ask me some questions about my wife.”

“What about your wife?” she asked. Of course, she didn’t know about Nina. One of the few.

“Never mind, dear. She’s missing is all.”

“Missing?” she said, peering at me.

“Look, we’re going to have to take you in,” Sanchez said, a little less apologetic. He started reading me my rights, and there I was back in my TV police drama.

“Oh my,” I could hear Marie saying as I was led away. “What should I do?”

“It’s all right,” I said back over my shoulder. “I’m sure I’ll be back before too long,” I said, thinking that at least they hadn’t cuffed me this time.

I was directed into the back seat of their car, Sanchez placing his hand on my head and easing me in. Then he and his silent partner got in the front. Sanchez looked at me over the back of his seat, and then he glanced through the back window toward Marie’s small parking lot. “Where’s your car, Eddie?” he asked.

“I’m using another car,” I answered.

“Is that it parked over there?” He nodded toward my rented Pontiac.

“Yeah, that’s it. It’s a rental”

Sanchez exchanged a look with his partner. “Changes things, don’t you think?” he said to the partner.

With the partner driving, we moved off then, without the flashing lights this time. I met the curious gaze of Sanchez again looking at me over the back of his seat. Still trying to play dumb, I asked. “At least I’d feel better if I knew what you wanted to question me about.”

“Klaus Meyer was killed last night, sometime around ten o’clock.”

“This is Detective Dan Harris,” Sanchez said, motioning to his partner. We were in a room at the city police station, maybe the same room as the last time. I sat at a table, while Sanchez stood across from me with one foot on a chair. His partner sat across the room.

“Hello, Eddie,” Detective Harris said, nodding, his expression a blank.

Detective Ray Sanchez looked thoughtful, pursing his lips. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do, Eddie,” he said. “I’m going to read you your rights one more time, just in case. We don’t want any confusion, do we?” He started reading from a card, the Miranda card of all those television police dramas, only this one was real. He read slowly, pausing to look up at me, maybe to see if I was comprehending him, and the effect was chilling, which is probably what he intended. When he finished, he smiled and said, “Do you want to exercise any of these rights?”

I thought about that for a minute. “No.”

“Good. Can you tell us where you were last night?”

“What time?”

“How about around ten o’clock?”

“I was in my room.”

Detective Harris chimed in, “What time did you get there?”

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“A little after nine, I’d guess.”

He nodded. Of course they would verify that with Marie Gustafson. “Where were you before that?” Harris asked.

“I had dinner alone.”

“Did anybody see you?”

I shook my head. Sanchez was pursing his lips again in that thoughtful way. “Eddie,” he said. “Why did you rent a car? Something wrong with your other car?”

“No.”

“Where is it?”

“Parked out by the airport.”

Sanchez and Harris exchanged another look and Sanchez went back to his lip pursing. “Did you know a car just like your rental was seen out at Klaus Meyer’s house last night?” he asked.

“No.”

“Some shots were heard inside Meyer’s house between nine-thirty and ten. This is according to the neighbor living next door. It’s real quiet out there, you know? Then a car was heard driving away, and the next-door neighbor investigated. He’s the one who called us. We found Klaus Meyer inside the house dead, with two bullet wounds. We went up and down to all the houses around there, asking if they heard or saw anything. One citizen told us he drove by the house earlier and saw a car like your rental parked in front of the house. He also saw a man standing in the yard.” Sanchez looked at me thoughtfully. “He kind of matched your description—same height and build. What do you think about that?”

I looked at the two of them, considering what to do. It seemed clear that Marvin was the guy. Maybe he had gone out there for the same reason as I did, and maybe when he saw me, his suspicions that Klaus and I were in collusion somehow were fueled. He probably confronted Klaus, and maybe they argued and maybe they tussled, and then Marvin shot him. I didn’t know; I was just making this up as I went along, but it sounded plausible. But the two detectives apparently suspected me.

When they’d first come to take me in for questioning, it was probably just that, questioning. That was probably all it was going to be, perhaps because I had been seen with Klaus. But when Sanchez elicited the information from me about my rental car, and it clicked with what some witness had told him about seeing a similar car, it became something else. That’s what he had meant by his earlier comment to his partner in the car, “Changes things, don’t you think?”

I could stonewall them and admit nothing. I was smart enough to know right away that they didn't have anything. A vague description of a car that looked like my rental or someone standing in the yard that maybe matched my description wasn't going to be enough. On the other hand, if I told them the truth, it might give them something to go on, because I was convinced Marvin was the guy. "Okay," I finally said, "I was out there last night, at Klaus Meyer's house. And I think I know who killed Meyer, because I saw the guy out there too."

Sanchez sat down then, giving his partner another look. "Okay, we're listening."

They both waited for me. Finally Sanchez held his hands out, palms up, telling me to go on.

"I rented the car yesterday because somebody's been following me around."

Sanchez frowned. "Okay."

"It was Marvin Kainz."

"Marvin?" Detective Harris said, raising his eyebrows. "Where do you know him from?"

I described it for the two of them, my encounters with Marvin, first his following me in his old Cadillac and then in the other car, and how he approached me about Nina.

"What about Nina?" Harris asked.

"You know about her," I said, pointedly looking at him. "She's missing. You know about that."

"We know she's wanted in California. What does Marvin Kainz have to do with your wife?"

"That's just it. I don't know."

"What did he say when he approached you about her?" Harris asked.

"He wanted to know where she is. He thought I knew." I remembered something then. "The second time Marvin approached me, yesterday, I was at an outdoor restaurant with Klaus Meyer. It's a few blocks from his gallery." I had to admit to them that I hadn't noticed the name of the place.

"What were you doing there with Klaus Meyer?" Harris asked.

"I went to ask him about my wife. I had an idea she might be with him."

"Why would she be with him?"

"Because they used to be friends, years ago." I didn't want to go into any more detail than that.

"So was she with him?" Harris asked.

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The questions were beginning to annoy me, and it occurred to that maybe that was the intent. I took a breath before answering. "Meyer said he hadn't seen her in years. But that's not what I wanted to tell you. When Marvin came up, he as much as said the same thing I did, that he thought Meyer knew where Nina was. There was some shouting between the two of them. A waitress witnessed it. You should ask her."

"This was yesterday afternoon?" Sanchez asked. "What was the waitress's name?"

"How should I know?"

"We'd check it out," Sanchez said. "Except that you can't remember the name of the restaurant."

"It was in an old house with a big porch, down the street from Meyer's gallery. It had an outdoor patio with some tables."

Another look passed between the two. "Okay, Eddie," Sanchez said, "you rented the car because Marvin was following you. So you wanted to lose him, is that it? So why were you out at Klaus Meyer's house last night?"

I described following Klaus, first to the restaurant last night, where he'd had dinner with a woman I didn't know, and then to his home. When they asked why, I told them I didn't really believe him about Nina. I still thought he might be hiding her.

"So you followed Klaus Meyer to his home," Sanchez said. "Did you go inside?"

"No. I just walked around and looked in the windows," I said, realizing it sounded foolish.

"That's it? You looked in the windows? Then what?"

"Then I left."

"And that's it?"

"Pretty much. I went around looking in all the windows like a fool, and I didn't see anybody but Klaus."

Detective Harris was trying to suppress a smile, apparently at my *like a fool* comment.

"After that I left. When I was driving away, I saw Marvin Kainz. He was in his car, heading back toward Meyer's house."

Sanchez stared at me. "What time was this?"

"It was probably before nine o'clock."

"Tell us where you know Marvin Kainz from," Harris said.

"I already told you. I don't know him. He was just following me."

"How do you even know his name?"

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I told them how Helen had recognized that it had been Marvin following me, from my description of him and his Cadillac. “She called you guys about him, right?” I said.

Harris answered, “We never received any calls about Marvin Kainz.”

“You sounded like you knew who he was,” I said.

“Marvin used to be a policeman here,” Harris said. “Retired.”

Sanchez shifted his eyes over to his partner and then back to me. “Okay Eddie. So you saw Marvin Kainz at around nine o’clock. Then what did you do?”

“I went home and went to bed.”

“And what time was that?”

“A little after nine, like I told you. Maybe it was nine-fifteen.”

“It takes fifteen minutes to drive home from Tesuque?” Harris asked, his eyebrows raised.

“Just about. Maybe twenty. I wasn’t keeping track.”

“And your landlady saw you?”

“No. But I’m sure she heard me. I know she was still up.”

“We can check that,” Harris said.

They had me repeat the whole scenario a few more times, asking me specifics: what did I see when I was peering through the windows? what did the house look like from the outside? what was on the patio? how many other cars did I see on the road? was I sure it was Marvin I saw on the road? what did Helen Rodriguez have to do with anything?

After awhile the questions dwindled down and the two were silent, staring at me. Finally Sanchez rose from his chair, placing one hand on the back of his neck and kneading it. “Okay, we’re through here for now,” he said. “We’re going to have an officer escort you to a holding cell.” He opened the door and stuck his head out, motioning to someone. A uniformed officer entered and approached me, taking me by the arm and half-lifting me to a standing position and cuffing my hands behind my back.

“Is this necessary?” I said to Sanchez, at which he shrugged.

The cell wasn’t the same one as in my previous incarceration. The officer uncuffed me and gave me a gentle push into the cell, locking it behind me and leaving me alone with my thoughts. Of course, it had occurred to me right away that they probably didn’t believe me about Marvin, thinking that I was making him up. But Detective Harris had said that Marvin was once a cop. I wasn’t sure what to make of that piece of news. I went through a bad time then, letting my imagination run away with itself, checking my watch every

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thirty seconds. Then Detective Sanchez entered the tier and approached my cell, his cowboy boots making clumping sounds, and faced me, leaning on the bars with both hands. It had only been a half-hour, but it seemed much longer.

"I'd offer you a cigarette, but there's no smoking in here," he said cheerfully. "Besides, I think I remember you don't smoke."

Sitting on the thin bunk with my back to the wall, I stared back at him.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I don't think you had anything to do with Klaus Meyer's death. I never did. And you were smart to tell us the truth instead of trying to hide it."

That hardly made me breathe easier. Maybe he was just telling me that to see my reaction. "So what about Marvin Kainz?" I asked. "Are you looking for him?"

"We're considering that."

"You knew about Marvin. You knew he'd been following me."

He shook his head slowly. "How would we know that?"

"Because you received a call about him."

"From who?" he asked, staring at me through the bars. "Who told you that?"

"Helen Rodriguez." Of course, that wasn't quite the truth, but I wanted to see what he'd say.

He gave a little shrug and raised his eyebrows. "She told you that?"

"She did."

"Well, I never talked to Helen. I don't know her all that well. But, about Marvin? I did hear about him. At the time, I didn't think much of it."

So Helen had never officially informed the police, apparently, so she hadn't been lying to me, strictly speaking.

Sanchez held out both hands. "Maybe it's a possibility that Marvin killed Klaus Meyer. But we have nothing really to go on, other than what you just told us."

"Which you believed, of course."

"Sure, Eddie," he said. "Why wouldn't I believe it?"

"So Marvin's a suspect?"

"Maybe he is."

"So am I a suspect?"

He made a face. "Let's just say I believe you, okay? But officially we have to hold you. We have a dead body. In a place and at a time where you were seen."

“Look,” I said, standing and approaching the bars. “You just told me you didn’t think I had anything to do with Klaus Meyer’s death. If that’s the case, then what am I doing here?”

“I told you that unofficially,” he said. “But there’s been a murder. And you were there. You said so yourself. So we have to check out everything you told us.”

“And the first thing you should check out is Marvin Kainz,” I said, my voice going up a notch. “You should be looking for him right now.”

“All right, calm down, Eddie.” Sanchez was frowning at me through the bars.

“You know what I’m going to do now?” I said. “What do they say on those TV cop shows? I’m going to lawyer up. I’m exercising my rights to have an attorney.”

The first thing Roy Wyman told me when he arrived was that he wasn’t a criminal attorney. He only handled civil cases. But his was the only name I could come up when Sanchez had asked who I wanted to call. I related that to Wyman and he nodded.

“I can recommend you to a good criminal attorney I know,” he said, sitting across from me. The two of us were alone in the same room where the two detectives had earlier questioned me.

“That’s okay,” I said, calmer by now. “I’d just like you to work on getting me out of here.”

“You mean bail?” he said. “You would have to go in front of a judge first, and they’re not planning on that for now. But they can hold you for forty-eight hours on suspicion. And for questioning. I talked to the arresting officers.”

“Are they going to do that?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Even the forty-eight hours doesn’t mean that much. They can let you go before the time’s up and then turn around and re-arrest you, saying they have further evidence. It’s been known to happen.”

“Great. What other good news do you have?”

“Nothing, other than the fact that they’re not arraigning you. That could be a hopeful sign.”

“Did they tell you anything else?”

“They told me what you told them. Now why don’t you tell me?” He smiled, apparently liking the way it had sounded.

I recited it just the way I’d told Sanchez and Harris, also giving Wyman the background on Klaus and Nina and describing my several encounters with

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Marvin. But it was a selective story I was telling: I left out the start of my troubles, the Joe LaFont murder. I simply mentioned that my wife had disappeared and I was trying to find her. He frowned at that but said nothing. I also didn't mention the part Helen Rodriguez played in any of it, since Wyman was representing parties opposing Helen in a court, namely the people of Tecolote Pueblo. If he knew of any relationship with Helen, whatever that may be, he might view my earlier fact-finding visit to his office as a spy mission from the enemy camp and refuse to represent me now.

"What did this Marvin Kainz want with your wife?" Wyman asked.

"That's the question."

"So you saw him driving toward Meyer's house last night, and then you drove home and went to bed. Meyer is shot, and they arrest you. And you tell them this, just like you just told me." He considered this, looking at me with narrowed eyes.

"Right. And Marvin did it."

"You're sure of that?"

"Who else could it be?"

"How should I know?" He let out a brief laugh and then turned serious, looking at me from across the table. "That's some story." His eyebrows went up and an amused look crossed his face. I figured that he probably didn't believe me. "Somehow it doesn't make any sense," he finished.

"Well I didn't do it. You believe that, don't you?"

"I don't know what to believe," he said. "I don't think I have all the facts."

"Look, can you get me out of here or not?"

He made a small shrugging motion, barely lifting his shoulders. "Like I said, there has to be arraignment before there's bail."

"How about if you just go to them and say, either they arraign me or they let me go."

He looked doubtful at that. "I don't know what good that will do, but I can try." He went to the door and signaled to the uniformed officer waiting outside and he walked out. The officer led me back to my cell.

About fifteen minutes later, the officer returned. He opened the cell door and motioned me outside. We passed through the door leading from the tier of cells and were met by Roy Wyman and Detective Sanchez. Wyman leaned over and whispered in my ear, "What do you know? It worked."

Sanchez told me they had checked with Marie Gustafson and she verified the time I'd returned to her B&B. Actually, she put the time at around nine. Remembering then that the clocks in her house were always behind in time, I

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gave silent thanks to an old lady's forgetfulness. Sanchez also related that they had canvassed several restaurants in the vicinity of Canyon Road and found a waitress at the Feathered Serpent restaurant who could verify that Klaus and some creepy looking guy in a leather jacket had gotten into an argument. She identified the creepy guy as Marvin from a photo they showed her. Sanchez then recited to me in a bored tone that I was being released on my own recognizance and I was not to leave Santa Fe. I walked out into the afternoon sunshine, accompanied by Roy Wyman.

Chapter 12

Helen leveled her serious gaze at me. “The first thing you should understand is that Marvin is crazy. Otherwise, how could anyone explain what he’s doing?” After another minute of staring, her eyes went slightly out of focus and she looked away, her face taking on an amazed look. “I believe he may actually be certifiable.”

We were in her living room with the view down toward the city. Maribel had brought in coffee in a metal pitcher and a bottle of cognac. Helen poured the coffee while Maribel watched, glancing my way a few times. Then she left the room. “I don’t think I understood before how bad off he was,” she was saying. She asked me if I wanted a cognac to go with my coffee and I nodded. She poured from the bottle into a brandy glass and handed it to me. Ignoring the standard cognac drinking etiquette of sniffing and sipping, I drank it down in one gulp. The liquor going down made my eyes water, and I let loose a cough.

Earlier that morning, the day after my second release from the Santa Fe jail, she’d called me at Marie’s. “I want you to come up to the house,” she’d said. “We have to talk.”

Once again, I drove up the hill to see Helen. Maribel answered the door, not saying anything, looking as she did that first day I arrived, dressed in a long skirt almost to the floor and a peasant blouse, no longer the typical teenager. Instinctively, I glanced down at her feet. They were bare, and her toenails were unpolished. I stared at them.

Helen was waiting in the living room, also dressed in a long black skirt, topped with a white silk blouse. Her hair was swept up on top of her head, and she wore her glasses, a different look for her too. Again she looked the part of the Santa Fe businesswoman. She motioned me to sit.

“I’m sorry you were arrested again,” she said with a sympathetic look. “It shouldn’t have happened.”

“I’m getting used to it,” I replied.

“When I heard about it, I called right away to get you out.”

“I called a lawyer. He got me out.”

“You can think that, if you want,” she said. “I called down there and told them they better let you go or they’d have me for a problem.” She stared at me for a moment. “Marvin Kainz killed Joe LaFont,” she said and sat back to watch my reaction.

For some reason my mind didn't register surprise. Instead I stared at her for a long moment, noticing the wrinkles around her eyes and the way her lips moved slightly from one side to the other as if something she'd just eaten hadn't tasted quite right to her. Maybe I didn't believe I'd heard what she'd said, or maybe I was in shock from hearing it. When I finally spoke, my voice came out in a croak, "Why did he do it?"

"I'm not sure. But I am sure he did it."

After a few throat clearings, I asked, "How do you know?"

"Nina saw it."

I said nothing to that, trying to picture it in my head.

"Remember," Helen said, "when she came here I told you she was hysterical. That's why. She wasn't making much sense, but that much I got out of her."

I could feel something running out of me, maybe the will to go on with any of this. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I'm sorry Eddie. I didn't think it was a good idea to involve you in it."

My eyes wanted to close against the image of this woman I'd really never known sitting there telling me this in matter-of-fact tones. I asked, "What was that nonsense you gave me that first day I came here from California? You asked, did I think Nina killed Joe? And you said you didn't care if she killed him, you'd still love her anyway. What was that all about if you already knew?"

"I had to find out what you knew," she said. "That was my way. I'm sorry. Like I told you, I didn't want to involve you in any of this."

Involve me in what? I thought. "Helen, what kind of sense does that make? Nina comes to you with a story about Marvin shooting Joe, and you don't want to tell me about it?" I watched her for a minute while she stared back at me with her patient look. "What was Marvin doing out there anyway?" I asked.

"I'm afraid I sent him. I'm sorry." She shook her head. "Joe had been calling me almost every day for about a week. He was in trouble."

"You sent Marvin out there? I thought he didn't work for you anymore."

"He did at the time."

"What kind of trouble was Joe in?" I asked. My mind wasn't making sense of any of this. "I didn't know anything about it."

"He wouldn't have told you," she said. "But he called me several times, acting scared. He related some wild stories about some group he'd fallen in with at a club where he was hanging out."

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I knew the place she was referring to, The Feline Club. Nina had confided to me about it, after Joe had told her. With me Joe was usually reserved, but not with Nina. At least that part of what Helen was telling me did make some sense. “So what was Joe afraid of?” I asked after a minute.

“Well he wasn’t all that coherent, but the gist of it was that there was a lot of drugs being passed around, and he started using. And I think he was being blackmailed.”

“Blackmailed about what? It couldn’t be because he was gay. Everybody knew that. That club he hung out in was a gay bar.”

She waved that off. “It wasn’t about that. It was about the drugs. He was afraid that you’d find out and he’d lose his job.”

“Helen, I’m having a hard time believing this. I wouldn’t have fired him. Did he really believe I would?”

“You didn’t know Joe that well,” she said, giving me a slow-blinking look.

I had to admit she was right about that. “This still doesn’t make sense. Why did you send Marvin out there?”

“Because I thought Joe might be having a breakdown. I was always very protective of him. He was a delicate creature, if you know what I mean. I think you do.”

“So what was Marvin supposed to do about it? And why Marvin, if you thought he was crazy, for Christ’s sake?”

“I sent him to look into it. I thought he could *do something*. I don’t know, maybe talk some sense into Joe.” She sighed. “Or talk to whoever was blackmailing Joe, if that’s what it was.”

“So what are you saying, Marvin was going to use his muscle to persuade whoever was making Joe crazy, for whatever reason? And you sent Marvin out there for that purpose, knowing he was a nut case.”

“I really didn’t think he was crazy, at least not then. I do now, though, after Joe. And after the other night, with Klaus Meyer.”

I wanted to shake my head to try to bring everything into focus. “So Marvin goes out to California. Then what happened?”

“That’s the part I’m not clear on. I just know what Nina told me, that Marvin shot Joe.”

I thought for a minute. “So Nina comes here to you and then she takes off again. Then Marvin shows up looking for her.” I was ticking off the events on my fingers. “He comes after me because he thinks I know something. Didn’t he approach you too, asking about Nina?”

“No. He was afraid of me,” she said, showing a slight smile. “He probably thought I’d heard what happened by then and knew I’d have had him arrested.”

“But you let him come after me.”

“Look Eddie. As soon as you told me he was around I had the Santa Fe police looking for him and that car of his.”

“That’s funny. They told me you never called them.”

“I couldn’t do call them officially,” she said. “I had a few of my friends on the force looking for Marvin.”

“Do they know about Marvin shooting Joe? What about the Los Gatos police? Do they even know?”

“Not yet they don’t.”

It occurred to me then that Helen might have been afraid of revealing that much because it could implicate her. Nina too, of course. But Nina was already implicated. So what else was going on here that Helen wasn’t telling me?

“Why was Marvin looking for Nina?” I asked, afraid that I already knew why.

She gave me a sober look. “I believe he wanted to kill her too, so she couldn’t implicate him in Joe’s murder.”

Even guessing that much myself, her words still had a chilling effect. “This Marvin was a cop, wasn’t he?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

She nodded. “He retired and then he came to work for me. I knew him before, though. For a long time.” She reached across and poured me another cognac. She was a mind reader. I had the sense this time to down less than half of it. “Let me tell you a story,” she said, sitting back. “Remember when I told you about Nina’s father Bert, when Nina was just a little girl? And about Nina’s mother, Rae Ann. Rae Ann wanted to get rid of Bert, remember? And there were two police friends of Rae Ann’s. One of them was Marvin Kainz. Marvin started seeing Rae Ann, even before Bert was out of the picture. Marvin was one of the ones who helped Bert make up his mind to leave. Marvin liked Rae Ann and he liked Nina. He was protective of her. That’s one of the reasons I hired him, after he left the force. After Rae Ann died, Marvin still wanted to be a part of Nina’s life, but you know Nina. She didn’t even notice him. Anyway, she was with me, and I had Marvin working for me. But he never had anything to do with her after that. Her choice and mine too.”

“So Marvin was protective of Nina,” I said, trying to catch up. “He’s so protective that now he wants to kill her? Is that about it?”

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She raised her eyebrows but said nothing. Right now I didn't like Aunt Helen very much.

"And he kills Klaus Meyer in the bargain," I added. "With my help." In all of this, from the first hearing of his murder the day before, I hadn't given Klaus a second thought, except in how it affected me.

"What do you mean, with your help?" she asked.

"Marvin wouldn't have gone after Klaus if it wasn't for me," I said, realizing the truth in that.

"Don't be melodramatic, Eddie."

"What other explanation is there?" An image of Klaus went through my head, his handsome face and the polite way he had of smiling, with raised eyebrows, as if he wanted you to share his smile with him. I liked Klaus, even if I hadn't known it at the time. Detective Sanchez had told me he was shot once in the chest and once in the head. The image in my mind didn't change, the polite smile was still there, only now there was blood running down Klaus Meyer's face. "Shit," I muttered, rubbing my face.

"Don't beat yourself up about it, Eddie," Helen said. "It was Marvin who killed him. I'm not going to tell you I know why, but it was him. Just be glad it wasn't you he finally came after. That's all you need to know."

"Yeah," I said. "Look, tell me something. That day Nina came here. Who drove her?" I waited. "Was it Klaus?"

"I don't know, Eddie. What makes you think she didn't come alone?"

"Let's say I'm just assuming she was with someone."

Helen looked tired suddenly. "What difference does it make anyway?"

"Why did she leave here so suddenly, like you told me?"

"I don't know that either. I wish I did."

I waited for her to say more, but she kept silent. I watched her sipping her coffee. My cup was still full. As if by a signal, Maribel entered the room and retrieved the pitcher. "Shall I bring some more?" she asked, looking at Helen, who shook her head. It was probably time for me to go, now that she'd given her bad news.

"Hello," I said to Maribel, giving her a smile that I knew wasn't all that happy. "How are you?"

"I am fine," she answered, sounding almost formal. "And you are well?"

"I've had better days," I said.

She smiled at me and left the room.

Helen watched her until she was gone, and she turned to me and said, "Has anything been going on between you two, Eddie?"

"Between what two?" I said. I knew what she was asking, though.

Stephen Hazlett

“I think you know what I’m talking about.” She looked again at the doorway where Maribel had disappeared. “Something about the way she looks at you. Maybe you’ve been looking back. She told me you took her to lunch one day.”

I shrugged. “She’s a nice girl,” I said. “I like her. And she seems lonely.”

“She’s also young and impressionable. But you’re right, it has been lonely for her here. Anyway, she’s going back to Mexico soon. I think she needs to be with her family.”

“You’re sending her back home because you think something’s been going on between us?”

“Don’t be ridiculous Eddie,” Helen said with a tired look. “No, I’m actually cutting back on the staff here. Business is down, I’m a little strapped right now for cash, and I have to let people go. I don’t have your kind of money. Besides, I think it’s time she was with her family and friends again. Like you said, she’s lonely.”

When I left a while later and walked up to the parking lot, Maribel was waiting for me at the top of the path. “I didn’t see your car,” she said. “I thought you maybe left already.”

“I’m driving a different one today.” I pointed to the Pontiac rental.

“Oh, that’s a nice one too,” she said, narrowing her eyes looking at it. “I am going back to Mexico.” I liked hearing the way she said it—slurring the X with a little lisp.

“I know.” I nodded sympathetically. “I’m sorry to see you go.”

She was standing on the packed earth at the side of the brick path, looking at me. “I don’t want to go, but the Señora says I should. She says business is not good. Four other people are leaving too.” She nodded her head up the hill toward the spa. “But they work there all the time. I am only helping out sometimes. I am not a real employee here. I think she is sending me home for another reason.” Her hair was hanging down, covering part of her face. One corner of her mouth twisted down. She turned and walked around to the back of the house.

Later that night, Marie Gustafson knocked on my door. I was lying in the dark feeling sorry for myself. “Mr. Collins?” Marie called, tapping lightly.

I sat up and switched on the light.

“You have another call downstairs,” her muffled voice said through the door.

I opened the door and looked at her. “Do you know who it is?”

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“A woman is all I know. I think it’s the same one as the last time.” She turned and walked away in that stiff, listing way she had.

In the front parlor, the receiver was sitting on the table next to the phone base. Marie had obviously returned back to her television, which was blaring out what sounded like a commercial from the back room. I picked up the receiver. “Hello.”

“Hello, Eddie, how are you?” Maribel’s voice answered, sounding casual like she’d just called to pass the time of day.

“I’m fine. Is anything wrong?”

“No. I am down at the plaza and I thought you might like to meet me someplace.”

“How did you get there?”

“I walked.”

“You walked all the way down there in the dark?” I had a mental image of her picking her way down the dark road.

“It is not so far,” she said. “I’m not afraid of the dark.”

After a minute I asked, “What are you doing there?”

“Oh, I just wanted to get out of the house,” she replied. “I wanted to go for a walk. I thought you might like to have something to eat with me or something.”

“Where are you now?”

“I am just at a phone booth.”

Through the phone I became aware of traffic noises in the background, and I pictured her standing next to an open phone, holding the receiver to one ear while covering the other ear with her free hand. “Okay, I’ll come down there right away,” I said. “Do you remember where the LaFonda Hotel is? How about if I meet you there in ten minutes?”

She was waiting in the lobby, looking like a little girl in a chair too big for her, her hands gripping the arms, watching with her big eyes the people coming and going through the lobby. She didn’t see me right away because I came in through the back entrance. When she spotted me, she stood, giving me her smile, her brows lifting and her mouth turning upward. She wore plain jeans and a dark jacket and flat shoes on her feet.

She surprised me by offering her hand as I walked up to her. “Hello, Eddie.”

I took her hand and held it for a few seconds and then let it go. Nodding toward the restaurant, I asked, “Would you like to have some dinner?”

She looked over without much interest. “I’m not really too hungry. Maybe we just get a drink.” She pointed toward the lounge.

“You’re underage,” I said. “They wouldn’t serve you a drink.”

“They would if I was with you,” she said, looking into my face. “Back home they do if you are with someone older. It doesn’t matter so much there, the age.”

We found a table inside the lounge. I ordered a beer and Maribel ordered a Margarita. The waitress shifted her eyes to her for a second and then went to get our drinks.

“So you just felt like taking a walk,” I said.

She leaned forward. “I don’t feel so good. I thought I would ask you what I should do.”

“Don’t feel so good how?”

“I don’t want to go back home. I am old enough to stay. What do you think I can do?” She was looking at me with her brows lowered. “Can I get a job someplace?”

“I don’t know. Do you have a work permit?”

She frowned. “No. Just what Señora Helen got for me. I’m not even sure what it is. But I can get papers, can’t I?”

“I think you have to have somebody to sponsor you for that. You know, offer you a job.”

“Maybe you could offer me a job,” she said.

“I have a computer company in California.” I said it as if that explained it.

“So” she said. “I know about computers. I took computer courses in school back home.”

“Well, but it’s not that simple. Actually, it’s not even my company anymore. I’m being forced out.”

“Forced out?” She gave me a puzzled look. “Why?”

“It seems that my problems with my wife aren’t so good for business.”

“Oh,” she said, nodding then. “I’m sorry.”

The waitress brought our drinks and set them on the table. Maribel picked up her glass and downed half the slushy liquid in one gulp.

“Do you drink those a lot?” I asked, watching her.

“Not really,” she said, wiping foam from her mouth. “Sometimes. But I like them anyway.” She shrugged one shoulder and sighed theatrically. “Maybe I get a job someplace else. Maybe I become an illegal. What do you think?” she said. “I could become a wetback.” The thought seemed to amuse her.

“Not such a great idea,” I said.

“Would you sponsor me if I was a wetback?” she asked, a teasing look in her eyes.

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Not amused, I considered the conjured-up image of her emerging dripping from a dark river. "I don't think you'd like picking lettuce for a living," I said.

She reached over and touched my arm. It was a gesture that I'd grown to like. "Maybe it is foolish of me to even ask you all this," she said, "even if I am only joking. Maybe I'm just sad about going back."

"I'll be sorry to see you go too." I said, trying to say something reassuring.

"I am not the same person as I was when I come here," she said. "I am not the same person as I was a month ago. Do you know what I mean? I am nineteen years old. When I was eighteen, I didn't know anything. I don't even know what that means," she concluded with a surprised look on her face.

"It just means that you're young," I said.

"Sure, I am young." She regarded me. "I should be enjoying my life now. But I don't even get a life here before I am sent home. Is that fair?"

She didn't seem the same at all. Maybe it was just a difference of the setting and the night and the drink in front of her. "Maybe you're overreacting," I said.

"Sure, I am overreacting." She nodded, appearing satisfied with that description. "Do you know why Señora Helen wants to send me back? She thinks I'm stupid." She downed the rest of her drink and set her glass down, frowning at it, reminding me of a little girl again.

"She doesn't think you're stupid. Why do you say that?"

The waitress came by and picked up Maribel's empty glass, looking at her questioningly. Maribel nodded to her and turned back to me. "She say it to me, 'You're stupid, Mari. He is married.' She means you, of course. She knows I like you."

Even in the dim light, I could see her dark face flushing. I didn't trust myself to say anything.

"That's why she's really sending me back," Maribel said.

"It probably isn't all that simple."

"Oh, it is," she said, waving a hand. "It really is. I am not so stupid though. I know you are married and you love your wife. I am not that dumb."

"I don't think you're dumb at all."

"Maybe I am. You know I feel something for you, right?" She studied me like she was wondering what I would say next.

"I know that. I like you too."

She nodded then, as if my answer was the right one. "Maybe I just like you like a friend," she said, touching my hand. "Maybe that's all. And I am feeling bad because I don't want to go back. It's my problem, no?" She

brightened then, folding her hands in front of herself. Her second drink arrived by then, and Maribel immediately drained half of it. "What if I get drunk?" she said, sounding happy at the thought.

"Let's don't do that," I said, visions in my head of bringing her home in a giggling, falling down condition, like sneaking a high school girl home after a night of partying.

"Anyway," Maribel sighed, "you probably think I'm pretty silly. Besides, you have your own problems." She looked at me with a solemn expression and leaned toward me and said, "Why don't you tell me something about your wife? I like to know."

She'd had a third Margarita by the time we left. I had just the one beer. But she walked steadily enough next to me through the underground garage to my car, taking my arm halfway there. Our footsteps echoed through the place. It was deserted, just rows of parked cars with no one in sight, and an image of Marvin Kainz popped into my head. I looked all around, suddenly nervous.

"I think I am drunk," she whispered seriously. "I have nothing to eat since lunch. It can do that, can't it?"

"Yeah, it can," I answered, gripping her hand that held my arm. "Alcohol on an empty stomach can do that." I was still scanning the place, looking between each row of cars as we walked by.

"I hope I am not sick tomorrow."

I drove her home, checking my rearview the whole time. When I stopped at the house, parking in the darkened lot at the top of the path, she didn't get out right away. "Thank you for coming and for listening to me," she said. "I think I am just lonely. Maybe I will be okay when I get back home again with my family. I hope I see you again. Do you mind if I kiss you goodnight?" Without waiting for an answer, she leaned over and kissed my cheek and slid her face over and kissed me briefly on the mouth. It was over too quickly for me to respond. She got out of the car then, and I watched her run down the path toward the big house.

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