

PROJECT MOSES

A Mystery Thriller

Robert B. Lowe

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Dedicated to Candace
With thanks for her encouragement and support

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Exodus 11:1

“And the LORD said unto Moses, Yet will I bring one plague more upon Pharaoh, and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go hence...”

Chapter 1

TALL AND SLENDER with well-coiffed silver hair that touched her shoulders, Judge Miriam Gilbert was a handsome woman with sparkling blue eyes who still attracted admiring looks from men, even if the looks were somewhat less carnal than in the past.

At the age of 52, after a decade as a San Francisco Municipal Court Judge, Miriam Gilbert had long ago developed the most important quality required for a jurist charged with resolving the petty crimes and minor civil disputes that filled her courtroom – infinite patience.

But, she was struggling today to remain stoic behind the particle board and formica bench at the front of the courtroom. She watched the middle-aged juror twist her fat hands until the knuckles were red and swollen. The woman shifted uncomfortably in her seat as she scanned the people sitting around her in the jury box.

The juror was about Judge Gilbert’s age but the resemblance ended there. She wore a blue, vaguely nautical dress at least two sizes and 15 years too young for her. Her face was loose and malleable, shifting back and forth between fear and disdain as she looked at her fellow jurors.

Raising her hand like a child in class, the woman fought her sobs as she spoke through lips painted blood red.

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“I am not crazy!” she said. She took two deep breaths. “They kept yelling and yelling at me. And I am *not* going to change my mind.”

“He is innocent! *That* one did not prove his case.” Her face trembling, the juror jabbed a lethal-looking fingernail at the prosecutor just beyond the jury box.

Orson Adams stared back at his accuser, removed his tortoise shell-rimmed glasses and frowned.

The muscles around Judge Gilbert’s left eye twitched slightly. She didn’t mind so much that the hung jury was going to waste four days of trial time devoted to a minor case. That was par for the course. What bothered her was a headache that had started about the time the bailiff knocked on the door to Judge Gilbert’s chambers and said: “They want to come out. I think they’ve run out of names to call each other.”

The judge cleared her throat, a signal that the histrionics and squabbling that had emanated from the jury box for the past ten minutes were over. She stared at the empty notepad in front of her for a few seconds before looking up.

“It is apparent to me that this jury will not reach a unanimous verdict,” she said. “They have deliberated for two days - as much time as it took for the state and the defense to present their cases. Therefore, I declare a mistrial.”

“The prosecution will inform the Court within one week whether the state intends to retry this case. I thank the jury for its efforts. I know it has taken much of your time to be here and that the last two days have not been easy.” Judge Gilbert made it a point to nod in the jury’s direction.

Then, she looked over at the defendant, an almost emaciated young man with dirty blond hair tied in a ponytail. He sat beside his attorney, a corpulent man wearing dark-blue pinstripes, pink tie and a forced smile that looked more like a snarl.

“Mr. Warrington will remain free on bond,” she said.

An hour later, the lawyers, jurors and courthouse staff had joined the evening traffic jam. With her black robe now hanging

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in the closet of her chambers, Judge Gilbert wore a long-sleeved white blouse and a pleated beige skirt as she settled behind her large desk stained yellow to bring out the wood grain through the heavily polished sheen. Behind her were volumes of California cases, bound in blue leather. A cup of Misty Mint tea sat on her right, hot and steaming. Next to it lay two capsules of Darvon painkiller. The headache was worse. It now seemed to fan outward from the center of her brain to her scalp.

Judge Gilbert looked over the assorted papers laying on her desk. She picked up a large envelope that she had opened in the morning. It was teal blue and embossed with a logo in darker blue along the left side that she had never seen before. It was a rising spiral with flowers and bunches of grapes hanging from it.

Judge Gilbert reached into the envelope and pulled out a yellow rose that had been pressed flat. She held it to her nose, inhaled and was rewarded with the aroma of cinnamon. She was reminded of hot apple cider and sweet potato pie.

She set the rose on the desk and grabbed her letter opener, a gift from a former law clerk. She inserted it under the flap of another envelope and tore it open with a satisfying rip. She skimmed the letter inside. Then, Judge Gilbert turned to the next envelope sitting in the tray on the corner of her desk.

The next morning the body of Judge Miriam Gilbert was still at her desk when her law clerk went into her chambers. Her head lay on the desktop, eyes staring at a blank wall. Her silver hair was stained brown where it lay in a puddle of cold tea.

ORSON ADAMS WAS more than a little miffed when he was assigned the Warrington case. After three years of prosecuting crime, he had enough seniority to avoid the dog shit cases. Here was a burglary with nothing actually taken, just forced entry with intent to steal. The fact that the case had ended

in a hung jury that afternoon was the capper. What a colossal waste of his time.

Adams hadn't handled a case in Municipal Court for a year. Being back there the past four days made him wonder if he was spinning his wheels as a prosecutor. He had progressed rapidly through the District Attorney's office. Being one of a handful of black prosecutors in the office didn't hurt. Still, maybe it was time to get out on his own. Spread his wings and go private. He could defend the scumbags he had been putting behind bars, pocket the big fees and buy a house in Tiburon.

Adams rounded the elevated indoor track at the Run N Racquet Club for the 33rd time. He was in excellent shape at 30 and, with his tailored suits, Adams cut a dashing figure in the DA's office. He frowned again at the memory of the matronly juror who had blown the whole goddamn trial and blamed him...HIM for failing to prove the case.

"Bleeding heart hag," he muttered to himself.

He should have guessed that the middle-aged juror might take a maternal, boys-will-be-boys attitude toward Warrington. The ages were right. During jury selection, Adams hadn't even tried to inquire into whether the juror had any children. Adams had found that older women usually make great jurors for the prosecution. He wasn't accustomed to worrying about them being on the jury unless they wore peace medallions or were former Berkeley radicals.

Adams finished his 44th and final lap and slowed to walk two more, just to warm down and keep the lactic acid from pooling in his legs. He stopped for a moment at the railing overlooking the racquetball courts.

Down below on Court One, surrounded by glass on two sides, a pair of attractive blonds wearing headbands and Spandex tights and tops in purples and pinks were grunting enthusiastically as they pounded a blue ball around the court.

The smaller woman was named Diana. She had a gorgeous body, buxom yet athletic. She was a fixture at the club and

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invariably attracted a crowd of male spectators as she and her playing partners sweated through their skintight outfits.

Adams made his way downstairs to the men's locker room. He showered and stuffed his running clothes back into a Nike gym bag. He put his tie in his coat pocket and flung the jacket over his shoulder.

Adams walked in the breeze across the four lanes of Folsom Street. It was balmier than usual and the wind carried the faintest smell of the ocean. The scent made him hungry and his mind shifted to restaurants. Last night they had eaten Thai. Maybe Diana would like the new South of Market restaurant, the one that specialized in seafood cooked on a gigantic rotisserie imported from Naples or somewhere. How did they cook fish on that thing, anyway? Wire baskets?

When he heard the engine gunning behind him, Adams barely had time to turn his head before the black pickup slammed into him.

Chapter 2

ENZO LEE STARED at the blank computer screen in front of him, focusing on the blinking cursor, a dash of amber that seemed to be whispering at him, “Come on...Come on...Come on...Come on...” He had been watching it for 20 minutes, through two tall cups of oily cafe au cafeteria, waiting for the words to flow into his fingertips, or at least materialize somewhere in his cerebral cortex where he could dredge them out. Nothing. A total blank.

He had lost it at some point in the past two days. It had been there when he covered the story about the unfortunate casket mix up involving the mayor’s deceased mother and a dead Saint Bernard: (“*San Franciscans long convinced that the city is run by a son of a bitch got further confirmation yesterday...*”) The words had been flowing for the article about the boxer who fought back from insect-borne Lyme disease: (“*Welterweight Marvin Grossman took a tickin’ but kept on lickin’...*”) And, Lee knew damn well he still had the touch when he wrote the piece about the mysterious sheep mutilations: (“*Picture Lambchop costarring in the Texas Chainsaw Massacre and you have some idea what’s been happening in Solano County...*”)

In the two years since 1992 when he moved from New York to San Francisco and joined the News, Lee had successfully revived his journalism career, staking out his turf here as the undisputed King of Fluff. His specialty was the light feature - spitting out pithy one-liners, bad puns and witty opening paragraphs of dubious taste. Like most journalists, Lee had a love-hate relationship with his editors. But, his was a little more complicated. He knew the editors loved his light, well-read feature stories they often outlined in a box and featured on the front page. But, the “story lite” reputation came with a dollop of

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derision. They questioned whether he had the chops to tackle a tough news story. Lee had no misgivings about that. But, he was happy to skirt controversy and leave any worries behind after he filed his daily feature and exited the downtown News building.

So, Lee was worried. After all, he had spent the previous day interviewing the man who held the unofficial San Francisco record for pierced body parts (72 unnatural holes) and watching the winner of the Egg Producers' Cool Hand Luke Contest consume 59 hard-boiled eggs. This was a bad time for the creative juices to run dry.

"Hey, Enzo!" yelled City Editor Ray Pilmann from across the room.

"Yeah. What?" replied Lee.

"Come here, willya?"

Lee traversed the newsroom, threading his way through the mismatched desks and the oddly placed aluminum poles carrying computer cables to the ceiling. He dodged the frayed seams in the ash-colored indoor-outdoor carpeting and the mounds of brittle, yellowed newspapers some of his coworkers kept stacked in the newsroom. He finally arrived at the small office with a window onto the newsroom from which Pilmann directed the News' reporting staff.

"Look, Enzo," said Pilmann. He was waving a square piece of newsprint in the air. "I need you to cover this."

Lee was uncomfortable in Pilmann's office. The city editor was a big man with a bad temper who flapped around the newsroom like a penguin in heat. The modest size of Pilmann's office left little room to maneuver. When Pilmann jumped to his feet and started waving his arms around – which was his wont in meeting with Lee – the reporter found himself pinned against the flimsy office wall. The four-foot saguaro cactus in the corner – a keepsake from Pilmann's early editing days in Arizona – just heightened his discomfort.

Lee snatched the paper from the editor's fingers. It was a story that had appeared that morning in the rival Chronicle

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about the death the previous night of a prosecutor named Orson Adams in a hit-and-run incident.

It looked suspiciously like a breaking news story and that bothered Lee. He'd worked hard to develop his feature specialty. It had become a comfortable niche in the newsroom, a nest cushioned with daily fluff he could usually churn out at will. One hard news story tends to beget another. Before you know it you're covering the courts, city hall or, worst of all, education. God, it was depressing just to think about it.

"Jesus, Ray," said Lee, raising a dubious eyebrow in Pilmann's direction. "This looks like *news*. I mean real hard news. I don't know about this. Not my usual thing, you know."

"You're a reporter goddamit! Duffy's out covering a brush fire in San Rafael! What else you got coming?"

Lee thought for a moment. At the rate he had been writing, he'd be lucky to finish the feature stories by the weekend, much less by the first deadline. What the hell.

"Okay, boss. You got it. Let me at 'em. Where do I go? What do I do? Is there an undercover angle here?"

"Christ, Enzo," said Pilmann. "All ya gotta do is call the fucking police department. Call McGuire and see if there's anything new for Christ sake!"

"Oh." As he walked back to his desk, Lee pulled off his wire-rimmed glasses and polished the clear lenses with a handkerchief. He was grinning. It was great pulling Pilmann's chain once in a while, instead of the reverse.

LEE HAD MET Jim McGuire, the police flack, when he wrote a profile of a police officer busted for moonlighting as a transvestite hooker: (*"When Officer John Riley said, 'Put 'em up!, ' it came with a wink and a pout..."*) McGuire had seemed like a decent guy, not someone who viewed the press as a mortal enemy like some of the cops.

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Lee consulted the Chronicle clip closely, typed a few notes into his computer and got McGuire on the line.

“There ain’t much new,” said McGuire. “Your basic hit-and-run. The only new development is that we found the truck this morning, stripped clean, at China Basin. It belonged to some yahoo in Fremont who said it was stolen while he was buying his girl a present at K-Mart. Big spender, huh? Anyway, the grill’s a mess and we’re checking for prints.”

“Okay. What about this eyewitness from the health club?” asked Lee, checking the clip Pilmann had given him to make sure he had it right. “If you can believe the Chronicle, she said the truck swerved to take him out.”

“Yeah. Well, there were some skid marks,” said McGuire. “But, it was probably just a guy who stole the truck, got soused, and was driving all over the road. What else could it be?”

Lee hesitated for a moment.

“Well,” he said. “He’s a black guy, right? Could there be anything there?”

McGuire didn’t say anything for a minute. When he did, it was slow and deliberate like he was explaining to a five-year-old why the kid couldn’t take the family car for a spin.

“Look, Enzo. I know you don’t cover the police beat. I know you specialize in...uh...features. When we find who did it, we’ll find out why. Don’t try to sell papers with bullshit theories.”

Lee sighed. The last thing he needed was to piss off the top S.F.P.D. media guy. And, for a story like this one.

“Yeah. Okay,” Lee said. “Look, man. Thanks for the information...as always.”

“Well...okay,” said McGuire. “Look, I’ve gotta go. Tell Duffy to get down to the Hall of Justice if he wants confirmation on the dead judge. I won’t get the report until this afternoon.”

“A judge?” said Lee.

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“Yeah. It just came over the radio five minutes ago,” said McGuire. “Judge...umm...Gilbert. Miriam Gilbert. Municipal Court. They just found her. She croaked during the night in her chambers. Duffy probably picked it up on your scanner.”

“But, Duffy’s in San Rafael,” said Lee as warning sirens screeched in his head. As he glanced up, he watched Ray Pilmann leave his office and begin the long waddle to Lee’s desk.

MORE COPS THAN usual were milling around the dingy, cavernous third-floor corridor of the San Francisco Hall of Justice. Lee knew that behind the courtrooms was a rabbit warren of dark passageways and windowless offices. The area was where the judges and their staffs worked and was off limits to the public. Judge Gilbert’s chambers would be buried there someplace.

Lee pulled out his thin notepad from the back of his waistband. He was wearing faded jeans, a V-neck maroon sweater over a black T-shirt and a beat-up pair of Asics running shoes. He had come to the newsroom planning to sit at his computer all day. As a feature writer, Lee might have to spend one day on a ranch with a horse whisperer and the next following a chimney sweep down a smoke vent. So his dress code was flexible. Lee checked his watch, a Rexall special. He had 15 minutes to the 10 a.m. deadline.

Two patrolmen standing outside a doorway in black uniforms looked particularly forbidding. Lee walked over.

“Enzo Lee of the News,” he said. “May I go in there?”

The cops looked at Lee’s informal attire. They exchanged looks. The bigger one with huge ears, an overdeveloped schnoz and a smug expression smiled insolently and shook his head.

Lee tried again. “Is this where the judge is? The dead one?”

They looked at each other again. The big one shrugged and grinned again, a little more malevolently.

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Hell, thought Lee, becoming annoyed. These bastards were going to make it rough and he didn't have time for it. Pilmann was going to rip him a new one if he didn't come back with this story.

"What the hell is the problem here?" he said. "I'm the goddamn Press! I wanna talk to somebody!"

Dumbocop looked absolutely gleeful now. He grunted mirthfully as he and his buddy began advancing in a pincer movement. Lee tried to think of something to say or somewhere to move.

"Ah, Christ," Lee muttered to himself as he slowly gave ground. A slow-motion image flashed into his mind of the two cops flailing away with their sticks while Lee absorbed the punishment. How had the day turned so rotten?

"Atten-SHUN!"

The cops froze. Lee hadn't heard any footsteps or seen the door open. But, in the doorway behind the pair stood a black woman, wearing an amused smile and with her hands on her hips. Lee guessed she was in her late 30s, about his own age. She wore her hair in a profusion of shoulder-length braids and had on glasses with black rims, a dark gray pants suit and held a radio in her right hand.

"What's up, boys!" she said, glancing left and then right at the patrolmen in a quick assessment of the situation. She chuckled as she shook her head. The uniformed cops gave her a sour look and grimaced in a poor imitation of a smile.

She walked into the hallway, letting the door close behind her. Lee left the sentinels behind and walked beside her, savoring the protection.

"Allow me to introduce myself," said Lee when they were out of earshot of the two uniformed watchdogs. "Enzo Lee of the News."

The woman gave Lee a critical once over. "Where's Duffy?" she demanded.

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“Brush fire,” said Lee. “Somewhere near San Rafael. You know how quickly townhouses can go up. Stuff burns like dry tinder.”

“Hmmm,” she said, looking at the reporter even more closely now, starting with the worn Asics and moving up to his face. She raised both eyebrows approvingly.

Lee had wavy, jet black hair that was beginning to gray at the temples. He was a lean six footer with fine but not delicate features. The Chinese blood from his mother and the European influence of his father had made Lee into something of an ethnic Rorschach. In his travels, natives in such disparate locales as Hong Kong, Istanbul, Guadalajara and Maui would often mistake him for one of their own. A gay friend had once told Lee he looked like the product of a marriage between the actors Sylvester Stallone and B.D. Wong.

“So... ahh... they sent me down to cover the dead judge,” Lee explained. “What’s her name? Is it Gilbert?”

“You asking me to confirm the story, right, Scoop?” said the woman. “Don’t try to bullshit me now.”

Lee glanced at his watch. He was out of time for bullshitting or anything else. His only hope was the direct approach.

“Okay,” he said. “You’ve got it right. I’ve got a deadline in ten minutes. I’m desperate to confirm the story.”

She thought for a minute.

“Okay, Scoop. You’re right. The law clerk of Judge Miriam Gilbert found the judge dead in her chambers when she got to work this morning. We don’t know the cause of death. Stick around, I’ll probably have more in thirty.”

“I’ll be here,” said Lee as he walked toward the nearest pay phone, scribbling on his notepad as he went. “And thanks. Say, what’s your name?”

“Detective Bobbie Connors. Spelled like the tennis player.”

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“ENZO!” THE VOICE of Ray Pilmann burst through the telephone and into his head.

“Ray!” Lee replied. From the bank of telephones at one end, the third-floor corridor of the San Francisco Hall of Justice seemed like a massive tunnel. Looking toward the opposite end more than a city block away, Lee could see a cross section of the city’s citizenry, bored jurors, anxious defendants and tired lawyers waiting on the plain wood benches that lined the dungeon-like corridor.

Lee noticed a few heads turn his way. It sounded like Pilmann was at his apoplectic worst. Some of the reporters had actually started a pool, betting on the time of day that Pilmann finally would have a coronary. Lee considered it wishful thinking, like throwing money into a wishing well. He had contributed thirty bucks.

“What kind of bullshit story was that about the judge... whatshername?” said Pilmann

“Gilbert.”

“Yeah. What is this bullshit?”

“It’s called deadline reporting, Ray. You knew the situation. It’s called busting my ass to get any kind of story at all.”

“Yeah. But what did she die from? Was she killed? Did she kill herself? You can’t tell from this story. Was she hacked to death or did she choke on a piece of meat? What’s the story for the next edition?”

Christ, thought Lee. The story was turning into a four-alarm disaster. The next edition?

“Uhh...well...it looks like natural causes,” said Lee. “No obvious signs of violence or trauma. She was at her desk. It looks like she had a heart attack or a stroke or something.”

“Natural causes?” said Pilmann. “What about suicide? She was a widow, right? Was she depressed?”

“Her husband died - I don’t know - years ago,” said Lee. “Her clerk said she seemed fine. There was no note.”

“What about drugs? Did they find any drugs?”

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Lee delayed answering for a few seconds. “They found half a bottle of Darvon in her purse,” he finally admitted.

“What?” yelled Pilmann. “They find drugs and you aren’t going to write about it?”

“C’mon, Ray. It’s Darvon, a prescription painkiller. A lot of people use it. Besides, it was more than half full. If she wanted to kill herself, why leave most of the bottle?”

“Half empty, half full! What is this, a goddamn riddle?” Pilmann was shouting now. “It sounds like suicide to me! She’s lonely! On the bench all day! Married to her work! No one to go home to at night! You got to work in the goddamn drugs! Get the suicide angle and have it ready for the next edition!”

“Do you want me to announce the Second Coming, too?” said Lee.

“Yeah! If you got time, yeah! But get this fucking story first!” Pilmann slammed down the phone. Lee sighed, then banged his hand against the faux marble partition harder than he intended. The sound echoed down the dim corridor and more people looked his way. Lee put in a quarter to call back the paper. He still wasn’t sure when the next deadline was.

Chapter 3

THE FIRST THING that Lee noticed about Sarah Armstrong when he returned to the News newsroom from an extended coffee break was the way she primped her hair, running her hand through the short brown hair styled to slant along her forehead and graze her left eye. She had high cheekbones, almost a model's face. He guessed that she had a smile that could light up a room. But, Lee could tell he'd have to wait to see it – if he ever did - because her lips were compressed in a manner that suggested impatience, annoyance or both. Her eyes were gray, luminous yet direct. Lee guessed she could be hell on department store clerks and uncooperative reporters.

The other thing that Lee noticed was that she was sitting in his chair. Seeing a stranger sitting at his desk amid the clutter of notepads, phone messages, press releases, and with the partially written story about the pierced-body parts record holder on the computer screen, made him nervous.

“You're in my chair,” he said

“Are *you* Enzo Lee?” She spoke briskly and in an irritated tone.

“No. I'm Duffy. Who are you?”

“I'm Sarah Armstrong.” She looked puzzled and miffed. “I wanted to talk to Enzo Lee and they told me to wait here.”

“Okay. I was just kidding. You've got the right man. But, I don't have much time. I'm on deadline. And...do you mind if I sit there?”

“By all means.”

As she stood up, Lee took stock quickly. Medium height. Slender but full breasted. She was wearing a moss green sweater that reached her mid-thigh, black pants tapered at the ankle and slipper-like black shoes. She moved quickly, efficiently. He

guessed she was 30. Lack of confidence didn't seem to be her problem.

While Armstrong walked through the space on one side of the desk, he went around the other side and sat down. Lee clicked his half-written story off the computer screen. She took the chair opposite his desk and folded her arms across her chest, her posture ramrod straight.

"Okay," said Lee. "Let me guess. You want to talk about Judge Miriam Gilbert."

"How did you know?"

"Join the crowd." Lee nodded at pink message slips strewn about his desk. In the story that had hit the newsracks the previous afternoon, Lee had complied with Ray Pilmann's instructions and mentioned the half-empty bottle of Darvon prominently in the story. His article said pointedly that the police had not eliminated suicide as the cause of death.

The messages were from friends and acquaintances of Miriam Gilbert, irate about any speculation that the judge had taken her own life. His phone had been ringing off the hook when he arrived early in the morning. This was the price he was paying for letting himself be sucked into this story. Pilmann had said to tell them all to fuck off. Lee had finally instructed the receptionist to refer all his calls to the city editor. He considered all this Pilmann's fault anyway.

"Look. Every word in that story is true," said Lee. He started gathering up the messages, forming a small mound in the center of his desk.

"I know," said Armstrong.

"You do?"

"I know she had a bottle of Darvon with her. She always did. She had migraines and her doctor prescribed it."

"Oh, yeah?" Lee made a show of sweeping the messages into his wastebasket.

"And, she didn't have much of a life outside of her work."

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“Well, that’s what I wrote,” said Lee. He began to fiddle with his computer. He looked up at the newsroom clock.

“What you didn’t say was that she was an incredibly happy woman who valued her work,” said Armstrong, showing no response to his impatience. “She felt very fulfilled. She was finding ways to speed up the courts. That’s what she had been working on so hard. She was looking to the future.”

“Okay, I give up,” said Lee. “What are you? Her psychic? Her personal trainer?”

“I’m her niece. I guess...I just wish you had found out more about her. You read this, and it’s just so cut and dried. You reduce her to six facts and make her seem so lonely and...almost afraid. That just wasn’t her at all.”

Armstrong was silent for a moment. She stared at the wall of the newsroom.

“Dammit!” Her fist crashed on the end of Lee’s desk so suddenly that he involuntarily jumped out of this chair before catching himself and sitting back down. “You don’t care! It was a mistake to come here.”

Lee was trying to think of something to say when Armstrong stood abruptly and walked quickly to the door of the newsroom, her shoulders back and her head held high. As she passed the copydesk, all the old geezers stopped what they were doing and looked.

Lee watched her disappear out the doorway. A couple of the copy editors looked his way. Lee shrugged. Then he turned to his computer. What had she expected, anyway? A retraction? An admission that he was a creep?

After staring at the pulsating cursor for a minute, Lee stood up and walked over to the windows facing 4th Street.

He waited until she walked out of the building’s front entrance. Armstrong stopped at the curb. Her head turned left, then right. Then she walked purposefully across the four-lane street.

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THE BURLY GERMAN with long blond hair had slimjimmied the door and hotwired the ignition in less than three minutes. With any luck, the stolen vehicle report wouldn't show up in the police computer until midday.

Hans Dietrich had waited patiently since six in the morning for Sarah Armstrong to emerge from her home. He had stolen the maroon van the night before from one of the dark, quiet residential neighborhoods in the Sunset district.

When Sarah Armstrong came out of the house Dietrich got a good look. She was attractive. He knew she was a lawyer but she was dressed casually. She moved athletically. Maybe a tennis or soccer player in her youth. Dietrich filed all this in his mind as she drove away in a yellow BMW and he followed.

When Armstrong parked across the street from the newspaper building and headed for the entrance, Dietrich parked the van with the engine running a half block from the building entrance and waited with a hunter's watchfulness. It was a half an hour before he saw her emerge again. He could see that she had no idea that she had been followed or that she had any reason to be afraid. As he pulled the stolen van away from the curb, Dietrich saw her crossing the street quickly.

As Dietrich drew near her and shifted into second gear, he saw the terrified expression on Armstrong's face as she looked at the oncoming van. She began sprinting to reach the other side. Dietrich twisted the steering wheel hard to the right and floored the accelerator.

Chapter 4

LEE TOOK THE stairs three at a time. By the time he had run through the lobby and out into the morning sun, a cluster of people surrounded the figure sprawled on the asphalt. Someone had placed a jacket under her head. Armstrong was moaning as she struggled to lift herself up onto her elbows. Lee moved between two pressmen who wore gray uniforms streaked with ink. He knelt on the pavement beside Sarah, put his hands on her upper arms and pressed her down.

“Don’t move anything,” he said. “Just stay down. It’s okay to lie here.” She was looking at him but didn’t seem to recognize him. Still, she relaxed and let him push her back down on the asphalt. Then, she grimaced and writhed as pain shot through the shock.

“Call 911. Right now!” Lee told the pressman on his left. As the pressman trotted back across the street to find a telephone, Lee turned back to Armstrong.

“They’ll be here in no time. They’ll take you to the hospital. We need to find out what’s been hurt.” He spoke calmly but insistently. Her eyes were closed. Her forehead was furrowed in pain and she was biting her lip. But she nodded in agreement.

Her last-minute sprint had taken her out of the van’s direct path but the driver had swerved hard and sideswiped her. Lee had lost sight of her behind the van, but guessed that she had been knocked into one of the cars parked along the street before hitting the ground.

He continued holding one of her arms as he looked her over. He saw no bruises or scrapes around her face or head. Her pants were torn on the outside of her left leg where she must have hit the street. He could see some blood and scraped skin, but it wasn’t as bad as he had imagined.

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It wasn't until the paramedics had taken Sarah Armstrong away to San Francisco General that Lee thought to ask the people who had gathered to watch if anyone had taken down the license number or gotten a look at the driver. One of the pressmen volunteered that the van was a Chrysler with tinted windows and that he thought the driver was a woman or a man with long hair.

It was after noon when the hospital finally released Armstrong. By then, Lee had argued with Pilmann over a hospital pay phone about the body-piercing story. The News readers would have to remain ignorant of the amazing facts for another day. The emergency room at the hospital was a barely controlled bedlam of wailing children, broken limbs, high fevers and bandaged cuts and burns.

Lee hadn't actually planned to spend three hours in the San Francisco General emergency room. However, once the nurses realized his presence was somehow related to the patient being treated for scrapes and contusions, and x-rayed to ensure her bones and joints remained in their original, undamaged condition, he had no choice.

First he was ordered to buy her a pair of oversized sweatpants and a T-shirt. Then he became the designated keeper of Armstrong's jacket and purse. Lee couldn't resist a quick peek at her driver's license. It revealed that she was 32 and that she lived on Sutter Street, in an area not too far from San Francisco's upscale Pacific Heights neighborhood. Finally, when it became clear no one else was there to ferry her home, Lee became the presumptive chauffeur.

Lee had just exhausted the hospital's meager supply of Time magazines when Armstrong came out in a wheelchair adjusted so that her left leg stuck straight out. She held a pair of wooden crutches and a brown pill container. She looked alert but exhausted.

"Are you taking her home?" asked the nurse pushing the wheelchair.

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“I guess I am,” Lee looked at Armstrong for concurrence. She acknowledged him with a curt nod.

The nurse helped her into the passenger seat of Lee’s Fiat Spider. With the top down, she had no trouble getting in. Armstrong could keep the leg straight with the seat pushed back as far as it would go. As they waited behind another car to exit the hospital parking lot, Lee glanced over at her and saw her profile as she stared out the front of the car. They drove in silence the entire way.

Armstrong lived in the upper flat of an old Edwardian house. It was in a decent neighborhood where the character was defined block by block. Down the street, Lee could see a housing project painted a faded blue. Yet he knew that an exclusive shopping row lay only four blocks to the north. Across the street was a Baptist church painted a tired pink with a cross on the top outlined in neon lights. A bus with the sign “Herb’s Tours” was parked in the driveway along the side of the church.

It was obvious after they parked that Armstrong was intent on getting where she was going without Lee’s help. She slid out of the seat onto the curb, stood on her good leg, and pulled out the crutches behind her. Then she used the crutches to get to the outside stairs.

Lee stood behind her in case she lost her balance and she painstakingly climbed the 10 steps to the front door. When she reached the top, she stopped, rested on her crutches and tried to catch her breath. Then she took the purse Lee was carrying, extracted a key and unlocked the front door. The sight of the flight of stairs heading up to the upper flat made her pale.

“C’mon,” said Lee. He took the crutches from her and set them beside the door. Then he took her left arm. She resisted at first. Then, he tugged a little harder until she relented and let her arm drape over his neck.

“Grab the railing,” he said. “We’ll stop if it hurts.” With his arm around her waist, they mounted the stairs. She used his

neck and the railing on the side of the inner staircase for support, and jumped while he lifted and steadied her. In a minute, they were at the top.

“Where to?” he asked.

“The bedroom.” She pointed toward the back of the flat. She hopped still using him for support while he half carried and steadied her. When they reached the queen-sized bed, she let go of his neck, turned on her good leg, sat down and reclined slowly.

Lee retrieved the crutches. On the way back to the bedroom, he glanced around approvingly. It was the type of apartment he might have chosen, rich with natural wood and the detailed touches in turn-of-the-century interiors that he loved. He saw that Sarah was inclined toward art deco style furniture. It looked like she had bought carefully in secondhand stores.

Lee brought the crutches to the bedroom and set them on the floor along side the bed. Armstrong had her arm over her eyes and seemed completely spent. He stepped back to the door.

“Do you want anything? Water? Something to eat?”

She shook her head. Lee paused, trying to decide what to do.

“I saw the whole thing and it looked like more than an accident,” he said. “Do you have any idea why anyone would want to do you harm?”

Armstrong shook her head again, her arm still covering her eyes.

“Look, I’m very sorry about your aunt,” he said. “From what everybody says, she was a fantastic woman. And I’m sorry about the story. You’re right...I just screwed up. It’s too late to change it. The best I can do is wait until the medical examiner figures out the cause of death. I’ll make sure it gets in the paper.”

Lee waited a few seconds. She still didn’t move. He turned to leave.

“Wait,” Armstrong said. She pushed herself up to a sitting position. Lee could tell she was trying to decide whether he

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could be trusted. He wasn't sure of the answer. Trusted with what? Her secrets? The story of her aunt's death? Her honor? He stared back blankly. Finally, she held out her hand to him. "Why don't we just start over? I'm Sarah."

"Okay. I'll go for that," he said with a half smile of relief. He took her hand and tipped his head forward. "Enzo Lee...at your service."

THE HOUSE WAS about 20 miles northwest of San Jose, at the end of a long steep driveway that was, itself, at the end of a narrow street that snaked up the Santa Cruz Mountains. It offered a fabulous view of the Santa Clara Valley, best seen from the balcony that ran around the entire second floor, except for the side of the house that was nestled in the mountainside. Like the exterior of the house, the furnishings inside were entirely white or shades of beige. The bedrooms downstairs were large and furnished with deep carpets and thick quilts. But the focal point of the house plainly was on the upper floor.

Upstairs, the combined dining room and living room was large, more than 5,000 square feet. The space seemed even larger because of a vaulted ceiling. Coming up the driveway at night with the curtains opened and the lights turned on, the living room looked like a stage. All it lacked was a spotlight to illuminate the principal actor who, in this case, happened to also be the sole resident of the house.

This morning, though, the occupant had shunned the incredible view, the splendorous room and the colorful abstract paintings hanging on the walls. Instead, the owner of this opulent palace was in a small downstairs room. The room centered around a computer terminal connected to a Cray T3D supercomputer capable of performing nine billion mathematical calculations per second. The computer enabled a user to tear apart complex structures of molecules into their constituent

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parts and reassemble them, adding certain modifications in the process. It saved months of laboratory time.

The short, squat man, who resembled a friar with a large bald spot on his crown surrounded by a fringe of thick black hair, was using the computer for a much more simple purpose. He was reviewing files of electronic mail and financial records, most of it not his own. Finally, he found what he wanted and printed the documents on an HP Laserjet. He folded the printed pages and inserted them into a plain white envelope. He looked at the copies of the San Francisco News that lay on a white, melamine desktop beside him, scanning the bylines. In block letters he addressed the envelope to "Enzo Lee, Reporter."

Chapter 5

AS LEE LEFT Sarah's flat, he turned his Fiat east on Bush Street. If he was going to keep his promise and report on the cause of death of Judge Gilbert, he might as well start now.

The San Francisco's Medical Examiner's Office was located in an annex behind the Hall of Justice. Lee checked his watch. It was only 3 p.m. He might have to wait a while, but he guessed he'd be able to see Chief Coroner Michael Santos even if he dropped by unannounced.

Santos had a reputation as being a brilliant but eccentric forensic pathologist. His office was located just off the main laboratory where the autopsies were performed. Like the laboratory, it was decorated in modern industrial style with square, commercial quality linoleum tiles in mottled gray, light-green walls and fluorescent lighting overhead. Tall, dark file cabinets lined the walls of the office waiting area.

On top of the file cabinets sat large bell jars filled with fluid and what appeared to be human organs. Some of the fluid in the jars was tinted red and blue. Lee hoped there was some professional reason for the display but suspected it was someone's bizarre taste in office art.

When Lee was ushered into Santos' inner office by his secretary, he found the coroner behind his desk wearing a white lab coat. Santos was about 50. He was tall and thin with sunken cheeks and thick, Coke-bottle glasses. In front of him sat a melon-sized model of a human brain with removable parts. Off to one side was a small cluster of pill bottles.

"Uhh...Hello, Mike," said Lee. "We've talked on the phone before. I'm Enzo Lee from the News." Lee thought about shaking hands, but Santos hadn't offered his or even stood up. So, the reporter took the single chair sitting in front of the desk.

Santos opened his mouth as if to say something, and then closed it. He did it again. Lee realized Santos was just stretching his mouth as if to exercise his jaw muscles. It was disconcerting. It made Lee feel as if he was trying to conduct a conversation with a fish.

“Mike, I’ve come about Miriam Gilbert.”

Santos stopped his mouth exercises. The dull glaze in his eyes brightened into a gleam and his thin-lipped mouth turned up at the corners.

“Ahhh,” he said. “Our judge.”

Lee half expected Santos to invite him next door for a viewing of “our judge” so he decided to hurry along the interview.

“Mike, let me cut directly to the chase. Do you have a cause of death?”

Santos didn’t say anything for a moment. He gave Lee a long, sly look. Lee thought if Santos had had a mustache, he would have twirled it. Instead, Santos began disassembling the brain in front of him. He did it without looking, his eyes still on Lee as the plastic pieces of the model brain made a clicking noise.

“I do and I don’t,” said Santos.

God, thought Lee. Was this going to be 20 questions? It suddenly occurred to him that he hadn’t eaten any lunch and was starving. “Okay,” said Lee, pulling off his glasses and massaging his eyes wearily. “Let’s start with the ‘I do’ part.”

“A clot,” said Santos. “A basic blood clot cut off blood to the brain. A massive stroke.”

“That sounds simple enough,” said Lee. “So, what’s the mystery?”

“All the other clots,” said Santos. “The hundreds...no, make that thousands of tiny clots that filled every artery, vein and blood vessel of any size.”

“What?” said Lee.

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“I’m describing something that I’ve never witnessed in my 26 years of practicing medicine,” said Santos. “Someone’s body filled with tiny blood clots and no apparent reason for it.”

Lee said nothing while Santos continued staring at him, manipulating the brain parts. The clicking was nerve wracking in the otherwise silent office.

“Okay, I give up,” said Lee. “What is the significance of all this? I’m just a layman.”

“Something caused this to happen and I have no idea what it is,” said Santos. “It could have been a chemical, something environmental, or maybe even some infectious agent like a virus or bacteria that I’ve never heard of.”

“Infectious?” said Lee. “You mean other people could get it?”

Santos shrugged as he turned a chunk of the left hemisphere of the brain in his fingers. “Anything is possible,” he said. “I’ve ordered all the tests and we’ll just have to see what comes back.”

“But, what if it *is* infectious?” said Lee.

Santos shrugged again. “I’ve double bagged the body and washed down everything with antiseptic. There’s nothing I can do except take antibiotics.” He nodded at the cluster of pill bottles near his right elbow.

Lee thanked the coroner and found out what time the next day the first set of test results would come back. As he walked out the door, Santos finished the brain puzzle and moved it to the side of the desk with a small, satisfied smile.

On his way back to the newspaper, Lee knew he would have to write another news story based upon what Santos had told him. He wondered how he could do it without causing a panic in the city.

IT WAS DARK when Lee jumped off the Powell Street cable car. He walked down to Stockton Street and then

continued north through the several blocks that hold Chinatown's bustling fish and vegetable markets.

Lee lingered for a minute outside the picture window of a small restaurant. Behind the glass, four roasted ducks dangled from metal brackets that clasped their necks. Their flat bills pointed stiffly downward toward the metal trays placed to catch their drippings. Inside, a sweaty cook wearing a soiled apron looked up, grinned brokenly, and turned back to his cleaver which became a blur as a fifth bird was quickly transformed into bite-sized pieces.

Lee continued along Stockton, wallowing in the odors of black bean sauce, raw fish, ginger and other heavy smells that he couldn't name but still identified with Chinatown as much as the ubiquitous curio shops with their Buddhas, cheap china and T-shirts.

He stopped at Wayne Chan's market. He waved at Wayne Jr., a young man in his early 20s with a ring in his right ear. Wayne Jr. wore his hair Elvis Presley style with long sideburns and a short pompadour in front. He was picking through a pile of rock cod on a bed of ice as a picky shopper described in loud Cantonese what she wanted.

"*Sansin. Sansin.* Fresh. Fresh. Get me one that's fresh. *Siu. Siu.* Small. Small. When was that one caught?"

Lee walked through the cod, the large flounder and the small pink snapper sitting in the crates filled with crushed ice, and past the big tank where live dungeness crab sat stacked atop each other. He went to the vegetable side of the store and picked out a bunch of choy sum, a bright green cabbage with yellow flowers. He paid another young member of the Chan extended family, a sunny-faced girl with laughing eyes and a beguiling smile who made him wish he was 15 years younger.

He continued up Stockton, past busy Columbus Avenue, and crossed from Chinatown into the North Beach Italian district. In two more blocks, Lee came to a three-story house with front windows on the top two floors that curved outward along the

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entire width of the building, protruding like an edge of a double-layer cake. He walked up the staircase on the side of the house, unlocked the door on the right and went up another flight of stairs to his flat.

At the top of the stairs, an orange and white cat greeted him by rubbing against his legs, forcing Lee to do a quick stutter step to avoid tripping.

“Hi, Max,” said Lee. “I hope your day was better than mine.”

Lee stood at the doorway leading to the small kitchen and tossed his keys on the table. They hit with a bang, despite the cushion of overdue bills, junk mail and the morning editions of the New York Times and the San Francisco Chronicle spread out on the table top.

He walked over to the living room which faced the street. Lee stood with his hands on his hips, staring down at the nearby Italian espresso cafes. Beyond them, across Columbus Avenue, he could see most of the way down Grant with its profusion of restaurant and store signs, mostly colored in red and yellow and carrying Chinese characters next to the English words. He had rented the flat for its location and because of the inlaid hardwood floors and elaborate Victorian molding in the double-parlor living room and dining room. He liked where he lived, close enough to see Chinatown but not in the middle of it.

Lee’s usual routine was to visit his grandmother in her rest home. He tried to go at least twice a week. But, the thought of spending the next hour in the rest home depressed him.

“Screw it,” Lee thought. “I’ll go tomorrow.” He would call and have the staff at the home tell his grandmother to expect him the next day.

Lee went back to the kitchen, bent down to rub Max’s head, which was positioned over a bowl of cat food, and pulled an icy bottle of Stolichnaya vodka out of the freezer compartment of the refrigerator. He poured the clear, syrupy liquid into a short

water glass, sliced a lime in half and squeezed the juice from both halves into the glass.

He sat in his favorite reading chair positioned for the view in front of the bay window and set the glass on the side table. Lee mulled over his quandary.

Not very long ago, he had been a different type of reporter. He had specialized in investigating corrupt politicians and finding the secrets that corporations tried to hide. He was one of the best at it in New York.

Then, his aggressive style of reporting backfired. He trusted a source who had a separate agenda. By the time Lee figured out he had been played, he had blundered into professional quicksand. His newspaper had to issue an embarrassing retraction. Lee's editors deserted him and he came close to losing his job at Newsday.

The move to San Francisco and the feature beat had been a salve to that time. It was a means of starting over, a way to stay in the news business that almost seemed like part of his DNA at this point. Now he was free of the high expectations – his own and his editors' – of breaking the big story. He didn't need to worry about being pressured into making another costly mistake.

But the events of the last two days had awakened the old instincts. He could sense in the shadows beyond his reach not just a puzzle to solve but something dangerous, too. Of course it worried him that he didn't understand the danger. And, it brought back the not-so-distant memories of the low point in his career. But, he couldn't deny that he was feeling the old adrenaline rush - a reignited fire in his gut that he hadn't realized how much he missed until now.

Lee swished the Stoly and lime mixture around in the glass and took a sip. The first one produced a burning sensation as it flowed down his throat. The second sip didn't burn at all.

Chapter 6

MASTER CHU HELD the position of the ascending dragon for an absurdly long time, his left leg held up in the air, his arms extended forward with palms out. With his weight balanced on his right leg, he sank down and slowly straightened the left leg until his toe touched the pavement. Then, he completed the slow step forward, pulling his arms in to assume the starting position of the crane with spreading wings.

Lee mimicked the wizened old Chinese the best that he could but he felt like an oaf beside Chu with his smooth, precise movements.

Lee thought that of all the animals that serve as models for the various tai chi exercises, the crane seemed to fit Master Chu the best. Chu's London Fog windbreaker and stretchy leisure pants couldn't disguise the fact that his limbs were bird thin. Lee imagined the bones would snap if somebody grabbed his arm the wrong way.

He had met Chu during one of his early morning jogs through Chinatown. Lee had noticed the ancient-looking man going through his graceful routine of slow-motion exercises alone in the middle of Portsmouth Square. During the day the square was alive with the sounds of kids chattering in Chinese and English, and the old timers slapping mah jong tiles onto stone tables as they cursed their bad luck. But, early in the morning, before the metal shutters protecting the nearby shops slid open with a clattering bang and the city buses came roaring up Kearny Street, the square was dark and deserted, an uninviting patch of elevated cement holding only long shadows cast by streetlights.

Even in the predawn darkness the suppleness and fluidity of Chu's movements looked amazing, particularly for a man who

must have been close to 80. They reminded Lee of the best mimes he had seen during the years that he had frequented New York's theaters and dance studios.

Chu's concentration was so intense that Lee assumed the old man didn't notice him running past. Then, one morning, Chu had stopped Lee.

"Hey, you," Chu yelled.

"What? Me?"

"Who else running by this time of morning?"

Lee was almost finished with his normal three-mile run so he had stopped and gone over to Chu. He saw that the right side of Chu's face drooped.

"Try this," Chu said.

Chu led Lee through what he now realized was a fairly rudimentary warmup exercise involving simple leg movements made with the knees bent the entire time. After a minute, the muscles in his thighs burned and Lee feared for his knees so he fell out of step while Chu continued on.

"Not so easy," said Chu.

"No."

Chu had gone back to the more elaborate fighting movements as the day's first light brightened the sky.

"You Chinese?" Chu had asked.

"My mother was Chinese."

Chu had nodded, as if the answer was acceptable. When he didn't say anything else, Lee had taken his sore legs back to his flat.

After that, Lee began alternating running with tai chi exercises with Chu. He found they were a good counterpoint to running, using a different sort of strength and working different muscles. After six months, he was just beginning to understand how the slowness of the movements required a type of power that he had never appreciated. He was learning there was meaning behind phrases that Lee had assumed were simplistic

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slogans. There was strength in softness. It was important to find one's center.

At some point, Lee had asked Chu his name. With a twinkle in his eye, Chu had answered, "Master Chu." Lee hadn't bothered to inquire what Chu had done to earn the "Master" appellation or even if Chu had other students. He figured that at 80 a man could choose to be called "Jesus Christ" if he wanted. Lee just gave him a short bow and repeated, "Master Chu."

This morning, the exercises seemed to take longer than usual. When they finished the final set, Lee thanked Master Chu for the lesson as usual.

"You not concentrate," observed Chu, giving Lee a critical look. "You thinking of other thing."

"I am," admitted Lee. "It's something at my job. I'm trying to decide whether to start something that might end up causing me trouble."

Chu frowned. "Why you start trouble?" he asked.

"I don't know exactly." Lee shrugged. "Curiosity, I guess."

Chu's frown did not change. "Before you start trouble, you better know why."

SARAH ARMSTRONG EASED herself carefully into her car and tossed the cane into the back seat. It was a heavy cane made of yellowed bamboo, a loaner from a sympathetic neighbor. Thus far, she had resisted the urge to buy something more consistent with her wardrobe, perhaps something with trim lines and a dark, wood-grain finish.

It had been two days since the accident...incident? She wasn't sure what to call it. Sarah had finished two spy thrillers, read Architectural Digest, Harpers and Ms. magazines cover to cover, overdosed on talk shows and answered every phone message left at her office. She had discovered it was nearly impossible to ride her stationary bicycle using only her right

leg. She was going stir crazy. Gimpy leg or not, Sarah had decided she was heading to work.

Sarah drove east on Sutter Street. It wasn't the fastest route, with all of the stops, but it was the simplest since her office was on Sutter near Taylor in one of San Francisco's older office buildings. The lawyers at the downtown megafirms knew immediately from the address that her's was a "second-tier" firm, housed in cheaper, less prestigious quarters than in the financial district where, with enough seniority, one could hope for a view of the San Francisco Bay. Sarah didn't mind too much. She had tasted and rejected big firm life and was happy to have ended up at Cross & Roberts.

The adjustment had taken some time, though. The "rumple factor," as she called it, was a lot higher at Cross & Roberts than she had been accustomed to seeing. It had taken her a while to see managing partner Larry Roberts as a wily litigator whose skill and down home charm had endeared him to clients and an entire generation of the San Francisco bar, and not simply as a guy with bad dandruff, dirty ties and cheap suits. She thought it was a joke the first time another attorney suggested cocktails at a nearby culinary school where the hors d'oeuvres were prepared as class assignments.

Sarah knew that the process of assimilation had taken some effort on the part of Cross & Roberts as well. She had arrived with all the trappings of a dilettante willing to sacrifice her position and salary to represent more deserving clients, but still keeping one foot in the fast lane.

First, there was the Beemer. Then, there were her clothes, always professional but with just enough extra style to set her apart and mark her as a clothes horse. There was something else, too, a distance or reserve about her that others mistook for aloofness.

The truth was that Sarah felt like she had been raised about as far from San Francisco as was possible – even if the distance between the City by the Bay and her small, dying home town in

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Nebraska looked tiny on the globe. Her father worked in a hardware store. Her mother worked part-time as a school nurse. Both were born again Christians who spent most evenings at their church and eschewed alcohol, movies, dancing and any social activities unrelated to church. They had expected Sarah to live by the same creed.

Armstrong had bought the car used from her aunt. It had been a gift really, from a proud Miriam Gilbert to her niece who had graduated from law school with top honors and was following in her footsteps. A fashion expert would have pegged Sarah's clothes as last year's lines, often of no-name or mid-level brands. Sarah was a ruthless shopper who bought only on sale or at discount. She substituted creativity and her own sense of style for cash.

Of course she never took her friends at Cross & Roberts shopping with her for the same reason she never discussed the origin of her car or the fact that she came from more modest means than anyone would have guessed: It was none of their damned business.

As she pulled into the parking garage across the street from her office Sarah was thinking about which of her clients to call first, assuming, of course, that one of them hadn't already beaten her to the punch and left a panicked message recounting the day's first crisis. She was too preoccupied to notice that the blue station wagon that had followed her all the way down Sutter Street had parked only a few spaces away.

LEE'S QUICK SEARCH of old News' stories had yielded a rough portrait of Detective Bobbie Connors as a woman accustomed to being first. She had been first in her class at the police academy as well as the first black woman to make detective in the San Francisco police force. Connors also had

been the first lesbian cop to walk in uniform in San Francisco's annual Gay Pride parade.

She was 42 and had a reputation as one of the department's top homicide detectives. Lee guessed that she had gotten a rough reception early in her career from the old-line cops, including the top brass, who were predominantly white, Irish and macho. She must be both smart and tough to have gotten where she was.

Lee almost hadn't bothered calling on Connors. He figured the follow up to the deaths of Judge Gilbert and Orson Adams would be handled by the police and court reporters. But, every time he tried to focus on one of his feature assignments, the questions kept pulling him back. What did it add up to? How did Sarah's brush with death figure into it, if it did at all? Maybe Connors knew something that helped it make sense. At least he could share his concerns with the detective. Maybe *she* could figure out what the hell was going on.

Connors was dressed casually, wearing khaki pants and a white golf shirt. She had a tiny cubicle to herself created from thin, plastic partitions colored white and pale green. On one wall hung a framed poster of two women in a convertible advertising the movie "Thelma and Louise." On her desk sat a Chicago Bears helmet. She flashed Lee a friendly smile.

"Scoop. Or should I say, 'Mister Lee.' We meet again."

"Thanks for seeing me," said Lee.

"Always happy to spend time with the press," said Connors. "Take a load off." She gestured to the single chair in front of her desk.

"Thanks," said Lee, settling down. "So...uh...did I get the story right?"

"About the judge? Yup. No complaints here."

"That's nice for a change," said Lee. "Say, you're handling the Orson Adams case, too, right?"

"You got that right," said Connors. "Busy week."

"Anything new on that one?"

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Connors grimaced and shook her head slowly.

“We’re working on it,” she said. “We’re working on it.”

“Do you expect any developments soon?” Lee tried again.

“Can’t say. I’ll let you know if something breaks, though.”

“Okay. Thanks,” said Lee. He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts.

“Listen,” he continued. “Something happened yesterday that I thought you might want to know about. In the morning...right outside the News building...a young woman was hit by a van. She wasn’t hurt badly. But, it was a hit-and-run, just like Adams. I saw it happen and it looked like the driver tried to hit her. I thought there might be a connection.”

“Was there any ID on the van or the driver?” asked Connors.

“Not much,” said Lee, shaking his head. “It was a maroon Chrysler. No one got the license number. Someone saw a driver with long hair but they didn’t know if it was a man or a woman.”

“Not a helluva lot to go on. Hmmm. Who’s the victim?”

“Sarah Armstrong,” said Lee. “She’s the niece of Judge Miriam Gilbert.”

“Oh my goodness! I see...hmmm.”

“Right.” Lee watched while Connors entwined her fingers and rested her chin on her knuckles as she pondered what he had told her. Lee wondered what other bits of information in Connors’ head might be clicking into place to make sense of the last three days.

“So, what exactly are you suggesting?” asked Connors.

“Don’t know really. Maybe there is no connection. It just doesn’t *feel* right. Maybe two hit-and-runs aren’t unusual. But intentional?”

“Just because someone weaves across the road doesn’t mean it’s intentional,” said Connors. “Believe me. There are drunks out there *all* hours of the day and night. I know. I’ve busted hundreds of them.

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“Look at it this way,” the detective continued. “Maybe you’ve got a couple of drunk driving cases. But, other than that you got no suspects...no motivation...nothing connecting these events together. Believe me, there is a lot of shit goin’ on every day out there. It’s easy to pick two or three things out of the soup and say, ‘Lookee here. See the pattern?’”

“I need more than that,” Connors concluded, tilting her head back and staring down her nose at Lee.

Lee didn’t have a good reply. He didn’t really have any good theory to throw at Connors. It was just a hunch based on instinct as much as anything. Plus, Lee knew that Sarah Armstrong’s involvement had given him an extra incentive to keep sniffing around the story. He knew the chance to see her again was fueling his interest in the story.

Maybe Connors was right. Perhaps he was seeing ghosts. Maybe it was time to figure out how to get this story out of his hands and over to the courts and cops reporters. They could do the follow ups on Gilbert and Adams.

He rose from the chair and was about to thank Connors for her time when she cut him off with a curt nod, and then a slowly developing smile.

“Don’t give up so goddamn easy,” she said, chuckling now. “If you do come up with anything, let me know. We’ll work something out.”

LEE HAD SETTLED back to read the Chronicle after finally turning in the story about the man who had 72 unnatural holes in his body at last count: (“*His friends are seeing less of David Wrightson these days...*”) The story wouldn’t run until the next day and Lee was feeling entitled to a long lunch. Then, he saw Ray Pilmann waving at him from inside the city editor’s office, no doubt to offer congratulations for another piece of clever journalism.

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“What the hell is this?” demanded Pilmann, the words leaping out to greet Lee in the office doorway. Pilmann held a copy of the early edition of the News in one hand and gave it a backhanded slap with the other.

“I can’t believe you blew an unbelievable story,” said Pilmann. “This story shoulda screamed out: ‘Mystery Disease Plagues City!’ Instead, it reads like shit. What happened, Enzo?”

“Listen, Ray,” said Lee. “I know I downplayed it a bit. We don’t know what it is or if it’s even contagious. Do you want people jumping out of their windows in fear?”

“It’s not your job to censor the news, is it?” said Pilmann. “What’s wrong? Did all that time at Newsday ruin your news judgment? Is this too complicated for you? Don’t you get it?”

“What’s done is done,” said Lee. “I wrote the story the way I thought it should be written. Some editors must have agreed since it made the paper without a change.”

“This sure as hell won’t happen again,” said Pilmann. He tossed the paper onto his desk in disgust. “I’m editing all these stories from now on. What’s the next story? Why don’t we have a follow for the late editions?”

Christ, thought Lee. More goddamn deadlines. Now, he really wanted to wash his hands of all this before it killed him a deadline at a time.

“Santos has a press conference at 5 o’clock,” explained Lee. “I talked to him and he won’t have any test results until then. I thought...I thought maybe Duffy would cover it.”

“Think again, Enzo.” Pilmann was getting red in the face. “This is fucking unbelievable. We break the story and then hand it off to the Chronicle. Is there something wrong with this goddamn picture?”

“This could all fizzle into a big zero by tonight,” protested Lee. “What am I supposed to do? See if Santos will turn up the heat on the petri dishes so the crud cooks faster? Jesus.”

“I just want you to think like a goddamn reporter,” said Pilmann. “Be aggressive. And you, of all people, shouldn’t bore the hell out of our readers.”

Lee turned around to leave, resigned to the fact that he would have to cover Santos’ press conference. He hoped that would get him off the hook once and for all.

“What about the profiles?” asked Pilmann, stopping Lee in his tracks and sending a chill up his spine.

“What?” said Lee, turning back. “What profiles?”

“Look, Enzo. These are your stories now. You break ‘em, you take ‘em. The judge and the prosecutor.” Pilmann spoke slowly, but Lee could see the pressure building for an explosion if he wasn’t careful.

“You haven’t covered much hard news here,” Pilmann continued. “Maybe you didn’t realize that we usually write profiles about people like this, glorified obituaries, really. They weren’t exactly nobodies, you know.”

“Shit,” said Lee. “Okay. When are these gems due?”

“You got two days, Enzo. Make ‘em count.”

When Lee got back to his desk, he saw that one of the copy clerks had dropped a letter on his desk from the late mail run. He opened the plain envelope. The 12 pages inside contained nicely formatted paragraphs on the left side with columns of dollar amounts on the right. Lee saw the pages were a monthly bill from a local law firm to some company with an address in Palo Alto.

The law firm was Sutro, Foerster and Bridges, one of San Francisco’s megafirms. The client was a company called Futura Products, Inc. Lee had never heard of the company. He scanned the pages quickly. The bill was for the month that had just ended and totaled \$47,750. It listed meetings, telephone calls, legal research, memo drafting and the like. The itemized listings mentioned directors’ meetings, securities regulations and other corporate-related topics.

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No letter accompanied the document. He looked at the envelope. There was no return address, just a San Jose postmark. The bill meant nothing to Lee. He shoved it into his bottom drawer, meaning to examine it more closely when he had the time, and promptly forgot about it.

Chapter 7

THE EIGHT-STORY Whalers Hotel on the outskirts of Casa Grande rose out of the endless rolling Sonora Desert unexpectedly, like someone decided it would be a funny idea to plunk down a deluxe hotel in the middle of absolutely nowhere. The hotel towered over the countryside and dwarfed any other structures from Phoenix to the north to Tucson to the south, both an hour's drive away. The most noticeable feature of the hotel was a huge black baseball cap bearing the orange "SF" insignia of the San Francisco Whalers.

In the early spring, the hotel filled with players working off the winter's rust while the desert floor began its slow bake. By April, the ball players moved on to cooler climes and the empty, out-of-place monument to baseball stood empty while the Arizona sun went from hot, to hotter to flat-out sizzling.

The past year had been the exception.

The young athletes had left, taking with them their aloha shirts and baseball gloves. Then came the newcomers who were not quite as young as the ballplayers. They carried Toshiba laptops rather than Louisville Sluggers. Computer paper filled their wastebaskets, not beer cans and bandages.

After breakfast in the hotel restaurant, these older, pudgier, less playful hotel guests, climbed into their rentals, three or four to a car, and headed east down one of the straight country roads that carve the desert into square mile chunks of real estate.

The hotel clerks, the waitresses, the bellboys, the maids and the manager didn't care where they went or what they did. They were just happy for the continued employment. If their guests claimed to be working on a farm, that was all right. It made a certain amount of sense. Casa Grande is in the heart of the

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Arizona cotton growing region. No one cared that the men came back without dirt on their shoes, sunburned necks or salt stains on their golf shirts that come from working, even a short time, under the relentless sun.

Had anyone followed the Chryslers, the Buicks and the Fords heading toward the east, they would have seen them pull onto the asphalt apron, all in a row, next to a large hangar at an abandoned airport 40 minutes away from the Whalers Hotel.

It was an old gray building with a corrugated roof and a heavy metal door in front painted black. New vents were spaced every 30 feet around the building, each carrying the hum of a powerful air conditioner. Inside was a science laboratory that would have been the envy of the nation's most prestigious universities...had they only known that it existed.

THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S Office was located two blocks away from City Hall in an aging granite office building filled with narrow corridors, worn linoleum and doors with frosted glass. It reminded Lee of the grade schools he had attended as a boy - constructed after the war with hardly a dollar devoted to renovation since then.

Barry McDonell, the Assistant District Attorney for felony prosecutions, was in his mid-40s. He was a small, wiry guy with sandy hair cut short, a whippet of a prosecutor.

Lee entered his office wearing his chinos, docksiders and a blue nylon parka over a striped dress shirt. He sat on a blue and purple couch with chrome legs and arms, a 70s throwback. Flanked by a big, dusty rubber plant on his right, McDonell spelled his name for Lee and then leaned back behind his heavy mahogany desk and waxed eloquently about Adams, his climb within the office toward bigger, more difficult prosecutions, and his prosecution style - quietly understated but hiding an incisive mind that could slice apart a weak argument.

McDonnell described Adams' intense disappointment during the rare times that he lost a case. He always felt it was a personal failure. He would dwell on it, almost to the point of depression and analyze and re-analyze every step to determine where he had gone wrong. He was a perfectionist. It made him a good prosecutor and Adams would be missed by the office.

"A couple of hours before he died, Orson stopped by to talk about a hung jury," said McDonnell. "He was berating himself for not eliminating the juror who hung the case. She just couldn't bring herself to convict. She developed some attachment to the defendant, Orson said."

"What was the case?"

"Uhh. Let's see." McDonnell put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling while he thought. "Was it Washington? It was something like that. Or, maybe Warrington. I think that's it. Warrington. Just a burglary case in Municipal Court. It was a bullshit case that should have been bargained down, but the guy's attorney thought he could get him off. Orson was great about taking it.

"See. That's the kind of guy he was." McDonnell continued and pointed his finger at Lee for emphasis. "It should have gone to someone more junior, but everyone else was up to here." McDonnell held his hand at the level of his forehead.

"Did he have any other cases coming up?" Lee felt foolish as soon as he had asked the question.

"Are you kidding? He was responsible for 70 or 80 cases. He probably had trial dates penciled in for the next three months."

"Any really big cases? You know, important cases?"

"I guess they're all important to the defendants," said McDonnell. "Let's see. He had a good drug case. A few rapes and armed robberies. I don't think he had any capital cases. Orson wasn't to that stage yet, taking the cases where the prestige of the office is on the line. He was a couple of years away but he was getting there."

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“Any threats?” As soon as he asked the question, Lee wished he hadn’t. Stick to the profile, he told himself. Limit your losses.

“Hey,” said McDonnell. “I thought you were working on a profile.”

“I am. I’m just curious. And, as long as I’m here...”

“If there had been any threats, I wouldn’t tell you while the investigation is ongoing. But Orson hadn’t mentioned anything. Sure, defendants screamed at him on occasion. But that comes with the territory. Some people take going to jail too personally.”

Lee closed his notebook, thanked McDonnell and headed out the door. In the corridor, a final question occurred to him. McDonnell watched his back through the door while the reporter teetered in indecision. Finally, Lee turned back to face the prosecutor.

“Who was the judge in the Warrington case?” Lee asked. “Was it Miriam Gilbert?”

“Yep. I think it was. Pretty strange, her dying in her chambers like that, huh?”

WHEN HE AWAKENED an hour after dawn the next morning, Lee’s head was feeling the effects of too much single-malt scotch and beer consumed at the Bull’s Eye, a neighborhood watering hole where he had gone to practice his dart throwing, flirt with a barmaid named Donna and wash away the increasingly bitter taste that his confrontations with Pilmann were leaving.

He pulled on sweats and tennis shoes and walked down to the corner where he dropped two quarters into the newspaper box and pulled out a copy of the Chronicle. As he climbed the stairs to his flat, he read a front page Chronicle’s story that was almost the same as what he had written after Santos’ press conference.

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MYSTERY DISEASE REMAINS UNSOLVED

By Lawrence W. Frankman

The strange disease that took the life of Municipal Court Judge Miriam Gilbert earlier this week remained a mystery yesterday but health officials said they believe the disease poses no immediate health threat.

San Francisco Chief Coroner Michael Santos said laboratory tests failed to identify the foreign substance, virus or bacteria that resulted in Gilbert's death. Researchers also found no evidence that whatever caused the judge's death is infectious.

In addition, local hospitals reported no other deaths or illnesses similar to Gilbert's, another indication that whatever caused the judge's death does not presently pose a health threat.

Santos said medical researchers locally and at other research centers throughout the nation continued to attempt to isolate the cause of Gilbert's death and to discover how she contracted her fatal illness...

THE TWO LAWYERS in Courtroom Three were arguing about the portly gentleman in the witness box with a toolbox sitting on his lap. The dapper attorney with black blown-dried hair and a gray double-breasted suit complained that the witness was not qualified to testify as an expert witness on home construction techniques. Lee settled in the back pew. Ah, the courts, he thought with an inner smile. Where all the details of people's lives – from the mundane to the sordid – get spilled out on the table for public inspection.

Still fighting a hangover, Lee had purposely arrived just before noon. He had once written a story about a judge who guarded his private time so zealously that he made a sequestered

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jury wait overnight before delivering its verdict so he could keep a date with his mistress at a delicatessen: (*"It was a pastrami on rye, hold the justice, please..."*)

Lee knew the stomachs of most judges were well trained by the custom of the lunch recess so that only the most urgent business kept court running into the lunch hour. He could tell that the end of Mr. Double Breasted's argument would soon be cut short in favor of a meatball sandwich.

"Thank you Mister Sawyer," growled Judge William Canady, a veteran of the bench who looked particularly bored at the moment. "Recess until two o'clock." Canady tapped the gavel quickly to cut off any protest and headed for the door so fast that no one had an opportunity to stand.

While the attorneys gathered their papers, Lee walked quickly through the gate separating the spectators' section from the business end of the courtroom. He strode up to the young woman who sat at the enclosed desk below and in front of the judge's seat.

"Melissa Jensen?" he said.

"Yes." She had a round face and long blond hair parted down the middle that was held in the back by a mother-of-pearl clasp. Her glasses were old-fashioned horn rims that might have been throw-back fashionable on someone else. She wore a pale yellow blouse with frills in front and at the end of the sleeves, and a plain blue skirt loose enough to accommodate her rather generous hips and thighs.

"I'm Enzo Lee of the News. I want to talk to you about Judge Gilbert."

The expression on Melissa Jensen's face changed from quizzical to pained. She swallowed and looked down at the papers in front of her.

"God," she said, shaking her head. "I'm so tired of talking about it. I just want to forget about it. It was too horrible."

Lee explained that he wanted to tell readers what Judge Gilbert was really like. He had heard so many wonderful stories

about her. Then he assured Melissa Jensen that he understood how difficult and horrible the entire episode had been. He could scarcely imagine the horror himself.

Mostly, what Lee did as he was trying to talk Melissa Jensen into an interview about her deceased former boss was stick to her like glue while she finished gathering her papers and when she stood up and walked past the bailiff into the private corridor behind the courtroom used exclusively by the judges and their staffs. The bailiff raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. Lee guessed that law clerks are a couple of notches above bailiffs in the courthouse hierarchy.

He had learned through a couple of telephone calls that Melissa Jensen had recently graduated from Golden Gate Law School. He also knew that she had arranged to keep working as a clerk to Judge Canady whose original clerk had contracted hepatitis and was out indefinitely. It was only when Lee saw the nameplate outside the office that she turned into that he realized that Melissa Jensen was still working out of Judge Gilbert's chambers.

Melissa was describing Judge Gilbert's dedication and amazing work habits, how she labored well into the night, long after Melissa had left for the day. Lee was asking questions and taking notes for the profile almost by rote.

"What was she working on that night?" Lee finally asked. "You know. The night that she died."

"I don't really know. Just going through her usual backlog, I suppose. We always had briefs pouring in. She was one of the few judges who actually read the things all the way through. Footnotes and everything."

"Hmmm. What was her last day like?" asked Lee. "Do you remember what happened in court that day?"

"Oh sure. It was a strange case," she said. "A trial that lasted four or five days. It was a mistrial because some crazy woman would not vote to convict. It seemed an easy decision to me."

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“Someone mentioned that case to me,” said Lee, feigning forgetfulness as he tapped his forehead with his pen as if trying to knock loose a memory. “Was it Whittington or Wellington, something like that?”

“Warrington. Right.”

“What was it?” said Lee. “Burglary?”

“Right. The police caught him coming out of one of the University of California medical buildings.”

“Where?” asked Lee. “Parnassus Heights?”

“Right. Somewhere near the hospital,” Melissa Jensen replied. “He was coming down the fire escape. He admitted breaking a window and everything.”

“Sounds guilty to me. What was his defense?”

The law clerk tilted her head and adjusted herself in her chair. Lee felt a legal discourse in the works.

“Well, for burglary you need breaking and entering,” she said. “That wasn’t an issue. But you also need intent to steal something. That wasn’t so clear. See, Warrington didn’t have anything with him from the lab. He said he went in there to get information about illegal experiments on animals.”

“I see,” said Lee, digesting the information. “But, wouldn’t that be stealing information?”

“Maybe. Who knows? It might be something that was, or should be, public information. If you believe him, it gets murky as to whether his intent was to steal. You might think illegal experiments are a greater evil than stealing the information.”

“Wow. That sounds like a creative defense. But, it also sounds like something a lawyer would dream up.” Lee glanced at his watch. “Say, I know you’re probably going to lunch. May I look at the judge’s office? It’s just so I can describe where she worked.”

Melissa stood up and opened the door that connected the outer office with the inner chamber. He stepped inside. He noticed the blue volumes lining the back wall with the wide

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desk sitting just in front. The desk was stripped clean. Just bare, gleaming wood. No papers lay on it.

Lee circled the desk slowly. When he reached the opposite side, he noticed the gray plastic wastebasket underneath the desk. He pulled it toward him. The only thing in it was a empty package made of some sort of clear plastic material. It was about the size of a pack of cigarettes and had been ripped open.

Chapter 8

MELISSA JANSEN HAD let Lee peruse the court file for the Warrington case. He found the old police report of Warrington's arrest which listed an address on McArthur Boulevard in Oakland. He should have used the time to make some more telephone calls to wrap up the reporting for the profiles of Miriam Gilbert and Orson Adams. But, he headed to Oakland anyway. He was curious about this Warrington character and his animal rights defense. Was it mere coincidence that the judge and prosecutor had shared the same courtroom before their deaths? What the hell, he thought. He was already on Pilmann's shit list. If he ended up needing an extra day for the profiles, it couldn't get much worse.

It was early afternoon by the time Lee got to Oakland. As he pulled in front of a yellow stucco house with a covered porch that spanned the entire front, Lee saw a tall, skinny black woman in silver high heels, red hot pants and a skimpy white vest waving at him from the intersection just ahead.

An early bird, he thought. By nightfall she would be fighting for curb space.

Lee went to the door. He was greeted by a heavysset guy wearing a blue ambulance company uniform with "Nick" stitched onto a patch. He had a stringy black goatee and was puffing on a Marlboro. Lee looked past him and saw plastic garbage bags sitting on the kitchen floor. The carpet in the living room was dark green, threadbare and splotched with what Lee guessed were the stains from beer, wine, coffee and the pitbull pacing behind Nick with an anxious whine.

"Ain't here," said Nick. "Don't know where he is. Don't think he works. He's a weird fuck." He tossed down the Marlboro and crushed it with his foot on the door sill.

“Try People’s Park,” added talkative Nick. “He ‘angs out with the homeless bums.” He exhaled twin plumes of smoke as he shut the door.

People’s Park, adjacent to the UC Berkeley campus, still held some mystique for Lee as an early battleground that helped define the 1960s counterculture. Perhaps that was why it always depressed him to see the place now, a square block that looked like a vacant lot, overgrown with weeds interrupted only by clumps of small, deformed trees. Strewn around the park were clusters of people, surrounded by shopping carts, plastic garbage bags and bedrolls. Green wine bottles were making their rounds.

People’s Park had taken on a new, surreal quality since Lee had last been there. After 30 years of failure, the university had finally managed to put its stamp on the park in the early 90s by constructing two volleyball courts. In the late afternoon shadows, trim college sophomores wearing gym shorts and clean T-shirts spiked, blocked and dinked while the burned out, chewed up and spit out sprawled on the sidelines.

Lee found Lloyd Warrington sitting on blankets with two other guys and a girl. He was skinny, built like a gawky kid although he looked like he was in his 30s. He had shoulder-length blond hair tied back in a ponytail and wore black-framed glasses on his narrow face. The smell of marijuana was in the air but Warrington, sitting cross-legged and straight-backed, looked at Lee with eyes that were clear and appraising.

“You Lloyd Warrington?” asked Lee.

“Who are you?”

The beefy guy in dirty jeans and Mexican serape sitting to Warrington’s left laughed.

“That your name, man? Lloyd.”

“Shut up,” said Warrington. “What do you want?”

“I work for the News. I wanted to talk to you about your case, about the trial.”

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Warrington examined Lee for few moments. He tapped his fingertips on the brown blanket underneath him.

“You must think I’m pretty stupid,” said Warrington. “Talk to my lawyer.”

“Listen, I’m not trying to get your confession,” said Lee. “I want to talk to you about the experiments. The illegal experiments. About why you were at the labs in the first place.”

Warrington was silent. He started rocking back and forth to the sound of a couple guys playing congas at the other end of the park.

“Can we talk about this somewhere else?” asked Lee.

After a few seconds, Warrington stood up and walked slowly with Lee until they were out of the earshot of his companions.

“So, tell me about the experiments,”

Lee said.

“Are you religious?”

“Yeah. Sure. I believe in a god.”

“If you know anything about religion. I don’t mean Sunday School bullshit. I mean *religions*. Not just Judeo-Christian ideas. Then you know that Western culture and religion is the most egocentric and ethnocentric in the world. *You* should know that. It is ends-oriented totally. It excludes every other way of thinking. It is basically intolerant, of other religions, of other people, of other beings and creatures, even though we all come out of the same slop.

“That’s where it starts,” Warrington continued. He was getting cranked up now and shook a fist in Lee’s face. “Sacrifice everything for the greater glory of mankind. The environment. The land. The forests. Screw the animal kingdom. If they’re below us on the evolutionary ladder, screw ‘em. Where does it end?”

“So, what were you trying to do in the labs?” interjected Lee.

“Stop the killing. Do you know how many monkeys die in this country every year in the name of medicine and developing new drugs? More than 28,000. Think of it. You could populate a

couple of rain forests. If you count the number that die during capture or because of disease, the number is probably twice that.

“That’s just the beginning,” continued Warrington. “There are hundreds of thousands of cats, dogs, rats, rabbits. It’s just too horrific. To a Hindu, that’s unbelievable. It’s criminal. Somehow, it must be stopped.”

“Okay. So what specifically were you trying to do?” asked Lee. “Do you know about specific experiments? Are there some specific documents? Maybe I can get them through a public document request.”

Warrington laughed.

“This is all covered up,” said Warrington. “You think they’ll just *tell* you? Lawrence Livermore Labs is involved. The UC School of Medicine uses thousands of dogs each year. There’s no record of it. It’s all off the books. That’s where we’ll get ‘em. The coverup. You’re a reporter. You should know that. Watergate, right?”

“That’s all I can tell you, man,” said Warrington suddenly, turning his back on Lee and walking toward his group. “Talk to my lawyer if you want anything else.”

Lee watched as Warrington sat down again on the brown blanket.

“Hey, Lloyd,” the guy in the serape greeted him.

Someone handed Warrington a bottle half filled with a pink fluid and he took a quick swig, keeping his eye on Lee the whole time.

Lee walked back to Warrington and stood over him.

“What about your trial?” said Lee. “You know the prosecutor and the judge both died after your trial.”

Warrington shaded his eyes with one hand as he squinted up at Lee. He took another swig from the bottle in his other hand.

“I guess the Bible would call that justice,” said Warrington.

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AFTER THE THIRD ring, the computer 3,000 miles away answered the call. A few seconds later, a soft squeal was audible as the connection was made. "Access code:" read the white lettering that suddenly appeared on the deep blue screen of the monitor. The man sitting in front of it typed in: "Nightwriter." Next, the computer asked for his user ID. He typed in the initials "GWK." Finally, he was asked for his personal code, and he typed in: "Gloria." He wondered for a moment who "Gloria" was. Maybe it was the wife or daughter of the person whose initials were "GWK". Perhaps his mistress. Or his poodle.

The menu of words that suddenly appeared across the top of his screen flushed away the Intruder's idle speculation. The list told him that with a few keystrokes he could look into GWK's personal documents files, explore his electronic mail and even look into the computerized calendar to see what appointments were scheduled for the next day. But, the only thing about GWK that interested the Intruder was that through him the Intruder could access the same information for any of the 44 reporters on the staff of the San Francisco News.

In a couple of minutes, he was rummaging through the stored files of Enzo Lee. He bypassed 90 days worth of old newspaper stories and concentrated on everything the reporter had input into the computer since the day that Judge Miriam Gilbert and prosecutor Orson Adams had died. He was delighted to find that the reporter used the computer for everything: notes of interviews; telephone numbers of contacts and sources; appointments; even reminders to send birthday cards.

*The Intruder was less sanguine to see that Enzo Lee had been assigned to cover the deaths of **both** Miriam Gilbert and Orson Adams, and that Sarah Armstrong was in his telephone list. But, the Intruder had anticipated the possibility that someone might try to link the deaths of the judge and prosecutor. As a hedge, he had made sure they were provided*

with such a connection in the form of a petty burglar named Lloyd Warrington. He was relieved to see that the planning was paying dividends. When he was finished with his electronic foray, the Intruder turned off the lights in his government office and joined the evening commute on his way home.

“*NI HAU MA, lai lai,*” said Lee.

His grandmother was staring out the window of her small room. She shuffled slowly on the green linoleum in her brown, fuzzy slippers until she could see Lee. She was tiny and seemed almost childlike to Lee. She was bent forward, her head naturally angled toward the floor unless she exerted the effort to lift it as she did now.

She blinked at Lee, focusing through thick eyeglasses that magnified her eyes to twice their size. Her hair was white and fell to her shoulders. Her face was round and held a wistful expression. She remained silent.

Lee walked over to her and guided her to a soft chair with padded arms.

“Sit down,” he said. “Look what I brought you.”

He produced a wrapped slice of wintermelon.

“Ummm,” she said, accepting the melon in both hands and inspecting the pale flesh. “Doeng gwa. Makes good soup.”

Lee usually brought his grandmother some sort of Chinese vegetable. She didn’t seem to realize that she couldn’t cook in the rest home. She would give the food to a nurse to keep for her and then forget about it. But, she enjoyed getting it.

In his youth, Lee had seen his grandmother on rare occasions, usually at the weddings and funerals of relatives. It wasn’t until he was a teenager that he learned his grandparents had broken off all contact with his mother before he was born. She had refused his grandparents’ order to end a relationship with a young man considered unsuitable. She not only defied her parents but had the audacity to accept her lover’s proposal.

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Thomas Lee was Italian-Scottish and died in an auto accident when Enzo was 8. The rift within his mother's family survived.

Then, Ben Hom, one of Lee's cousins, had called him one day in New York. It was soon after his grandfather had passed away. His mother had died a few months earlier. Only his grandmother had attended his mother's funeral. And, Lee hadn't bothered to attend his grandfather's. Ben's message was simple: His grandmother was ill and wanted to see him.

It had been an emotional meeting. He could never fathom nor totally forgive the abandonment of his mother. But, when he saw his grandmother, small and weak, in the hospital bed, he couldn't help but feel compassion for her. Then she showed him the scrapbook. Pictures of his mother growing up. A report card from the fourth grade with straight A's. A newspaper clipping announcing his mother at age 13 as the featured dancer at a Chinatown benefit. Pressed flowers from her prom night.

She described how she had hidden the book from his grandfather, saying that she had thrown it away. Then, his grandmother had shown Lee a second scrapbook. It was filled with clips of newspaper stories that Lee had written. She had been having friends and relatives in Florida and New York collect them for years. He quickly realized the only words his grandmother could read in the stories were his name.

"Your mother and your grandfather were the same," she had told him. "Very strong will."

Afterward, Lee had felt a kinship with his grandmother that was based on more than common blood. He guessed it was the way people felt when they discovered someone else who has lost their loved ones to the same war.

She had recovered from her illness. Now, his grandmother was physically well but her mind wandered, leaping decades in a moment.

His grandmother abruptly looked up at Lee.

"What stories you work on, Enzo?" she said.

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“Oh, the same old thing, grandma,” he replied. “A little bit of this. A little bit of that.”

“I’m sure they very good, Enzo,” she said. “I so proud of you. I see you name in paper alla time.”

She suddenly handed Lee the melon and pushed herself out of the chair.

“I will cook this later,” she said. She went to the dresser and pulled out a scrapbook and began turning the pages.

“Your mother. So beautiful,” she said.

Chapter 9

JORGE MASVIDAL HAD watched the numbers grow daily in the small camp in the middle of the vast sugar plantation he supervised. Most of them came with a bag or two. Some came with nothing more than a paper sack carrying a clean shirt, underwear and a couple of pairs of socks. Invariably, they came ill prepared for the back-breaking work they faced.

He wasn't surprised. Nothing surprised him in the state controlled economy of Fidel Castro's Cuba. With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the reduction in aid to Cuba, he had witnessed the technological regression of the country's agricultural industry with increasing dismay. First, the new tractors due the year before had never arrived. Then, the replacement parts to keep the old machines running failed to materialize. Finally, the gasoline and diesel oil needed to operate all of the machinery on the farm ran out.

Instead of machines and fuel, Masvidal was getting men, hundreds of them. Buses brought more each day, soft-handed urban dwellers conscripted into work gangs and forced to work for the glory of Cuba for 90 days at a time. It had taken all of Masvidal's resourcefulness to keep them all decently sheltered and fed, much less turn them into a labor force capable of plowing, planting, irrigating and fertilizing the fields.

Now, Masvidal was facing a problem even greater than overseeing the substitution of man for machines. Something was destroying his fields. It had started with the most southern plantations, a brown powdery growth that first attacked the leaves and then spread into the precious sweet cane itself. It had spread northward at the rate of twenty miles a week. Finally, it had reached his plantation.

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Like the other plantation supervisors, he had tried to fight back. He had burned the worst fields, hoping to spare the others. It hadn't worked. Nothing did. The small supply of fungicides he had on hand was exhausted almost immediately. Now, he was trying to salvage what he could. Maybe 15 percent of the plants resisted the disease. At least he could harvest that much in the fall. The disaster was solving his other problem, however. Now, Masvidal could start sending the laborers back to Havana.

LEE WAS SURPRISED when Sarah Armstrong called him at the newspaper earlier in the day. He knew that the simple funeral for Judge Gilbert had been the day before. He had intended to call her in the next day or two. He wanted to see how she was recovering from her injuries. Lee also wondered whether Sarah could shed any light on the events of the past few days.

When Sarah asked if they could meet to talk about her "accident," he suggested dinner that night and Sarah agreed.

After returning from Berkeley in the late afternoon, Lee had stopped at his flat, spent a half hour with his grandmother in the rest home, and then drove to Sarah's. He found his leather jacket in the trunk of the Fiat. Sarah buzzed him in, and as he trudged up the interior stairway, he could hear her shuffling footsteps off somewhere in the flat.

"I'll be right there," she said as he reached the top. He walked down the hallway to the large living room that looked out on the street, and again admired the beautifully finished hardwood floors, maple paneling and tall white walls that curved into the ceiling 12 feet overhead.

Sarah came in through the dining room moving slowly on her bad leg. She was wearing black corduroy pants, a beige cashmere turtleneck with splashes of red and blue, a black suede jacket and hand-tooled cowboy boots.

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“Hello,” said Lee. “No ballroom dancing tonight, huh?”

Sarah smiled at him. “I’ll take a rain check. You wait. I’ll be back on my rollerblades in another week.”

“Are you a big rollerblader?” he asked. Lee couldn’t help associating rollerblades, neon clothes, zinc oxide and Walkman tapeplayers with the decline of Western civilization.

Sarah shrugged.

“I’ll do anything that involves spending time in Golden Gate Park,” she said. “Bike, run. Even ride those stupid paddleboats in the lake.”

Sarah directed Lee to the nearby Hilltop Cafe on Filmore Street, a small restaurant with dark polished wood and elegant lace tablecloths. They found a parking space in front. Lee was famished and immediately ordered fried calamari to go with his Samuel Adams beer and her camomile tea.

After he put down his menu, Lee had a chance to study Sarah more carefully than he had earlier. He noticed her hair had a hint of auburn in it. Aside from lipstick, she wore little makeup. Her face was well tanned. She must have spent a lot of time outdoors. He could imagine her in ski goggles, slaloming down a mountainside in perfect, no-nonsense form. Sarah’s menu was flat on the table, her hands palm down on either edge. She was studying it carefully. She sat with her shoulders squared but leaning slightly toward him.

“You’re staring,” Sarah said, without looking up.

“Oh. Yeah. I’m sorry.” Lee looked at his hands and realized he had been unfolding and refolding his napkin. He put the napkin down and took a gulp from his beer.

Sarah looked up and studied him for a few moments with a considering gaze.

“So,” she said. “How did you end up at the News? I understand you used to work in New York.”

“Quite a change, huh? So, you’ve been checking up.”

“I have my sources. I want to know who I’m dealing with.”

“It’s not a particularly interesting story,” said Lee.

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“That’s all right. Tell it anyway.”

Lee could see that he was going to have to give her at least part of his story so he retraced the early years of his journalism career. He started with the years in Florida, learning the craft, moving to various newspapers in the itinerant lifestyle of a young journalist. He didn’t try to describe exactly what he wrote about. He glossed over the New York years.

“So what made you leave New York?” Sarah asked.

Lee finished his beer. Set down the bottle and ordered another.

“Change of climate,” he said. “I just couldn’t stand the cold anymore.”

They were silent for a minute. Lee studied his thumbnail, irritated that he had lied. It must be the guilt. He was still paying for that original story about Judge Miriam Gilbert. He took a sip of water.

“Anyway,” he said. “I needed a change.”

“And has it been a good one?”

“The jury is still out. I have a city editor that I am ready to murder, though. So I may just kill him and get it over with. It would simplify my life. The only drawback would be the food on Death Row, speaking of which...I’m starving.”

Lee ordered salmon filet in a creamy sauce with minced ginger and mango. Sarah opted for New York strip steak. While they waited for their food, Lee demanded equal time.

“You know that I’m an attorney, right?” said Sarah.

Lee nodded while he speared another lightly crusted circle of calamari. “Second in your class at Hastings. You went to work for some big law firm, right?” Sarah nodded.

“But you left after two years,” he went on. “I guess the money was too good. See. I have my sources, too.” Lee flashed a smug grin.

Sarah lifted an eyebrow ever so slightly. “Your intelligence is remarkable,” she said. “You must have honed those investigative skills working for Newsday.”

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Lee munched the calamari slowly. It had suddenly turned rubbery. He eyed Sarah thoughtfully.

“All right,” he said. “I get the message. Tell you what. I’ll fill you in on all the sordid details of my past. Just not today, okay? I don’t want to ruin my appetite.”

“Besides,” Lee said through another ring of calamari that was starting to taste better, “I want to hear your story. Tell me why you left and what you’re doing now. That part I don’t know and I am curious.”

“Well, as I guess you know, I spent the first two years out of law school at Flowers & Myce. It was a very prestigious law firm, or so they thought,” said Sarah. “I hated it. I just wasn’t ready to spend my entire life making and saving money for rich people. I need more suspense than wondering whether the kids will make it into Stanford.

“So, now I work at a small firm of lawyers that specializes in prosecuting lawsuits against employers, mostly accused of discriminating against women, minorities or the elderly,” Sarah continued. “I like the work. I run my own cases. I get into court. I have a lot of fourteen hour days but it’s good.”

“Is that why you were so close to your aunt? I mean the fact that you were both lawyers?” asked Lee.

Sarah nodded. “Yes. There was that. Actually, it was more. My family...our family...was not what you could call full of professionals or academics. Aunt Miriam blazed the trail. She really inspired me. And, she helped me along the way. It was a lot of things.”

At the mention of her aunt, Lee could see Sarah’s mood darkened perceptibly. Fortunately, the food arrived on cue and Lee fell back to a safe discussion of their favorite restaurants.

They skipped dessert and Sarah proposed that they return to her flat for coffee and more privacy than was available at the tightly packed restaurant. They still hadn’t discussed what had happened earlier in the week outside the News’ building.

Chapter 10

THE MAN IN the blue Ford station wagon had been waiting outside Sarah Armstrong's flat for two hours before Enzo Lee had arrived. Abdul Hassan had followed Lee's Fiat when they drove to the restaurant, parking farther down on Filmore Street and then walking back up Filmore where he could watch them through the large windows of the Hilltop Cafe.

When he saw that they were ordering dinner, Hassan returned to Sarah's flat. He parked the station wagon a block away and walked back to the flat. Hassan was Egyptian by birth, although he had moved to Queens as a teenager. He had short black hair and a thick, well-trimmed mustache. He was wearing jeans, Reebok running shoes, and a gray sweatshirt with the hood drawn over his head.

When he reached the front of the house, Hassan leaped quickly up the outside stairs. It took him 20 seconds to pick the lock to Sarah's flat and let himself in. He locked the door behind him.

Once inside the flat, Hassan moved methodically through the rooms. In the bedroom, he took a pillowcase off a pillow and emptied the contents of a jewelry box on the dresser into it. He pulled open all of the dresser drawers and pulled everything out, looking in the places where people ordinarily hide their valuables. He found a wad of \$20 bills in Sarah's underwear drawer. He added that to the jewelry in the pillowcase.

Hassan pulled Sarah's hanging clothes out of her closet and pulled out the boxes stacked on the upper shelves. He pulled off the tops but found nothing except a Nikon camera that he added to his stash.

In the office, he went through the file cabinet and pulled most of the files from the drawers. He put them on the floor

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quietly. He didn't want the tenants below to hear anything alarming. He didn't find anything worth stealing in the office and just left the files scattered about.

In the living room, Hassan removed the books from the built-in bookcases and piled them on the floor. He knew it was a place where many people install wall safes. As he expected, he didn't find one. It didn't really matter. He just wanted to leave the trail of a half-way competent burglar. He decided to bypass the kitchen. The noise would have been too great a risk.

He made a quick survey of the rooms, thinking about how they would look to the police. He left the pillowcase with the meager booty at the top of the stairs. Hassan made a mental note to take it with him when he left. Afterward, he would dump it someplace where it would likely be found and, hopefully, reported to the police. He would leave the camera and some of the jewelry inside.

The last thing he would do is take the girl's purse and the reporter's wallet, if he returned with her. In a few days, he would try to use one of the credit cards or bank cards, making sure that he couldn't be identified in the process, of course. That should convince anyone that he had been a burglar, surprised in the act, who had merely killed the people who walked in on him.

Hassan moved a small chair in the living room to the front bay windows. He would have to return it to its original place when he saw them drive up. He was careful to position it in the shadow, where no one outside would see him sitting. Then, he took his .38-caliber Glock out of a holster in the small of his back. He toyed with it, popping the magazine out and then pushing it back into the handle of the gun, over and over, while he waited.

SARAH AND LEE were at the bottom of the outside stairway when the door at the top of the landing, the one beside

the door leading to her flat, opened. A couple emerged. The man had long, brown hair tied in a ponytail in the back. The woman was a plump Asian.

“Hi, Sarah,” said the woman.

“Hello, Denise. Hello, Terry,” said Sarah. “Meet a friend of mine. Enzo Lee.”

Lee shook hands with the couple who occupied the flat beneath Sarah’s.

“Did you forget something?” said Terry, blinking in the bright light of a street lamp directly overhead.

“What do you mean?” asked Sarah.

“Well, we just heard you moving around upstairs,” Terry explained. “You know how everything squeaks in these old houses. It’s not that you make a lot of noise or anything, but, well...”

“You mean you heard somebody? Just now, you heard somebody in my flat?” Sarah asked the question with a puzzled expression on her face. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” said Denise. “That’s sure what it sounded like to me, too. We were in the front room and it sounded like someone walking right above our heads.”

Sarah looked at Lee.

“There shouldn’t be anyone in there, right?” he asked.

“Right,” Sarah replied. “What do you think we should do?”

“Call the police,” said Lee.

The four of them held a hurried whispered conference on the outside stairs. If there was a burglar in the building, Terry and Denise didn’t want to go back into their apartment. But, they were willing to wait outside and watch the building while Lee and Sarah hunted for a pay phone.

All of a sudden they heard the ugly sound of metal scraping on concrete followed by the tinny crash of a trash can tipping over.

“Around the side,” said Sarah, pointing toward the side of the house.

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Lee jumped down the stairs and ran quickly around the corner of the house. As he turned the corner, he saw someone wearing a hooded sweatshirt hanging from the top of a fence at the rear of the house. The person dropped to the sidewalk, looked up at Lee and then started sprinting in the opposite direction.

Lee took off after the intruder. He was about 20 yards behind. They ran down the poorly lighted block past trees spaced every few yards. Lee thought he was gaining. Suddenly, Lee saw the figure ahead of him twist around. He saw a flash. There was a loud pop and he heard a short, high-pitched whine as a bullet whizzed by his left ear, hitting a telephone pole behind him with a thud. Lee stopped on a dime. He was stunned. It took him a second to realize he was still an exposed target and to drop to the cement while the hooded figure disappeared in the dark.

SARAH AND LEE went up to inspect the damage. It appeared to Lee as if Sarah's papers and clothing were strewn everywhere. He guessed that the intruder must have been there through most of their dinner, rummaging through every room. The mess seemed particularly bad in the small room near the top of the stairway that Sarah used as an office. Her file cabinet drawers were standing open and empty. Piles of papers and file folders lay on the floor and spilled into the hallway.

They found a pillowcase the intruder had left behind filled with valuables. Lee followed Sarah from room to room while she picked through clutter trying to determine if anything was missing. He noticed that there were no signs of perversion, ripped panties and the like. It appeared that clothes had been scooped out to see what lay beneath, and dresses had been yanked out of the closets to see what was behind them.

When the police finally arrived 20 minutes later, they had to repeat the journey. Lee thought about trying to explain how this

might be more than just a burglary attempt. But, he doubted whether the two patrolmen would take him seriously. From his experience with a couple of car break-ins and a burglary at his own apartment in New York, he didn't think that any extra investigative work like dusting for fingerprints would do any good. He kept quiet.

As they moved through the flat, Lee could sense Sarah's energy ebbing and depression setting in.

"Look," he said, after the police had finally gone. "You should clean this up later. I'll help you. You shouldn't stay here tonight. It's too dangerous and too depressing for you. You can stay with me. I'll sleep on the couch. Or stay with someone else you know, at least for tonight. Just don't stay here."

"Well, I guess I could get a hotel room for tonight," said Sarah.

"It's late. Why don't you come with me?" said Lee. "I sleep on the sofa a lot anyway. I have a lot of room. It's just me and my cat, Max."

"Oh, a cat," echoed Sarah. She shook her head as if to shake out the images of the chaos in her flat. She refocused on Lee. "Is Max a boy?"

"No, a girl," said Lee. "It's short for Maxine, I guess. I don't know. The name just fits. You'll love her."

As Sarah packed two bags and they locked up her flat, Lee thought again about his pursuit of the intruder. The scene was completely clear in his mind and he knew already it was one he could never forget: the muzzle flash, the innocent-sounding pop and the bullet that he had felt cleave the air as it sped by his head.

Chapter 11

LEE WOKE TO the sound of water running in the shower. It took him a couple of minutes to remember why he was in his sleeping bag on the living room couch. Then, he remembered Sarah.

He got up and pulled on a shirt and a pair of sweatpants. He poured water into the coffee maker and put a Frank Sinatra disk on the CD player. Then, Lee walked down to the corner market and bought a dozen eggs and a block of white Vermont cheddar. Sarah was yawning into her coffee when Lee walked into the kitchen. She wore designer jeans and a blue work shirt with flowers embroidered on the pockets. Her damp hair was combed straight and parted down the middle.

“Sleep okay?” he asked.

“Great, once Max fell asleep and stopped purring. She sounds like a diesel truck.”

“Really. I never noticed. Everything work okay in the shower?”

“Fine. You know, you can buy cans of spray-on cleaner that cut through mold pretty well. They have bubbles with little faces and cleaning brushes...on the can, I mean.”

“Yeah. I’ve been meaning to find a housekeeper.” Lee tapped open the first egg against the side of the bowl. “Do you like eggs and cheese?”

They ate the scrambled eggs in the small breakfast nook in the kitchen. The finicky toaster decided to produce two slices that were golden brown, a rarity. Lee considered it a good omen. Lee noticed that Sarah drank her coffee black.

“So,” said Lee. “How are you feeling?”

“Not bad, considering I’ve been run over, burglarized, and lost the person I’m closest to in the past four days,” said Sarah. “Not bad at all, considering.”

“Still no idea why any of this has happened, huh?”

Sarah shook her head.

“All I can tell you is that, as the one on the receiving end of all this attention, I have the inescapable feeling that someone is out to get me. Or they want something. Or both.”

“And you can’t think of any possible explanation?” asked Lee.

“None. I’m what I look like. I lead a fairly simple life. I’m not rich.”

“You drive a BMW,” said Lee, with a shrug.

“Used,” said Sarah. “I bought it used from my aunt. I don’t think this is about a six-year-old car.” She set her coffee mug down emphatically. “Look, I sue people and sometimes I win. But, mostly I sue large companies. It’s part of doing business for them. I can’t understand why in God’s name this is happening.”

“Well, people can be pretty irrational,” said Lee. “Take the guy who shot those lawyers downtown. They helped him settle a lawsuit in his favor and years later he’s blowing them away. And, then there are all those stalking cases where someone has become obsessed with someone else. Maybe somebody is obsessed with you. Someone you don’t even know.”

“I guess anything’s possible. I’ve never considered myself obsession material, to tell you the truth,” said Sarah with a dismissive toss of her head. “The other thing is: What about Aunt Miriam? What about Orson? Is all that just coincidence, too?”

“Did you know Orson Adams?” asked Lee.

“Oh, sure. We went to Hastings together,” said Sarah. “We were in a lot of the same classes our first year. We had a circle of friends, six or seven people, who spent a lot of time together. We were buddies.”

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“Was it just...uh...platonic?” asked Lee.

“Were we involved? No. I was living with a guy at the time. My ex. Orson and I were just friends. We stayed in touch. I saw him at lawyer functions every now and then.”

“When did you last see him?”

“Oh...a couple of months ago.” Sarah rested her chin on the palm of her hand and closed her eyes, trying to recall the scene. “It was some fundraising event. I don’t remember which one.”

“Did he talk about anything in particular?”

“Not really. He may have mentioned some of his cases. You know, with all that criminal work he had some good war stories. I’d really have to sit down and think about what he said.”

“Did he mention anything about a guy, a defendant he was trying, named Warrington? Lloyd Warrington?” asked Lee.

“The name doesn’t ring a bell.”

Lee told her what he knew about Lloyd Warrington’s burglary case, including the conversation that Lee had had with Warrington in People’s Park.

“I don’t know,” said Sarah. “It’s hard to believe that a bunch of animal rights types, no matter how extreme, would start killing people. But, I guess zealots of some sort are as good a theory as any other. But, why me?”

“Well, it could be guilt by association,” said Lee. He started to gather up their plates. “If someone targeted your aunt, maybe they saw you together and think you’re her daughter. Maybe they think that you were assisting her somehow, or know something that threatens them. Who knows?”

“So, do you think Aunt Miriam was killed? What about this disease? What is that all about?”

Lee stood up and carried the dishes to the sink. “I don’t know,” he said. “I hope to get some more answers today. I’m hoping the medical examiner’s office can at least say whether poisoning is a possibility.”

He noticed Sarah’s grim expression.

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“I know it sounds horrible,” said Lee. “But we need to get to the bottom of it.”

Lee left Sarah at his flat to call old law school friends who might have been in recent contact with Adams. He went downstairs and unlocked the garage door to get the Fiat. He paused for a minute, looking up and down the street. He couldn't help wondering if someone might be there, staking out his apartment and waiting for Sarah to emerge. He couldn't see anyone obvious. But, it was a busy neighborhood with major streets only a stone's throw away. How could he be sure?

Lee had been impressed by Sarah's reaction to what must be a terrifying situation for her. She was dealing with it coolly and analytically, not panicking. He imagined that he'd be howling at the gods in her situation.

As Lee headed into the Broadway Tunnel, he thought yet again about what had happened the night before. The shock and fear of having a gun fired at him had worn off. Now he was just angry. And determined to find out who was after Sarah and why.

MIKE SANTOS WAS out when Lee arrived at his office, so he waited out by the receptionist thumbing through catalogues for medical saws, autopsy tables, organ scales and other accessories for today's modern morgue.

Santos walked in wearing his lab coat. He invited Lee into his office.

“Sorry,” said Santos. He explained that he was working on a fascinating case involving a victim who had been shot and then torched to make it look like an accident. Santos blew his nose into a white cloth handkerchief.

“I can't get the smell out,” he said.

Lee was glad lunch was still a couple hours away.

“Mike, I wanted to check again on the Gilbert death,” said Lee. “Are you any closer to figuring out what it was?”

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“No. It still is a mystery,” said Santos. He looked downcast. “We’ve tried spectrometry and have analyzed the tissue samples. No one has found anything that shouldn’t be there. If it weren’t for the clotting, you wouldn’t think anything abnormal had happened. The labs will keep trying different things for weeks. Maybe something will turn up. My guess is that this one will stay ‘unexplained.’”

Lee shook his head sympathetically.

“Say, Mike. Did your office or the cops take any pictures of the judge’s chambers?”

“Of course.”

“Can I see ‘em? I mean, if you’ve got them here.”

Santos picked up the phone and dialed four numbers. “Cathy? Bring in the Gilbert file.”

There was a stack of 15 pictures from different angles and distances. They all showed Miriam Gilbert, head down on her desk. Santos left Lee alone in his outer office. Surrounded by the colored bell jars filled with human organs, Lee studied each photo quickly before laying it face down on a second stack.

Somewhere toward the middle of the stack, he noticed one envelope in particular sitting on the judge’s desktop with a distinctive logo, a spiral with fruit and flowers dangling from it. He also noticed what looked like a pressed yellow flower on the desk. He made a mental note of both items.

When he was finished, Lee handed the file to Santos’ secretary. He retrieved the Fiat and headed down Bryant Street toward the News. The profiles of Miriam Gilbert and Orson Adams were due the next day. With a few more calls he could finish his reporting for the articles.

As he drove, Lee thought about Lloyd Warrington. There was something about Warrington that intrigued him. He was arrogant, the type who thinks he can beat the system because he’s smarter than everyone else. On the other hand, Lee wasn’t sure whether Warrington actually believed all of the animal rights philosophy he had espoused the day before or whether he

was just full of crap. Lee considered himself a professional at detecting crap but he just couldn't tell with Warrington.

The phone calls took most of the afternoon. While he waited for people to call him back, Lee started to rough out the two stories. He kept the tone properly somber, avoiding his usual irreverence. He just wanted something serviceable, something that would do Gilbert and Adams justice and get Ray Pilmann off his back. It was early evening and Lee was getting ready to leave when his phone rang. It was Bobbie Connors.

"I told you I would call if anything developed," she said. "We've got a suspect in the Adams case. His name is Lloyd Warrington."

"You're kidding."

"Honey, I'm dead serious. We've got him in the station now for questioning. Give us an hour and we'll probably make the arrest."

"I was just talking to him yesterday," Lee said.

"What? Warrington? How's that?"

"You know about his case, right?" said Lee. "He was Adams' last case. There was a mistrial because of a hung jury the day Adams died."

"No kidding?" said Connors. "Whattaya know? When it rains it pours."

"What have you got? If you didn't know about the case, why is he a suspect?"

"Look, Enzo," said Connors. "Just between you and me and the wall. And if I ever see any of this in print your ass will be dead meat here, understand? We got an anonymous call saying Warrington stole the truck."

"You're basing this on an anonymous call?" said Lee.

"No. Listen. The caller said Warrington showed him the truck. The caller knew things about the truck. What kind of stereo. What was on the dash. He even knew the names of the tapes - some kind of country western garbage. This wasn't a crank. This caller was definitely in that truck."

Chapter 12

THE AROMA OF onions, tomatoes and garlic working their magic in a hot skillet greeted Lee at the top of the stairs to his flat. Max gave him a particularly enthusiastic welcome, throwing herself against his legs with a seductive meow before darting into the kitchen as if inviting him to see what was cooking.

Sarah was at the stove, stirring with a big wooden spoon. She wore an apron and her hair was pulled back in a short pony tail.

“What’s this?” he said. “If you’re any good at cleaning showers you’ve got a job.”

“Hello. Do you like chicken cacciatore?”

“Are you kidding? I love it. Didn’t I tell you about the Italian side of my family?”

They ate in the kitchen. First came a salad of sliced tomatoes, avocados, onions and mozzarella cheese with virgin olive oil and a touch of balsamic vinegar drizzled on top. The chicken followed, cooked almost to the point of falling off the bone and smothered in a rich marinara sauce with parmesan cheese spooned on top. Sliced sour dough heated in the oven with butter, garlic and paprika completed the meal.

While they ate, Lee told Sarah the news about Warrington and Mike Santos’ pessimistic prediction about researchers ever identifying the cause of Miriam Gilbert’s death.

“So. Do you think they’ve got the right man?” Sarah asked.

“Warrington? I can’t believe it. I thought there might be some connection with the case. But, after meeting him ...” Lee shook his head. “There may be a connection but I can’t see him doing it.”

“Why not?”

“Warrington may be a zealot. But, he’s not stupid. Why risk a murder wrap to avoid a burglary charge? Besides, why would he think that killing a judge or a prosecutor would change anything about his case?”

“Could something have happened during the trial that set him off?” asked Sarah. “Maybe some sensitive information that came out?”

“Maybe. I just can’t picture him doing it. Burglary, yes. Stealing, yes. Vandalism, yes. Running someone down with a truck? It doesn’t fit.”

Sarah used her last scrap of bread to mop up the last of the tomato sauce on her plate. Then she plopped it into her mouth.

“You know, I like a woman with an appetite,” said Lee while Sarah chewed. She ignored the comment.

“While you were out, I did a little sleuthing myself,” said Sarah after she finished swallowing.

“Yeah?”

“I called some of our group. The friends that Orson and I had in law school. I just wanted to see if he had told them anything interesting that might fit in.”

“How did you make out?” asked Lee.

“Well, the four who I spoke to are all alive and well. I found that encouraging. Larry Washington in Los Angeles broke his ankle roller skating at Venice Beach. And, Helen Jinks in Washington D.C. had her car stereo stolen. But, I chalk that up to random bad luck.”

“Right. Yuppie occupational hazards.”

“You cynic,” said Sarah. “But, Francine Nahm, who works for a personal injury law firm in Burlingame, talked to Orson a few days before he died. He called to refer a client to her.

“Orson told her about some new woman he was seeing,” Sarah went on. “Orson always had a new woman in his life. He was a real charmer, not to mention a romantic, and had a great sense of humor. Anyway, this was a white woman. Francine thought she was French. And, apparently her ex-boyfriend was

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harassing Orson, calling him at night, threatening him, using racial slurs...pretty nasty stuff.”

“Did she remember any names?” asked Lee.

“The girl’s name was Diana. Orson met her at his health club. That’s all Francine remembered.”

“Well, that sound like it’s worth checking out. Do you want to track her down?”

“Sure. Oh, Francine also invited me to stay with her for a couple of weeks until things settle down or we figure out what’s going on. I’ll head over tonight. I’m also taking a few days off work. I decided you’re right. I just won’t feel safe at my place.”

“Good,” said Lee. He stood, picked up both of their plates and walked them into the kitchen. “Why take any unnecessary risks?”

IT WAS MIDAFTERNOON the following day by the time Lee finished the profiles of Orson Adams and Miriam Gilbert. They were good, strong stories, not anything that would win a prize but sympathetic accounts of their lives that spoke by implication of the tragedy of their deaths.

Then he called Bobbie Connors to find out what had happened to Warrington.

“He had an alibi and a lawyer, both good ones,” said Connors. “He was at some anarchists meeting in Berkeley when Adams was killed.”

“A what?”

“Anarchists. You know, like Sacco and Vanzetti. Back in the 1920s...”

“I know who Sacco and Vanzetti are,” said Lee.

“Good for you. I guess you paid attention in American History. Anyway, the meeting ran from six in the evening until after 10 o’clock. There were more than 20 people. Apparently, Warrington had a few things to say. We talked to several people who remember him.”

“So, if he was at the meeting when Adams was run down, I guess the anonymous call takes on new significance, huh?” said Lee.

“You got that right. We have a tape of it but that’s all. No name. No phone number. The guy had a slight accent, a little clipped. Maybe Indian or Middle Eastern. Someplace where they learn English English.”

“You mean proper English,” said Lee.

“Yassuh.” Connors chuckled.

Lee wasn’t surprised that Warrington had an alibi, just disappointed that there was not to be quick resolution of the case.

“And, what was this about his lawyer?” said Lee.

Connors said that Warrington had demanded the presence of his lawyer before making any statements and offering his alibi.

“A punk like him,” said Connors, “I figure he has a public defender or some low-budget dude. You know, someone down in the Mission District. Anyway, the guy shows up in nothing flat. Lo and behold, it’s Gerald Fulmer.”

“Who?” said Lee.

“Gerald Fulmer. You haven’t been around too long, huh?” said Connors. “He used to be with the U.S. Attorney’s Office. He was one of their big guns before he sold out like they all do eventually. He works for one of the downtown law firms now.”

Lee pondered the significance of what Connors had just told him. Then, a thought occurred to him. “That law firm wouldn’t be Sutro, Foerster and Bridges, would it?” he said, holding his breath.

Connors was silent for a moment. Then she said, “Don’t you know everything.”

Even before he hung up the telephone, Lee had pulled open his bottom drawer where he found the 12-page legal bill right where he had placed it before completely forgetting about it.

He went through it now, line by line. He saw that the entries all contained initials that he presumed were for the attorneys

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who had performed the work. On the last page, the bill contained a listing of the initials and the full names of the attorneys. He found Gerald Fulmer's name with a billing rate of \$325 an hour.

For someone like Warrington, Fulmer's rate was absurdly high. Lee did some quick math. A four-day trial would have cost Warrington more than \$10,000, and that didn't count the cost of preparation. Based on what he knew about Warrington, there was no way Warrington could pay that much. Someone else must have footed the bill.

Looking over the bill yet again, Lee found only two entries with Fulmer's initials. One was for 11 hours on the last day of the month. The other was for 8 hours, the previous day. The descriptions of services in both entries were short: "Miscellaneous legal services." They were in sharp contrast to all of the other entries that described the work performed in detail.

Lee tried to get a telephone number for Futura Products, Inc., the client whose name appeared on the bill. The operator found nothing listed in Palo Alto. He went into the News library to ask the head librarian where to look up information about corporations in California. She gave him a special number for the Secretary of State's Office in Sacramento, one where a human being rather than a recorded message answered.

It took the clerk in Sacramento less than a minute to pull up Futura Products, Inc. on his computer. He read Lee the names of the directors and officers of the corporation.

Lee plugged his computer into the News computerized database that contained every story that had appeared in the newspaper since 1987. He tried "Futura Products." Nothing. He then tried each of the five officers and directors. He came up empty until he tried the fourth name, a "Gary P. Jacobs."

The computer came up with a single story. It was a one-paragraph brief, an announcement really, from 1991. It said that Gary P. Jacobs had been promoted to vice president of

production at AgriGenics, Inc. Lee saw that the reporter's name at the end of the brief was Lorraine Carr. He grinned and looked across the newsroom where he saw Lorraine sitting at her computer, biting a fingernail.

"Hey, Lo!" said Lee, sitting down behind her. "Like, tell me everything you know about AgriGenics, Inc."

Lorraine "Lo" Carr was a pixie of a woman whose jet black hair was cut short. She invariably wore black, usually tank-tops and jeans, except for her shoes which were Converse hightop sneakers that she owned in a rainbow of colors.

Carr looked like she was 16, but she had a master's degree in electrical engineering from Columbia University. She covered technology and spent most of her time reporting on the rise and fall of companies and products in Silicon Valley, the cradle of high tech, located a half hour drive south of San Francisco.

Carr was one of Lee's favorite people at the News. She was quick and funny, and seemed oblivious to office politics and what anyone else thought about her. Based on Lorraine's accounts of her weekend activities, Lee imagined she existed on a diet of underground nightclubs, feminist poetry readings and street theatre performances. Lorraine was also a talented journalist.

"So. What are *you* doing on AgriGenics?" she demanded in a very non-mellow way.

"Look, Lo. I only heard of AgriGenics 10 seconds ago. I'm not doing a story about them. The name just popped up on this other story. There's some connection between AgriGenics and a company called Futura Products. Ever hear of them?"

"I've never heard of Futura Products," said Carr. "But, if you'd *read* any of my stories you'd know something about AgriGenics."

Carr accepted with skepticism Lee's assurances that he both respected her journalism and wasn't invading her turf. With some prodding Lorraine revealed what she knew about AgriGenics. The company was on the cutting edge of applying

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genetic engineering techniques to agriculture. It had actually cloned cows, for example, producing a set of six animals that were genetically identical. But, its main work consisted of improving crops such as tomatoes that wouldn't spoil for weeks, wheat that was amazingly resistant to troubling pests and fungi, and corn that yielded 30 percent more grain.

The growth of AgriGenics had been as phenomenal as the products it produced. AgriGenics was Wall Street's darling and its stock, offered publicly for the first time in 1992, was now selling at twenty times the initial offering price two years later. The company was celebrating its lavish new headquarters in Palo Alto in three days and was using the occasion to throw what amounted to a huge celebratory bash. Carr showed Lee her engraved invitation to the event. The RSVP address on it matched the one that appeared in the Futura Products legal bill.

"*Everyone* will be there," said Lorraine Carr. "All the CEOs from the Apples, the Hewlett Packards, the Genentechs. I'm thinking of covering it like a society event. You know. 'Green floral tie from Macy's.' 'Ill-fitting blue pinstripes from Nordstrom's Rack.' What do you think?"

"Wow, Lo. Sounds like a really, really great idea. If I spike my hair, can I be your date?"

Chapter 13

LLOYD WARRINGTON HAD just put his quarter into the Donkey Kong video game at the University of California at Berkeley student union. He stared serenely through his black-frame glasses into the center of the screen while his fingers seemed to operate the controls of their own accord. Jump! Hop forward to the barrel. Jump again! Go back to the ladder. Up to the next level. Jump!

He enjoyed the new machines like Killer Slaves and Robowarrior. But he liked to close out the arcade by returning to his old favorite. It was like warming down after a hard workout. No thinking. Just reacting to the machine as he had thousands of times before. Jump! Move up to the ladder. Up to the next rung. Jump! He could make the quarter last an hour if he wanted.

“Hey, Lloyd,” said Rafe, sidling up next to him. Rafe was always in a hurry to leave. He didn’t really like the machines or the young kids. Let Rafe sit in the sun in his serape and drink sweet wine and he was happy. Otherwise, he was a pain in the ass.

“C’mon,” said Rafe. “We got to go. Dude will be waiting.”

Warrington stayed with the machine for another minute until he had achieved the next level of play. Then, he spun on his heel and headed for the door leaving Rafe to hurry after him.

Out on Telegraph Avenue, they saw the familiar black El Camino waiting at the curb under the street lights. The night was warm and the driver, a muscular Filipino man in his 30s, had his arm out the window and was slapping his hand against the door in time to the salsa music blaring out of the stereo. He kept up the beat, merely nodding a little harder when Rafe opened the passenger side and they climbed in.

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They drove in silence down Telegraph across the Oakland border and turned left on Alcatraz. Then they turned right on Colby, kept on for another four blocks, and finally turned into the driveway of a modest bungalow with lime green aluminum siding.

The driver and Warrington got out of the El Camino and walked further down the driveway to the back of the house. The driver was wearing designer jeans, cowboy boots and a white Hard Rock Cafe T-shirt. Rafe stayed in the car as lookout, since his grandmother owned the bungalow and was the most likely person to turn up unexpectedly.

On the grass at the back of the house, raised on concrete blocks, sat the rusting body of a 1968 Mustang. It had originally been red, but was mostly primer gray now. A dirty blue plastic sheet covered part of the open passenger compartment, but the upholstery was rotten and there was more yellow foam stuffing showing than red vinyl.

Warrington and the driver walked to the back of the Mustang. Warrington pulled out a set of keys. He inserted one into the trunk lock. Before he turned it, he looked behind him to see if anyone - a curious neighbor, perhaps - was watching. The lock made a hollow metallic click and Warrington lifted the trunk open. Inside, sitting on a brown wool blanket, were three Meiji TechnoAmerica stereo microscopes. Their shiny chrome sparkled even inside the shadowy trunk, picking up the light of the stars overhead.

Warrington turned to the driver and smiled. The driver picked up two of the microscopes. Warrington took the third. They shut the trunk and took the instruments back to the El Camino. They set them down by the front bumper, away from the street traffic. The driver went to the back of his car and lifted out a large Igloo chest that he carried to the front. He pulled several thick towels out of the chest and wrapped each microscope carefully before placing it in the chest. He used the

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remaining towels for extra padding to prevent shifting inside the chest.

They got back into the El Camino. Before backing out of the driveway, the driver handed Warrington a wad of bills. Warrington flipped through them quickly, counted eight \$50 bills and handed four of them to Rafe. Rafe started whistling an unrecognizable tune as he stuck the bills into his pants pocket.

They left Warrington at his house on McArthur Boulevard before continuing to People's Park where Rafe wanted to be dropped. As Warrington climbed the stairs to the covered porch, he was thinking about the \$200 in his pocket. It was chump change compared to the fifty grand he expected to get very soon. He could hear a television laugh track through the door to the yellow stucco house.

He had his hand on the doorknob when the cold metal silencer was pressed against the base of Warrington's skull and three .22 slugs were pumped into his brain in rapid succession. He toppled forward and lay nearly invisible in the shadows of the porch.

THE THREE MEN sitting on the bench at the Run N' Racquet were staring straight ahead. Sarah detected small movements of the head, little jerks and twitches that seemed to affect all three in unison.

She looked up and saw the two blonds in the glass-walled racquetball court who had captured the trio's undivided attention. They took turns assaulting the small blue ball and then bouncing back to center court to await their next shot. It was the bouncing that was causing the spectators' heads to jerk as if they were all attached to the same puppet string.

Sarah decided to try the one on the left, a tall fellow with unruly brown hair, wearing a tank top and shorts, and with two elastic braces on his knees.

"Excuse me. Excuse me."

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His head bobbed over toward Sarah.

“Excuse me. I’m trying to find someone here named Diana. I don’t know her last name. Do you know anyone by that name?”

His head continued to bob, moving back toward the direction of the racquetball court. It took a minute for Sarah to realize that the man’s nods in the direction of the two blonds were in response to her question.

“One of them?”

He smiled dreamily.

“The taller one? The shorter one?”

Another smile.

Sarah waited until after the pair had finished their game and showered before approaching the smaller of the two in the women’s locker room. She was stuffing her clothes into a pink and purple Reebok duffle bag.

“Excuse me,” said Sarah. “Were you a friend of Orson Adams?”

The attractive woman with long, blond hair had a quizzical look on her face. She had put on skin-tight jeans and a white stretchy top that showed both a lot of cleavage and that she didn’t have an ounce of excess fat. Sarah felt Diana give her a quick once over. Although Sarah considered herself fit and athletic, she had to resist the urge to throw her shoulders back and pull her stomach in just a little.

“I’m an old friend of Orson’s,” Sarah continued, giving Diana a sincere smile. “I heard he was dating someone from the club and I thought it might be you.”

“Yes, we were seeing each other,” said Diana in her French-accented English. “Until, of course, the accident.”

“Yes, the accident,” said Sarah. “You see, Orson told another friend about you. And, he said that he had been having trouble with someone, perhaps an old boyfriend?”

Diana nodded her head knowingly.

“Yes. Yes. A pig. He is a pig.” Diana jammed her athletic shoes into her bag for emphasis.

“Here. Let me walk you to your car while we talk about this,” said Sarah. She carried a smaller bag while Diana picked up the larger duffel and they left the locker room, walked through the lounge, and went out the door.

“Raymond,” said Diana, as they walked around the club to the parking lot in back. “His name is Raymond. We dated a short time. It was a mistake. When I started to see Orson he was...how do you say?...abscess?”

“*Obsess*...I mean obsessed.”

“Yes. He called me many times at my home and say...said horrible things to me. He say, ‘That nigger. That nigger. I will kill that nigger.’ He say horrible things about sex...having ‘sex with niggers.’”

Diana was standing beside her Lexus, fiddling in the duffel for her keys when a big man walked up behind her. Even wearing street clothes it was easy for Sarah to see that he was a weight lifter. He was good looking with black hair and a mustache. His chest was huge. Sarah saw acne on the sides of his neck and immediately thought of steroids. He put his hands on Diana’s arms.

Diana dropped her bag and spun out of his grasp. But, he grabbed her again, holding her face-to-face this time, and pushed her against the car.

“I’ve been waiting for you, you bitch!” he yelled at her. “You fucking cunt! Where are you getting it now that your nigger is dead, you goddamn slut!”

“Stop! Stop!” Diana screamed. “You are hurting me!”

Sarah could see that his fingers were digging deeply into Diana’s arms. Diana’s eyes were wide with terror. She looked at Sarah, silently asking for her help.

Sarah thought about running into the club for help. But, she didn’t want to leave Diana. The weight lifter looked enraged, totally beyond control. With one shove he could easily toss Diana against the car and break a few ribs or worse.

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The crazed weight lifter wasn't paying any attention to her. Sarah dropped the bag she had been carrying for Diana and moved behind the weight lifter who continued to yell profanities. She planted her sore left leg carefully and then launched her right, punting perfectly into his crotch.

The weight lifter froze for one second then grabbed himself as he began a slow, twisting collapse to the ground. Sarah tried to ignore the moans.

"Is this him? Is this Raymond?" she asked Diana, who was crying and massaging arms that were already showing bruises. Diana nodded. Raymond was still retching on the asphalt when Sarah retrieved her own car and followed Diana's Lexus out of the Run N' Racquet parking lot.

Chapter 14

THE LECTURE HALL was constructed like a Greek amphitheater with steep tiers rising from the blackboards in front to the doorways in the back. Each semicircular tier held long desks that were shaped to follow the curve of the tier.

When Lee arrived wearing jeans, a cable-knit sweater and a black peacoat, he slid into a seat in the top tier. Several students were gathered at the bottom, sprawled on chairs and desks. A young woman wearing tattered blue jeans stood at a podium, gently pounding her fist into a yellow legal pad in front of her as she concluded her argument.

“Liability based on market share is not an appropriate remedy in this case,” she said. “This is not a situation where several suppliers of an identical product have put them on the market, exposing the user to an identical risk of cancer. This is like the facts in Johnson versus Beck Construction where the court concluded that asbestos was not an undifferentiated product. It comes in insulation, paint, ceiling tiles. Each form, and even differences in how it is mined and processed, create different risks.

“Therefore, the court should require the plaintiff to identify the source of the tainted blood. Any other result will turn the traditional notion of liability on its head and open a Pandora’s box of uncertainty.”

When she finished, the other students clapped, hooted and stomped their feet.

After they had quieted down, Sarah, sitting directly in front of Lee, halfway between him and the law students, began her critique:

“That was good Emily. My main criticism is that all the numbers you presented were too confusing. Most lawyers are

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morons mathematically. You had good points there, I think, but you need a chart or, better yet, distill the numbers to just a few that tell the story. Also, when you are addressing the court, don't say 'you.' It's 'your honor' or 'the Court.' And finally, let's leave Pandora and her box out of this since she isn't a party."

Then Sarah addressed all of the students.

"You all seem to be on track. Just keep practicing. Spend some time in front of the mirror. Remember, it's just moot court. If you make a mistake, it's not fatal. You won't actually lose the case and no one can fire you. Good luck. I'll see you in a couple of weeks."

The students gathered up their books, legal pads and backpacks and filed out of the hall. Sarah put her legal pad into her briefcase and turned to walk up the stairway to the back of the hall. She saw Lee above her at the top of the stairs and waved.

"Hi. You're here."

"I didn't want to disturb Emily. She was pretty convincing. She had my vote anyway."

Sarah walked up the stairs toward Lee. She was wearing a linen jacket, over a white blouse and brown slacks. Her hair was pulled back into a short ponytail in the back. She wore large silver earrings that nearly dangled far enough to brush against her jacket. They drew Lee's attention to her strong jaw line and graceful neck.

They drove to Max's Opera House, the nearest thing to a New York delicatessen in San Francisco for an early dinner. Sarah ordered a corned beef sandwich. Lee had chicken salad which turned out to be almost a whole chicken on top of a huge green salad.

Sarah pulled out a slip of paper and slid it across the table to Lee.

"Here's the guy who was threatening Orson," she said.

"Did you get this from the girlfriend?"

“Well, he and I had a run-in at the club,” said Sarah.

“You’re kidding. What was he like?”

“Big. Good looking. A bodybuilder,” said Sarah. “I think he’s on steroids, though. He went after the girl, Diana, when I was there. He grabbed her and started screaming at her. I thought he was going to hurt her.”

“Jesus. So, what happened?” said Lee.

“Well, like I said, I really thought he was going to hurt her. No one else was around. So...I...uh...kicked him.”

“You kicked him?” said Lee.

“Yeah. Between the legs.”

“Sarah. My god. What happened?”

Sarah opened a jar of Dijon mustard and began spreading it on her sandwich.

“I had to do something,” she continued. “It was very effective. Afterward, he wasn’t really in talking-to condition. So, we left.”

Lee looked at Sarah with an expression filled with surprise, amusement and imagined pain.

“Actually, it felt pretty good,” Sarah said as she got ready to take her first bite. “I kinda imagined right behind him all the jerks who ever groped me in a bar and a couple of ex-boyfriends.”

“Uhh...yeah,” said Lee. “Glad you got it out of your system. No, really. Good move. I’ll pass this along to Connors. We’ll let *her* talk to him. Without Warrington as a suspect, I expect she’ll want to run down any decent leads.”

The waitress came back and they both ordered coffee.

While they waited, Lee told Sarah about Gerald Fulmer, Warrington’s attorney, and his suspicion that Warrington’s legal bills had been paid by either the mysterious Futura Products, Inc. or the AgriGenics biotech company. He showed her the law firm’s bill that he had received in the mail.

“I can’t tell you that I see how everything fits together,” concluded Lee. “There are two things I find intriguing. The first

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is that there is a hell of a lot more to Warrington than meets the eye. The second is that someone, including whoever sent me the legal bill, is going out of their way to point the finger at Warrington.”

Sarah nodded her agreement but said nothing. Lee had said something that somehow seemed familiar to her, but she wasn't sure what it was. She stirred her coffee absentmindedly while she tried to think of what had flashed in and out of her mind while he was talking.

Lee noticed that Sarah seemed distracted. He guessed that she was overwhelmed by everything that had happened to her.

“So, how is it being back on campus?” he said, trying to turn the conversation to a less stressful topic. “Does it bring back some pleasant memories?”

“Some,” said Sarah. “Some painful ones, too. I remember spending time with Orson. I half expected him to burst into the classroom. Aunt Miriam, too. When I did my moot court argument my first year, she was there.”

“That was nice of her.”

“Yeah. She was wonderful,” said Sarah. “The law professor who was supposed to be a judge was sick at the end so she volunteered to fill in. Afterward she took me out to dinner to celebrate. It meant a lot to me. There was no one else around.”

Sarah's eyes filled as she thought about her aunt. Every once in a while, something would happen that reminded her of Miriam Gilbert and all the emotions came flooding back. It seemed like the smaller or more distant memories hit her the hardest, sneaking through her defenses.

Lee reached across the table to squeeze her hand.

“Look, Sarah. We'll get to the bottom of this. It won't bring her back. But, at least we'll know what happened and that will bring some peace of mind. And we'll figure out what's happening to you, too. I know things seem very bleak to you right now. They'll get better.”

Sarah looked up and nodded. She pulled some tissues out of her purse and blew her nose.

“So, tell me about this moot court,” said Lee. “How does it work?”

“Moot court?” said Sarah, clearing her throat and welcoming the change of subject. “Well, it’s really just a mock court case. Someone comes up with a hypothetical fact situation. The students research the legal issues, write briefs and argue the case. They choose sides and go at it like they are really arguing before an appellate court. Briefs, oral argument, the works. At the end, there will be a couple of judges, including a law professor or a practicing lawyer, and they’ll fire questions during the argument.”

“Sounds like fun,” said Lee. “How do they come up with the hypotheticals?”

“I assume the instructors and perhaps some of the second and third year students write them. They try to come up with some cutting edge issues, areas where the law isn’t fully developed. I’ve heard of law professors writing them based on cases they’ve been hired to consult on, just to see what kind of arguments the students use.”

“I see. Free research,” said Lee.

“In a way. Remember, sometimes there are judges on the panels and seeing how the pretend cases play out can help guide the real thing.”

“And all the students do this?” asked Lee.

“Right. Every first year student,” replied Sarah. “In a couple of weeks they’ll be holding twenty sets of moot court arguments a night. Different problems and facts, of course.”

“The students who want to can keep at it,” she went on. “There’s a competition for second-year students, like a tournament. It culminates in oral arguments between the top two teams. It’s a big deal. Real appellate judges sit on the panel. There are hundreds of people in the audience.”

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Lee turned in his chair to find the waitress. He caught her eye, signaled for the check and turned back to Sarah. "So, you must like working with the students," he said.

"I love it," said Sarah, nodding. "I think I'd like to teach eventually, once I've learned something worth teaching. I love the students' enthusiasm. It actually makes me more enthused about being a lawyer."

"Yeah?" said Lee. "Maybe I should try that. I could use a little enthusiasm in the workplace right about now."

LEE HAD JUST returned from San Jose the next afternoon where he had covered his first "miracle" story for the News. A sighting of the Virgin Mary in the bark of a tree had turned ugly overnight. All that remained in the morning was a stump and a bunch of guys selling holy wood chips at \$1 a pop. The archbishop had been relieved that the tree wasn't a protected species: ("*Praise God it was only a ficus...*") Lee found a note on his chair telling him to call Bobbie Connors.

"Hello, *Mister* Lee," said Connors. Her tone put Lee on his guard.

"Hey, Bobbie. What's the news?"

"You want to tell me some more about your ideas? Your grand conspiracy theories?"

"Uh oh. Why so interested now?"

"You know who they found last night with three bullets in the head?"

Lee shot to his feet.

"Who was it? Not Sarah Armstrong?" he said.

"Who? Oh, the niece? No, not her. But it's nice that you care, you sweet thing." Connors laughed. "No, it was Warrington. Found him last night outside his house. It looks like a .22. Killed a dog, too."

"Who did it?" asked Lee.

“Listen to him. ‘Who did it?’ I wouldn’t be soliciting your wisdom if I knew who did it, now would I? They didn’t leave much behind. No witnesses.”

“Hmmm. Listen, Bobbie. You met the guy. He could have been into anything. Drugs. Religious cults. Extortion. He was slime. Pretty smart slime. But still slime.”

“So, now you’re the one saying it’s coincidence. But, you got me convinced now, Mister Lee. I still don’t know about the judge and her niece. But, we pick Warrington up for possible murder one day and he’s blown away a few days later. That’s just too much coincidence for me. How about you?”

Lee was quiet for a minute.

“Yeah,” he said. “As much as I’d like to think these are random events, it’s too unbelievable. You’re right. I mean I’m right. It’s got to be connected. Someone wanted to shut him up, right?”

“That’s what I think,” said Connors. “Whoever it was that killed Orson Adams. Maybe Warrington could ID him. Maybe Warrington tried to negotiate a little something to stay quiet.”

“Could be. The other possibility is whatever might have come out in Warrington’s trial.”

Lee explained what he knew about Warrington’s burglary defense, that his claimed motive for breaking into the medical school laboratories was to find evidence of improper experiments involving animals. He left out his suspicions about Warrington’s legal fees. He wanted to find out more about AgriGenics first.

“Maybe there was some truth to what Warrington was saying,” said Lee. “Maybe there was some research being done off the books. Maybe he was making people nervous. The surest way to avoid a new trial is to kill the defendant.”

Chapter 15

LEE'S FIAT SPIDER sped south on I-280, through the brown rolling hills and reservoirs at the base of the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Francisco. The top was down and the cool, late afternoon air swirled through the car.

In the passenger seat, Lorraine Carr in her signature black-on-black ensemble, held a shiny report in her lap that fluttered with each new gust of wind. Over the noise of the motor and the wind, she read the final paragraph aloud.

“Since its inception in 1978, AgriGenics has cultivated the best that nature has to offer. Our goal has been to enrich the earth's bounty through an age-old farming technique. We choose the hardiest, the best tasting, the most abundant - simply, the finest in the world - and make it the industry standard.”

“Wow!” said Lee. “That's what I call an annual report. Is it my imagination, or did they get through that whole thing without once using the term ‘genetic engineering?’”

“They must believe that people don't want to know too much about what they eat,” said Carr.

They turned off on Page Mill Road, and took a right two miles later onto a recently paved street.

The sweeping drive that led to the new AgriGenics complex was two lanes wide with a thick median landscaped with turf and sharp-looking succulents.

A flat gray and silver building sat at the end of the mile-long drive. It was three stories high, but a grass berm surrounded the structure, flattening its visual impact. In front of the block-long structure sat a smaller building, one-third the length of its neighbor.

When they drew close, Lee could see that the back building was of more functional design, made of gray concrete and

aluminum-hued reflective glass. The closer building was modern but with classic touches. The facade was white granite. Massive arched windows wrapped around the building, reflecting the outside world in metallic blue.

On the sidewalk in front of the building, Lee saw a line of people. There may have been two dozen, mostly young but joined by a few with gray hair, walking back and forth in an elongated circle. They carried white placards with black and red lettering.

“Reengineer AgriGenics,” read one. “Don’t Play God,” read another. “Keep Your Genes Out of My Jeans” read a third.

Lee and Carr parked in a lot across the drive from the white and blue building. As they neared the front entrance, they could hear the crowd chanting: “...two, four, six, eight, we don’t need to replicate...”

A half dozen uniformed policemen, their patrol units discretely out of sight, clustered to one side of the tall entranceway, keeping the picket line from blocking it. Well-dressed men and women trickled into the building, smiling tolerantly at the demonstrators.

They entered an immense, open lobby better suited for a posh hotel than an office building, particularly in Silicon Valley with its reputation for no-frills work environments. The floor as well as a long curved staircase that rose to a balcony were clad in white marble. Luxurious Oriental rugs held a few pieces of furniture made of leather and dark teak wood. The balcony, with a glass and metal barrier along the outer edge, overlooked the lobby from a height of 20 feet.

In the middle of the lobby sat long tables brimming with exquisite fruits and vegetables. Lee wandered amid them. Huge, blood-red strawberries perfectly uniform in shape. Tangerines the size of softballs. Figs sliced in half to reveal pink flesh with the aroma of oranges. Cold, cooked asparagus with tips twice the normal size. Lee felt a sense of future shock, as if he were getting an advanced peek at the brave, new world of

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supermarket produce. Beside each dish, next to the stacks of small China plates and neat piles of white and teal linen napkins, sat a card describing how AgriGenics' work had enhanced each offering. Each card was embossed in gold with a design that consisted of a single spiraling helix intertwined with flowers and bunches of grapes.

The crowd had turned out in an unusual display of finery for a Silicon Valley event, Lorraine Carr said. She explained that while the executives who run the high-tech companies and the top tier of investment bankers, venture capitalists and lawyers who making their living in high-tech have money to burn, the preferred style is casual. Lee could see that for once, they had broken out the dinner jackets, evening gowns and diamond necklaces.

Circulating among the crowd, which now filled the lobby, were young men and women bearing silver trays of warm hors d'oeuvres and glasses of chilled champagne.

Television crews were making the rounds as well, each well-groomed reporter followed by a cameraman. As they buttonholed the CEOs of Intel, Silicon Graphics and the other stars in Silicon Valley's firmament, a blinding camera light fixed a section of the crowd in its glare.

Lee noticed a man in a black dinner jacket with his hair cropped stylishly close on the sides begin walking up the curved stairway. Halfway up, the crowd began to notice him. People pointed and the murmur increased in pitch. By the time he reached the top, sporadic applause had grown into an enthusiastic ovation that continued while the man stood at a microphone on the balcony and looked over the crowd.

He was tanned, looked to be in his 40s and his well tailored jacket hung over a fit, athletic frame. He had a prominent nose, a strong chin and extremely white teeth that shone when he smiled. Meeting him casually, Lee might have guessed that he was an actor. It wasn't just his good looks. It was also a certain

air, as if by dint of his mere presence, one's notice and respect were demanded.

"Thank you. Thank you," he said to silence the crowd. "Thank you for joining us tonight to celebrate the completion of AgriGenics' new headquarters and research facility." More applause.

"But we all know this is about much more than mere bricks and mortar and glass. What this represents, and what the wonderful success that we have had on Wall Street this past year ..." More applause. "...what that success represents is the fulfillment of a dream.

"Fifteen years ago, Arthur Sendaki created AgriGenics with a \$5,000 loan from his mother and the credit on his MasterCard. One by one, he assembled the most talented group of biologists and geneticists the world has ever known. Many of them are here today. You came, and worked for a pittance, because Arthur sold you a dream.

"Arthur, and later I, went around to many other people in this room tonight to *beg* for money. I mean literally *beg*." Laughter. "And you kept AgriGenics afloat for many long, profitless years. I don't think you did that out of pity, did you? It was not because we were behind on our mortgages and our children had worn out their shoes. No, you too saw the dream and, with us, you believed in it, too.

"So, what is that dream? It is not simply the dream that Arthur Sendaki had twenty years ago in the biology labs of Stanford University of having a successful company one day..."

Off to Lee's right, he caught a slight movement in the crowd. He turned just in time to see an arm clad in a gray sleeve rise above the crowd and swing forward in the direction of the man at the microphone. He saw a red object leave the hand, and fly upward, tumbling. It seemed like it took a long time for the tomato to finally smash against the glass barrier on the balcony just in front of the microphone.

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The tomato splattered. Most of it slid down the glass and dropped down to the marble floor. A few people screamed as it fell toward them. The glass caught most of the splatter, but some drops of red goo had splashed on the speaker's sparkling white shirt.

For a moment everyone was paralyzed. Then, eyes swung back from the tomato damage to the launching point. There was more movement, people moving away from the man who had thrown the tomato. At the same time, several young men dressed in identical dark suits rushed toward him. Lee saw two of them grab him roughly by the arms. A third held the man from behind, around the shoulders. A fourth stood near them talking into a handheld radio.

They began pushing him toward the front entrance of the lobby. He pushed back, but it hardly mattered. As he was hustled off, the man in the gray suit turned his head over his shoulder. Lee heard him shout, "You don't know what you're doing! You are poisoning our food! You have no right!"

Then he was out the door, shoved into the group of uniformed officers who seemed only now to realize there had been a commotion inside.

Lee turned back to the balcony. The man who had been speaking had a white handkerchief in his hand and was dabbing at the red spots on his shirt. He shook his head, put his handkerchief back in his pocket and leaned forward to address the microphone.

"If that had been one of our tomatoes, you still could have it in your salad tomorrow." A few people laughed. Then applause seemed to explode from the crowd. It lasted for a while, long enough to wash away most of the tension of the incident.

"Let's not let one rotten tomato spoil the crate ... or this party. I was talking about the dream, the dream that has brought all of us here tonight. It is not one of mere financial success, or the success of one company. It is the same dream mankind has had for eons. The dream of applying our knowledge and our

know how to the world around us. To make it a safer, more productive place. To use that knowledge to make our lives better.

“But, the success of AgriGenics represents an entire new chapter in that endeavor. It represents the beginning of an era of almost unfathomable changes in our relationship to the world around us. It offers the opportunity for unimaginable progress.

“So, thank you again for coming tonight to this celebration. As mankind moves forward in this endeavor, I guarantee that AgriGenics will be at the forefront. Together, we will realize this dream.”

The applause that followed lasted until the man had descended the stairway to the floor below.

Lee went looking for Lorraine. He finally found her amid the food tables, talking to a tall, thin man in a dark blue suit. He was talking excitedly to Carr and she was jotting down notes. Lee guessed he was an AgriGenics flack. Lorraine introduced him as Roy Curley, AgriGenics Vice President of Marketing and Communications.

“It was a good speech,” said Lee. “But what a recovery after the tomato. He did everything but catch it. Who was that guy?”

Curley had thinning blond hair and fine features. He looked like he had had too much sun.

“*That* was Brian Graylock,” said Curley.

“Oh?”

“President and CEO of AgriGenics.” Curley couldn’t quite hide his impatience with the fact that Lee didn’t know who Graylock was.

“What happened to the other guy? Sendaki?”

“Arthur is still with the company. He’s just not involved in the day-to-day operations anymore. He has returned to his first love, research.”

“Oh. Eased out, huh?”

Curley’s upper lip curled ever so slightly.

PROJECT MOSES

“Arthur’s a true visionary. His talent would be wasted if it were bogged down in the administrative chores of running a large corporation.”

“Right. Say, Roy. Have you ever heard of a company called Futura Products?”

“Certainly,” said Curley. “It’s one of our subsidiaries. It’s just a vehicle for distributing products.”

“I see,” said Lee. “One other thing. I was looking over your annual report. In the notes to the financial statements, the accountants seem a little worried about some pending regulatory questions that haven’t been answered. What’s that about?”

“Your question is too nonspecific,” replied Curley. “There are so many regulatory issues in this industry.”

“Something about labeling.”

Curley was no longer attempting to control his upper lip, which had curled back into a snarl.

“If you read that section again, maybe you would understand it,” he said. “The FDA and the various states are still deciding how, or whether, to label foods that have been structurally adjusted.”

“Structurally adjusted?” said Lee. “Oh, you mean genetically engineered. Are you guys for it or agin’ it? The labeling, I mean.”

“Speak to Lorraine,” said Curley, hardly moving his lips. “I’m sure she can explain it to you.”

Curley turned and walked away.

“Roy’s a little touchy,” said Lee.

“Well, this is their big day,” said Carr. “You were being obnoxious.”

“That was nothing. Flacks expect to be abused. C’mon, let’s get out of here. I get nervous around money.”

As they left the AgriGenics headquarters, Lee noticed the food on the tables still lay heaped in magnificent piles that had not been touched at all.