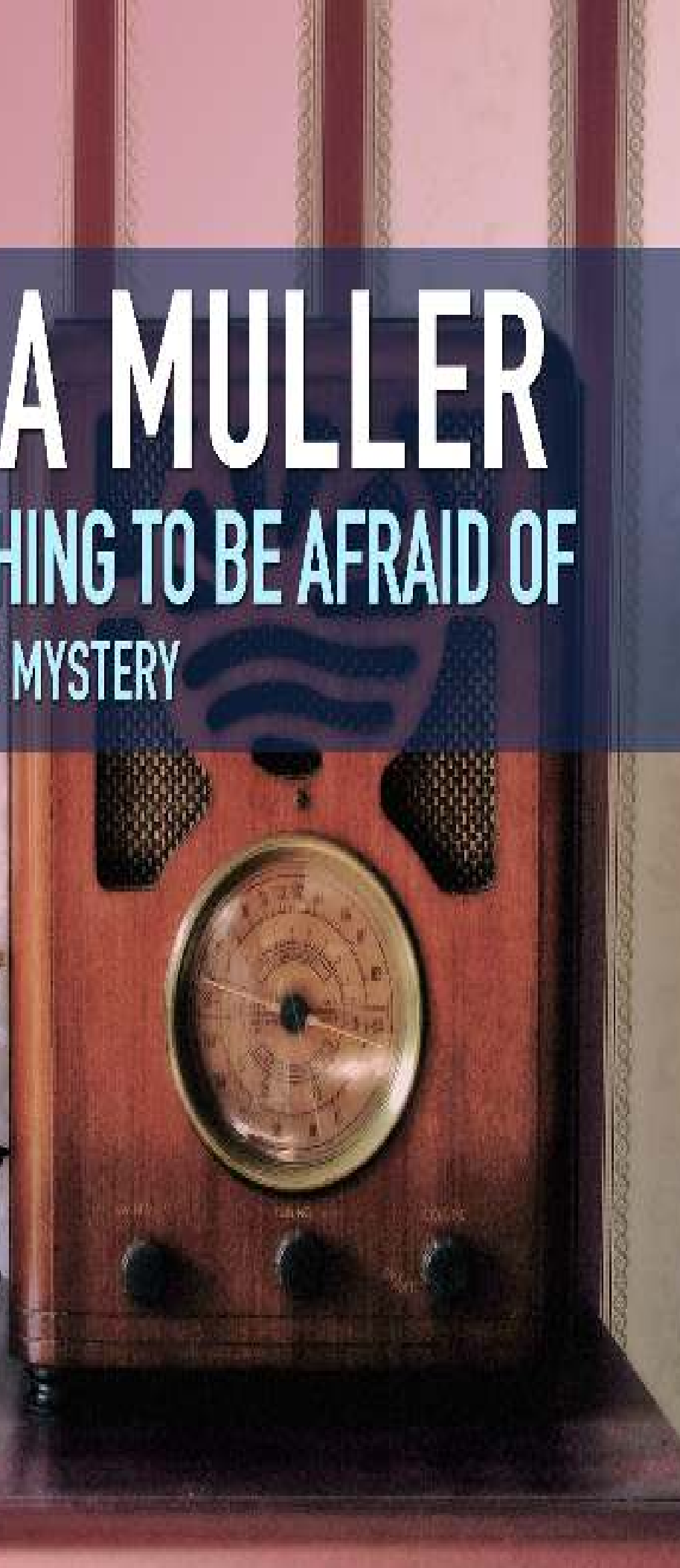


MARCIA MULLER

THERE'S NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF

A SHARON McCONE MYSTERY



THERE'S NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF

BY

MARCIA MULLER



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CHAPTER ONE

San Francisco's Tenderloin is a twenty-square -block district that contains some of the greatest contrasts in the city. One of these confronted me as soon as I got out of my parked car one sunny December morning: a street preacher in baggy pants, stocking cap, and signboards, setting up in front of the Sensuous Showcase Theatre. Down the sidewalk came another study in opposition: schoolchildren, ten or twelve of them, who parted ranks for a slow-moving old bag lady as they ran for a Muni bus. The woman was intent on the trash in the gutter and didn't even look up as the kids—chattering and yelling in what had to be Vietnamese - surged around her. I watched them clamber aboard the bus, then put my keys in my shoulder bag and started off down Eddy Street.

It was funny, I thought, how much of this part of the city had changed without my really observing it. The last time I'd worked a case down here—over three years ago—I hadn't seen many children on the streets. The Tenderloin was the refuge of the poor, the disabled, the disturbed, and the vicious; parents hadn't allowed their offspring to wander unattended. But then had come the great influx of Southeast Asian refugees, people with little money and many dreams. And the character of the area had begun to alter, slowly.

Now many of the storefronts were spruced up and offered produce and Oriental groceries. Hole-in-the-wall restaurants bore names such as Saigon Palace and Vientiane West. Dingy hotels were made more cheerful by the presence of plants on windowsills and fire escapes. And everywhere were the children—being pushed in their strollers, playing on the sidewalks, running in and out of stores. True, the pimps were still here, as well as the prostitutes and drug pushers and purveyors of pornography. But an uneasy truce had been negotiated between them and the newcomers that permitted all to live in a prickly sort of peace. And the city had even gone so far as to build a playground not far from here on Jones Street.

The place where I was headed was called the Globe Apartment Hotel, a narrow, dark brick structure I spotted midway down the block. It was six stories tall with bay windows jutting out on either side of a central fire escape. Someone had festooned the iron railings with tattered green garlands and red Christmas ornaments that had lost most of their glitter. I took a piece of paper from my jacket and rechecked the address, then went into the lobby.

At one time this had evidently been a regular hotel, because there was a registration desk to the right with pigeonholes in the wall behind it. The holes were empty now and the desk unmanned, although the resident with the case of Christmas spirit had struck here too. A plastic tree, garish green and three feet high, sat on the desk; it was decorated with the same kind of worn out ornaments as the fire escape. Several brightly wrapped packages lay on a white cotton skirt underneath it.

It seemed like a big risk, leaving Christmas presents in the unlocked lobby of a Tenderloin hotel. I went over and picked one of them up; it was light, and shaking it produced no rattle. Just as I was about to set it down, the front door opened. I stared guiltily and turned.

The woman who stood there was tall, about five-ten, and must have weighed two hundred pounds. A sacklike dress in red-and-white stripes fell in billowy folds from the enormous shelf of her bosom, and in her unruly gray hair was a corsage of holly and red carnations. This, I thought, had to be Mother Christmas.

She said, "There's nothing in them."

Quickly I replaced the package, smoothing the cotton out around it. "I didn't think there would be anything, but I was curious. I had to check."

"And if there had been—then what?"

“I’d have put it back.”

“Yeah?” She folded her arms and regarded me sternly.

I was used to being taken for many things, but never a thief who would stoop so low as to steal someone’s Christmas present. “Look,” I said, “I was just being nosy.”

“Everyone is.” She closed the door and came toward me, seeming to fill the tiny lobby. “Since I’m here, can I help you?”

“Uh, yes.” As a rule, I’m not easily intimidated, but all that fat seemed to convey authority. I fumbled in my pocket and produced the paper I’d consulted earlier. “I’m here to see Mrs. Lan. The Refugee Assistance Center sent me.”

She ignored the paper. “You mean Mrs. Vang.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The last name’s Vang. You’ve got it backwards.”

“Oh.” I looked at the paper again. There, in my boss’s bold script, was the name, Mrs. Vang Lan.

“Vietnamese names all sound alike to Westerners,” the woman said. “They don’t take the trouble to get them right.”

Feeling a little defensive—after all, it wasn’t even *my* mistake—I said, “Well, I suppose other names all sound alike to them.”

“Probably.” Then she smiled a big, gap-toothed grin, to let me know she wasn’t really hostile. “You must be the detective from the legal service. Lan said the Center told her they would send someone over.”

She’d probably guessed who I was all along. “Right. Sharon McCone.”

“Sallie Hyde.” She held out a big hand that completely engulfed mine. “I live across from the Vangs. Come on, I’ll take you up there.” She squeezed around me and waddled toward the elevator at the back of the lobby.

Between the two of us, we filled the little cage. Sallie Hyde slammed the iron grille, punched the button for the fourth floor, and the elevator wheezed upward. I glanced anxiously at the certificate posted above the control panel to see when it had last been inspected.

“Don’t worry, it won’t fall,” my companion said. “It’s been days since it even got stuck between floors.”

I smiled thinly and watched the buttons light up—two, three, then four. There the cage came to such an abrupt halt that it bounced up and down several times.

“At least it has good brakes,” I said.

“Works better than anything else in this building.” Sallie Hyde yanked on the iron grille, pushed down the lever on the heavy outer door, and ushered me into a narrow, dim hallway.

I’d been in other Tenderloin hotels; this one was different. All the light builds worked, the worn green linoleum squares on the floor looked clean, and the paler green walls appeared to have been recently washed. The underlying smell was the usual harsh odor of disinfectant, but those overlaying scents were not typical: garlic, fish, and something spicy like hot red peppers. I followed Sallie’s red-and-white-striped girth to the right, where a red Exit sign glowed at the end of the hall. She knocked on the door midway between it and the elevator.

The woman who greeted us was around five feet tall and wore a shapeless flowered cotton dress and rubber shower thongs on her feet. Her face was round and plump, and her short black hair was parted in the center and tucked behind her ears. She looked from me to Sallie Hyde, then back over her shoulder into the apartment.

Sallie said, “Hello, Lan. This is Sharon McCone, the lady from the legal service.”

Lan Vang smiled and motioned for us to enter. I stepped forward first and was confronted by a sea of faces. There were about ten people in the small room, ranging in age from Mrs. Vang—who mu

have been around forty—to a baby crawling on the floor. They looked expectantly at me, and then one of them stood.

“Thanks for coming, Sharon.” It was Carolyn Bui, a Eurasian woman—half Vietnamese, half American—whom I had met while on a case the previous spring. Shortly afterward, she had been appointed director of the Refugee Assistance Center, a nonprofit organization that aided Southeast Asian refugees in getting settled in their new city. Partly because of her connections with me and partly because of All Souls’ low rates for nonprofit groups, she had brought the Center’s legal work to the cooperative where I am staff investigator.

“It’s good to see you again.” I said, clasping her hand.

Carolyn glanced at the door, where Sallie Hyde still stood. The fat woman was surveying the assemblage, obviously realizing there was no way she could squeeze into the already crowded room. Before Carolyn could speak, Sallie said to me, “You need anything, I’m right across the hall. It’s my day off, so I’ll be home.” Then she turned and lumbered off. Lan Vang shut the door, and I immediately began to feel claustrophobic.

I turned back to Carolyn. She said, “I see you’ve met Miss Hyde.”

“Yes. She’s . . . quite something.”

“A nice lady. She works in a flower stand down at Union Square, and when she’s not doing that she plays surrogate mother to everyone in the building.”

As she spoke, I studied Carolyn’s delicate oval face, framed by curving wings of shoulder-length hair. She’d been through some rough times in the past year, and the last time I’d seen her, she had been too thin and had looked strained. Now, however, she’d gained weight and there was a sparkle in her eyes. Life must be looking up for her, and I was glad.

“Speaking of everyone in the building,” I said, “are they all here in this room?”

She laughed and said something in Vietnamese to Mrs. Vang, who laughed too. “Hardly. You are looking at the Vang family, minus Mr. Vang, who is at work.”

“What! They don’t all live . . .” I motioned around us. The room—clean, but sparsely furnished—was no more than twelve-by-fourteen. A couch, where Carolyn had been sitting held three young women, and the rest of the family members perched on its arms or sat on the floor.

“It’s a two-bedroom apartment,” Carolyn said. “And they make do.”

Quickly I counted noses. Eight people, including the baby—and the absent Mr. Vang made nine. Suddenly my little five-room earthquake-relief cottage seemed palatial.

Carolyn was watching me. “In Saigon,” she said, “the Vangs lived in a large house, Mr. Vang owned a wholesale food business, and the children attended private schools. The family fled the homeland in the final hours of the Republic, losing everything. Now they are starting over.”

I glanced at Lan Vang and the others. They were listening intently. “What does Mr. Vang do now?”

“The *family* owns a small café on Taylor Street—Lan’s Garden, after Mrs. Vang. All who are able to work there; in addition, the children go to school or college. Everyone contributes, and they are hoping to one day buy a home in the Sunset District.”

The tone of Carolyn’s voice and her careful phrasing told me far more than just the outward circumstances of the Vang family. They said, *These are valuable people, and they are not looking for sympathy or charity. They had a great deal once, and they will again.*

Ashamed of my initial condescending reaction, plus the fact that Carolyn and I were speaking as if the Vangs weren’t there, I said, “I’d appreciate it if you’d introduce me to everyone.”

She nodded and turned to Mrs. Vang. “You’ve already met Lan Vang, head of the household in her husband’s absence.”

Mrs. Vang shook my hand formally.

“On the couch,” Carolyn went on, “are her daughters—easier to give you their American names they have chosen for themselves—Amanda, Susan, and Dolly.”

The young women nodded in unison. They were in their mid-to-late teens and dressed in jeans and sweaters—typical girls.

“Next to Amanda,” Carolyn said, “is Duc Vang.”

A young man in his early twenties with an odd brushy haircut regarded me solemnly.

“Hello, Duke,” I said, thinking incongruously of John Wayne.

Duc must have heard the shade of difference in the way I pronounced the name, because he said, “It’s D-u-c. Many people think I have taken an American name until they see it spelled out.”

Carolyn pointed at the other end of the couch, where a chubby boy of ten or eleven perched on the arm. “Next is Billy Vang.”

Billy screwed up his face and grinned hideously. Behind me, his mother made a hissing sound.

“Billy’s the family comedian,” Carolyn said. “Now we come to those on the floor. This baby is Renee, and next to her is Jenny.”

Jenny was about Billy’s age and just as plump. She exhibited better manners by smiling prettily.

Carolyn turned to me. “So there you have the entire family. Everyone has stayed home today because this is a vital conference.”

“I see.”

“In the Vietnamese culture, the family is important. Everyone has a say in decisions and everyone supports the others in time of trouble. Naturally it is necessary they all be here—except for Mr. Vang, who must keep the restaurant open.”

Duc stood abruptly. “I will get Miss McCone a chair.” He left the room and returned quickly with a straight-backed chair and placed it next to me. “Please,” he said, indicating it.

I sat, and Carolyn squeezed onto the couch next to Dolly. She said, “We discussed how to go about this, and decided Mrs. Vang will outline the problem. The others will help when appropriate. Everyone speaks good English, but I’m here to interpret in case there’s some difficulty with shades of meaning.”

I nodded. Carolyn, I thought, had already done her fair share of interpreting, explaining the family in the context of its culture while appearing to be making only polite introductions.

Mrs. Vang had remained standing by the door; now she dropped gracefully to the floor, folding her legs to one side. The baby, Renee, gave a gurgle and began crawling toward her. Lan Vang held out his hands and drew the child to her as she began to speak in careful, accented English.

“There is bad trouble in this hotel, and my family has been . . .” She paused, looked at Carolyn, and then plunged ahead on her own. “We have been elected by the others here to have something done.”

After she was silent for a moment, I also looked to Carolyn for guidance. She spoke quickly in Vietnamese, and Lan Vang went on.

“The trouble is that someone seeks to frighten us. There are noises in the basement, where the furnace is. Strange noises. And shadows in the stairwell. And the lights go out.”

“Power failures,” Carolyn said.

“Yes, power failures. People are caught in the elevator and cannot get out.”

I remembered Sallie Hyde’s remark that the elevator hadn’t gotten stuck between floors in days. “When did these things start?”

Lan Vang glanced at her son Duc. He said, “About a month ago. At first it was noises. We thought perhaps it was something wrong with the furnace. Then the power began to fail. PG and E finally came to investigate and said someone was turning it off at the main switch.”

“Can you describe the noises in the basement?”

“Groaning. Howling. It was as if a wild animal was imprisoned there.”

“Did anyone go down and look?”

“The manager. Myself and my friends from floor six, the Dinh brothers. We saw nothing.”

“All right,” I said, ~~taking out a pad and pencil and beginning to make notes~~, “what about the ‘shadows in the stairwell’? What are they like?”

Lan Vang said, “Large strange shadows. Oddly shaped. They wait for the children and frighten them.”

“Can you describe them a little more?”

She glanced at Billy, the chubby little boy on the arm of the couch, and spoke in Vietnamese. Billy sat up straighter and seemed to swell with importance. “I saw them. Twice. Jenny saw them too.”

The little girl nodded solemnly.

“Was there one shadow? Or more than one?” I asked.

“Only one each time.”

“What did it look like?”

“Big.” He spread his arms wide above his head.

“Big, like people are big?”

“No.”

“Like an animal?”

“No . . .” He looked crestfallen, then brightened. “Maybe like an elephant.”

Oh, terrific. I thought. An escapee from the zoo is stalking the Tenderloin. “Billy, where did you see the shadow?”

He gave me an exasperated look. “Mama said, in the stairwell.”

“Where in the stairwell?”

Billy frowned.

From the floor, Jenny said, “On the wall.”

I looked down at her. “Did it move?”

“Yes. At first it was standing still. Then it danced around and went up, around the turn to the next floor.”

“Did you follow it?”

“No!”

“What did you do?”

“Screamed and got Mama. She came and looked, but by then it was gone.”

“Thank you, Jenny.”

Obviously proud at having stolen her brother’s place in the limelight, Jenny turned to Billy and stuck out her tongue. This one was not as angelic as she had first seemed.

I looked back at Lan Vang. “Mrs. Vang, what about those times the elevator got stuck? Was that during the power failures?”

“Yes, then. But also other times. For no reason, it stopped between floors. Once Mrs. Dinh, who was pregnant, was inside. We feared for the unborn child.”

“Did anyone come out to inspect the elevator?”

“No. The manager asked the owner to send someone, and he said he would. But no one came.

I said to Carolyn, “What about this owner?”

“That’s another story. I’ll fill you in later.”

I paused. “Did anyone contact the police about all these things?”

Mrs. Vang said, “There is a foot officer—”

“Beat officer,” Carolyn corrected her.

“Yes, beat officer. A Patrolman Sanders. I spoke with him and he came into the hotel and looked around. But he also saw nothing. He said he could do no more unless someone was hurt or if there was proof of what I told him about. He was very nice, but he could not help.”

I looked down at the scribbling in my notebook, wondering how seriously the officer had taken Mrs. Vang's complaint and if he'd filed a report on it. "Well," I said, "what I'd like to do now is get a list of the disturbing events, by date."

Lan Vang set the baby in Jenny's lap and rose. She went to a little table next to the couch and took a paper from its drawer. Handing it to me, she said, "We have written it all down."

I unfolded the paper and saw a chart, printed in a neat hand. It contained two columns, respectively labeled Date and Incident. The first entry was for November 17, and it read, "Jenny Vang frightened by howling in furnace room. Mrs. Zemanek goes down, says no one there."

"Who's Mrs. Zemanek?" I asked.

"The manager," Carolyn said. "We'll see her later."

"Okay." I glanced over the list again, pleased at its detail. If only all my clients were so well prepared. "I think what I should do is study this list, check around, and then get together with all of you again when I have further questions. Would this evening be convenient?"

Lan Vang said, "It will have to be very late. We must be at the restaurant until after eleven."

I thought of my evening's plans. My boyfriend, Don Del Boccio, was coming to my house for dinner, but then he had a taping scheduled at the radio station where he was a disc jockey. I would be left to my own devices from about nine o'clock on. "That's all right," I said. "I'm used to late hours too."

"Thank you, Miss McCone." Lan smiled for the first time, a shy and somewhat tremulous smile that made me determined to help her and the other residents if I could.

CHAPTER TWO

Carolyn and I said goodbye to the Vangs and walked silently toward the elevator. When their door had closed and we were out of earshot, I said, “How serious do you think this problem is?”

“Serious enough that I’m willing to spend the Center’s money to have you investigate it. These are not fanciful people; they’ve experienced real danger in their lives, and they don’t imagine things. I think someone’s trying to frighten them for some reason, and I want to put a stop to it.”

I nodded and looked up and down the hall, trying to get a sense of how the hotel was laid out. At the end where the Vangs’ apartment was, the Exit sign glowed over a door that presumably opened into the stairwell where the frightening shadows lurked. At the other end, ahead of us, a window opened onto an airshaft; through it I could see the grimy stone wall of the building next door. Four doors opened off the hallway on the side that fronted on Eddy Street, but only two on the wall opposite. The front apartments were probably one-bedrooms or studios, while those in the rear—only one of which was the Vangs’—would be two-bedrooms. The elevator was in the center of the building, midway between the two rear apartments.

Carolyn punched the elevator button and said, “I think you should meet the manager, Mrs. Zemanek, and then look the building over.”

“Okay. But before we see her, tell me something about Mrs. Zemanek.”

“There’s really not much to tell.” The elevator arrived, its door opening about three inches and stopping there. Carolyn sighed and flung it all the way open, then wrestled with the iron grille. “I wonder it gets stuck between floors.” She waved me into the cage, then said, “Anyway, about Mrs. Zemanek. She’s a lady of around seventy who supplements her Social Security with this job. I don’t think it pays much, but it does include a free apartment. Mrs. Zemanek seems to genuinely care for most of the tenants, and she doesn’t exhibit hostility toward the Vietnamese—which is something we’re up against all the time in these Tenderloin hotels—but she tends to side with the owner in there’s any sort of dispute.”

The elevator bumped to a stop at the ground floor. “Have there been many?”

“A fair number. Like I said, Mrs. Zemanek needs the job to supplement her Social Security payments, and she’s not about to make waves.”

Carolyn led me from the elevator to a door next to the deserted reception desk. “Mrs. Zemanek’s apartment.” She knocked and seconds later it was opened by a small woman whose short white hair was arranged in tight snail-like curls. She looked at Carolyn, and then her pale blue eyes surveyed me from head to foot.

“So you’re planning to go ahead with this foolishness,” she said in a low-pitched voice that was gravelly with age.

“If you mean that I’m going to get to the bottom of what’s been happening here, yes.” There was an edge to Carolyn’s words; I gathered she’d had trouble with the manager before.

“The owner won’t like somebody snooping around on his property.”

“The owner will like it less if something really bad happens here.”

The little woman stood her ground, blue-veined hand on the doorknob. “Is this the detective?” She jerked her tightly curled head at me.

“Yes, this is—”

“What if something happens to her?”

“Like what?”

“What if she falls on the stairs? Or get hurt prowling around in the basement? This is an o

building; plenty of things can happen. The owner wouldn't like—"

~~"The owner has insurance to cover things like that. Besides"~~ — Carolyn glanced at me, faint amusement in her eyes — "Ms. McCone has been a detective for many years. She can take care of herself."

Mary Zemanek looked doubtful. "It's a funny job for a woman. I'd feel better if it you brought a man."

"Well, it can't be helped."

"Mrs. Zemanek," Carolyn raised her voice a little. "I would like your permission for Ms. McCone to look over the building."

"What if I refuse?"

"That, of course, is your right. But if she's denied access, we might have to call the police in to investigate instead. You can't refuse to let *them* on the premises."

A look of guile came into the old lady's pale eyes. "The police were here before and they didn't find anything."

"They can always come back again. And this time they might discover something."

The manager's lips tightened into a thin line, and she glared at Carolyn. Then she said, "All right, let her look over the hotel if she wants. But the police didn't find anything, and she won't either. If you ask me, everyone's in a stew over nothing. *I don't hear noises. I don't see shadows.*"

"Thank you, Mrs. Zemanek." Carolyn turned to me. "Shall we start with the basement and work our way up to the roof?"

"That's fine with me."

Mary Zemanek said, "You can't go out on the roof. Door's always locked. The owner doesn't like ___"

"Perhaps you'll let us have the key." Carolyn held out her hand.

The manager looked at it, then shrugged and took a key off a ring that was hooked to the belt loop of her plain black dress. "If you get hurt, it's not my fault."

"Don't worry," Carolyn said, pocketing the key. "We'll be careful." She started for a fire door in the wall opposite the desk.

Mary Zemanek came out of her apartment and walked stiffly over to the desk, one hand pressed to the small of her back. She removed a couple of advertising circulars that had been left there, then she contemplated the Christmas tree. "I should take that down. It's a fire hazard. Those packages are an invitation to thieves."

Carolyn turned, looking as if she was about to make a reference to Ebenezer Scrooge.

"I won't, though," Mrs. Zemanek went on. "Someone would only put another one in its place." She paused, still studying the tree, then added wistfully, "Besides, it looks nice. And the owner probably won't show up again until after the New Year." Slowly she walked back to her apartment.

Carolyn and I pushed through the fire door and went down a hall, past three other apartments, to the second door. "She's not as tough as she tries to act," I said.

"Mary? No. She's as frightened by these goings-on as anyone here, but she feels she has to set a brave example. Her way of doing that is to pretend nothing's happening." Carolyn held open the second fire door and I stepped onto a stairway landing.

The walls were the same dull green as in the hallway, and the steps were gray concrete with worn metal tread. A bare bulb gleamed in a ceramic wall fixture. The door shut behind us with a sigh from its pneumatic mechanism.

"This is the stairwell where the kids saw the shadows." Carolyn's voice bounced hollowly off the walls that enclosed us.

"Which way first?" I asked. "Up or down?"

“Down, I think.” She reached for a switch next to the door and a light flashed on below. I started down there, clutching the cold metal railing, my footsteps echoing.

“What about the owner?” I asked. “Mrs. Zemanek’s attitude toward him seems to stop just short of reverence.”

“I think it’s more like the fear of God. His name is Roy LaFond, and he’s by no means your typical slum landlord.”

“I’ve heard the name somewhere.”

“LaFond is a big Marin County real estate developer. He did that Bay Shores condominium project in Tiburon.”

“That’s why it sounds familiar. How’d he end up owning a place like this?”

“Mrs. Zemanek says he took it as part of a larger deal about a year ago. You know—the sort of thing where the former owner wanted to unload it and gave LaFond a lower price on some property he really wanted in exchange for taking the Globe off his hands. Anyway, LaFond seems genuinely horrified to possess a Tenderloin hotel full of Vietnamese and other social misfits.”

We reached the bottom of the stairway and stopped. To our right was a bank of plywood storage lockers, most of them secured with padlocks. Straight ahead was the gray metal hulk of a furnace. And to one side of the furnace a clumsy old-fashioned boiler stood on absurd spindly legs. It reminded me of a big white cow that had grown too fat for her underpinnings.

“Quiet down here, isn’t it?” I said. “The furnace isn’t on. Is one of the disputes you mentioned about heat?” Heat was a major problem in the Tenderloin. A few years ago the morning paper had run a series of articles exposing the “heat cheats,” landlords whose skimping forced tenants—the majority of whom were elderly and needed more warmth than most people to stay healthy—to wear coats at all hours and sleep in several layers of clothing. As a result, the city inspectors had swept the hotel demanding proof that they were being heated the legally requisite eleven hours per day. Owners had been fined, some had been jailed, and compliance had been forced. But now heat was a dead issue having been milked by the media for all it was worth, and many hotels had become cold once again.

“No,” Carolyn said. “Roy LaFond stays strictly within the letter of the law.”

“I noticed the hotel is better maintained than most.”

“No thanks to the owner. The Vietnamese are a tidy people; they can’t abide dirt, and they don’t wait for someone else to clean up after them. This place was a pigsty when we moved the first family in over two years ago. You’d never know that now.”

I nodded and looked around the basement. It was as tidy as the upstairs halls, and there didn’t seem to be anyplace a person could hide. The storage lockers were flush against the walls. A small person might be able to squeeze behind the furnace, but that was the first place any searcher would look. And the walls were all solid cinderblock; there were no niches, vents, or other recesses. I supposed someone could have climbed up on the overhead heat ducting, but it didn’t look like it would support much more than a child’s weight.

I went over to the boiler and touched its curving side; it was warm. “Plenty of hot water.”

“Yes.”

“So what were the disputes over, then?”

“LaFond stays too much within the law. He’s deathly afraid of being cited or having something happen that will force his insurance rates up. He’s always issuing directives through Mary Zemanek—they’re perfectly legal but they make life here very rough.”

“Such as?”

“Well, for one thing, the children are not allowed to play in the halls or the lobby. That creates a difficult situation for tenants with active youngsters. The stairs are officially off limits to them too. And that makes things damned near impossible when the elevator’s not working.” Anger had come

into Carolyn's voice; even in the dim light I could see that her face was flushed.

~~"I take it the rules aren't always observed, since Billy and Jenny saw shadows in the stairwell."~~

"Of course they're not! They're ridiculous. And this thing about the roof being locked—there's a lot of room up there, and high barriers so no one could possibly fall. It would be an ideal place for the children to play, plus the people could grow vegetables in containers. The tenants got together and petitioned LaFond to let them use it. His reply? A flat 'no' delivered through Mary Zemanek."

"What about the Christmas tree? Would he really demand it be removed, as Mrs. Zemanek hinted?"

"He'd probably throw it in the trash himself—plus rip the decorations off the fire escape. To the Roy LaFonds of the world, the Vangs and the others here simply aren't people with normal human needs. They're rent-paying units. And if the laws didn't prevent it, you can bet their rents would have tripled in the last year."

I watched Carolyn, surprised at her vehemence. I'd seen her under some of the worst circumstances, and she'd always been rational and controlled. Too controlled, perhaps. I was glad to get a glimpse this fire under her cool exterior.

In the silence, she began shaking her head ruefully. "Forgive me, but I get so angry. In my work I see too many people like the Vangs, who have been through so much. They've fled their homelands, lost everything, and yet they go on striving. To me, they're heroic people; to Roy LaFond, who's had everything handed to him all his life, they're dirt."

I thought about that, then said cautiously, "Do you really know that Roy LaFond had it so easy?"

She shrugged and turned away. "I know the type. And now we'd better take a look at the rest of the stairwell and the roof. I assume you've seen all you want to down here."

"I will have in a minute." I went over to the storage lockers and began opening those that weren't secured by padlocks. The first two were empty; the third contained a cardboard roach trap and a box of miscellaneous nails and screws; the fourth was crammed with some sort of dark material. I pulled it out and spread it on the floor.

It was a sheet, an old, tattered one, in an ugly olive green. There were two neatly cut holes near the center. I picked it up and held the holes to my eyes.

"What's that?" Carolyn said.

"Looks like your basic Halloween ghost costume."

"In dark green? I doubt it. Besides, what's it doing down here?"

"Maybe some former tenant forgot it. Or . . ." I looked thoughtfully at the sheet.

Carolyn waited.

"You know," I said, "this could be what the prankster uses to make those shadows on the stairwell walls. A person could look very scary in shadow if he was wearing this and waving the material around."

"I guess so. But if that's the case, why didn't Mrs. Zemanek or Duc and his friends find it when they investigated down here?"

"If you recall, they were looking for a person who was making noise in this room, not the creature in the stairwell. Besides, even if they'd seen this, to them it probably would have been just an old sheet."

She looked dubious, but didn't say anything.

I bundled the sheet up and stuffed it under my arm. "I'll bring it along tonight and ask if anyone knows who it belongs to. If no one recognizes it, this could be our first concrete evidence that someone really is trying to frighten these people." Then I motioned at the stairs. "Let's see if we can find anything on the roof."

We went up seven flights, and Carolyn unlocked the door to the roof. As she had said, there were

high concrete parapets around the periphery, topped by a tall chain-link barrier. It might not be a good place for children to play unsupervised, but under the eye of a vigilant adult, no harm could possibly come to them. And there was ample room for a container garden.

I made a thorough search, finding nothing, then crossed to the west side and looked out over the rooftops. I was beginning to feel some of the same anger Carolyn had expressed, and as if she sensed that, she came up beside me and said, “You know, sometimes I feel so helpless. There’s so much these people—my people—need and so little I can do for them. The Center doesn’t have the staff or the money. Every year we think we won’t get re-funded, and there’s always a two-month gap when we exist on credit and do without salary waiting to hear what the government agencies and private foundations will dole out to us. And then I see someone like Roy LaFond, who could help if he wanted to ...”

“I think I understand.”

She studied my face for a moment, then nodded decisively. “Yes, I guess you do.”

I looked back out over San Francisco, seeing the squalid roofs of the Tenderloin and, beyond them, the curves of the hills and skyscrapers where the rich people lived. More and more lately it seemed to me that there was so much unnecessary waste in the world, waste of our precious resources—be they forests or endangered species of animals. Or people. And most of it stemmed from the same reason that made Roy LaFond keep this roof locked and off limits. Simple cowardice—the inability to take personal risk or make a stand for what one knew was right—was dressed up as looking out for Number One, as watching out for that old bottom line.

Maybe, I thought, I didn’t belong in this world of the nineteen-eighties, where things counted more than people. Maybe I was too much a child of the sixties, a throwback to a time when many of us had tried to care about one another. But I couldn’t change that; I’d just have to muddle along, doing what I could in my own small way. And one thing I could do was try to make matters better for these people—here in the Globe Hotel, in San Francisco’s Tenderloin, on this wintry day in the eighties.

CHAPTER THREE

Carolyn had to get back to her office, so I said, I'd check in with her later. We parted on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, and I watched her hurry off toward Market Street, her shiny hair bouncing as she made her way among the slower-moving pedestrians. A tall black man—wearing only jeans and an open leather vest in spite of the December chill—stopped to stare at her with obvious pleasure. Carolyn brushed by him, her pace not faltering. He turned, made a move to follow her, then shrugged and continued on his way.

When I was sure the man wasn't going to change his mind and go after her, I went to my car and unlocked the olive-green sheet in the trunk. Then I looked up Eddy Street toward the corner. There was a grocery store, Tran's Fine Foods, and I could see a pay phone just inside its door. I went up there, skirting three old women in black who looked as if they'd just come from Mass and a strolling blond girl in hotpants, an early rise for San Francisco's hooking community. When I got to the phone, I discovered I had no change, but the wizened Oriental man behind the grocery counter willingly broke a dollar for me. I called Marin County Information, got Roy LaFond's office number in San Rafael, and called to make an appointment. Monday was his busy day, his secretary said, but he could make time for me at two o'clock.

Hanging up the receiver, I looked at my watch. Five past eleven. Three hours to kill, and I might as well spend most of it in the neighborhood. I turned back to the counter and watched the old man ring up the sale of a pack of cigarettes. A transistor radio on a shelf behind him was blaring rock-and-roll, and when the song ended, the announcer came on with the call letters: KSUN, the Light of the Bay. That was the station where my friend Don worked—a raucous, rowdy and thoroughly ear-splitting frequency on the dial. I wondered why the old man wanted to endanger his eardrums with it.

When the customer had left, I went up to the counter and said, "Excuse me, are you the owner?" "Yes, ma'am. Hung Tran at your service. What may I do for you?" His accent was heavy, but his pronunciation was clear and precise.

"My name is Sharon McCone, Mr. Tran. I'm a private detective, working for some of the people who live at the Globe Apartment Hotel."

He nodded, displaying no surprise at my occupation.

"Do you know any of the Globe's residents?" I asked.

"Yes, I do. This is the nearest market. Many of them shop here."

I looked around. While the store was stocked with the standard items you find in any city grocery store, there were also distinctly Oriental foodstuff—big sacks of rice, tins of soy sauce, *bok choy* in the produce section. "Then perhaps," I said, "you know of the frightening things that have been happening at the Globe?"

"Yes, a number of the people have spoken of them to me. This is what they have hired you to find out about?"

"Yes."

"I hope you will be able to help them." His eyes, behind gold-rimmed spectacles, were polite but emotionless.

"I hope so too, Mr. Tran; who do you think is responsible for frightening these people?"

Now he looked surprised. "I? I have no opinion."

"But surely you must hear things. People talk. In your position you must know a great deal about what goes on in the neighborhood."

He laced his waxy-looking hands together across the front of his gray smock. "People talk, ye

But what they say often makes no sense.”

“Still, it would help me to know what they are saying.”

His eyes strayed toward the door. The girl in hotpants stood there, arranging her fall of elaborately teased blond hair with the aid of her reflection in the plate glass. Mr. Tran's lips curled, then he looked at me. “They say many things. Some think it is the owner of the building, who seeks to remove the people so he can rent the apartments at a higher rate.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I have seen this owner. He is not one to hide in basements.”

“What else?”

“They say it is the young me, the *bui doi*.”

“*Bui doi*?”

“In my language, it means ‘the dust of life.’ You would call them gangs.”

“Street gangs, juvenile delinquents?”

“That is what outsiders say. They do not understand that in our culture we do not have gangs like those of your black or Chinese or Chicano citizens. If this is the work of the *bui doi*, it is far more serious than teenagers. But I do not see what interest they would have in that hotel.”

I made a mental note to call a man I knew on the police department's Gang Task Force and find out about the so-called dust of life.

“What else do the people say?” I asked.

“That this is the work of a sick person. There are many in the neighborhood.” Again Mr. Tran's eyes went to the door, but the hooker had moved away.

“They mention the prostitutes and their pimps, but of course that is nonsense. Those ones care only about money. They talk of Brother Harry, the street preacher.”

“The man with the sandwich boards?”

“Yes. He claims to be a man of God, but he is full of hate.”

“How so?”

“His message is one of vengeance. Listen to him. You will understand.”

“I'll do that. Is there anyone else in particular?”

The old man spread his hands. “In this neighborhood we have derelicts and bag ladies, and criminals who prey on them. We have many homeless persons. There are people who act strangely—who shout or glare at others on the street. Who is to say which one might be responsible?”

Suddenly my job loomed large—and dangerous. I said, “But there's no one in particular whom people talk about?”

“They speak of one or another from time to time, especially if he or she has had a recent outbreak of violence. But no one more than the others.”

“I see.” I paused, then picked up a Hershey bar from a display on the counter and dug in my bar for money.

Hung Tran held up a waxy hand. “Please, accept it with my thanks.”

“But it's I who should be thanking you for the information you've given me.”

“No, you are helping my people. It is the least I can do.”

Touched, I mumbled my thanks and put the candy bar in my pocket. “May I come to see you again if I have more questions?”

“Certainly.” His nod was almost a bow.

The street preacher, Brother Harry, was still in front of the Sensuous Showcase Theatre. He stood on a small square of blue carpet that he had spread on the sidewalk to the right of the marquee, waving his arms and exhorting all to come back to God. The signboards he wore said PRAY TO JESUS on the

front. One particularly vigorous gesture turned him partially around and I made out the words ~~WILL ANSWER on the rear.~~

In spite of his vociferous message, Brother Harry wasn't drawing much of an audience. A few pedestrians eyed him with wary curiosity, but most ignored him, hurrying past with their gaze straight ahead or on the ground. Still others went up to the theatre's glassed-in ticket booth, paid their money to the heavily made-up clerk, and went inside. Undaunted, Harry preached on.

"He is waiting, brothers and sisters. He is waiting for you to come back to Him. His love is eternal and all-forgiving. But time passes quickly. And the end of the world approaches. There will be fire, flood, and pestilence. Only those who have come back to God, through Jesus Christ our Savior, will survive."

"Blood will run in the streets! Your children will scream in agony! Your own flesh will burn! The sinner will writhe in torment! None will be spared! Thus will be the punishment of he who does not accept God!

"Return, sinner! Return or else . . ."

Beside me, a man's voice spoke. It said, "They must to keep their certainty accuse . . . all that are different of a base intent."

I started and turned. The man who stood there was probably in his fifties, with longish gray hair and a thick beard and mustache. His nose was elfin, his cheeks rosy, and the full mouth that was visible through the surrounding hair curved up in delight. He wore baggy khaki pants and a worn brown corduroy jacket—standard Tenderloin attire.

Deciding he was harmless, I asked, "What did you say?"

Patiently he repeated, "They must to keep their certainty accuse . . . all that are different of a base intent." The rhythm in which he spoke indicated he was probably quoting poetry. More loudly, he added, "Pull down established honor; hawk for news . . . whatever their loose phantasy invent."

Brother Harry stopped preaching and looked over at us, his eyes becoming slits in his fleshing weather-roughened face.

The other man continued reciting, louder and louder. I backed off.

Harry balled his fists and started toward the man, his signboards flopping clumsily. "You get off of here, you poetry-mouthing wimp! Get off my corner!"

"Truth flourishes where the student's lamp has shone, and there along—"

Harry grabbed the man by the collar of his jacket and began shaking him. He was a head taller and looked more vigorous, in spite of the cumbersome sandwich boards. I stepped further back. Harry shouted, "This is my corner! Off!"

Surprisingly, the other man's eyes were sparkling, and his mouth still curved up in a smile. The crowd had begun to gather behind me, and he turned his head and said, "William Butler Yeats. 'The Leaders of the Crowd.' Now, that was a man who knew about God."

Harry's face grew red and he continued to shake the man, sandwich boards heaving violently. The other man just smiled, his head bobbing this way and that. Harry's face grew redder, both from fury and exertion. Just when it looked as if he might really hurt the man, someone stepped up behind him and grabbed his arm above the elbow.

"Let go of him, Harry," the newcomer said.

Harry whirled, still clutching the poetry quoter. "Get your goddamn mitts off me, Otis."

"I said, let go."

Harry looked at the poetry quoter and gave him one last shake, then let go reluctantly, like a puppy relinquishing a bone. The man stumbled back a few feet, still smiling, and stuck his hands in his jacket pockets. He stood there, rocking back and forth from heels to toes.

I looked at the man who had broken up the confrontation. He was slender, with fine light brown hair, wearing jeans, a colorful red cowboy shirt, and elaborately tooled leather boots with two-inch

heels. Letting go of the street preacher's arm, he glanced at the bearded man and said, "Beat Jimmy. Go recite your poetry someplace else."

The man called Jimmy just grinned at him.

"Get!"

With a shrug, Jimmy ambled off across the street. Once he reached the other curb, he stopped and stood there, then thumbed his nose.

The cowboy sighed and turned back to the street preacher. "Why do you let him get to you, Harry? You know Jimmy likes to see you all riled up."

Harry glared over at Jimmy, a muscle jumping in his jaw. "Otis, the son-of-a-bitch keeps messing up my preaching. I ought to kill him, him and his William Butler Yeats."

"Well, Harry, the way I hear it, Yeats has been dead for years. And killing Jimmy wouldn't be good P.R." The cowboy named Otis waved emphatically for Jimmy to go away. Jimmy thumbed his nose again.

"There—you see, Otis?" Harry said. "He's gonna stand there and mess up my act. How am I supposed to get through to these sinners when he's doing that?"

"I guess you won't, right now. So why don't you take a break? He'll get bored and go someplace else."

"But I was really warming up."

"Take a break, Harry."

Anger flashed across the street preacher's fleshy face, and then he turned and lumbered back to his square of carpet. He bent down clumsily, rolled the carpet up, and stood, tucking it under his sandwich boards. "Sometimes I think you're on his side, Otis," he said.

Otis sighed again. "That's your trouble, Harry. You don't understand people. I'm on *my* side. Mine. Nobody else's." Then he turned and strode off into the Sensuous Showcase Theatre.

Harry said, "Huh. The hell I don't understand people." He gave Jimmy one last glare and headed around the corner onto James Street.

I looked over at the bearded man and saw his face fall. He shoved his fists into his pockets, kicked at the curb a time or two, and then shuffled off, his head bent despondently. The small crowd that had gathered began to disperse.

I glanced at the marquee of the theatre. Something called *Rajah* was playing on a triple bill with *Mother's Love* and *The Reluctant Couple*. I looked at my watch, decided I had time, and followed the man named Otis.

CHAPTER FOUR

No one was in the ticket booth when I went up to it, so I just walked into the lobby of the theatre. The man called Otis stood to one side of the doors talking with the jowly, heavily made-up woman who had been collecting admission fees. The lobby was small, draped in red and black velvet and bathed in what was probably supposed to be sensuous crimson light. All the light did, however, was emphasize the worn spots on the velvet hangings and carpet. Beyond the doors to the main part of the theatre I could hear the mutterings of a sound track.

When I came in, Otis broke off his conversation with the woman, frowning. "Better get back out there, Ruth. They're wandering in without paying."

As he spoke, I realized who he must be: Otis Knox, one of the kingpins of San Francisco's pornography industry. Knox owned this theatre, as well as two others, plus was involved in film production and distribution. He was one of a handful of operators—along with the famous Mitchell Brothers—who claimed to be legitimate entrepreneurs selling a necessary and desirable product. In a recent newspaper interview, Knox had been photographed astride a horse at his ranch in an undisclosed Marin County location. The article quoted him as saying he was just a country boy trying to make an honest buck. Why he was always being hassled by the D.A.'s office was something he couldn't understand. He'd claimed to be providing employment for a lot of people—including women who might otherwise be out on the streets. One quote that remained in my mind was: "And I keep a lot of lawyers busy. That's all the D.A.'s harassment does—put money in the pockets of my lawyers, who don't need it anyway."

Now Knox came toward me, barring further entrance. Up close I could see that he was older than he'd looked on the street—in his late forties—and that his light brown hair was blow-dried backward in an attempt to disguise a spreading bald spot.

"You want to see the movie, you have to pay," he said, glancing at the woman, who was disappearing through a door to the ticket booth. "Go back outside, she'll be glad to take your money."

"It's not the film I'm interested in, Mr. Knox," I said. "I'd like to talk to you."

"If you're a reporter, I don't give interviews on short notice. Call and set up an appointment."

"I'm not a reporter." I took out the Photostat of my license and handed it to him.

He squinted at it, holding it up to the dim light. Then his lean face twisted in annoyance. "Aw Christ! Now it's some unofficial beef. Who hired you?"

"No one who has any interest in you or your business. I saw the scene you broke up on the street between Brother Harry and the man you called Jimmy. I'd like to talk to you about them."

His annoyance turned to perplexity and he handed the Photostat back to me. "You want to talk about those bums? Why?"

A couple who were easily identifiable as tourists—she carried an enormous vinyl handbag, he had a camera slung over one shoulder—came in, the woman hanging back in obvious reluctance. I said, "Is there someplace better to talk?"

Knox shrugged, then turned and headed for a door marked OFFICE. "Okay, I've got a few minutes and nothing better to do"

The office was a small cubicle jammed with the kind of junk some people call collector's items. The walls were covered with signs—street signs, Yield signs, Stop signs, Men Working signs. Shelves held old beer cans, disconnected limbs of mannequins, wooden cigar boxes, a gumball machine minus the candy, Coca-cola glasses, a mason jar full of marbles, a stack of Uncle Scrooge comic books, miscellaneous bottles, and a decoy duck. From the ceiling hung a fishnet full of glass bobbers, cork

and seashells. There was a metal desk covered with papers and two chairs in front of it—one of which held a saddle. Knox waved me toward the other chair and went around the desk. He fumbled through the papers, came up with cigarettes and matches, lit one, and put the match in an ashtray shaped like a foot.

I sat down and looked up at the fishnet. A crutch rested incongruously among the nautical items.

Knox was watching me. “You like my stuff?” He flopped into his desk chair, gesturing around us.

“It’s interesting.”

“Yeah. A hobby of mine, collecting.”

“I see.”

“I’ve got even more at home. Bigger stuff. Jukeboxes. And old Coke machine. McDonald’s Golden Arches. Babe and Blue Ox.”

“What?”

“Babe and Blue Ox. A statue. Thirteen feet high. I got him when they tore down the Paul Bunyan Drive-in in Corvallis, Oregon.”

“Good Lord.”

Abruptly Knox’s manner changed. He leaned forward on the desk and looked at me intently. “Now what’s this about Brother Harry and Jimmy?”

I explained about the problems at the Globe Hotel and the suspicions that were circulating through the neighborhood. Knox listened carefully, squinting at me through a haze of smoke. When I finished he said, “I don’t know, honey. Both of the boys are as crazy as loons, but to frighten a bunch of slop . . .”

Inwardly I winced at the cruel term, which had come home from Vietnam with the American military.

“I don’t know,” Knox repeated. “Harry’s just a lunatic, has some half-cocked ideas about God. And Jimmy’s a poor homeless bastard who’s been run from pillar to post. It doesn’t seem likely either of them—”

“Tell me about them.”

He shifted in his chair, stuck one booted foot up on the corner of the desk, and leaned his head back. “Well, Harry’s been around for years. Mostly preaches on this corner; I guess he thinks it’s some kind of antidote for my films.”

“Does he live in the neighborhood?”

“Yeah, he’s got a room in a flophouse over on Turk Street. He’s here rain or shine, hollering about salvation. Sometimes I chase him off, just for form’s sake, but usually I let him rant.”

“What’s his last name?”

Knox paused. “Woods, I think. But I wouldn’t swear to it.”

“Do you know how he feels about the Vietnamese who have been moving into the area?”

“We’ve never discussed it. Probably the same as he feels about everybody else—that they’re sinners who’ve got to be brought to God.”

“What about Harry’s background? Has he ever said where he came from?”

“No. He’s been around here as long as I have, maybe fifteen years.”

“And you don’t know how he got the way he is?”

Knox shrugged. “How do any of us get crazy?”

It was a good question. “What about the man you called Jimmy? Who’s he?”

“Jimmy Milligan. Sad case. He’s educated—you can tell that, the way he recites poetry. Yeats. Always Yeats, nothing else. But his moods go up and down fast, without much warning.”

I’d noticed that a little while ago. “Is he violent?”

Knox smiled, a little surprised. “Jimmy? Hell, no. Just real happy or real sad. One minute he’ll be

grinning like an idiot—like he was out at Harry—next he’s looking like he might cry. Does cry sometimes. Stands there on the street and bawls.”

“You said something about him being homeless.”

“Yeah. Jimmy’s one of these proud people—won’t take welfare or sleep at the Salvation Army or the Glide Memorial. He sets up places to live in abandoned buildings, old newspaper kiosks, in the holes at construction sites. You name it, Jimmy’s tried it. Makes the places pretty nice—I remember one time he even hung curtains in this big wooden crate somebody left in an alley. But the cops always come along and roust him. The cops or the people who own the property or the housing authority. Happens every time.”

“Where does Jimmy live now?”

Knox shrugged. “Who knows? It’s been a couple of months since he was chased off that lot where the Rendezvous Bar burned down over on Ellis Street.”

“Why does Jimmy taunt Brother Harry?”

“Why would anybody taunt Harry? He’s got no sense of humor and a real short fuse. It’s kind of fun to watch him explode.”

Some people, I reflected, had an odd idea of fun. “Let me ask you this, Mr. Knox,” I said. “Do you have any idea of who might be trying to frighten the people at the Globe?”

He hesitated, as if he were trying to decide whether to say something or not. I waited. Finally he took his foot off the desk and said, “I’ve got no ideas. None at all. I’m just a country boy, trying to make a living as best I can. I’ll tell you—I should have been a cowhand. I come into the city every day, do my bit, but by nightfall, I’m back on the ranch with my horses.”

“I see.” It was the same folksy line he’d trotted out for the newspaper reporter. “But you’re here in the neighborhood every day. Don’t you hear things—”

“Honey, I got three theatres to run. This is my headquarters, but I’m out half the time at the other two. And there’s the production company, and the hassles with the D.A., and the lawyers. . . I tell you, I’m up to my ears in work. I got no time to entertain ideas about who’s trying to scare a bunch of slopes.”

I merely watched him. After a moment, he added, “Yeah, honey, I’m real busy. The business is growing; we’re making a big move.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. You know the old Crystal Palace Theatre over on Market Street?”

I nodded.

“I bought it last week. Going to consolidate operations, give this town the biggest and best adult entertainment center ever.”

The Crystal Palace Theatre was one of the ornate relics left over from the early part of the century. It had been standing empty and unused for years now. Several preservationist groups had attempted to have historical landmark status approved for it, but so far had been unsuccessful. I frowned, wondering if their membership knew of Otis Knox’s plans for the structure.

Knox didn’t seem to notice my displeasure. He lit another cigarette and leaned back in his chair again, his eyes dreamy through the smoke. “It’s some place, that theatre. Downright Shabby now, but what a history it’s got. You know anything about it?”

“No, but—”

“The first Crystal Palace was built in the 1860s. They called those time the ‘Sensation Era’—and I guess it sure was. Variety shows. Burlesques. Minstrels. Performers like Lotta Crabtree, Eddie Foy, Lola Montez. You heard of them?”

I nodded, surprised at his interest in the history of his purchase.

“Yeah, those were some days,” Knox went on. “Of course, the original theatre was destroyed in the

oh-six 'quake and fire. Only one in the city—I forget which—survived. But they rebuilt, and then you had vaudeville and all that. They say the owners of the Crystal Palace even built a speakeasy under Market Street during Prohibition. Tunneled right out there under the streetcar tracks, and all the fancy ladies and gentlemen would sit and tipple while the cars rumbled over their heads.”

“Have you seen the speakeasy?”

“Nope. They say the tunnel was closed off in the thirties. *I* say the story’s pure legend. Otherwise they’d have found it when they excavated for BART and the Muni Metro. But if it existed—why couldn’t I do with it! Anyway, the theatre fell on hard times after the movies came in. For a while in the seventies some promoter tried to convert it for rock concerts, but they didn’t go over. Kids who go to things like that need space, don’t want to be told to stay in their seats. So the place has been standing empty for years.”

“And now it’s going to become a porn palace.”

I’d expected that to annoy him, but he merely shrugged. “I don’t pretend to be any better than you am. It’s a business, that’s all.”

At that moment the door opened behind me. I glanced back and saw a gangly youth with limp black hair standing there. “Mr. Knox,” he said, “there’s something wrong with the projector.”

“Christ, Arnie, now what?”

The youth gestured vaguely; he looked half stoned. “I don’t know. Can you come?”

“In a minute.” Knox stood up. The projectionist went out and Knox smiled at me, spreading his arms in a placating gesture. “Look,” he said, “I’m not the bad guy everybody thinks I am. You ought to get to know me better. You should come over to Nicasio sometime—play the jukeboxes, a little pinball. I’ll even introduce you to Babe the Blue Ox.”

Unwilling to offend him in case I needed additional information later on, I said, “You know, Mr. Knox, maybe someday I’ll take you up on that offer. Babe sounds like quite a guy.”

Neither Brother Harry nor Jimmy Milligan was in sight when I emerged from the theatre, and the people on the street were the usual ragtag assortment. Once again I checked my watch, and since I had a little time before I had to leave for San Raphael, I went back to the Globe Hotel in hopes of talking with Sallie Hyde.

I didn’t have to look far for her. She stood in the center of the lobby, clutching one of the branches from the Christmas tree. Mary Zemanek was in the doorway to her apartment, and two Vietnamese children—preschoolers—peeked out from behind the desk.

The little plastic tree had been ripped apart, branches and smashed ornaments strewn all over the floor. The packages looked as if they had been stomped on. Both of the women and children were very still.

I said, “What’s happened here?”

Sallie turned slowly. Her eyes were full of shock and grief. “Someone . . .” She motioned feebly with the tree branch.

Mary Zemanek cleared her throat. “It’s what comes of setting out a temptation in the middle of a neighborhood like this.” But under the stern words, I could tell she was shaken too.

“When did this happen?” I asked.

Sallie shook her head.

“It had to be within the last hour,” Mary said. “Since you and that woman from the Refugee Center were here.” She paused, then said to Sallie, “I trust you’ll see this is cleaned up?”

The fat woman merely nodded. Mary went back into her apartment. I looked for the children, but they had disappeared.

“You don’t suppose she . . .?” I motioned toward Mary’s door.

“No.” Sallie sighed heavily and began gathering the torn branches. “Mary liked the tree as much

any of us; she just didn't want to be responsible."

I knelt and began helping her. "Who, then?"

"I don't know."

"The same person who's been trying to scare all of you?"

"Maybe."

"I found something this morning, in the basement. An old olive-green sheet with eyeholes in it. Someone could have worn it to make those shadows in the stairwell."

Sallie continued picking up fragments of ornaments.

"Have you every seen anyone with that sheet?"

She paused, then shook her head. "No."

I swept some small fragments of red glass together, then looked for a receptacle to put them in. "Will you get a new tree?"

"I don't know." She straightened up and set the debris she'd gathered on the reception desk. I'd loaned this tree to the hotel; it seemed so much better to share it than to keep it in my room. But now I wish I hadn't. I liked the tree. I've had it for years. Ever since . . . every since I came to the hotel. Why would I do such a thing?" Her words were tinged with resignation that verged on despair.

I pushed the last of the ornament fragments together, being careful not to cut myself. "That's what I'm going to find out."

Sallie went around the desk and dragged out a wastebasket. She dropped the wreckage that sat on the desk into it, then helped me dispose of the pieces of glass. "The city's changing," she said as she stood up. "This never would have happened before."

"Before what?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. I mean, years ago. The city's so different now. There's so much anger in people. The other day I was in the crosswalk in front of Magnin's, by the Square, where my flower stand is. Walking with the light. This guy in a sports car—nice-looking, well-dressed guy, what we used to think of as a gentleman—turns the corner, almost hits me. I jump back as he screeches on the brakes, and you know what he says to me? 'Fuck you, lady.'" She finished dumping the remains of the gift packages into the basket, then placed it out of sign behind the desk.

"'Fuck you, lady,'" she repeated wearily. "And that, from what we used to call a gentleman."

I could see she was in no mood to answer the kind of questions I wanted to ask her, so I said, "Will you be home tonight, Sallie?"

"Tonight? I'm always home at night. Don't like to be on the streets after dark."

"I'll stop by and see you then."

"Sure. Stop by any time." The fat woman made her way to the elevator, looking years older than she had when I'd met her that morning.

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