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↑ LABYRINTH ↓

A Nameless Detective Mystery



SHAMUS AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

BILL PRONZINI

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SPEAKING VOLUMES

NAPLES, FLORIDA

2011

LABYRINTH

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9781612320724

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TWENTY

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Labyrinth

A Nameless Detective Mystery

Bill Pronzini

This one is for the memory of *Black Mask*, *Blue Book*, *Golden Fleece*, *Green Ghost Detective*, *Red Star Mystery*, and all the other magazines of the colorful pulp era.

ONE

The dead girl lay in a twisted sprawl, like something broken and carelessly discarded, among the reeds and bushes that grew along the edge of Lake Merced.

I could see her from where I stood alone on the embankment thirty feet above, and I could watch the movements of the half-dozen Homicide cops and forensic people who were down there with her. One of the cops was Eberhardt. He knew I was waiting up here, but he had not paid any attention to me since my arrival a couple of minutes ago; he wasn't ready yet to tell me why I had been summoned out of a sound sleep at seven A.M. to the place where a young girl had died.

It was a cold gray Wednesday morning in November, and the wind blowing in across Skyline carried the heavy smells of salt and rain. Pockets of mist clung to the reeds and trees and underbrush around the lake shore, giving the concrete pedestrian causeway at the south end an oddly insubstantial look, like an optical illusion. The whole area seemed desolate at this hour, but that was illusion too. Lake Merced sits in the southwestern corner of San Francisco, not far from the ocean, and is surrounded by public and private golf courses, upper-and middle-class residential areas, San Francisco State College, and the Fleishhacker Zoo.

It had been awhile since my last trip out here. But when I was on the cops a number of years ago I had come to the lake at least once a month, sometimes with Eberhardt, because the police pistol range was nearby to the west. Another inspector had had a small sailboat in those days, moored over at the Harding Boat House, and if the weather was good the three of us would take it out on Saturdays and Sundays. Lake Merced is bigger than you would expect an in-city body of water to be, and because of its location, removed from the tourist areas downtown and along the Bay, it's a recreation area pretty much reserved for the natives.

Behind me I heard another vehicle come wheeling in off Lake Merced Boulevard. I turned, saw that it was a city ambulance, and watched it maneuver to a stop among the blue-and-whites and unmarked police sedans—and my car—that were strewn across the wide dirt parking area opposite Brotherhood Way. Two attendants in white uniforms got out and opened up the rear doors. While they were doing that, a coroner's car swung in and joined the pack; the guy who stepped out of it, carrying a medical bag, came over and stopped beside me.

"Where is it?" he said, as if he were asking about a tree stump or a piece of machinery. He seemed to think I was one of the Homicide inspectors. "Down there?"

"Yeah," I said. "Down there."

"Sorry I'm late." But he did not sound sorry; he only sounded aggrieved. "Goddamn car wouldn't start."

I had nothing to say to that. He shrugged, pulled a face, gave me a short nod, and began to make his way down to where the dead girl was.

I looked away again. The knots of people along the bicycle paths that flanked the parking area—

college kids from S.F. State, residents of the lakeview townhouses down the way, reporters and TV remote crews—seemed to be getting larger; cars crawled along Lake Merced Boulevard, filled with eager gawking faces. Ghouls, all of them. There were half a dozen uniformed patrolmen working crowd control in the area, but the cops knew and I knew that the crowds would not be dispersed until after the body was taken away.

The cold bite of the wind was making my eyes water. I rubbed at them with the back of one hand, reburied the hand in my topcoat pocket, and bunched the material tight around me. Filaments of black like veins, had started to form in the overcast sky; we were going to have rain pretty soon. I considered waiting inside my car, where I could use the heater to chase some of the morning chill—but before I could make up my mind to do that, Eberhardt's voice called my name from below.

I stepped back to the edge of the embankment and saw him peering up at me, beckoning. "Okay," I said, "you can come on down."

So I let out a breath and picked my way along the slope, using the vegetation there to keep my balance on the wet grass. When I got to where Eberhardt was, he turned without saying anything and led me to the girl's body.

"Take a look," he said then, "tell me if you recognize her."

She was lying on her stomach, but her head was canted around so that most of her face was visible toward the lake. There was one hole on the left side of her forehead, black-edged and caked with dried blood, and a second just below the collarbone. Shot twice, with what was probably a small caliber weapon judging from the size of the entry wounds and because there did not seem to be any exit wounds. She had been young, maybe still in her teens, and she had been attractive; you could tell that even with her features blanked and frozen in death. Long dark hair, pug nose, sprinkling of freckles across her cheekbones. Wearing a suede coat, tennis shoes, jeans, and one of those football-type jerseys, red and white, with the number forty-nine on it.

I had never seen her before.

My stomach coiled up as I looked at her. After a couple of seconds I swung around and stood staring out over the wind-wrinkled surface of the lake. I had seen death before—too much death, too many bodies torn and ravaged by violence—but each time was like the first: a hollow feeling under the breastbone, the taste of bile, a sense of sadness and awe. I had never learned to inure myself to it, never become jaded or detached enough, the way some cops did, to treat it as an abstract.

But this time I felt something else, too—a kind of dull empty rage. A young girl like that, robbed of her life before she had much of a chance to live it. Why? Where was the sense in such a brutal act? No matter what she might have done to someone, no matter what she might have been, she could not have deserved to die this way.

Beside me Eberhardt said, "Well?" His voice was sharp and gruff, and I knew him well enough after thirty years to understand that the girl's death had touched him too.

I shook my head. "I don't know her, Eb."

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“All right. We’ll talk up top. I’m finished here.”

He asked the assistant coroner if he could release the body, got an affirmative nod, and the two of them climbed back up to the parking area. I watched him gesture to the ambulance attendants and then take out one of his flame-blackened briar pipes and clamp it between his teeth. He was my age, fifty-two, and an odd contrast of sharp angles and smooth blunt planes: square forehead, sharp nose and chin, thick and blocky upper body, long legs and angular hands. His usual expression was one of surliness and cynicism—a false reflection of what he was like inside—but now his face had a dark, brooding cast. I wondered if he were thinking about his niece, the one who was not much older than the dead girl by the lake.

When the ambulance attendants came past us with the stretcher and disappeared below, Eberhardt said to me, “Her name was Christine Webster. Mean anything to you?”

“No.”

“We found her purse in one of those bushes on the slope,” he said. “Address on her driver’s license is Edgewood Avenue, up by the U.C. Med Center. She was twenty years old and a student at S.F. State. Student I.D. card in her wallet, along with the license.”

“None of that rings any bells,” I said.

“You working on anything connected with the college?”

“No. I’m not working on anything at all right now.”

“You know anybody up around the Med Center?”

“I don’t think so, no. Look, Eb—”

“Not much else in her purse. Except one thing.”

“What thing?”

“One of your business cards,” he said.

“So that’s it.”

“That’s it. Kind of funny for a girl that young to be carrying around a private eye’s business card, don’t you think?”

“I think. Christ.”

“But you’re positive you never saw or heard from her?”

“I’d remember if I had.”

“What about phone calls or letters from unidentified women. Anything like that recently?”

“No. I’m sorry, no.”

“You hand out many of those cards?”

“A fair amount, sure,” I said. “Insurance companies, lawyers, bail bondsmen, skip-trace clients, friends, casual acquaintances—hell, I must have distributed a thousand or more over the past few years.”

There were sounds on the slope behind us, and we both turned to look as the ambulance attendants struggled up with the stretcher. When they got to the top and started past us, a ripple of movement and sound passed through the watchers along Lake Merced Boulevard. You could almost see them all leaning forward for a better look, even though the shell of Christine Webster was just a small, shapeless mound beneath the sheet and restraining straps.

Eberhardt said, “Bastards.”

“Yeah.”

He got a little box of wooden matches out of his pocket, hunched over to shield his hands from the wind, and used four of the matches to get his pipe lighted. “Okay,” he said then. “She picked up your card somehow, and maybe she was planning to contact you, but for whatever reason she never did. The point is, is there a connection between that and her death?”

I had been wondering the same thing. The idea of it bothered me; I had not known the girl existed until this morning, when she no longer did exist, and yet the fact that she’d had my business card was a thread linking her life and mine. If there was a connection, and if she *had* come to me about her problem, could I have done anything to prevent her murder? But that kind of thinking never got you anywhere. I had allowed myself to indulge in it in the past and I had promised myself, for a number of reasons, that I was not going to do it anymore.

For the sake of argument I said, “It could be she had the card as a gag. You know, the way kids do—flash it on her friends, make up some kind of story to go with it.”

“Maybe.”

I stared over at where the attendants were loading her body into the ambulance. “Could it have been robbery?” I asked. “Or attempted rape?”

“It wasn’t robbery,” Eberhardt said. “There’re thirty-three dollars in her wallet and a good engagement ring on one of her fingers. And it doesn’t figure to be rape; she wasn’t molested or otherwise abused.”

“Street shooting?”

“Possible but not likely. She lived way the hell up on Edgewood, and with Thanksgiving coming up

there won't be any night classes at the college for the next couple of weeks. Seems doubtful she have been wandering around here alone at night. Coroner's rough estimate as to time of death between nine P.M. and midnight."

"She could have been killed somewhere else," I said. "Or picked up somewhere else and forced in a car and brought here."

"Uh-uh. See that old blue Mustang down at the end there? Belongs to Christine Webster. Lab boys have been over it already; no bloodstains or anything else that figures to be important. The way it looks, she either drove here to meet someone or came willingly with the person who shot her."

"Anything in the area that might point to the killer?"

"Nothing. She was shot at close range with a small caliber handgun—.25 or .32, probably. Then she either fell down the slope or was rolled down it after she was dead. College kid out jogging at six thirty spotted the body and called us. That's all we know for sure so far."

The ambulance started up and eased out onto the street. The rubbernecks all turned to watch it fade out of sight toward the campus. End of show. They began to drift away singly and in small groups.

Eberhardt said, "So that's that for now. You can take off, *paisan*. I'll let you know if we turn up anything definite."

"Do that, huh? A thing like this . . ."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "Go on, get out of here. I'll be in touch."

I went over to my car and managed to get inside and away from there without being hassled by the media types that were still hanging around. The sky had grown darker; droplets of rain began to spatter against the windshield. I could still feel the chill of the wind and I turned the heater up as high as it would go.

Twenty years old, I thought, and somebody shot her dead. My business card in her purse and somebody shot her dead.

I stayed cold all the way downtown.

TWO

It was after nine when I reached the Tenderloin and parked my car in the Taylor and Eddy lot, not far from where I have my office. I thought about going into a nearby greasy spoon for some breakfast but I had no appetite; the image of the dead girl was still sharp in my mind. Instead I locked the car and hustled straight up the hill on Taylor.

The rain kept on coming down, alternating between a drizzle and a fine mist, and the wind was gusty enough to slap the coattails around my legs. At this hour and in this weather the streets were pretty much empty. The dark wet sky made them and the old buildings look dingier and more unappealing than usual. Even the faint pervading smell of garbage seemed stronger.

The Tenderloin used to be, and on the surface still was, a section of lunchrooms and seedy bars and secondhand bookstores; of low-rent apartment buildings and cheap hotels inhabited by transients, senior citizens with small pensions, nonviolent drifters and the Runyonesque street characters that were as much an institution in San Francisco as they once were in New York. It used to have character the way Broadway-Times Square did in the old days, and you could walk its streets in relative safety. But in the past couple of decades it had changed—had lost all of its flavor and taken on instead a kind of desperate sleaziness. The transients and senior citizens were still there, but the street characters had been replaced by drug addicts and drug pushers, small-time thugs, fancy-dressed pimps and hard-eyed whores. You walked on Eddy or Mason or Turk or lower Taylor these days, and you saw porno bookstores and movie houses spread out like garish weeds; you saw men and women openly buying and selling smack, coke, any other kind of drug you can name; you saw spaced-out kids, drunk and sleeping it off in doorways, elderly people with frightened eyes watchful for purse-snatchers and muggers because the Tenderloin has the highest crime rate in the city.

I asked myself again why I didn't, for Christ's sake, move my office to a better neighborhood. Business had not been all that good recently, and maybe part of the reason was my location. Why would anyone want to put his trust in a private investigator with an office on the fringe of the Tenderloin?

Moving made good sense—but the problem was, I couldn't really afford to move. The rent in my current building was reasonable enough, even though the landlord was making noises about kicking it up again; the price of an office in a more respectable area was beyond my means. Besides which, I had occupied this one ever since I left the cops and went out on my own fourteen years ago; I liked it there, I felt comfortable there.

So I was not going to move and that was that. Just keep on toughing it out, I told myself. Hell, you've had plenty of practice at toughing things out, right? Particularly in the past year and a half.

When I entered my building and started across to the elevator I noticed the white of an envelope showing inside my mailbox. There were envelopes inside all the other boxes, too. Uh-oh, I thought because it was too early for the mail; and there was only one other person with access to the boxes. I opened mine up and took out the envelope: my name hand-written on the front, the building owner's name and address rubber-stamped in the upper left-hand corner. Greetings from your friend and landlord.

I said something under my breath, stuffed the envelope into my coat pocket, and took the elevator up to the third floor. My office was cold; and it still seemed to retain the faint smell of stale cigarettes. I had not smoked a cigarette in seventeen months, ever since finding out about the lesion on my left lung, but I had averaged two packs a day before that. Maybe the walls and furnishings had permanently absorbed the smoke odor. But probably it was just a ghost smell—a similar kind of thing to the imagined sensations an amputee feels once he has lost an arm or a leg. When you live with something for most or all of your life you never quite adjust to the fact that it's gone.

The first thing I did was to check my answering machine. Up until the beginning of this year, I had subscribed to a regular service; but then inflation had forced them to raise their rates, and that in turn had forced me to go out and buy the machine. It was something I should have done years ago, maybe except that I had an old-fashioned outlook on the conventions of the private detecting business.—I suppose because I identified strongly with the fictional eyes and cops in the pulp magazines I had read and collected for more than thirty years. I had always wanted to emulate the Spades and Marlowes and Race Williamsses, and if that was childish and self-deluding, as a woman named Erika Coates had once claimed, then so be it. It was my life and the only person I had to justify my feelings to was myself.

I did not expect to find anything on the machine: I list my home number on my cards and in the phone book in case anybody decides on the weekend that he needs a private investigator, reasonable rates, strict confidence at all times. But I had had at least one call because the little window on the corner had a round white spot in it. I worked the controls and listened to my voice play back the message I had recorded. Then a woman's businesslike voice said, "Yes, this is Mrs. Laura Nichols. Would you please call me as soon as possible?" She gave a number, repeated it—and that was all.

I wrote the name and number down on a pad. Then I went over and fiddled with the steam radiator until the pipes began banging and thumping. Took my coffeepot into the alcove, emptied out the dregs of last Friday's coffee, filled it with fresh water from the sink tap in there, and put it on the hotplate over the heat. Morning ritual.

Sitting at the desk, I opened the letter from my landlord. It said what I expected: my rent was being raised thirty dollars a month, effective December 1. No explanation, no apology. Nice. Some time ago the California voters had passed the Jarvis-Gann tax-reform initiative, Proposition 13, which gave property owners a 60 percent tax cut per annum; and ever since the governor had made a lot of noise about owners passing on some of that savings to renters. Result: a thirty-dollar increase on an office in the goddamn Tenderloin.

I threw the letter into the wastebasket. The thing with Christine Webster and my business card had already made it a lousy Monday; this was just the icing. Well, maybe Mrs. Laura Nichols, whoever she was, had something positive to offer. Like a job. I had not worked at anything in five days and needed both the activity and the money.

So I pulled the phone over, dialed the number I had written down. While I waited I sat looking at the poster blow-up of a 1932 *Black Mask* cover that I had tacked up on one wall. It was not exactly appropriate for a business office, but I liked it and that was what counted. Eberhardt, on one of his infrequent visits here, had said that it made the place look like something out of an old Bogart movie. Me and Bogie and Sam Spade—

The same businesslike female voice said hello in my ear. I asked, "Mrs. Nichols?" and she said y

and I identified myself.

“Oh, yes—good. Thank you for calling.”

“How can I help you, Mrs. Nichols?”

“Are you free to accept a confidential job? It would be on a full-time basis for at least two weeks.”

“Yes, ma’am. Depending on what it involves, of course.”

“It’s a rather delicate family matter, concerning my brother. I’d prefer not to discuss the details over the phone, but it isn’t anything unseemly. We can discuss it at my home, if you don’t mind driving out. I’m sure it will be worth your time.”

“When would you like me to come?”

“As soon as possible,” she said. “The address is 2519 Twenty-Fifth Avenue North. In Sea Cliff.”

I raised an eyebrow. Sea Cliff is a synonym for money in San Francisco; you don’t live there unless your yearly income is around six figures. “I can be there within the hour,” I said.

“Fine. I’ll expect you.”

She rang off, and I cradled the handset, gazing again at the *Black Mask* poster. Full-time job for at least two weeks, working for a lady in Sea Cliff? It was the kind of thing that always happened to the pulp private eyes, but that happened to me about as often as a woman who said “yes” on the first date. So there figured to be a catch in it somewhere that I was not going to like. The last time I had worked for a rich client—one of the few times in my career—I had wound up in the hospital with a knife wound in my belly. I still had the scars, one you could see and one you couldn’t.

But then, why expect the worst? Maybe it was all going to be fine; maybe for a change I was going to get a break. I stood up and poured myself a quick cup of coffee. Then I locked the office and went down and out to pick up my car.

THREE

Twenty-five nineteen Twenty-Fifth Avenue North turned out to be a massive beige stucco house separated from its neighbors by a lot of bright green lawn. Its architecture was so old-California Spanish that it looked as if it belonged in Los Angeles instead of San Francisco: red-tile roof, decorative wrought-iron balconies framing all of the windows, front portico with a black-beam archway, wall patterns here and there done in four colors of mosaic tile. There were even mosaic tile inlays in the series of terraced steps that led up from the street.

I parked in front and climbed the steps. The rain had stopped, but the morning was still damp and dismal-gray with overcast; the wind here was blustery, knife-edged. Behind and on both sides of the house you could see the broad choppy sweep of the ocean and the entrance to the Bay, and through the low clouds the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge, the brown hills of Marin, the cliffs at Land's End. The view would be spectacular on a clear day, which was what made the Sea Cliff area prime real estate; even now it was pretty impressive.

A big brass knocker shaped like a lion's head sat in the center of the front door, but I found no doorbell button and used that instead. Chimes sounded faintly inside, faded to silence. Another ten seconds went by before a peephole above the knocker opened and an amber-colored eye peered out at me. A woman's voice, different from the one on the phone, said "Yes?" in the tone people use only with door-to-door salesmen.

I gave my name and added that Mrs. Nichols was expecting me.

Pause. "You're that private detective."

"Yes, that's right."

Another pause. Then the voice said, "Just a moment," and there was the scraping of a lock, the door opened, and I was looking at a tall slender woman in her early twenties. She had fine, pale-blonde hair cut short in the style we used to call shag and a pale sensitive face dominated by high cheekbones. The amber eyes were wide and striking. She wore one of those long button-down skirts that are supposed to be popular now, a white blouse and a little black knit vest.

"Come in, please."

I went in. She shut the door, locked it again, waited for me to give her my coat, and then hung it away in a closet—all without smiling, speaking, or even looking at me. We went down a dark hall and through another of those Spanish archways into a living room. The floors were tiled and carpetless, and my heels clicked so loudly that it made me a little self-conscious, the kind of feeling you get when you walk through a church or maybe a museum.

The young woman gestured to a large bulky sofa. "I'll tell my mother you're here," she said.

"Thank you."

She went away through the arch. I sat on the sofa with my hat on my knees and looked at the room. The Spanish effect seemed overdone, as if the people who lived here were trying too hard to create an atmosphere of old-world gentility. The antique furniture included a refectory table, a pigeonhole desk, several big chairs with flat wood arms and bare wood backs; a massive rococo chandelier hung from the ceiling. On the far side a set of narrow glass doors gave access to a patio that had a mosaic tile floor and a lot of bushes and plants growing out of brown urns. It was all dark and ponderous, a little depressing. There was not much color anywhere; even the old paintings on the walls were somberly hued. About the only modern things in the room were a stereo unit and a typewriter on the desk, and they seemed out of place.

I sat there for about two minutes. There was no sound anywhere, not even the ticking of a clock. Then I heard steps on the hall tiles, and got on my feet as a large handsome woman in her late forties or early fifties appeared at the arch. She came through it like a stockholder entering a board room—poised, purposeful, self-assured. A tailored green pants suit set off carefully coiffed blonde hair and the same amber eyes as her daughter, just a little darker under long curling lashes. There was a diamond as big as a grape on the ring finger of her left hand.

No smile from her either. She said, “I’m Laura Nichols,” and offered me her hand, then shook mine in the same businesslike way. Her eyes went over me in frank appraisal, but there was nothing in them or on her face to tell what sort of impression she was getting. She asked me to sit down, and when I did she went over and arranged herself in one of the heavy wooden chairs.

“Would you care for coffee? Tea?”

“Thanks, no.”

She nodded as if she approved of my answer. “Then I’ll get directly to the point,” she said. Her enunciation was careful and precise; I had the feeling that everything she did would be with care and precision. “I’ve asked you here because of my brother, Martin Talbot. He’s had a very unfortunate experience, you see.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Two nights ago, while he was driving back from a Los Angeles business trip, he fell asleep at the wheel of his car near South San Francisco. The car veered into another lane, struck another car and caused it to spin into an overpass abutment. Martin wasn’t hurt, miraculously enough, but one of the two people in the other car was killed.”

A very unfortunate experience, she’d said. That was some way of putting it.

Mrs. Nichols went on, “The driver of the second car, a man named Victor Carding, also escaped serious injury; it was his wife who died. Later, in the hospital, my brother insisted on seeing Carding and spoke to him alone for a minute or two. During that time the man called Martin a murderer, threatened his life, and then tried to attack him. Two interns came in and restrained him just in time.”

“You’re afraid Carding might try to carry out his threat—is that it?”

“Yes. He’s due to be released from the hospital today.”

“Have you talked to the police?”

“Of course. As soon as Martin told me.”

“And?”

“They seem to feel there’s nothing to worry about. When they spoke to Carding he told them I couldn’t remember threatening Martin or trying to attack him. He claims not to hold my brother responsible for what happened.”

“Well, that’s probably the case,” I said. “People do and say things in shock and grief that they don’t really mean.”

“Perhaps. But we can’t be certain of that. Carding is a construction worker, a common laborer. There’s no telling what a man like that is capable of.”

Common laborer, I thought. Why do people like her always use the word “common” as if there were some social stigma attached to being a blue collar worker? Christ, we’re *all* laborers of one kind or another.

I said, “What does your brother think?”

“That Carding would be justified if he chose to seek revenge.”

“I’m not sure I follow that, Mrs. Nichols.”

“You would have to know my brother to fully understand,” she said. “He’s an unusual man.”

“In what way?”

“In many ways. Our father was a banker, quite well-to-do, and when he passed on he left Martin and me a substantial sum of money. Martin refused to accept his share of the estate; it was his belief that he had no right to the inheritance because he hadn’t earned the money himself. He worked his way through college, received a degree in electrical engineering, and proceeded to follow his own path in life. He has been moderately successful, I’ll admit—”

She broke off because her daughter, silent as a wraith, had appeared in the archway. Mrs. Nichols gave her a somewhat annoyed glance and said, “What is it, Karen?”

“Do you mind if I come in?”

“I’m discussing a business matter, dear.”

“Yes—with a private detective. About Uncle Martin. I’ve a right to know what you’re planning, and why you want a detective.”

Mrs. Nichols pursed her lips and looked at me. The look said that children really could be difficult at times, couldn’t they? I kept my expression stoic and attentive; I had no opinion on the subject of children. And none I cared to show about a mother who appeared to think of her twenty-odd-year-old

daughter as a child.

“Oh, all right,” she said to Karen. “Come in, if you must. You won’t leave me alone, I suppose, until you do find out.”

The girl came inside and sat on one of the chairs at the refectory table—with her knees clasped together and her posture erect and her hands folded in her lap. I wondered if there were still such things as finishing schools. If so, Karen had no doubt been sent to one—whether she wanted to attend or not.

All of Mrs. Nichols’ attention settled on me again. She said, “As I was about to say, my brother was also the most moral man I have ever known. He lives by the strictest code of behavior imaginable: what is right is right, what is wrong is wrong, and there are absolutely no gray areas or extenuating circumstances. I’m sure that’s why he’s still a bachelor at forty-four; he simply never found a woman who measured up to his standards.”

I said, “He feels guilt over the accident, then?”

“That is an understatement. He has barely slept since it happened, eaten almost nothing, and hasn’t gone back to his job or even left his house except for short walks around the neighborhood. He considers himself to be just what Carding called him: A murderer. His ‘negligence’—his word, not mine—caused the death of another human being. He even expressed the desire to stand trial for manslaughter; thank God that isn’t legally possible. The point is, if Victor Carding attempted to harm him, I doubt Martin would try to prevent it. He is altogether on Carding’s side on the matter, if you see what I mean.”

“Yes,” I said, “I see what you mean.”

“In view of that, it’s my duty to have him protected. That’s why I called you.”

I frowned at her. “You want me to act as his bodyguard?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“Why would he consent, feeling as he does?”

“He wouldn’t, if he knew about it.”

“*If* he knew about it?”

“Martin lives across the street from Stern Grove; you can see his house from inside the park, from the front and back. What I want you to do is watch the house for any sign of Carding and also to follow Martin whenever he goes out walking. He’s a compulsive walker, you see; and of course he refuses to even drive a car again.”

I knew there’d be a catch, I thought. Damn, I knew it.

I shifted on my chair. I had been offered a lot of different jobs over the years, not a few of them of the screwball variety, but this was something new out of left field. Bodyguard-from-a-distance. Chris

People get the damndest ideas into their heads.

Karen apparently had a similar reaction. She said, “I don’t think that’s a very good idea, mother.”

“Don’t you, now?”

“No. Victor Carding isn’t going to come after Uncle Martin; I don’t believe that. But even if he did, what could this man do about it?”

“I’m afraid your daughter’s right, Mrs. Nichols,” I said. “Carding could just ring the doorbell and attack your brother when he answers; there wouldn’t be time enough for me to stop him. Or he could let Carding inside, of his own free will. In that case I couldn’t just break in—not without a hundred percent certainty that an attempted murder was about to take place. I’m a private investigator, not a police officer. I don’t have any more rights than you or any other private citizen.”

“Don’t you suppose I’m aware of all that?” Mrs. Nichols said. Her voice was cool, almost patronizing, as if she felt now that she was dealing with a pair of “children” instead of just one. “But there *might* be something you could do. You *might* be able to prevent another tragedy. If no one watches over Martin, then no one can prevent anything from happening in an emergency.”

She more or less had a point. But I said, “You’d want me to keep this watch on your brother for at least two weeks?”

“Yes. If nothing were to happen in that time, I would feel satisfied that Carding’s threat was meaningless.”

“Would you want a full twenty-four hour vigil?”

“Certainly.”

“That’s a three-man job,” I said. “I’d have to hire two other operatives and pay them full salary.”

Karen said, “You know what he’s saying, don’t you, mother? It would cost a small fortune—”

“I know what it will cost.” There was frost in the lady’s voice now; she did not like to be argued with. “The expense is of little importance. Your uncle’s safety is all that matters.”

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea—”

“I don’t care *what* you think, young woman. And I’ll thank you to be quiet from now on or else leave the room.”

Karen glanced at me, looked back at her mother, and then lowered her eyes to her folded hands. I thought I saw her lips form words, thought I recognized what they were; but it was difficult to be sure with her head bowed and the lighting in there. If I was right, though, the words explained a good deal about her side of this mother-daughter relationship.

What she seemed to say was, “Stubborn old bitch.”

Mrs. Nichols asked me, "Do you have any more questions or observations?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, then? Will you accept the job?"

I thought it over. It was screwball, all right. Judging from what she had told me about Mart Talbot, he needed the services of a psychiatrist a lot more than those of a private detective. But if the surveillance did last at least two weeks, the kind of money involved would pay my groceries, the rent on my flat, and the just-raised rent on my office for the next few months. You can turn down a prospective client when there's a question of ethics; but when you're dealing with sensitivities, and when you have to worry about making ends meet, it's no damned contest at all.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I'll accept the job."

FOUR

Martin Talbot's house was located on the corner of Twenty-first Avenue and Wawona, directly across from the north-side entrance to Stern Grove—a fourteen-block-long park and recreation area on the west side of the city, a mile or so from San Francisco State College and Lake Merced. It was a modest stucco affair, boxy-looking, painted white with a red tile roof, that stood shoulder-to-shoulder with its immediate neighbors. In front were a tiny patch of trimmed lawn, a brick staircase, a built-in garage under what would probably be the living room windows. Behind the house was a tiny fenced-in yard; you would be able to see the side gate and at least part of the rear porch from within the park.

It was after two o'clock when I got there. I parked my car on Wawona, facing east, and entered the park through the gate in its cyclone border fence. The rain had not started up again, but it was in the air and in the bite of the wind. Nobody else was out and around that I could see; the rolling lawns, the kid-sized soccer field, the short driving range for golfers to practice their chip shots, the sunken putting green, all looked deserted.

There were no benches to sit on, but in this weather it would not have mattered if there had been; it was too damned cold to sit out in the open. I wandered around for a time on the wet grass, to refamiliarize myself with the landscape and to see how far I could go east and west and still have a clear view of Talbot's house. Cars drifted by now and then and there was a steady whisper-and-rumble of traffic over on Nineteenth Avenue; otherwise it was a pretty quiet area. You could even hear water dripping off the eucalyptus and other trees that lined the north rim of Stern Grove's deep, wide central grotto.

When my nose and ears began to burn I went back out to sit in the car. What I wanted more than anything right then was some hot coffee. I wished I had thought to buy a thermos and fill it from the pot in my office; I had driven there after leaving Sea Cliff, to make some calls and check my answering machine, and there were stores in the vicinity where I could have got a thermos. I made a mental note to do that tomorrow, before I came back out here.

I started the engine, put the heater on full blast until I was warm again. Then I opened up a 1940s issue of *Black Mask*. But trying to read on a surveillance is not much of an idea; you can't concentrate because you have to keep glancing up after every paragraph or two in order to stay alert. At the end of fifteen minutes I gave it up—and just sat there.

Nothing happened over at the Talbot house. Nothing happened anywhere, except that a woman with a poodle on a leash came walking down Wawona behind me, crossed the street in front of my car, and entered the park. She gave me a curious glance as she passed, the kind that meant she was wondering what I was doing there.

I sighed a little. Curious neighbors, like as not, were going to present a problem eventually; you *could* run a two-week, round-the-clock stakeout in a residential area without arousing suspicion, but the odds were against it. Both Bert Thomas and Milo Petrie—a pair of retired cops who worked part-time as guards and field operatives—had mentioned the fact to me when I called them from my office. They had been willing to take the other two eight-hour shifts, but neither of them figured the job

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