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Joe Klingler

TUNE UP

The Secrets of Mylin - Book I

**A Qigiq and Dreeson
Thriller**

CartoSi LLC

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To my siblings:

*Joanne, Mary, William, Helen, Robert, Dolores, Catherine,
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who each in his or her own way helped make me
crazy enough to want to be a writer.

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TUNE UP

“A bird does not sing because he has an answer.
He sings because he has a song.”
—Joan Walsh Anglund

PROLOGUE

MRS. CHONG TOUCHED HER GRAY CURLS to ensure they were in place. The same dark blue dress she always wore on Monday hung from her thin shoulders—feng shui indicated blue was auspicious for the start of her week. She had made the dress herself on the sewing machine she operated all day long to make a living. The owner hadn't even charged her for thread, though she had to provide her own fabric. But she didn't mind. She loved America, and never felt so free as she did in her little apartment in Chinatown so close to the enormous bridge of gold.

Sometimes she wished for a larger apartment away from the alley. But she wished more that Mr. Chong hadn't smoked himself to death at fifty-two. She picked up the picture of him standing on the pier beside the gray steel ship that had brought them to America thirty years ago and gazed into his dark, ambitious eyes. She kissed two fingers of her right hand and placed them on the picture, adding another smudge to the glass. She said softly:

“Good day, Mr. Chong. I am off to work. I hope you are having a beautiful life with our ancestors.” Dr. Fan at the Chinese hospital had warned her about talking to herself too much as she grew older. But she wasn't talking to herself, she was speaking to her husband's ghost so he would leave her in peace.

She replaced the black lacquer frame on a pearl-colored doily. Glancing right, she sighed, and lifted a photograph of two preteen girls in yellow dresses down to their shins wearing white orchids in black hair.

“I miss you and your wonderful music. Please call.

Remember I cared for you when your mother..." She sniffled and blinked back tears. "In that bad bad year when your father smuggled us into Shanghai. And now..." She waited for a deep breath to lift and lower her chest. She replaced the picture. As she positioned it carefully, her gaze touched a third picture.

"You left our homeland to escape the one-child policy of our fine government. And look what has happened to us." She shook her head, then turned away.

She touched her hair again. The oversized numbers of the bamboo clock on her lovely cherry wood nightstand glowed 6:40. She had made sure the clock was made in China before paying the man at the pawn shop for it. Helping the people of Asia with money she made working in America made her happy. The Buddha taught the connectedness of all things, and surrounding herself with the words *Made in China* helped her feel connected to a homeland she hadn't seen in decades. And with Mr. Chong gone...

She pushed the word *never* from her mind before forcing her face into a smile. Americans didn't want to see the sadness of an old Chinese woman, so she was careful not to show it to them.

She walked down to street level, being careful of her posture, and squeezing the rail with her stiff fingers. Only two flights, but she knew that every bit of exercise was a wellness prescription for her aging body.

She tried to be glad the old building had no elevator.

The heavy main door stuck. She pushed hard with her shoulder, caught her balance as it swung, and stepped outside to the sidewalk. A misty fog glowed orange in the sky. She pulled her sweater to her chin and turned right toward the factory: the spare room where she and three other women manufactured anything the boss could get an order for. She liked the baseball caps with their emblems and bright colors best. Doing a beautiful embroidered logo, or someone's name, made her happy—though the boss said she was too slow. She told him,

“Haste makes waste.” He would grumble, but leave her alone to work. Not so with the younger sewers. He was always talking to them, and rubbing against their bodies. Some quit, but most couldn’t afford to.

She walked two blocks and stopped at an intersection with a group of pedestrians. She needed to turn left, but the little walking man she thought of as a friendly Chinese man helping her navigate the chaos of San Francisco wasn’t there. A red hand glowed. She waited. A tall white man bumped her with his brown shoulder bag. She knew it contained a computer. Her boss had one and gloated that it let him keep track of every stitch they sewed. She turned around; a dozen people had gathered behind her.

She smiled. She liked people close by. They gave her comfort, as if she were a small part of a larger whole like the Buddha taught. But the autos zooming through the streets scared her. Always so fast. Pushing bicycles and people out of the way as if cars were special. Bullies. She didn’t have a car—and didn’t want one. They were a kind of opium that made people crazy and rude, disconnected from the Earth: the root of all life. No, the Buddha would have walked. So she walked. Not that she could afford a car, even a small one.

Her walking man friend replaced the hand.

The human mass around her moved into the street. She tried to stop at the curb to look both ways, but her small body was carried forward. A white van was stopped to her left. A light green car sat next to it—one of those curved ones that look like hungry fish. Her boss said they were the future because of the wind.

She stumbled as her toe found the street, but with so many people pressed together she wasn’t in danger of falling. She squeezed her cream-colored purse closer to her chest and took small steps to get past the front of a towering black truck with a grill of immense shining teeth.

She told her feet to move faster in the Oxfords she struggled to tie each morning.

The woman near her left elbow screamed.

A lion roared. She looked toward the sound, worried the truck was coming to crush her. A shoulder bag slammed against her chest. The screaming woman jumped away. A blur of moving colors washed over Mrs. Chong's eyes.

"Too fast," she whispered.

The crowd was gone. She was alone partway across the street with light all around her. The roar became the buzzing of a giant insect caught in a trap. Her head filled with:

Run, you must run.

She shuffled backwards. Within her spinning world a black hand reached out from the truck. She tried with all her might to leap. Up over the curb. Reach safety—but she wasn't sure she was even moving.

The black hand slapped her right shoulder, then the hip the doctors said she should be careful of because older women often broke hips because of weakness in their bones. Oh, how she hoped her hip wasn't broken.

She spun like a whirling Sufi and the orange-gray fog of the morning spun and the insect flew past like the train whistles of her youth when she would stand on a platform and watch enormous train engines fly by, hoping one day to ride one all the way to America.

She hit the pavement. The sound of a tree branch losing a battle with the wind reached her ears. Rough stones pressed hard against her cheek, then...

The driver of a black delivery truck paid careful attention as a motorcycle blasted across the intersection against a red light. Pedestrians scattered, car horns blared, asphalt-tortured tires squealed. The bike swerved behind a Mustang that was braking hard to avoid an SUV arching into its lane. A Toyota sedan ran

up the curb and cracked a plexiglass bus stop that was empty, the departing bus only a few yards down the street.

Voices cursed at the rider's back, now a quarter of a mile away. A crowd formed around an elderly woman in a shabby blue dress and a torn sweater lying in the crosswalk.

She wasn't moving.

Cell phones lifted to ears.

The driver ignored the green light and the horns blaring behind him, dialed the 911 operator on his cell phone, and crawled down from his cab. When the dispatcher answered, he read the street names from a black and white sign.

"No, she isn't moving," he said. "Okay, we'll leave her be. I have the lane blocked. Thanks." He hung up.

The woman was breathing, but her shoulder was bleeding, and she was lying very still. He leaned against his chrome grill and fished a Camel cigarette pack out of his jacket.

Traffic backed up behind his truck for blocks. The cigarette was half gone when a cop weaved a bulbous motorcycle through traffic. He parked to the far side of the prone figure, protecting her from cross traffic. As he dismounted the crowd thinned fast: people figuring the cop had things under control, or maybe reluctant to get involved.

Half-a-minute later two paramedics with a stretcher jumped out of a red vehicle parked half on the sidewalk. The truck driver drew on his cigarette and watched them work: smooth and coordinated, like a good hockey team. Traffic inched to the right of his truck and moved within a couple of yards of the woman's head.

The cop took notes from a woman who said she had been walking beside the victim. But she managed to run across the space between the lanes where the motorcycle had shot through. He then talked to a guy carrying a shoulder bag who had also been near the woman. As he finished with the bag man he noticed the trucker sitting on the front bumper staring at him.

“It’s okay to move that now,” the cop said, gesturing with his writing hand. “We’ve got to get traffic flowing.”

“Sure, officer. In a minute.”

The cop looked up and was about to speak when the trucker said: “I’m a witness. I was right up there.” He pointed to his cab with what remained of the cigarette.

The cop flipped a sheet on his pad.

“Bill Perkins. Perkins Delivery Service. I’ve been waiting for you.”

The officer stopped writing.

“Waiting? Why would you wait? We appreciate it, but there are dozens of witnesses.”

“Did they all tell you what happened?” Bill asked.

The cop nodded. “A motorcycle split lanes, which is legal in California. He was going fast, ran the red light.” He flipped his pad closed before adding, “Which isn’t legal in any state in the Union.”

Bill took a long drag, pressed the butt out on the front bumper, and slipped it into the front pocket of his overalls.

“I was elevated,” Bill pointed with his thumb. “Unique perspective.”

The cop pursed his lips, nodded, said nothing.

“Bird’s-eye view if you know what I mean.”

“You have a point Mr. Perkins, but your truck is blocking morning rush-hour traffic. Where is this going?”

Perkins tapped another cigarette out of a squished soft pack. He lit it while the cop tapped the handle of his holstered pistol with this thumb.

“Officer,” he leaned forward to read the badge, “Marsail...did I say that right?”

The cop nodded, softening a little.

“Officer, the guy riding the motorbike hit her on purpose.”

Officer Marsail stood straighter and frowned.

“I saw him coming in the rearview. He waited. Waited for

her, the woman in blue. And timed it almost right. But as his bike entered the crosswalk she was moving slower than he had planned, so she was still in front of my left front fender.”

Perkins inhaled through his Camel. Marsail reopened his notebook.

“The guy had clear road. The noise of that bike had parted the crowd like he was Moses. But he didn’t go straight through. He swerved. A nice accurate swerve with his body to the inside like a racer boy. Had his butt hanging off the machine when he hit her with his shoulder and knee. Easier for him to maintain control than if his handlebar had clipped her. That might have sent him flying.”

The cop met Perkins’ eyes.

“You’re sure?”

“Officer Marsail, I’m sure enough that I missed my seven o’clock delivery this morning to wait for you. And I left my truck right where it was so you can see the view I had.”

The cop pointed up.

Bill nodded.

The officer climbed up and sat behind the wheel of the Mercedes box truck. Bill stepped up on the running board.

“He took her out on purpose, Officer. I hope you can find out why.”

The officer slid down from the cab, walked to his motorcycle, and picked up the radio handset.

CHAPTER 1

I OWN ROBERTS PHOTOGRAPHY, which is really just me and a Chevy Suburban with framed pictures, cameras, and a kiteboard in the back. Shooting was what I was doing that first time—back in July at the Ann Arbor Art Fair in Michigan. I was crouched behind a low hedge of nannyberry, the moon two days shy of full. I always check the moon phase for night shooting—there are few things better than the ghost-flavor of moonlight to make a good picture mysteriously great. She had stepped from the shadows between the 38-foot-tall stone columns of Hill Auditorium where the highbrow concerts were held. I remember her skin most of all—golden silver as her cigarette lighter illuminated the smooth curves of cheeks. Asian. I guessed Chinese, but I don't have much experience with beautiful women from the Far East.

She had smoked half of her cigarette, drawn from a black-and-white box I didn't recognize, when blinking lights beckoned concertgoers to return to their seats. In the few minutes between the lighter and the blinking I filled a memory chip with RAW digital images. Normally, I would review my work. Instead, I ran across the street with my Canon banging against my hip to buy a seat in the thirteenth row. My luck was good; she was sitting in row eight. The orchestra consisted of thirty-three women from Asia according to the program I hid behind while examining the smoker girl. They were about to play Mozart.

Of the 342 pictures on that memory chip I committed six to the archival ink of my Epson professional printer on 46-by-30-inch canvas using a giclée process that helps a photo look like a

painting. One of those six prints hung six feet in front of me at an art show in the chain of shows I've done for three summers in a row trying to scratch out a living as a creative photographer.

This weeks' show had my display tent pitched in the warming mountain air at Kings Beach beside the incomparable blue of Lake Tahoe, California. To pass the time I was reading a novel about a portrait painter from Shanghai who had been sold into prostitution. Her incredible resilience was inspiring me to continue my modest effort to become an artist whose work spoke to people. The shuffle of shoe leather against pavement drew my attention. I closed my book and prepared to play *meet the artist*. With luck I might sell a print—or at least get an email address, and strive to sell something, someday, via my newsletter.

My eyes stopped mid-rise.

A slender woman in boots was staring at the print entitled *Smoking Girl #6*, my favorite from the series. The girl in the photo stood in partial profile, beginning to lower a lighter, its flame almost extinguished—just enough remaining to form an auric glow around the slender fingers of her closed left hand. Her hair was shorter on the right side of her head, parted above the right eye and swooped to the left—seemingly making it impossible for her to see from her left eye. Her slim body appeared miniaturized by the massive column of stone beside her. Yet the composure of her face made them both appear strong—maybe she even more than it.

This girl was standing the same way now.

This girl had identical hair.

It seemed improbable in the extreme. I was two thousands miles from Michigan. Yet here she was, standing inside my tent.

The professional in me wanted to grab the camera beneath the seat of my stool and capture the magic of the subject examining the subject. I would title it *Smoking Girl #7*. I made a living taking photographs on a planet where anyone could hold up a box of electronics and (“say cheesy”) get a picture. My real

job was to find ways of seeing the world that people would never discover on the screen of a cell phone.

For this, I needed rarity. I roamed the world hunting for it—like at the top of those stairs that night at Hill Auditorium.

This was such a moment.

Yet I couldn't move. Short breaths dried my mouth. Blood pulsing in both ears joined the slow rhythm of waves washing the beach behind me. She stood quietly, like that stone column, color swirling behind her from art show attendees strolling by.

I tried to say hello, but my lips wouldn't part. Seconds passed. A muscle in my left biceps twitched. I grabbed the camera below me, found the on switch, and fired three quiet clicks before realizing what I was doing.

She didn't turn.

But she did say, "Did you take this picture?"

The thought of lawyers stampeding in my direction un-hypnotized me. Naturally, shooting in a public place, I hadn't asked her to sign a model release. And here I was, selling her image. At best I was in a gray area of the law. At worst, I owed her money I had already spent.

But lying wouldn't help.

"Yes. A few weeks ago. During an art fair in Ann Arbor."

She turned toward me. My legs went slack—beautiful was too small a word to capture her up close in the flesh 3D presence. I was glad I hadn't stood up.

"You were in Michigan?"

I nodded, not sure my speech would hold up to the intensity of her dark right eye; her hair still completely covered the left. Hair that was touched with silver sparkles, and streaked with a strand of purple.

I wanted to lift my camera again.

"She looks a lot like me," she said, turning her eye back to *Smoking Girl #6*.

I cleared my throat and managed, "Do you think so?" I

would have sworn on a couple of Gideons she was smoking girl, but my response was automatic when anyone said a picture looked like someone they knew. It had slipped out before I realized how stupid I sounded.

The girl stared at the picture while I stared at the girl, all five feet, maybe three or four inches of her. Midsummer, yet she wore high-heeled black boots that hugged her calves to just below her knees. Then nothing but golden silky thigh to the lower edge of purple shorts. Short purple shorts that matched the streak in her hair. My eyes were lifting to study the fog-gray silk clinging to her chest when her head spun towards me.

“I was in Ann Arbor once.”

It didn't sound like an accusation—more a proclamation of worldliness. I found part of my brain and said:

“Did you like it?”

Her red lips, maybe with a hint of purple, parted to show gleaming white teeth that had needed an orthodontist when she was in middle school. No matter, even slightly crooked her smile had the intensity of the Luxor beam in Vegas. She said:

“I went to my first ever concert in America to learn about new music.” Her eye grew distant. “Computers and wires and hands waving in the air with dozens of speakers all around me.” Then she whispered. “The energy was so intense. I didn't know humans could make such sounds.”

I tilted my head toward #6. “Is that the building where you attended the concert?”

She shook her head. “No, that was the GO Orchestra. I didn't play that night, it was my turn to listen.” She grinned. “I snuck outside to smoke. My father doesn't allow me to smoke.”

Confusion seeped into my head alongside the taser-stun effect of her presence. I threw myself back in time trying hard to remember other concerts during the art festival. Blank. There had been dozens; I only remembered one.

“I heard your orchestra. They're fantastic.”

“We work very hard.”

“It shows. Really.” I was being overly enthusiastic. Obvious. A klutz. I tried to calm down. “I only saw the second half, it was...” I needed a non-obvious word, but I was a photographer not a writer, “great.”

Her eye bored a hole in my forehead for an instant. She turned back to #6.

“You took this during intermission, didn’t you? Then you wanted to see more of me, so you bought a ticket for the second half.”

I tried to read in her voice if this was good thing. But her tone was flat, like she was reading from a teleprompter.

I cleared my throat.

She turned to face me. All of her this time, including the toes of her black boots.

“That’s okay. I’m told men like me.”

My knees did their Jell-O imitation. I made an effort to sit taller on my stool.

“I was, um...curious about the concert. And hoped to show you the pictures.”

Her smile came back and a giggle joined it. She leaned forward toward my display case where I kept anything smaller than 11 x 14. The summer air carried the scent of lilacs to my nostrils.

“You,” she read from my business card, “Mr. Roberts, professional photographer with the big...lens, are a terrible liar.”

She had caught me, and my brain was still running slower than...my grandfather came to mind saying *Molasses in January*, something I had never even seen. While I sat mute, trying to balance a better lie and the truth, she picked a card from the stack and stared at it the way she had been staring at #6.

“You’re right,” I managed. “I wanted to see you up close.”

Her eye danced between the card and my face, and settled on the card.

I said, "Do you live in Tahoe?"

She shook her head slowly, eyes still on the card. "I had to work last night." She looked up. "Do you know this place CalNeva? It sits on the state line. A wide stripe runs right across the floor, dividing the two sides into different worlds: one dusty and boring, the other filled with light and sound and energy."

I had read about that casino in the local paper while trying to find my name in the listing of artists for the show. Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack had performed there decades ago.

"Never been there."

She shrugged. "I saw a poster for this art show. I love art and music." She took a deep breath. "And the amazing sunshine in the mountains. I'm waiting here for my s—" She looked back down at the card, said, "Um, my ride." Then she glanced over her shoulder at *Smoking Girl*.

I guessed her thoughts. "Would you like to have that picture?"

She stepped back as if I had shoved her. "Oh no." She shook her head so emphatically I got a glimpse of her left eye, then added softly, "I don't have a place to hang it."

Now *she* was lying. There was a reason she was refusing the picture; a reason that frightened her. Thankfully, I was finally together and only said:

"If you ever want one, just contact me." I nodded toward the card she was holding with both hands. "I'll be happy to deliver it to you. Or perhaps to your family. Maybe they have a place to hang it."

She took another step backward, shaking her head again.

Couldn't I do anything right? I figured her family would love my picture of their lovely daughter.

"If you ever change your mind, call me, okay?"

She stopped moving backward and turned to face #6 again. She said:

"Are there more?"

“There are five others. That’s the last one of the series.” I chose not to mention the dozens of reprints I had sold thus far, my most successful series yet.

“Your picture is...beguiling,” she said in a breathless whisper most people saved for places like the Grand Canyon.

“Thank you. So is the subject.” I should have stayed shut up, but it was true.

“May I see the others?”

“They’re in my truck; booths don’t hold much. I put one of the series out at each show. Would you like to go with me to get them?” I spoke before realizing that might sound like a proposition.

Her face turned slowly toward me and the brow over that one eye lifted slightly.

“Who will watch your booth while you’re gone?”

My mind flashed to her lips pressed against mine on the floor of my Chevy while the most valuable items I owned were carted away in broad daylight—better than a fair trade.

“Good point.” I waved my camera hand toward the other tents. “We usually watch out for each other, but today is Monday. Still lots of tourist traffic from the weekend. People stop by early, then head home at lunchtime.”

Her eye dropped to my hand, perhaps because it was holding the camera. You shoot enough pictures, your hand just feels normal with a camera in it.

“You want to take my picture?”

Now what was I going to say? All of my work was clandestine. As soon as someone knew their picture was being taken, the mystery drained from their bodies and the results were empty shadows of life. I desperately wanted to take her picture, her phone number, her virginity in the unlikely event she still had it. But a posed portrait?

“Well, usually I—”

“Take sneaky pictures of people who don’t know you are

there,” she said, not asking a question.

“It’s not like I sneak. It’s just—”

“You hide where we cannot see you.” She smiled. “It’s okay. If you don’t want to...”

“No. I mean, yes. I’d love to take your picture. Just turn back toward the *Smoking Girl* picture.”

I lifted my camera. A woman wearing a pink top, pushing a dark blue stroller, and towing a kid in a yellow dress passed the booth; putting far too much color in the background. I shot anyway. I wanted to record every inch of smoking girl’s turn, and the stillness she had shown when studying the picture, which is exactly what she did—as if she knew what I wanted and was making an effort to give it to me.

When I had burned through enough megabytes, I said: “Turn this way and let’s see that smile when you told me how good a liar I am.”

I shot her smile, and instantly wished I owned a house to hang it in. Then managed twenty more shots, and decided I would put one on the lock screen of my smartphone until I had that house.

“I’ll go look for the other pictures if you mind the store. Deal?”

She glanced at her wristwatch, a slender silver thing nearly too small to read. She looked up, her face passive.

My heart sank at the thought she was about to run away.

“Deal,” she said.

I’m not the most organized of people, but I found *Smoking Girl #2* and *#5* in less than five minutes in a breathless search. The others were in the truck somewhere. Except for *#1*. I sold that in Ann Arbor to a young cop who claimed to like the way her body had been backlit when the door to the auditorium was opened by a woman wearing a sapphire-blue gown. I’d bet he just liked her shape in silhouette. Since then I’d been on art-show highway—too busy to set up my printer.

I stepped under the Roberts Photography sign just as smoking girl was selling a small version of *Girl #6* with no frame. The customer, a slender woman in her forties in tight red slacks waving a brown 100mm cigarette with her left hand, was jabbering about how thrilled she was to buy a picture from the very model who had posed for it. And it depicted what she called the “lost art” of smoking a cigarette so that men would notice, the orally fixated bastards that they were.

Considering that she might put me in that group of bastards, I hung back from the conversation, not wanting to jeopardize a sale. People often lost their enthusiasm when they found out the “great photographer” was a somewhat disheveled surfer dude only a few years out of art school. I combed my raggedy blond hair with my free hand. As the woman turned to leave I stared at a picture of a Utah rock like it was a living specimen.

“You made a sale?”

“That was my third.” She shrugged. “The cash is under this napkin.”

“Amazing. Would you like a sales job?” I smiled.

“I have a job.”

Right. Musician. What had she called it, the GO Orchestra?

“You can play in the booth—anything you want.”

She looked up fast, startled.

“Your fiddle...uh...you never told me which instrument you play.” I knew there were other instruments in an orchestra besides the violin, but couldn’t name them.

“You didn’t ask.”

I hesitated. Should I ask now?

She smiled. “Viola. See?” She pointed to a spot on her neck that looked like a love bite from a sailor who had been on a slow boat. She must have read my eyes.

“It comes from holding the *fiddle* with my chin.” She tilted her head to demonstrate with an air instrument. “The viola is larger than the violin, with a sweeter tone, but is held the same

way.”

“I never knew there were hazards in fiddle playing.”

“Many.” She stepped from behind my makeshift sales stand. “You found more pictures of me?” She brought both hands together under her chin like a kid awaiting ice cream.

“Two. But there are others. I didn’t want to keep you waiting.”

“It was fun. People recognize me right away. They wanted to know how I take pictures of myself.”

Of course they would assume she was the Roberts of Roberts Photography. An obvious mistake; still, I felt like an intruder in my own booth.

“What did you tell them?”

She lowered her eyes and grinned with closed lips. She took a step toward me and whispered, “These modern cameras are wonderful,” into my right ear.

Neither confirm nor deny. Smart girl. No wonder she was making sales.

“Very clever,” I said, smiling. I was smiling a lot since she walked into my booth.

I took down #6 and put up #3 with her staring over my shoulder. The nearness of her body caused me to almost drop the picture. Twice. When I stepped back, she was locked in her staring stance again.

In #3 she again stood beside the column, but I had cranked the zoom to a longer focal length—so large that blown up on the print, her face was triple life size. It was just barely possible in this photo to verify that she did indeed have a dark and glistening left eye behind that swoosh of hair.

But that wasn’t what most people noticed.

They noticed she was looking up—chin lifted, eyes upturned so far the whites showed below the irises. She had been gazing at the moon, whose light created the whitewash softness on her cheeks. But there was no way for the observer to know about the

moon. Only her upturned face covering the entire canvas, lips pulling on a cigarette, its embers glowing crimson from the effort was visible.

“Do you have trouble?” she asked.

I had loads of trouble, most of it related to scratching out a living with a camera as I wandered in my search. And most recently keeping my knees solidified in her presence. Even in my lust-induced stupor I doubted that’s what she meant.

“What kind of trouble?”

She waved her hand at #3 with two fingers extended like she was holding a cigarette, though she wasn’t.

“Selling these.”

Ah. “I sell a few.”

She shook her head vigorously.

“I mean the smoking. Americans do not like. I try to stop. My father hates for me to smoke unless...” her voice drifted off. “But sometimes I am tense.”

She had a point. More than once a woman, almost always a woman, often dragging a kid by the hand, would stop to chastise me for my photographs and blab about how I was promoting a disgusting habit, ruining the young, etc. If I was in a good mood I would respond that artistic license gave me free rein to have a perspective that showing smoking promoted beauty and eroticism—not smoking. And if I wanted to start a discussion I’d add: maybe the world needed more of both. Then the little one would usually interrupt to ask, “Mommy, what’s rot-siz-him?”

If I wasn’t in a good mood—say at a craft show I should have skipped on artistic grounds where people let me know they were insulted by my prices for a mere *photograph*—I would suggest she buy the picture to take it off the market before it could harm impressionable young minds. Once I offered a loud, obese woman wearing ballet slippers and leading a child on a red leash to help burn the picture after she paid for it. In cash. She was not amused.

The smoking girl was staring at me.

“Sometimes people complain.” I shrugged, then smiled. “I just take the pictures. Can I help it if you smoke?”

“Sell better without smoke, you think?”

I repeated my shrug.

She stepped up to *Smoking Girl #3* and held her hand up to make the cigarette disappear. She observed for a moment, tilting her head left, then right. She said:

“Better with smoke.”

She was right. I could have timed that shot differently, but something about the geometry of the straight cigarette and the curve of her cheekbone had made me wait.

“Right you are.” I chewed my lower lip, decided to take a chance. “Are you performing in the area?”

Her head jerked to face me.

“The viola,” I said, pointing to my neck. “Are you playing anywhere I can come see you?”

“To take pictures?”

Maybe that would have been a better move, most women like to have their picture taken. But I was trying to get personal.

“If you like. If you don’t, I won’t. Either way I would enjoy hearing you play,” which was true. It wasn’t all I would enjoy, but it was a start.

“Not here,” she swooped a long curve with her right hand in a sort of Tai Chi move. “We travel.”

“I travel too,” I said with a grin, hoping to swoop along her path in my old truck.

She shook her head. Too emphatically for the current state of my ego. I said:

“Are you staying here in Tahoe?”

Her eyes widened. “No.”

That no clearly meant no.

“Not staying,” she added. “I am here to visit Pé.” She paused. “If possible.”

I breathed a little sigh, hope rising slowly upward from my toes.

“This art show is over in a few days, then I’m on to Reno for the Hot August Nights street fair.”

Something like surprise slipped out before she got her left hand up to cover her mouth.

“You come to Reno?” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

“For over a week.” I searched for a way to grab this moment. “Will you be there?” It hit me. “I’ll dig out the other pictures of *Smoking Girl* to show you.”

Her hand didn’t move, but the corner of her eye was smiling even as she shook her head no.

Time to persist. “How can I reach you in Reno? Phone? E-mail?” I paused. What a fool. “I’m sorry, I just realized I’ve never introduced myself.” I held out my hand. “Hello, by name is Joe Roberts. I’m a photographer.”

Without lowering her left hand from where it covered her charming, slightly-tilted teeth, she lifted her right arm, took my hand and did a little curtsy.

“Pleased to meet you,” she said through her hand.

No name. I half-smiled with my right cheek. My rational forebrain was insisting that she hadn’t given her name because she had no interest in Mr. Roberts, and I was trying to ignore it.

“Shall I just call you *Smoking Girl*?”

Her hand came down. She bowed as she said:

“I am Mylin. I choose name after famous architect who designed your war memorial. I dream of the magical art she creates. She is so free. And powerful.” She hesitated. “My father does not approve, but he allows this little rebellion so long as I do my work.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mylin,” I said, with a butterfly whacking its wings against my chest. I figured she meant Maya Lin, the famous architect from Yale. I experienced her incredible Vietnam Veterans Memorial during a DC art show, designed

while she was still a student.

“Does anyone work here?” a deep voice said from behind her.

I glanced over her shoulder. A husky guy made of about 250 pounds of muscle was holding the #3 I had just hung on the booth’s wall. His salt-and-pepper growth hadn’t been shaved for a few days. Before I was able to put my mouth in motion, Mylin said, “I’ll be right with you, sir.” To me she said, “Please write your address here. I’ll be sure your picture is sent today.”

She moved with a sideways hopping motion over to the husky guy.

“How may I help you?”

For the first time since I had met her she reached up and brushed the multi-colored strands of hair back from her left eye. Something dark flashed beneath it near her temple. The hair fell back into place before I figured out what it was.

The guy glanced down at the print of #3 he was holding in two huge paws hardened from physical labor. He looked up at Mylin, back to the print, up to Mylin.

“Is that you?”

She used her dim-the-sun smile and said:

“Oh yes. That was taken by moonlight in Michigan. I was staring at Orion wondering about our small space in the giant universe, and enjoying the little lift tobacco gives the soul.”

“I’ll be damned,” he said. “A hot chick who understands why I smoke. How much is it?”

“Well, that depends,” she said.

The man’s jaw hardened.

“We want to be sure that our art goes to the man who appreciates it. You know there are wealthy people here at Lake Tahoe who buy only to match their carpet. They don’t feel the heart of the picture. Like those rich boys in Hollywood who buy a chopper, but can’t change oil.”

Biker was a good guess. And by the look on his face,

correct. But how did she know this stuff?

“I know the type,” he said. “I do my own custom work. Every bit of chrome I put on myself.”

She nodded, still smiling. “Would you like to make an offer for my picture?”

My ego felt a speed bump rumble under its spinning wheels. Her picture?

“Well, I guess I—”

“Shhh,” she said with a finger to her lips. “Don’t say it aloud, bring bad luck.” She reached down her blouse and came up with the small pad of paper I usually have on the counter. Somehow a miniature ballpoint appeared.

“Write down what you think would be fair. I will check with accountant.”

The guy carefully lowered the print like it was a small child, putting the frame on the toe of his boot so it wouldn’t be scratched by the asphalt.

“Will you sign it?” he asked.

She nodded. “On the back. Write that down too, just the way you want it.”

His hand dwarfed hers as he gently took the pad.

“Take your time. I’ll be right here.” She walked backwards and stopped next to me.

“How much?” she whispered from the side of painted lips.

A little arrow speared my wallet; she might have made those three sales in five minutes by low-balling the price. I should have counted the money under the napkin.

“I’m flexible.”

The guy waved her over and slipped the paper into her palm like they were doing a cocaine drop. She held up a finger for him to wait. Back in our corner she unfolded it. Out front the guy held the pictures in two hands and shifted weight from one foot to another—like he was waiting for a date who was late, worried she might not show.

I glanced at the paper. His price was fifty bucks over the asking I would have put on it—she was doing a bang up sales job. I shook my head; the guy frowned. I held out my hand for the magic appearing pen, crossed off the number, subtracted a hundred, and wrote a new one. Her eyes studied me with disapproval. She half-brushed her hair again. I read the inscription he wanted.

I gaze upon you longing to feel the vibrations of your life fill me.

I swallowed hard. This guy did custom chrome work?

I whispered to Mylin, “You okay with that?”

She shrugged with her right shoulder, took the slip of paper, and held it up for him to read, since both of his hands were holding the painting.

His unshaven face didn’t look happy. “Why?”

“Because we have sale price for the right buyer. I want you have this picture...with your poetic description.”

He swallowed hard. I’d bet his mouth was as dry as mine.

“Deal,” he said, and shook her hand while carefully balancing the painting.

After she signed it, and we carefully wrapped the picture for travel, the biker gave her a big hug, and strutted away smiling. She tugged at my sleeve.

“Why did you do that?”

“Do what?” I hesitated. “You did all the work. I just watched.”

She shook her head. “His offer. You didn’t take it.” Her visible eye carefully studied my face.

“He offered more than I normally ask.”

“So?”

We gazed at each other. I tried really hard to keep my mind on our conversation. Finally I said, “I wanted to be fair.”

She stared at me, not moving. “What is this *fair*?”

Since I didn’t respond she continued.

“You could have gotten more,” she said, like I had missed the winning touchdown in the homecoming game.

“Sure. But now he feels great about his purchase, and I feel great having sold it to him.”

Her right eye scanned my face. She brushed her hair again.

“And this feeling great? Is more important than money?”

Since I work alone, I hadn’t ever needed to explain this to anyone. But I tried.

“This feeling is why I do art. Art to make people happy. Art to make me happy.”

Her eye didn’t move.

For lack of a better idea, I stared back. Finally, her lips curved upward. She said:

“Me too.”

She got me. Maybe this was the moment.

“Would you have dinner with me after the show? It closes at seven.”

Her smile faded; her lips stiffened; she stepped away.

“I’m sorry, Joe. I can’t do that.”

My mouth formed *Why?* but my brain got there in time to strangle it. “Another time then.” My heart was sinking, but I remembered something she said. “Maybe in Reno. I’ll be there all week.”

Her head wagged. “Not a good idea.” She froze. “You don’t know me.”

That was a twist. Girls usually said: *I don’t know you.*

“At least let me buy you a drink.” I was grasping. “For helping with the booth. And these pictures are of you. It’s the least I can do.”

Hesitation clouded her gaze. It struck me she might be married; of course she couldn’t take a picture home. Or maybe she didn’t even like men.

Very softly she said, “I have to work.”

“I’d really love to hear you play.” That was true. Her lithe

body and slender fingers coaxing sound from an instrument would make me like any kind of music.

Her head shook.

My hands felt cold, my feet stiff, like standing in wet sand.

Without warning her head stopped moving and the visible half of her brow furled. "I must go," she said as she spun in a single motion like a ballet dancer exiting the stage.

She was out of earshot before I recovered enough to say, "Wait."

She didn't look back.

The growing crowd enveloped her.

I took three steps in her direction and stopped. She wasn't just playing hard to get; she didn't want me to follow her. I returned to the tent and slumped on my stool. Potential customers strolled past. What had I learned? Her name. Her instrument. And she was employed by the GO Orchestra. She was working less than an hour drive away, but I didn't know when, or where.

The blank space where *Girl #3* had been hanging gaped at me. Without enthusiasm I dragged myself over and hung #6 back where it had started. I stared at the girl by the pillar and felt California's summer sun heat up my black cargo shorts. Then a smile found its way onto my face. An hour ago I had nothing. Now I had a name (maybe false), a musical instrument (probably real), and an encounter with a beautiful woman I had thought I would never see again in my life.

The day was going quite well, and the sun was barely up.

CHAPTER 2

QIGIQ WAS NAKED WHEN THE PHONE on the teak nightstand emitted the rumble of an Italian V-twin. He took two steps, grabbed the wireless handset and pressed it to his ear as he continued to the bamboo dresser that stored half of the clothes he owned. Only his partner would call before breakfast.

“Hello, Kandy.”

“Someday it’s not going to be me, Qi.”

“Who else would call a hardworking stiff like me before coffee on a Monday?”

No hesitation. “Anyone who knew of a possible homicide on Richardson because her buddy Marsail was on that beat this morning. Vic is on the way to the hospital. Perp’s a motorcycle hit and run—right up your two-wheeled alley. A witness claims premeditated action. Let’s go get a head start.”

Qiqiq pondered the idea that he was having a dream of rising early and receiving a baffling phone call from Kandy. Or maybe...

“You’re making this up, right? I’ve done something to annoy you and this is payback.”

“You should be so lucky. ETA in three minutes. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Just looking for underwear to match my boots. I’ll roll in five.”

“Fifteen thirty-four Richardson. Take Charlotte, turn north. One way.”

He hung up and grabbed synthetic shorts, well suited to sitting on the narrow seat of the rented Aprilia 850. Its automatic

transmission had let him keep riding while his ankle healed from a conversation with a Mercedes. Two minutes and fifty seconds later he thumbed the starter, missing the low rumble of his Moto Guzzi.

Twelve minutes of focused riding ended at Charlotte and a row of creeping commuters. He unzipped the leather bag strapped to the gas tank, pulled out a round block the size of a hockey puck, flicked a switch with his thumb, and powerful blue and red LEDs began strobing. He stuck the box to the top of his white helmet and eased the bike to the left between two lanes of cars. He motored four blocks before seeing the black Mini at the curb. No Kandy. He continued crawling past stopped cars for three more blocks and found her talking with a motor cop on the corner of Richardson.

“Nice hat, Ronald MacDonald would be impressed,” Kandy said as he pulled to a stop along the curb. He removed the lights and switched the bike off.

“Tom Marsail, my partner Qigiq from Alaska,” Kandy said. “Would you mind telling a short version again?”

Marsail moved his gaze away from the black shirt adorning Kandy’s nearly six feet of gazelle-muscle. She preferred athletic clothes that didn’t hinder movement in an altercation. Since she didn’t know when there might be one, she wore them all the time, violating a number of department regulations that Captain Jasik let slide because she was good at her job and babysat the sabbatical guy from Alaska without complaining about it.

“Got the call at 7:39 this morning. Elderly lady down, unconscious. She’s in transit to the UCSF Medical Center.” He glanced at his watch. “Maybe there by now. She was crossing Charlotte,” he pointed, “with at least a dozen other people. Charlotte light was red, her walk light was go. A motorcyclist split lanes between cars, fast enough to knock her down on impact. Rider crossed the intersection against the red, swerved through traffic, and rode away.”

“Drugged-up kid using the city as a video game?” Qigiq asked.

Kandy shook her head. “Even the lowest of the low don’t party on Monday morning. And—” she nodded at Marsail.

“And,” Marsail continued, “we have a witness over there driving a box truck. Says he was the first vehicle in line, saw the guy coming in his rearview. Claims the rider *aimed* for the old lady.”

Qigiq frowned. “Do we know the ethnicity of the victim or the perp?”

“Woman was Asian.” He shrugged. “Probably Chinese given we’re in Chinatown. No info on the perp. Full-coverage racing helmet. Dark shield.”

Qigiq looked at the lanes the bike had split. “Dark shield at seven-thirty on a foggy morning? Not safety first.”

Marsail’s eyes moved between Kandy and Qigiq.

“Weird,” Kandy added.

Marsail said, “Black. A witness said the bike was a late model black Triumph. But he also said there were no markings so I don’t know how—”

Qigiq held up a hand. “Did the witness say something like, ‘Vertical twin, black engine, one tail pipe on each side?’”

Marsail nodded and tapped his notebook with a pen. “And—”

Qigiq added, “It *sounded* like a Triumph.”

Marsail smiled. “Exactly.”

Kandy scanned up and down the street, tracing the path of the motorcycle with her eyes. “What do we know about that witness?”

Marsail flipped a page of his notebook. “Mechanic at a place called Munroe Motors, here in San Francisco.”

Qigiq pushed both hands into his pants pockets. “Triumph for sure. A mechanic who works on European bikes wouldn’t be mistaken about an exhaust note.”

A boy of about eleven wearing a green windbreaker appeared next to Qigiq. He held a silver camera in his raised hand, but didn't speak.

Qigiq dropped to one knee. "Would you like me to take your picture?"

The boy's head moved slowly from side to side.

Qigiq pointed. "Would you like to sit on officer Tom's motorbike?"

Marsail's face showed surprise, but he didn't comment.

The boy smiled, and continued moving his head.

"Do you want to show us something?" Kandy asked.

The boy nodded.

"Anthony!"

A woman raced toward them with powerful strides, her low brown heels stomping the sidewalk. She continued loudly:

"I told you to leave the police alone, they have important work to do."

She grabbed his free hand and pulled him along Charlotte in the direction of the traffic jam, her shoulders rocking with each step.

Kandy and Qigiq's eyes met. She said: "Our conversation won't end well."

Qigiq trotted after the woman.

"Excuse me, Ma'am. I'm detective Qigiq. May I talk with you?"

She stopped and spun on her heel. "I'm in a hurry. Are you arresting us?"

He drew up with her body between him and her son—a mama bear protecting her cub.

"No, Ma'am. An elderly woman was seriously injured on this corner a few minutes ago. If you or your fine son could help us understand what happened, it would greatly assist us in our work."

She said: "What happened?" Then shrieked: "What

happened!?”

Qigiq resisted the temptation to cover his ears. He frowned to appear serious.

“I’ll tell you what happened. I was over there in that dry cleaners.” Her free hand pointed diagonally across the intersection. “Waiting waiting waiting. They didn’t want to open until 7:30, but I pounded on the glass. These Orientals are so lazy. There I was, the customer, ready to pick up my dress and they wouldn’t let me in. When they finally opened there was a wrinkle in it, so they can just do it over before I pay.”

“Yes Ma’am, I understand.” Qigiq said, giving no indication of what he was beginning to understand.

“As I was leaving that...that...*madman* on a devil machine roared into a bunch of pedestrians crossing the street. I don’t know why we allow them in this country; they’re dangerous. Only hoodlums ride them. And they pollute more than a car. Can you imagine that? Only one person, and it pollutes more than a car!”

“Not all—”

“And he *raced* through that crowd of nice folks trying to get to work to make a decent living, which is getting harder and harder to do with so many illegal aliens sneaking in and taking our jobs.”

Kandy had been prescient.

“That rider—” She stopped. The little boy was tugging at her printed skirt.

“Leave me alone, Anthony. Can’t you see I’m talking to this nice policeman?”

She turned back to Qigiq.

“That rider never even slowed down. He drove that evil thing into those people like they weren’t even there, and knocked that poor lady—” Another tug.

“Anthony! When we get home!”

“What does he want?” Qigiq asked gently.

“He wants to show you pictures, but he’s too shy to ask. All the time he’s taking pictures and pictures and more pictures and wants to show them to people. Let me tell you, it can try the patience of the Almighty.”

Qiqiq dropped to one knee and spoke directly to the boy.

“May I see what you have?”

Without looking to his mother for approval he rushed to Qiqiq and held the camera up with both hands. The screen showed the intersection; the boy had also been inside the corner dry cleaners. The box truck faced him. A crowd stood on the corner to the left. It verified the positions described by the witnesses, but wasn’t otherwise helpful.

Qiqiq started to rise, but the crowd began crossing the street. He leaned closer.

A tiny movie showed a motorcycle moving toward the camera.

It toppled a woman in a blue dress. Zigzagged through the intersection.

A car careened onto the sidewalk.

The motorcycle disappeared.

The woman in the blue dress didn’t move.

Definitely a Triumph.

Qiqiq leaned forward and placed both elbows onto a light blue desktop blotter that would never see ink because he used a pencil and a laptop. He said:

“Tell me again why Captain Jasik gave us this corner office?”

Kandy smiled across the double-wide desks they had positioned back-to-back in the middle of the room so they could converse without turning around.

“You already know why. We pulled him out of the media fire on that serial explosion thing.”

“But that’s our job.”

Kandy leaned back and dropped the heel of a leather boot on top of her desk. “He just wanted a reason to be nice to you.”

“The visiting gumshoe whose Alaskan name no one can pronounce? That usually means the basement.”

“Unless...” She lifted an eyebrow.

“You mean we get this palatial office on the third floor with an actual view because the captain wants me to stay?”

“Feel the love, Detective Key-jeek,” she said, tapping her laptop with one hand. “But...”

He waited. Kandy usually had a punch line.

“Now we have another case.”

“And the captain has a short memory,” Qigiq said.

“It’s not that. It’s just...”

“You’re only as good as your last case,” they said in unison.

When they stopped laughing, Qigiq tapped the arrow key on his laptop. The movie on the screen jumped forward one frame. His formal computer training had been a couple of classes in college, so he was unsure how much to trust a recording from a kid’s pocket camera. That was why he had applied for a sabbatical in San Francisco, the land of geeks, where he learned something new every day.

“How do you read Anthony’s movie?”

She blew a stream of air at their big window that provided a view of fifty feet at the top of the Golden Gate’s south tower. It was barely identifiable, but just knowing it was the famous bridge reminded him of the special place he was living—and the special crimes it harbored.

“Given that I’ve only watched it,” she glanced at the corner of her screen, “forty-eight times so far this morning. I don’t yet have a final analysis.”

“First impression?”

“The guy might swerve for a million reasons, especially if he were drunk or high. So many bodies and colors moving in his visual field, being trapped beside the box truck. Had nowhere to

go. He could have panicked.”

“He could have stopped,” Qigiq offered.

“Sure, stopping is the primary maneuver to avoid an imminent crash. But it’s not the only one.”

“You sound like a courtroom lawyer,” Qigiq said, letting the movie play in slow motion. “He never reached for the brake.”

“True.” She stepped her movie ahead. “He definitely committed to swerving instead of stopping.”

“See his right wrist drop in frame five forty-one?”

She leaned close to her screen and bumped the movie ahead. “Yeah.”

“He accelerated.”

She shrugged. “So? He saw an opening in the crowd and wicked it up to blast through the daylight before it closed off, like a running back trying to score.”

Qigiq lifted his eyes and smiled. “Wicked?”

“Racer talk.”

“Good thought. Maybe he has track experience. Does it look like intent to you?”

“Maybe.” She dropped her feet and stood; took five long paces to the window; stared down at the street. “Maybe just a kid splitting lanes too fast. With that tall truck in his way he didn’t see the red light until it was too late to stop. Or...” she turned to face him. “He saw the light go yellow and was trying to make it through. He just arrived late and overconfident.”

Qigiq stopped his movie. “And as he reached the crosswalk, he was surprised by the crowd because he had been fixated on the light.”

Kandy leaned against the glass. “That might explain what could be construed as a survival reaction when he swerved.”

Qigiq remained still.

“You don’t believe it?” she asked.

He leaned back, rubbed his chin and sighed. “Not sure. Did you see how he rode through the intersection?”

“Fast,” she said.

“Expert rider. Not everyone can make a bike weave through moving cross traffic at forty miles per hour.”

“Ferd’ll calculate the speed for us. I’ll get the movie up to him.”

Qigiq slid his lips across each other, thinking.

Kandy said, “You think expert rider means something?”

He shrugged without looking up.

She said, “Lots of riders in the city. They survive on the ability to react to rapidly changing conditions.”

“I’ve seen them ride.”

“Meaning?” She lowered her rear end to the fresh pale green paint on the windowsill.

“Most...what’s that term you use to describe the way Americans drive?”

“Suck,” she said. “More interested in cell phone chit-chat and text messages than the tons of lethal metal in their hands.”

“Exactly.”

“So what about this guy?”

Qigiq met her eyes. “Seeing how he moved his body, I think he’s spent time on a track. Maybe a young racer, maybe just an enthusiast.”

“And you conclude?” she pressed. “Please hurry, I need more coffee.”

“Let me put it to you as a question, Detective Dreeson. Why was this rider able to avoid,” he glanced down at the movie, “three vehicles moving perpendicular to his path, one of them an SUV?”

“And not the fast moving Chinese woman shuffling along the crosswalk?”

“Curious,” he said.

“You want a coffee?”

“You buying? Molly likes the office kitty overflowing with love.”

“Nope, but I deliver,” she said as she stood from the windowsill.

He dug into his pocket for dollar bills and handed them over. “Decaf please.”

She took the bills. “You smoking again?”

“No, why do you ask?”

Kandy shrugged. “I figured you were trying to compensate. How can you drink coffee without caffeine? It’s a crime against nature.”

“Trying to sleep better.”

She laughed as she turned toward the door. “You’re a detective. You only get to sleep when you’re dead or on vacation.” She stopped at the door and looked back. “And we’re too busy for vacation.”

The hydraulic cylinder let the door swing slowly closed behind her.

Qiqiq stared at the fog lifting off San Francisco streets on the other side of a hundred square feet of glass, then at the screen of his laptop. The man knew his bike. Coincidence, or handpicked for this job? An odd job. A Chinese woman (ethnicity not yet verified, he reminded himself) injured in morning daylight at great risk to the rider. Made no sense. Failed homicide? Why an elderly woman?

For the umpteenth time, he stepped the movie a single frame at a time. Was the dark shield a conscious choice to prevent recognition, or a kid with good eyes who wore it as an anti-glare strategy? Like teenagers who wore sunglasses at night and were shocked that everyone else didn’t.

“How do I find you?” he said to the rider in the video. “Might you be a woman?” There was no definitive evidence for anything except skill, and thousands of women rode motorcycles. Some even raced the boys, and beat them.

The door flung open as Kandy backed into the room with two oversized steaming mugs. She lowered one to Qiqiq’s desk

while raising the other to her lips.

“Careful, it’s really hot.”

He nodded thanks. “Was the rider a woman?”

She sipped. Frowned. Sipped again. “Nothing says no. Not many girls ride like that though.”

“Might be a good reason to use a female. Figure we wouldn’t expect a girl.” He sighed. “I need something to grab hold of.”

“How about a sandwich?” she said.

“It’s only ten-thirty.”

“Mid-morning snack?”

He rolled back from the desk and patted his stomach, which was flat, but not rippled like he knew Kandy’s was. “Some of us don’t work out as much as you do.”

“And whose fault might that be?” She grinned, or maybe snickered; he wasn’t sure.

He got up and walked to the window, resting his eyes on their little piece of bridge in the distance. “We have a great view.”

“Yeah, you can watch the world go by while we get nothing done.” She kicked her chair over to the front of her desk and dropped into it without spilling a drop. “I stopped and saw Ferd. Said he’ll take a quick look at Anthony’s movie this morning.”

Qiqiq stared at the traffic two stories below drifting along at no more than a brisk walk. Fast movement caught his eye. A motorcycle half a mile west sliced toward him between the rows of cars.

“Maybe we can follow the bike,” he said.

“Sure. Black bike. Black leathers. Black helmet with a reflective silver design that could be a bird or a monster or maybe my fairy godmother, depending on which witness you think had the best eyes.”

“Sounded like a Triumph though.”

He felt her staring at his back.

“Terrific,” she said. “The Brits have only been shipping bikes to the U.S. for what, half a century?”

The bike snaked along. “They closed down for a spell in the seventies.”

“That’ll help a lot.”

That time she snickered, he was sure. He turned around. “Do you have binoculars in your desk?”

“Do I look like Army surplus?” With coffee in one hand, she pulled out the lowest drawer with the toe of a boot, removed a stack of Black Belt magazines, and dropped them on the floor. “You should hire a Sherpa to follow you around.” She huffed a soft laugh; her head disappeared. She came up with a pair of green glasses nearly a foot long and tossed them in one smooth motion to Qigiq.

They arched high directly at his chest. He managed to get two hands on them. “You live dangerously. The captain wouldn’t appreciate your breaking our new window.”

Kandy leaned back with her coffee. “Breaking glass doesn’t even register on my danger meter, Qi.”

He searched for the bike. “It’s black.”

“One.”

“Dropped clip on bars like our movie bike.”

“Two. It’s *our* bike, huh? Thanks for sharing.”

“Vertical twin. I’d guess Triumph, though I can’t see well from this angle. No markings on the tank. Rider in black leather.”

She bolted upright. “Is it our man?”

“Relax,” he said. “Way too tall. This guy makes ours look like a gnome.”

“How’s he ride?”

“No finesse, but he’s comfortable muscling the bike around with raw strength.”

She sat back down. “Helmet?”

“Black with a silver insignia. I’d say dragon, or some kind of

otherworldly monster, maybe from a movie.”

“I thought you read books.”

“Saw a bus wrapped with a giant furry creature a couple of weeks ago. I’ve only seen monsters in movies.”

“Never been married, huh?” she asked, huffing.

“Torment the over-thirty guy on his love life at a time like this.”

“I can see how stressed you are, peeping out the window, probably ogling a mini-skirt at a hundred paces.”

The glasses shook as he chuckled. “It’s leather. Union Jack on the back. Looks good on her.”

She launched herself to the window. “What in hell are you talking about?” she said, peering in the direction the glasses pointed.

“Three blocks up, heading this way. Our boy has stopped and is chatting with an Asian girl on the sidewalk. They keep looking this way, like they’re watching us watching them.”

Kandy put her hand above her eyes to block the brightening sky and squinted. “An Asian wearing a Union Jack? What is going on here?”

“Chicks dig bikers.”

She punched him in the arm and he handed over the glasses. She studied the scene for thirty seconds before saying: “They’re focused on this street corner. And know each other well.”

“You can read a relationship at five hundred yards?”

“Woman’s intuition.”

He waited. The couple was partially obscured by a vintage light pole. Finally he said, “I didn’t know intuition had such range.”

She lowered the glasses. “The kiss she gave him was a hint.”

“Chicks dig—”

“Oh shut up.”

She crossed back to her desk, dropped the glasses in the low drawer and tossed the magazines in after them. “Let’s go chat.”

“Official?” He reached for his riding jacket. The fog was lifting, but the dampness of San Francisco chilled his bones in a way Fairbanks never had.

Kandy was halfway out the door when she replied, “Nope.”

CHAPTER 3

KANDY AND QIGIQ DOUBLE-TIMED DOWN two flights of stairs and out the McKinney side of the building to remain invisible to their quarry. They passed the biker and Union Jack girl on the opposite side of the street, crossed at a corner lacking a street sign, and strolled back toward them. The bike sat parallel to the curb, its rider straddling the seat, one hand on the handlebars, the other on the girl. The two alternated between jabbering, kissing, and staring down the street toward the SFPD offices.

As they approached, Qiqiq said: “Nice bike.”

The guy released the girl’s waist and rotated. His eyes sized up Qiqiq in one sweep and landed on Kandy. They took longer to size her up.

“Yeah,” he agreed, his eyes on Kandy’s chest.

“Triumph?” Qiqiq asked.

The girl punched his upper arm.

He grinned. “New one. Built in Hensley.”

“Looks vintage,” Qiqiq said.

“Like your jacket,” the guy offered.

Qiqiq had been wearing his Brooks black leather jacket since college. Maybe it was time to update.

Kandy said, “Doesn’t riding in the city suck?”

Eyes turned. The girl scowled.

The rider’s grin widened. He seemed happy to be talking to Kandy’s shirt.

“Nah, it’s great. Cars are wallowing whales. I slice around them like a jet fighter.” His right hand demonstrated.

Qigiq put him in his mid-twenties, Caucasian with a hint of something, perhaps Hispanic. Or maybe Native American, like himself.

Kandy said, "Isn't it dangerous?" stepping closer to the bike. She reached out her left hand and stopped an inch short of the gleaming black fender. "OK to touch it?"

There wasn't a mark on the bike. Not even dust. But the guy said, "Sure. Be careful, it's hot."

Qigiq knew he meant the exhaust, but it made him want to know how the guy had come by the shiny machine.

Kandy stroked the fender with her fingertips near a license plate mounted on a hinge low on the left, and flipped in so it couldn't be read from behind.

"It's smooth."

The Asian girl crossed her arms over her bosom.

The guy said, "I rub it with clay. Makes it shine."

"Is it fast?" Kandy asked, straightening and meeting his eyes.

"Fast is a relative thing," he said, lifting a thigh across the saddle to face Kandy. "It's faster than most cars. And it's fast for a Triumph. But there are extreme motorcycles that are outright faster."

The honesty of the answer surprised Qigiq; he had been expecting: *Yeah, babe, like me.*

The rider watched Kandy, as if Qigiq and the Asian girl had gone off together for lunch.

"Nothing is faster through the city though." He gestured forward, "Narrow bars squeeze between cages," and down, "loads of torque." He paused before adding, "I never get caught in the city."

That sounded like the voice of experience to Qigiq.

The girl wearing the Union Jack skirt interrupted. "Michael."

He shot her a glance that contained a few daggers.

“Where did you get it?” Qiqiq interjected. The girl visibly relaxed.

Kandy walked slowly around the rear of the bike so Michael and Qiqiq faced each other, and the two women were on opposite sides of the machine. And its rider. One of Michael’s eyes tried to follow her.

“Got it new from Munroe Motors. Had it worked on by a guy.”

“I’ve always wanted a Triumph,” Qiqiq said, which was true. He wanted a ’69, if he ever found one in decent shape.

“Watch Craigslist,” Michael said. “Good ones show up out of the blue.”

The mention of Craigslist reminded Qiqiq of his first case in San Francisco where an ad had been rigged to trigger an explosion. Quite an unnerving experience with Internet technology.

Kandy squatted to admire the bike; Michael tried hard not to stare.

“What kind of modifications?” Qiqiq asked.

“Michael,” the girl said with more insistence.

Michael didn’t bother to look at her. “Rebuilt from the ground up. Suspension and everything. Only way to get it right.”

“Maybe your guy will help me?”

Michael shook his head. “He only works by referral. Sorry, I don’t know you,” he turned towards Kandy, “and your lady, well enough.”

Kandy popped up from a full squat. “Yet,” she said with a wide smile.

He hesitated, clearly torn between two paths, maybe considering the one less traveled.

Qiqiq suppressed a grin and let the moment play out.

Michael made his decision, turned towards the girl, pulled the clutch and fired the bike. “Gotta go,” he said to Union Jack. “I’ll call you tonight.”

“You’d better,” she said, adding a quick kiss before he slipped into his helmet.

“Hey,” Kandy said. She pointed to his head, “Great graphics.”

“Custom.”

She leaned in close, her body between his bike and traffic—blocking his only means of escape. “Don’t tell me, custom guy only works by referral.”

His cheeks puffed up with a smile inside the full-coverage helmet. “Bye.”

Qiqiq put the departing exhaust note at 100 decibels—above the legal limit, but it was just a guess.

Michael slipped his machine into traffic where there appeared to be no space, crossed deftly between moving cars, and accelerated into the narrow lane between them.

“Why is lane splitting legal in California?” Qiqiq asked rhetorically.

“Because it’s cool,” the Union girl said as she turned away.

Kandy took long strides. The first over the spot on the pavement where parked cars dripped oil. The second up the curb. The third put her beside the girl.

“Hey,” Kandy said.

Qiqiq stared in the direction of his office trying to figure out what the two had been looking at, kept quiet, and listened.

“Hey, what? Stay away from my man.”

“How about helping me?” Kandy said.

The girl stopped. “Why?”

“We only stopped to admire his bike.”

“Yeah, I saw you admiring.”

“I want one,” Kandy said.

The girl began correcting her smeared lipstick with a finger. “You want a bike?”

Kandy shook her head. “No. A man with a bike.”

The girl started to turn away.

“Not your man. Someone, uh, shorter.”

“Like that guy?” the girl asked, flipping her hair toward Qigiq.

“We just work together. You know...”

The girl laughed. “Something with better performance?”

Kandy shrugged. “I thought you might know some bikers.”

“Bikers are everywhere. You just have to know where to look.”

Kandy held out her hand. “Kandy.”

The girl hesitated, “Trina.” She shook lightly once.

They watched each other in silence. Trina finally said:

“They love to talk bikes in the cafés: Drive Chain, Zeitgeist, Ton Up, Lucky 13, even Old Princeton Landing down in Half Moon Bay.” She walked away, her heels clicking softly below the swaying Union Jack flag of the United Kingdom emblazoned on her skirt.

Qigiq was studying the pavement where the bike had been when Kandy returned. New Triumphs didn’t leak like the old ones.

“Find anything?” she asked.

“Recent chain lube. Doesn’t seem useful.”

“He’s careful about maintenance, and likes lube,” she said with a laugh.

“Make a new friend?”

She dug into the front pocket of her black jeans and came up with a half-empty yellow pack of gum. “Friend would be an exaggeration, but she gave me a tip: biker bars.” She proffered the pack.

He held up a hand. “I heard the list. Ton Up will be café racers, maybe some Brit bikes.”

“Let yourself go, it’s only sugar.”

He drew a stick, palmed the wrapper into his pocket. “It’ll have vintage race bikes on display. Place will be frequented by kids trying to capture the mysterious essence of the 60s when

making a motorbike go 100 mph took more than a credit card and riding it away from the dealer.”

“Your kind of place.”

He shrugged as they started back towards the office. “My kind of decor. What do we find at the Ton Up?”

“Boys and bikes,” she said as she chewed. “Maybe a connection to our hit-and-run machine. And more black Triumphs.”

Qigiq rolled his lips together. “We don’t know if the rider was male.” He glanced down at his orange-faced wristwatch. “They’re wearing full-coverage helmets—safe, but not retro. Hides their faces.” He paused, considering. “Think the Ton Up is open for lunch?”

Kandy pulled out her cell phone and asked for the number. Before she placed the call, it vibrated in her hand. She tapped speakerphone and said, “Dreeseon.”

“Hello, Detective. A rush order this morning, I see.”

“Sorry we can’t arrange attempted homicides for your schedule, Ferd. The bad guys won’t cooperate.”

“But the time stamp on this movie data is 7:28 am. It didn’t arrive on my desk until 9:04.”

“Sorry, Qigiq and I wasted time studying it. I should have just taken it to your lab, but we didn’t want to bother you if there was nothing there.”

“And how did you ascertain that without bringing it to me for analysis?”

“You win, Ferd. At least we were smart enough to realize you needed to see it.”

“As I understand the situation, a child was astute enough to realize that. And please Detective, my name is Ferdinand.”

“Sorry, Ferd.” She laughed. He laughed with her. “So?”

“I’ve done a first order analysis that has produced results you will wish to see. Thus, my personal phone call.”

“Thanks, two minutes. Really. We’re only a couple blocks

away.” Her phone disappeared into a pocket.

Qiqiq read her expression. “What’s wrong?”

“Ferd has results he wants us to see right away. But...” She pointed to her left.

Four black Triumphs glided between lanes of traffic and parked near the oil spot where Michael’s bike had been. The machines ceased roaring together.

The crawling traffic was library quiet by comparison.

He said: “Must be ride your Triumph to work day.”

While one man dismounted, Qiqiq studied bikes that could be part of a top-secret government cloning machine. From a distance they matched the one in little Anthony’s movie. And Michael’s bike, though not nearly so clean.

A short man strode the half-block between them wearing his helmet. He stopped, facing Qiqiq. The entrance to the Footwear Etc. store to the left reflected in the dark shield.

“You the one asking questions?”

The voice was male, young, slight accent.

“About what?” Qiqiq said.

The man pushed him on his left shoulder, moving him back a step.

Kandy inched closer.

The helmet turned. “So you’re the chick that has Trina upset?”

Qiqiq glanced at Kandy. She nodded.

“I was talking to Michael about his bike,” Qiqiq said. He leaned slightly to look past the guy’s shoulder. The other three riders sat astride their machines, barely paying attention. “It looked a lot like yours.”

From Qiqiq’s left Kandy said, “His helmet looked like yours too.”

“Not your business.” He turned to Qiqiq and lifted his hand into the gun imitation kids use. “You stay away from Trina.”

“I never looked at Trina,” Qiqiq replied truthfully.

The guy pushed him again.

“That’s not the way she tells it.”

Kandy moved in another inch. “What did Trina have to say about Michael?”

The finger moved toward her. “You came on to him. Tried to find out about,” he waved his other hand toward his buddies, “us.”

“Us?” Qigiq laughed. “I see four guys who dress pretty and ride motorbikes. You could be Shriners, though they prefer red.”

“Don’t push me, old man.”

“What’s your problem?” Kandy said. “We only chatted about British bikes and how underpowered they are by today’s standards.”

The helmet’s shield flicked back and forth between them.

“Too many questions. Consider this a warning to stay away. You only get one.”

“Oooo,” Kandy cooed under her breath.

Qigiq took a guess. “So we’re not welcome at the Ton Up club?”

The guy’s titanium enhanced racing glove came up fast. Qigiq dodged left. The punch grazed his right ear. Kandy’s elbow doubled the guy in half with a thud.

His knees smacked the pavement.

His friends materialized on the sidewalk, but stopped ten yards away when he raised a hand as he wheezed inside his helmet.

Qigiq prepared for him to leap up.

But he gestured and his buddies returned to their bikes, fired them up, and left. He stood slowly and surprised Qigiq by flipping up his face shield and glaring directly at him. He was Asian, with black, angry eyes and a narrow straight nose. The helmet limited his peripheral vision; maybe he wasn’t aware that Kandy was the one who had hit him.

“Would you tell me who mods your bikes?” Qigiq asked.

“Not a chance.”

“I’m glad we’re still on speaking terms. What’s with the design on the helmet?”

A gloved hand reached up and perfectly traced the image. “Our mascot,” he said, turned and headed for his bike.

“You going to let him leave?” Kandy whispered.

“You want to do paperwork on this?”

She flexed her hand and rubbed her elbow.

“Was he wearing armor?” he asked.

“Not where I hit him. Did you notice the plates?”

“Flip mounts so the plate can be folded flat to the bike, can’t be read from behind. Harley ships some bikes with that feature.”

“Does it have any legal use?” she said.

“Looks cool. Keeps people from tripping over it in a parking lot.” He smiled.

“I got Michael’s, by the way: 20J2254. Easy to read while stroking his fender.”

“I’ll bet his fender enjoyed it too.” He tilted his head in the direction of the office. “Shall we?”

Halfway back Kandy said: “Four guys. They must have figured you’d be tough.”

“Or you.”

She slipped her thumbs into the front pockets of her jeans. “Guys rarely figure that right.”

They stopped to wait for a cable car to trundle through the intersection on steel rails, then hustled across with a small group of pedestrians.

“Even after they’ve met you?” he asked.

“Even after they’ve met me.”

They walked a block in silence. He thought about bikes. Gangs. Criminal organizations built around riding. He eventually asked:

“Who are they?”

She shrugged. “Local club. Drugs, babes. Hot bikes. All

black, no markings, trick license plates. Don't want anyone to see what's going on."

"Related to the injured Mrs. Chong?"

She chewed her gum for a second. "Or just an accident. They're aggressive riders."

He stopped and faced her. "What was our rider doing out of bed at seven-thirty on a Monday morning?"

Her head bobbed slightly. "A point worthy of consideration over a fine lunch."

"I bet the Ton Up has British food."

She turned toward the office and picked up the pace.

"Let's go see what Ferd has for us first. I promised we'd stop by right away."

CHAPTER 4

KANDY AND QIGIQ STOOD BEFORE A DOOR half-filled with frosted glass emblazoned with the words Electronic Evidence Recovery in black letters. Kandy tapped the glass with two fingers, each tap slightly louder than the previous one. Ferdinand hated being disturbed, and had instructed her on his preferred method of being knocked at.

“Enter,” came from within.

“You first,” Qigiq said. “He likes you best.”

Kandy turned the knob and whispered, “Chicken.”

They entered an open room with rows of long tables that reminded Qigiq of his high school cafeteria, only these tables held computers in various stages of disassembly rather than students in stages of development. A lone figure draped in a knee-length white lab coat sat in the center of the room leaning over a binocular microscope.

“Hello, Ferdinand,” Kandy called across the room.

Without looking up he said, “Trying to sweet talk me now, Detective? You must have another stalled case that requires my skill to save your—” He paused for a moment, “Reputation.”

“Cute, Ferd,” Kandy replied. “But you can save my pert little ass by waving your digital voodoo wand anytime you want.”

The white shape rolled his armless chair away from the scope.

“Please, Detective, must we be so suggestive?”

“Only if it helps you think,” Kandy replied with a one-huff laugh.

Ferdinand removed thick glasses in gold aviator frames and rubbed them with his lab coat. His eyes lifted toward Kandy.

“Vulgarity is hardly necessary to power my thinking apparatus.”

Kandy stopped beside Ferdinand. “Did you like our movie?”

“Anthony did a fine job for one so young. Of course, today’s digital cameras are remarkable.”

“Which means you have something for us,” Kandy said, smiling in Qiqiq’s direction.

“When, Detective, in the years I’ve been saving your—” Ferdinand paused.

“Did you just smile, Ferd?” Kandy asked.

“When have I *not* had something for you?”

Kandy said, “Well, there was the time I brought you that BlackBerry.”

Ferdinand returned his glasses to his face and stared over them. “The one the Boeing aircraft had run over?”

She shrugged. “It wasn’t in the best shape...”

Ferdinand nodded a hello to Qiqiq that contained a grinning hint of *how do you put up with her?* He walked briskly to a far corner of the lab, waving for them to follow, and reached into a deep pocket of his coat. The room lights faded to candlelight.

“Overspend your electric budget again?” Kandy said.

“Give your eyes a moment to adjust. You will see much more with less ambient light.”

Three large monitors arranged in a curve lit up. They held a frozen frame from Anthony’s movie, greatly enlarged. A single motorcycle sat far back in traffic.

“We begin,” Ferdinand said. A blue line emanating from the bike’s headlight shot across the screen between the cars. “This,” he pointed to the screen, “represents the bike’s speed and direction of travel. Its velocity, if you will.”

The movie began playing in slow motion; the bike inched along the blue line.

“Now,” Ferdinand said.

A green line glowed from the forehead of a woman in a blue dress and extended out into the crosswalk.

The movie stopped. “Using these two lines, we obtain the following.”

A rectangle the size of the bike, and an ellipse the size of the woman moved across the still frame.

“He should have missed her,” Kandy said.

“Correct,” Ferdinand said. “If he had simply maintained his speed and direction—”

“Velocity if you will,” Kandy interjected.

“Correct. No collision would have occurred.”

“Damn, you’re good,” Kandy said. A tiny grin flickered at the corners of Ferdinand’s lips. “But we knew that. Witnesses saw the bike swerve.”

Ferdinand shook his head. “Witnesses are much less reliable than science.”

A red line lit beside the blue one. This time the box moved along the line, veered to the rider’s right as it reached the front wheel of the truck, and made contact with the ellipse.

“How much time?” Qiqiq asked.

“From here,” Ferdinand pointed to where the red line veered away from the blue one, “to here at the collision. Six-tenths of a second.”

“An old woman can’t move that fast. She had no chance,” Kandy said.

“How fast?” Qiqiq asked.

Ferdinand pointed to the bike far back in traffic. “Here. Zero. He’s stopped between lanes.”

“Zero?” Kandy said a bit too loud. Her voice echoed in the long room.

The frames of the movie flashed past until the motorcyclist made contact with the woman. Ferdinand tapped a keyboard. Numbers popped up beside the image of the biker.

“Forty-three miles per hour.” She whistled.

“Zero to forty-three in?” Qiqiq asked.

Ferdinand pointed.

Qiqiq read. “Two point eight seconds.”

“Was he trying to beat the pedestrians?” Kandy asked.

“Ah, yes. The human’s motivation,” Ferdinand said.

“Science does not help so much with that question.”

Qiqiq leaned closer to the screen. “So he hit her on purpose.”

Ferdinand shook his head. “This we don’t know.”

“I love your voodoo wand, Ferd,” Kandy said. “But I gotta tell you. I’m not learning anything new here.”

Ferdinand’s eyebrows shot up. “You knew he was going forty-three miles per hour?”

“Uh...”

“From a standing start?”

“Well, no, but...”

“So you have learned something, Detective.” Ferdinand met Kandy’s eyes. With a perfectly straight face he said, “Shall I wave my wand again?”

Kandy burst out laughing.

Ferdinand fought a grin.

Qiqiq said, “Do you have any coffee? I left mine in the office when we ran out to meet the Union Jack girl.”

“Fresh.” Ferdinand pointed to the far left corner.

“Want one?” Qiqiq said.

Ferdinand declined.

In the corner Qiqiq found a pair of personal computers whose internals had been replaced by Krups drip coffee makers: one regular, one decaf. A third computer frame held a bean grinder. The fourth concealed a bright red espresso machine. From most angles they looked like a computing array that only the anointed should approach. It was Monday, still before noon, but an ugly case was already on his desk. Caffeine would sure be welcome. To postpone the decision he drew a cup for Kandy. As

it filled, a compromise suggested itself.

He filled a ceramic mug half full of decaf and finished filling it with full-on Colombian blend, and a dash of cream. He would ease into caffeine reduction.

“You mean Ferd has decaf?” Kandy said. “You didn’t give me any did you?” She stared suspiciously into the dark liquid.

Qiqiq shook his head. “Never.”

“You’re drinking decaf?” Ferdinand asked. “I thought only the VW driving, flower-on-the-dash yoginis who work for me drank black water?”

“Trying to cut back,” Qiqiq said. “Helps me relax.”

“I know you have more, Ferd,” Kandy said, after a sip. “You have that look in your eyes.”

Ferdinand held up one finger. “Perhaps just a little.”

Ferdinand typed and talked. “There wasn’t a great deal more movie to analyze. We can, of course, tell you the curvature of each swerve, the acceleration forces involved, and the one place where the rider touched his brakes.”

“Conclusion?” Qiqiq asked, blowing across the top of his cup.

“First class rider. Most street riders would be unable to make such rapid changes of direction.” He turned. “Based on accident analysis, riders often crash when the bike could have saved them.” He paused. Sighed. “Sadly, the same can be said of automobile drivers.”

Movie frames flicked by on a large monitor until the bike was directly beside the truck, not yet in the crosswalk.

“We were very lucky,” Ferdinand said.

Kandy looked up. “You science guys believe in luck?”

Ferdinand gestured at the screen. “We were fortunate that our famous fog was present to diffuse the morning light. It allowed me to perform this analysis.”

The image zoomed in until the helmet filled the screen. The graphics the guy who tried to punch him had traced with his

finger grew into a dancing dragon. Or lizard.

“Note the dark shield to protect against sunlight. We see only a deep green.”

Kandy caught Qiqiq’s eye and shrugged.

“But there is more data here than meets the naked eye,” Ferdinand continued. He stroked a flat pad with his thumb and middle finger. The remainder of the frame became very bright, but an image emerged from the face shield.

Qiqiq stepped closer and stooped until he was on the same level as the dark eyes now staring out from behind the shield. He said:

“That was there the whole time?”

“Oh yes,” Ferdinand replied. “But not where your eyes could perceive it. By expanding and shifting to the range of the monitor, we see this.”

His hand stopped and the image quality improved as the computer filled in higher resolution data.

“Eyes,” Kandy said.

A portion of a face was visible above the cheek pads of the helmet. Qiqiq compared it to the guy who had swung at him on the street.

“Yes,” Ferdinand said. “And asymmetrical eyebrows. The left is slightly longer.”

Kandy nodded. “Not enough for an ID.”

“True,” Ferdinand agreed. “But enough for something important.”

The movie zoomed out until the rider was back beside the truck. The blue line of his direction of travel appeared, then the red of his veer to the right. Ferdinand brushed his pad and a new yellow line was added parallel to the blue one.

“Watch this yellow line,” Ferdinand instructed.

The frames played in slow motion. The woman appeared from the left side of the screen. The bike moved forward. In an eye-blink the yellow line flashed to the rider’s right, connecting

his face shield with the face of the woman in the blue dress.

Ferdinand stopped the movie.

“You didn’t?” Kandy said.

“I most certainly did. And with great accuracy.”

Qiqiq sipped his half-decaf and listened. He had moved to San Francisco to learn computer tricks, after all, and Ferdinand was delivering a master class.

“You tracked his eyes?” Kandy said, incredulous. “From that tinted fog you showed us behind the face shield?”

“Some effort was required,” Ferdinand admitted. “But the computer and I are both highly confident in our findings.” The movie moved forward. The timer readout told Qiqiq that the eye movement towards the woman occurred a half second before the veer began.

“He saw her,” Qiqiq said.

“Most definitely.”

“And swerved to hit her?” Kandy asked.

“Assuredly.”

“On purpose?” Qiqiq asked. “Or target fixation?”

“For that we need further analysis.”

“It takes practice to break the instinct to stare at a threat in the road,” Qiqiq said. “And staring almost guarantees you’ll hit it.”

“Speaking from experience?” Kandy asked.

He grinned. “I’ve hit a few things. Falling rocks as they roll into the road. Wild animals in the dark. Eventually learned to focus on the escape route at an off-road riding school.”

“So we still can’t know if he meant to hit her?” Kandy said, as she drained her coffee and began pacing the length of the three monitors.

“Detective, have you no faith in our skills?”

The movie played. The bike straightened, the yellow arrow went left into the gap behind an SUV; the bike went left. The arrow straightened, pointing across the intersection; the bike

straightened. Arrow right, two car lengths in front of a Toyota. Bike right. Left, right, left as cars swerved and slowed, the Toyota and a Ford colliding, the bike weaving through them like a halfback on amphetamines.

“And this tells us?” Ferdinand asked.

Kandy stopped pacing. “The bike goes where that yellow line goes first.”

“It follows his eyes,” Qigiq added, “for all subsequent turns.”

“So he swerved right at her, intending to hit her,” Kandy said.

“Maybe kill her,” Qigiq added. “He was going fast enough.”

“Forty-three miles per hour,” Ferdinand said. “Sixty-three feet per second.”

Kandy shook her head. “Crazy stunt...running a red light straight into a busy intersection.”

“The time of day was key,” Ferdinand said. “Early morning traffic creeps through there. Gave him opportunity for evasive action.”

“Something else,” Qigiq said.

The room quieted.

“He knew?” Kandy said.

Qigiq nodded. “Yes. He knew she would be there. Probably knew the time within a minute or two.”

“I agree,” Ferdinand said. “Most certainly premeditated.” He spun his chair. “I’ll have that coffee now, please.”

CHAPTER 5

I SAT IN THE BACK OF MY ROBERTS photography display tent ruminating. It was Monday; the Kings Beach Art Show ran through Wednesday. But Mylin had sold in one day what usually took me a week. The organizers would be upset if I left empty pavement where a booth should be, and Roberts Photography might not be allowed in next year. I wouldn't be the only one though; two spots had been barren all weekend from artists who hadn't shown up at all.

On the other hand, if I finished the show, I couldn't break down until Thursday morning because the end-of-show auction shindig lasted until after midnight Wednesday. That would put me in Reno Thursday afternoon. Would I still be able to find her?

Find her? What was I thinking?

Yes, she was mesmerizing. And showed interest in my pictures. But not me. What would she want with a traveling artist anyway?

A twenty-something couple with six tattoos between them passed by without glancing in. I sighed. My body energized every time I recalled her voice, conjured her face, or glanced at *Smoking Girl #6*. Fate had made our paths cross a second time. I needed to *carpe diem*.

And when I found her?

I stood and inhaled hot summer air; a Greek food tent upwind was roasting lamb. I stuffed two twenties from Mylin's stack on the counter into my cargo shorts, and rolled the rest into a canvas whose surface I was preparing for archival inks. The

school of hard knocks had taught me that cash was safer hidden than where pickpockets could easily reach it.

On my way out of the booth I stopped to admire *Girl #6*. I turned to leave. A hand wrapped around my left biceps and dragged me backwards. A second hand gripped my opposite wrist and yanked it behind my back. Someone had seen me stash the cash. I twisted and caught a glimpse of straight black hair and a gray sport coat.

He didn't speak.

My instincts yelled *run*. I forced my panic down. What did I know about being robbed? *Remain calm. Don't resist. Give him no reason to hurt you.* I inhaled like dragging on a cigarette, a habit I had dropped after the peer pressure of high school went away. His grip held firm. Didn't relax, didn't tighten, just pressed like surgical tubing squeezing blood from my arms.

Surely a thief would tell me what he wanted.

I counted silently to ten, then blabbered: "If there's something I'm supposed to do, I'm happy to oblige."

Breath hotter than the California sun hit my neck as a voice whispered: "Be quiet."

A couple, perhaps in their fifties, strolled by. The man glanced at #6, the woman at me.

I smiled.

She frowned.

They didn't enter my booth.

The hand remained fixed—like I was trapped in a machine that had lost power. I waited, afraid to ask another question.

An Asian gentleman strolled into the booth and stopped in front of #6. His hair was nearly white against sun-darkened skin, and long enough to cover his ears. August in California, but he wore a dark blue suit with a subtle light blue stripe; maybe the stripe was his concession to the heat. His leather loafers had the aerodynamic look of something designed in Italy.

"She is quite a beauty in her way," he said.

Did he mean my picture? The girl? Was it okay to talk?

“This was taken in Michigan,” he said.

It didn’t sound like a question.

The hand shook my arm.

“Uh, yes it—” I choked, cleared my throat. “Ann Arbor. About a month ago.”

The old man stared into her eyes. “Yes, quite a beauty.”

He stepped closer to the picture, clasping his hands behind him as if he were being careful not to touch it. He said:

“Do you know this woman?”

“Not exactly. It’s a long story.”

A shake. Maybe the old man liked long stories and the guy holding me knew it. As I prepared to tell the story, I also sought an explanation. This old man wasn’t here to rob me. I began:

“When I took that picture, I had never seen her before.”

A second shake.

“Truly. I was taking pictures of the crowd attending a concert.”

“The GO Orchestra?” he asked.

I hesitated. “At the time, I didn’t know who was performing.” A tighter squeeze on both arms. “Please let me finish,” I said rapidly to avoid being treated like a salt shaker. “I took that picture and several others. Then started selling reprints from my booth at art shows.”

“You have her permission for this?” the old man asked.

“No,” I answered quickly. “Not then. I’ve been selling them for a few weeks, and today that girl, the one in the picture, walked into this very booth.”

“And the girl with her?” the old man said.

I rewound my mental reel. Had there been a girl with her? Was I so distracted I had missed her friend? I sure hoped not. I said: “She came into the booth alone,” preparing to be shaken. But nothing happened.

The old man turned to me, oblivious to the crowd behind

him and the guy behind me.

“And?” he said.

“She was here for a few minutes.” I ran the scenario through my mind, trying to push away the images I had of her legs in those purple shorts, her boots, her smile, her one-eyed look. “She liked the picture. I offered to give her one but she declined. I told her there were others.”

I was not being shaken so I continued.

“I went to my truck, found two more. When I got back I learned she had been selling pictures for me. She’s quite a good sales person.”

The old man smiled just a fraction.

“We hung *Smoking Girl #3* right there where *#6* is now, and a guy came by and bought it while she was still here; in fact, she sold it to him and—” I coughed. I was going to say she signed it, but something stopped me.

The old man cocked his left eyebrow. It was almost as white as his hair.

“She did a really good job. So I put,” I gestured with my head, “Number six back up.”

The old man was silent, though his mouth moved like he was sucking candy.

“One more thing,” I added.

The man lifted his eyes and gazed through me, as if remembering something important.

“She talked about a GO Orchestra. Is that the one you asked about?” I didn’t want to give him new information that could put Mylin in danger, but did want to appear cooperative.

Thumbs dug into both arms. Questions were not okay. And I was going to have bruises.

The old guy’s face remained blank as he said: “You saw no other girl. About the same height, slightly heavier, round face?”

I shook my head slowly and emphatically.

He said, “I’ll take your number six, Mr. Roberts. My

colleague will remain to settle the account.”

He turned 180 degrees in place, the way soldiers do, and was gone.

The hands released me. My left arm was numb, the right had goosebumps. I started to turn around but froze when it occurred to me that being able to identify the man’s face was a bad idea.

I was wrong about that too.

He stepped around me and lifted the picture from the wall of my display tent, then turned to face me. He was only five foot seven or so, and as thin as the old man. He wore industrially faded blue jeans and Jordans below his gray sport coat. His hair was the same length as the old man’s, but pure black—though reflections from the lake were tinting it midnight blue. He held the painting in front of his chest and smiled, his teeth straight and even.

“How much?” he asked.

I swallowed. I had assumed they were going to just *take* it. I pointed and said, “There’s a sticker on the back,” so he would know I wasn’t making something up. “But I can discount it if you wish.” Ever the power salesman.

“No need.”

He held the picture under an arm and peeled off hundreds with his thumb like a one-handed card dealer. I counted eight, but he was awfully fast. He held out the money and said:

“Tell her to call grandmother.”

I reached for my stash to make change. “Would you like me to package that for travel?” When I looked up he and the picture were gone and hundreds fluttered to the pavement.

I retrieved the cash, then sat on my stool to compose myself.

The August sun heated my tent. The aroma of lamb hung in the air.

I began shivering.