

CAT IN A TREE

By

Rich La Bonté

Copyright © 1992 and 2000 Rich La Bonté

Visit fLAtDiSk.NeT at <http://flatdisk.net>

Email: rich@richlabonte.com

CHAPTER ONE

The Wilshire District is not all cold architecture, roaring cars, and busses. There are little tree-lined side streets that retain memories of a thinner and more sedate Los Angeles. Houses are warm, three-story family structures built in the Golden Era by established patriarchs of the business community and the movie world. Bordered by Paramount and the old Columbia and RKO studios to the north, and the Wilshire Country Club to the west, this was never the paranoid island of Bel Air. It is a community of the secure and moderately wealthy - an upper middle class once worshiped as The Dream.

I've lived in Los Angeles for over fifteen years, and I have only borrowed memories of those legendary days, but I can feel the ghosts in those neighborhoods.

Ten years ago, I was driving by the ghosts, taking Arden from Wilshire to Melrose to avoid traffic, and it was on this passage that I stopped to help get a cat out of a tree. The tree was a magnificent elm, a rare enough sight even then, and the cat was a white Persian.

The cat's concerned owner was a boy of about ten, who lived in the red brick home sheltered by the elm. Less concerned were a middle-aged man standing next to the tree, and a pretty teenage girl with dark hair relaxing in a hammock on the front porch of the house. The cat was the least concerned. It sat patiently on a branch, some twenty feet above, licking a paw.

*

"Excuse me!" The boy had shouted, running across the perfect lawn to flag me down. "Excuse me, sir? Can you climb a tree?" The look on his face was persuasive. I pulled into the circular driveway and followed the boy to survey the situation.

"How'd he get up there?" I asked the middle-aged man. He was portly, thin-lipped, and pale. A butler, I guessed, although I couldn't remember ever meeting one before.

"I have no idea, sir. I suppose it would be better to call the proper authorities." He had already rejected my Dodge as too run down for the driveway. I wasn't sure if he meant to call Animal Control or sick the cops on me.

"It flew," said the girl on the porch. I looked over at her and she smiled at my frown. "It's a Persian flying cat," she explained.

"I thought they were extinct," I quipped back, and then I found a way up the elm using a strong lower branch. After a few minutes of negotiation, the cat came to me and we returned to earth. The girl on the porch uttered a sarcastic bravo and remained in the hammock. The butler had no comment: he was still considering the cops.

"Gosh! Thanks for getting Mickey, mister," the kid said upon receipt of his flying cat. "He's been up there for hours. He was afraid to come down." He extended a polite little hand: "I'm Eugene Duran."

"Well, I was pleased to be of service, Eugene Duran," I said, shaking on it. I fished into my jacket and produced a card. I was new to my profession then, with an office in a crumbling Hollywood landmark and expensive business cards. "I'm Frank Yellowflower."

"Wow!" Eugene exclaimed after carefully studying my card. "You're a private detective!"

"I'm trying to be," I said. The teenager on the porch was now curious and left her hammock to join us on the lawn. The butler looked down at Eugene.

"If that will be all, Master Eugene?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you, Leslie," Eugene said. Thus dismissed, the butler returned to the house. As she passed by him, the girl made a remark that I could not hear. The servant hesitated for a moment in his stride, stiffened slightly, and then continued inside, closing the front door of the house behind him.

"You look like an Indian," the girl said when she reached us. She wore an oversized gray sweatshirt and jeans, but it was not to hide imperfections. Her face was beautiful without

make-up, and the jeans were tight and sexy in a deliberate way. Everything about her said sixteen and dangerous. She smiled and looked up into my eyes. "Are you really a private detective?"

"That's my sister," Eugene noted without enthusiasm. "Zenobia Duran."

"I'm part Native American," I said to Zenobia. Her eyes were hazel, and I tried unsuccessfully to avoid them.

"How old are you, Mr. Detective?" Zenobia asked me. The question was an unwanted invitation. "You've got such a nice..."

"Old enough to know that flying cats are extinct," I said quickly. I turned back to Eugene. "Take care of Mickey," I told him. Zenobia returned to the porch to pout at my rejection, but Eugene waved goodbye as I drove away.

*

I never reprinted the business cards and I no longer need an office. I keep all my records in a PC on the kitchen table, but that's not why. Working as a private detective creates two classes of people you want to avoid: enemies and clients. Sometimes the two are hard to tell apart, so I have an answering service and a mail drop on Sunset, an unlisted home phone number, and there is no traditional P.I.'s secretary with nothing to do.

If there's nothing to do, I do it myself. That is exactly how I was occupied when my doorbell rang Wednesday afternoon. As I wasn't expecting trouble, I opened the door wide.

"Frank Yellowflower!" the woman said. She was tall, dark, and beautiful - and I had no idea who she was.

"Hello," I said. "Won't you come in?" After all, I had nothing to do.

"Er, yes. Yes, of course," she decided, and I watched her walk into the living room. It was a small pleasure. She settled it on my couch, and I closed the door.

"Can I get you something?" I asked. "Diet Coke?"

"You don't have any idea who I am," she reminded me. I liked her eyes. "I'm surprised that you're so friendly. I'll take something harder, if you've got it."

"Nope. Diet Coke or bottled water. Or I could make some coffee, but you're right: who are you?" She stood up: another small pleasure.

"You're the detective. You tell me. Take a good look." She turned around slowly, and I took a good look. "I'll give you one clue."

"Oh, great!" I suddenly lost confidence. "A summons, right? You're a process server?"

"No, that's silly. Here's the clue: it's got fur, and it flies."

"Huh?"

"Ok. Another clue." She walked over to me and put her arms around my neck. I didn't resist. "You passed on me once," she continued, "and all I wanted then was to do this..." She moved up, opened her mouth, and kissed me for about thirty seconds. I continued nonresistance, and then I kissed back. It was her turn again, then mine. This went on for a few minutes until all the oxygen in the room was depleted.

"Enough!" I gasped. "We'll be naked on the floor before long, and I need a name to growl in your ear."

"Zenobia Duran," she told me, pulling me to the couch. "But you can growl 'Zena' if you like."

*

Zena Duran had grown up into a kind of girl few men can refuse, but times have made casual companions a thing of the past, so I exercised my common sense and declined our recline. Zena was annoyed:

"That's twice, damnit! You could have had me when I was a sixteen-year-old slut, for God's sake! Are you by any chance homosexual, Frank?"

"Not by any chance," I told her. "But I am monogamous." It was true. I have a steady date with a certain registered nurse named Alicia Lloyd. Ms. Lloyd happens to be a millionaire as a result of a case I once solved - but that's another story.

"Oh," Zena said. She turned it off as fast as she had turned it on. "Well, I guess I better tell you the reason I had to find you."

"First tell me how you found me. My home address is not common knowledge."

"Contrary to popular opinion, Frank, money buys everything. Especially favors. I'll have that Diet Coke now."

We relaxed with our aluminum cans, and Zena produced a purse I hadn't noticed. She pulled out a small photograph.

"You remember meeting my brother Eugene?"

"He's changed too," I observed. The snapshot was of a handsome young man of twenty, wearing a suit and tie that were definitely not off the rack. Zenobia shrugged.

"I guess. The point is that he is in trouble, and I can't call the police. I was frantic until Mickey knocked an ashtray off the coffee table."

"Who?"

"Mickey! The cat you rescued. I remembered you then, and looked for your card. Eugene never throws anything away. I found it, but it was too old, so I called a friend at TRW and got your address. I did think that you'd be happier to see me." She returned to her purse for a cigarette - she smoked Rothman reds, a British brand - and offered me one. I made an exception and accepted.

"I'm not unhappy, but get to the point, ok? So far I've got a credit file I didn't know about and Mickey's still around. You were frantic about what? And why no cops?"

"Eugene is missing, Frank. He's been kidnapped!"

"Why do you think that?" I asked her. She went into the purse for a third time, and brought out a yellowed envelope.

"Because he disappeared on Saturday," she said, flicking the envelope against her bare knee. The effect was unsettling. "And then there was a phone call last night."

"To you?"

"To the house. Leslie took it."

"That would be Leslie the butler?"

"Yes. You have a good memory. They told Leslie that they have Eugene, and not to call the police. They said they'd be in contact and hung up. Leslie came right to me. He was afraid to tell mother. He doesn't like to upset her."

"You said 'they'. Was it a male or female voice?"

"Leslie wasn't sure. He thought it was male. With an accent."

"What kind?"

"He said Arabic. Middle Eastern, I guess."

"I'll have to talk to Leslie. But your mother does know. You told her immediately."

"Yes. How did you know that?"

"You and Eugene are both very close to her, aren't you? And you are planning to offer me a very large fee to check this out. Your mother has the money. It is Sylvia Duran we're talking about?"

It was not guesswork. I had learned more about the occupants of the red brick house on Arden after our first encounter, and quite by chance. Their former family doctor was now the L.A. County Coroner, my friend Dave "Doc" Collins. He had filled me in one night

when I was still drinking at The Gaslight regularly. I had related the tale of the cat in the tree, and Doc had given me a Hollywood history lesson.

The Durans were indeed ghosts of the Wilshire District, and they were wealthy, but not stinking rich. They had lived in the large brick house on Arden since 1948. Grandpa Duran had the place built after a peak of success in the set design business, most notably at RKO. You've seen Thomas Duran sets in your favorite black and white classics on cable. He had a genius for shadows, working for Welles for a while, and on two of Hitchcock's better wartime thrillers. He got loaned to MGM for "Return of Dorian Grey" in 1946, and it earned him an Oscar.

Technicolor ended Thomas Duran's career, and he died a week after the house was finished. His son, Martin Duran, inherited everything in the will, which amounted to the house and the statuette. Martin had become an accountant at his father's insistence, and he kept the family in fine wines working for TV producers for many years. In 1980, Martin formed his own production company, divorced Zena's mother, and bought a new house and pretty young wife named Kitty in Malibu.

Sylvia Duran, his first wife, put on the screws after the divorce with the help of a lawyer named Pierce Dougherty, and together they squeezed Martin back into relative modesty. Sylvia bought the flying Persian for Eugene - and everything else that Zenobia and her brother needed or didn't need. Martin Duran never saw or spoke to his children or Sylvia after the squeeze began.

*

I related what I knew to Zena. She added only one minor note about her father.

"He's very sick," Zena said. "He's got some painful disease. Personally, I hope he lives to a hundred - coughing his lungs out." She lit a second Rothman, but I declined.

"And you all believed the caller?" I asked.

"Well, nobody's seen Eugene for four days - five today. He's a homeboy. You know - he lives at the house, on the third floor. He's never been away this long..."

"But he has disappeared before?"

"For a day or two on weekends. He hikes in the woods up near Mount Baldy. Overnight, sometimes."

"He leaves without telling anyone?" I asked. She hung her head a bit.

"There's usually no one to tell but Leslie. I have my own apartment in West Hollywood. Mother is almost always somewhere else. And Leslie... well... he's forgetful."

"Eugene camps out alone?"

"As far as I know. He doesn't have many friends. Never has. But there is another reason we believe the call, Frank." She handed me the old envelope. "My mother found this a few years ago in the attic. It was tucked away in an old crate of grandfather Duran's stuff. It hadn't been opened since the forties, I guess."

The envelope contained a one page, typewritten statement, dated September 7, 1948. It was a codicil to the will of Thomas Duran. It was witnessed and bore the seal of a notary:

"This is an addition to my last will and testament, concerning the disposal of debentures given me upon my retirement from RKO. These shares in Bio-Electronics, Inc. are a personal gift from Mr. Hughes, the owner of RKO, and although they are stock in a business I know nothing about, Mr. Hughes assures me that they will be worth a great deal someday. They are properly registered and managed by the investment firm of Morris Galwaith in Pasadena.

"Knowing I am in ill health, I wish to leave something to the grandchildren I may never see. I therefore bequeath the Hughes stocks, and all compounded interest, to those children. The stocks are to be sold, and the money divided equally between them, upon the twenty-first birthday of the last child born to my son Martin Ellison Duran and his wife Sylvia Jennings Duran. In the event that no grandchildren are born to my son by

Sylvia Duran, the ownership of the stocks and their earnings shall revert to him upon her death or to her upon his."

Thomas Duran's signature was at the bottom of the page.

"Wow!" I said. "Howard Hughes."

"Eugene will be twenty-one in ten more days," Zenobia explained.

"Have you contacted this firm in Pasadena to see...?"

"What it's worth? Mother did, of course." Zena clammed up suddenly, dropping the butt of her Rothman's in the Coke can. She gave me a look.

"My girlfriend is worth a cool million or so," I said defensively, referring to the aforementioned Ms. Lloyd. "If you think..."

"No, Frank. I'm sorry. Pierce and my mother are worried that my father will find out. They made us swear not to tell anyone, but I think father knows anyway. Let's just say I'll be a better catch than your girlfriend financially." She stood up and stretched, and my resolve wavered a moment. She noticed and grinned. "I'm willing to compete in other areas, Frank."

"I'm flattered, but if you want me to find Eugene, you'd better sit down and keep talking. So far, I haven't got a clue." She sat back down.

"You'll take the case?"

"Sure, Zena," I said. "Flying cats intrigue me."

*

The Duran house looked bigger and more expensive from the inside. Not tasteful, but expensive. Sylvia Duran clearly had Beverly Hills aspirations, and she had the decorators to prove it.

Leslie let us in, and he had aged ungracefully in ten years. His portly had become fat, and he waddled to one side when he saw me. The red around his eyes and capillary damage to his face convinced me that the butler hadn't done this one. He was just sober enough to remember Zenobia, and immediately addressed me as her brother.

"Mashur Oogeen," the wretch slurred to a space between Zena and myself. An odor of gin and chocolate repelled us both. "Sho glad you are home, shur." He wandered away after this effort, leaving the door ajar. A similarly decrepit, white Persian cat slipped into the yard.

"God," Zenobia sighed, ignoring the cat that had first brought us together. "Leslie's always like that, Frank. I'm sorry."

"The sodden family retainer," I joked. She snorted.

"Mother refuses to even consider dismissing him. Not that I would either - but he could try, at least."

"What happened to him? He had dignity the last time I saw him."

"He started drinking a few years ago. No one's sure why." She closed the front door and led me up the front staircase. On the third landing, we passed an awkwardly placed, gigantic deco floor lamp that would have frightened Cecil B. deMille. "Ghastly, isn't it?" Zena remarked. "Mother is convinced that she has to fill every inch of floor space with antiques."

The top floor of the red brick house had been modified into a single room loft for Eugene. The loft was a rich boy's paradise, and there were indications that Eugene had never grown up. Toys of all description were everywhere: on shelves, scattered on the hardwood floor, and popping out of an assortment of wooden chests. It was a department store at Christmas, without the floorwalkers.

"Eugene likes to play?" I surmised. Zena stood in the doorway while I poked around.

"He designs them, actually," was her dry reply.

"Designs toys?"

"Yes. These aren't all his, but some of them are. He works for about six different companies. He does it all on that." She pointed to a computer workstation in one corner of the room. It made my own PC insignificant, but I had almost missed it. A sullen stuffed alien, with blue fur and three arms, was obscuring the monitor. "Eugene has no head for business, though," Zena added, finally entering the room. "I handle most of it for him. He's been quite successful this year: we sold a new robot plane that's doing well in Japan."

"You and your brother are close then?"

"Oh, very. All we ever really had was each other." She parked it on a swivel chair next to the computer and crossed her legs. They were nice legs. "He was always an inventor - even when we were kids. He grew up thinking he was Thomas Edison."

"Lot's of kids get into that," I said, defending the young Eugene I'd once met. I spotted an aluminum knapsack frame and a folded tent in one of the loft's half-dozen closets. "I guess he didn't go hiking after all."

"He wouldn't have taken those to Mount Baldy. Eugene takes trips to National Parks every summer - Crater Lake in Oregon last time. He stays at the cabin when he goes to Baldy."

"You didn't mention a cabin."

"Oh? It belonged to Grandfather Duran. But we called the San Bernardino Forest Rangers and they already checked it out: it was empty."

"Where is the cabin? Exactly."

"It's off Mount Baldy Road, in the Cucamonga Wilderness area. Why, Frank? The Rangers said..."

"I know, but I'll have to take a look. Can you show me on a map?"

*

There had been an unexpected four inches of snow that day, and he had tromped through it religiously. He was not a hunter, but he traveled on and off the trail with expertise, observing changes in the area since his last visit, and penciling notes in his journal. He kept the point sharp with a hunting knife he carried. He stopped to feed some small animals with granola from his knapsack, and set several salt licks from the supply in the cabin. The evening came early, as it always does in winter, and the wind off the glacier near Baldy picked up, so he went inside. Further snowfall was likely.

He drank water drawn from a well outside the cabin, lit a fire in the fireplace, and ate some of the packaged food he had carried with him. After his meal, he settled in with a book called Understanding Chaos. His hiking boots dried on the floor before the fire.

The woman arrived after six-thirty p.m. and she was out of her element. She was dressed warmly enough for a half-hour ski lesson at a tourist resort, but not to face the steel cold snow that the winds had brought down the mountainside. Her hiking boots were cosmetic, and brand new. She was in her thirties, attractive, and wore a black wig. She drove to the short cabin trail in a blue Jeep.

He answered her knock and welcomed her into his shelter. She was a stranger, apparently in distress, and he offered her tea - a jasmine Chinese from the cabin's provisions, packed by Yamamoto in Pasadena. They drank two cups apiece, and then something extraordinary happened: they moved to the large featherbed in one corner of the cabin and made love. Although a great deal of passion was spent in that bed, the woman did not remove her wig.

Just as unexpectedly, they left together in the night, returning to her Jeep parked at the end of the trail. He had planned to stay until the next morning, so the decision to leave must have been at her insistence.

True to the good habits of a woodsman, he properly doused the fire and disposed of most of his garbage at the compost heap on the way to the Jeep. Perhaps enthralled by his passionate partner, Eugene Duran left Understanding Chaos behind.

This was what I learned when I reconstructed the events immediately preceding the disappearance of Eugene Duran. The clues and signs were all still as fresh as the snow around his grandfather's cabin.

The black wig threw me for a while: I had forgotten that some expensive wigs are now made from synthetic hair. A long strand of otherwise inexplicable black fiber on the couch by the fireplace matched others under the blankets and pillows of the featherbed, however, and was thus explained.

The metal cups were not washed, but I believed they had been wiped of prints. There was a familiar smell in the residual tea of the cup without lipstick. I bagged them both and took them with me. I doubted that two cups of tea would have been shared had Eugene been expecting a passionate older woman to join him on his retreat, but she was not his style in any case. Zena had specifically insisted that her brother was a very intelligent, resourceful, and ultimately boring nerd.

A guy who takes the bus to Glendora, then hikes fifteen miles along a ridge road to camp out alone on Mount Baldy and read a book on computer art, isn't expecting a romantic evening.

For the rest, the San Bernardino Rangers gave the woman directions to the cabin trail at six ten p.m. She wore dark glasses and never got out of her Jeep, but they guessed she was in her thirties and said she wasn't dressed for a long stay. Her brand new boots made the smaller boot prints in the snow around the cabin.

There were little piles of granola and pencil shavings on the trails, and the featherbed was a mess.

When I got back to the Ranger Station, an urgent message was waiting from Zena:

"Come back at once. Someone shot my mother!"

CHAPTER TWO

It was easy enough dealing with Quinoles, but to tell him about a kidnapping that might not be a kidnapping? And while he was investigating an attempted homicide? I decided I should say nothing about Eugene's disappearing act. Luckily, Zenobia and her mother had already reached the same decision.

A gray Lincoln was on its way out of the Duran driveway as I arrived. It stopped next to the Dodge, and the driver's window powered down.

"Well, hello son," Doc Collins said. I knew he was genuinely pleased to see me. It had been a while since our art gangster case, and Doc is one of the few honest people in Los Angeles.

"House calls, Doc?" I asked. "The lady isn't dead, is she?"

"Not likely," Doc laughed. "Sylvia Duran is one tough cookie, Frank. I do make house calls on old favorites, by the way." He frowned slightly. "What's your interest? Mickey is too old to get stuck in trees any more."

"It's not the cat this time," I mumbled. I could tell my old friend anything, but there was a lady cop posted at the gate a few yards away. "It's a case I'm working on, Doc." He saw my glance at the cop and nodded.

"Ok, kid. If I can be of any assistance to those Indian ways of yours..." I remembered the tea.

"As a matter of fact, you can," I said, handing him the plastic bag with the two metal cups from the cabin. "I don't think there are any prints, but I could use a test on the residue in the one without the lipstick. The tea is pure Chinese jasmine, but I'm betting on additives."

"Sure, Frank." Doc grinned. "Want the boys to find out the lipstick brand?"

"Couldn't hurt," I grinned back.

"Then take two aspirin and call me in the morning," Doc said, powering his window back up.

*

A tall woman with red hair opened the front door. She was in her mid-thirties, and wore a clean sweatshirt announcing an affinity for the Lakers. She also wore tight blue jeans and a nice smile.

"Ah," she decided, "and you must be Zenobia's friend, Frank Yellowflower." Her eyes were very dark for a red head.

"You have the advantage," I said, stepping into the foyer. I heard voices from the overstuffed drawing room.

"I'm Janet Dougherty," she told me. "Zena was right about you." Without further explanation of this remark, she closed the front door and led me toward the voices. I stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Who's in there?"

"Well, all of them: Sylvia, Zenobia, and my brother Pierce. Versus the police captain and his people."

One voice in the drawing room immediately became familiar. It belonged to Ray Quinoles, Captain of the Sixth Precinct Homicide Squad. I followed Janet Dougherty inside, and Quinoles boomed discontent when he spotted me.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Janet stepped to one side, instinctively ducking shrapnel.

"Who is he?" a weaker voice asked. A woman who could only be Sylvia Duran was stretched on a sofa from hell in the center of the room. I thought of an operating theater in a nineteenth century hospital. Two of the men in blue, a policewoman, Zena, Quinoles,

and another, tall man attended her. Mrs. Duran wore a bandage on her left arm, and another as a headband. "And where's Collins?"

"The doctor left, Mother," Zena reminded her, looking right at me. "Don't you remember? Are you all right?"

"What is he doing here?" Quinoles asked the Durans again. I began an explanation, but they all ignored me.

"Frank is my boyfriend," Zena told Quinoles, causing his jaw to drop to the out of place Navajo rug beneath his flat feet. "He's a private detective too," she added, making things worse.

"I am not a private detective!" Quinoles ranted. "We are public servants, young lady!"

"Well," Zena said with a wink for me, "I asked him to come. I told you, mother."

"He's an Indian," Sylvia said crossly from the couch. "And he's rather old for you, dear."

"Pierce Dougherty," the tall man said, stepping forward to me with his paw outstretched.

"I am Mrs. Duran's attorney." I heard a warning in this introduction.

"Zenobia has mentioned you," I said with a look at my newly cast girlfriend. Zena shrugged.

Pierce Dougherty bore little resemblance to his sister, who had wandered to a silver tray of cooling coffee cups near the far door. The lawyer was in his forties, dressed in a six hundred dollar suit, and had dark hair and blue eyes. Sylvia Duran noticed his attitude too.

"That will do, Pierce." He winced at her command, but took it like an employee. Sylvia waved him out of the way to get a better look at me. "Come over here, Frank." I obliged, and she smiled up at me from the couch. "You stay for dinner, Mr. Native American. I think I like you. And I'm sure the Captain will be happy to cooperate with your investigation."

"Mrs. Duran!" Quinoles blurted in exasperation, but Sylvia was clearly in charge.

"That will be all for now, Captain. You've asked, and we've answered. We know nothing, and I'm certain all these people you brought with you know even less. Go look for clues in the garden, or whatever it is you do, but don't trample the flower beds: I have annuals arriving in the spring."

Quinoles gave up meekly, realized he had done so, and stomped out of the house with his blues. I hastily excused myself and followed, hoping to make amends. A crow on the lawn barked, but I was determined to keep Quinoles on my side.

"Quin!" I yelled. He was half way into the back of a cruiser.

"Look, Frank," he warned, "I don't know what you're doing in this part of town, but it isn't big enough for the both of us." The joke was intentional. Quinoles has a temper, but it cools quickly.

"What happened here, Quin? Or what did they tell you happened?"

"Oh, yeah," he sneered. "You were late for tea. Well, the story goes that the old broad was puttering, down on her saintly knees in the big garden, behind the house. She heard a noise, she said, and she stood up. Wham! A slug goes right through her arm. It misses the bone in all that wealthy flesh, but it knocks her over and she bangs her head on a pink concrete birdbath and is out for the count." He paused to settle into the black and white.

"Who found her?"

"Your 'girlfriend' heard the shot and got to her in seconds. Not that I'm falling for that bullshit about you, by the way. And I wouldn't go tossing her little butt too much if it were true. Miss Zenobia Duran has a rep as a local party favor. Juvenile had a field day with her a few years back, and a certain heiress we both know is bound to hear about it."

"Thank you, mother, but she's a client..."

"I knew that, wise guy. But you wanna surprise? I ain't even gonna ask you why. You just remember to call me if Sylvia Duran gets planted, ok? This is still my beat, Goddamnit!"

"What kind of a gun, Quin?"

"Huh? Well, we assume it was a pistol, although that's unofficial so far. Small caliber or it would have taken her old arm right off. Doc guessed a .22, and I'd say he was right." Quinoles waved at the house. "I got boys and girls trampling her precious annuals right now, lookin' for the slug."

"Nothing else?"

"Nah. From the angle of fire, we figure the shooter was standing on the other side of the brick wall at the back of the garden. But there's nothing back there - not even a print. It's a service alley." He looked tired. "The old broad was right about one thing. They know as much as we do!" He growled at the blue in front and the patrol car sped away.

*

Dinner was elegant, except for Leslie, who dropped the remaining contents of a large bowl of carrots on the Oriental dining room rug while clearing the table for dessert. I learned there were other servants on hand. An Armenian woman of fifty did the cooking and most of the serving. She was sober, not a live-in I was told, and quite good with roast duck. Sylvia Duran also employed an aging Italian chauffeur I never met.

Janet Dougherty didn't stay, but she took me aside before she left and made it quite clear that she agreed with Sylvia about my age gap with Zena. She also agreed I was likable, and gave me her phone number. Zena later explained that Janet frequently stopped by to gab. They were good friends, and the only benefit that Zena saw to her mother's choice of council. She called Janet's brother a weasel.

The weasel was also invited for dinner, however, and Sylvia was obviously quite taken in by his sanctimonious opinions on the subjects of gun control and her son Eugene. Zena

and I chewed the duck silently through most of it, while Pierce put the garden incident down to an accident and tried to convince us that Eugene was not a victim of anything.

"The shot was probably a neighbor's kid," he summed up, "playing with Daddy's pistol. And Eugene has undoubtedly wandered off to some national monument without telling us again."

"My brother," Zena interjected suddenly, "does not wander off! He is methodical and precise. Besides, he didn't take his tent." She looked to me for support and I shushed her with my eyebrows.

"Perhaps he bought a new tent, dear," Sylvia suggested. "He's always buying some new toy. That absurd robot plane, for example."

"He didn't buy that, Mother. He designed it."

"Yes, well..." Sylvia rose from the table, touching the bandage on her head with one hand. "I'm going to bed." She looked at me. "You think he has been kidnapped, don't you Frank?"

"Yes, ma'am, I think so. In a manner of speaking, at least."

"What does that mean?" Pierce Dougherty demanded.

"I need a little more information before I can explain," I answered. "I will have to meet Martin Duran."

Sylvia sat back down. Zena and Pierce both stared at me.

*

The Los Angeles County Coroner's Office is in downtown, near the Music Center. As a surviving edifice in a neighborhood the latter was supposed to rejuvenate, it sticks out like a memorial to the Roosevelt era. It is very brown, inside and out. Doc Collins, being a man of irreverent good humor and in love with the movies his town made famous, had

his office redecorated with Bugs Bunny wallpaper back in 1985 - at his own expense. He says Bugs keeps him sane.

"Traces of phencyclidine," Doc reported. "Not the kind of stuff you usually find in jasmine tea."

"I give up," I admitted.

"PCP to you, son. Some in both cups, but a whole lot more in the one without the lipstick. The woman was high, but her friend was tripping. The lipstick itself is not the drug store variety. More like something Liz Taylor would wear."

"How's that, Doc?"

"Custom stuff. Very expensive. Made from whale byproducts. Westmore invented it for MGM in the Fifties. Only movie people use it."

"What do you know about Martin Duran?"

"Decent, hardworking studio accountant who parlayed his contacts and became a TV producer. Has a mean form of cancer that kills very slowly and costs a fortune to treat."

"Can he afford the treatments?"

"Hard to say. He produced TV movies. They don't have as much rerun value as a series in this country. The estate in Malibu is a peach."

"Know his second wife?"

"Kitty Duran. She was a surprise. Twenty years younger and hot as sun to look at. I've met her a few times, yes. Typical of the beachfront crowd. Wax jobs for her French g-strings and cocktail parties Martin wouldn't go to if he could. Great boobs, if they're real."

"Is that why Martin divorced Sylvia?"

"Don't be naive, Frank. Sylvia's got great character, but she's a horrible, grasping bitch. Martin found a way out. Kitty came along and snapped him up. Too bad his kids couldn't have escaped with him. Sylvia's messed them up pretty badly."

*

I knew it would be difficult, but I had no choice. After ten minutes on Doc's phone with Martin Duran, I returned to the red brick house on Arden and dropped the bombshell. Zena was not pleased with me. In fact, none of them were pleased with me:

"I refuse!" Sylvia said. Pierce Dougherty glowered at her side.

"This is ridiculous!" he added.

"Well, Zena. What do you think of your young man now?" Sylvia asked. Zenobia looked at me like I had kicked her, but it was the wrong question to ask a daughter who has always needed to escape the claw of authority.

"I... think Frank knows what he's doing, Mother," she forced out. "We'd better do what he wants - for Eugene's sake."

*

Malibu is a quiet place in early evening, and we arrived in silence as well. Sylvia Duran's Cadillac limo fit us all comfortably. I had elected to drive, as it was the unseen Italian's day off. The gate to Martin Duran's estate opened to my request, and the Caddy purred up a winding hill. The main house was low and unpretentious for its kind. A Spanish maid opened the door and led us through an expensive, modern decor to a large veranda overlooking the Pacific. She wordlessly indicated the spotless, powder blue deck couch and matching chairs, and vanished through glass doors and billowing white curtains.

Martin Duran made his entrance a moment later, propelling himself in a motorized wheelchair.

"Oh, Martin. How could you?" Sylvia Duran said reflexively, but the sight of her ex-husband's condition drained the color from her face. The hardness drained with it, and her eyes softened. When I looked at Zenobia, I saw tears starting there as well.

Martin Duran was a withered husk. His skin was gray, his eyes black and sunken, and his hair was pure white and sparse. A tube ran from his chest to a tank mounted behind the wheelchair. His breath came in short, painful stabs.

Only Pierce Dougherty was unmoved by the emotion of the reunion. He refused to sit when the rest of us took our places. He said nothing when I introduced him.

"And this is my daughter?" Martin asked me. His voice was raspy and weak.

"Daddy..." Zena managed. She shrank back into her chair in confusion.

"Kitty will be with us in a minute," Martin said. "Maybe you'd like to..." He was cut short by the arrival of a blonde woman in a golden silk robe - his second wife. "Ah," he said.

I remembered standing once on a great plain of grass in Wyoming, a storm nearly broken overhead. The rain was in the air, but would not fall, and the breathtaking hesitation of the moment made it impossible to move to shelter, no matter the consequence.

"Good evening," Kitty Duran told her assembled guests. She wore dark glasses. No one said anything. "What is this all about, Marty?"

"I believe Mr. Yellowflower - this gentleman here - has a very serious matter to discuss, Kitty. You know who everyone else is, don't you?"

"Why, I don't believe so, Marty. I don't believe I know any of these people." To my great relief, Kitty Duran looked directly at Pierce Dougherty as she spoke.

"Yes, what is going on here?" Dougherty tried, but I took the floor.

"But of course you do, Mrs. Duran. Except for me, and I'm Frank Yellowflower. I'm a private detective, Mrs. Duran."

"Mr. Yellowflower?" Kitty Duran asked vacantly, her control lost. She removed the dark glasses and steadied herself against the back of a chair opposite Zena. Her voice dropped an octave into a mumble. "I'm sure..."

"The two Rangers you met will have no trouble identifying you," I continued, "even without the wig. And they take license numbers of anyone entering a wilderness area, Mrs. Duran. I have already traced the Jeep - to Mr. Dougherty's credit card."

Martin Duran backed his wheelchair slightly, and turned to look thoughtfully at his daughter.

"Paranoid moron!" Pierce Dougherty spat at Kitty. "Your damned card was too risky, right? You had to tie me into it!" He turned toward the glass doors, but he wasn't hard to stop.

"What are you going to do, Pierce?" I asked him. "Hitchhike up the Pacific Coast Highway? You'll have to walk home, remember?"

"Where is Eugene, Kitty?" Martin Duran, still looking at Zenobia, asked his wife. "Where is my son?"

*

Eugene Duran was found in a Century City hotel. He was heavily sedated with barbiturates and PCP, and handcuffed to a bed in a penthouse suite leased to Kitty Duran. Eugene was physically unharmed, although he did confirm later that he had a vague memory of losing his virginity at the mountain cabin.

As Doc Collins' lipstick test had given me the final clue, I was obliged to reconstruct the case for him in his Loony Tunes office a few days later. He interrupted a lot, but he always does.

"Pierce Dougherty was my first suspect," I said. "He was the only one outside the immediate family who had knowledge of the Thomas Duran codicil, and Zena was too close to her brother to be involved. She and her mother both had motive, as either might

stand to inherit, but they both had plenty of money from Sylvia's marriage to Martin and the marketing of Eugene's toys.

"I just couldn't figure out how Pierce could hope to profit from Eugene not inheriting. I almost gave up on him when I found evidence of a woman at the cabin with Eugene. If Kitty had only taken the time to rinse the metal cups after she wiped her prints, she might have succeeded. The tea bags said jasmine, but the smell was drugs."

"A woman with servants doesn't do dishes," Doc put in.

"Pierce was still a likely accomplice, because he would also know about Eugene's weekend retreats to the cabin. Then the Rangers helped me out. Mount Baldy is in the middle of a wilderness area, and they really do jot down plate numbers for safety reasons. They ran the Jeep for me before I left San Bernardino National Forest, and it was a rental. The Rangers even called the car agency and got Pierce's name and credit card number. You don't mess with Forest Rangers on their own turf, Doc."

"But how did you come up with Kitty Duran?"

"The lipstick. When you told me it was studio grade, it occurred to me that only Martin had any connection with the picture business. From what you told me about his condition, it seemed unlikely that he would be involved. I called him up and asked him if he knew his son was missing. He was very upset, and he confided that it was his second wife, Kitty, who had kept him from his children all those years. I asked him if she had ever been an actress. Pay dirt! They had first met on one of his productions when she was doing bit parts. He also confirmed that she owned a pistol."

"And Martin decided you were right about her? Just like that?"

"I don't think he liked his second wife any better than the first. The difference was that his illness kept him from escaping the second one."

"So, Pierce and Kitty planned to knock off Sylvia and the kids? Then they just had to wait for Martin to inherit the loot and die - unless they planned to pull the plug on Martin too."

"Right. Pierce had handled Sylvia's legal battle with Martin. He met Kitty Duran back then, and it takes a con artist to know a con artist. When he found out about the Hughes debentures, he called up Kitty and suggested that they split a fortune. She knew Martin's illness was eating up her own inheritance. Here was a new prize, just a few simple steps away."

"But why didn't she kill Eugene at the cabin?"

"She probably intended to: she put most of the PCP in his cup. In that state, he would do anything. Maybe she was planning to push him off a steep part of the trail, or just take him out into that snowy night and leave him to freeze to death. She was a user herself, however, and she couldn't resist a taste. Then Eugene lit up like a Christmas tree: PCP is a psychedelic. Imagine Einstein on acid. He must have mesmerized her, babbling on about chaos and nature. She was attracted to her husband's son."

"Sounds like she was the one who was seduced. Brains over beauty."

"She didn't know what to do with him after they made it together. It was too hard to kill him, so she enticed him to the hotel in Century City and hyped him with barbiturates to keep him on ice. I don't think Pierce knew about that.

"She went right on to step two of the plan and took a shot at Sylvia in the garden. But Sylvia heard a noise just before the trigger was pulled and stood up, which spoiled Kitty's aim. After that, Kitty realized things weren't going as planned at all. She was probably doing hits of the junk all along the way, and now she was really getting confused. She was out on a limb."

"So she decided to let it all ride and went back to the beach."

"Right again, but I think Pierce would have forced the issue before long. All of the Durans were still in danger."

"Zena would have been the next target," Doc suggested, putting his feet up on his desk.

"Which reminds me," I said. "I have a date for lunch."

*

Zenobia Duran had never looked better. We met at a little Thai place on Cahuenga, sipped tea, and played with the glass noodles on our plates. The attraction had died away, but we were friends.

"Ok, Mr. Detective," Zena said, grinning. "I have a confession to make."

"What's that, ma'am?" I asked, doing a bad Jack Webb impression.

"I never really knew how Mickey the cat got way up in that tree. Persian cats don't really fly, do they?" She was like a kid again, and a nicer, happier kid.

"No," I told her, "but all cats try to catch onto things that do. Mickey tried to be cunning, but he never really understood his prey. He reasoned that he could climb, and therefore he could trap the bird by cornering it on a branch - if only he was high enough. By the time he was, of course, the bird wasn't, and the way back was lost as well."

The End