

PERILOUS OPTIONS

By

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CHAPTER ONE

I lit a cigarette and exhaled into the dark wind. A tiny fleck of tobacco stung my lower lip, and I picked it off. It was a subconscious gesture after all those years of tiny flecks. Legendary rats kept red-eyed vigil in the tall palms lining Sunset Boulevard. Huge crows - more admirable than the rats, and some much older than me - hopped and perched on the edges of crumbling office buildings.

I find the sixty-year life span of the crow fascinating: what do they think of human progress in the latter half of the twentieth century? Were some of them here when the stars trouped into the Garden of Allah or sipped champagne at the Hollywood Hotel? Or does the crow use his allotted time more wisely, winging the world in ebony insolence?

Crows may not be easy to tell apart, but they're not all alike, you know. Like humans, the young are curious and quick-tempered. The old are creatures of habit, and very sure of themselves.

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I headed up Vine to the famous corner where no one was ever discovered. One of my shadow friends, high on a windowsill of the Equitable Building, cawed three times. No betrayal here, I thought. As I ground my cigarette into the sidewalk, carefully avoiding a famous star of radio, I heard a distant reply.

Don Juan told Castaneda to beware three crows over the left shoulder. Impending demise of the beholder, he said. Or was that the right shoulder? I remember seeing a row of seven on a Western Avenue billboard the day before the NASA shuttle burned up a few years ago. Seven passengers died. Would those crows have been a sign to an old Indian?

Rats, at least, know nothing. I took consolation in that as a black shape soared overhead in the moonlight. I reached my destination: Raji's, a punk club where less mystical intentions are played out. I hesitated in the doorway while the tattooed biker bouncer

shuffled previously accumulated gate in his little gray metal box. Not that Raji's was doing a particularly raging business that Sunday night, but the bouncer was apparently so loaded that he felt the need to recount the cash before every new admission.

I had a moment to survey the assorted hardcore fans in Raji's upstairs bar. My client wasn't there, so I slapped the biker with a five and waited for the ink smear on my right hand. A girl with purple streaks and blue eyes gave me a stare as I passed through the room to the staircase. She had legs - a bit skinny, but nice - under her torn black nets.

The upstairs bar is the first floor of an ancient residential hotel, and the music is below in a concrete basement about the size of an average middle class rec room. The stairway is the only way in or out, as the rest of the basement is a boiler room for the hotel. As Raji's management doesn't exactly enforce city occupancy laws, any top local group can turn the concrete bunker into a claustrophobic's nightmare.

The bandstand was temporarily vacant. A few wiped-out fans wandered the room, lost between sets, and a few others smoked and drank at tables along the opposite end of the room. Jackson McKenney was there, having staked a claim on an entire table. He gripped a bottle of Bud in one fat fist, sitting with his considerable bulk against the wall. He was my client, but I had only one reason to maintain that relationship. You can bet it wasn't his sweating three hundred pounds or pork personality that brought me to Raji's.

"You got the money, McKenney?" I asked when I reached his table.

" 'Course I do, Frank," the fat man uttered. "Said I would, didn't I? Wanna beer?"

I have nothing against people of large bulk as a rule, but I knew McKenney from years back when he was closer to average size and I don't like self-destructive displays. Some people have glandular problems, and others eat as a hobby. McKenney was plainly trying to kill himself. Maybe he had good reason. He'd once been a successful movie agent, but his success had ruined his reputation. Now he owned a burger joint on Hollywood Boulevard.

"No thanks," I said, pulling a folding chair up to the table. I considered another cigarette, but the atmosphere in the basement was dense enough. I'm trying to cut down. "Your message said a missing person. What's the deal?" McKenney took a sloppy swig on his Bud and made a disgusting noise in his throat.

"A woman," he said, searching the floor around his side of the table. I hoped he wouldn't spit. He didn't, which was equally disgusting. "Name's Julie."

"I'll need a bit more to go on than that," I said. "And the money, of course." McKenney frowned, and began the process of extracting his wallet from somewhere under the tabletop. "One of your waitresses at Burger Dog?" I asked.

He looked up, his mission for my retainer not completed. The street knows his story, but Jackson McKenney prefers to maintain a myth. The missing Julie was not an employee of Burger Dog, he informed me, but a promising actress in whom he had an interest. Her full name was Carole Juliette Zinko, although she had worked under other names for professional reasons. He added that she had made several motion picture appearances - which translates to bit parts, probably non-speaking - and was recently signed for an important role in a network mini-series. The latter was the reason he needed to find her, he said.

"Your ten percent?" I assumed. "And why don't you call the cops?"

"I am her personal manager, Frank. And I don't like the cops any more than you do. She is missing, and a potentially important talent. What does my own meager percentage compare to such a lost opportunity for Julie? Money is, after all, the least of my worries."

"Not the least of mine," I said, reminding him of his quest to find the wallet inside his mountains of flab. While he struggled, I reminded myself that personal managers get as much as twenty-five percent. The fat man finally finished his dance, and I took notes while he worked on the song.

*

An hour later, after stopping to spend a frugal part of McKenney's two-fifty retainer for a late dinner at a falafel stand, I picked up my Dodge from the garage space I lease under a Sunset Boulevard bank and took off for the Pacific Coast Highway. I had all the details I needed to make a stab at a legit investigation, and that was all I planned to do for Jackson McKenney's money. He had hired me once before on a case - involving one of his clients, blackmail, and drugs - and that one had landed me in a Beverly Hills hot tub with the LAPD. I didn't need another bath. The idea was to take McKenney's retainer and wind things up fast.

Julie Zinko had been missing for about two weeks from a section of Malibu reserved for Hollywood hopefuls with bank accounts. McKenney said that her father was a wealthy New York manufacturer, and she was a rich kid who had no reservations about soaking Daddy for whatever she could get. Julie had been in town for three years, which is past the usual saturation point for young girls who think they are Monroe reborn or young boys who want to be James Dean. She lived with another actress-in-waiting named Karen Fuller, which is a better movie name than Zinko. The roomie also turned out to be much more desirable company than McKenney.

I had to walk along the Malibu shoreline with my shoes off for a while before I found the address, set in about a hundred yards from the ocean. It was a single story job, with a little front porch and a picture window facing the beach.

"Hi. I'm Karen," an auburn-haired beauty said when I rang her bell. The house was bright and cheerful in the moonlight, like its occupant. "Mr. McKenney said you'd be by to ask about Julie. He's her new agent, I guess. She told me she was always changing agents. Come on in." I noted Karen hadn't dressed formally for our interview. In fact, her little peach terry cloth jump suit was the best thing that had happened to me so far that night.

"Frank Yellowflower." I grinned openly at her peaches. It was clumsy, but she didn't mind and grinned right back. Actresses! God love 'em! "Do you have a picture of Julie? McKenney didn't have one when he hired me."

"That's an unusual name, Mr. Yellowflower," Karen noted, leading me into her living room. She picked a framed photo off a modern blue and white coffee table that fit the beach locale. I looked at a frosty blonde in a silver, one-piece swimsuit. She had long legs and an obvious Hollywood potential. "Here you go. That's Juliette. Would you like a drink?" I knew what she was thinking.

"My parents were hippies," I said, "and I'll have a Diet Coke, if you've got one." It was cute, but she wasn't going for it.

"No way! You look Indian." There was a small bar in one corner with a little refrigerator. I watched as she retrieved the soda and a bottle of imported ale for herself. "Besides, you're, uh, older than that, aren't you?"

"Quite a bit. And part Menominee, actually. They're a tribe in Wisconsin. Mostly I'm white bread." I accepted the Coke and we settled in opposite cyan wicker chairs. "What can you tell me about your missing roommate?"

"I don't know much that can help you, Mr. Yellowflower. I just moved in a month ago. By the way, is Mr. McKenney a good agent? I'm thinking of changing mine."

"He's just a client," I said diplomatically. I didn't like McKenney, but there was no reason to deplore him to a stranger. "Call me Frank," I added, trying not to be one.

"Frank..." Karen mused. "Frank Yellowflower, I like that. But I'm not so sure that Julie's all that missing exactly."

"McKenney seems to think so," I said. It was a surprise. Maybe I could wrap this up sooner than I'd expected. "I understand Julie was supposed to start work on a TV mini-

series this month. Do you know where she is?" Karen smiled winningly and leaned forward.

"Well, Frank. Juliette is spacey, I'd say. Like the hippies, you know? She was always in and out."

"But she does live here?"

"Yes, but Juliette gets around - if you know what I mean?"

"Ok. You're saying you don't know her very well, she is your roommate, she does drugs, and she sleeps around. Is that it? Oh, and she's rich, so the money from the TV jobs probably doesn't matter very much?"

"You catch on quick, Frank - she's my opposite number, really - except for the acting: she really does want to be a star."

"You haven't heard from her in two weeks. You don't think that's unusual?"

"Well, no. I mean, yes, I guess. She was gone for a few days right after I moved in, but she turned up. She did leave me a number where she could be reached that time. In case a job came in - you know." She smiled warmly. "She was already signed for this job before she left. In any case, I don't think she'll turn up tonight, Frank."

"So she packed up and left two weeks ago, without saying where or why?"

"Not exactly..."

"She didn't pack anything?" I guessed. Karen had very nice eyes, but I wasn't getting lost in them.

"Nothing that I noticed, Frank."

"Was that less than usual too? I mean the other time..."

"Listen, Frank. Maybe I should tell you something."

I wish you would, I thought. "I wish you would," I said.

"I'm really attracted to Native Americans."

"Older men too," I supposed. My case was going nowhere. I couldn't decide if Karen was trying to dissuade me, confuse me, or seduce me, but I had no objection to the latter. I decided to hang around the beach to see if I could learn more.

*

I rolled over just in time to become a material witness. I saw Karen in the moonlight through a doorway. She was standing naked in front of the living room picture window, looking out at the ocean. I was in her bedroom, tangled in powder blue silk sheets, and I propped myself up on one elbow to call to her. I saw a glint of red light on the fresh bottle of ale she held in her hand, and I heard her draw in a sudden breath. There was a sharp crack, the back of her head exploded, and the window turned into a shower of glass.

*

I was surprised when the other LAPD detectives all seemed to know me. Lieutenant Quinoles had been the cop in the hot tub with me in Beverly Hills - which is another story for another time - but I didn't know the other guys. I get mostly small-time stuff, like process serving or following spouses. The old McKenney case I mentioned was what they really remembered because the blackmailer offed herself in the end, some of the people being blackmailed were in the rich, movie crowd, and the case got press. That was suicide, of course, not homicide, but I suppose even police detectives read the papers.

I was questioned briefly before lunch, but Quinoles believed me when I said I didn't know what the hell had happened. I used a contact at the City Coroner's office to find out. It was a single bullet that passed through the picture window and Karen Fuller's brain,

probably fired from a high-powered rifle at close range. I had mentioned the red light to Quinoles, but it wasn't until I talked to him later that we realized it was a laser pinpoint. It had been a professional's weapon.

Nothing added up, but I knew one thing: Karen had been trying to seduce me, but not to dissuade or confuse me. Too bad she succeeded so easily.

*

The story was too late for the morning news, but it made the afternoon edition of the L.A. Times. "Actress Shot In Malibu", they said, with a typical lack of style. The biggest paper in Los Angeles doesn't have many good writers outside of Entertainment.

I had tried to find Jackson McKenney all morning, but he had vanished. Quinoles' boys were looking for him too. I'd given them almost everything I had, because I'm a public minded citizen at heart, and nobody wants a killer on the loose. I didn't think McKenney was the rifleman, and I doubted Quinoles did either, but the fat man knew more than he had told me at Raji's. If I found him first, I might have a clue as to what was really going on, but if the cops got him he might never tell me.

I hoped the LAPD would figure it all out and find the rifleman before I did, but I couldn't count on it. I only held back a few things that Karen had told me in bed about Julie Zinko. It was only our first date, but I had decided to take her death personally.

*

A crow perched on the second story roof of the new Hollywood Library. The big bird gazed in my direction as I walked down Ivar, and I stared back hard and made the little cluck sound I learned talking to scrub jays. Even at that distance, the crow reacted and switched from two eyes to one the way they do. I smiled, but said hello silently to avoid upsetting a wild-eyed older client of the County welfare system who was sitting in the

middle of the sidewalk making noises of his own. The same trick works on hawks, by the way.

Inside the library, I looked up the name Zinko in various social registers and business directories. McKenney had been right: Carole Juliette Zinko was of major capitalist breeding stock. Daddy Zinko, a.k.a. Julius Werner Zinko, was worth about seven hundred million cashed in. How Daddy made all his loot was more interesting to a guy who nets less than a tenth of a percent of that in two years: Zinko was an arms maker. A little additional research at the Glendale Gunshop told me that high-powered rifles with laser sights were very much a part of the Zinko family of fine death bringers.

I tried Burger Dog, but its enormous owner was not there, so I made my next scheduled stop at the Cahuenga Actor's Playhouse, to investigate one of those little things Karen told me before she got her brains blown out in Malibu.

*

Bobby Lee was a familiar face to television viewers everywhere. I don't watch cop shows, but even I knew Lee had done tall, Nordic tough guy cops in at least two series in the last ten years. I had also read about his more recent cocaine bust and subsequent community service sentence, but I hadn't read about his romantic connection to Julie Zinko.

Julie had "studied" with Bobby Lee at CAP, as the Playhouse was called on the local theater circuit. He was a valuable teacher, according to Karen, but mostly because his sister was a major casting agent. That was one of the reasons Julie had dated him, Karen told me. Cocaine was the other reason.

CAP was appropriately located on Cahuenga Boulevard, above Franklin, in a little row of dilapidated storefronts. I noticed the class schedule on the front door. It was a one-man show for Bobby Lee.

"Come in, come in," Bobby griped from an uncluttered desk in his office. To me, no paper means no business. "I already told your guys everything a week ago."

"My guys?" I enquired. "You mean the cops, Mr. Lee?"

"Call me Bobby. Not cops. Aren't you one of Zinko's heavies?"

"Nope. But I am trying to find his daughter for her agent. She's up for a part."

"Oh. So you're a private dick? Hey, that's cool, then. I'm doing one next season. He flies around L.A. in a chopper. Slick idea, huh? You could help my character research. Sit down, uh...?"

"Frank." I stood. "Do you know where Julie Zinko is?"

"Nah, I only heard she was missing from the bruisers last week. Like I told them, we haven't dated since my bust. I promised the old man. I'm good to my word. A character point, Frank: are you an honest private eye?"

"I can be. Your cocaine bust was last year. What old man?"

"Zinko. This ain't for the press, Frank, ok? The old man is very powerful in Washington. He's the one who busted me. He knew Julie was seeing me, and he knew we both had the habit. So he told the FBI to raid my place one night when she wasn't there. To scare her off drugs, supposedly. I had to pull a lot of strings to fix that community service deal. Old man Zinko didn't like me getting off so easy. He sent some of his boys around to see me. I promised to keep away from her."

"Did you?"

"Yeah, and I don't miss her a bit."

"Do you know her roommate?"

"No. She didn't have one when we were dating." His blonde features had grown paler. I sensed Bobby Lee was practicing his profession.

"Karen Fuller?" I suggested. "The dead one?"

"Huh?" he maintained ignorance. It was not out of his range.

"Catch today's papers, Bobby. Where were you at four sixteen this morning?"

"I was home in Brentwood. Asleep."

"Alone?"

"This interview is over, Frank."

*

I had to hustle out to Burbank before the rush hour traffic completely jammed the Cahuenga Pass. I took the old road that ran alongside the Hollywood Freeway. When the talkies were young, a galaxy of stars drove this single lane back and forth from town to the big studios. Now it is battered concrete traveled by ghosts, or knowing locals from four to six or when there is a concert at The Hollywood Bowl.

The Dodge looked out of place parked in the lot behind what is called "the black tower" by employees of the most major studio in town. Any other day I might have taken advantage of my gate pass to sneak around the sound stages, but I had an appointment. I elevated to the top floor of the aforementioned ebony office tomb and faced an aging male receptionist in a chromium waiting room.

"I have a meeting with Raymond Vogel," I told him. I was in the right place, being unfashionably early, and was instructed to sit on a puce couch with copies of Advertising Age, Variety, and Business Week. I was here because of another of those little things Karen Fuller told me before she got wasted at the beach house: Raymond Vogel was the producer who signed Julie Zinko for the mini-series. The fact that both Jackson

McKenney and I had previous dealings with Vogel made the appointment important. McKenney had never mentioned Vogel to me at Raji's.

Eventually, a secretary to Mr. Vogel's secretary appeared, transferred me into a plush executive office suite, and seated me on a vinyl couch with copies of Wired, Fortune, and an unexpected Map To The Stars Homes. I thumbed the latter, noting that Jack Benny's house was still on the map decades after his death.

"Frank!" a cheerless male voice echoed on the mahogany walls. Ray Vogel slithered across off-white carpeting to greet me like a relative. We had only met twice before, and he probably didn't remember anything but the name.

"Mr. Vogel," I said to cut through unnecessary amenities. He blinked, understanding that I was not a client or potential backer, and pulled a tight grin. "The Curtiz blackmail case?" I reminded him. I was amazed at his reaction.

"Of course! Now I remember! The only Indian private detective in Hollywood! Come on in, Frank!" The biggest producer of TV movies in the business shook my hand warmly, patted my shoulder, and escorted me into his conservative brown leather office. His desk was buried in paper.

"I hope there are no hard feelings about the Curtiz case?" I asked. It is wise to clear the air before invading new territories.

"No way, Frank. It had to come out. McKenney suffered. Curtiz killed herself. We lost a few deals. Water under the bridge, pal." He offered drinks and we both passed.

"I'm here about Julie Zinko..."

"Wait a minute, Frank. Hold on, now. I got something to talk to you about first. I've been chewing this one over and over since that Curtiz thing: how'd you feel about being a TV hero, my friend?" He sat down behind his desk and put both hands flat on top of the pile of paperwork.

"A what?" I inquired. I had a feeling I knew what he was doing, but we don't get bought out with beads and firewater anymore.

"Well, a series idea. Based on you, Frank: a full-blooded Indian P.I. in the big city. You know. I could give you a 'from an idea by' credit and make you a technical advisor." I was right. He was trying to play out his line, so I snapped it.

"I'm not full-blooded, Mr. Vogel. What can you tell me about Julie Zinko?" The grin returned for a moment, like a Please Stand By, and then vanished with the offer of stardom.

"Not much gets by you, does it Frank?" He shuffled his papers. "I have very little to add to what we've all heard on the news. This Zinko woman is a missing heiress who is also an actress. Isn't that correct? There was a shooting out in Malibu, or something?"

"She's under contract to you, Mr. Vogel. A mini-series that begins work this month?" He didn't blink.

"Zinko? No. Are you sure? I've got a lot of projects. Where did you get this?"

"Carole Juliette Zinko. Blonde. Big role. I got it from Jackson McKenney. She's his client, as a matter of fact."

"Juliette? Now that rings a bell, let me see." He turned to a laptop computer on a shelf behind him and checked some files. "Ah. Juliette Randall, that was it. This her, Frank?" He propped the laptop between us. There was a digitized photo of Julie on the screen.

"The very same." I made a note of the name change in the little spiral I carry.

"Not McKenney's, though, Frank. She's got William Morris, or, no, it's IEC. See?" He had punched a key and a window confirmed that Juliette Randall was represented by the world's largest agency. "Nice girl, by the way. Cast her myself from a video they sent me. Didn't even know she was missing, much less an heiress. I'm working on a new series this

week, and I'm up to my ears as you can see." He looked down at his desk. "Big role. Have to look for someone to replace her if she doesn't show up by next week," he added.

"From what happened in Malibu, I think you'd better start looking," I told him. "The lady may be permanently unavailable. You don't know anything else that I might be able to use to find her?"

"Didn't really know her." He shrugged. "So what's this all about, Frank? Some Arab arms connection or something?"

"Beats me," I lied. I was beginning to get some ideas. "I don't suppose you'd mind telling me where you were at four sixteen this morning?"

"Not at all. I was on my way to a location in Gorman. It's for the series I was talking about. We're shooting some special sequences out there every morning this week."

"Pretty early for a Monday, Mr. Vogel. Where did you say?"

"We all get up early in this business, Frank. It's a little town out off Route 5. Gorman. We use it for exterior work. I arrived on the set just before five a.m. The director and crew can vouch for me. Good enough alibi, Frank?"

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Vogel."

"Same here, Frank," Raymond Vogel said, rising and extending a paw. "Let me know what happens." I wondered if it was true about white guys and forked tongues. "Be sure to think on that series idea, ok?"

Yep. I guess it is true.

CHAPTER TWO

I dropped McKenney as a client on the way back into Hollywood, but I wasn't dropping the case. Things were getting thicker - thanks to Karen, who was now my client in memorial. I owed her that much for not keeping her longer occupied beneath those powder blue silk sheets.

Jackson McKenney had lied to me about his client being his client. Or Raymond Vogel had lied to me about McKenney's client not being McKenney's client. If the former were true, McKenney had probably hired me to find Juliette Zinko for somebody else. If the latter, Vogel knew something more about Julie than he admitted knowing.

Juliette Zinko would have the answer, but she was as missing as ever. I could check with the IEC agency, but it was after business hours, so I began to look for McKenney again. First stop was the dusty tenth floor of the Equitable Building, where he had always kept a pigeonhole office. The door was locked, and no sounds inside. I knew he lived in town, but there was no Jackson McKenney in the phone books. There were three numbers for J. McKenney, and two didn't answer, so I spent several hours hunting them down in vain. After one more pass at Burger Dog, I adjourned to our original meeting place.

*

Raji's is "dark" on Mondays - that's showbiz for no live music - with no cover charge. In spite of the late hour, there were a few loyal patrons in the upstairs bar. I asked the hippie bartender for a Diet Coke in a can and if he had seen the fat man. His reply indicated that McKenney was a regular. I sat at the bar, staring at the sawdust on the floor, and analyzed the case. I had a lot of facts, but no way to add them up. I decided to consult an authority.

Jenny Parkhurst is like the crow: she perches and she watches. She has outlived long forgotten eras of Hollywood, and all of her famous rivals. She is a gossip columnist of high repute, and she has a mind like a Cray computer. Raji's jukebox began to play "Friend Of The Devil" by the Grateful Dead. I slid into the wooden pay phone booth and

quizzed Jenny. It was a little late to call, she said, but she unraveled my loose ends anyway - and created a few more:

"Starlet Juliette Randall, a.k.a. Zinko, and producer Raymond Vogel?" I asked.

"Anything unusual?"

"Yes. I'd say so, Frank. A five-movie option is very unusual in the network television business these days. Especially with Ray Vogel."

"Hmm," I said. No one had mentioned options before. "How about Juliette and Bobby Lee?"

"Well, they were an item until the drug thing. He blamed her for that, Frank. Big public fight at Bono's. No details though. I don't eat Italian."

"Not an item anymore?"

"Bobby Lee prefers older women now. One in particular, but I'm not telling you who, Frank."

"Does Bobby Lee know Vogel?"

"Of course. Ray is the executive producer of Bobby's new comeback series."

"Interesting. The flying detective show. Any other ties?"

"Well, Ray took dope himself, you know. Money breeds bad habits, Frank. He was wired - that's right, isn't it? - until the house of cards almost fell on him. You had something to do with that, Frank. The Curtiz case? They say he's cleaned up his act."

"One more, Jenny: Julius Werner Zinko, Juliette's father."

"Familiar, but I can't place him..."

"East coast. Arms manufacturer. Government contracts, I'd guess."

"Not my beat. I have to cut this short, Frank. I make my New York calls at six a.m. You are a day person, aren't you, Frank?"

"Next time I'll call after breakfast, Jenny."

"Good, Frank. I like a man who gets up early. I'll be here. Good night, Frank." She was always there - like the crow.

*

It appeared that Carole Juliette Zinko was either in hiding or as dead as her former roommate. I was pretty sure the bullet Karen Randall took through her brain had a different address on it, and it wasn't likely it had been for me. As McKenney might know why the shot had been fired at all, I had no alternative but to stay put at Raji's. I hoped he might still make an entrance. Besides, the bar stayed open all night.

Julie knew Raymond Vogel, who had been mixed up in a messy blackmail and drugs case I knew about first hand. That could be coincidence, I thought, except for the fat man, who had also been involved in the same mess.

Julie was also familiar with cocaine, attested to by her dead roommate and the efforts of her father to separate her from Bobby Lee, her actor-dealer boyfriend. Bobby was also about to start work on a project with Vogel, and he had a grudge against Julie.

Julie's father manufactured sophisticated rifles of the type used in Karen's killing.

Bobby had a questionable alibi. I had reasons of my own for suspecting Vogel was involved, but his alibi was sound: a road map in the Dodge showed me that Gorman was at least ninety minutes from Malibu. Vogel could not have fired a rifle at Karen at four sixteen and driven to his location set by five a.m.

Those were the pieces, but I needed a motive. I lit a cigarette and began the puzzle again from another angle. If Julie's father was powerful enough to manipulate the FBI...

I had fitted the pieces in a new way, when a soft purple streak interrupted me. Buy me a beer, it said, and I blinked at torn net stockings under a black micro. I looked up into blue contacts covering eyes that were big and tired. I had passed on her the previous night, when I hadn't a clue, but now I knew she was just what I needed.

"Ok, if you think you should," I lectured, tapping my Diet Coke with one finger. It was a conversation starter.

"You don't drink," she mused, "so why do you come in here? You're not a dealer. Not the type. Not looking for sex. Not a sleaze. Don't look like a cop, but you take it all in. A writer?"

"What drinks beer at Raji's and weighs three hundred pounds?" I asked in return. The blues were fake, but the eyes were intelligent. They registered an answer to my riddle. I smiled. She smiled. I bought her a beer and steered her into corner booth.

"I know him," she said cautiously, sitting across from me. "My name's Jade." I nodded.

I had already confirmed that her legs weren't as skinny as I had first thought: nearly perfect, in fact. She was medium height in spike heels, and over twenty-two. She wore tight black clothes, short hair, pale make-up, no lipstick, and black eye liner under her eyes. The hair was died black and purple. It was a standard uniform of LA after-hours clubbers, but she did it too precisely.

"I'm Frank. Know where he is now?"

"You're Amerindian, aren't you?" she asked, and I laughed. Nobody uses the newspeak word for Indian. "Oh," she added with embarrassment. That blew the rest of her image: punks don't worry about offending anybody.

"It's ok," I said. "You're right. I'm part Menominee. You didn't answer my question."

"He lives here," she said. "Third floor. But he waddled out hours ago."

I didn't laugh because she had relaxed and it was time to wind things up: "You live here too, don't you?"

"Lately," she gave me a frown. "You are a cop?"

"Private detective," I told her, reaching out one hand. "I was hired to find you." She started to get up fast and I had to grab her wrist hard to sit her back down. "By McKenney," I added. "Relax."

"Why would he do that?" Carole Juliette Zinko asked me. She dropped her act quickly. "He knows where I am."

"He didn't when he hired me. Last night, remember?"

"That's true," she admitted. "I saw you come in last night. Before I let him know I was here. But how..."

"It's a good disguise, but Karen showed me the bathing suit picture in your living room." I shrugged down at the table space between us. "The one with all the legs." I'm a leg man, with no apologies. Julie sighed and took a swig of her beer.

"Poor Karen. God, I hardly even knew her! That bastard!"

"Who, Julie?" There were no tears, but she wasn't that kind of woman.

"Bobby Lee, I think. It must have been him. They'll get him. I'm going to put him away."

"That's what it's all about, isn't it: cocaine and the Feds? You're going to testify." I was guessing, but it was the only answer.

"Yeah. I'm going to burn him. The idea was to save my career. You know, clean up my image. But now..."

"I get it. It was McKenney's idea, wasn't it, when he found out about your relationship with Bobby Lee? Bobby was part of a much bigger thing than the Feds had originally realized. A bigger thing that the fat man knew all about."

"That's right, and Jackson wanted me to do it right away. I had just gotten signed to a big deal..."

"Raymond Vogel."

"Yes. And Jackson said it was time to clean up. He's my personal manager. So we called my dad, and he told me who to go to at the FBI."

"But after you talked to the Feds you disappeared..."

"I got scared. Jackson was so sure that it would turn out ok, but I kept thinking about what Bobby would do. They were having me go up before a special session Grand Jury. Bobby threatened me after he got out the first time. There was a big scene..."

"The blow-up at Bono's..."

"Yes. You do your homework, Frank. It was kept out of the papers, but the word got out that we were both cokeheads. My career started to skid..."

"Raymond Vogel signed Juliette Randall to a five picture deal. Doesn't sound very downhill to me."

"That was a miracle. I don't really know how it happened. He said he saw my test for IEC. I was using Juliette Randall with them. Maybe Mr. Vogel never even knew about me and Bobby."

"Don't count on it," I said. I knew better, but there were still some loose threads dangling. I told Julie to stay put and I hit the phone booth to make the first of two cooperative calls to Quinoles and the LAPD. The fat man turned up a few hours later.

*

Jackson McKenney was apologetic. It was out of character. I almost felt sorry for him, but I kept thinking of Karen dying in the moonlight.

"I am sorry, Frank," he was saying again. "I was just protecting my percentage, like you said. If I had known..." He was fishing for his wallet, uncomfortably seated on a normal sized chair in his hotel room above Raji's. His twenty-five percent - Julie Zinko - was perched on the bed.

"Why don't you just stand up and save me some time?" I was in a hurry, and I knew he still wasn't leveling. The fat man had more answers than I needed, but Quinoles was on his way to meet me in front of Raji's in a few minutes. I wasn't feeling polite.

"I just didn't want to be the next target, Frank" he whined, pulling himself and his wallet out of the chair. He handed me a larger-than-life fee.

"That's why I'm collecting, McKenney. Just in case you are." We watched him shiver. It was like three hundred pounds of unhappy Jello. "Come on, Juliette," I told her, "You'll be a whole lot safer with the Feds."

*

Quinoles is a good cop, and he was right on schedule. He sent Julie downtown to the Federal Building in a black and white, and motioned for me to join him in his unmarked Ford. Two monsters from Homicide were in front. I was surprised when we just sat there on Hollywood Boulevard.

"What about Bobby Lee?" I asked.

"We've got him, Frank," Quinoles said, "and you were right: he's not the shooter. He was in bed like he told you. You were right about the witness too. He's got one, she is

married, and we believe her. So what are we up to? What are these loose ends you were babbling about on the phone?"

"I don't babble, Quinoles." I stared him down easily. "Shouldn't we be moving along to Burbank?"

"Ok, ok. Not so fast, hotshot. You found the missing heiress and the Feds will get their coke connection. You oughta' get a medal. Everybody oughta' get a medal. You also got me out of bed to make the pickups. It's four a.m., for God's sake! We go no further until I know what's happening. Talk to me, Frank."

"What about the other guy and the NRA? You checked it out?"

"Yeah. He's been a member for thirty years. Military record also checked out. The guy knows guns, Frank, but lot's of people do. He's a big man in this town. What would be his motive? I don't get the logic, and besides, the alibi he gave you is tight."

"Head for Burbank Airport," I told the driver. Quinoles sighed and nodded his permission.

"This had better not be a long shot, Frank," he added. I filled him in on the way. It wasn't entirely a long shot: I've been knocking around Tinseltown long enough to be a lay expert on the movie business, and there are plenty of rats crawling around the old back lots. I've also met a few who pass for executives in the front office. Dope is a steady date for some of them, and it's big bucks for others. The Maggie Curtiz case exposed some of both, but everybody involved knew the biggest rats got away with the cheese.

Raymond Vogel hadn't arrived when we parked out on the tarmac, but his production company's private helicopter was there on the Burbank Airport pad and ready for him. The airport people confirmed that Vogel had used the chopper the previous morning. Mr. Vogel didn't need a pilot, we were told. He'd been licensed as a pilot for years.

The puzzle had fallen into place after I talked to Jenny Parkhurst. Jenny was a survivor as a columnist because she had her loyalties. Jenny refused to name Bobby Lee's latest conquest, which equaled a married woman with Bobby the night of Karen's death. Confirmed by Quinoles, this explained his own unwillingness to name a witness to his alibi, and eliminated him as the rifleman.

I also figured that Vogel might be a major coke importer who got away in the Curtiz case. His role as Bobby Lee's executive producer clinched it: the new series was a payoff for silence. Bobby was not exactly a hot commodity in Tinseltown.

Neither was Juliette Zinko, and Raymond Vogel had signed her to a deal with options. This might have happened to an unknown in the old days, but not in the sagging world of network television. Vogel knew who Julie was and that her father had busted Bobby. I was positive Vogel was lying about that when he made the little crack about Arab arms connections. Vogel had probably signed Julie at Bobby's suggestion - to further ensure anonymity.

But fate stepped in and introduced Julie Zinko to Jackson McKenney, who knew it was Vogel who supplied stardust to Hollywood's fallen angels. One of his clients had killed herself with that stardust, and the backwash had drowned McKenney's career.

McKenney hadn't lied to me when he first said he didn't care about his percentage from Julie's deal with Vogel: he had served up a lot of hamburger dreaming of revenge, and he figured the publicity from her testimony would propel Julie up the Sidewalk of The Stars. Jackson McKenney had planned to hitch a ride right beside her.

Vogel found out that McKenney had taken Julie to the Feds and that the Grand Jury was calling for a new investigation of Bobby Lee's drug ties. He knew Bobby wouldn't want to fall any further. Vogel decided to risk a little side trip to Malibu on the way to Gorman - to cancel his investment in the Grand Jury's star witness. With Julie Zinko dead, all Vogel had to do was recast one part in his mini-series. Business would go on as usual.

What Bobby Lee and Vogel didn't know was that Julie had taken a roommate at the beach house. Early Monday morning, using a laser-targeting device, Vogel shot Karen through the picture window thinking she was Julie. With the laser, he wouldn't have to see her face before he squeezed the trigger.

I needed a way to break Vogel's alibi. I was stuck there, because any one who can read a road map knows that it would be impossible to fire a rifle in Malibu at four sixteen a.m. and drive to Gorman in forty-five minutes.

I was stuck until I realized Vogel never had an alibi in the first place. He didn't drive to Gorman. He flew. The guy was so sure he'd never be asked that he didn't bother to cover his tracks. The helicopter landing on the beach was probably the reason Karen was in the living room, looking out the window. Vogel didn't have to flush out his prey - the noise of the chopper did it for him.

Quinoles agreed that Vogel's military training, and his long time membership in the rifle association, rated him as a prime suspect.

I waited about thirty yards away in the unmarked Ford while Quinoles and his linebackers met Raymond Vogel at the gate to the helicopter pad. They presented him with their credentials and there was a short argument between Quinoles and the producer. It ended when the cops pointed to the car. I stepped out and gave Vogel a friendly wave. His face went red and his shoulders pulled together. He started to turn back into a rat, right there before my eyes.

*

They say the magic has come back to Hollywood with films by Spielberg, Lucas, Ronnie Howard, Rob Reiner, and other newer practitioners of the shadow play. Personally, I don't believe it ever left.

There are ghosts everywhere along the boulevards, and each permanent resident has a favorite legend to recount. There is magic here, and in our memories of Tinseltown: darkness is soon forgotten in the sparkle of the silver screen. There is a kind of deliberate innocence to it - a longing for the happy ending.

I took a walk down Hollywood Boulevard the night after Karen Fuller's funeral. She was buried in her hometown, near Santa Clara, far removed from the glitter and glitz. I drove up alone in the Dodge. I met Karen's family at the little cemetery, and they were nice. They had wanted what she had wanted, they said, and they didn't blame Hollywood for what had happened. They never knew the whole story.

As I passed over the stars, threading my way through tourists and hucksters, a crow landed on the curb and looked at me. It tilted its head, the way they do.

I smiled, and said hello.

THE END