

SAVE THE LAST DANCE

By

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CHAPTER ONE

I was at The Gaslight in Hollywood, a club grafted onto one side of the old Ivar Theater. The Ivar is a strip joint featuring some of the saddest girls in the business, and The Gaslight is a standard Hollywood dive where local music acts play. I usually dropped in a few times a week in my drinking days.

That night there was an incident involving a 60s revival group called Bananas From Hell. The Bananas brought along a dancer, a short brunette in her early twenties, who was supposed to stand to one side and do a 60s go-go girl thing while the boys were playing. I watched for a while, but Bananas From Hell was just an out of date cover band. I slid out the back door and encountered Kim Vincent, a friend who produces records. Kim was engaged in an exploratory conversation with an English rock star visiting Tinseltown, but he motioned me over.

"Ah, Frank," Kim said. He is a towering guy of an undisclosed age with as many irons in the fire as the entire State of Texas at round-up time. "I'm sure you've heard of Terry: he's guitar for Piston."

"Sure," I lied. "Frank Yellowflower." The leather-clad rocker shook my hand and Kim grinned down at me. His eyes were usually cold blue, but they sparkled at my cooperation.

"Frank is a genuine Hollywood private detective, Terry. One of the best in the business."

"Yeh?" Terry slurred. "Oh! Gotcha! Mannix, eh? Bloody Columbo?"

Kim raised an eyebrow and steered their conversation back to something Terry could comprehend. I was not really listening, as I had heard variations of my friend's rap on many occasions. I was the first to notice the commotion growing at the back door of The Gaslight.

Two large men marched the go-go girl out into the courtyard, followed by another man in a gray sharkskin suit, a pale longhaired guy, and the club bouncer. The bouncer was a short, Muscle Beach boy in blue jeans and matching denim jacket. Except for the

longhair, all of the men were shouting angrily at the diminutive dancer, who was in tears. Kim stopped talking long enough to make an assessment of the scene, pointed a long finger at the girl, and said:

"Your type, Frank. Go rescue her!" He turned back to his British quarry and began to relate a lionized account of one of my previous cases, suggesting that he and Terry collaborate on a musical version of the story.

"A musical about a transvestite mass murderer?" the Brit asked. Kim accelerated his pitch.

I moved away from them to better watch The Gaslight's current drama. The bigger men had stopped yelling. They were drunk anyway, and looked bored. The guy in the suit was speaking to the girl in a low voice. A few other Gaslight patrons had wandered outside. I nodded to one I knew, a surfer. He was semi-concerned.

"What happened in there?" I asked.

"Nothin', Frank. Really. Little chick got naked, that's all. She was just dancin' and all of a sudden she pulled her dress over her head. Nothin' but a black garter belt underneath. Nobody got offended but those guys. She has a killer bod, dude!"

"Who are they? Those guys?"

"The two big ones are off-duty security guards. They're always here Fridays. Hittin' on the chicks, you know? The other guy's only been around a few weeks. He deals LSD. Word is: he's a narc."

"LSD?" I laughed. We watched the man in the sharkskin suit. He was stocky and unhip, too old to mix effectively with The Gaslight's young crowd. He did look like a cop.

"People who like 60's punk are really into acid, Frank," the surfer explained. "There's a lot going around The Valley. But I sure wouldn't buy it from a suit. You know?"

The night air was beginning to cut through the go-go dancer's cotton shift. She was shaking from the cold and there were tears in her eyes. The suit walked back into the

club, and the bouncer took over, delivering a loud lecture on his concept of female decency. I was sure his mother would approve.

I looked around. Kim caught my eye and grinned. A local punk, who was trying, in vain, to hustle the master, had replaced the British musician. Kim pushed off from the offender and joined me, frowning lightly.

"No White Knight, Frank?" He pointed at the girl with a friendly sneer. "She is your type, isn't she: small and dirty."

"Sometimes," I reminded him. "But I prefer Red Knight."

"Ah, a Native American joke! There is a window of opportunity opening over there, Frank."

The bouncer had returned to his post at the back door. Only the longhaired boy remained, frozen in the background. I pegged him as an embarrassed boyfriend. The little dancer was crying by herself, leaned against a wall of the building. I waited for the longhair to comfort her.

"Come on, Frank!" Kim urged. "That other guy is the band manager. It was probably his scam in the first place. Get yourself laid, man!"

"Maybe," I admitted, but Kim and I frequently had very different motivations. I walked up to her, glancing at the longhair. He was a blank. "You ok?" I asked her. She winced, pulling back to the wall. I put out a hand. She ducked slightly, as if to avoid an expected blow.

"I'm sorry..." she insisted, her face turned away from me. "I didn't know..."

"No," I said. "I mean, I'm not... I just wanted to see if you were ok." She met my eyes. Hers were big and brown and wet. She had a New York accent.

"Oh. You're not...?"

I smiled and she smiled.

"My name's Frank Yellowflower," I told her.

"I'm Wendy," she said. "I guess I should have kept my dress on." We smiled again. I noticed the bouncer glaring at us from the doorway, and then he moved aside. A figure in black swept by him and walked up to us.

"Hello, Frank." It was Deborah, a friend who was booking The Gaslight. We kissed in greeting. Kim saw Deborah and came over to us. We drifted away from Wendy.

"That group you sent me lost money," Kim complained to Deb. She rolled her eyes at me.

"I didn't send them. I gave them your service number. You're the one that signed them."

"They owe me a thousand dollars," Kim barked. Deborah took my arm.

"Well, don't you have any complaints, Frank? As long as I'm the new target for the evening?"

"This place could control its employees a little better," I said.

"Do you mean the bouncer or the dancer?" Deb asked.

"If it had been you dancing," I told Deb, "the cops would have had their guns out."

Deb laughed, incongruities were banished, and the world centered on her. It is a way she has, a mystical control of benevolent energies. She has Aztec blood. Her opposite is Kim: a mixer of dark Anglican forces and maestro of night chords. I stand between, Frank the Libra, in my usual assigned role of mediator balancing the old feuds of Light and Darkness. They are both my friends.

The conversation mellowed into personal things. Kim had a book out and was, as always, about to begin a project with a young group. Deb was singing in one of her own, booking The Gaslight on the side. I was trying to uncover a corporate computer spy for some Chinese-Americans on 7th Street. We had all but forgotten the dancer, when the noise began again.

The gay bouncer had returned. He had Wendy pinned against the brick wall, and he was screaming. I saw a tiny bird about to be crushed by a rhino.

"Hey!" I yelled, Red Knight arriving after all. "That's enough!"

The bouncer was shaking with rage, rehashing his theories on women and nudity with an almost psychotic zeal. In a split-second of irony, I noticed a faded sign, painted on the Ivar Theater wall boasting "15 Naked Girls!"

The rhino was ready to charge me, but then Kim stepped forward. At six-four, he had several inches over me and he was at least a foot taller than the muscle boy. Deb stood next to him. It was too much for the bouncer: the powers of Good and Evil, and the sword of Justice.

"The lady gets the point," I told him.

"I'm trained to kill," Kim reminded all of us. It's one of his standard lines, but I've never doubted he could.

"This ain't over," the bouncer yelled, but he was on his way back into the club, and was obviously wrong. I was relieved. Wendy stopped crying.

"Reggie is a total asshole," Deborah decided, referring to the bouncer. She pecked at my cheek with approval, and followed he bouncer inside.

*

I went to unpark the Dodge. By the time I pulled into the alley behind The Gaslight to pick him up, Kim had convinced Wendy to dine with him at his sleazy restaurant. As they got into my car, Kim in front and Wendy in back, I noticed the guy in the sharkskin was leaving too. Wendy entertained us by explaining her lewd behavior to Kim:

"My clothes just melted away," she giggled. "I'm a natural exhibitionist."

"Nothing wrong with an appetite for sex," Kim suggested. His own was legendary. Seduction was in the air.

"It has nothing to do with sex," Wendy told us. "I don't even like sex that much." This is an open challenge to any man of Kim's generation, but Wendy didn't know that. "Maybe it's the Librium."

"You're on Librium?" I asked, spinning the steering wheel to avoid a jaywalking madman on Sunset.

"Not any more," she said. "My Dad made me take treatments. That's why I came to California." She grinned at Kim. "I know a lot of your songs, Mr. Vincent."

"Sing one!" Kim commanded. He saw a possible new hustle. Kim had made and lost millions based on identical auditions. Wendy launched into an uneven medley of four songs from four generations of Kim Vincent's career.

"Very good!" the producer said. "Why don't you come back to my place tonight? I think you might have something to sell." Wendy expressed elation. She leaned forward over the back seat and asked me if we could stop on Gardner to retrieve her car. I made the necessary turns. The streetlights were dead on Gardner, but we managed to find her black Camero. Producer and starlet exited the Dodge.

"I guess you two can take it from here," I said.

"Why don't you follow us?" Kim invited politely. "You're a good judge of character, Frank. You can help me decide if she's star material."

"Ok," I said, "but I can only stay for a few minutes."

"Fine, fine," Kim laughed. The Camero roared to life, and I limped after them in the Dodge. When I reached Kim's apartment building, a few blocks away, Wendy had already occupied his normally empty space in the underground garage, so I parked down the street.

We were in Kim's living room for all of five minutes when Wendy revealed more about her melting clothing: she was on acid, and she needed to crash. Kim sighed and showed her to the bedroom.

"Nothing ventured," I reminded him when he emerged a moment later. "She did warn you that she doesn't like sex. I'm leaving."

"I have a late session tonight anyway," Kim snorted. "She'll keep." We both left the dancer to her dreams. Forgetting where my car was, we left the building through the parking garage door.

"Need a ride?" I asked when we reached the Dodge.

"I think I'll walk, Frank. It's just over on Cahuenga. Take care, man."

"Rock and roll," I said, and went home.

*

I concluded the case for CAD, a.k.a. Chinese-American Data, Inc., the next morning. The job had been unusual from the beginning. I never met Mr. Zhang, my employer and the company CEO, directly. Miss Ting Li, an attractive but outwardly untouchable secretary in her late twenties, was my liaison. I had no complaints, but she was most apologetic throughout the investigation. I surmised that private detectives are placed slightly below women and dogs on the Chinese social ladder.

Miss Li took notes on my verbal report in the spacious CAD conference room. When I finished, she expressed some relief at my conclusions.

"Mr. Zhang," Ting Li said in careful but perfect English, "will be very pleased that you have sorted all this out." She was warmer and friendlier than she had been in our previous meetings. She bowed out to talk to her boss.

Uncovering the data thief had taken me almost a month. It might have gone faster if I understood their language, but I never picked up a word, and Ting Li was the only person I met at CAD who spoke mine.

The real spy was what is called a "worm". In the lingo of the computer world, a worm is a small program that buries itself inside a system and makes the computer do things it shouldn't. In this case, the CAD mainframe computer was sending monthly reports on the

CAD computer supply division to a rival firm in Taiwan via modem. The person I uncovered at CAD was a "mole", which is a spy term for an agent of the enemy who is put in place in advance of a mission and then activated when he is needed.

The mole at CAD was a data entry clerk, planted by the rival. Exactly how I caught the guy is another story, but the mole and his worm had apparently been undercover for several years. Ting Li returned to inform me that Mr. Zhang was very unhappy with the clerk, but pleased with me. She handed me a check for my fee, paid in full, and a nice bonus added by her master.

I shuddered to think what the clerk would get.

"You are a Native American?" Ting Li asked on the way to the elevators. She had never asked any personal questions in the month we had worked together. I had a feeling she was sorry to see me go.

"Partly," I nodded. I stopped walking and turned on the charm. She grinned, which was definitely a first. "I have Menominee blood, but it's watered down."

"There are some who think that America's Indians are an Oriental race."

"There are others," I said lightly, "who think that it's the other way around." She colored slightly at this, and the ice was back. I had blown it somehow.

"Well," she said when the elevator doors opened. "Thank you again, Mr. Yellowflower."

"Please call me Frank," I said, in a last ditch attempt to make amends. I saw a brief flicker at the corners of her mouth. She extended a hand and I deliberately held it a beat too long.

"I do hope we will meet again, Frank," she admitted. It was too early for lunch, and I had her number, so I let go of the hand with a smile. She refrosted, and the doors closed.

*

I was boiling some bottled water to make coffee when my phone rang. I picked it up on the third ring. I had to hold the receiver away from my ear: it was Kim Vincent, and he was screaming.

"Frank! Where the hell have you been? I need you here! Now! There's money in this for you."

"What...?" I was surprised by the panic in his voice. It was atypical, to say the least.

"Slow down, man. What's this all about?"

"The girl. The one from the club. That little acid bitch, you know?"

"Wendy..."

"Yes, Wendy! Wendy. See? How could I have done it? I didn't even remember her name!"

"Done what, Kim?"

"The little bitch went and got herself murdered last night, Frank!"

"What?"

"And in my apartment!"

*

Ethics are a dividing line in most professions. A politician who says he's not a crook better not have any old friends in Sicily. A dentist who uses gas better not have a fetish for women's undergarments.

No one expects a private detective to be ethical, but I thought I had a reputation for playing by the rules as closely as possible. I was surprised at Kim's opinion of me when he opened his door.

"You've got to get the body out of here, man! Can you do that for me?" The producer looked ten years older than the night before. I glanced around the room at the chaotic

jumble of paper, audiotape, CDs, gold and platinum records, dirty plates, and unwashed laundry.

"Of course not," I answered. "Where is she?"

"In here." He led the way through the single bedroom and into an adjacent bathroom. Wendy was pale and naked; her beautiful body was limp in a tub of brown water.

"I thought you said murder. Looks like a suicide pose. She slit her wrists?"

"No, no! Look closer! There's a bullet hole under the water."

"I assume you didn't call the police?" I lifted her body carefully by the armpits and saw the hole. It was a clean wound through the abdomen. I couldn't tell what range it had been fired from, but the tile on the tub wall had stopped the bullet, and the bleeding was long over. Her wrists were intact, and I saw no other marks of violence. I let her slide back into the tub.

"I didn't call them. I can't call them! I called you!"

"The girl is very dead, Kim. You have to call them."

"No police!" he demanded. He knocked a bottle of feminine shampoo off the sink, and suddenly regained his composure. "That's not mine," he added.

"Ok. Why can't you call them?"

"Because I have a deal happening!" He ushered me out into the living room. "It's money, Frank. We sign this afternoon..."

"Oh, come on, man! There's a murdered girl in your bathtub, and you're sweating some rock and roll hustle? Call the police, Kim! Or I will."

"Goddamnit, Frank! I can't! Twenty-four hours and the paper will be binding. It's a group of young girls, for God's sake! I just got in an hour ago from the studio. I left the bitch here... you remember?"

"Do you own a gun, Kim?"

"Of course not! I wouldn't even know how to fire one."

"Then what's the problem? You were in the studio with musicians. You have an alibi. You tell the cops the truth: you came back and found a dead houseguest..."

"No, no! You don't understand! The group must be signed before... Look, it's a pre-teen group see? A female Menudo. Their parents don't like me - the greedy pigs! They know my reputation. I could get cut out of the deal, and I'm talking real money here, Frank! A major label..."

"How much, Kim?"

"Two million, Goddamnit! Maybe more. And... well, my alibi... it isn't that solid."

"What does that mean?"

"I was in and out, I wasn't there the whole time. The session started at seven last night, at David's studio on Cahuenga. He had some remixing to do on instrumental tracks before the girls could lay down vocals, so I skipped out..."

"Producer at work," I said cynically, but I knew it was a common practice. "So you did your usual walk and talk through nearby clubs until you got to The Gaslight. I know what happened after that - or most of it." I thought of Wendy in tears behind the club. The Red Knight had failed to protect her against her fate after all.

"The vocals were bumped up to midnight," Kim continued. "I left The Gaslight with the two of you about eleven. You and I left here around eleven-thirty."

"Just guessing, but it looks like she was shot last night, Kim. I saw you leave, and there were people at the studio with you. I repeat, what's the problem?"

"I didn't stay. Not the whole night. I left again at around two a.m. It wasn't going well. The brats were up past their bedtime, and they weren't ready. I told them to rehearse it and I left."

"For where?"

"Here. I thought she might have come down."

"And you thought you might get some after all?"

"Yeah. But she was gone when I got here, Frank! I swear: she was gone! So I went back to the studio, but I was still in and out. You know how boring these sessions get..."

"When did you come back here again?"

"Like I told you: about an hour ago. Ten a.m., I guess."

"You're right, Kim. This doesn't look good. Depending on exactly when she was shot, of course."

"You can't tell exactly?"

"It's nearly noon. She's been in that water for hours, from the look of the wound and the blood. It'll take a forensics guy to tell exactly. Which brings us back to the police..." Kim moaned.

"I thought you'd know what to do, how to avoid them. At least until tomorrow. Can't you do that, Frank?"

The argument went no further. At that moment, the doorbell rang. Kim sagged and shrugged, and I opened the door. A uniformed officer and several patrolmen were waiting in the hall.

*

Kim Vincent was as hard and as mean as they come when cornered. He had more than survived decades of rock and roll: a gambler against the record industry's million-to-one odds of success; a guerrilla in the battle against flabby corporate corruption and stupidity; a blade runner in the tacky underworld of flesh and drugs. But even Kim Vincent wasn't up to a prolonged stay in jail.

"What the hell have you found out, Frank?" he asked me in the little interrogation room at the Sixth Precinct. "Where's that asshole who claims to be my lawyer?"

"I haven't seen Walter," I told him, "and I can only stay for a minute. My contact here is at lunch. I had to pull a few fast ones just to get in."

"Who reported it? Do we know that yet?"

"Neighbors, actually. They heard a shot sometime after two-fifteen a.m., but it took the cops nine hours to respond. I think they're a bit embarrassed about that, which may be in your favor. Where were you then, after you left the apartment the second time? I mean exactly." Kim slumped forward, his head in his hands.

"I was walking down Hollywood Boulevard around then, trying to avoid going back to the brats in the studio..."

"Did you talk to anyone?"

"A hooker, I think. Some hot Italian chick with a skirt up to her navel, but I don't know her. Fuck, man! I'm dead! I'll wind up raped and murdered in some prison yard."

"Forget the hooker, but don't panic yet. We'll get you out. I told the duty officer everything that you told me, and I'll tell Quinoles the same thing when he finishes stuffing his face."

"Who?"

"Captain Quinoles of Homicide. My contact," I explained, as the steel door to the room swung open. A fat, cheerful man in a dirty T-shirt and jeans peered in.

"There you are," he said.

"Hi, Walter." I waved. Kim groaned.

"Legal eagle meets brave detective," Walter Ramsdale quipped. I don't like Indian jokes as a rule, but Walter is Everyman. It can't be held against him. Kim wasn't laughing,

however, and Walter became officious. "No charges yet, Kim, despite your rather awkward position. I'll have you out of here in no time."

"Don't count on it, Ramsdale," a voice said behind him. It was Quinones. He glared at me and marched past the lawyer into the room. "Who let you in here, Frank?"

"I have friends everywhere, Quin. Are you charging Mr. Vincent with something? There's nothing substantial..."

"I'll decide that, Frank. Now, get the hell out of here, if you don't mind."

"I do mind, Quin. Mr. Vincent is a client."

"Mine too," Walter added. "And he's been held here long enough."

CHAPTER TWO

Several hours later, I headed out into the Hollywood twilight to find the real killer of Wendy Ryles. Walter did his best, and he did talk Quinoles into a private cell, but Kim Vincent remained a guest of the Sixth Precinct.

The only new information I gathered from Quinoles was Wendy's last name and the address of her father. He was Dr. Michael Ryles, and he lived in Scarsdale, New York. The cops found this out when they searched Wendy's Camero in the basement garage of Kim's apartment building, but they had not been able to locate the doctor to inform him of his daughter's death. The car also contained some evidence that Wendy had only been in town a few days.

Quinoles might have given in if Kim hadn't insisted that Wendy was not at the apartment when he returned at two a.m. The time of death was unofficially based on the gunshot heard by Kim's neighbors. I believed Kim's version, but I had to admit even I was puzzled by the death of the girl who wasn't there.

Bananas From Hell was a local band, and they seemed a good place to start. I called Deborah and got the Santa Monica address of their manager, one Frazer Wedgewood. He turned out to be the longhair from The Gaslight, and he wasn't pleased to see me.

"What do you want?" he asked in greeting when he opened his apartment door. He kept the chain in place. I heard others inside, speaking loudly over familiar music. "Wendy isn't here."

"Wendy is in the morgue," I replied, "and I'd like to come in and talk to you about why."

"Fuckin-a you will!" Frazer said, and he started to close the door. I had already tagged the chain lock as a minor impasse, however, and I applied the necessary force. The chain snapped, and Frazer retreated. As I had previously observed, Frazer Wedgewood was a wimp.

Bananas From Hell was gathered on the floor of Frazer's living room with two girlfriends - one blonde, and one brunette. It didn't take a drug counselor to know all six people were tripping. A CD player played Magical Mystery Tour in one corner. Pot and jasmine filled the air.

"Hey, man!" one of the boys said from the floor. "It's good stuff! Wanna blaze?" He waved a joint in my direction, squinting at my face. "You look uptight, man. Maybe you'd better do some of the acid."

"He's real cute!" the brunette groupie exclaimed, crawling around me. "Who is he, Frazer?"

"Some guy looking for Wendy," Frazer mumbled. He had fallen back on a couch in exhaustion. "He was with Kim Vincent last night." This suddenly got the attention of the band's lead singer, who had been engrossed in the mechanical difficulties associated with removing the blonde girl's jeans.

"Wow! He's a living legend!" he said, brushing the girl aside and stumbling to his feet. "You really know Kim Vincent, man? My name's Arthur: like Arthur Lee, yuh know? Only I'm not."

"Frank," I said.

"He does a good cover of 'Seven And Seven Is'," the castoff blonde volunteered. She buttoned her fly and rose from the floor. "I'm Sandy. Wow! You're old, Frank! I bet you remember the original Dickies?"

"Yeah," I confirmed. "Can any of you tell me anything about Wendy Ryles?"

"I know her," Arthur said, with a cautious look at Sandy. "Wendy's been crashing here for the last few nights. She almost got us all busted at the gig."

"He knows that," Frazer said sourly from the couch. "He was there."

"Hey! How'd you like our cover of 'Scuse Me Miss Rose', man?" one of the other musicians wondered. "The West Coast Pop Art Experimental Band number. You know?"

"It was pretty bad, as I remember," I said. The guy laughed.

"Wendy did score us all acid," Sandy said, taking my arm and curling up to me. "Her old man's rich. You got nice skin, Frank. You know that?"

"Hey!" Arthur complained, pulling her back. "That's what you told me!"

"Everybody's got nice skin when you're on acid," Sandy explained. "Why do you want to know about Wendy, Frank?"

"She was shot to death about two-thirty this morning," I said. "I'd like to find out who did it."

Somebody shut off The Beatles, and we were back to the 90s.

*

The band knew very little about Wendy Ryles, but Sandy took my phone number and my service told me she had called when I checked back into my apartment on North Beachwood. She picked up on the first ring:

"Frank?"

"Good guess. I thought you were the popular type, Sandy."

"I like you, Frank. Wanna teenage girlfriend?"

"How teen? Over eighteen?"

"Sure. And I can prove it, if you give me a chance."

"No, I think I'll pass. Is this what you called about?"

"I have a name for you. I'm giving it to you because I like you, Frank, not because I feel sorry for that dumb little rich girl."

"Fine, Sandy. Give it to me then."

"Joey Madrid. He was the guy who got Wendy the acid. I'm pretty sure she did a strawberry for it, if you know what I mean. She didn't have any money without her dad. You know what a strawberry is?"

"Yeah, but she was in her twenties..."

"I'm just saying she fucked the guy for the drugs. Anyway, he was pretty pissed at her at The Gaslight last night." I put two and two together:

"This is a guy in a sharkskin suit? The one that's a narc?"

"That's the bozo, but he's no narc. He told Wendy he just says that to club owners so he can sell on the dance floor."

"Thanks, Sandy."

"Don't thank me that way, Frank. You owe me one date."

"We'll see. I got your number."

"Use it, Frank. You're not getting any younger."

*

I hoofed it over to The Gaslight to see what I could learn about the dealer who pretended to be undercover as a cover. It was a nice night, and I ambled along Hollywood Boulevard, nodding to crows and humming the Beach Boys. Kim Vincent would have snapped up Sandy the groupie in seconds, I mused, but I preferred the more unattainable Ting Li. Lost in an introspective analysis of this choice, I arrived in the alley at the back door to The Gaslight, where I forgot I had a new enemy. I waved as I walked inside.

"I'm on the permanent guest list," I told the muscle boy who had bounced Wendy Ryles. It was true, courtesy of my friend Deborah, but Reggie was holding a grudge.

"No you aren't," he decided, and he blocked me.

"Sure I am," I said amicably. "Ask Deb."

"You're on the shit list," Reggie sneered, grabbing my shirt. It was an unfortunate decision for Reggie. As a rule, I try not to hurt anyone, but the Red Knight knew basic jujitsu. I showed Reggie what I had learned in the first lesson.

He got right up and came back for more after I flipped him. The Gaslight's bartender came over to watch. He knew me, and he didn't interfere. It was the second time that I got a little mean, throwing Reggie harder and further, but he broke his nose all by himself bouncing off the bar.

"They don't call them bouncers for nothing," I noted to the assembled patrons. Some of them had applauded. Reggie and his nose retired to the men's room.

"Reggie's a total asshole," the barman reported, agreeing with Deborah's assessment and leading me to wonder why clubs anxious for business always employ a "total asshole" to greet their customers.

"I'm looking for Joey Madrid," I said. The barman grimaced.

"You ain't the only one. Boss found out the guy ain't a cop after all, and the boss don't like dealers. Says people on drugs don't buy enough drinks. Don't expect you'll see Joey Madrid hanging here much anymore."

"Any hints?"

"Yeah, Joey talks a lot. But I wouldn't go chasing him down there."

"Down where?"

"In Chinatown. He plays bodyguard for some oriental."

"There are lots of them in Chinatown."

"Joey mentioned the name Zhang," the bartender said, and he noted my reaction: "I guess you know the guy then?"

"Not personally," I said, "but I think I just found a worm in the apple of my eye."

*

Fifteen years ago, Chinatown was a very specific area of Downtown, next to Little Japan and the big police headquarters building everybody remembers from Dragnet. But when the Koreans arrived, the Chinese changed with the times and expanded in a scattered, American way. Chinatown continued to be a culturally segregated community, but less obvious Chinese enterprise has spread from Grand to Beverly Hills.

CAD was on Seventh, near Western, where Los Angeles is fighting its own decline and not winning. The iron gate to the CAD parking lot was closed, so I parked the Dodge up on Harvard, behind a vintage Toyota pickup with a smashed rear window. A Rasta in rags slept next to a dumpster on the opposite curb.

I waited under a palm in front of CAD for about fifteen minutes. There was no sign of activity inside. I was identifying the few remaining stars in the pre-dawn sky, when a small gray Ford pulled up and the gate swung open. I trotted behind the car into the parking lot.

"I'm sorry," Ting Li said, bowing slightly. "I usually sleep late on Sunday." She looked like she could turn over and fall back into dreamland without the slightest provocation. Translate that as desirable. My blood pressure soared like the hawk. I nearly forgot why we were there - and that she was waiting for an explanation.

"Uh, there's been a new development in the case. Could we go inside?"

"Of course, Frank." She used her plastic pass card on the security box, and we took the elevator to the fourth floor. "I really didn't think I'd see you again."

"Disappointed?" I grinned. Ting lowered her eyes.

"Yes, Frank. Because you said it is for business." She faced me bravely and I grabbed the ring. The kiss was longer and more serious than I had intended. We finally broke it off, mutually surprised, and considered various traditions while Ting brought up the CAD employee files on the workstation in her office. I ran through the events of the past two days, and Ting listened.

"Zhang is not an uncommon name in my country," she pointed out when I was finished.

"What could such people have to do with CAD?"

"I have no idea how Wendy Ryles is involved," I said, "but it's all pretty far-fetched for coincidence." She wasn't convinced. "I'm following a lead," I added.

"Far what?"

"Means unlikely. What's your machine got to say?" She was searching the CAD files for one "Madrid, Joey".

"Nothing under that name. Or 'Ryles'."

"Does you boss have private files?"

"Of course. But it wouldn't be proper..." She looked at me for a second and blushed. "I have unlimited security. I'll check." A billion bits of information sorted a few floors below. "He does have a personal employees file!" She made a hissing sound.

"What is it?"

"This name, Hong. He's the one you called a 'mole'." Ting hit a few keys to bring up the complete file on Hong. "Impossible! This entry shows that Mr. Zhang hired Mr. Hong personally! And he knew of Mr. Hong's previous employer!"

"That's not unusual, is it?" I asked. "Hiring a guy from a rival firm?" The light from the monitor accented her frown.

"It is not what Mr. Zhang told me on Friday. He lied to me. What can this mean, Frank?"

"I'm not sure yet. Let's keep looking."

"There is no Madrid."

"Wait! Go back to that one. Spain. Close enough. Bring it up."

"You're right! Look, in this window." The data confirmed that "Spain" was a code for Joey Madrid. An address was included. "Mr. Zhang's home address! This man is listed as Mr. Zhang's 'gardener'!"

"Maybe we'd better get out of here," I suggested, and she shut down the workstation.

The lights went out when we reached the elevator. I looked at Ting, but she didn't have an answer.

"I didn't think anyone was here," she said. There was a rumbling behind her. The elevator was heading up from the ground floor, and I hadn't pushed the button.

"Where are the stairs?" I asked, and she led the way to a small metal door around a corner. It was a fire exit, but it was locked. "No key?" I assumed. She shook her head. She was scared.

"Something is not right," Ting said in the darkness. I was inclined to agree:

"Come on!"

The fourth floor was mostly one large loft with five-foot high, modular gray dividers for CAD clerks. There were a few real rooms with doors, like the one with Ting's workstation. I grabbed her hand and we hurried through the maze of cubicles until we were inside the conference room at the far end. "Stay here and listen," I told her. "If you hear me yell, try for the elevator."

She nodded a little bow, and I left the door open a crack. The rumbling had stopped and the hunter was with us. I saw a thin beam of light playing against the cubes. He was slowly coming in my direction, which was what I wanted. I grabbed a weighted tape dispenser and waited until he was inside a cube to slip by him. I figured I'd brain him when he came out. It wasn't much, but it was a plan - or it was until I caught sight of his .45 in the shadows.

My self-defense instructor taught me that the only good move against a man with a gun is fast feet in the opposite direction. Luckily, I had a technological alternative.

I moved quietly into the office with Ting's workstation and flipped the red switch on the PC as she had done. The darkened room was flooded with the monitor's glare. I picked up a folded metal chair, and stepped out of the office to take cover behind a cubical. I yelled as clearly as possible:

"Ting! Now!"

The hunter moved first, of course, in the direction of my voice and the light. Waiting, not breathing, I saw Ting leave the conference room. It was risky, but he didn't notice her. He plunged into the office, and I connected the metal chair with his back. He howled, and the force pitched him forward. I slammed the door behind him, wedging the chair under the knob.

Ting Li was waiting in the elevator. She was shaking so hard I had to drive her car up Harvard to where I had parked the Dodge. The guy in the little patch of grass was still sleeping.

*

Ting didn't feel comfortable in my apartment, and I was beginning to remember why I had tagged her as unapproachable. She made it clear that men and women did not cohabit in her country, even temporarily. The ice was back.

"I don't see why I can't go back to my own home and wait there," she pouted. "I certainly will not stay here 'for a few days'!"

"Look," I argued. "There is no way that Zhang can find this place. My home number is unlisted, and my office number is an answering service."

"But why should Mr. Zhang want to 'find' me? Or you, for that matter?"

"I don't think he'll be inviting us for tea and rice cakes. Think about it, Ting: when I found the 'mole', you reported directly to Mr. Zhang. Who else knew about it?"

"Hong's supervisor, I suppose. And the company accountant would have to know that Hong was fired..."

"If he was fired. Hong programmed the worm, right?"

"You know that, Frank. We traced the files."

"How do you know that Zhang fired him?"

"Mr. Zhang was angry! Very angry... oh, I see." She stopped pacing and sat down on my couch. "It wasn't Mr. Hong that he was angry about?"

"He was angry that we had found the worm! The whole 'investigation' was a test to see if we could figure out how the data was getting to Taiwan - not to find out who was responsible for the leaks. Zhang thought the worm was foolproof." I watched her. I knew she was beginning to get it.

"CAD does work for L.A. County, I know that. I don't suppose the company has any contracts to process data for the Federal Government?"

"Several."

"Like?"

"Well, one is for Social Security. Another is for the NRC..."

"The Nuclear Regulatory Commission? What kind of data?"

"It is very technical. Having to do with radiation background counts. That sort of thing."

"Could Zhang's so-called rivals in Taiwan possibly have contacts with the People's Republic of China?"

"I suppose they could. It's not unusual, Frank. Everyone has some past connection." I sat next to her and took her hands. They were shaking. "But it isn't high level information. It isn't strategic. It's only emission test data."

"From nuclear sites all over the United States. Not just reactors - probably missile sites too. It's part of the NRC's mandate to watchdog radiation wherever it might pose a threat to the public. The data would need codes to indicate the site locations, right? All the

Chinese would need is a key to interpret the codes. As you said, it's not considered high level information. Any computer could probably figure out those codes."

"Oh, my God."

"It's like sending People's Republic of China a map of the US defense system, updated on a regular basis. And you and I are the only good guys who know about it - or how it's being done!"

*

Sandy hated Ting at first sight. The two women sat at opposite ends of the couch. Arthur and Frazer sat between them. I hated to bring the kids into it, but we had to pin something on Joey Madrid to get Zhang. Quinoles had listened, but it was only theory to him. He refused to come into it until there was something more substantial. I had no choice.

"You're putting me on," Sandy griped. She was wearing a nearly transparent halter, a black leather micro, and black net stockings. Ting had been shocked and courteous.

"I like your outfit," she said to Sandy when the Banana delegation showed up that evening. Sandy had ignored her.

"I thought you'd get rid of everybody and we'd be alone," Sandy said to me, playing with the nets. "You said this would be an adventure."

"You don't have to do it if you don't want to," I reminded her, "but it would be a big favor for Kim Vincent."

"Right!" Arthur agreed. "This could be a big break for Bananas From Hell. All you have to do is get this Madrid guy to hit on you. You're good at that, Sandy."

"Big break? Big deal!" Sandy pouted.

"Come on, Sandy," Frazer whimpered. "A favor for Kim Vincent could get us a record. Or at least a tour with a major act."

"You might get to meet Iggy," Arthur whispered. He was good. He knew the magic words.

"Iggy?" Sandy genuflected. She looked at Ting, then back at me, and shrugged. "Oh, hell. Ok!"

We applauded her decision.

*

"Hi. Can I speak to Joey?"

"Who? Who? This is the house of Zhang."

"Joey Madrid. He works there."

"One moment..." We watched Sandy and listened to the silence. A new voice came over the speakerphone:

"Yeah? This is Madrid."

"Hi, Joey. I'm Sandy. We met at The Gaslight on Friday?"

"Who? Where didjuh get this number?"

"You gave it to me. You said I could call you about some stuff. You know."

"Huh? What stuff? What didjuh say your name is?"

"Sandy. I'm the real cute blonde who was with the second band. You got us some stuff. You said you could get some more for me - at a very special price, remember?" Sandy winked at me. "You said you really liked my bod, Joey."

"You got big tits, yeah. I remember. I was wacked myself on Friday." I nodded at Ting. I had suspected as much.

"So, you wanna make a trade, Joey? Your stuff for some of mine? That's what you told me."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen. And I can prove it." That's what she told me, I thought. Arthur looked like he was thinking the same thing.

"Sounds good, babe. When can I pick you up?"

"Meet me at The Gaslight tonight. We can go wherever you want after that." She was on a roll. "It is the same stuff as Friday?"

"Sure, babe. Uh, how will I know yuh? For sure, I mean?"

"Don't worry, Joey," Sandy said before hanging up. "I'll know you."

"That was great," I said.

"I oughta' try sales, huh?" Sandy asked. "God, he's a sleazy bastard!"

*

The Gaslight was packed. With only two hours notice, Deborah had juggled the bookings and filled the club for Bananas From Hell as well. The band was doing a sound check. I was by the bar, and Sandy was at one of the few tables near the bandstand. I hoped she could bat off the boys long enough for Joey Madrid to spot her when he arrived: the transparent halter could incite a riot.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to face a broken nose in a white bandage. Every muscle in my body tensed.

"Relax, pal," Reggie said. He offered me an outstretched hand.

"What's this?"

"I heard about what happened to the dancer. I'm sorry. I feel bad about it." He was as sincere as he would ever be.

"And I'm sorry about the broken nose, Reggie," I lied. I shook the hand. It was as limp as I'd expected. Reggie was pleased that he had made the peace. "Maybe you can do me a favor?" I asked. "For the dancer - in a way."

"You name it, pal."

"There may be some action outside in a few minutes. Keep your eyes open. I may need your help."

Bananas From Hell stopped adjusting their volume controls and went into Larry Williams' "Slow Down", which they credited to The Beatles. I always liked The Jam's version best myself. Arthur made it through the first verse, but he froze when he got to the second. He was staring at the club entrance. I couldn't see what was distracting him until a tall figure came at me through the crowd.

"Walter did his job," Kim Vincent explained when he reached me. Arthur and the boys began to assault Larry Williams with new vigor. "Is the hustle still on?"

"Just in time," I said, nodding toward the stage. Joey Madrid was at the table with Sandy.

*

Quinoles needed proof of a crime - preferably a felony - to grab Madrid and get him to tell what he knew about Wendy Ryles' death and his boss, Mr. Zhang. Joey's little sideline as an acid dealer was felonious behavior, but the strawberry game doesn't involve cash, so the cops needed at least a credible witness who could testify to hearing Joey offer Sandy acid for sex. I wanted more.

We arranged a little choreography to sweeten the bust, and Sandy was on cue. She led Madrid to the back door and into the alley. When they were outside, Kim and I followed. The producer stayed at the doorway. I went through, nodding to Reggie, who was at his post. There were two other people in the alley, both women, talking quietly against the outside wall of the Ivar Theater.

Madrid had his back to me, and Sandy could see me, but she ignored me as I walked to the two women and asked for a light. Sandy's voice grew louder.

"You look different than I remember," she said to Joey Madrid. "I don't know about this..."

"Come on. It's good stuff," Joey argued. "I'm real good too. You give me a little, I give you a lot."

"A little what?" Sandy asked. "The same thing that bitch Wendy gave you, huh? What'd she give you?"

"Everything, babe. That bitch fucked me good. You will too."

"Yeah? I hear you fucked her good," Sandy said, as rehearsed. She was brave. "Like to death." Madrid backed off a bit. His face went pale in the moonlight.

"Who tol' you that?" he demanded, stepping forward again. Brave Sandy laughed in his face.

"Everybody knows, asshole!"

"Bull shit!" Joey roared. Then his voice lowered: "The cops got that Kim Vincent guy. They think he killed her. Who told you?" He grabbed at her, but she shook him off. I waited.

"It's ok, man," Sandy purred. "I hated that bitch. She was fucking Arthur behind my back. It would have been a pleasure to pull the trigger. Must have been fun?"

"It was a mistake," Joey told her. "Was supposed to be that Indian. I was stoned. Too stoned. Wrong target! Ha, ha! That guy Kim Vincent takes the fall!"

"Did somebody mention my name?" Kim asked as he walked over to them. "Hello, Sandy. Didn't you promise me the last dance?"

"What?" Joey said, staring at the producer.

"Hi, er, Kim," Sandy answered, and Kim pulled her quickly toward the door, away from Joey Madrid. The women next to me had their guns out and assumed the correct position.

"Freeze, Joey!" one of them ordered. "Police officers!"

Reggie stepped out to block the door as Kim and Sandy ducked inside to safety. Madrid ignored them, staring at me for an instant, and then turned toward the alley.

"Forget it, Joey!" I said. Quinoles arrived with the backup, lights flashing on the black and whites. Madrid chose to pull his .45 from his jacket and spun around. He leveled the barrel in my direction.

Joey Madrid started to yell something derogatory to my Native American ancestors, but Reggie threw an excellent full body tackle before he could get it all out, and the .45 dropped to the concrete. A moment later, one of the lady undercover cops read Joey his rights, then he and the murder weapon left on a bad trip to the Sixth Precinct lockup.

*

Kim and I ordered breakfast at the aforementioned restaurant on Sunset. It was about six-thirty a.m. Doc Collins, the L.A. County Coroner, had given me a copy of the report on Wendy Ryles. I leafed through it while Kim talked:

"Oh, I get it," he said. "Madrid was staking you out at The Gaslight from the start. His boss had him tail you, and he found out you were a regular, so he hung around. When you solved Mr. Zhang's puzzle, he told Joey Madrid to hit you."

"I was the target all along," I agreed. "When he followed us from the club, he was following me, not Wendy Ryles. Wendy put her Camero in the garage under your building, and I parked a block away. Joey passed by and parked in front of me somewhere. He probably thought it was my place. He tailed me right to the apartment, but when he saw you open the door, he went back to his car to wait again. He admitted to the cops that he fell asleep. He didn't see us leave or you come back, but he was awake to see you leave the second time at two a.m. He must have thought I was there - and alone. He took a chance, broke the lock quietly, and slipped inside."

"But why did he shoot the girl?"

"He didn't even know he had until it was over. They were both on acid remember? I thought it was strange that the wound was in her abdomen. She must have heard him and she stood up in the tub trying to see into the bedroom. She was frightened, and probably didn't call out, but he heard a sound or saw a movement and took a shot through the open bathroom door.

"Doc Collins says that she might have made it. It was a .45, but the bullet passed right through her. He says that it's pretty certain she slipped in the water and fell against the porcelain tub. She blacked out when she hit her head against the porcelain and bled to death."

Our breakfast orders arrived. A local pimp greeted us from the counter. Kim frowned.

"One thing I don't understand: where was Wendy Ryles when I came back at two a.m.?"

"She never left the building. I figure she woke up alone, decided to take a bath, and went down to her Camero in the garage to get that bottle of shampoo that was on your sink. She had been more or less living out of her Camero. You must have just missed her."

"Too bad," Kim said, reaching for a napkin. "About that contract."

"Yeah," I agreed. "They'll hang, though. Madrid is still squealing, and Ting Li should be able to figure out exactly what NRC files were transmitted to Taiwan."

"What?" Kim asked, eating some whole-wheat toast. "No. I mean my contract with the pre-teen, all-girl Menudo. Their parents decided they were too young for rock and roll." He frowned again.

"There's always Bananas From Hell," I suggested.

The End