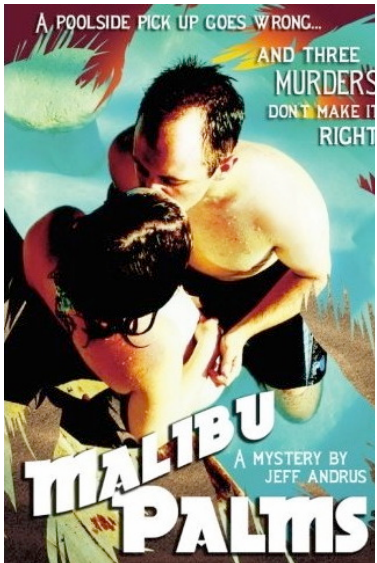


CHAPTERS 1, 2 & 6



[Malibu Palms](#) by Jeff Andrus

Cover design by [Heather Peters](#)

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OVERVIEW

Charlie is a funny-tough, hard-drinking bad boy whose wife is a comatose victim of a random drive-by. He hangs out at the Malibu Palms Apartments and works at the nearby marina. He doesn't like God, doesn't like cops, and he doesn't like being "a person of interest" when a beautiful neighbor drowns. She was Cindy Korbell, a struggling actress on the verge of stardom. In trying to track down her murderer, Charlie is sucked into a land scam, corrupt politics, and the sleazy world of Hollywood players and posers. He gets himself targeted for killing.

Child's play compared to dealing with Patricia Diaz, a deliciously desirable, zealously devout Catholic. A bad boy might attract her, but only a good man can win her.

Chapter One

I found out about the murder because of geography. The victim and I lived on the same continent, in the same country, in the same state. We had roamed the same part of town. In L.A. that can be as social as two ants scurrying in different directions, but Malibu Palms put us in the same heap.

Malibu Palms housed 242 apartments, not one of them in Malibu, but from the northern balconies you could see the curve of Santa Monica Bay where Malibu started fourteen miles away. The complex was layered in three stories around two concrete courtyards in which there were potted plants, not a palm among them, not even a dwarf. The ones you would expect lined the streets around us, tall and spindly, and were part of Playa del Rey, an unincorporated beach town next to Los Angeles International Airport. Malibu Palms was in the flats, three blocks from bluffs that dampened most of the aircraft noise. The rest you got used to.

Wetlands guarded our eastern approaches and stretched along Ballona Creek to Lincoln Boulevard. A levee separated Ballona from the Marina Channel. These fresh- and salt- watercourses flowed into Santa Monica Bay where a breakwater calmed their common outlet. The breakwater was made up of granite boulders barged from Santa Catalina Island more than

forty-five years earlier. Cindy Korbell was twenty-four when her body washed against those rocks.

That was two years ago, the Tuesday after the Fourth of July. I found out Wednesday morning when I was too hung over to much care. I tied one on every week or so, usually after I'd visited my wife. I kept in practice between times. Vera was in a long-term care facility on Manchester Boulevard. They fed her through a tube. At the time of Cindy Korbell's death, Vera had been unconscious for nearly three years. That's when a drive-by froze her life forever and made it a supreme act of will that I get through parts of mine sober. So I was hung over when the news came to me, minding my own business as I pinched a sunburned love handle. The man in the bathroom mirror vowed to jog tomorrow morning, this time for sure, when urgent knocking made the front door rattle and shudder.

In those days if you were, say, a process server who wanted to talk to me in my apartment, you would have to ring the bell in the second courtyard. We'd exchange pleasant greetings on the intercom. Because I wouldn't recognize your voice, I'd tell you to buzz off. Politely. In an uncivil and brutal world, I believed in being polite.

But some people are pushy, and maybe you'd push more buttons. There'd be a couple or three suspicious "Hello"s and "Who is it?" Most of the other residents of Malibu Palms, being citizens of southern California in the first decade of the Third Millennium, weren't going to let you in either. You could have been a former spouse or a jealous one, an abandoned child, a business partner just out of jail, some starry eyed kid tweaked on meth.

You could get lucky, though. You could rouse Phil the Fossil who'd hung his baseball cap at Malibu Palms since it opened in 1967. (That was a mite before my time, as he would put it; more precisely, I was born seven years later.) Or you could get Rena the Russian. She liked to get up in the middle of the night, turn on the bath, and forget about it until the National Transportation Safety guy and his wife in the unit below realized they'd have to replace their television again. Ol' Phil and Rena, they would have let you in without even talking to you.

By the time you walked to the end of the lobby, saw that #162 was through the left fire door, made your way down the long corridor past the parrot, the palm reader, and the Landmark life coaches, then turned left for an even longer corridor, so much time would have passed that Rena the Russian

and Phil the Fossil would have thought your ringing doorbells was just the microwave going off. Having gotten into the building by subterfuge, you could pound on my door like an old fashioned neighbor wanting to borrow an old fashioned cup of sugar.

Except we didn't have neighbors like that.

You could have been Justine or Barry Hume, the middle aged couple who managed the building. He was easy-going and kept mostly to the office, so she was the better bet. Justine was good looking but crabby and kept the maintenance staff (all from Costa Rica and nearly half legal) in fear of their jobs. She might have sent one of them to finally fix my dishwasher.

The thing was, my idea of a home cooked meal was a handful of peanuts I shelled myself. Not many dishes in that, so the maintenance hombre could come back *mañana*.

The knocking persisted. There was another way to get to my door. You could have had a key for the building's outer doors and elevators, rec room and sauna, which meant any one of my fellow residents at Malibu Palms. But as I said, we seldom called on each other unless....

There was a bubble-butted hottie I met at the swimming pool Monday afternoon, about whom, after some bourbon and cooking sherry, I couldn't remember much except her saying she could whip up an omelet for supper. At her place.

But that was two days ago. Nothing happened yesterday except work, I was reasonably sure of that, so I must have come home before I started work. I wondered when. More importantly, if I was thinking about her, something must have happened between the omelet and the when.

After my wife's shooting, I tried to remain celibate. Hanging out at the hospital for five weeks to be near Vera in intensive care pretty much killed sexual desire. Sometime after she was wheeled to the wards, all I wanted was to be normal again, to get on with my life. From my old life there was a friend who was always sympathetic and, unfortunately, was lonely too. Vera and I had promised undying fidelity, she for religious reasons, I because of the effects of my parents' divorce. I think the friend and I could have continued the relationship indefinitely, but I was still hoping Vera would come right, and in a fit of self-pity and subdued rage, I told the friend

very reasonably that we could never see each other again.

So much for safe, steady sex.

There was at least one call girl in Malibu Palms. There were many mere girls. I didn't care how any of them made a living. I would feed on companionship for a gluttonous season until one or both of us sensed that waning passion might entropy into real familiarity.

As the knocking persisted and I moved from the bathroom to the front room, I tried to remember the name of Monday's fellow traveler, a beautiful but pathetic lady who gave animals her heart and the likes of me her body. She bragged she had never been married, had no intention of tying herself down. Her life was committed to saving the foxes in the Ballona wetlands. The foxes didn't know who she was. They had no ability to be embarrassing. They could not be grateful. As for me, I could wish for an unconditional omelet, but how many times would it take before I finally realized eggs always get broken?

My worst fear was realized when I opened the door and couldn't remember her name, just that her unblemished, well oiled skin looked as smooth as when I first noticed it at the pool. The sun's glare hid the fact that she was letting her hair go gray. That's right, that's right. She was a forty-something cougar, and besides foxes, acting dominated her life. She was making the transition from ingénue to character actress.

"*Actor*," she had corrected me. "Only chauvinists say actress any more."

She was weeping now and in my arms, hugging me tightly. "She's dead!"

"I'm sorry," I kept saying, "I'm sorry." I didn't know who was dead. I sensed I should, but I was genuinely sorry that anyone should die. I was also sorry that death was ruining my pity party.

"I was so awful to her. But I didn't mean to be!"

"No, no, of course not."

"She wanted me to come with her."

"You can't blame yourself."

"But if I had, I might have...."

I stroked her back. "That's OK, that's OK."

"But I was with you."

"I'm sorry."

"What are we going to do?!" she wailed.

What I was going to do was get her out of the doorway and buy some time to remember her name. I danced her so that she was where I had just stood. Letting go, I reflexively picked up the newspaper in the hallway before I shut the door and stepped back. "I'm sorry," I said, shutting down that place in me that threatened to feel more.

Instead, I acted. I got her Kleenex. I said I would make her coffee. I took her tearful resistance, "No, that's OK, you don't have to," to gruffly insist that I would make her breakfast too.

Her name came back to me after I took my last frozen sausage-and-egg sandwich from the microwave and cut it in half. Andrea Lawless. I also remembered her saying that I was a lousy lover. How drunk she was, I didn't know, and whom she might have been trying to get back at other than me, I didn't know. She said it without particular malice, just a mumble while she was slick and steamy with sweat. Instantly she fell asleep. Sometime in the night, her skin cool now, she reached out for me and moaned softly, but I slipped away. That's what lousy lovers do. How much she remembered she didn't let on. Her story about Cindy was first and foremost.

Cindy Korbell was a bit player on the set of *Grey's Anatomy* where Andrea had found contract work as a dialogue coach. They met at the lunch wagon and whiled away the afternoon with coffee and conversation. On film and TV sets you either work like a dog or do nothing and still get paid for it. The first day, their first meeting, they were paid to be friendly. After that it was Dutch at Johnny's Coffee or Tanner's, one or the other sometimes picking up the tab for a meal at Berri's. They never kept track of who paid, said Andrea as if she did keep track. I couldn't tell whether she thought they were squared up.

Cindy came from someplace in the middle of the country (my mind wandered on the precise place) where she had success in high school drama and won some beauty contests in college. She arrived in L.A. and did stints as a waitress and a temp sec while she tried to get an agent, get noticed by casting directors, get invited to the right parties, get an acting coach who didn't cost too much. She starred for free in a jumpy, grainy film written and directed by a UCLA graduate student. The film won a festival prize. The student went on to make a feature for Miramar but didn't have a part for Cindy. She did a couple of videos that showed on pay TV, the kind where the *Babes of Busty Beach* prance around without clothes but don't have sex. They just tell the world what the producer says was their most memorable encounter, on the Eiffel Tower, under the Golden Gate, wherever.

Cindy's in truth, according to Andrea, was with the producer who liked to play rough. As Andrea and Cindy got to know each other, Andrea met the producer a couple of times. Daniel Mandeville aka "Dan the Man." The name rang a bell. Mandeville hadn't rested on his laurels as a pornographer but achieved respected Hollywood fame for conceiving the teen slasher flick, *Run Dead or Dead Run*, something like that, and turned it into sequels II through VI. Andrea didn't really know him but thought he looked good. Andrea was the kind who thought looks told a lot about a person. "Danny is very well groomed," she said. "Dresses like *GQ*." Andrea seemed puzzled that a man like that could abuse a woman. "Maybe Cindy was exaggerating. Maybe it was just emotional abuse."

Mandeville and Cindy were "kind of living together" when Cindy landed a pretty good speaking part in a mini-series that hadn't yet aired. Andrea ran lines with her, perfecting Cindy's accent. Cindy thought she was better than she was, and Andrea was sure that if it weren't for Dan, Cindy would still have been a day player.

My balcony was just wide enough to hold a hibachi and two deck chairs side by side, so from the table in the dining nook you could see part of the access road that circled my end of the two buildings of Malibu Palms. There was a cop car squawk, that one short blast that tells mothers with baby carriages to move it. Andrea's eyes widened. I always gave guests the view: the glare off the bay and the mountains beyond distracted from my bloodshot eyes. I turned to take in the white roof of a Dodge Charger that was stopped for a utility truck backing out of the underground garage. The Charger didn't have a light bar or markings, but there was no doubt

Johnny Law was throwing his weight around.

Andrea's voice shivered, "They're here to talk to me."

Or the depts were filling their ticketing quota of illegally parked cars. It wasn't the end of the month, however, so my guess was with Andrea.

"I have to go."

"Sorry," I said.

"They'll probably want to talk to you too."

I wondered why. I didn't know the dead woman, neither her age nor her name, until forty-five minutes ago. Maybe there were a couple of fleeting memories of her when we were in the same elevator, but I wasn't sure of that.

"But I didn't know her," I said.

"But she lived just down the hall." Andrea nodded upwards. "Second floor."

I shook my head. "Sorry." I hardly knew anyone around me except what they looked like. And I tried not to look. "Sorry."

"But you know me."

I put on my most charming smile. "Boy meets girl. Eyes across the crowded pool. It's different," I paused to make what I added all the more meaningful, "Andrea."

I was escorting her to the door when she turned to me, face tilted upward. I kissed her with brotherly affection and felt less brotherly as she held onto me.

"They'll probably want you to verify where I was."

I nodded like I knew what to say.

She said, "We started talking around three o'clock. I remember looking at my watch when you offered me one of the beers in your cooler. Then you left to mix us Manhattans. You remember."

"Yeah, sure, the Manhattans, that's what I would do."

"You brought them back in plastic glasses."

"Because glass," I said, "you can't have glass around the pool." I drank beer only from bottles, so I didn't give a damn about the rules, but most of the dishware in my apartment was plastic. I had given everything else Vera and I had to Goodwill.

"Yes," Andrea said. "Then you mixed more Manhattans, and I made you dinner, and you were going to go back to your place to make us a nightcap, but I talked you into having sherry instead, and then...."

Her voice trailed off. And afterwards, I thought, you called me a lousy lover. I said, "Andrea, honey, it's probably not important, but I can't cover for you for all of Monday night. I left when it was still dark. Morning, night, I don't know."

"That's OK," she said, drawing back. "Cindy's body was found late yesterday afternoon."

"How do you know?"

"The paper." She kissed me briskly. "Thanks for being so good to me." Her eyes teared.

"I am sorry," I said.

She made a brave face, "Like I said, thanks," and hurried out the door.

Chapter Two

For days I piled up unread copies of the *Los Angeles Times* because I was too lazy to cancel the subscription. Now I yanked the paper open and peeled it to a couple of column inches in *L.A. Now*. I filled in the blanks of what wasn't there, a habit from not wanting to wander aimlessly among life's mysteries. Connecting missing dots could come up with a tale that was good or bad. It could be off track or right on target. Either way, I was in charge of it. Being in charge, that's how I missed an important fact.

Staff Reporter described the drowning victim as a 24-year-old actress living in Playa del Rey. Her body was spotted by a deck hand on *Gone Fishin'* coming back to port in the Marina. A Sheriff Department spokesperson said the death was probably accidental. The department was conducting a routine investigation while awaiting an autopsy report and positive identification of the body.

I didn't know when the *Times* was put to bed, but I figured the forensics must have been in already. I knew the skipper of *Gone Fishin'* from sharing a drink or two at local watering holes. Nate Hollenbrock was ex-Coast Guard. Four ex-wives. Grown children who didn't talk to him. Grandchildren he had never seen. Actually, I had a lot of drinks with him.

In my imagination I could see Nate at the helm of his 65-foot walkabout, his sun dark face with reddish patches of cancer, wisps of palomino hair under the faded cap, his deep brown, reflect-nothing eyes set on the breakwater. He never drank with paying customers aboard (one part of his rambling life story that I was 75% sure was true), but that's all he'd be thinking once he began to skirt the breakwater in preparation to make the the turn into the channel.

Outside the wheelhouse, excursion fishermen would be drinking their final beers of the day, bragging or cursing depending on their luck. One of the hands—Manuel or Tomas, or maybe that high school dropout Jerry who sometimes worked crew—had lifted his gaze and saw Cindy Korbell bobbing against the rocks.

Nate threw *Gone Fishin'* into slow astern and held her steady in the flood tide. I saw boat hooks splash near the body then draw her in, the catch of a lifetime.

For reasons that I was incapable of examining, there were a lot of questions I wanted to ask Nate and the boys. At the moment, though, I had a job to get to. I dressed and showered slowly, slathered myself in sun block, as good a deodorant as any, and put on clean trunks, a wrinkled "Ozzfest 2001" T-shirt and stained deck shoes, no socks. I took time puttering in the kitchen, cleaning up a week of clutter. I even scoured the sink. I wanted them to come before I left.

They did.

One was a young black deputy. The other was a skinny white with a shaved head. Both wore sports jackets and ties. Something about the black man said his job was to drive. Pistol whip the unruly if it came to that. The white had pale shark eyes. He'd do the talking, but he didn't have to say anything to tell me that the forensics were in on Cindy Korbell and the L.A. County Sheriff's Department didn't think her death was accidental.

Meet Detective Price and Sergeant Novak. We didn't shake hands. Novak took in my beachwear with displeasure. He asked if I were Charles Caswell Clement. I'd heard worse names, but I still didn't like mine. He didn't like it either.

"Charlie, Mr. Clement or Three Cs," I said affably. "Please don't string them all out again."

I asked them in. I asked them if they wanted coffee. I could tell Price wanted coffee. I pushed the advantage, "How about a bagel or a sweet roll or something?" Anything sounded better than stale bread with hairy spots of mold that I actually had, and I knew that Price would take his cues from Novak. "I could scramble some eggs." Price was looking in Novak's direction. "Dice some chilies, put in some Cajun sausage, add a little cheese."

"No thanks," said Novak.

I kept looking at his sidekick. "It will only take a second. With some hash browns sizzling in butter."

"No," Novak said again, this time without thanks.

Good. I had just made Novak the bad guy. Price might be the one to take the homeless behind the Dumpster and beat them into Ventura County, but in his eyes on this morning in my apartment, Novak was the bad guy.

I asked them to sit down. They were going to take the sofa that had mysteries in the nooks in crannies, but I gestured to the plain pine dining set. "Better view," I said.

The better view put the outside light to my back. I remained in the Red Baron position while they seated themselves, and I kept looking down at them until Novak, clearly ticked off, said, "Please sit down."

I had been playing this process as if it were the first drink after a dry spell, and now suddenly I was hooked. I wanted more. I didn't care where it led. I needed it. What were these goons doing here? They should be hunting down the gangbangers who screwed up my life.

Novak put a large manila envelope on the table. "Do you know why we're here?"

I tried to sound nervous. "Oh no, not that parking ticket. I'm sure I put a check in the mail."

Price volunteered, "We're not here for that."

Novak gave him a sideways glance, then slipped a large black and white photograph out of the envelope. It was stapled to a sheet of letter-sized paper. I had seen the likes of it before—an actor's headshot with credits and contact information on the paper. Actors and agents pass them out to casting directors and production companies. They are printed by the hundred and never returned. Novak was passing this one to me across the table and watching my face closely. I'd have to return it.

"Do you know this woman?"

Hint: "Cindy Korbell" was set in a cursive font in the lower right quadrant of the photo.

I'd seen her, not anywhere in the Palms, but at Waterside Shopping Center over in Marina del Rey, Playa's unincorporated neighbor. I spotted her under the umbrellas outside the Tobacco Trader. She and her companion had coffee cups from Starbuck's a couple of stores down. The companion was a dark haired man. He wore sunglasses, not that I gave him more than a glance. It was she who had me slowing my pace. She talked rapidly, gesturing with her hands, and was either angry or passionate about something she wanted him to understand. He didn't bother to look at her, kept his face set on his reflection in the window of the Tobacco Trader. He was a fool because she was so pretty even Narcissus would want to look at her.

I turned the photo over to study the information on the back. The deputies might as well have disappeared. I saw that Cindy had done gigs in

experimental theaters and actors co-ops in Venice, and in the Hollywoods North and West. I liked the fact that she had done a couple of weekends at a comedy club in Manhattan Beach. Beautiful women don't often try to make people laugh. At the bottom of the credit list was the part on the *Grey's* episode. The mini-series hadn't made this load of headshots. Several lines up I found it. *Babes of Busty Beach*. To put that in she must have been desperate to sound like a pro, not an equity player in a short list of productions created by people who say film rather than movie.

Actresses, I started to think. I corrected myself, *Actors*, then heard my own voice saying, "What a lousy life."

"What was that?" Novak asked sharply. "You know her?"

I shook my head. "Not really."

"You said something."

"I was just thinking. People who try to break into show business. It's a crummy way to make a living."

"You know actresses?"

"Around here every divorcee, every high school cheerleader has an acting coach. Every supermarket clerk is writing a screenplay. I bet you've thought about directing. An action flick, right?"

Novak's face flushed. He tapped the headshot of Cindy. "Her. Do you know her?"

I looked again. I shook my head.

"Never seen her around?"

I lied. "Naw."

"She lives just above you."

Present tense made him a liar too. What I had said honestly to Andrea earlier seemed a good thing to say now that I knew better. "I might have seen her in the elevators. Parking garage, around the pool. I don't know."

"Hard to forget a face like that."

"I go for what's farther down."

Sergeant Novak sheathed the headshot in the manila envelope. He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and took out the leather case for his shield. How thoughtful. Now he was going to show me his badge.

As he stood, he withdrew a business card from a slit in the holder. He flicked the card on the table. Apparently the badge could wait for a citizen who might be impressed by a piece of metal. "You hear anything, remember anything, my phone number's there. Direct line and cell. If I don't answer, leave a message."

"Mind telling me what this is about?"

He did mind, but he said, "We have a drowning victim. Cindy Korbell is missing. Maybe there's a connection. We're making routine inquiries."

"Murder, that's routine to you?"

He was about to head for the door without waiting for the king of the castle to lead the way and open it for him. He sat again. "OK, wise guy, what do you know?"

"About an hour and a half ago I was sitting at this table with a woman named Andrea Lawless."

They both kept poker faces.

"Not bad to look at. Name ring a bell?"

Still the silent treatment.

"Well, she dropped by all in tears. She was sitting right where you are when she saw you drive by. She didn't think you were going whale watching. She thought you were coming to interview her. Then you'd come to me because you had talked to her."

"How well do you know Ms. Lawless?"

"What did she tell you?"

Novak's eyes showed as much life as a tiger shark's when the membranes close so that it doesn't have to see what it has already decided to bite off.

"Right. I was with Andrea the night before last. Is that important?"

"Every fact is important."

"How did you identify the body?"

"I ask the questions."

"Call me curious. I know how Andrea knew Cindy Korbell. They met on some movie set. But how did you know that Cindy knew her? Was there a purse? A piece of paper with names on it? Or did you come by last night when we were all asleep here at the Palm's and go through Cindy's apartment? Where did you say she lived? Upstairs?"

"You know damn well where she lived."

"And you come to my house. You play it close to the chest. A missing person, a drowning victim, maybe they're connected. Yeah, like Siamese twins. You're only here because the last person you interrogated mentioned my name. You wouldn't have showed up at all if you were looking into an accidental death. You're looking for a murderer."

Price appeared impressed by my deductive reasoning, but I wanted more than appreciation. I addressed Novak, "Was there water in the lungs? Bruising? What did the medical examiner say?"

"You don't really think I'm going to tell you that."

I didn't know water in the lungs from water on the knee. But hunches I did know, how men play their hands when they're holding something back, how the order of information had been upside down. I tried one last ploy.

"Listen, Sergeant Novak, you asked me to call you. What am I supposed to say? Deconstruct the history of the world? If I'm going to keep my ear to the ground, I want to know what I'm listening for."

Novak said defensively, "I never told you to keep your ear to the ground. I just said if you remember anything. I'll say it again. You got my card."

He pushed up from the table. Detective Price was already standing, but he hung back a moment, a working man curious as to how we idle rich can lounge about so late in the morning.

"What is it you do, Mr. Clement?"

"Marine repairs."

He looked surprised. "Got a cousin who does that down at Dana Point."

"Price!" came Novak's voice from the front room.

"How does he describe himself?"

There was a pause. "Handy man."

You have to buy [Malbu Palms](#) to find out what chapters 3, 4 and 5 are about.

Chapter Six

Cindy Korbell's parents flew from Iowa to claim the remains of their daughter. They were going to accompany the body back to Mason City but changed their minds, reasoning that L.A. was where their firstborn had come to make her life. Therefore they would bury her here.

On Tuesday evening a vigil was held in St. Anastasia Church in Westchester. I went but didn't sign the guest book. I could see that Dan Mandeville and Raymond Barclay had. Barclay's scrawl was a dark gouge with the only decipherable letters making it look like Ra Bark.

The casket was at the foot of the altar, open, which I was hoping for. I walked up the aisle accompanied by a pervasive sound, soft and eerie, that grew in volume the closer I got. It would have shaken anyone's confidence. The corpse's face was that of a frozen beauty. The hands

were folded to the chest, and although the dress was long sleeved with ruffles at the cuffs, I thought the one wrist I could partially see was darkened. I imagined it could be bruising, or mortician's wax had not been evenly applied. There was no way to examine the discoloration or to tell whether the body bore other signs of trauma.

I nodded my head like, "Good-bye, Cindy, have to run," but I forced myself to turn slowly because I was looking for Raymond Barclay and Dan Mandeville.

What I saw was a woman in black nearly prostrate in the front row. A man supported her shoulders and tried to gentle the restless wringing of her hands. The noise was coming from her. I knew the definition of the word keening, but it meant nothing until I saw the unspeakable grief in Mrs. Korbell's face and realized the wail came from something horribly mutilated inside.

Coming up the aisle, I didn't see Barclay or Mandeville. I did, however, catch the soft brown eye of young woman. Outside, I carried an impression. Kindly eyes, that's always nice, but serene, that's what got me.

The funeral Mass was the next afternoon. The vigil was one thing. To hear a sky pilot drone on was something else, so I attended private services in Vera's room.

Hers was the funeral I wanted to go to. She wasn't dead, though. I wished she would die because that was what I would want if I were in her shoes. But I wasn't in her shoes. I had no idea what anyone in her shoes would want. She was called a vegetable. When I first heard that, I said to the doctor (this was early on), "Yeah? What kind? Broccoli? Carrot? Eggplant? Com'on, you salad-brained sum'bitch, what kind of vegetable?"

Vera sometimes opened her eyes when you came into her room. She could smile when you brought ice chips to her mouth or brushed her hair. I didn't put much into those reactions any more, but her folks did. They were another reason I did not sign off on Vera. I wondered what I would do if they had a change of heart.

From Casa Serena on Manchester I drove to Holy Cross Cemetery in Fox Hills. The rolling lawns rose behind a shopping center that was at the junction of the San Diego and Marina Freeways. Bing Crosby, W.C. Fields

and Sharon Tate were "distinguished residents." I took potluck on a winding road and slowed past the parked cars of a group of mourners moving up a slope toward a gravesite. Among them, I recognized Dan Mandeville. I didn't see Barclay.

Mr. and Mrs. Korbell were there. Close to them was a woman who bore a family resemblance. Cindy's sister, I surmised. A priest in a cassock recited the Rite of Final Committal.

"Before we go our separate ways, let us take leave of our sister. May our farewell express our affection for her; may it ease our sadness and strengthen our hope. One day we shall joyfully greet her again when the love of Christ, which conquers all things, destroys even death itself." The priest sprinkled holy water on the casket.

Mandeville kept his head bowed the whole time. He was dressed business casual, no tie and a tailored cashmere blazer that didn't bunch anywhere. The designer sunglasses, judging from what I had seen when Cindy was alive and now across from her coffin, were standard equipment. Thick wavy hair curled around his ears and down his neck, and was subtly streaked with highlights.

A barber cut my hair. My blazer had some wool in it.

"Saints of God, come to her aid! Hasten to meet her, angels of the Lord!"

Some of the people hesitantly responded, "Receive her soul and present her to God the Most High." The most certain voice was feminine and musical and right behind me. I turned to those eyes.

"May Christ who called you take you to himself; may angels lead you to the bosom of Abraham."

She returned my look unblinkingly. And smiled. She had rich dark auburn hair and a buttery complexion. I felt my cheeks flush, and I turned away. She was overweight by thirty or forty pounds, not unattractive, but.... Who was this Rbubenesque delight? I felt as if I knew her, but I knew I had never seen her until yesterday.

"Into your hands, Father of mercies, we commend our sister Cynthia in the sure and certain hope that, together with all who have died in Christ, she

will rise with him on the last day."

There were more words and a final blessing before people began to move away. Some came up to the Korbells. I was thinking about doing the same until I saw Mandeville glad-hand the Mister and embrace the Mrs. He kissed the sister. I had the strange hope that when I turned....

She hadn't moved. "I don't believe I know you," she said with just a trace of something.

"How old are you?" sounded idiotic even as it was coming out of my mouth. What I was really asking was, Are you past the age of consent?

"What?"

I thought I recovered nicely. "Between eighteen and forty, right? I guess ages. I can't help it."

She smiled and held out her hand. "I'm thirty-one, and my name is Patricia. Patricia Diaz. My friends call me Tish."

There was a timbre to her voice, not quite an accent, that was very fetching. It made me think there was nothing wrong with being heavy of bosom and ample-thighed. Nothing wrong at all. Many people would have considered her round face cute. Not a few would have said beautiful. She didn't sag anywhere. No implants. No danger of anorexia. A picture of health.

"Charles Caswell Clement. I know. It's awful. Call me Charlie or Three Cs."

"How old are you?"

"Is that important?"

"It was to you."

"Can't you guess?"

"You're forty-five."

"What?!"

"I'm teasing. You probably get carded in bars all the time. Are you going to Dan's?"

"For?"

"Father Fred announced in church that mourners were invited for refreshments."

"A wake?"

"Technically, no. Last night's vigil is sometimes called a wake. This is just people who knew Cindy getting together informally. You didn't hear the announcement?"

"No," I motioned with a hand, "I barely made this...this deal."

"You're not Catholic, but you're not a Protestant either." She closed her eyes. "I don't get New Age. You're not Jewish." She opened her eyes. "You're nothing."

How she got there seemed strange. I shrugged. She smiled like someone trying to cover something. As I understand it now, she did not want me to see pity. A little *evangelista*, my *Señorita* Diaz.

"Can you give me a ride?" took me off guard again.

"How'd you get here?"

"Friends. I'll tell them you're going to take me."

She turned and hurried to two long sleek women. They talked. Tish nodded in my direction.

Transferring junk from the passenger's seat to the backseat of my used-to-be-white Civic, I wondered why I was so embarrassed. Once we snapped our belts on, just before I turned the ignition, she said, "Some people think you have to be a fortune teller to see where people will be in five years. I say, you just have to look at their cars."

I put the clutch in first. "What's mine tell you?"

"You already know."

Provocative, yes. Irritating, yes. Maybe useful. "So, you met Cindy in church?"

"Well, not really at St. Anastasia. I got to know her a little through this non-denominational prayer group that meets once a week. She went to that for a while."

"Non-denominational. That's a Protestant thing. I thought Catholics think all Protestants are going to hell."

"Where did you get that idea?"

"Some foamer on Third Street Mall gave me this little comic book. Catholics are going to hell. Jews are going to hell. I think Episcopalians are already there."

"So how do you get we're condemning people to hell?"

"Stands to reason. One side shoots; the other shoots back."

"Do you want a serious answer?"

"I'm a shallow person, Tish. But deeply shallow."

"I don't know who is going to hell. What I know is that Jesus makes sure his followers do not. I also know there are many people who call themselves Christians, but by their words and actions are something quite different."

"Yeah, OK, sure. So this non-denomination thing with Cindy?"

"The Catholic Church has everything a Christian could want, but too many of us don't take it to heart. We don't make faith a personal decision. We think it's enough just to say we're Catholic. Protestants can teach us a lot about how to be intimate with God and to love the Bible. What they lack is real accountability to authority, so they can go off the rails. Some are all emotions, no thought, no history. Some are all head trips. They don't put much stock in the Eucharist, and.... I'm sorry. You have no idea what I'm talking about."

"But I love the sound of your voice."

"Anyway, some of us get together and pray together and expect things to happen. There are several denominations represented. I can't say that Cindy was a good Catholic, but she and I were the only two."

"Until?" I glanced at her. Tish was waiting for me to fill in the blank. "Dan Mandeville, right?"

"She wanted work. He had it. People get lonely."

"What did Cindy say about their relationship?"

"She didn't. Not after I said what I had to say. That more or less killed our friendship."

"What did you say?"

Tish didn't answer for a while. "Do you know what a liar and deceiver is?"

"The folks in City Hall. Sacramento too. That's my short list."

"Someone who moves you away from truth."

"That's what Dan Mandeville did?"

"Yes. But he's also been deceived."

"By?" I could tell by the way she drew in a breath as if ready to speak then hesitated that she was reconsidering what she would say.

"All the substitutes for God." She gestured to a billboard ahead. The phrases "4 Play" and "Gentlemen's Club" sandwiched provocatively dressed pulchritude. I knew the club. I knew the pulchritude. I didn't think those facts would impress Tish. I nodded because I knew what she meant about the substitute part. I found myself thumbing my wedding ring, wondering what she thought about that.

Amazingly, she asked, "How long have you been separated?"

Separated made it simple. "Three years. How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"You knew that I'm...I'm separated."

"I get impressions."

"Was that your impression at the cemetery?"

"No, it took a while. Playing with your ring got me wondering."

That would not have told her separated, but I didn't want to edge closer to that ground. "What do you do?"

"I work for a security firm."

"Stocks, bonds?"

"Research."

I tried to impress her with what remained of my financial jargon. "Standards and Dows kind of stuff?"

"*Security* firm."

"Oh. Alarms."

"That's part of our business."

"What's the other part?"

"We work for lawyers and insurance companies. Local banks sometimes hire us to make sure their electronic data is safe."

"You're like a private eye."

"I have a license."

"Wow."

"It's not like on television. We have some field operatives, but the stuff I do is like being an accountant."

"It's still impressive," and made her potentially more useful than I initially

thought.

"What is it you do, Charlie?"

"I'm a boat ni-- I work on boats."

"That sounds fun."

I didn't try to allay the impression. Whenever possible I want people to think I'm a fun guy.

"But you don't like it much," she said.

"How do you do that?!"

"Impressions."

"Can you do Marcel Marceau giving a speech?"

"This will sound crazy."

"People called Galileo crazy."

"They called Joan of Arc crazy. And Charles Manson. I get notions...pictures sometimes...of things I think God is revealing to me. I'm in that prayer group because I want my impressions tested by other people. I mean, I'd rather be closer to Joan than to Manson. It's a question of accountability."

"You're what-do-you-call-it? A psychic, a mind reader?"

"I don't want to read your mind. I am not a psychic."

"Yeah, well, it's all mumbo jumbo to me."

"I know. You want to turn left up there."

We were in L.A.'s first Fantasyland. Laid out in the 19-Preteens, the canals of Venice spidered one time swamp. Tacky commercial buildings rose in faux Italian style. The homeless added what the boosters call a "colorful presence." But the northern part of Venice had luxury hotels, and in the southwest quadrant you could pick up a two-room house with bath in a

foreclosure sale for about a million. Chump change compared to the market value of bigger homes or to the smaller, older ones on the canals.

Tish directed me to a narrow street off Abbot Kenny. We went over the hump of a canal bridge. Back patios of homes lined both sides of the canal. Canoes were moored next to some of the homes. A duck and her ducklings left a V wake in the still green water. A soft saxophone riff came from a combo that was playing "Taking the A Train."

"I think that's it," said Tish.

When we found parking (not the easiest thing to do in Venice), we walked to the front of the jazz house. I asked whether she had been here before. She explained that maps were passed out at the church.

A party was in full progress. It wasn't raucous, but there was the gaiety released after somber proceedings. I'm sure the atmosphere was discomfiting for the Korbells. Upon Tish's and my arrival, I saw them set wine glasses down and say something to Mandeville. He kissed Cindy's sister good-bye, and she hurried after her parents. From my vantage point, her face looked as if she were whining something. They left without her. Laughter noticeably increased, and Sis went right back to Mandeville's side.

"Let me get you something, Tish, then I'm going to mingle."

A serve yourself bar was set out on the patio. I stood next to a man making two G-and-Ts, stood for a while to smell that juniper promise mixed with jazz on a summer afternoon. Then I reached into an ice chest and pulled out one the light beers offered. Miller would have tasted passable, but Tish had chosen a rival's imitation of pond water. I couldn't figure the point. For 70 calories more she could have enjoyed a Pilsner Urquell.

I passed off Tish's beer and enviously swung away with my fist around an icy glass of tonic water. The partygoers seemed to be in three groups.

The largest was show biz. I recognized one star and actually fought the temptation to ask for an autograph, but in West L.A. we're too cool for that sort of thing. Everyone else in the show biz group wanted to be near that lady or Mandeville or a man in a tailored suit and tie (looked like an undertaker, probably an agent). It was as if those worthies were three

islands in a stream, around which all the water eddied.

I assumed the best looking in the water were actors. There was a sprinkling of frumps and shoddies who must have crawled out from behind-the-scenes. Some obeisance was being paid to one of the shoddies, so I assumed he was a director or a drug dealer. I saw the Moviola guy from the Palms seemingly lost in a daze. I gave him a wave, high and big like hailing a taxi. He eventually saw the movement and came to take my hand in both of his.

"I'm glad you came." And then he was off to his own world.

The second largest group looked like frumps and shoddies except you didn't hear anyone trying to imitate *South Park* characters. Instead, names came up like hot vomit--Bush and Cheney, Rumsfeld and Karl Rove. They blew up the Pentagon and were killing innocent Iraqis. The venom sounded nutty. Hence the second group was largely shunned, but not from lack of agreement. Most citizens in this part of town were either liberals or Revolution Now radicals, but they tried to sound coherent and look presentable.

Randoms. We were the third group. Oddballs and others. Me, myself and I. Tish and respectable citizens. A bona fide other was Cindy's sister. You didn't get better looking than Cindy was, but dipping out of the same gene pool came up with something pretty sweet. She looked like she was hanging onto Dan the Man's every word and appeared almost to flutter when he introduced her to the beautiful people.

I edged up behind a guy saying, "After he dies, the wife and the mistress meet. Regular catfight." The guy wore designer jeans and cowboy boots, had long hair, too dark to be anything but dyed to take out the gray, and was flabby around the middle. "But for different reasons," he was saying, "each woman suspects her beloved's death wasn't accidental. They become grudging allies to find his killers, and when the tables turn and they become the prey, they are closer than sisters and ready to kick some serious butt."

Dan nodded to show that he was alive if not exactly listening.

"I see it as a movie, but catch this. Once the wife and mistress come together, it's like a franchise for a television series."

"I don't do television."

"No, no, I know. I'm just thinking of the additional revenue. After the theatrical run, the video sales, rentals, Pay-per-View. I mean, we'd milk them dry first. Television is just an after thought. Look, why don't I pop the script by your office tomorrow? Or whenever."

"Any coverage?"

"I'm not sure. I had a friend of mine. Actually, a friend of a friend. At Sony. It was just a rough draft then. I was looking for a gut reaction before I re-wrote and went wide. You're the only person I've actually talked to about it."

"Get me the coverage. Then maybe I'll read the script."

"But really, I made a lot of major changes for the re-write."

No answer.

"Sorry. OK, Dan, will do. Thanks for the time. I really appreciate it."

The writer turned away with a castrated look that instantly became contorted with rage. "Prick faced jerk," he muttered. He stalked toward the middle of the room. "Philistines!" He flipped everyone off and headed for the door. "Degenerates!"

My kind of guy.

"Wait a second," I called, having followed onto the sidewalk.

He threw a glance over his shoulder and smoldered on down the street.

"Please."

He turned. "Yeah, what do you want?"

"Answers."

"Disappear. I don't have the meaning of life right now." He started to walk on.

"You don't look you ever had," stopped him. I closed the distance between us. "Charlie Clement." I offered my hand; he didn't take it. "I noticed you don't like Mandeville."

"How astute. Who does?"

"How did you know Cindy Korbell?"

He didn't answer.

"She lived two doors over from me, one floor up."

"Yeah? Yeah? You over there a lot, were you? You have to stand in line, pal, huh? Did you?" He looked to be balancing his weight to throw a punch.

I held up both hands. "I saw her once. With Mandeville. I didn't like him. Her, I was smitten with. I wish I had known her better."

As suddenly as his anger rose, it flooded away. "We all wish that," sounded as sad as anything I ever heard.

I saw him start to feel his pockets, and quick as a blink I was out with I'm OK, You're OK cigarettes. He took one; I lit it for him. "You're a writer, right?"

"Right, right, I write. So I'm told by people who don't know their ass from my elbow."

"Did you meet Cindy on a set or something?"

"*The Angelinos*, that's a three-part mini-series due out-- Hell, who cares now? I don't know. It was set for fall, but now it's a big summer deal. End of the month, I'm told. She had a part in the second night. In the read-through, she took it as far as it would go. Most actors hold back until the camera's rolling, but she went balls to the wall. I was hired to do a quickie re-write of... Crap, it was crap, but she made it Shinola. I was supposed to make the second night hers. I went balls to the wall too. I've never written anything so good. We were three weeks together practically every hour of the day and night. When a writer can feed lines to an actor and get instant feedback, the chemistry is amazing."

I leaned against the fender of a parked car, hoping that he'd pick up that I wasn't in any hurry. "You loved her."

"Huh?" was angry again. "Yeah, so what? She had me thinking she loved me. But she wasn't going to leave that scumbag. She was like everyone else. A writer in this town is used like a paper cup then thrown away when everything's drained out. Well, screw that. I don't give a damn that she's dead. Little hustlers like her deserve it!"

"You don't mean that."

He spit in my face then looked as startled as I felt. Tears sprang to his eyes, and before they welled over, he was running down the street.

Fairly fast for a smoker, I thought. A jealous, deranged smoker in Tony Lamas.

Back at the house, I stood in line again until I finally got the chance thrust out my hand aggressively.

"Danny Boy! How in the heck are you?"

"Fine, uh..."

"Charlie. Charlie Clement." I held out my hand to, "You must be poor Cindy's sister. God, she was beautiful. I can see it runs in the family."

"My name's Erica."

"Erica, honey, please accept my condolences. All of us are just..." Obviously, I was too broken up for words.

"How did you know Cindy?" asked Mandeville, trying to take charge of the conversation.

"Geez, Danny, I can't tell you how much my heart goes out to you. I mean, you guys were really an item."

His face froze. Beyond him, off his elbow, the famous actress gave a slow take in our direction. It suddenly hit me. She had a stage name and another name. Mrs. Daniel Mandeville.

"Item as in friends. Item, that's how we described friendships where I grew up. Local vernacular. Little place in Colorado. Cindy and I were an item. We were neighbors at Malibu Palms. She was a great girl."

"I never heard her mention you."

To answer Mandeville, I looked at Erica. "If she ever mentioned Three Cs, that's me." I spoke now to Mandeville, "I guess you last saw her on the Fourth or around then, huh?"

His wife looked as if she were as interested in his answer as I was. He spoke deliberately but showed no sign that he was aware of her hovering presence. "I was in Baja fishing. With colleagues. Perhaps you've heard of them. Stu Ayers and Randy Griffin."

I shook my head.

"They're players in my business, but I suppose people on the outside wouldn't know that. We got back to the Marina the day after poor Cindy drowned. Both my wife and I were quite fond of the girl. As you said, we liked her as a friend, and we thought she had great potential as an actor. We were both very broken up to hear of her premature death." He put his hand around Erica's shoulders and gave an avuncular squeeze. "Not as much as her family, of course. But we wanted to put together this little reception in her honor."

My glancing impression when I first saw Mandeville with Cindy was the same as seeing him with her sister now. Didn't like him. Andrea's liking him was no vote in his favor. Tish's reluctance to say anything positive proved that I was dealing with Triple-A *sphincter flambé*, for which the only strategy is the Red Adair technique of dropping nitro on the flames.

"And I can't tell you how honored I am to be here, Dan. Now, she called you, didn't she, on her cell before she drowned?"

"I get a lot of phone calls, Mr. Clement. Unless the reception breaks up, I can't tell whether someone is on a cell or not."

"Sometime in the afternoon of last Monday."

"I don't see how that is any of your business." He shrugged as if it were no

concern to him whether I was being impertinent. "Actually, I don't remember. I get a lot calls. And Cynthia and I were friends, remember?"

"Andrea Lawless," I said, "she was a friend of Cindy." There was a little involuntary twitch around his eyes. "Me and Andrea are an item. Like friends, that kind of item. Not that I wouldn't want more, know what I mean?" I watched his mouth line hardened. "Andrea says she knows you, Dan."

Pregnant pauses should, if you ask me, give birth to something, but I didn't have anything more to say and left it to Mandeville to go full term. He made a show of looking around the room. When he caught his wife's eye, he said, "Honey, have you seen Andrea?"

"No, dear."

"I am surprised, Mr. Clement. She doesn't seem to be here." Mandeville turned to Erica. "Your sister and Andrea Lawless were really quite an item, to use Mr. Clement's childhood vernacular."

"I know the name," said Erica.

"But Three Cs, does that ring a bell?" The little minx shook her head in total innocence. Mandeville was now in control. "And what is it that you do, Mr. Clement?"

I scrunched up my face. "Something really exciting, let me tell you. But I have congestive heart failure, and I take Lasix, and I really have to pee." I was describing my father. "So if you could just tell me where the head is."

"Give me the elevator pitch."

An elevator pitch is when a writer or any other of Hollywood's bottom feeders finds himself suddenly in the same elevator as a power player who can change his life forever. But he has only until the doors open to make an impression with his story. It better be a good story.

"I fool with boats. I'm a silent partner in the *Lady Devon*."

Mandeville did not look good, so I decided to rub in my wealth and prestige.

"That's just one of my toys. I have some jets I sub-lease to corporate clients."

"Cool!" exclaimed dear Ms. Korbell. "What kind?"

"The kind that fly." I gave a hearty laugh. "I hope."

Cindy's sister laughed like a good sport. Mandeville smiled like a jolly fellow. But he sounded like a jolly fellow with a mean streak:

"You know, Mr. Clement, I had you pegged as a very bad actor pretending to be a fumbling detective who knows squat."

"Exactly the part I played in the junior class play! Please, Dan, before you throw rotten tomatoes, can you tell me where the head is?"

I have the bladder of a camel. Rather than waste time trying to empty it, I went through the His and Hers medicine cabinets. His contained a prescription for Cialis, the drug that guarantees erections any time you want for up to thirty-six hours, a mail order topical anesthetic to help deaden a tendency for premature ejaculation, male potency vitamins, and Modafinil, which I looked up later and discovered was to keep you awake. After all, what good is a 36-hour woody if you're asleep?

Mrs. Mandeville seemed to want to avoid her husband. Ambien, Halcion, Klonopin and Lunesta were her sandmen, with over the counter Sleep-Eze to give the heavy hitters a break. There was a prescription dose of an antihistamine used for allergies and with the happy side effect of drowsiness. Ativan and Xanax kept the panic and anxiety away. Vicodin worked on pain, and Dilaudid bitch slapped it out the door.

Speaking of doors, I heard the one to the bathroom open, which was strange because I had locked it, but the man who was opening had a key that explained everything. He was a big black man, very big, and I wondered why I hadn't seen him before. While I was wondering, he took my closer elbow in a hand that was the size of a 24-ounce rib eye steak. He gave a squeeze.

"That's your funny bone. It's really a nerve. The ulna nerve. If I squeeze just a little harder, you whole arm goes numb. Want me to demonstrate?"

"No."

He squeezed harder. My arm went dead but for the lightening bolts of pain going up and down it. "Not much harder and most people faint. And when I'm crushing the elbow...the ulna nerve runs from the collar bone behind the elbow to the fingers, so I can't help crushing the elbow...everyone screams like a girl. Want me to demonstrate?"

"No, sir. I really want to do whatever you want me to do. I want to do it very quickly because I am very eager to please Your Lordship."

"You're a coward, is that right?"

"Yes, sir. Exactly right."

"This is what is going to happen. I am going to usher you down the hall, through the front room and out the door. If you give me any trouble.... Have you see *Chinatown*?"

"I know we've got one, but I'm just familiar with the one in Frisco."

"In *the movie* this detective played by Jack Nicholson gets caught snooping around by.... That little director guy. You know, the Polak. Got had up on statutory rape charges. You know."

"Sorry."

"C'm'on, man, he won the Academy Award."

"Oh. That rapist. Whatshisname."

"So he has this knife. He puts the blade up one of Nicholson's nostrils, gives a little flick and slices it through." He chuckled, "It was a great scene."

"And if I am very, very good I don't have to worry about reenacting it."

"You have to worry about what happens afterwards. When I hit you in the mouth, you lose your incisors and canines, and most of your pre-molars. Then when you are curled on the pavement, I will kick you in the exposed kidney. There will be a lot of internal bleeding. They won't be able to save the kidney."

"But I'll have the other one?"

"Not if you roll over."

"Well, sir, I'm not going to make a scene. I just want to do your bidding."

He ushered me down the hall. As we were weaving through the guests in the front room, I hissed, "You're going to have to tell me your name."

"Hush."

"That girl who's coming up, I came with her. I have to tell her I'm leav--"

"Charlie, I've been looking all over for you."

"Tish, look who I just ran into. An old pal."

I would have called him The Compton Creeper, but when he said, "Roosevelt," I knew everything was cool.

"Look, sweetie, Rosey and I have urgent business. You're going to have to catch a ride home with someone else."

"I'll come back," said Roosevelt. "I can give you a ride."

I was pleading with my eyes and giving the slightest shake of my head. Tish picked up the cue and smiled sweetly, "That's very kind but no thank you."

"What's the matter? You don't like black people?"

She gave a tinkling laugh. "I adore black people. But I was just looking for Three Cs to tell him I have to leave now with some of my friends."

His brow furrowed in suspicion.

"May I take a rain check?" asked Tish.

Now he looked surprised. "You'll give me your number?" sounded doubtful.

"Certainly."

I tried to wave Tish off, but she found paper and pen in her purse, and wrote a number. Rosey took it like a blessing. When he ushered me out the door, not squeezing so hard anymore, he said, "No one does that."

"Does what?"

"Gives me her number."

"So it's not just a white thing?"

"She looks Mex."

"That's really the same thing."

"No, it isn't."

"OK. Gringo chicks and Latinas, they don't give you the time of day?"

"Yeah," he said sadly.

"African-American women?"

He shook his head.

"Asians? Pacific Islanders?"

"You don't have to rub it in."

"Well, Rosey, you're kind of a scary guy, know what I mean?"

"Man has to make a living."

"That's true, but in the bathroom, I got the idea you really like the way you make your living."

"In my business, people have to think you're tough."

"Of course they do. But it's that toughness that puts the ladies off. You've got to get in touch with the sweeter, gentler Rosey. My car's up there. A big guy who's tender, who's a protector and a teddy bear both. Women go nuts for that combination."

"You can't make money off that."

"Rosey, you gave me an anatomy lesson in the bathroom. You know your body parts. Have you ever thought about doing therapeutic message?"

"You open your mouth, and the stupids just run out, don't they? That's your car? Figures." He took a paper out of his pocket. "She going to really take a ride with me?"

"I don't know."

"But I call this, that's her number?"

He handed me the paper. On the one side was the map to Mandeville's; on the other, a number I couldn't possibly verify. "Yeah, that's her home phone."

He snatched back the paper and looked at it, muttering to himself, "Looked scared to me." After some thought he asked, "You sweet on her?"

"Uh...we've been talking about playing the field."

"I bird dog no man's woman," he said with unexpected dignity. He handed me the paper and never looked back.

You have to buy [Malbu Palms](#) to find out what happens next