

A Glint Through the Trees

by Karl Stull ©2021

Going fast, getting nowhere, I decided to slow down. Off the superhighway, onto Avenue of the Giants. The scenic route would take twice as long, winding among the redwoods. Delay was okay. Less forest, more trees.

It was twilight at noon on the Avenue. The trees were that tall. Direct sun reached the forest floor in dapples, and I thought if I were a hermit I would dance in their hour-long glory like a wild man. The rest of the day would be for gloomy contemplation. Seen at easy cruising speed, the redwoods were like clawed columns in a cathedral too vast to behold. Or the trees were pins in a cosmic pachinko machine, and I was a shiny ball bouncing on an idiot path, with good and bad luck along the way, to an end foreseen by gravity.

“Too quiet here for pachinko,” said Detective Sergeant Hamish.

In the turnout, with the engine off, the silence was almost vacuum-perfect. No birds called to warn of our approach. There was only a faint susurrations, a whisper of air flowing through branches or through dark hallways in an ancient tomb. The Detective Sergeant relieved himself on a fern. I looked for a photo opp, something to proclaim my appreciation of nature.

There was a glint between two trees. It happened to be the only time of day when a glint could occur. I was standing at the only angle where the glint could be seen. I didn't have to call Hamish. There's nothing he loves better than a walk.

The glint came from a brushed-aluminum valise. It lay between a pair of massive roots, like a baby cradled in the body-builder arms of fate.

“Must be money in there,” Hamish growled.

The valise was expensive in a sleek, rugged way, obviously at home in overhead compartments in first-class. It was the valise an assassin would expect in an operation the Agency would later deny all knowledge of. Undoubtedly weather-proof, it could also have been booby-trapped. Hamish and I stood at a respectful distance.

“Possibly a ransom payment, awaiting pickup,” he said.

“Or a drop in a drug deal.”

“Drug dealers don’t leave cash unattended, sir.”

“You raise a good point. What if it’s not money?”

“What else would you put in a suitcase and leave in the forest?”

“I don’t know. Underwear. Secret plans for a bombsight...”

“There is another question to consider.”

“It’s more a valise than a suitcase, I would say.”

“You’re right,” said Hamish. “Definitely a valise.”

“Or briefcase would be the more everyday term.”

“Briefcase is good. You hear briefcase a lot.”

“Though valise has the connotation of something elite. Not just a Joe Shmo briefcase full of insurance paperwork.”

“No paperwork. It’s a valise.”

“How much money, do you think is in there?” I asked.

“Numbers are your department, sir.”

“It could be a million dollars. Or five million. Or it could be a lot less, if the money is in twenties. Or ones

and fives. Unmarked, used bills.”

“Rumpled bills in a valise?” The Detective Sergeant was doubtful. “Crisp hundreds in tidy packets. Fresh from the bank.”

“Could it be as much as fifty million? Is it physically and numerically possible to cram \$50 million — or \$100 million — into a suitcase this size?”

Hamish gave me his blank, happy-dog look, wagging.

“You said suitcase.”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“There is this other question,” said Hamish.

“Yes?”

“Is anyone coming soon to pick up the valise.” He paused to let that sink in. “Are they going to be violently unhappy about our being here?”

“You raise another very pertinent point.”

On closer inspection, it was clear the valise had been in the forest for some time. Evaporated streaks of dust ran down the sides. The forest mat was a paler shade of brown under the valise. There were bite marks on the leather handle.

“What kind of animal left these marks?” I wondered aloud.

Blank, happy-dog look, wagging.

“Bear, squirrel, maybe a canine?”

“No idea,” said the Detective Sergeant. “As a human, can you rule out human teeth?”

“That’s an unsettling mental picture. But since you ask, I don’t know.”

“I don’t know any better than you, sir.”

On the Avenue again, returning to the superhighway, I kept an eye on the rearview mirror. Hamish stood on the

passenger seat, head out the window, feeling the wind on his face. The plan was to take the valise somewhere safe and decide what to do. For now, it was in the trunk, folded inside a plaid blanket.

The decision to take the valise had been an impulse. I tried the button to pop the latch. It was locked. The combination lock had four wheels. I tried 1 - 2 - 3 - 4. No dice. With 10x10x10x10 possible combinations, minus the two I already knew didn't work, I took off my jacket, wrapped it around the valise, and carried it under my arm, walking fast, back to the car. Angling around brambles and fallen logs. Hamish was at my heels.

"Are we sure about this, sir?"

We had the cool, dimmed Avenue of the Giants to ourselves. A sign said Visitor Center, 8 miles. A red coupe with a white roof came into the rearview, a 1950s model. I sped up 10 mph to see what would happen. The coupe fell back. A couple of curves later, it hove in sight again.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I think you don't see many Studebakers on the road these days."

"Looks like a Champion. Maybe the Commander?"

"Hard to say at this distance."

"It's not a car that blends in with traffic."

"Definitely not a plainclothes vehicle."

"Not a mobster car either," I said. "Unless it's a flashy psycho mobster. Al Capone or Mickey Cohen."

"Capone and Cohen both had black Cadillacs."

"So who drives a 1950s, two-tone Studebaker in a redwood forest?"

"Vintage car owners are eccentrics," said Hamish, cocking an ear, as if tuning in a live feed from a law

enforcement satellite. “They’re passionate. Time on their hands. More at home in a junkyard than a relationship.”

“Dangerous, would you say?”

“Car guys are perfectionists, obsessive. Potentially explosive.”

“We shouldn’t assume it’s the car guy at the wheel. It could be the car guy’s wife, taking the Studebaker to the grocery store, because her car is in the shop.”

“Sir,” said Hamish, “no one but the car guy is ever allowed to drive the car guy’s car.”

I sighed.

Another roadside sign: Visitor Center, 1 mile. The red and white Studebaker hung in the rearview mirror, no bigger than a bullet. The whole world was redwoods, rusted and scabbed, standing around in loose formation, a legion awaiting orders for the last thousand years.

The center-line formed a crook for left turns. I flipped the turn signal, and heard the seconds ticking by. Hamish climbed onto the floor in front of the passenger seat.

“Out of the line of fire, Detective Sergeant?”

Blank, happy-dog look, wagging.

A short road and a long curve brought us to a gravel parking lot and the visitor center, a double-wide planked cabin with large plate glass windows. Woodsy with conveniences. A dozen or so cars were scattered around the lot. I pulled up beside a van, which gave us a little cover with the option to get out fast, spitting gravel, if necessary. A coin-operated freezer on the porch by the gift shop offered ice cream bars, ice cream sandwiches, and drumsticks — an odd offering of edibles where the weather always called for

flannel. Left and right of the parking lot, rough-hewn signs with yellow letters marked the way to trails and exhibits. People wandered in the distance like shades in the underworld.

The red and white Studebaker came to the driveway entrance and paused for a look around. It cruised slowly in our direction, as if to block the way, but then turned into a space more than a stone's throw away. Two figures got out, closing their car doors considerately. The Studebaker was old if not completely antique.

"Here's a surprise," I said. "The driver is a woman."

Hamish scratched his ear, rapid-fire.

Her clothes went with the car. Red and white houndstooth wool pants, jacket with Robin Hood shoulders over a white blouse with ruffles, arrowhead hat with a scrap of red gauze caught midflight, and a handbag big enough to hold the gun that killed John Dillinger. Her heels gouged gravel as she walked.

"Good morning, kind sir." Her Southern drawl was humid as an orchid greenhouse. "I am in distress. I must put myself at your mercy."

Her onyx eyes locked onto mine. "I do hope you'll help me recover my valise."

"Good morning," I said, summoning all the available suave from the reservoir of my charming personality. "Pardon my confusion. I have never before been asked by so fair a damsel for help with her valise."

She fluttered appreciatively.

"How may I come to your rescue? What valise are we talking about?"

Her eyes went slitty and suspicious. She turned

her face aside and choked back a sob. “If you knew how important... If you knew the half of what I’ve been through...”

Crunching gravel underfoot, the passenger from the Studebaker came up behind her. He was middle-aged, could have been anywhere in the zone where able-bodied men have seriously furrowed faces. Round as a turnip above the belt, he had pretzel-thin legs below, and wore a white linen suit that he probably lived in, taking it off only before breakfast to have it pressed.

“Calm yourself, my dear,” he said, laying avuncular hands on her shoulders. “All will turn out well.”

“This is Asa Pomfret,” she said, stepping away to face him, “my business associate. I’m Annabelle Zeller.”

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Zeller,” I said, shaking her hand through the car window. I opened the door and stood to shake with Pomfret. He raised his white fedora, revealing a sprout of sand-colored hair. It was my turn to give a name.

“I’m Romeo Davis, man about town, Reseda, California,” I said, handing each a business card. Annabelle’s coquettish mood sprang back at once.

“Romeo,” she purred. “How romantic.”

“My mother was a Shakespearean, played all the great roles — Juliet to Lear. Yes, she was King Lear, at the Ashland festival in 1987. You folks headed north today or down to San Francisco?”

“We must obtain the valise,” said Pomfret.

“There might be a Lost and Found in the visitor center,” I suggested.

Pomfret frowned, took a quick glance at the front seat and then the back. “The valise belongs to us.”

“I have no doubt, Mr. Pomfret.”

“Is that a Westie?” said Annabelle, spotting Hamish. “I declare, he is so cute.”

Hamish climbed to the passenger seat but made no move to join the party. The West Highland White Terrier breed has tall ears, round eyes, and a tongue-dangling grin that gives the impression he is really happy to see you. In truth, he doesn't give a damn. He cares about me, other dogs, and food. Hamish is a model of patience when passers-by fuss over him, cooing and asking silly questions in a high-pitched voice: “Are you a good dog? Are you a good dog?”

“Damn good dog,” he says, though they never seem to hear.

“I can offer you \$100 for the return of the valise.” Pomfret pulled a billfold from his jacket, ready to do business. Gold-foil lettering on the billfold read: Pomfret Motors, Semi-precious Automotive Gems.

“I'm sorry not to be of more help.” I shook my head, very sorry.

“Five hundred dollars.”

“What can I say?” I showed my hands were empty.

“The valise is ours. It is vital to our business.”

Pomfret's eyes bulged in frustration, as if I had denied the sky was blue — although in fact the sky was overcast that day and, strictly speaking, not visible from where we stood. I could have been a lawyer, my mother used to say.

Annabelle put her hand on Pomfret's arm. “Asa, darling. Mr. Davis doesn't know about the valise. We'll leave him with our thanks and let him be on his way. Mr. Davis, Romeo, I have so enjoyed making your acquaintance. And your handsome canine friend. Bye-bye, sweetie! Bye-bye!”

Annabelle gave a little wave. “Are you a good dog?”

“For the record, it’s a Champion,” said Hamish. “not the Studebaker Commander.”

Damn good dog.

The valise lay on the motel bedspread, beside a hammer, a heavyweight screwdriver, and a 40-pound dog. The curtain was drawn. It was time to get answers.

The drive from Avenue of the Giants to Eureka had been uneventful. Noshing an ice cream sandwich on the porch of the visitor center, I watched the red and white Studebaker leave the parking lot and turn south. The coupe’s roofline sloped upward, giving the car a lunging-tiger look. The trunk sloped long and low in back, roomy enough for a couple of dead bodies. The last of the ice cream sandwich went to Hamish. He chomped it with head shakes between bites, juggling to fend off brain-freeze.

We went north to Eureka — which, in ancient Greek, means “I found it!”

At a mega-mart, we picked up the tools and some latex gloves. We had dinner al fresco at the Arctic Chicken drive-in. Their specialty was a sandwich on a bun with chicken breast hammered thin, breaded, and fried, plenty of salt and black pepper. The customers were hardscrabble. Some were dressed for work in the mill, though the logging was long gone. A few looked like prospectors from the Yukon gold rush, still trying to get back on their feet after three generations. Stringy, worn-out wives and girlfriends drank diet cola and searched irritably in their purses for keys. Children yanked, slapped, and chased each other

around trashcans, blowing off steam before the years of lethargy and hopelessness to come.

The sandwiches, I had to admit, were tasty.

Detective Sergeant Hamish and I reviewed what we knew so far.

“Is it possible the valise really belongs to Pomfret and Annabelle?”

“Doubtful. If it was ever theirs, they haven’t seen it recently.”

“Pomfret seemed very sure we had it.”

“Bluffing. He’s a car salesman.”

“He spotted us somehow.”

“There might have been surveillance. Or profiling.”

“Feds?”

“Not those two, not that car.”

“They were so sure, and all of a sudden they gave up.”

“My view is: they’re as much in the dark as we are. I’m going to need an after-dinner walk.”

“Right.”

We checked into the Shipwreck Inn, A sign in front outlined a galleon in neon, tipping over sideways in a storm. A welcome card in the room said a sailing ship had run aground in olden days on this very site. Locals picked it clean as a beached whale. There was no plaque to mark the history, just a motel stuck onto a dismal stretch of sand.

“Any thoughts about the combo before I break the lock?”

“Whale away, sir. Let slip the dogs of war.”

“You’re supposed to be my voice of restraint and consideration, you know.”

“It would be foolish to stay up all night dialing different numbers, and then have to break the lock

anyway.”

“Yes. It would take days to run through all possible combinations.”

“Unless there is no combination to begin with.”

“What does that mean? It’s a combination lock.”

“Try zero-zero-zero-zero.”

Voila. The latch popped. Inside the valise, tidy bundles of \$100 bills lay in neat stacks as predicted by the Detective Sergeant. They were not fresh from the bank. The bills were decades old, with a smallish Benjamin Franklin in an oval, looking well satisfied with himself. It was about \$2 million in all — as much as I had earned in my entire working life.

There was a crash at the door, a heavy fist on a hollow slab of thin wood. Four hard raps. “Open up! Eureka PD.”

Hamish scrambled off the bed as I lifted the mattress and slid the valise underneath. He took up a tactical position under an Early American writing desk, next to a standing lamp and a semi-circle chair in aquamarine.

“Open up!”

“Coming,” I called with my best imitation of a Weary Traveler Just Trying to Get a Little Sleep, and stowed the hammer and screwdriver and the latex gloves quietly as possible in the desk drawer.

There was a badge visible in the peephole. I opened the door and staggered backward as an overcoat and oversize fedora pushed their way in. He had a grown man’s face with a child’s look of dawning disappointment. He waved an old-fashioned .45 automatic, sweeping the room as if I had confederates who might leap from any corner. The gun looked too big. He was too short to be a police officer.

“Move back,” he said. “Hands behind your head.”

I obeyed.

“Don’t look at me, I’ll blow your head off.”

He looked around the room, checked the open closet, where a steam iron hung like a wall phone and a 30-inch length of pipe held hangers that could not be removed.

“Front desk know you got a dog in here?” He leaned into the bathroom, keeping the gun raised in my direction.

“All right, where is it? You leave it in the car?”

“Leave what in the —”

He took two strides toward me, coattails flying up like a cape. “I ought to sap you down, wise guy. Don’t insult my intelligence.”

In the mirror, he noticed the bed. His big fedora rocked up and down like a toy boat in soap bubbles. “In plain sight. Of course.”

He pulled the mattress aside. There lay the valise, stained with rain and dirt but gleaming like platinum forever. He popped the latch, saw the cash, snapped the lid shut. He took the valise to the door and stood it upright, ready for a quick exit.

“Sit in the chair,” he said, pulling the semi-circle chair away from the wall. “Put your hands behind you.”

I sat, hung my arms down in back, ready for cuffs.

Three pounds of iron slammed into my head above the right ear. I did not see stars, but the room seemed suddenly pulled inside out. I wasn’t sure which side of the looking-glass I was on. As the knobby green carpet came up to me, I thought about meeting it half-way. I saw the little man struggling to get out the door. He had the gun in one hand, the valise in the other, and a mass of white-haired dog hanging from his thigh. He bent down to roll free, then tried to stand. Hamish growled in a way I seldom hear, like he smelled raw liver and meant to rip it out.

An angel in camo, out of nowhere, blocked the door. Lights from the street threw a saintly radiance behind her. She seized the brim of the little man's big hat in both hands and shot her knee, like a cannon recoiling, into his face. He cried out, "Darlene!" and Hamish let go as the little man fell, like a goalpost struck by a meteor.

Then the valise was in her hand, and the angel in camo was gone.

The little man got to his feet, crawling up the doorframe. "Darlene. Honey, come back."

Hamish and I and a handful of other Shipwreck guests stood in our doorways and watched the little man jog to his car. It was your granddaddy's Buick LeSabre, with wide fins front and back like a pair of butterflies mating. The headlights came on, and they were slanted, clinching the model year — 1959.

The phone rang as soon as we got back from our morning walk, a half-hour ramble down the dismal beach. The sky was moon-crater gray, with cloudy streaks of white, like the breakers in the crater-gray sea. Beachcombers hunched under a northerly wind. The flats of wet sand were strewn with bronze kelp, reaching out like lost sailors.

"You're awfully cheerful this morning."

"Easy come, easy go," said Hamish, short legs at a brisk trot. "Good smells here."

He doesn't often get to visit the beach back home. There are a couple of dog beaches within an hour's drive, but a dog beach is a beach with a lot of dogs, which is wonderful but not in the same way as a whole beach almost to yourself. We stopped for a prolonged sniffing inquiry into something that might once have been an octopus.

A couple of million dollars had slipped through our

grasp. Darlene had the money now, and maybe she would make good use of it. You can buy a lot of camo with a million dollars, or take first steps toward a new life. Our new plan was to wipe away the tears and get back on the road. The new plan had to be re-revised when I picked up the phone.

“This is Annabelle Zeller.”

“Good morning, Miss Zeller. How are you this morning?”

“You had a visitor last night. Things got out of hand.”

“That is putting it mildly. You seem to have lost your Southern accent, as well as the valise, Ms. Zeller.”

“That was theater, Mr. Davis. This is business.”

“Same thing when the business is a con.”

“We need to talk.”

“I am all ears.”

“Meet me at Neptune’s Feast, eleven-thirty.” She hung up.

Neptune’s Feast proved to be an upscale eatery on a maze-like dock with slips for yachts and motorboats and a few working trawlers. A teenager with a moustache like a worm led Hamish and me to a glassed-in patio with a view. Hamish had water. I had a mug of Irish breakfast tea with a splash of milk. A 1955 Thunderbird, with porthole windows, swung into the lot. The Thunderbird was white. Annabelle emerged in dark blue serge with white piping. Her hat was a blue-corn tortilla with a white band. She found us and took a seat, making a kissy face at the Detective Sergeant. She turned to me with a look that was all brass tacks.

“So who the hell are you really, Mr. Davis, apart from being the new Ronald Biemer?”

“Ronald Biemer?”

“I’ll explain. You talk first.”

“I’m Romeo Davis, Man About Town, Reseda, California. I work for my uncle Luis, who owns a commercial block on Reseda Boulevard and various other properties. I’m a notary, nightwatchman, on-call bookkeeper, and writer of the purple sage. What else. Yes, I got married, I got divorced, I got custody of the dog.”

“All right,” said Annabelle. “Yesterday, what brought you to the Avenue of the Giants.”

“Business trip for my uncle. I took some contracts to a rock vendor in central Oregon. Yesterday, on the drive back, I saw the sign and took the scenic route.”

“Have you been on the Avenue of the Giants before?”

“A few times, years ago.”

“Did you have a specific reason for taking that road on November 4th?”

“Purely a whim.”

“You didn’t feel drawn to the Avenue of the Giants in some unexplainable way.”

“Is she suggesting something paranormal, sir?”

“I don’t think so,” I said aloud, in stereo.

“It seems like a very improbable happenstance,” Annabelle said, “to drive down a road at random and find a valise containing a couple of million dollars, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I’ll tell you what’s improbable, sir, and that’s a car on a random road coming across a couple of million dollars and another car coming along shortly after and knowing about the first car and there not being some kind of set-up.”

“You raise a good point,” I said. More or less in

unison, Hamish and Annabelle replied:

“So how do you explain your being at the right place and time to find \$2 million in cash in the middle of nowhere?”

“So what were Pomfret and Zeller doing on that particular road on that particular day, sir? Why were they even in the same car together?”

“You tell me,” I said, to anyone with a theory.

“Why are you looking at the dog? I’m talking.”

“No truer friend than your dog, sir.”

“Listen carefully,” Annabelle said. “The reason you were on that road on that day was: the Ronald Biemer cyclicity.”

“The Ronald Biemer what?”

“Sir, this is bollocks!”

“Bollocks?”

“Bollocks?” said Annabelle.

“Yes, bollocks,” said the Detective Sergeant.

Our server arrived. We ordered two salmon salads and a tuna burrito.

Ronald Biemer, as Annabelle Zeller told the tale, was a clerk at Scotia-Dell State Bank for twenty years and realized one day he was getting nowhere. Then, on November 4, 1966, following the regular procedure for disbursement of Weott Company timber royalties and fees, Biemer delivered a secure valise and supporting documents for \$2 million from the bank vault to armored car guards. The transfer went smoothly, as always, except Biemer had to return to the vault briefly with the valise because one of the documents was not complete. Next day, Biemer did not report for work, nor the next day or any day after that. Word spread fast through the tri-county region about the missing millions and the mild-

mannered clerk, and Biemer became a folk hero. Over many a beer in many a tavern, loggers with rolled-up sleeves and bulging forearms averred they would help the little man escape if he should cross their path. In the end, as with Jesse James, somebody tipped off the police. Biemer was holed up in the South Eel Trading Post, a hundred-year-old drafty wreck. He died running in a storm of bullets in the redwoods, a hundred yards off the Avenue of the Giants. According to legend, Biemer's dying words were: "I'll get it all when I get out." He thought he was going to prison.

The money was never recovered, despite weeks of intensive searching by authorities. They brought in money-sniffing dogs.

"More bollocks," said the Detective Sergeant.

Over the years, rumors popped up about ordinary folks finding the Biemer valise: a cashier at the Safeway in Fortuna, a returning vet in Garberville who couldn't work and couldn't qualify for benefits, a laid-off librarian in Arcata, a holy-roller in Loleta. There were a dozen or more such stories. Every bar in the county had a regular who would retell a few for drinks. The legend grew and accumulated detail.

"That was how Asa Pomfret got involved," said Annabelle. "For him, history is a line of business. He sells old cars — while others dither over butter churns and rocking chairs. Hearing the stories about the Biemer valise, he picked up on regularities in the different versions, and he became convinced he could predict when and where the valise would turn up next."

"And this year," I said, "Pomfret predicted the valise was to appear on November 4th on the Avenue of the Giants."

"More specifically," Annabelle said, opening her

white-piped purse and pulling out a satellite image of forest land with circles and arrows to mark features you would not otherwise notice. “The apparition — that’s Asa’s term — was to occur on the morning of the fourth of November, in the second year after a US presidential election, anytime after 10:30 a.m. And the place would be along the back-door trail from the South Eel Trading Post cabin, which crosses Avenue of the Giants at this turnout here. Which is where our motion sensors detected someone moving around. You were out there more than forty minutes.”

“Well, I must say...” I said, searching for the right words. “Not completely bollocks.”

Annabelle Zeller nodded agreement and brought an artful forking of salmon, romaine, and avocado with a bead of caper to her lips — which were full and voluptuous, I couldn’t help noticing. She had beauty, which is a gift, like being tall or double-jointed. Her put-together clothes were part of a confident, focused, put-together way of presenting herself to the world. She was a decade or more out of college and determined to get somewhere.

“Are you a folklorist?” I asked. “How did you get involved in the Ronald Biemer saga?”

“Asa brought me in to do field research. That was two years ago. I’ve interviewed ninety-eight witnesses, and three individuals who say they themselves had possession of the valise for a time. One was lying. I’m not a folklorist. I’m a fashion designer, vintage.”

“So history is business for you too.”

“You could say the same for half the county,” she said. “Antiquing is the new logging.”

“And what will you do with your share if you catch up with the vagarious valise?”

Annabelle glanced demurely up toward the blue-corn

brim of her hat, “I might go to New York, and try to launch a clothing line.”

“I hope it comes to pass. For now, you’re aware I no longer have the valise. Pomfret sent a stooge to hijack it.”

“That was Harold Wilmer, a great-grandson of Ronald Biemer.”

My surprise registered.

“Asa says Harold adds to the team. DNA magnetism.”

“Hmph,” I said. “I thought Pomfret was all business.”

“With a dash of the romantic. Asa is a businessman the way Sir Francis Drake was a businessman.”

“Well, the magnetic Harold snapped up the valise. Then he lost it to a tall and oppositely charged woman wearing green camouflage.”

“Darlene Kenilworth, Harold’s ex.”

The powerfully built blonde with the fedora’d Harold Wilmer made an unlikely mental picture. “The ways of love are mysterious indeed.”

“To some,” said Annabelle. Flirtation was a language she was fluent in.

“Anyway, I and my trusty dog are done with Ronald Biemer and his valise and will be on our way to Los Angeles.”

“We’d like you to hang around a day or two.”

“We?”

“Asa. He thinks your presence will prove...reverberant.”

“Interesting. What do I get for reverberating?”

“Twenty-five percent of the \$2 million, clean and spendable.”

“And if the valise is not recovered?”

“How about a great deal on a ’62 Chevy Impala? A cruiser classic.”

I made a face.

Annabelle leaned forward, clinching the deal. “I want you to stay another day or two.”

Darlene caught up with me on the dismal beach. She was unrecognizable at first. Instead of camo, she wore a mauve dress, dotted with tiny irises and cut just above the knee that Harold Wilmer met up with. Her pale-yellow sunburst hair was pulled back to a fruit-salad scrunchie. Hamish was reconnoitering well ahead when she called from behind. “Davis! Yo, Davis!”

I turned. “Is it Darlene?”

“Kenilworth, brother.” She added, “Semper fi.”

People think I am a Marine sometimes because of a bumper sticker on the car. My uncle was a Marine. It seemed Darlene Kenilworth was too.

“Pretty dress,” I said.

She smiled, pleased. “It’s reversible.”

She turned the hem up, showing the other side was butter yellow, also dotted with irises.

“What’s up? I thought you’d be long gone with the cash.”

“Yeah,” she said with a look up and down the beach. “Is your name really Romeo, or is that some kind of play?”

“My mother was an actress who loved Shakespeare.”

“No shit.”

“Not one dram of shit.”

“So you must answer that question about your name a hundred times a year.”

“Quite a lot.”

“Ever think of changing your name?”

“Whenever a beautiful woman asks me if I’m really Romeo, I think the name is worth the trouble.”

“Yeah, you’re Romeo all right,” she laughed. “The thing is I could use a little help from someone I can trust,

as a fellow Marine,”

I explained that I was not a Marine but only played one while driving. It turned out her status too was iffy.

“Technically, I’m AWOL. Lying low for now. I can’t go anywhere near a bank.”

“I see.”

So Darlene Kenilworth proposed a fifty-fifty split. She would give me the valise if I could launder the money. I said I thought my uncle the ex-Marine could do it — a lot of cash changes hands along Reseda Boulevard — and he would know a good lawyer who could help a fellow Marine. How long would it all take? I had no idea. What was the best way to stay in contact? There were a lot of details to work out, but we shook on it.

“I have to get going. I can’t stay in the open like this,” she said, checking again up and down the beach. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Tell me one thing, Darlene.”

“Yeah?”

“How did Harold Wilmer ever get anywhere with you?”

She tipped her head, thinking back. “I saw he had courage. I thought he also had honor.”

“Like a good Marine.”

“Semper fi, brother. Or nephew, I guess.”

Hamish came charging up and skidded at my feet, in time to watch Marine Corporal Kenilworth, Darlene K., walk the tufted sand to the mega-mart parking lot, her shoes in her hand, her legs crisscrossing as if she walked a tightrope, her dress swishing back and forth like a bell. Hamish said, “Wha’d I miss?”

Pomfret Motors, Semi-precious Automotive Gems, had offices in a junkyard where boats had come aground as well as cars. Hulls were parked and piled wherever they

would fit, a few sailing skyward. A diesel V-12 hung from a crane like the catch of the day. Cars were on the other side of the yard, mostly mashed metal stacked house-high. There was a corner for restoration works-in-progress: a 1959 Cadillac Eldorado with fins like a great white shark, a 1964 Pontiac GTO as flat and wide as Kansas, and a 1955 Chevrolet Bel-Air station wagon, in blue-green and white, with homemade pleated curtains around the back windows — just like the custom job that made Henry Velasquez a legend among boys at Reseda High.

I parked in front of a cracker-box office, built for answering phones and riffling through oil-smeared work orders. The door was still on hinges. The windows had not been opened since the tsunami of 1964. Inside, however, it was like a miniature Carnegie library. The walls were lined with blond shelves full of books. Asa Pomfret, Annabelle Zeller, and Harold Wilmer sat around a long oak table, down the middle of which there would once have been dark-green bound volumes and light-green paperback updates of the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. Now the long table was a parking lot of documentation: news clippings in folders, numbered notebooks of spreadsheets and scattergrams, trays of 3 x 5 cards, some with colored flags. Asa sat at the far end in his comfortably wrinkled but spotless white suit. Annabelle was on-theme in a prim white blouse, gray jacket and skirt, and sensible pumps. Her rose gold lapel pin was a scroll with curls at both ends. Harold had on a checkered jacket last seen at a race track. He leaned his left shoulder back so I could see his .45 in its holster.

“Welcome, Mr. Davis,” said Pomfret. “So glad you

could join us.”

Annabelle had invited me. She phoned rather soon after Hamish and I got back from the beach, still considering the encounter with Darlene. In a cheery phone voice, Annabelle asked, “Any interesting developments?”

“Not really,” I said. “Were you expecting anything specific?”

“I thought you might have heard from Darlene.”

“The amazing amazon,” I said. “Not a peep. Why would Darlene —”

“Hmpf. We’re having a meeting at the lot this afternoon. I want you to come.”

“We?”

“The whole team. We’ll get everyone up to speed.”

So there I was at the meeting with bells on. I pulled an oak chair with round arms and a sculpted seat up to the long table. Hamish took his post as sentry at the door. He gave Harold Wilmer a look with his full-round black eyes and omnipresent Westie grin. The Detective Sergeant never forgets a buttocks.

“Let’s get started then,” said Pomfret. He turned to me, folding his hands and opening his eyes wide, the portrait of attentive listening. “Mr. Davis, what did Darlene have to say?”

I took a moment, presented a wrinkled brow of consternation. “As I told Ms. Zeller previously, I have not seen Ms. Kenilworth. Not since the first night at the motel — when Mr. Wilmer, um, took a knee.”

Wilmer sprang to his feet, pulled his gun. “Give me five minutes with this punk.”

Annabelle gasped. Hamish gave a warning growl. Pomfret said, “There, there, Harold. We do not want violence here. Put the gun away, dear boy. For now.”

With a pantomime of reluctance about to burst, Wilmer did as he was told.

I leaned toward him. “That was an amateur move, Harold. Everybody knows you don’t pull till you’re ready to shoot.”

“Gentleman, please,” said Pomfret. “We have business. Let us return to it.”

I stood up, pushing my chair back so the legs scraped, and I blazed into Wilmer’s face, “You won’t get the chance next time. Punk.”

There was fury around the little man’s mouth. His chin and upper lip were pebbly gray. High school must have been tough for him, shaving every day, wearing the face of dark maturity while other boys sprouted into smooth-skinned bean poles, lanky and brimming with impudent charm. Those boys went out for basketball. Harold Wilmer would have been on the wrestling team, if any team at all. I could see the stalking shadow of second thought in his eyes. He was vowing inwardly to be less impulsive from now on, and possibly more dangerous. At least, I thought, the topic of conversation had been well and truly changed. But I was mistaken about that.

“Very well,” said Pomfret.

He waited while I sat back down. I pulled the chair silently, as befit a library, to the long table.

“Mr. Davis, I would like you to convey to Darlene — that is, to Ms. Kenilworth — that our group is sensitive to her situation. We are willing to pay a generous fee for return of the valise. That is to say, I wish you to convey this information if you happen to have occasion to speak with her in the future.”

“I’ll pass that along if I hear from her. How generous a fee did you have in mind?”

Pomfret nodded. “Twenty-five thousand dollars in clean, safe-to-spend cash.”

“Twenty-five thousand,” I shrugged. “That may not sound so generous if she’s had an eyeful of the whole two million.”

Pomfret’s eyes sagged to disappointment. “Ms. Kenilworth’s role in our enterprise has been of no value to anyone. Nevertheless, I am willing to add, gratis, legal consultation and services through our attorney, Mr. Seneca Seedley, Esquire, of Eureka.”

“Twenty-five thousand and a free lawyer. What’s the lawyer for?”

“As you may not know, Ms. Kenilworth is on the run from federal authorities — a matter of leaving military service prematurely.”

“She’ll need more than a ham and eggs lawyer to deal with the feds.”

“Seneca Seedley is a respected local practitioner,” said Pomfret, as though I had questioned the mileage on an odometer. “If a specialist is needed, if there is indeed a sexual abuse case to be made against her commander, Mr. Seedley can partner with a larger firm in San Francisco. Many possibilities are in play. However, a lawsuit along those lines would be Ms. Kenilworth’s business. I care only about the valise — which she stole from me.”

“I think you mean she stole it from me,” I pointed out. “Or she stole it from Harold, who stole it from me.”

“I mean nothing of the kind,” said Pomfret, coming to a boil and bobbing like a fritter. “The valise is mine. I consider \$25,000 a painfully generous ransom.”

“What’s your top number if she says no to twenty-five thousand?”

“Sh-sh-sh-sh.” Annabelle held her forefinger to her lips. “Enough with the class-clown antics, Mr. Davis.”

“Sorry, can’t help it.” I said. “I seem to learn more that way.”

“It’s time to put your cards on the table, Romeo,” said Annabelle. Her gaze stayed level as she tipped her forehead for a steel-piercing stare. Her lipstick, forming a heart, was perfect. “Are you with us or not?”

“I’m not with anybody, Ms. Zeller. You offered me twenty-five percent of \$2 million to help you get the valise. I don’t know if that offer’s worth the wind it was written on. Now you ask me to offer \$25,000 to someone I’ve never been formally introduced to — for the exact same valise. What does everybody else know that I don’t?”

“Aha, good. Mr. Davis wants clarification,” said Pomfret, now seeing a way to close the deal. He could put me in a new used car today, I tapped my pocket to make sure my keys were still there. “Our friend wants clarification and certainty. Very understandable. These are things we all want, and seldom get enough of.”

Pomfret opened his arms wide, encompassing the room. He had small hands, stubby fingers. His lips were slippery and quick, like something hungry in a tidepool.

“A speech, sir. I smell a speech coming on.”

“This region, seen from the air, is a choppy sea of forested slopes and valleys. Under the vastness of this ocean, there lies a sunken galleon. I speak of Ronald Biemer’s valise, laden with riches. Its exact location has remained a mystery to all except Ronald Biemer, who hid it away, and to myself.

“Mysteriously, the galleon floats to the surface from time to time, only to disappear again — or so the legend holds. No one who finds the valise manages to keep it for very long. This feature of elusiveness is important. It means anybody might someday get their chance at the treasure. Indeed, the valise seems always to fall into the

hands of people who need and deserve a dose of good luck.

“Our review of reported cases shows the valise-finders are people working for wages. They are worn down by mortgages and other addictions. They cling to chimerical dreams, and they are dragged down by iron-jawed mistakes in life. One day, in the unending drear of their lives, they see a glint through the trees — the gleaming hull of the fabled galleon of Ronald Biemer.”

“So you’re saying,” I interjected, “only losers find the valise.”

“That is not at all the wording I used.”

“You’ll have to try harder if you want to make me feel bad, or grateful.”

“Not in the slightest, Mr. Davis. My belief and expectation is you will be the one to bring the story to its happy ending.”

“So long as I don’t have to wear glass slippers or marry Prince Charming.”

“Heh-heh, very funny. No, I see it more as a story of young Arthur finding Excalibur.”

“So I am young King Arthur?”

“Just so,” said Pomfret. “And I am Merlin.”

“Merlin’s a car salesman, sir,” cautioned the Detective Sergeant.

“Mr. Davis, the salvage rights to the galleon are mine,” continued Pomfret. “I have invested in people, in their training and time, in equipment, in facilities, and in other resources. I have earned and, I may say, paid for Ronald Biemer’s valise. It is my destiny.”

“I found it without your help, Mr. Pomfret. No disrespect,” I said. “And thinking back, I don’t recall the part in the King Arthur story where Merlin sends Sir Harold of Wilmer to snatch Excalibur.”

“Mr. Davis, you would have lost the valise if left to

your own devices,” Pomfret hissed, “as you did in fact lose it. All the finders lose the valise.”

“Harold lost the valise. He lost it to Darlene, an ex-girlfriend who was following him. Harold in turn was following me. You must have put him on my tail at the visitor center.”

“I was waiting by the Stafford on-ramp,” said Wilmer. “Easy pickings.”

“So, my dear Merlin, it was you who sent the loser who lost the valise.”

Pomfret reddened. He seized a notebook from a stand of notebooks on the table. He fanned its pages — satellite images of forest from different altitudes, with circles and arrows and handwritten landmark names, some with exclamation points and double-underlines.

“I was the one who found the precise location of the old South Eel Trading Post, and mapped the trails leading to it. Not the Humboldt Historical Society, not the history professors at the state university, not the bloody History Channel. I surveyed hundreds of documents and accounts of witnesses. I sifted data through myriad filters — age, education, genealogy. I extrapolated probabilities from pairs of factors and triads. And finally I was able to predict, with a now-proven degree of precision, where the valise would appear and when.”

“If you knew all this, why didn’t you go pick it up yourself?”

“We tried,” said Pomfret with an oh-brother sigh. “We thrashed the underbrush. Ms. Zeller, Harold, even Mr. Seedley. The Biemer valise is a manifestation in the smoky realm of legend. In that dimension, Who seems to matter as much as Where and When.”

“So Hamish and I happened by at the predicted time, and you followed my car to the visitor center. You suspected but didn’t know I had the valise. Even now,

you've never actually laid eyes on it."

"It had to be you," said Annabelle. "Yours was the only car to stop near the lost trail."

I turned to Wilmer. "You, me, and Darlene — hey! We're a club. The only ones who've seen the money."

Wilmer did not return my look. He stared over my shoulder, a grim sentinel watching a distant horizon where avenging hordes from Hell could soon break loose.

A phone rang in another room. There was a door behind Pomfret, which I assumed led to a privy. The door opened, and a man leaned partly into the library. His visible part wore a double-breasted wool suit in dark blue with a yellow chalk stripe — costly yet rakish, a good look for a swindler in the financial district or a Tory member of Parliament. His oblong face would have been perfect on a withered and disapproving aunt, except for the ink-black pencil moustache.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said. He searched the faces in the room, pausing at mine. "Hello, Mr. Davis. I'm Seneca Seedley, ham and eggs lawyer. I will need to speak with Mr. Pomfret for a few minutes in private."

The meeting was adjourned.

Stepping outside the library, scanning the junkyard, Annabelle hooked my arm and pressed close to my side. She had decided I was walking her to her car. The lot was gravel, as at the visitor center on the Avenue of the Giants. Pursuit of the Biemer valise was causing serious wear and tear in her shoe closet. Turning to face me, standing close, she said, "Good meeting, wouldn't you say?"

Electrified and stupefied by the recent contact with her body — the grip of her fingers, the yielding fit of her breast against my arm — I managed to get out a whole sentence of reply. "I understand more now than I did

going in.”

It’s what I always say about a meeting.

Annabelle arched an eyebrow. “Any lingering questions?”

“One or two,” I said. “What is the average annual rainfall in Valparaiso?”

“Depends on whether you mean the town in Chile or the town in Indiana.”

“What gives you and Pomfret the idea that I’ve talked with Darlene?”

“We saw you on the beach.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny it was her. Or me. But I wonder, why such hard bargaining with Darlene? You offered me 25 percent of \$2 million without batting an eye.”

“That’s simple. Darlene is a contractor, you’re a partner — if you want to be one. Harold is a contractor. His cut is \$25,000.”

“I see. Hard on him if Darlene gets more. Hard on him all the way around.”

“Your concern is surprising, after the emotional workover you gave him in the meeting.”

“How did I get to be a partner and not a contractor?”

Her eyes had a look of merriment. “I’ve got a feeling about you, Romeo.”

We stood considering each other, no nicks in our polished surfaces so far. She threw a glance toward her 1955 T-Bird with portholes. “What’s it going to be — are you in or out?”

Our lips met, carefully at first. Seeking, finding, pressing gently open. I held her waist, felt her fingertips on the bones at the back of my neck. From a time too long ago, my warming body and my montgolfiering mind recalled that it takes only one other person to make a whole world. We pulled apart for a look at each other.

“Feels like all in,” I said.

Annabelle smiled. “I thought so too.”

Detective Sergeant Hamish was waiting by the car with his eternal grin. “With respect, sir,” he said, “you’re being an idiot.”

At the Shipwreck Inn, I unlocked the room and pushed open the door. Hamish went in, click-click-clicking from concrete onto carpet. I flipped the wall switch and saw someone in the half-circle chair.

“Yo, Davis,” said Darlene Kenilworth, relaxed and cheerful in jeans, nondescript plaid flannel shirt, and bare feet. “Hey, a Westie,” she said leaning forward to Hamish, who had gone straight to the feet for a wet-nosed sniffing. Darlene held out her hand for permission, then scratched between his ears and along his grinning cheeks. “You’re a good ratter, I bet,” she cooed. “Yeah, good tunnel man.”

The Detective Sergeant assumed a sitting position, available for more.

“I see you brought the valise,” I said.

It stood beside the half-circle chair, wiped clean and ready for inspection.

“Over to you,” Darlene said, and handed me a folded paper. It was a hand-drawn map of back roads near Myers Flat, leading to an encampment on a ridge with the remains of a stone fireplace. “That’s my grandparents’ old place. Memorize the map, then destroy it. I want my share dropped at that location, whenever the money is ready. Let me have your phone number.”

I recited the number. She wrote it on the heel of her hand.

She said, “Okay. We’re good to go.”

“I don’t know about that.” I sat on a corner of the bed. “There’s a chance the other side knows you’re here

right now. They spotted us this morning on the beach.”

“Figures,” she said, her good mood intact. “We’re all right.”

“What makes you think so?”

“They watch people more than places. If you and the Westie go out somewhere for dinner, I can slip away after you leave.”

“Let’s think about this.”

We pondered. The next step was going to be big, a turning point. The quilt I sat on was a blotchy South Seas print in palmy greens, ocean blues, blooming magenta, and buggy yellow — it would never show a stain. The carpet had a squashed-broccoli look, forever downtrodden. Darlene’s feet were callused and discolored, wide in the span from the big toe to the pinkie. She went barefoot a lot outdoors.

“Backpack,” she said.

“What?”

“My shoes are in my backpack.”

“Oh.”

I tousled Hamish’s face and ears. “What do you say, Detective Sergeant?”

“I say if we go out for dinner, and Kenilworth makes her escape, the valise will be left unattended. Not a secure option.”

“‘Detective Sergeant.’ That’s an unusual name for a dog,” said Darlene.

“Mac was already taken.”

“Yeah, figures.”

“The Detective Sergeant doesn’t like the go-out-for-dinner plan.”

“Yeah. He’s right. Can’t take the risk. One thing the Biemer valise does over and over is suddenly disappear.”

Plan B went into effect about an hour before dawn. I

woke Darlene. She had taken the first watch. Hamish and I checked out of the motel, picked up breakfast at a drive-thru, and met Darlene a couple of blocks down the road. She laid her backpack on the back seat. Hamish hopped in her lap. If anyone was following, they were not being obvious about it.

We kept to the speed limit out of town and onto the 101 freeway south. Flatlands gave way to green rolling hills, with coastal mountains on our left. On our right, a strip of dark gray sand ran along a darker gray Pacific and an unsettlingly close drop-off at the edge of the world. We reached the steep mountains that Pomfret called a choppy sea. Mills, cemeteries, ragged roads, hamlets, and homesteads lay under forest cover, hidden from the swooping superhighway, like last holdouts in a long war. We roller-coastered from pass to pass, the timbered grandeur becoming as tedious after a while as the blond tablelands of the Great Plains.

“There he is,” I said, spotting the 1959 Buick LeSabre in the rearview mirror. “It’s Harold, and maybe others in the car with him. He’s hanging back for now.”

Harold was too far back to see for sure whether I had a passenger. If he didn’t already know, he would find out soon enough. We were going to stop near Myers Flat and let Darlene out. She would scramble up a difficult hill to a trail in rugged terrain. “They’ll never catch me up there,” she said.

The history between Darlene and Harold was not a classic tale of true romance, but notable. It began when Darlene went to a school dance, the Highland Fling, because her friend Stephanie wanted to go and needed someone to hang with so she wouldn’t look pathetic. Out of nowhere, Harold came up and asked Darlene to dance. He was a mere sophomore, a foot shorter than Darlene at the time. She could see in the upward aim of his eyes he

had no hope, only a grim resolve to see it through, no matter what. Various humiliating outcomes were possible. She could ignore him, act like he didn't exist. She could laugh, and get others to laugh. She could probably even knock him on his ass. *Into the valley of death rode the six hundred*, Darlene thought, recalling a poem from class.

“What if I say yes?”

Harold took her hand and led Darlene to the dance floor.

Their first dance was awkward and ridiculous. It felt very public.

“We better go again,” said Darlene. “I don't want to leave it there.”

They danced another fast dance, not much better, and then a slow dance. During the slow dance, something happened. The song was about hiding your love away, and though holding him close was still very public, and comical, Darlene felt a jolt when their bodies touched — his desire spreading through her like heat from molten rock, and something else... It was power, flowing from her fingers into him like water from a fast creek, soothing, clean, throwing light.

She asked, her lips against his ear, “Why me?”

“You're different” he said. His cheek was scratchy against her soft throat. “You go your own way.”

It was understood between them she would enlist after graduation. They wrote letters while she was in training at Parris Island, and they were together when she came home on leave. But they were different people after Iraq.

“I could tell you some things, Romeo,” she said, her eyes blank as a sea swallowing ships, “but you cannot begin to imagine... Nights over there I thought I'd never see the end of.”

“After Iraq, Harold brought you in with Pomfret and all that.”

“He tried. Harold wanted us to take up again where we left off.”

“He couldn’t let go.” I added, “It happens a lot.”

“One time, he actually said — he would turn me in if I wasn’t with him.”

“You were right to hear that, not push it aside. A threat like that keeps coming back, only gets worse.”

“Nobody pushes me into a corner, not ever.”

I veered sharply to the off-ramp, though the LeSabre was far enough back to make the exit smoothly. Turning onto Avenue of the Giants, I floored it and kept to top speed until Darlene spotted the side road. The unpaved road ran a bumpy, mile through the forest to a T intersection at the base of a hill. I turned right, leaving a cloud of dust that Harold might see or not, it didn’t matter. Darlene pointed, and I cut left up the hill to a terrace. I got out, engine running, Darlene left the Detective Sergeant in charge of the passenger seat. I opened the trunk and handed her the valise.

“Take care, troop.”

“You’ll hear from me,” she said.

Head down, Darlene Kenilworth double-timed up the hill. Hamish and I watched her angle toward a tree-lined ridge, the gleaming valise in her downhill hand.

The LeSabre skidded into my rear bumper. His door swung open, and Harold ran a dozen strides up the hill. “Darlene,” he called. “It’ll be all right, I promise... Darlene!”

The rising sun was hours from topping the mountains’ crest. The shadow of morning hung heavy and cold. Harold waited motionless in the silence, like a man in chest-high water, straining to hear. He ran a few

more steps uphill, waited, then turned downhill. As if snakebit, he whirled and his gun was out. He fired three times into the trees on the ridge. “Darlene, Darlene!”

A plume of dust sprang up near Harold’s left shoe, then another near his right. The pop-pop of Darlene’s pistol arrived a second later. She had a target-shooting Beretta 92, and Harold was bracketed. He spread his hands, *Shoot me*. Nothing. And more nothing. Then an idea came into Harold’s head. He turned toward me. I was watching from the car as his drama played out. Our eyes met. He nodded, the moment for payback had come. He raised his great big Colt at arms’ length. I floored the accelerator, felt a hammer-blow in the car door. A cauliflower of stuffing burst from upholstery. An exit hole, discovered later, went through the floor.

Spinning tires and spewing dust, I got off the terrace and hightailed along the base of the hill to the T, and back to the Avenue of the Giants. I turned south, looking for the next access to the freeway.

At normal speed, like any other tourists taking the scenic route through a state park with a bullet hole in the door, we cruised the easy esses through the redwoods. I put on the headlights, which made no difference in the eternal gloaming of the forest. I felt shaky, but I’d been through worse — though I couldn’t at the moment remember when. All in all, things were all fine, really.

“We dodged a bullet, sir.”

“You’re so literal sometimes, Detective Sergeant.”

“Doggie view of the world,” he said. “It’s why I’m such a help.”

“If you say so.”

“Everything is still going according to plan.”

“Yes,” I said carefully, considering the main points. “Darlene has her end under control. If Harold saw her take the valise up the hill, so much the better. Meanwhile,

we have \$2 million in the trunk and a four-hour drive to San Francisco. We're good. And there's lunch in Cloverdale."

"The Mexican place, sir."

"We'll be back on the freeway in no time."

A sheriff's car and a gray sedan that looked federal had a roadblock set up on a stretch before the on-ramp. Parked at the side of the road was a 1963 Lincoln Continental — squared-off fins at all four corners. The license plate frame was too far away to read but surely said Pomfret Motors, Semi-precious Automotive Gems. Standing beside the car was Seneca Seedley, pointing us out to the deputy. Against his dark blue chalk stripe sleeve, the white Continental had a shine like meat turning bad. Good look for a lawyer.

I swung around in an undramatic U-turn and told the Detective Sergeant, "Honestly, officer, I just remembered I left something at the visitor center."

"Was it your credit card, your hat, or your more believable story?"

"Hat sounds good."

The sheriff's car, federal-gray sedan, and white Continental formed a caravan behind us. No flashing lights. No reason to get over-excited.

No flashing lights meant there was no arrest warrant and as yet no probable cause. We would be cooperative but not terribly informative. We would rather they did not search the car. We really did not understand why we were being detained. Uncle Luis had a lawyer on standby in San Francisco.

The presence of Seneca Seedley was helpful. The sheriff and feds would have no idea that Seedley's client was mainly interested in a valise full of money from a forgotten bank robbery. They were probably after the fugitive Darlene Kenilworth. Whom I did not know and

had never met. Anyone saying otherwise would have to try and prove it. May I leave now? Am I under arrest?

The visitor center was still miles ahead as we came near the unpaved road. I rolled the window down to listen. Forest cool rushed in, whipping the white curls on Hamish's face, whiffing between his Gothic cathedral ears. His ears tipped right. Faintly but unmistakably, there was the sound of gunshots.

Darlene had already made her escape. There was no foreseeable reason she would still be on the ridge. The shots most likely were Harold. The problem was there was no one on scene for him to shoot at. Unless something unexpected had happened. So much for the visitor center.

I turned onto the unpaved road.

"There's nothing you can do if she's still there," the Detective Inspector observed.

"You raise a good point," I said, speeding up toward the T. My three-car convoy sped up too. We slowed approaching the terrace. There was the garbled squawk of a loudspeaker: "...the gun down and both hands in the air."

On the terrace, I saw that the LeSabre now had two cars parked behind it, the red and white Studebaker Champion and another sheriff's car. Harold was a tiny figure up the hill, like a toy soldier taking a stand.

He watched the arriving cars fill the terrace. It was like a drive-in theater. The hillside was a giant screen. Harold spoke to the people below in the voice of a commander addressing the troops.

"Darlene Kenilworth got away, all right? That's it," he said. "Hard fact. Let her run."

Then he added, "Anybody tries to stop her, they gotta get past me."

He fired a shot downhill. Everyone ducked, though we were all behind cars for cover.

There were four officers of law enforcement on the terrace, one talking on the radio. The radio chattered. A suicide prevention team was on its way.

Pomfret stood behind the open door of a sheriff's car, holding a megaphone. Annabelle was standing nearby, ready if a fashion photographer happened by. She wore a hunter-green cloche curled up around back, a crème silk jacket with Byzantine trim along the collarbones, a tweed skirt, black tights, and brown oxfords with cat-cheek perforations on the vamp.

Pomfret triggered the megaphone experimentally. "Harold. I have good news. Seneca Seedley is here."

Megaphone static crackled in the silence.

"He can help. We need to be careful, in the excitement of the moment — ."

Harold fired another shot downhill.

"You'll never take me alive," Harold yelled, and charged. His overcoat flew up, his hat flew off. Then he stopped short, an easy target, frozen in the shadow of morning — heavy, cold, and silent.

The deputies checked with each other, nodded, holding their positions.

"Harold," Pomfret's amplified voice rasped. "Nothing bad has happened yet. Not really. No one is hurt. And there is tomorrow, Harold. Another chance. Tomorrow is a clean slate."

"Do I even have any bullets left?" Harold shouted. "Let's see."

He held the pistol up, as if to fire in the air, then angled down on a line with his ear. The explosion left him deaf on that side for the rest of his life, but the bullet went wide.

“How about now,” Harold laughed. “Any bullets left now?”

He raised the gun again, as if to shoot in the air. His laughing grew manic. His body shook and his shoulders folded. The Colt sailed on a gentle underhand arc down the hill, splashing dust.

“I’ve been a fool,” said Harold. “I have been a fool too long,”

The first glint of morning sun crept down the mountain. Harold was in its spotlight for one moment before the deputies took him into custody.

The deputy pressed down unnecessarily on Harold Wilmer’s head, loading him into the backseat, behind the fry-basket wire in the sheriff’s car. I watched along with Annabelle and Pomfret as the door shut and the cruiser eased away. Harold would be detained for 72 hours and evaluated by a psychiatrist and would likely then be cited for unlawful discharge of a firearm in a state park — according to Seneca Seedley, who spoke with the senior deputy and the federal officer.

“We could have been interesting, you and I,” said Annabelle with an arched and perfectly pencilled eyebrow.

“I thought so too,” I said.

“And yet,” said Annabelle, “here we are.” She walked with a measured march to the red and white Champion. Opening the driver’s side door, she gave me a look that said yesterday was gone.

“And yet you chose the other lady,” said Pomfret, “the damsel in distress.”

“The damsel put her life in my hands.” I shrugged. “If that doesn’t bring out the Galahad in you, I don’t know what will.”

“You are a romantic, Romeo Davis.”

“Bounces off me and sticks to you, Mr. Pomfret.”

A belly laugh burst from his considerable belly.

“That will be the first time in history a used car salesman has been called a romantic.”

“A quest is a quest,” I said, “and the Biemer valise looks very like a grail.”

“A man of insight as well as wit. You are an interesting fellow,” Pomfret chortled, straightening his white linen jacket for a downshift to business. “If in the near future Ms. Kenilworth should visit you...”

“Yes?”

“She’s going to lose the valise, you realize. The legend is implacable in its repetitions. You and I could reach an agreement in her best interest as well as our own.”

“She may have lost the valise already,” I said. “It’s not my business anymore.”

In fact, the plan was for Darlene to ditch the valise as soon as possible. Evidence relating to a bank robbery would only complicate any future negotiations with the U.S. government. Meanwhile, the \$2 million and the Detective Sergeant were waiting in the car. Darlene would call in 30 days to arrange the first installment on her share of the take.

“If it must be so, we shall part as friends and bide our time,” said Pomfret. He gazed into the darkling maze of the Avenue of the Giants. “The next apparition will be in two and a half years. Come by, Mr. Davis, if you care to try your luck again. There are no guarantees. However, this much is certain. On the appointed day. I’ll be waiting.”

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