PROLOGUE

September 29, 1946

MARLENE

I heard the car door slam and stopped writing. Gently, I slipped the note I'd been working on inside the book, like a makeshift bookmark, and switched off my flashlight. I sat at my kitchen table, waiting in the dark for the inevitable footfalls.

He had come for the Jules Verne first edition, or rather for what was in the Jules Verne first edition. And presumably he had come for me as well. I listened but could only hear the fierce Santa Anas rustling the trees and toppling a trash can or two, which then clattered down the street.

Operating now only by moonlight, I slid the Verne into a large envelope, already addressed and stamped, and sealed the flap. As part of my escape plan, I had mentally mapped the route to the post office, where I would mail the envelope before heading to my safe place.

In my head, I repeated the lines of my note:

My old mentor gave me your address and thought you might enjoy this book. Every time I see an airplane, I remember our time together. Time and again, I have wondered how you are and what you are feeling. Regret, fear, loneliness? Or relief and comfort? Perhaps you've wondered whatever became of me. Or why I never wrote. Luckily I now know the truth, at least some of it anyway. I understand why things happened the way they happened. That's why I'm sending you this gift. A story full of numbers! Naturally, it all starts with the number one.

I would have liked to have expressed myself more elegantly in my note, but I only had so much time to be clever. If I had been smart, I would have left the house hours ago. But believe it or not, despite my reputation as a genius, I don't always do the smart thing.

I laid the envelope on top of the clothes I had packed in my much-traveled overnight case. Was I ready to go? After a quick internal debate, I decided to grab the car coat my mother had bought me (despite me not owning a car), because while the wind was warm, when it blew this hard, the dust had a way of getting into everything.

I remembered that instead of dumping the coat on the couch or using the back of a chair as a hanger, I had hung the coat on a peg next to the front door. From the kitchen, it was only a few yards to the door, so I decided to chance it, zigzagging around the clutter in the living room. Just as I was grabbing the coat, I looked out the window in time to see a man, head down, approaching from the side of the house. I gasped and stepped back, out of sight, and prayed I hadn't been seen.

The wind, I thought, must have swallowed the man's footsteps after leaving his car. But who was he? Not the man I had been expecting. What was this stranger doing on my doorstep? I was about to return to the kitchen when he started knocking on the door—firm but soft raps at first, then still quiet but with increasing impatience. He kept knocking but didn't call out my name, probably to avoid alerting the neighbors.

Don't panic, I told myself. Do. Not. Panic. Breathe. Count. Breathe. Finally, the knocking stopped, and in between whooshes of the wind, which seemed to be pouring in through every crack of my old bungalow, I heard footsteps receding, then returning. Had he brought a gun? A knife?

I had helped defeat the Germans, but until a few days ago, I had never faced physical danger. I didn't like the feeling. I wasn't prepared and I like to feel prepared. I hustled to the kitchen with my coat and case in hand. The rapping stopped and was followed by silence. Had he given up and gone home? The answer came a second later when I heard the sound of a lock—my

lock—being fiddled with, picked. Believing the house empty, I suppose he had decided to break in.

His fumbling and scraping inside the door lock made me shudder. Only the wind was slowing him down. Then, as though cued off-stage, the wind let loose with its fiercest gales yet. Wave after wave of hurricane-level wind battered the sides of the house. Tree limbs, bowed by the wind's force, scraped the roof and tapped at the windows. More metal trash cans took flight, crashing and bouncing down the street.

The intensity of it terrified me. Would I even be able to stay upright out there? The answer didn't matter, because I had to leave. I waited out the next gale and opened the rear-side kitchen door. I slipped into the backyard and, drawing my coat and bag close, I ran into the dust-scented night.

* * *

My run down the hillside seemed to take forever. I should have been used to the distance, given that I worked six days a week and don't drive, but it's one thing to stroll down from Paradise Boulevard to the trolley stop and another to flee in blind terror. Believe it or not, the latter took longer than the former.

The safe house was 2.6 miles away. The trolley went in the wrong direction and wasn't operating due to the high winds. No taxis would be out either. Walking was my only option, and despite all the stress retrieving my coat had caused me back at the house, I was glad to have it for warmth and comfort. When I could, I took side streets down the hill, and on the rare occasion I saw headlights, I ducked behind a parked car or a bush.

Just I had done in Washington, I went over my assignment in my head as I walked. My first order of business would be the post office. Mailing the book wouldn't necessarily protect me, but

as long as my pursuers believed I had the book—and all that it contained—I had leverage. How long that would last was anybody's guess.

The bigger question was what to do with the book in the long run. Did I have a moral obligation to alert the authorities to its existence, even though I hadn't figured out the specifics of its clues? The Who, What, Where, When? And the Why. The Why of it was the biggest puzzlement of all.

I was so used to working in secret that saying nothing seemed the natural choice. And who knows? Perhaps by the time I resurfaced, like one of Jules Verne's submarines, I might be so far gone in my mind as to have no credibility anyway.

True Investigations

October 4, 1946

Chapter One

KIT

The startled look on the hairdresser's face said it all. The burn scar that stretched across her left temple had lost none of its nastiness. The burn itself had healed, but the skin still glowed crimson around the welt, which, according to her brother, resembled a flying saucer. The nurse had assured her that, in time, the redness would fade to nothing, and the scar would flatten. Flatten, but not go away.

Until then, Kit had been hiding what Henry liked to call her "trophy"—earned during a fiery fight with a crazed mystic—behind hats and scarves, a strategy that worked fine as long as the hat or scarf never came off. For a brief spell, she tried a Veronica Lake peekaboo hairstyle, which hid the scar nicely, but also blocked half her vision.

Like most of her girlfriends, Kit set and styled her own hair, painted her own nails and bought outfits from the sale rack. Trips to the salon were a rare treat, or, as was the case today, a rare necessity.

Once her shock had worn off, the hairdresser—Peggy, according to her name tag—took on the problem of hiding the scar. She moved Kit's shoulder-length locks about, parting her hair first on the right, then on the left, and finally in the center. Ever discreet, she didn't ask Kit how she came by the wound, and Kit didn't offer an explanation.

Peggy's first suggestion—the Barbara Stanwyck—involved rolled bangs that cascaded over Kit's forehead, ending just above her brow. Unfortunately, instead of Stanwyck, Kit saw Moe

from the Three Stooges in the mirror. She grimaced and shook her head, and Peggy moved on. For the Betty Grable, she created a roll that resembled an oval dinner platter, with a wavy tail that fell across her left eyebrow. It looked like the backside of a squirrel and Kit couldn't help but giggle at it. Peggy agreed with a snort, then without a word, she unpinned the "rump" and reshaped Kit's locks so they fell into a loose, flirty wave over her left temple—the Lana Turner. The scar lay hidden underneath, and the styling worked perfectly with her crimson beret. Kit grinned with relief. She was ready for the day.

* * *

As usual, Ruby had beaten Kit to the office. The coffee was perked, the fans were blowing, and the blinds were drawn just so. The phone rang and Ruby snatched the receiver with the speed of Wyatt Earp at the OK Corral.

"Comfort and Company Private Investigators. Miss O'Reilly speaking. How may I help you?" Ruby steadied the phone receiver in the crook of her neck, her pencil poised on her steno pad, her copper hair catching the high sun sneaking in through small rips in the window shades. She spoke in that silk 'n' satin voice that disguised her youth and put potential clients at ease. For Kit, Ruby's "vamp voice," as Henry referred to it, had been the deciding factor in her hiring.

"Hello?" Ruby repeated. "This is Comfort and Company. Who's calling please?"

Now a few months into the job, Ruby had settled in, skillfully negotiating the tiny space, two schedules, two personalities, and the occasional request for the dog featured in the company's Yellow Pages ad. But with more zip than a Mustang P51, she was prone to boredom, even in the best of times. And in Kit's professional opinion, the week so far had been slow, disturbingly slow.

"Hello, hello," Ruby said. "Anybody home?" After a few seconds of her most patient listening, Ruby grimaced and shot Kit a look. She then aimed the phone receiver at Kit, inviting her to listen in. From the other side of the tiny office, Kit could hear what sounded like an angry back-and-forth between two men.

Ruby drew the phone back and switching to the loud, deliberate voice of the air raid warden she once was, said, "Excuse me, sir. Sir? Hello? Sir? Are you there?" Getting no response, Ruby, muttered a "good grief" under her breath. Finally, she said, "Thank you, sir. Who may I say is calling?" In a flash, Ruby's pencil tip was streaking across the pad. "Donald Dreiland. Editor in Chief. From *True Investigations*—oh, I love that magazine! Hang on, please."

Ruby handed Kit the phone and explained, "Donald F. Dreiland. He's in a phone booth. Apparently, the other guy was trying to bust in to call his bookie, 'cause the bookie's got a hot tip on the first race at Santa Anita."

Kit shook her head, then turned on her own professional charm for the caller, "Good morning. This is Kit Comfort." Now it was Kit's turn to listen, while Ruby hovered, pencil poised. "Oh. I'm sorry to hear that . . . When did this happen? . . . No, of course. Of course, sir. Yes, discretion. I do understand . . . Lem's Cafe. I know where it is, yes . . . Back area. Three o'clock?" Kit said, glancing at her watch. "All right, see you there."

Kit returned the phone to Ruby. "Did you get all that?"

"Lem's. Discretion. Hidden. Three o'clock."

"What do you know about *True Investigations*?"

Ruby's eyes lit up. "It's kind of . . . you know . . . it's a—"

"Dime detective magazine?" Kit cut in. She wasn't a fan, but in high school, her younger brother Stanley had used his meager earnings as a soda jerk to buy subscriptions to both adventure and science fantasy magazines.

"Except higher quality. Sort of."

Kit grunted. "Sort of?"

Suddenly, Ruby held up her hand in a "stop" gesture, then bent down, yanked open the bottom drawer of her small desk and rummaged inside it. "Last month's issue," she announced, waving the magazine triumphantly. "I'd forgotten I had stuck it in there."

"May I borrow it?"

"Gosh, keep it." Ruby grinned as the September issue passed hands.

"Thanks." Kit studied the cover artwork of the compact digest. At first glance, it looked like every other sleezy drawing she had seen on one of these publications: A snarling thug in a black fedora, brandishing a revolver toward a terrified young woman, her ample cleavage straining at her red (always red) cocktail dress.

The drawing had all the required elements, but there was something about the way the artist had rendered the shadows enveloping the thug, and the positioning of the woman's bejeweled arms that hinted at novelty. "*New True Investigations*," Kit said. "That's the full title apparently."

Ruby smirked. "It's been 'new' for years now."

"Really?" Kit opened the title page and checked out the company listing at the bottom. "Popular Properties," she mumbled. "HQ in Los Angeles." She scanned the table of contents: short stories, a serialized novella, and a "factual" section at the end. She didn't recognize any of the authors' names—no surprise there. Was it legit?

Flipping to the end pages, she began to read a random paragraph, but stopped abruptly when her eye caught the character name "Henry." She looked over at Ruby, who was filling out her phone log. "Where the heck is Henry?"

Ruby grimaced. "Oh, gosh, I'm sorry. I thought he told you."

"Told me what?"

"It's his anniversary. And Bea's birthday. He's taking the day off."

Chapter Two

HENRY

Henry woke earlier than usual, the date October 4th drumming in his head, and stumbled into the kitchen. It was both Bea's birthday and their thirtieth wedding anniversary. Marrying on Bea's birthday was her idea, as it gave her an excuse to ignore her special day in favor of their special day. And since Bea refused to acknowledge her birth, Henry had always insisted their anniversary celebrations be more than just boxes of chocolates.

In a good year, the couple might head to La Jolla for some ocean breeze, or to the desert for a spectacular view of the stars. Or they might take in a ballet, or an opera, a musical form Bea loved for reasons Henry never quite grasped.

In a bad year—those times when Bea's melancholy had a grip on her—Henry would arrange for a special delivery from her favorite restaurant, the French-themed Taix, and fill the house with gardenias, whose sweet, intense fragrance had the power to spark her senses. He would squeeze himself into the finely tailored pinstripe suit she had bought him at Bullock's a decade before. The cut may have gone out of style, but its fabric and colors ("midnight blue with a hint of steel gray") reflected Bea's timeless taste and thoughtful eye. He hoped it would remind her of better days.

No matter how low Bea was feeling, Henry clung to the October 4th traditions like a life preserver in a sea of gloom. But he knew his dream of driving down to the Palisades for a cool

evening on the beach would have to wait till next year. Bea had been going through a tough spell, with sleeping, drinking and pill-popping overtaking her every day. Her friends had all blown away with the wind, unable or unwilling to see her through the dark days. Family members—what was left of them—helped out from time to time, but only her older sister showed affection. It was a lonely existence.

Tonight, he would swing by Taix and pick up a quart of the French onion soup and a loaf of the crusty bread that Bea adored and buy himself a sirloin steak with *frites*. Both would be complemented by a respectable wine from Bordeaux, a place somewhere in France that had captured Bea's childhood heart. Out of respect for Bea's childhood heart, Henry might take a sip or two, but bourbon had planted a flag in his heart the moment he had turned eighteen.

Over soup and steak, they would offer their usual toast to Lady Fortuna ("another year down!"), reminisce about lighter days, listen to Ella, Glenn, and Duke, and say nothing of the future. For Bea, the future only went so far as the bottom of whatever bottle she was fishing from to keep her fiery demons at bay.

If only he could gift her the moon in the form of a cure. He used to believe a cure was possible—they both did. When the melancholia first started, Bea had agreed to every treatment Henry had tossed out, gone to all the doctors and therapies that, in his eyes, had looked promising. Some had offered temporary relief, but most proved ineffective, or worse, exacerbating.

Finally done with the so-called "rest cures," Bea took matters into her own hands during the war, forging friendships with unscrupulous doctors and high-end pushers. As he had discovered during his beat cop days, the latter hung about the jewelry district, where Bea's family once had a diamond store. In no time, Bea went from shooing them away to wooing them for special

discounts and payment terms. For real relief, she once said, you had to "walk the goofball gangplank and fall into the Bay of Bennie."

With each passing anniversary, Henry's expectations of better times for Bea waned and withered until it seemed the most they could hope for was holding the line against the blue devils. He sometimes wondered if things might have turned around for Bea if kids had been in the picture, but early on, they had chosen not to include them in their life.

As bleak as things had gotten, Bea had never tried to kill herself, but her actions had been so reckless at times, she had for all intents and purposes, flirted with suicide. When the melancholia was at its worst, she stopped listening to him, stopped hearing him, folding her thoughts and senses in on themselves. She resented his help then, pushed him away, refused his loving lifeline.

Henry sighed. He lit a flame under the percolator, then stepped outside to their little back garden. Though rangy and neglected, the trio of rose bushes that Bea had planted when they moved in decades ago still had blooms. Persistent and stubborn, Henry mused, like Bea herself. Henry chose the most vibrant and youthful flower on the bushes and, armed with Bea's rusty shears, snipped its stem. He twirled the deep red flower between thumb and forefinger, its perfect thorny beauty obvious even to a dope like him.

Back inside the kitchen, he filled a champagne flute with water and stuck the rose inside. He then poured a cup of hot joe, black, the only way Bea drank it. Not bothering with a tray, he plodded off to the bedroom, flower and coffee in hand, girding himself for the celebration ahead.

* * *

Standing next to the executive desk he shared with partner Kit, Henry checked the *News* movie listings for downtown showtimes. *Cloak and Dagger* with Gary Cooper, screening with second-run *The Big Sleep*, was playing at the Warners, just around the corner from the office. Kit

had gone to meet a new client, and Henry had nothing pressing on his docket, having finished up a routine cheating husband case the day before.

He couldn't use work to justify leaving a sleeping Bea alone at home all afternoon, nor could he appear suddenly at Comfort & Company in his fancy blue suit. But while Ruby had looked surprised to see him there, she had the good sense not to ask him about his change of plans. For all her silliness, she was remarkably astute at reading people.

Gary Cooper hardly ranked as a favorite star (Bea claimed he couldn't act his way out of a wet paper bag), but Fritz Lang had directed the show, and if anyone could make Cooper believable as a Nazi spy chaser, it was the dour Austrian.

Several years before, while tailing a blackmailing script girl, Henry had crossed paths with Lang on the Warner lot. In the land of make-believe, Henry found the director refreshingly frank. Upon hearing about his Hollywood encounter, Bea, however, had informed him that, according to one of her movie magazines, Lang was suspected of murdering his wife back in Austria.

"Out of my jurisdiction," was all Henry could say.

At the Warner's, Henry settled in to his usual spot, the last seat of the center aisle, left side. He had brought his own bag of nuts, being too cheap for concession stand prices. The theater was only half-full, with patrons scattered throughout the auditorium. If nothing else, he mused, maybe he could leave the pain of home behind for a few hours.

Since the war's end, newsreels featuring endless footage of dignitaries shaking hands and "the enemy" being led in handcuffs had become tedious affairs for Henry. He was on the verge of falling asleep when a story about Transair's new line of airplanes flashed on the screen. During the war, Kit's father had worked—and died there—and consequently, he felt some odd affinity for the company.

The screen filled with shots of Transair's new line of commercial and military planes and the engineering crews who designed them. The men waved uncertainly at the camera, clearly unused to the attention. The story wasn't an entirely happy one, however, as the latest version of the company's most powerful engine had exploded midair, killing the pilot. The narrator declared, "Undaunted, the testing goes on, keeping America safe for the next generation!

Henry was debating how "undaunted" the pilot's family must have felt when he heard a pair of women's voices whispering behind him. Without trying very hard, he heard one of them say, "It's Henry Richman." Then as the theme music for the Bugs Bunny cartoon started up, he caught the words "car bomb" and "wife."

It had been a while since he had been recognized in public. He sighed and tossed some peanuts in his mouth. Lady Fortuna really had it in for him that day.

Chapter Three

KIT

Lem's Cafe on 1st Street was one of a handful of Chinese eateries located in the heart of the Japanese district. Despite losing most of its regular clientele to the internment camps, the cafe had managed to survive the war and was slowly regaining its popularity, one moo shoo pancake at a time. What it couldn't shake, however, was the mist of sadness.

Defying the heat, Kit had hoofed it there fifteen minutes ahead of schedule in order to assess Donald Dreiland's arrival. Being first on the scene gave her a feeling of control, and after her brush with fiery death a few months before, seizing control, however slight, had become a new mania for her.

Kit parked herself at the corner newsstand and was busying herself with the afternoon edition of the *Times*. While half-reading, she glanced over at the entrance to Lem's every few seconds, ready to pounce. Everywhere in the newspaper were articles sounding the alarm about Reds infiltrating Hollywood's elite class. Their recruiting strategy was, according to J. Edgar Hoover, "dishonor, deceit, tyranny and a deliberate policy of falsehood." Kit almost burst out laughing, thinking about her recent encounters with the less-than-honorable Agent Burke and the Nazis the FBI was supposed to contain and punish.

Instead of jailing the German murderer, Agent Burke gave him a one-way ticket to Mexico, claiming that a trial would do more harm than good to the nation's peacetime standing. Kit's heart began to pound thinking about Hoover's hypocrisy, but the arrival of an elegant middle-

aged man gliding up to Lem's door instantly refocused her attention. In one hand was an attaché case, in the other a cigarette. Dreiland, she guessed. She tucked the paper under her arm and tossed a nickel into the open cash register drawer, then slowly headed for the restaurant.

Lem's dark interior offered some respite from the heat and sun, as did an army of fans positioned strategically throughout the long and narrow dining room. Kit glided between the two rows of tables in the front dining room, heading for the back. On the phone, Dreiland had mentioned wanting privacy. The place was nearly empty at that hour, and she had no trouble zeroing in on him, sitting in a side booth. He was writing in a small leather-bound notebook, his pen streaking across the page in a fury. A half-drunk beer, its foam flattened by the heat, sat by his elbow, neglected.

The moment she crossed into the alcove, Dreiland locked eyes on her. She acknowledged him with a formal nod and smile as he stood to greet her. He was tall and slender in a three-piece steel gray suit that echoed his thinning silver hair and silver-rimmed glasses. His pocket square was an elegant dark blue. If she didn't know any better, Kit would have pegged him as a Brooks Brothers model, not a pulp magazine editor.

"Miss Comfort, I presume?" Dreiland's deep voice had a smoker's rasp. He offered a gentlemanly smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I am. Nice to meet you," Kit said, reupping her own smile.

Dreiland sat back down, his mouth falling into a frown, and gestured to the empty space across from him. "Please. Have a seat."

Kit glanced around and, confirming they indeed had the joint to themselves, lowered herself into the booth.

"If you need a minute to finish your thought," she said, gesturing toward Dreiland's notebook. "I'm happy to wait."

Dreiland snapped his notebook shut and half-smiled. "I think the plot twist can wait. Thanks."

"Are you writing a story for your magazine?"

He nodded. "I like to contribute a story every now and then. Keeps me connected."

On cue, a diminutive man in traditional Chinese attire appeared with a cocktail menu and nothing more. Apparently, food service had ended at Lem's.

"Tom Collins please," Kit said, without a glance toward the menu. As a rule, she didn't drink while working, unless the work required it, and there was something in Dreiland's tense expression that suggested today it would.

After the waiter retreated, Dreiland reached for the leather attaché case nestled between his feet and slid it in Kit's direction. "Go ahead. It's unlocked."

Kit used both hands to pop open the case. Inside she saw several 8 x10 photographs and what looked like a carbon-copied legal document.

"You can take them out," Dreiland said before lighting up a Winston, sighing with relief after his first exhale.

Kit picked up the top two photos and absorbed their contents: the front and back covers of an old edition of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon: Passage Direct in 97 Hours and 20 Minutes*. A mouthful, Kit mused. Photos three and four were of the book's interior title pages, indicating the publication year—1869—translator—J. K. Hoyt—and publisher, Newark Printing and Publishing Company.

The waiter returned with her Tom Collins, complete with a pink paper umbrella, and silently placed it in front of her. After extracting the umbrella and refocusing her attention on the photos, she raised the chilled glass to her lips. A sigh to rival Dreiland's followed. "What am I looking at?"

"A first printing of a first edition. It was the second book by Verne to be published in English. The page underneath is a copy of its certificate of authenticity."

Kit glanced at the legal document. "It's valuable, I take it?"

Dreiland's eyes lit up. "In the rare book world, it's very valuable. I'd never consider selling it, though. Honestly, I bought it more for sentimental reasons than financial. It was my father's favorite book growing up. In fact, it was one of the reasons I took over the family publishing business."

"I presume something happened to the book?" Kit said.

Dreiland sighed and drew deep on his cigarette. "It's gone missing."

"Stolen?"

"Yes, I suppose you could say that."

The Tom Collins was halfway to her mouth when she paused. "Care to elaborate?"

"Eight days ago, one of my assistant editors, Marlene Overbrook, dropped from sight. With no warning. The last time I saw her was end of day on a Saturday. I told her goodnight, have a nice day off, see you Monday. She said the same to me. Just like we always do. Come Monday morning, though, Marlene was a no-show. By lunchtime I had become a little concerned. She had never gone AWOL before, not even for an hour. I tried phoning her at home, three, four times, but got no answer."

"What did you think might have happened?" Kit said.

"I thought maybe she had gone out of town on Sunday and was delayed getting back for some reason. But then, when she didn't turn up on Tuesday, I grew very concerned. I called around to a few hospitals, the morgue even. Nothing."

Phoning hospitals was a familiar tactic in these situations, but typically it was a spouse or parent making the calls, not a boss. To her ears, Dreiland's recitation felt rehearsed, drained of all punch and urgency by repetition. In Kit's experience, the more practiced a client's story was, the more desperate they were. A calm recitation of the facts usually signaled police involvement.

"How long have you owned the book?"

"Two weeks," Dreiland said. "I had just purchased it."

"Where did you buy it?"

Irritation flashed in Dreiland's eyes. "At an auction."

Kit nodded and consulted her checklist. "Husband? Boyfriend?"

"Excuse me?" Dreiland muttered.

"Sorry. Marlene. Does she have a husband or a boyfriend?"

Dreiland paused for another drag on his Winston. By the stains on his fingers, Kit guessed he was chain smoker. "She's unmarried and lives alone. As far as I know, she doesn't have any steady boyfriends, and no one called the office after she disappeared."

"Parents? Siblings? Other family members?"

"Does she have any? I don't know. I had no way of contacting them, assuming she has any family left *to* contact. She was always . . ." His voice trailed off.

"What?" Kit prodded.

"I was going to say 'cagey' about her family, but that suggests something illicit, doesn't it? Better to say, she never talked about her family. I suspect it had to something to do with her being a former prodigy."

Dreiland blew out a slow roll of smoke. "She mentioned it during her interview. I was a bit skeptical, but later the topic of publicity came up, and she confessed that when she was nine or ten, the *Times* had done a big spread about her as 'the smartest child in America,' or something like that. Her IQ was off the charts. Literally. The testers had run out of questions to ask her."

"That's smart," Kit said.

"After she had mentioned it, I did vaguely remember reading the article. It was a feel-better piece they filled the paper with after the Crash. Something about the way she talks about it now made me think it wasn't a happy time for her. And like I said, she never mentioned her family."

Kit's eyebrows raised and, as she sipped her cocktail, she scribbled the word "FAMILY?" in her mental notebook.

Dreiland returned his gaze to the photos. "I was so focused on Marlene's disappearance, I didn't even notice the Verne was gone until later."

"And you think Marlene stole it," Kit said.

"I think it's too much of a coincidence they both went missing around the same time. Don't you?"

On general principle, Kit agreed. Coincidences were a trick of the mind. At the same time, assumptions could be deadly. "Maybe."

"That's why I didn't contact the police," Dreiland said, seeming to anticipate her next question.

Kit said, surprised, "About Marlene or the book?"

"Both. I very much want the book back, but I'm not looking to punish Marlene."

"Why not?" Kit said. Did Dreiland have romantic feelings for his junior editor?

"Marlene has some . . ." Dreiland's face contorted with unease. "Let's just say, she's not well, mentally. I didn't know about her problems when I hired her, but she has . . . bouts."

"Bouts?"

"Periods of, I don't know, paranoia, anxiety? She fixates on things. The elevator operator, the neighbor's dog, milk bottles. Sometimes it's people, sometimes it's objects like . . ."

"Old books?"

"Yes, exactly."

"You think Marlene still has the book? A week later? Wouldn't she have sold it by now?"

Dreiland gestured at the legal document in his attaché case, exposing an old radium wristwatch with green markers and numbers. A Patek Philippe? "No bookseller in L.A. would buy that book without an original certificate of authenticity. And that's still in my safe."

"She could have forged a lookalike."

"Doubtful. Not with Treasury monitoring the market like it has been. Even the old-time booksellers are being scrutinized. These days, you'd have to be desperate to push a stolen edition with a forged certificate."

"How do you know Marlene wasn't desperate?"

Dreiland shook his head. "Marlene telegraphs her emotions. If she'd been desperate, I would have noticed. I honestly don't think she took it for the money."

"All right. Let's assume the book is still with Marlene. What do you need from me, and what do want from me?" Kit said, drawing on lessons learned from shrink boyfriend Luca. Always have the client spell it out: needs and desires.

Dreiland scowled. “As I said, I’m not interested in punishing Marlene. Wherever she is, she can stay there, if that’s best for her. What I need is my Verne back as quickly as possible, with as little fuss as possible.” Dreiland looked Kit in the eye. “Is that an acceptable proposition?”

Kit blinked. He needed the book and desired speed and discretion. As propositions went, it was a somewhat unusual one. She had never used her skills to find an object, only people. But as Dreiland had described it, to find the object, she had to find the thief. “It is,” she said, “with one standard caveat.”

Dreiland stubbed the end of his cigarette, burned to its last inch, in the restaurant’s kitschy ashtray. “And that would be . . . ?”

“Assuming everything you’ve told me checks out, the only thing that will pass between us is the book. Since you said you weren’t interested in pressing charges, I won’t reveal Marlene’s whereabouts unless she gives me permission.”

Dreiland was silent and Kit noticed his right ring finger twitch. Without thinking, he reached for his cigarette pack, then stopped himself. “I only want what’s best for Marlene.”

Kit paused. “We’ll have to meet again to go over the particulars and the legal requirements. I’ll need a photo of Marlene or a good description, delivered to my office by tomorrow. And, of course, a retainer check.”

“Of course,” Dreiland said, watching with amusement as Kit pocketed the pink cocktail umbrella.

Kit drained the last drops of her Tom Collins and rose to leave. “What time should my secretary call you tomorrow?”

"No, I'll call her, first thing," Dreiland answered, his bearing suddenly curt. He stood and in softer tones said, "I'll be racing all over town tomorrow. It's busy time in the publishing world, but it was a great pleasure to meet you."