

WINNER OF THE SHAMUS LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

**WILLIAM
CAMPBELL
GAULT**

**THE DEAD
SEED**

A BROCK CALLAHAN MYSTERY



The Dead Seed

A Brock Callahan Mystery

William Campbell Gault

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JAN'S TASTES ARE MORE sophisticated than mine. Jan favors Paul Klee; Norman Rockwell is my kind of painter. *War and Peace* is her idea of a great novel; *Bang the Drum Slowly* is mine. On the boob tube Jan rarely deserts the PBS channel. My television diet is confined mostly to old movies on the independent stations.

So that Tuesday morning when I came in from waxing my aged Mustang and told her, "I just saw Fortney Grange next door," she looked at me blankly for a couple of seconds.

Then she shrugged. "Who is Fortney Grange?"

"Come on! Everybody knows who Fortney Grange is. He was—"

"Wait!" she interrupted. She tapped her forehead. "I remember now. My father used to talk about him. He was a football player. Wasn't he called 'the galloping ghost'?"

I shook my head. "That was Red Grange."

"Wait," she said again. "The gray ghost of Gonzaga—?"

"That," I informed her patiently, "was Tony Canadeo of the Green Bay Packers. For your sad and thin information, Fortney Grange was probably the greatest actor of his time and possibly of all time."

"Maybe to you," she said. "I never heard of him."

"He starred in some big pictures. There was *The Sword of Destiny* and *Desert Fury* and—"

"Oh," she said. "That kind of actor, *your* kind. What was he doing next door, trimming the hedges with his sabre?"

"You're so smart!" I said.

She nodded. "And pretty, too. Let's not argue. Kiss me. I have to run. I have an eleven o'clock appointment in Solvang."

Ten minutes later, her little Mercedes was chattering out the driveway and Mrs. Casey, our housekeeper, came into the breakfast room. "Guess who is living next door?" she asked me.

"Fortney Grange."

"Imagine!" she said.

"Right," I agreed. "He didn't buy the place, did he? The Medfords have been living there for three generations."

"Buy? Him? With what? He was the biggest Hollywood spender of all time. The way I heard it, he's an old friend of Miss Medford's and living in that coach house they converted."

"I'd sure like to meet him," I said.

She nodded. "Maybe we will. Let's hold our thumbs. I'll never forget his pictures, not one of them. Fresh coffee?"

"No, thanks. I think I'll go out to see if the backyard needs watering."

She smiled knowingly. "Call me if you get a glimpse of him."

Mrs. Casey and I share a lot of tastes, including the culinary. No fancy French chef who ever lived could come close to the subtle flavors in her Irish stew.

Still, even I had to admit it was adolescent of me to stand out there like an overaged group watering the lawn with a hose just to catch a glimpse of my hero. The yard was equipped with a clock-controlled sprinkling system.

Quiescent. I guess that's the word for the next half hour. Though not soundless; soothing Mantovani music from a local FM station was drifting out from the ancient Medford home.

Was something going on in there? Fortney Grange had been not only one of the great Hollywood spenders; he had also been one of its famous studs. And Carol Medford, the last of her line, had been that distinguished family's only free-soul advocate.

She had never married. She was around seventy now but nobody thought of her as a spinster. Legend had it that she had left a litter of broken hearts in all the fashionable capitals of Europe.

I turned off the hose and was about to splash my way back to the house when they came down the steps of the side porch next door, hand in hand. They stood there, staring at me across the low hedge.

"Is that he?" I heard him ask. "It is!"

"That's your hero," she agreed. "Come on—I'll introduce you to him."

Crazy world, isn't it?

"My all-time favorite Ram," he said, as we were introduced. "I thought you were working as a private investigator in Los Angeles now."

"I was, until a year ago. I'm retired. Sir, I have been standing here pretending to water a lawn that doesn't need it just so I could get a look at you."

"You can't remember me," he protested. "You're not that old."

"You name the picture," I said, "and I'll tell you the plot."

And then Mrs. Casey was hurrying across the lawn toward us, undoubtedly dreaming up an excuse on the way. "Mr. Callahan," she called, "I was wondering what you wanted for lunch."

"Something light," I told her. "Mrs. Casey, shake the hand that held the sword of destiny."

She stood there, staring at him, a true Irish ham. "It can't be," she said. "Fortney Grange? That should live to see this day!"

He smiled at her. "You two are embarrassing me. But keep it up. It's been a long time since I last met any admirers."

It was a few minutes of chitchat after that when Carol explained that they were due in town in twenty minutes, but were Jan and I free to come over for dinner tonight?

"Even if we aren't," I assured her, "I'll see that we are."

"Cocktails at six-thirty, then," she said. I had a diet lunch, cottage cheese and fruit, and faced another empty afternoon. Retirement was not the blessing I had imagined it would be. That grin

existence in Los Angeles, riding the rim of solvency, had not seemed as attractive then as it seemed in retrospect.

I put on my running clothes and went out for a six-miler. As a Ram, I had been forced to stay in good condition. As a private investigator, my income had kept me from overeating. I enjoyed being solvent but I did not intend to become a solvent slob.

I came home bushed and spent half an hour in the Jacuzzi. I was working with the barbells on the patio when Jan came home around three o'clock. She looked grumpy.

"Another wasted trip?" I guessed.

"I think so. I will *never* understand why people hire decorators because they mistrust their own taste and then constantly argue with them."

Jan had gone back to her pre-marriage vocation six months ago. She, too, had found retirement boring.

I told her, "Carol Medford invited us to dinner tonight and I accepted. You will finally meet the great Fortney Grange."

"You might have waited until I came home to accept any invitations."

"Sorry, ma'am."

She sighed, and slumped onto a chaise longue. "That was bitchy of me, wasn't it?"

I smiled and nodded.

"Is he living with her?"

"I guess."

"At her age? He's old, too, isn't he?"

"Even old people have to live somewhere, Jan."

"You know what I'm talking about."

"Not me. I'm just a dumb virgin jock. Think of the dinner this way, you'll get a chance to talk Carol into selling you some of her precious antiques."

She nodded. "True. Is it too early for a drink?"

"A light one wouldn't hurt. I'll get them. Vodka and tonic?"

She nodded again. "And not too light."

I brought the drinks and we sat in silence. The soothing, syrupy music went on again next door. Jan said, "I wish Carol's taste in music matched her taste in food and furniture."

"She's a sentimentalist," I explained. "That can affect one's taste."

Another silence. Then she said, "I hate to sound bitchy twice in one afternoon, but aren't you tired of loafing?"

I nodded.

"You can't sit around waiting for your friend Bernie to call you in on another murder case."

Bernie had never "called me in"; he always warned me to stay out. It didn't seem like the right

time to mention that. I said, “Maybe I’ll go out to Goleta and work with the Little Leaguers again this summer.”

She finished her drink and stood up. “I’m through complaining. I’m going to take a shower.”

I sat there, not looking forward as a solid citizen should to a summer of social service with the kids. Little League kids are fun; it’s their parents who make the job unpleasant, their strident, over-competitive parents.

Jan had told Lieutenant Vogel about my father being killed by a hoodlum down in San Diego. I had been nine years old at the time; Mom and I had moved to Long Beach two months later.

My father had been a cop. His killer had never been found. My friend Bernie has this dope theory that I was still hunting for my father’s killer.

Who doesn’t hate killers? Killers of people, killers of the dream. Unless you don’t like people, despise their dreams....

The music stopped next door, replaced by the clack of mallets striking croquet balls on the sidewalk lawn. That was a game to match her house and her furniture. But sadly out of time and tune with her three face-lifts.

The sun went down, the cold moved in. We had been having ridiculous weather, eighty during the day, down to forty at night. I took my shower and dressed. I wore a tie. I knew it was not obligatory but I felt I owed it to tradition to wear a tie at dinner in the Medford home.

Her house was dimly lit, her dining table illuminated only by candles. That, too, could be tradition. And also cosmetic. Old people look younger by candlelight.

In any light they were a handsome pair, both of them tall, slim and elegant. At dinner, we were the triple interlocutors, he was the single-end man.

He told us about the Gish sisters and the Barrymores, both Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. He told us about his first picture, made right here in San Valdesto at the old Gramercy Studios. That was where he had met Carol.

After dinner, over cognac in the sun-room, he and I talked football, Jan and Carol discussed antiques.

As we walked back to our house, Jan said, “He’s a real charmer, isn’t he? Do you know whom he reminds me of? John Barrymore.”

“John Barrymore? He was about four feet tall. Fortney Grange, lady, did his own stunts. He never used a stuntman.”

“I can’t always decipher your nonsequiturs. What does that one mean?”

“I mean Grange is—oh hell, you know, all *man!*”

“Now I get it. Macho, macho. Dear God!”

“Aagh,” I said. “You!”

“Aagh, yourself,” she said.

We had been squabbling too much lately. I held my tongue. At home, she went to the bedroom;
went to the den to watch the late news on the tube.

The news was over and I was turning to another channel to catch an old Errol Flynn picture when
Jan appeared in the doorway in her dressing gown.

“Are you going to watch that idiot box all night, Mr. Macho?” she asked. “Or would you rather
have some fun?”

MRS. CASEY DOESN'T MAKE BREAKFAST when Jan is home, but she was in the kitchen before we got there next morning.

"That truck is out there again," she said.

"What truck?" Jan asked.

Mrs. Casey pointed to the breakfast-room window. I looked out to see a weather-beaten Volkswagen van parked on the street between our house and Carol's.

Mrs. Casey said, "I saw them drive into Miss Medford's driveway after she and Mr. Grange left yesterday morning. And then they came out again and parked right across the street from where they are now."

"They—?" I asked.

She nodded. "A stout woman and a teenage boy. They parked over there for almost two hours."

"It is possible," I said, "that they are friends of Carol's. The butler probably told them Carol wasn't home. So they came back today."

"Then why are they sitting there now?" Jan asked.

"Because it's too early in the morning to come visiting," I explained.

Mrs. Casey looked at Jan. Both of them shook their heads in scornful disbelief.

"All right," I said. "One of you can go out and ask them what in hell they're doing out there."

"We don't have the right to ask them that," Mrs. Casey said primly. "But I've had my breakfast. I'll go out and fetch the paper."

I watched her through the window. The morning *Los Angeles Times* was on the lawn about halfway between our house and the street. She picked it up and continued toward the curb. There, she made a show of looking into the empty mailbox and then came back to the house.

"The license plate was dirty," she told me. "I couldn't make out the number. But it's an Arizona license plate."

"A very clever piece of detection," I said. "Now what do we do with it? Phone Miss Medford?"

Mrs. Casey shrugged. Jan said, "I'll phone her."

She picked up the kitchen phone and dialed. A few seconds later she said, "I would like to speak with Miss Medford, Charles." A silence. Then she frowned at both of us and said, "This morning in Carmel? Would it be possible for me to reach her up there later today?" A pause. "The Delmont Lodge? Thank you, Charles."

She hung up and stared at us. "Carol and Fortney left for Carmel an hour ago." She looked at Mrs. Casey. "How long has that van been out there?"

"About half an hour," Mrs. Casey said. She sighed. "Well, I have my laundry to do. I can't b

worrying about the neighbors.”

Jan looked questioningly at me. “Okay,” I said, “I’ll go out and tell them.”

“Tell them what?”

“That Miss Medford is on her way to Carmel. They might sit there all day!”

“You tell them *nothing*. You ask them what right they have to park that obscene vehicle in front of our house.”

“Calm down,” I said. “It’s a public street.”

“Then I’ll ask them.” She started for the door.

“I’ll go,” I said. “Sit!”

Mrs. Casey had described the woman as stout. She was a little more than that; I judged her to be between one hundred and ninety to two hundred pounds of pale flab. The youth behind the wheel was slimmer and less malignant-looking. He was in worn jeans and a blue work shirt, the woman in a soiled caftan. I came around to his side of the car. He glanced at me and then returned to staring moodily through the windshield.

“Trouble?” I asked him. “Out of gas? Looking for somebody?”

He didn’t look at me. He inclined his head toward the woman next to him. “Ask her.”

I looked at her; she glared at me. “Get lost,” she said. “We found what we’re looking for.”

“If it’s Miss Medford,” I said, “she isn’t home.”

“What makes you think we’re looking for her?”

The boy sighed and took a deep breath.

I said, “Because you went to her house yesterday.”

She scowled at me. “Are all the neighbors as nosy as you?”

I shook my head. “And they probably didn’t see your car here yesterday.”

The boy said, “Let’s go, ma. I’m tired of sitting here.”

“Shut up!” she said. “And you, Mr. Big Nose, take off!”

The boy said, “Be reasonable, ma! I’m taking off myself in the next five minutes, whether you do or not.”

“Like your father did?” she said.

I said quietly, “I’m going to wait five minutes, along with the lad, and then I’m going to phone the sheriff’s station. Maybe you’ll be more civil to them.”

Her smile was scornful. “You do that, big boy. We’ll be waiting right here.”

“For exactly five minutes,” the boy said.

I didn’t hear her reply; I was heading for the house.

There, Jan asked, “Well—?”

I related the dialogue.

“So,” she said in her reasonable, wifely voice, “phone the sheriff.”

“Why?” I asked in my equally reasonable way. “We don’t own that street in front of the house.”
The lady was perfectly willing to wait for the sheriff. What could he charge her with? It’s not against the law to be overweight and nasty.”

“Okay. But I’m going to phone Carol tonight. I owe her that much.”

“And how about today?” I asked. “Do you realize we haven’t played golf in two weeks? Why don’t we get in a quick nine at Sandpiper before the boys take over at noon?”

She sighed. “Not today. Maybe tomorrow. I have to take some drapery samples up to the miserable woman in Solvang. You go and play with the boys.”

She went up to Solvang but I didn’t go to the course. At noon I was in Plotkin’s Pantry where Bernie always ate lunch on Wednesdays. He was nursing a martini in a corner booth all by himself.

“What in hell are you doing here?” he asked me.

“Hoping to have lunch. Is it closed to goys on Wednesdays?”

“The only time I’ve ever seen you in here is when you’re with me,” he explained. “What’s on your mind?”

“Only a few friendly questions. I’ll buy your lunch.”

“Sit down,” he said wearily. “I’ll buy your drink.”

I ordered a stein of *Einlicher* and related the morning’s adventure. “So what do I do now?” he asked him.

“How would I know?” he said gruffly. “I’m a city cop. Montevista’s not in the city. Did you expect me to muscle those two or something?”

I smiled at him. “You’re grumpy. You got turned down for captain again, didn’t you?”

He glared at me. “Who told you that?”

“Bernie,” I said soothingly, “this is old Brock, your stout friend and loyal confidant. Let’s start over.”

He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. You called it right. I got the shaft again.”

I said, “You are not exactly the Chief’s ideal Dale Carnegie cop, Bernie. But he can’t live forever.”

“I know, I know! Those two in the van—locals?”

“I doubt it. It had Arizona plates.”

“Why didn’t you call the Sheriff? The citizens in your area get the kid-glove treatment from the Sheriff’s Department.”

I shrugged.

He smiled. “Come on! You were thinking blackmail, right? Maybe you were afraid your wealthy neighbor might get burned.”

“Don’t be absurd. I happen to like Carol Medford and I think those people might be harassing her. And I have always admired her new boyfriend.”

“She’s had enough of ’em. Who’s her latest?”

“Fortney Grange,” I said, and waited for his reaction.

“What’s he—another young one?” he asked.

Were Mrs. Casey and I the only living members of the Fortney Grange fan club? I said, “Not to young. Let’s eat.”

He had herring in sour cream. I had a corned-beef sandwich and another stein of *Einlicher*. Over our coffee, he said, “If you could get the license number of that van, I could help you there.”

I handed him a slip of paper and said, “I thought you’d never ask.”

“You bastard,” he said. “You devious bastard!”

The gang I usually played with at Sandpiper on Wednesday was not playing today. I went to my own club and hit a bucket of balls and then went home.

The van was not in sight. But there was a Sheriff’s Department car parked in the Medford driveway. Ten minutes later, Mrs. Casey came out to the pool to tell me there was a policeman at the door who wanted to talk with me.

“Send him out here,” I said.

The officer looked too young to remember me. But he smiled and said, “I had no idea the Ransome paid this kind of money when you were with them.”

“They didn’t. I had a rich uncle who met an untimely death. Untimely for him, I mean. I suppose you want to ask about those two who were parked out in front this morning?”

He nodded. “Your housekeeper told me she tried to get the license number on the vehicle, but she couldn’t. You didn’t get it by chance, did you?”

I shook my head, which was not a lie. I had got it by design, not by chance. The front plate had been clean enough to read.

“Did Miss Medford ever live in Arizona?” he asked me.

“I don’t know. Did you ask the butler next door?”

He looked uncomfortable. “I forgot to. I’m kind of new at this. He told me the woman was there yesterday morning, but Miss Medford wasn’t home. A very heavy woman, he told me.”

“Very,” I agreed. “The kid was skinnier. Nicer, too, is my hunch. His mother didn’t seem worried when I threatened to phone you boys. By the way, who did phone you?”

“The butler. But they were gone when we got here. Weren’t you with the police department in Los Angeles after you quit football?”

I shook my head. “I was a private investigator.”

“Oh,” he said in a tone just faintly tinged with contempt.

“A man has to eat,” I explained.

“I suppose,” he said doubtfully. “Hey—wait-how did you know the woman was his mother?”

“Because he called her ‘ma’. After you’ve been with the department for a while you’ll pick up

these sophisticated detection techniques.”

He flushed. “You don’t have to get snotty.”

“It’s a hangover,” I explained, “from my cheap-peeper days. Sorry. My father was a cop. He was killed in the line of duty.”

His flush deepened. “Okay, I had a shot coming. You’re right; a man has to eat.” He took a breath. “If you get anything that might help, you’ll phone us, won’t you?”

“Of course,” I lied.

Bernie phoned around three o’clock. “Get a pencil and a piece of paper,” he said.

There was a pad and pencil next to the phone. I said, “Shoot, Loot.”

“That van,” he told me, “is registered to a Carl Tryden Lacrosse, aged forty-six, of Skeleton Gulch, Arizona.” He spelled out the Tryden and the Lacrosse: “Mean anything to you?”

“I know a La Crosse in Wisconsin,” I said, “but that’s a town.”

“Right. And two words. This is one. If you tell anybody I looked this up for you, I’ll deny it. When are we going to play poker again?”

“As soon as I recover from the beating I took last time. Thanks a lot, old buddy.”

The Tryden didn’t register with me, but Carl Lacrosse—that name had a familiar sound. I had seen it somewhere, and recently. It had stuck in my memory because my flanking tackle for four years with the Rams had been Moose Mulvaney from La Crosse, Wisconsin. To hear Moose tell it, La Crosse was the twentieth-century Eden.

Jan came home around three-thirty. “Guess who is up in Solvang?” she asked me.

“Ronnie? Paul Newman? Gore Vidal?”

“Don’t be silly. Carol.”

“Did you talk with her?”

“I didn’t even see her. But my client has this house hidden in the hills near there, and I saw Carol’s Rolls in the driveway of a house on the road up.”

“There must be more than one Rolls Royce in the Solvang area.”

“Not with a license plate that reads CAROL MD. Now, what would she be doing there?”

“The road through Solvang is a much quicker route to Carmel,” I explained, “than 101 is. The car probably stopped to see friends on the way.”

“Maybe—and maybe not. Mrs. Casey told me she was going over to talk with Charles today. I’m going out to the kitchen to find out if she’s learned anything.”

When she came back, she looked disappointed. “Charles told Mrs. Casey that Carol told him the woman was a maid she fired years ago, even before Charles went to work for her. The woman had apparently been harassing her every time she comes to town.”

I smiled. “And there goes your villainy theory.”

“Try not to be smug,” she said. “What have you been doing while I’ve been out laboring?”

“A little checking. That van that was parked in front is registered to a man named Carl Tryden Lacrosse. Why is that name familiar to me?”

“I can’t believe it is,” she said. “Not for a man whose idea of a class camera is a Polaroid One Shot. Carl Tryden Lacrosse is one of the finest photographers west of the Rockies. I am amazed that —”

“You don’t have to get snotty,” I interrupted. “He had some pictures in *Arizona Highway* magazine, right?”

She nodded. “Quite often. He lives in Arizona. Tell me what’s going on, Brock.”

“You tell me. You’re the smart ass.”

A miffed silence.

“I owed you that,” I explained. “How did it go with the miserable woman in Solvang?”

“I think I’ve got her nailed,” she said.

“That’s better,” I told her. “Now you’re talking my language.”

THREE

SO, WHAT BUSINESS WAS it of mine? The woman in the van had called it right; I was being a nosy neighbor.

“She always ran, didn’t she?” Jan asked at breakfast next morning.

“Carol? How do you mean?”

“She ran away from marriage often enough. And that’s the biggest commitment of all, isn’t it?”

“And how!”

“Please! Let us have a civilized conversation for a change. Carol is the same with her charities—no commitment, never physically active in them. She simply mails them a big check and gets her name on the honorary-sponsor letterhead.”

“So okay, she’s a butterfly. I thought you liked her.”

“I do. That doesn’t mean I approve of her. Do you?”

I shrugged.

“Be honest, Brock.”

“All right. I grew up middle class. That is where my attitudes were born. If I had been born rich I would probably be a butterfly, too.”

She laughed.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“I had this sudden image of a two-hundred-and-forty-pound butterfly flitting from flower to flower.”

“Two hundred and twenty-three pounds as of this morning, Ms. Acid Tongue. Are we going out for nine holes?”

“I guess. I don’t have to be in Solvang until this afternoon.”

It was ladies’ day at the club and Jan didn’t have a skirt that would fit me, so we played out on Sandpiper’s ocean course. The women’s tees there are at least fifty yards shorter than the men’s on almost every hole, but Jan refused to adjust her handicap. Underneath her refined and semisophisticated exterior, she has a tiger’s instinct for the kill.

We played for fifty cents a hole. As we walked off the ninth green she graciously accepted the four and a half dollars I owed her. And she considers *me* the competitive partner!

She left for Solvang right after lunch, and another afternoon yawned at me. Her belief that Carol Medford was running from trouble was not a belief I shared. A butterfly Carol might be, but the rich don’t have to run; they are insulated by their wealth and their powerful attorneys. And Fortney Grand running—? No way!

But that woman in the caftan and that sullen kid driving a van that belonged to a famo

photographer? That didn't make sense to my rational (and investigative) mind.

I put in a long-distance call to the editor of *Arizona Highways*.

He was out to lunch, the secretary told me, but an assistant editor was available and would the do? I said it would.

It was a woman. I explained to her that I was the president of a camera club San Valdesto, and we were trying to get in touch with Carl Lacrosse to address our group. But the letters I had sent to his Skeleton Gulch address had been neither answered nor returned by the post office as undeliverable.

"I am sure," she told me, "that he would have answered if he had received your letters. He has spoken to many photography clubs. But I doubt if he spends more than a week or two in Skeleton Gulch."

"Do you have a current address for him?"

"We don't. The last one we have is in London, and I know he is back from there. His most recent show was in the Smithsonian. You might try them."

"Doesn't he have an agent I could call?"

"Not *him*. He is a real loner and almost pathologically noncommercial. Anyone who is not seriously interested in photography is of absolutely no interest to Carl."

I thanked her and considered phoning the Smithsonian. Then I realized it was almost six o'clock in Washington and the place would be closed.

It was possible that the van was stolen. This picture formed in my mind of poor Carl being bludgeoned to death by the overweight woman and buried in a shallow desert grave, while her son looked on, horrified.

It was also possible that the woman in the van could be his wife. That would be reason enough for him to spend only a week or two a year in Skeleton Gulch—to visit his son. It was an incongruous pairing, but not all marriages are made in heaven.

I was putting together patterns without substance, building an incident into a drama. Carol could have been telling the truth; the woman might be a disgruntled former maid. But I doubted it.

For the second day in a row Jan came home looking unhappy. "I have decided," she told me, "let Audrey handle that woman. She and I are never going to agree on anything!"

Audrey Kay of Kay Décor was Jan's boss. I said, "Take off your shoes and relax. I'll bring you a drink."

When I brought our drinks back, I advised her, "Don't quit. Stick with that woman."

She shook her head. "I know your philosophy—try, try, and try again."

"Right."

"My daddy added a line to that adage. 'Try, try, and try again—and then stop making a damned fool out of yourself.' I've given her three tries. She's had it! Has anything new happened next door?"

"Nothing." I hesitated, and then told her about my call to Arizona, omitting the lie about my

presidency of a camera club.

“I thought you weren’t going to play nosy neighbor.”

“I thought of my role as that of a concerned friend.”

Mrs. Casey came out of the house then to tell us Lieutenant Vogel was at the front door. “Tell him to come out here,” I said.

He wore the same weary expression Jan had worn when she came home. “I thought I’d drop in on the way home,” he explained.

“You took a strange route.”

“I know. But you’re the only friends I have who pour good Scotch. Do you want me to leave?”

“You’re always welcome here,” Jan said. “Don’t mind Brock. Sit down.”

He nodded and sat on the chaise next to Jan. I went to get him his drink. He had gone four miles out of his way for a drink? Baloney! He was a devious man, at times.

“Bad day?” I asked him as I handed him his drink.

“They’re all bad,” he said. “I’d retire if I could afford it.”

Poor-mouth Bernie Vogel. His father had left him three small old buildings in the heart of the business district. They were now worth twenty times what his father had paid for them. His father had run the only kosher delicatessen in town right up to a month before his death. Plotkin was now renting two of the buildings from Bernie.

He sat there silently, sipping his drink and staring out at the hills.

“We sure need rain,” I said. “Those hills are dry as tinder.”

He nodded.

“Speak up,” I said. “You’ve got better Scotch than that at home.”

“Okay, okay. Mrs. Carl Lacrosse dropped in to see us this afternoon.”

“Was she a heavy woman in a caftan?”

“She was plenty heavy. But she was wearing jeans and a T-shirt.”

“God, what a sight that must have been! What did she want?”

“She wanted us to get her son back.”

“Back? From where?”

“Oh, that crazy cult up there off San Marcos Pass Road. I forget the name of it. I guess the kid has deserted her.”

“So—?”

“So what can we do? They call it a religion. We stick our noses into that and we’ll have the ACLU crawling all over us.”

I laughed. “But you figured old Brock might go up there and check it out. That’s why you dropped in—on your way home.”

“Not for one second! I simply wondered how much you knew about those two.”

“I didn’t even know the woman was Mrs. Lacrosse. She never identified herself to me. Since talked with you at lunch yesterday I’ve learned that her husband doesn’t spend more than a couple weeks a year in Skeleton Gulch.”

“Where did you learn that?”

“From an assistant editor at *Arizona Highways*.”

“You phoned them?”

I nodded.

“Why?”

“Because the people next door are not only neighbors. They are friends. Another drink?”

“Thank you. Make it weaker this time.”

I took my glass along and added some vodka to my martini. When I came back and sat down again, he asked, “Isn’t this Carl Lacrosse an artist?”

“In a way. He’s a photographer.”

“Which is an artist,” Jan explained, “to anyone who spends more than nineteen dollars for camera.”

I smiled at her tolerantly and agreed with a nod and asked Bernie, “Who will Mrs. Lacrosse go next, an attorney?”

“A lawyer won’t touch it if he knows the law. She’ll probably go to Dwight Kelly and his hoodlum associates.”

“Who is Dwight Kelly?”

“An ex-cop. He was a crooked cop, which is why he is an ex-cop. He calls himself deprogrammer, but what he really is is a kidnapper.”

“What’s a deprogrammer?”

“A person,” Bernie said, “who is trained to straighten out the thinking of those troubled kids who are rescued from all the weird cults that infest Southern California. To my thinking, that would require an M.A. in psychology or an M.D. in psychiatry.”

“Is Kelly qualified to do that—or any of his associates?”

“I don’t know much about his associates, but Kelly is trained in only two disciplines, dishonest police work and larceny. We have been trying to nail him for two years.”

“What stymied you?”

“The rich people who hire him, mostly. He is not cheap, only crooked.”

“You mean like a private eye?”

“I’d say ‘yes’ to that if I wasn’t drinking your booze.” He finished his drink and stood up. “Are you sure you’ve told me all you know, Brock?”

“All I know about Mrs. Lacrosse and her son. Cheer up, Bernie! It’s a crazy world, but we have to adjust to it.”

He left. Jan said, "Poor Bernie."

"Poor, hell! He's loaded. And he enjoys putting the bad guys into the clink. Even if he wasn't paid, he'd want to do it. He is a moaner, a poor-mouth moaner."

"That's no way to talk about a friend, Brock."

"I love the bum! Do I have to whitewash him? He is what he is."

We sat in silence for a while, and then Jan said, "Let's eat out tonight."

"Isn't it a little late to tell Mrs. Casey?"

"I told her when I came home," she informed me.

While she was taking her shower, I looked up the address of Dwight Kelly. It was on Cathedral Oaks Road, a fairly logical route to Charley's Chowder House, where I would suggest eating.

When I turned off our street onto Cathedral Oaks Road, Jan asked, "Why this way?"

"Less traffic," I explained, "and it's more scenic."

We were half a block from the Kelly address when she said, "Doesn't that look like the same van on that driveway up there?"

"Check the license plate as we go by," I said.

"Arizona," she said as we went by. Then, "I hope you're not going to tell me this was a coincidence."

"What else?"

"You!" she said wearily. "Once a peeper, always a peeper."

I said nothing.

Silence the rest of the way, silence while I parked. She made no move to get out, staring through the windshield.

I went around to her side and opened the door. "Well—?"

She looked up at me. "I have really been bitchy lately, haven't I?"

I shrugged.

"I knew what you were when I met you," she said. "I *despise* women who marry men and then try to make them into something they aren't. You never tried to change me."

"Why would I? If I wanted a different kind of partner, I would have married one. You had a lot of offers, remember. Personally, I think you made the right choice."

"So do I. I'm going to be nicer. I'm going to work at it."

"Don't do it for me. I love you just the way you are. You, feisty, are my favorite person."

I had clam chowder, she had broiled red snapper. She had Pinot chardonnay, I had beer. Calories, calories, calories.

"We'll get as fat as pigs," she said.

"Ma'am, if you were as fat as Mrs. Lacrosse, I would love you still. And look at the big fish she's hooked."

“You don’t know what she looked like when he married her,” Jan pointed out. “It had to be about eighteen years ago if the boy is his son. She might have been thin then.”

“It isn’t her weight so much. She looked so—so *sloppy*.”

“Maybe he does, too. I’ve never seen a picture of him.”

True enough. I had been building patterns again. The sensitive artist, the flaccid wife, the rebellious son; I had been writing a scenario in my mind.

The van was still on the driveway when we drove home. Maybe she was shacked up with Kelly. Maybe she didn’t have enough money to go to a motel. Kelly had been a crooked cop. It was possible some crooked cop friend of Kelly’s had recommended him to her when she was down at the police station. Stop it, peeper!

There was music coming again from the Medford house when we got home, soothing music.

“Do you think they’re home again?” I asked Jan.

“I doubt it. The maid tunes in to the same station. What is the name of that song? Something about yesterday, isn’t it? ‘I remember yesterday, all my troubles seem to fade away.’ Is that it?”

I nodded. Carol Medford’s troubles hadn’t faded away. Her yesterdays might be coming back to haunt her.

FOUR

I PHONED BERNIE AT home next morning before he went to work. I told him about the van being parked on Dwight Kelly's driveway.

"So what?"

"How do I know so what? *You* were the guy moaning about never being able to nail Kelly. I am trying to be of help."

"Okay, I'll run over there and arrest Kelly for having a van parked on his driveway. You're mental, you know it?"

"I try to be. Why not use your brain for a change? How would that woman from Arizona find out about Kelly the deprogrammer?"

"I have no idea. I am waiting patiently for your theory on it."

"She was at the station yesterday, wasn't she? Maybe she got the word down there."

"Oh, God—Callahan's crooked-cop complex again."

On our first case together we had uncovered a crooked cop who was now serving time for murder. I didn't mention this.

"Why don't you enjoy your ill-gotten wealth," he asked me. "Why don't you practice your natural Irish sloth?"

"Because I follow the Benedictine rule."

"And what's that?"

"'Idleness is the enemy of the soul.' From Saint Benedict. I'm sure you've heard of him."

"Not lately. Why don't you coach another Little League team again? You can't finish last *even* year."

"Sorry to have bothered you," I said. "Good-bye."

"Wait!" he said. "I know you meant well. I've got a desk full of paperwork waiting for me at the office, but I'll check into it. One of Kelly's best friends is still with us."

One of Kelly's best friends. I would put him into the scenario when I learned his name. This did not seem to be the best time to ask for it.

Jan told me at breakfast that she had decided not to turn her recalcitrant client over to Audrey.

"I'm glad," I said. "You're no quitter."

"Quitter," she said. "That's a dirty word to jocks, isn't it?"

"It is."

"To me, too," she said.

We had found another area of agreement, my love and I. She went back to the war in Solvang; I went back to reading the *Times*.

It had clouded up last night and the forecaster had promised us rain. A shift in the wind had made him a bad guesser. The sun was out again.

The only clouds in sight were imaginary, a presage not of rain in our area, but of trouble.

I phoned the Medford house to ask if the lovers had returned. They had not. The butler told me that they had phoned yesterday afternoon and explained that they had cancelled their reservation at the lodge in Carmel. They would phone him again over the weekend to keep in touch.

It was a clear warm day, a nice day for a drive. I headed for the San Marcos Pass Road. The route to it took me past the house of Dwight Kelly. The van was still on the driveway.

Bernie had told me Kelly's clients were rich. Mrs. Lacrosse did not seem to fit that category. Could it be that her body had interested Kelly? I didn't dwell on the image engendered by that fantasy.

Up the San Marcos Pass Road I drove, climbing and turning. A narrow, rutted road led off of the highway halfway to the top of the pass and a small white sign with gilded letters identified it as the entrance to The New Awareness. This had to be the cult that Bernie had mentioned. I turned into it.

The road got ruttier, rockier, and narrower. The Mustang labored on, groaning. But she is not a quitter. We arrived finally at a wide pair of gates in a high Cyclone fence topped with barbed wire.

A short, wide and ugly man in corduroy pants and a sweatshirt was sitting in a captain's chair inside the gate, reading *The Racing Form*. He got up as I came from the car.

"You got an appointment?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "My name is Lester Tryden. I am a cousin of Carl Lacrosse. He phoned me from Bern last night and asked me to come up here and talk with his son."

He frowned. "Bern? Where's that?"

"In Switzerland."

He studied me doubtfully. Then, "What's that name again?"

"Lester Tryden."

He went back to the chair and picked up a phone next to it. He talked for about a minute and then came over to unlock the gate. "Go straight up this road," he told me, "past those redwood barracks and that small white building at the end. That's Mr. Sarkissian's office."

The road inside the gates was wider and paved. Not a human being was in sight as I drove past the long two-story redwood building to the small white stucco building at the end.

The white was trimmed in gold around the doors and windows. The sign next to the door read Vartan Sarkissian, Founder.

The door opened into an outer office. A slim and flaxen-haired girl in a simple charcoal denim dress was typing at a desk in there.

"Mr. Tryden?" she asked me.

I nodded.

She pointed to a door in the far wall. "Go right in," she said, and pressed a button on her desk.

He was standing by his desk when I entered. It was a shock. I was looking at the spitting image of another of my old cinema idols, Tyrone Power. He was dressed in somber gray flannel.

“So you are a cousin of Carl Lacrosse,” he said.

I nodded. “You know the name?”

“I should. I worked in a camera shop for four years. His middle name is Tryden, isn’t it?”

I nodded again. “But I’m not really a—a first cousin. It’s kind of complicated.”

“Sit down, Mr. Tryden,” he said.

I sat in a straight-backed chair at the end of his desk.

“You are telling me, then, that Joel Lacrosse is Carl’s son? He denied any relationship when I asked him.”

“From what little I know, I guess he would. Carl doesn’t spend much time in Skeleton Gulch. To be frank with you, Mr. Sarkissian, Carl and I have never been close. I’m surprised that he phoned me.”

“But the fact remains that he phoned you. He must have some concern about the boy’s welfare.”

I shrugged.

“What is he doing in Bern?”

I shrugged again. “Maybe checking his Swiss bank accounts.”

He smiled. “It’s strange but, despite his reputation, I never thought of Lacrosse as being rich.”

“You can’t prove it by me. He was never real commercial, but my Aunt Lilah always claimed Carl still had the first nickel he had ever earned.”

He nodded absently. He looked past me into space. “Since we moved up here, Mr. Tryden, we have been under constant harassment from our neighbors. *That* is why we need the high fence. But this is not a racket. This is a true religion.”

I smiled. “And who has more right to the title? Weren’t Armenians the very first Christians?”

He smiled back at me. “My parents always claimed they were. You know about Armenians, do you, Mr. Tryden?”

“Very little,” I said. “I had a chauffeur years ago named Levon Apoyan and I learned that from him. And one more thing—they hate Turks.”

He sighed. “With reason. That was a holocaust the history books have slighted or ignored. You may tell your cousin that his son is in good hands.”

“I will. Could I speak with him for a few minutes?”

He shook his head. “Not for at least two weeks. He is now in his incubation period.”

“I get it,” I said. “He is being reborn. Would it be all right if I came back in a couple of weeks?”

“Of course,” he said. “But phone first, won’t you?”

“Of course,” I said. “And thank you for your courtesy.”

The flaxen-haired girl in the outer office smiled at me as I went through. “Peace,” I said. “Love.”

“Why not?” she said. She winked and held up a circled thumb and forefinger.

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