

Pacific Heights

Chapter 1

San Francisco

They ate a late dinner at Crete.

The androgynous Chinese wore a tuxedo without a tie, a clipped mustache, and bobbed jet hair. The other man was good-looking, with thick caramel hair neatly barbered, blue-gray eyes, and a strong jaw. He wore a chocolate sport coat, silk mocha trousers from Milan, and an attitude of placid self-assurance.

Sitting at a corner table not far from the white marble bar, they shared miso-glazed sea bass and coconut mojitos. The place was crowded with hip Castro scenesters swimming in the deep pink light that bounced off the rose-tinted mirrors and plate glass windows. The crowd was cosmopolitan, too cool, *très chic*.

The Chinese did most of the talking, chatty, animated. The Caucasian sat back casually but watched his companion closely, as if he were amused by the candlepower of the performance.

They left Crete at closing time.

Their hotel in the Castro was a seedy movie set on a side street. The window looked across to Le Mesonge, a club that throbbed with a baseline you could feel all the way across the street.

They locked the door, and while the Caucasian went to the window and looked out, the Chinese pulled the cover off the bed, then the top

sheet, and threw them in the corner. When he turned around, the Caucasian was right in front of him, taller by a foot. While the Chinese stood still, the other man began undressing him.

What followed was choreographed, though they hadn't rehearsed the details. The broad contours had been dictated earlier by the Caucasian, and the Chinese, surprised and intrigued by what he heard, had gamely agreed to go along. The proposed scenario was just another example of the Caucasian's extraordinary insight into the hidden nature of the Chinese. How far could he go intuiting the fantasies that the Chinese found so seductive?

Too far.

He threw the tuxedo aside, and they stood at the foot of the bed. The Caucasian carefully peeled off one side of the mustache of the naked Chinese, just the one side. She stood there, willfully unprotected, her stomach fluttering.

The sex was outré, right up to the edge of bizarre. It was intense and sublime, everything she had imagined it would be.

He went to sleep immediately after, as if she had drugged his last drink. And it was then, while she lay awake on the sheet without cover, bare and straight as a corpse, that she began to be afraid.

In her mind she played back the saraband they had danced, movement by movement. It was everything she had imagined, and that was what scared the hell out of her.

What he had just done to her was way beyond intuitive. It was unnerving, and it made her feel as if her physical brain was no longer the sole vessel of her imagination. Her sexual fantasies were just that: *her* sexual fantasies, and yet this man had just re-created one of those scenarios with such precise accuracy that it could only be described as sinister.

It was not a frightening script in her own head; it was only now, coming to her from someone else's imagination, that it horrified her. The chill she felt had nothing to do with the Castro nights; it was because of the mind next to her.

Even when the affair began, she knew it was a cliché. Still, she welcomed it. The sexual adventure, skirting the ragged margins of

propriety, the emerging special connection, the tangy odor of peril, all had been a much-needed rush in the extended story of her unraveling emotional life. But lately their uncommon collusion was increasingly troubling, moving toward weird. It was seriously freaking her out.

Tonight was too much. She couldn't do it anymore. She didn't care how handsome he was, and she didn't care how insanely good the sex was. Lying there, with pieces of her thoughts inside someone else's head, she decided she had had enough. She was going to end the affair.

But how would that work, exactly? When he called the next time, she just wouldn't answer. Could it really be that simple? Could it just end because she wanted it to end? Affairs did, she supposed. They both used assumed names. That had been the first thing they agreed on. Robert and Mei.

Did she really believe, then, that he knew nothing about her? She had played by the rules, but had he? They always met at a prearranged place and time. His idea. She never saw his car, didn't know where he lived (he had once mentioned Marin County), only vaguely knew what he did for a living (he had mentioned real estate). This protocol grew out of the tentative beginnings of their relationship and eventually developed into the rules of the affair. That's the way it was.

But she couldn't leave for the last time without knowing who he was. If he knew the inside of her head so damned well, why couldn't she at least know his real identity?

She sat up. Their clothes were in a pile at the foot of the bed, the physical debris of her psychic upheaval only a few hours before. She stood, walked around, and crouched by the clothes, and began separating them by the pale wash from the window.

She picked up his sport coat and found his wallet inside the breast pocket. When her fingers touched it, she stopped, listened. His breathing hadn't changed. She took out the wallet and opened it and looked at his driver's license in its clear plastic pocket. Too dark. She tilted it toward the window.

Philip R. Krey. 2387 Leech, Mill Valley. She examined his picture, repeating the name and address to herself several times as she went through the wallet. She slipped out the money, fanned through it, put it

back. She checked the credit cards, all in the name of P. R. Krey. There was a piece of paper with phone numbers. She would never be able to remember them.

She closed the wallet and stuffed it back into his coat pocket.

"Are you leaving?"

She flinched, stood quickly to cover her surprise, holding her clothes.

"Have to," she said, dumping her clothes on the foot of the bed. Grateful for the bad light, she nervously untangled her panties, which had rolled up into a small twist.

"Want me to call you this week?"

"I'll call you," she said from the darkness. "My husband's got a couple of business dinners this week. I'll have obligations, but I don't know the details yet. Don't even know the dates."

She pulled on her underwear. Backward? Inside out? She didn't give a damn. No bra. She picked up the white shirt and slipped it on.

He was quiet. Was he dozing off?

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"What's the matter?"

"You sound tense."

"How about wiped out?"

"Maybe," he looked at the windows. "It's quiet. No music."

"It's three-forty, for Christ's sake," she said, finishing the last button on the shirt. She grabbed the tuxedo trousers, pulled them on, buttoned the waist.

"You in a hurry?" he asked.

"Just need to get going," she said, stooping and feeling around for her shoes.

"You okay with the way it went?"

Why the hell was he fishing? "Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Surprised?"

"Yeah, sure."

"What surprised you?"

"Everything. I don't think you missed anything, Robert. Like I said, I'm exhausted."

She found the shoes and slipped them on. She didn't want to talk to him about this. She just wanted away from him, that's all. Raking her bobbed hair with her fingers, she started looking for her black silk clutch.

"What're you looking for?"

"My purse."

At the foot of the bed again, she grimaced and ran her hands over the filthy carpet and under his clothes. There it was.

"Got it," she said. She had to walk by him to get to the door, and she was petrified that he'd reach out and touch her, want her to react somehow.

He was leaning on one elbow on the bed now, watching her.

"Okay," he said.

"I'll call you," she said, and she stepped out into the musty hallway, closing the door behind her.

He got out of bed and went to the window. A minute later she came out of the front of the hotel and disappeared down the street, walking quickly.

Turning to the bed, he bent down, picked up his sport coat, and pulled out his wallet. He dropped the coat on the bed and stepped to the window again.

He opened the wallet. Everything looked okay. Was his driver's license crooked? No. Wait. He slowly pulled the money out of its slot: the bills were upside down.

Well, damn, sooner or later it had to happen. At the very least she might Web-search the address. He would wait and see.

But now there was a new development. He'd expected her to be rattled by what had just happened, but he didn't think her heightened anxiety would take a turn in this direction. He thought it might increase the edginess of the sex, but if he was right about what she was doing with his wallet, instead of edginess, he had created suspicion. Why, suddenly, did she want to know who he was?

As far as he was concerned this woman existed only within the parameters of a very small orbit he had created for her. He couldn't let her outside those secret limits. He couldn't afford that much instability. Especially not now. There was too much at stake.

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