

**M
IS FOR MALICE**

SUE GRAFTON



**M
IS FOR MALICE**

SUE GRAFTON



M
IS FOR MALICE

SUE GRAFTON



The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.**

Table of Contents

Copyright Notice

Dedication

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

Epilogue

Also by the Author

Copyright

For my good friends . . .
Barbara Brightman Jones and Joe Jones
and
Joanna Barnes and Jack Warner

The author wishes to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the following people: Steven Humphrey; John Mackall, attorney-at-law, Seed, Mackall & Cole; Sam Eaton, attorney-at-law; B. J. Seebol, J.D.; William Tanner, Tanner Investigations; Dan Deveraux, plant manager, Granite Construction; Marcia and David Karpeles, The Karpeles Manuscript Library; Captain Ed Aasted, Detective Sergeant Don F. Knapp, Detective Jill Johnson, Detective Roger Aceves, Detective Lieutenant Nicholas Katzenstein, and Lieutenant Richard Glaus, Santa Barbara Police Department; Dana Motley; Melinda Johnson, Santa Barbara Newspress; and Lucy Thomas, Reeves Medical Library, Cottage Hospital.

1

Robert Dietz came back into my life on Wednesday, January 8. I remember the date because it was Elvis Presley's birthday and one of the local radio stations had announced it would spend the next twenty-four hours playing every song he'd ever sung. At six A.M. my clock radio blared on, playing "Heartbreak Hotel" at top volume. I smacked the Off button with the flat of my hand and rolled out of bed as usual. I pulled on my sweats in preparation for my morning run. I brushed my teeth, splashed water on my face, and trotted down the spiral stairs. I locked my front door behind me, moved out to the street where I did an obligatory stretch, leaning against the gatepost in front of my apartment. The day was destined to be a strange one, involving as it did a dreaded lunch date with Tasha Howard, one of my recently discovered first cousins. Running was the only way I could think of to quell my uneasiness. I headed for the bike path that parallels the beach.

Ah, January. The holidays had left me feeling restless and the advent of the new year generated one of those lengthy internal discussions about the meaning of life. I usually don't pay much attention to the passing of time, but this year, for some reason, I was taking a good hard look at myself. Who was I, really, in the scheme of things, and what did it all add up to? For the record, I'm Kinsey Millhone, female, single, thirty-five years old, sole proprietor of Kinsey Millhone Investigations in the southern California town of Santa Teresa. I was trained as a police officer and served a two-year stint with the Santa Teresa Police Department before life intervened, which is another tale altogether and one I don't intend to tell (yet). For the last ten years, I've made a living as a private investigator. Some days I see myself (nobly, I'll admit) battling against evil in the struggle for law and order. Other days, I concede that the dark forces are gaining ground.

Not all of this was conscious. Much of the rumination was simmering at a level I could scarcely discern. It's not as if I spent every day in a state of unremitting angst, wringing my hands and rending my clothes. I suppose what I was experiencing was a mild form of depression, triggered (perhaps) by nothing more complicated than the fact it was winter and the California sunlight was in short supply.

I started my career investigating arson and wrongful-death claims for California Fidelity Insurance. A year ago, my relationship with CFI came to an abrupt and ignominious halt and I'm currently sharing space with the law firm of Kingman and

Ives, taking on just about anything to make ends meet. I'm licensed, bonded, and fully insured. I have twenty-five thousand dollars in a savings account, which affords me the luxury of turning down any client who doesn't suit. I haven't refused a case yet, but I was strongly considering it.

Tasha Howard, the aforementioned first cousin, had called to offer me work, though the details of the job hadn't yet been specified. Tasha is an attorney who handles wills and estates, working for a law firm with offices in both San Francisco and Lompoc, which is an hour north of Santa Teresa. I gathered she divided her time just about equally between the two. I'm normally interested in employment, but Tasha and I aren't exactly close and I suspected she was using the lure of business to insinuate herself into my life.

As it happened, her first call came on the day after New Year's, which allowed me to sidestep by claiming I was still on vacation. When she called again on January 7, she caught me off guard. I was at the office in the middle of a serious round of solitaire when the telephone rang.

"Hi, Kinsey. This is Tasha. I thought I'd try you again. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"This is fine," I said. I crossed my eyes and pretended I was gagging myself with a finger pointed down my throat. Of course, she couldn't see that. I put a red eight on a black nine and turned up the last three cards. No play that I could see. "How are you?" I asked, perhaps a millisecond late.

"Doing well, thanks. How about you?"

"I'm good," I said. "Gee, your timing's uncanny. I was just picking up the phone. I've been making calls all morning and you were next on my list." I often use the word *gee* when I'm lying through my teeth.

"I'm glad to hear that," she said. "I thought you were avoiding me."

I laughed. Ha.Ha.Ha. "Not at all," said I. I was about to elaborate on the denial, but she plowed right on. Having run out of moves, I pushed the cards aside and began to tag my blotter with a little desktop graffiti. I block-printed the word *BARF* and gave each of the letters a three-dimensional cast.

She said, "What's your schedule like tomorrow? Can we get together for an hour? I have to be in Santa Teresa anyway and we could meet for lunch."

"I can probably do that," I said with caution. In this world, lies can only take you so far before the truth catches up. "What sort of work are we talking about?"

"I'd rather discuss it in person. Is twelve o'clock good for you?"

"That sounds fine," I said.

"Perfect. I'll make reservations. Emile's-at-the-Beach. I'll see you there," she said, and with a click she was gone.

I put the phone down, set the ballpoint pen aside, and laid my little head down on my desk. What an idiot I was. Tasha *must* have known I didn't want to see her, but I hadn't had the nerve to say so. She'd come to my rescue a couple of months before and though I'd repaid the money, I still felt I owed her. Maybe I'd listen to her politely before I turned her down. I did have another quick job in the works. I'd been hired to

serve two deposition subpoenas in a civil case for an attorney on the second floor of our building.

I went out in the afternoon and spent thirty-five bucks (plus tip) on a legitimate salon haircut. I tend to take a pair of nail scissors to my own unruly mop about every six weeks, my technique being to snip off any tuft of hair that sticks out. I guess I must have been feeling insecure because it wouldn't ordinarily occur to me to pay real bucks for something I can do so handily myself. Of course, I've been told my hairstyle looks exactly like a puppy dog's backside, but what's wrong with that?

The morning of January 8 inevitably arrived and I pounded along the bike path as if pursued by wild dogs. Typically, I use my jog as a way to check in with myself, noting the day and the ongoing nature of life at the water's edge. That morning, I had been all business, nearly punitive in the energy I threw into the exercise. Having finished my run and my morning routine, I skipped the office altogether and hung around my place. I paid some bills, tidied up my desk, did a load of laundry, and chatted briefly with my landlord, Henry Pitts, while I ate three of his freshly baked sticky buns. Not that I was nervous.

As usual, when you're waiting for something unpleasant, the clock seems to leap forward in ten-minute increments. Next thing I knew I was standing at my bathroom mirror applying cut-rate cosmetics, for God's sake, while I emoted along with Elvis, who was singing "It's Now Or Never." The sing-along was taking me back to my high school days, not a terrific association, but amusing nonetheless. I hadn't known any more about makeup in those days than I do now.

I debated about a new outfit, but that's where I drew the line, pulling on my usual blue jeans, turtleneck, tweed blazer, and boots. I own one dress and I didn't want to waste it on an occasion like this. I glanced at the clock. It was 11:55. Emile's wasn't far, all of five minutes on foot. With luck, I'd be hit by a truck as I was crossing the street.

Almost all of the tables at Emile's were occupied by the time I arrived. In Santa Teresa, the beach restaurants do the bulk of their business during the summer tourist season when the motels and bed-and-breakfast establishments near the ocean are fully booked. After Labor Day, the crowds diminish until the town belongs to the residents again. But Emile's-at-the-Beach is a local favorite and doesn't seem to suffer the waxing and waning of the out-of-town trade.

Tasha must have driven down from Lompoc because a sassy red Trans Am bearing a vanity license plate that read TASHA H was parked at the curb. In the detective trade, this is what is known as a clue. Besides, flying down from Lompoc is more trouble than it's worth. I moved into the restaurant and scanned the tables. I had little appetite for the encounter, but I was trying to stay open to the possibilities. Of what, I couldn't say.

I spotted Tasha through one of the interior archways before she spotted me. She was seated in a small area off the main dining room. Emile had placed her by the front window at a table for two. She was staring out at the children's play equipment in the little beach park across the street. The wading pool was closed, emptied for the winter, a circle of blue-painted plaster that looked now like a landing pad for a UFO. Two

preschool-age children were clambering backward up a nearby sliding board anchored in the sand. Their mother sat on the low concrete retaining wall with a cigarette in hand. Beyond her were the bare masts of boats slipped in the harbor. The day was sunny and cool, the blue sky scudding with clouds left behind by a storm that was passing to the south of us.

A waiter approached Tasha and they conferred briefly. She took a menu from him. I could see her indicate that she was waiting for someone else. He withdrew and she began to peruse the lunch choices. I'd never actually laid eyes on Tasha until now, but I'd met her sister Liza the summer before last. I'd been startled because Liza and I looked so much alike. Tasha was cut from the same genetic cloth, though she was three years older and more substantial in her presentation. She wore a gray wool suit with a white silk shell showing in the deep V of the jacket. Her dark hair was streaked with blond, pulled back with a sophisticated black chiffon bow sitting at the nape of her neck. The only jewelry she wore was a pair of oversized gold earrings that glinted when she moved. Since she did estate planning, she probably didn't have much occasion for impassioned courtroom speeches, but she'd look properly intimidating in a skirmish nonetheless. Already I'd decided to get my affairs in order.

She caught sight of me and I saw her expression quicken as she registered the similarities between us. Maybe all the Kinsey girl cousins shared the same features. I raised a hand in greeting and moved through the lunch crowd to her table. I took the seat across from hers, tucking my bag on the floor beneath my chair. "Hello, Tasha."

For a moment, we did a mutual assessment. In high school biology, I'd studied Mendel's purple and white flowering peas; the crossbreeding of colors and the resultant pattern of "offspring." This was the very principle at work. Up close, I could see that her eyes were dark where mine were hazel, and her nose looked like mine had before it was broken twice. Seeing her was like catching a glimpse of myself unexpectedly in a mirror, the image both strange and familiar. Me and not me.

Tasha broke the silence. "This is creepy. Liza told me we looked alike, but I had no idea."

"I guess there's no doubt we're related. What about the other cousins? Do they look like us?"

"Variations on a theme. When Pam and I were growing up, we were often mistaken for each other." Pam was the sister between Tasha and Liza.

"Did Pam have her baby?"

"Months ago. A girl. Big surprise," she said dryly. Her tone was ironic, but I didn't get the joke. She sensed the unspoken question and smiled fleetingly in reply. "All the Kinsey women have girl babies. I thought you knew."

I shook my head.

"Pam named her Cornelia as a way of sucking up to Grand. I'm afraid most of us are guilty of trying to score points with her from time to time."

Cornelia LaGrand was my grandmother Burton Kinsey's maiden name. "Grand" had been her nickname since babyhood. From what I'd been told, she ruled the family like a despot. She was generous with money, but only if you danced to her tune—the reason the family had so pointedly ignored me and my aunt Gin for twenty-nine years.

My upbringing had been blue collar, strictly lower middle-class. Aunt Gin, who raised me from the age of five, had worked as a clerk/typist for California Fidelity Insurance, the company that eventually hired (and fired) me. She'd managed on a modest salary, and we'd never had much. We'd always lived in mobile homes—trailers, as they were known then—bastions of tiny space, which I still tend to prefer. At the same time, I recognized even then that other people thought trailers were tacky. Why, I can't say.

Aunt Gin had taught me never to suck up to anyone. What she'd neglected to tell me was there were relatives worth sucking up to.

Tasha, likely aware of the thicket her remarks were leading to, shifted over to the task at hand. "Let's get lunch out of the way and then I can fill you in on the situation."

We dealt with the niceties of ordering and eating lunch, chatting about only the most inconsequential subjects. Once our plates had been removed, she got down to business with an efficient change of tone. "We have some clients here in Santa Teresa caught up in a circumstance I thought might interest you. Do you know the Maleks? They own Malek Construction."

"I don't know them personally, but the name's familiar." I'd seen the company logo on job sites around town, a white octagon, like a stop sign, with the outline of a red cement mixer planted in the middle. All of the company trucks and job-site Porta Potti's were fire engine red and the effect was eye-catching.

Tasha went on. "It's a sand and gravel company. Mr. Malek just died and our firm is representing the estate." The waiter approached and filled our coffee cups. Tasha picked up a sugar pack, pressing in the edges of the paper rim on all sides before she tore the corner off. "Bader Malek bought a gravel pit in 1943. I'm not sure what he paid at the time, but it's worth a fortune today. Do you know much about gravel?"

"Not a thing," I said.

"I didn't either until this came up. A gravel pit doesn't tend to produce much income from year to year, but it turns out that over the last thirty years environmental regulations and land-use regulations make it very hard to start up a new gravel pit. In this part of California, there simply aren't that many. If you own the gravel pit for your region and construction is booming—which it is at the moment—it goes from being a dog in the forties to a real treasure in the 1980s, depending, of course, on how deep the gravel reserves are and the quality of those reserves. It turns out this one is on a perfect gravel zone, probably good for another hundred and fifty years. Since nobody else is now able to get approvals . . . well, you get the point I'm sure."

"Who'd have thunk?"

"Exactly," she said and then went on. "With gravel, you want to be close to communities where construction is going on because the prime cost is transportation. It's one of those backwater areas of wealth that you don't really know about even if it's yours. Anyway, Bader Malek was a dynamo and managed to maximize his profits by branching out in other directions, all building-related. Malek Construction is now the third-largest construction company in the state. And it's still family owned; one of the few, I might add."

"So what's the problem?"

“I’ll get to that in a moment, but I need to back up a bit first. Bader and his wife, Rona, had four boys—like a series of stepping-stones, all of them two years apart. Donovan, Guy, Bennet, and Jack. Donovan’s currently in his mid-forties and Jack’s probably thirty-nine. Donovan’s the best of the lot; typical first child, steady, responsible, the big achiever in the bunch. His wife, Christie, and I were college roommates, which is how I got involved in the first place. The second son, Guy, turned out to be the clunker among the boys. The other two are okay. Nothing to write home about, at least from what Christie’s said.”

“Do they work for the company?”

“No, but Donovan pays all of their bills nonetheless. Bennet fancies himself an ‘entrepreneur,’ which is to say he loses great whacks of money annually in bad business deals. He’s currently venturing into the restaurant business. He and a couple of partners are opening a place down on Granita. Talk about a way to lose money. The man has to be nuts. Jack’s busy playing golf. I gather he’s got sufficient talent to hit the pro circuit, but probably not enough to earn a living at it.

“At any rate, back in the sixties, Guy was the one who smoked dope and raised hell. He thought his father was a materialistic, capitalistic son of a bitch and told him so every chance he could. I guess Guy got caught in some pretty bad scrapes—we’re talking criminal behavior—and Bader finally cut him off. According to Donovan, his father gave Guy a lump sum, ten grand in cash, his portion of the then-modest family fortune. Bader told the kid to hit the road and not come back. Guy Malek disappeared and he hasn’t been seen since. This was March 1968. He was twenty-six then, which would make him forty-three now. I guess no one really cared much when he left. It was probably a relief after what he’d put the family through. Rona had died two months before, in January that same year, and Bader went to his attorney with the intention of rewriting his will. You know how that goes: ‘The reason I have made no provision for my son Guy in this will is not due to any lack of love or affection on my part, but simply because I have provided for him during my lifetime and feel that those provisions are more than adequate—blah, blah, blah.’ The truth was, Guy had cost him plenty and he was sick of it.

“So. Fade out, fade in. In 1981, Bader’s attorney died of a heart attack and all of his legal files were returned to him.”

I interrupted. “Excuse me. Is that common practice? I’d assume all the files would be kept by the attorney’s estate.”

“Depends on the attorney. Maybe Bader insisted. I’m not really sure. I gather he was a force to be reckoned with. He was already ill by then with the cancer that finally claimed him. He’d also suffered a debilitating stroke brought on by all the chemo. Sick as he was, he probably didn’t want to go through the hassle of finding a new attorney. Apparently, from his perspective, his affairs were in order and what he did with his money was nobody else’s business.”

I said, “Oh, boy.” I didn’t know what was coming, but it didn’t sound good.

“ ‘Oh, boy’ is right. When Bader died two weeks ago, Donovan went through his papers. The only will he found was the one Bader and Rona signed back in 1965.”

“What happened to the later will?”

“Nobody knows. Maybe the attorney drew it up and Bader took it home for review. He might have changed his mind. Or maybe he signed the will as written and decided to destroy it later. The fact is, it’s gone.”

“So he died intestate?”

“No, no. We still have the earlier will—the one drawn up in 1965, before Guy was flung into the Outer Darkness. It’s properly signed and fully executed, which means that, barring an objection, Guy Malek is a devisee, entitled to a quarter of his father’s estate.”

“Will Donovan object?”

“He’s not the one I’m concerned about. The 1965 will gives him voting control of the family business so he winds up sitting in the catbird seat regardless. Bennet’s the one making noises about filing an objection, but he really has no proof the later will exists. This could all be for naught in any case. If Guy Malek was hit by a truck or died of an overdose years ago, then there’s no problem—as long as he doesn’t have any kids of his own.”

“Gets complicated,” I said. “How much money are we talking about?”

“We’re still working on that. The estate is currently assessed at about forty million bucks. The government’s entitled to a big chunk, of course. The estate tax rate is fifty to fifty-five percent. Fortunately, thanks to Bader, the company has very little debt, so Donovan will have some ability to borrow. Also, the estate can defer payment of estate taxes under Internal Revenue Service code section 6166, since Malek Construction, as a closely held company, represents more than thirty-five percent of the adjusted gross estate. We’ll probably look for appraisers who’ll come up with a low value and then hope the IRS doesn’t argue too hard for a higher value on audit. To answer your question, the boys will probably take home five million bucks apiece. Guy’s a very lucky fellow.”

“Only nobody knows where he is,” I said.

Tasha pointed at me. “That’s correct.”

I thought about it briefly. “It must have come as a shock to the brothers to find out Guy stands to inherit an equal share of the estate.”

Tasha shrugged. “I’ve only had occasion to chat with Donovan and he seems sanguine at this point. He’ll be acting as administrator. On Friday, I’m submitting the will to the probate court. In essence, all that does is place the will on record. Donovan’s asked me not to file the petition for another week or so in deference to Bennet, who’s still convinced the later will will surface. In the meantime, it makes sense to see if we can determine Guy Malek’s whereabouts. I thought we’d hire you to do the search, if you’re interested.”

“Sure,” I said promptly. So much for playing hard to get. The truth is, I love missing-persons’ cases, and the circumstances were intriguing. Often when I’m on the trail of a skip, I hold out the prospect of sudden riches from some recently deceased relative. Given the greediness of human nature, it often produces results. In this case, the reality of five million dollars should make my job easier. “What information do you have about Guy?” I asked.

“You’ll have to talk to the Maleks. They’ll fill you in.” She scribbled something on

the back of a business card, which she held out to me. “This is Donovan’s number at work. I wrote the home address and home phone number on the back. Except for Guy, of course, the ‘boys’ are all still living together on the Malek estate.”

I studied the back of the card, not recognizing the address. “Is this city or county? I never heard of this.”

“It’s in the city limits. In the foothills above town.”

“I’ll call them this afternoon.”

2

I walked home along Cabana Boulevard. The skies had cleared and the air temperature hovered in the mid-fifties. This was technically the dead of winter and the brazen California sunshine was not as warm as it seemed. Sunbathers littered the sand like the flotsam left behind by the high tide. Their striped umbrellas spoke of summer, yet the new year was just a week old. The sun was brittle along the water's edge, fragmenting where the swells broke against the pilings under the wharf. The surf must have been dead cold, the salt water eye-stinging where children splashed through the waves and submerged themselves in the churning depths. I could hear their thin screams rising above the thunder of the surf, like thrill seekers on a roller-coaster, plunging into icy terror. On the beach, a wet dog barked at them and shook the water from his coat. Even from a distance I could see where his rough hair had separated into layers.

I turned left onto Bay Street. Against the backdrop of evergreens, the profusion of bright pink and orange geraniums clashed with the magenta bougainvillea that tumbled across the fences in my neighborhood. Idly, I wondered where to begin the search for Guy Malek. He'd been gone for eighteen years and the prospects of running him to ground didn't seem that rosy. A job of this kind requires ingenuity, patience, and systematic routine, but success sometimes hinges on pure luck and a touch of magic. Try billing a client on the basis of *that*.

As soon as I got home, I washed off my makeup, I changed into Reeboks, and traded my blazer for a red sweatshirt. Downstairs in the kitchenette, I turned on the radio and tuned the station to the Elvis marathon, which was moving right along. I lip-synched the lyrics to "Jailhouse Rock," doing a bump and grind around the living room. I pulled out a city map and spread it on my kitchen counter. I leaned on my elbows, backside still dancing while I located the street where the Maleks lived. Verdugo was a narrow lane tucked between two parallel roads descending from the mountains. This was not an area I knew well. I laid Donovan's business card on the counter beside the map, reached for the wall phone, and dialed the number printed on the front.

I was routed through the company receptionist to a secretary who told me Malek was out in the field but due back at the office momentarily. I gave my name and phone number, along with a brief explanation of my business with him. She said she'd have him return the call. I'd just hung up when I heard a knock at the door. I opened the

porthole and found myself face-to-face with Robert Dietz.

I opened the front door. “Well, look who’s here,” I said. “It’s only been two years, four months, and ten days.”

“Has it really been that long?” he asked mildly. “I just drove up from Los Angeles. Mind if I come in?”

I stepped back and he moved past me. Elvis had launched into “Always On My Mind,” which, frankly, I didn’t need to hear just then. I reached over and turned off the radio. Dietz wore the same blue jeans, same cowboy boots, the same tweed sportscoat. I’d first seen him in this outfit, leaning against the wall in a hospital room where I was under observation after a hit man ran me off the road. He was two years older now, which probably put him at an even fifty, not a bad age for a man. His birthday was in November, a triple Scorpio for those who set any store by these things. We’d spent the last three months of our relationship in bed together when we weren’t up at the firing range doing Mozambique pistol drills. Romance between private eyes is a strange and wondrous thing. He looked slightly heavier, but that was because he’d quit smoking—assuming he was still off cigarettes.

“You want some coffee?” I asked.

“I’d love some. How are you? You look good. I like the haircut.”

“Forty bucks. What a waste. I should have done it myself.” I put a pot of coffee together, using the homey activity to assess my emotional state. By and large, I didn’t feel much. I was happy to see him in the same way I’d be happy to see any friend of long standing, but aside from mild curiosity, there was no great rush of sexual chemistry. I felt no strong joy at his arrival or rage that he’d shown up unannounced. He was a man of impulse: impatient, restless, abrupt, reticent. He looked tired and his hair seemed much grayer, nearly ashen along his ears. He perched on one of my kitchen stools and leaned his forearms on the counter.

I flipped on the coffeepot and put the bag of ground coffee back in the freezer. “How was Germany?”

Dietz was a private eye from Carson City, Nevada, who’d developed an expertise in personal security. He left to go to Germany to run antiterrorist training exercises for overseas military bases. He said, “Good while it lasted. Then the funding dried up. These days, Uncle Sam doesn’t want to spend the bucks that way. I was bored with it anyway; middle-aged man crawling through the underbrush. I didn’t have to get out there with ’em, but I couldn’t resist.”

“So what brings you back? Are you working a case?”

“I’m on my way up the coast to see the boys in Santa Cruz.” Dietz had two sons with a common-law wife, a woman named Naomi who had steadfastly refused to marry him. His older son, Nick, was probably twenty by now. I wasn’t sure how old the younger boy was.

“Ah. And how are they?”

“Terrific. They’ve got papers due this week so I said I’d hold off until Saturday and then drive up. If they can get a few days off, I thought we’d take a little trip somewhere.”

“I notice you’re limping. What’s that about?”

He gave a pat to his left thigh. “Got a bum knee,” he said. “Tore the meniscus during night maneuvers, stumbling on a pothole. That’s the second time I’ve injured it and the docs say I need to have a knee replacement. I’m not interested in surgery, but I agreed to give the knee a rest. Besides, I’m in burnout. I need a change of scene.”

“You were burned out before you left.”

“Not burnout. I was bored. I guess neither one is cured by doing more of the same.” Dietz’s gray eyes were clear. He was a good-looking man in a very nonstandard way. “I thought I might stay on your couch for four days if you don’t object. I’m supposed to stay off my feet and put ice on my knee.”

“Oh, really. That’s nice. You drop out of my life for two years and then you show up because you need a nurse? Forget that.”

“I’m not asking you to make a fuss,” he said. “I figure you’re busy so you’ll be off at work all day. I’ll sit here and read or watch TV, minding my own business. I even brought my own ice bags to stick in the freezer. I don’t want anyone hovering. You won’t have to lift a finger.”

“Don’t you think this is a tiny bit *manipulative*, springing it on me like this?”

“It’s not manipulative as long as you have the option of saying no.”

“Oh, right. And feel guilty? I don’t think so,” I said.

“Why would you feel guilty? Turn me down if it doesn’t suit. What’s the matter with you? If we can’t tell the truth then what’s the point in a relationship? Do as you please. I can find a motel or I can drive on up the coast tonight. I thought it’d be nice to spend a little time together, but it’s not compulsory.”

I regarded him warily. “I’ll think about it.” There was no point in telling him—since I was barely willing to admit it to myself—how flat the light had seemed in the days after he left, how anxiety had stirred every time I came home to the empty apartment, how music had seemed to whisper secret messages to me. Dance or decline. It didn’t seem to make any difference. I’d imagined his return a hundred times, but never this way. Now the flatness of it was inside and all of my past feelings for him had shifted from passionate involvement to mild interest, if that.

Dietz had been watching me and his squint showed he was perplexed. “Are you *mad* about something?”

“Not at all,” I said.

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“What are you so mad about?”

“Would you *stop* that? I’m not mad.”

He studied me for a moment and then his expression cleared. He said, “Ohhh, I get it. You’re mad because I left.”

I could feel my cheeks brighten and I broke off eye contact. I lined up the salt and pepper shakers so their bases just touched. “I’m not mad because you *left*. I’m mad because you came back. I finally got used to being by myself and here you are again. So where does that put me?”

“You said you *liked* to be alone.”

“That’s right. What I don’t like is being taken up and then abandoned. I’m not a pet you can put in a kennel and retrieve at your convenience.”

His smile faded. “ ‘Abandoned’? You weren’t *abandoned*. What’s that supposed to mean?”

Just then the telephone rang, saving us from any further debate. Donovan Malek’s secretary said, “Miss Millhone? I have Mr. Malek on the line for you. Can you hold?”

I said, “Sure.”

Dietz mouthed *Did not*.

I stuck my tongue out at him. I’m very mature that way.

Donovan Malek came on the line and introduced himself. “Good afternoon, Miss Millhone . . .”

“Call me Kinsey if you would.”

“Thanks. It’s Donovan Malek here. I just spoke to Tasha Howard and she said she talked to you at lunch. I take it she filled you in on the situation.”

“For the most part,” I said. “Is there some way we can get together? Tasha wants to get moving as soon as possible.”

“My attitude exactly. Listen, I’ve got about an hour before I have to be somewhere else. I can give you some basic information—Guy’s date of birth, his Social Security number, and a photograph if that would help,” he said. “You want to pop on out here?”

“Sure, I can do that,” I said. “What about your brothers? Is there some way I can talk to them, too?”

“Of course. Bennet said he’d be home around four this afternoon. I’ll call Myrna—she’s the housekeeper—and leave word you want to talk to him. I’m not sure about Jack. He’s a little harder to catch, but we can work something out. What you don’t get from me, you can pick up from them. You know where I am? On Dolores out in Colgate. You take the Peterson off-ramp and turn back across the freeway. Second street on the right.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you shortly.”

When I hung up the phone, Dietz was checking his watch. “You’re off and running. I’ve got to touch base with an old friend so I’ll be out for a while. Are you free later on?”

“Not until six or so. Depends on my appointment. I’m trying to track down a guy who’s been gone eighteen years and I’m hoping to pick up some background from his family.”

“I’ll buy you dinner if you haven’t eaten, or we can go out and have a drink. I really don’t want to be a burden.”

“We can talk about it later. In the meantime, you’ll need a key.”

“That’d be great. I can grab a shower before I take off and lock up when I leave.”

I opened the kitchen junk drawer and found the extra house key on a ring of its own. I passed it across the counter.

“Are you okay with this? I know you don’t like to feel crowded. I can find a little place on Cabana if you’d prefer peace and quiet.”

“This is fine for now. If it’s too much, I’ll say so. Let’s just play it by ear,” I said. “I hope you like your coffee black. There’s no milk and no sugar. Cups are up there.”

He put the key in his pocket. “I know where the cups are. I’ll see you later.”

Malek Construction consisted of a series of linked trailers, arranged like dominoes, located in the cul-de-sac of an industrial park. Behind the offices, a vast asphalt yard was filled with red trucks: pickups, concrete mixers, skip loaders, and pavers, all bearing the white-and-red company logo. A two-story corrugated metal garage stretched across the backside of the property, apparently filled with maintenance and service equipment for the countless company vehicles. Gas pumps stood at the ready. To one side, against a tangle of shrubs, I could see six bright yellow Caterpillars and a couple of John Deere crawler dozers. Men in hard hats and red coveralls went about their business. The quiet was undercut by the rumble of approaching trucks, an occasional shrill whistle, and the steady *peep-peep-peep* signal as a vehicle backed up.

I parked in the side lot in a space marked VISITOR beside a line of Jeeps, Cherokee Rangers, and battered pickups. On the short walk to the entrance, I could hear the nearby freeway traffic and the high hum of a small plane heading for the airport to the west. The interior of the office suggested a sensible combination of good taste and practicality: glossy walnut paneling, steel blue wall-to-wall carpet, dark blue file cabinets, and a lot of matching dark red tweed furniture. Among the male employees, the standard attire seemed to be ties, dress shirts, and slacks without suit coats or sports jackets. Shoes looked suitable for hiking across sand and gravel. The dress code for the women seemed less codified. The atmosphere was one of genial productivity. Police stations have the same air about them; everyone committed to the work at hand.

In the reception area where I waited, all the magazines were work-related, copies of *Pit & Quarry*, *Rock Products*, *Concrete Journal*, and the *Asphalt Contractor*. A quick glance was sufficient to convince me that there were issues at stake here I never dreamed about. I read briefly about oval-hole void forms and multiproperty admixtures, powered telescopic concrete chutes, and portable concrete recycling systems. My, my, my. Sometimes I marveled at the depths of my ignorance.

“Kinsey? Donovan Malek,” he said.

I looked up, setting the magazine aside as I rose to shake hands with him. “Is it Don or Donovan?”

“I prefer Donovan, if you don’t mind. My wife shortens it to Don sometimes, but I make a rare exception for her. Thanks for being so prompt. Come on back to my office and we can chat.” Malek was fair-haired and clean shaven, with a square, creased face and chocolate brown eyes behind tortoiseshell glasses. I judged him to be six feet tall, maybe two hundred twenty pounds. He wore chinos and his short-sleeved dress shirt was the color of café au lait. He had loosened his tie and opened his collar button in the manner of a man who disliked restrictions and was subject to chronic overheating. I followed him out a rear door and across a wooden deck that connected a grid of double-wide trailers. The air conditioner in his office was humming steadily when we walked in.

The trailer he occupied had been subdivided into three offices of equal size, extending shotgun style from the front of the structure to the back. Long fluorescent