

That really was a fabulous dinner,” I said, looking over the morning paper at Gram, who was just coming through the kitchen door from her morning birdwatching expedition. “Artichoke and spinach quesadillas, jicama salad...”

“Don’t start,” Gram warned. “I feel bad enough as it is. Yes, it was a wonderful dinner. No, I’m not hiring them. Just having that truck come up the road got us half a dozen inquiring phone calls.”

“We could buy them a new truck if they came to work for us,” I said, sticking my nose back in the business section. I wanted to ask her why in the hell she would care about such things. Why would she go with me to hear Mrs. King speak, and then not hire a black woman of obvious quality? Who were all those people she’d rattled off the other day as being outraged if the Ruiz were hired? The neighbors? I knew how much regard she paid the neighbors. Most of them had built on land she’d sold them in the first place. We didn’t have to keep up with the Joneses – we were the Joneses.

The bridge club? The Audubon Society? I knew Gram better than that, too. People we didn’t even know? What ramifications could be bad enough to dissuade my iron-willed grandmother from doing what she wanted? Of course she’d also named my dad, and in that, I could see some possible merit. Maybe she just didn’t want to name him outright as the fly in the ointment. I’d wondered when she was going to give in and tell my dad what was going on, and now I could guess why she hadn’t. Still, when things got serious, my father could be counted on to do what was right. In that I had full confidence.

Gram had been right with my dad at the forefront of efforts to get us out of the hands of the Germans. While my grandfather was trying to hush things up and get some of the dirt swept under the rug, Gram had been employing a master forger to create documents for us. I wanted to ask her more about that time, but Mrs. Gustavson’s words haunted me. Maybe Gram had burned herself out on that particular front. Maybe she thought the children would be too much to contend with. Whatever her reasoning, it was beyond my comprehension, but it was her home, and it was therefore her decision.

“Never crossed my mind to nag,” I said as placidly as I could. “I mention it only because I ate the last of the quesadillas for breakfast, and now we are officially without sustenance. Actually, I think getting two dinners and a breakfast out of one cooking is pretty good, don’t you?”

“I said, don’t start, Aloysha, and I meant it. Have you exercised yet this morning?”

“I ran right by you going up the hill this morning,” I said, forcing a smile. “You were staring up into one of the pine trees over near the bluff. I didn’t want to holler and scare away your subject. Why do you ask?”

She shrugged. “I don’t usually find you reading the paper first thing, that’s all. Did you make this coffee?” She sniffed it, poured herself a cup, and sat down at the table with me.

“Um hm.” I put out the cigarette I was smoking and picked up my coffee cup. I’d made yesterday’s coffee, too. I wondered with some amusement if it had even registered with her that someone had to do such

things.

“That was a silly question, wasn’t it,” she said, as if reading my thoughts. “We’re the only ones here.” Her tone was wistful, and I knew that despite their rough parting, Gram missed Edythe very much. “It’s really quite good. I didn’t know you could make coffee. Did Mrs. Gustavson teach you?”

I raised an eyebrow and shook my head. “Geneva Miller taught me. She also taught me how to use a washing machine and a dryer, and how to peel a cucumber so it isn’t bitter, and other such impressive stuff.”

Grandmother just sighed. All things domestic escaped her, and not just because she’d never been exposed to them. Household duties both fascinated and terrified her in a way that the rest of us, including my father, found amusing. If Grandfather had suddenly found himself penniless, he’d have had a beautiful wife to comfort him, but a messy house and an empty table to come home to.

“Speaking of which, you were very impressive in concert last night, and I’m not the only one who thought so. You need to defy your father a little more than you do and concentrate on your music, Aloysha. Don’t let him make an actor out of you if you do not want to be one.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” I said, resisting the urge to burst out laughing. I could defy Dad, but I’d better not defy her. Dad felt just the opposite. I, for one, had no real desire to cross either of them, but, much as I dreaded it, I was about to. “I have to go out for a bit this morning. Should I stop and get some groceries, and what do I get? Have you ever eaten one of those TV dinners? Maybe they’d be something ...”

“Just ... stop,” she said firmly. “The temp service is sending someone over at eleven O’clock. Let her deal with it. Are you going down to the studios?”

“No. We meet with our lawyers tomorrow. Today I’m going on over to Malibu.”

“Meeting with Tommy?”

“Not exactly,” I said uncomfortably. “He told me about a place that’s for sale out there – it’s near the water, quite a bit of acreage – nice sized ranch house and some outbuildings, a barn and corrals, a foreman’s house. I’ve arranged with the realtor to take a look at it. It’s really not too far from here.”

I heard her coffee cup hit the table a little harder than usual, and the paper began to smoke from the heat of her gaze. “Peter Aloysha Aarons ...”

“Gram, listen,” I said reasonably. “I’ve given this a lot of thought. I’m a grown man. I can well afford a place of my own. You’re still a very active woman. You’d probably like to have company in without having to arrange with me to stop beating on my piano so you can hear each other talk. You could throw wild parties and have loose men hanging around. It would be nice for me to have a place of my own where I could play my piano all night, and have wild parties and loose women ...”

“And hire glory and Rafael?” she interrupted. “That’s what this is all about, isn’t it?”

“Not true ... exactly. I’ve thought about this for the past four or five years. I should be making my own way in the world, not living off my grandmother.”

“Did Edythe Gustavson have something to do with this? Because I can assure you that I loved you from the day I heard about you, Aloysha. The fact that you had some problems was to be expected, and I never

thought anything about them. I loved having you here.”

“And I have loved being here.”

“But?”

“But ...” I sighed, “I think perhaps the time has come when we are on a collision course, and I don’t want that. You are far too precious to me, Gram. I’d rather move out and get a place of my own than stay here and drive a wedge between us. I won’t be that far away. You can come see me, I’ll come see you, I promise. Did I tell you, the symphony has asked me back to help with the young people’s concert series? I’m really excited.”

I’d been focused primarily on the paper while we talked, and when she didn’t respond I looked up again. She had tears in her eyes. I dropped the paper and reached for her hand, which she pulled back beyond my fingertips. “I truly don’t understand,” she said quietly. “I guess ... of all the things in my life I thought were immutable ...” she turned her face toward the high windows and studied something outside rather than looking at me. “I guess I’ve taken you for granted, haven’t I? I’ve assumed you’d always be here. I’ve always assumed that even if you married, you’d live here. This is your house, you know. Has always been, will be when I’m gone. The bird house will always belong to you and your children. I suppose even that is foolish. I’ve always assumed you felt the same way about it that I do.” She made a soft, deprecating sound. “Well, you know what they say about assumptions making an ass out of you and me. I am sorry, Aloysha. I didn’t mean to chain you here against your will.”

She was overreacting, of course. I needed to tell her that, but I wasn’t sure how without sounding condescending. “Why don’t you come with me to look at this ranch property?” I said. “Maybe getting out of the house would do you some good. It’s a beautiful day. We could have lunch at the beach before meeting the realtor. Come with me, please.”

Much to my surprise, she did. It was a nice drive, and we had time to chat. Because she was hurt and I was male we judiciously avoided anything we really needed to talk about, but the physical proximity was comforting.

The house sprawled effortlessly across high ground overlooking the pacific, framed by wind-tossed trees and fragrant sagebrush. It was beautiful inside. It had been designed by a master architect, and, truth be told, it was much more livable than Gram’s house. There was an eight stall barn with hay storage and tack rooms and a big arena. The foreman’s house was a nice little three bedroom job just up the hill from the barns. I could have my big, bald-faced buckskin here instead of stabled someplace out in the valley. Here, I would have a private music room, rather than sharing the living room with Gram and her guests. This house was built for living rather than entertaining. The gardens were a delightful blend of the wild and the domesticated. I could open the window in the master bedroom and let in the sea breeze, and listen to the roar of the waves below. I could ride my horse down to the beach. To this day I kick myself for not buying that place on the spot, but ... I didn’t.

I thanked the realtor and told him I’d be in touch later in the day, put Gram in the car, and headed for home.

“You should buy it,” Gram said rather abruptly. “It suits you, and Buck would love it.”

“I know,” I replied. And that’s the only thing I said the whole way back.

When we got home there was a big van parked partway up the drive near the tennis court, and a crew of three men in coveralls was busy in the wild meadow. Two of them were grubbing out the tender young plants, and one was spraying the wild blackberries and the native shrubs. “Oh, my God!” my grandmother cried, and before I could get the Benz completely stopped she had stumbled out and was running over to them. “What are you doing?” she demanded. “Stop that! What are you spraying everywhere?”

The man with the nozzle shrugged and gave the end of it a little sniff. “Dunno, lady. But it’s sure as hell guaranteed to kill all this brush and shit you got all over the place.” He turned the thing on again, and my grandmother began to cry hysterically.

“Stop!” she sobbed. “Oh, please stop! My birds will die! Oh God, who told you to do this terrible thing to my home?”

He turned just a little too slowly, waited just a second too long to shut the thing off again. “The crew that regularly comes out here? They said you had some things needed removing, but see now, they heard you got a greaser giving orders out here, and they wasn’t gonna take orders from no greaser, so they sent us.”

He gave her a look that was almost a sneer, but by then I’d gotten the other two guys stopped and spun back around to where he was confronting Gram. He looked at me, and his stance softened just a little. I was bigger than he was, and I was obviously furious.

“And just who would *they* be, exactly?” I growled, and my voice was deep enough to startle both of us. “There is going to be hell to pay for this, and a great deal of money. Our gardening orders have stood for years with your company. No herbicides, no pesticides. Who put you up to this?”

“Nobody put us up to anything,” he said sullenly, “and I don’t like your accusations. We was just doing what the other guys said needed doing. This place is a stinkin’ mess with all these weeds. It made sense to poison them. Nice house like that, and a yard full of weeds and crap.”

My grandmother was sobbing hopelessly against my shoulder and I forced myself – physically forced myself – not to reach for that guy’s throat with my ham sized hands and just squeeze until his eyes bugged out. “Where in the hell have you sprayed this shit?” I grated. “Is there anything we can put on it at this point to reverse the damage? This place is a haven for songbirds. They’ll ...” I stopped and chewed my lower lip. “Where in the hell have you sprayed?”

“I’ll show you,” one of the other men said quickly, and Gram and I walked with him over nearly three acres of precious meadowland – so carefully cultivated to encourage birds to feed there and sing their songs of love – sprayed irreparably to death. “That’s it,” he said at last, and I could see that my grandmother was physically ill.

“Go.” I said. “Just ... go.” and they went. Quickly.

I took Gram up to the house, eased her into her favorite chair, grabbed the phone, and called the number on the side of the van. Arthur Antrim’s secretary answered, and I told her I needed to speak to Art, pronto. He

answered, smiling, and I proceeded to tell him what had happened, and what had been said.

“I just don’t understand what happened,” he groaned for the fifth or sixth time, but by then, I was beginning to. Edythe Gustavson, is what had happened. Who else would have called the regular gardeners and told them about Glory and Rafael? Art said he’d be right over to see what he could do in the way of damage control, and that he’d be having some words with a few people, and I thanked him and hung up.

“Gram?” I said softly, and she turned listlessly from staring out the window.

“So,” she said. “All of the curse and none of the blessing.”

“Hm?” I put on the tea kettle and then sat on the ottoman at her feet.

“All of the curse and none of the blessing,” she said again. “I turned those lovely people away because of what inconveniences might come of having them here, and this is my punishment. This was done because someone vindictive thought they were here, and yet if they had been here, none of this would have happened.”

I just took her hands and kissed them. She was quite probably right, but I wasn’t going to say so. “Maybe Art will have some suggestions as to how to fix this,” I said soothingly. “Let me make you a nice cup of tea, hm?”

She just shook her head and went back to staring out the morning room window toward the patio. “Our summer will be full of death,” she said. “My beautiful, innocent friends, who count on me for food and hospitality will die. Oh, Aloysha, I think my heart is going to break!”

She began to cry again and I sat on the arm of her chair and took her in my arms and wondered why, at times like these, there was so damned little to be done. “I suppose we should think about supper,” I said at last, and reluctantly, but I knew I had to get her mind off her gardens and her birds, or her broken heart might become a terrifying reality.

“There was supposed to be somebody here from the temp service to help us,” Gram sobbed angrily. “There should have been someone here.”

I got up and walked into the kitchen to call them, pretty much convinced of what they were going to say.

“Nobody would go, Mister Aarons. We heard such horror stories about that Negro woman you supposedly hired, and in a supervisory position! I’m glad to hear that didn’t materialize. I’m sure I can convince someone to come and help you tomorrow, now that the scare is over.”

“And who told you these stories?” I asked evenly, already knowing.

“Let’s just say your former housekeeper had some serious concerns. After all, it was her household for many years.”

“It was, and is, my grandmother’s household,” I said quietly. “You owed her the courtesy of showing up as you said you would.”

“Believe me, Mister Aarons, it was not my wish to leave your grandmother without domestic help, but the stories ...”

“Vicious stories spread by a disgruntled and racist employee should never have been given one moment’s consideration. In light of that, don’t bother sending anybody tomorrow.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” I growled, “you’re fired. All of you.”

“Mister Aarons,” said the very reasonable voice, “Our service has provided domestic help for your family for the last twenty-five years.”

“And someone else will do it for the next twenty-five,” I snapped, and hung up the receiver. I turned to where Gram was sitting and said, “I’ll find another temp service in the morning. I promise.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said quietly. “Nothing matters.”

I stood in the kitchen and looked at her sitting there, rigid and distant, and I began to understand that she had been the victim of a rape. Suddenly, I was frightened for her, and would have called my dad, or our doctor, or Steven, but she read my mind and told me to leave the telephone alone – she was fine. Then she got up and wandered outside, and before long Art’s truck came up the drive, and she walked slowly to meet him and with his arm around her they walked as people do through a cemetery – sadly, respectfully, purposefully – and I joined them in their silent march.

That evening lasted a hundred years. We found a meadow lark, dead on her nest. The darkness came and stayed. Art had dashed any hope of a quick fix for Gram’s beloved meadow, and she sat mourning and staring into the darkness beyond the casements.

I was playing the piano, of course, because it’s what I did when I was sad, or happy, or energetic or tired. It was what I did. It spoke, and spared us the trouble. “I wonder,” I said at long last. “I ... Rafael talked about so many low-tech things to do to make the yard a safer haven. I wonder if he’d have any weird, low-tech solutions for this.”

Gram just shrugged, enervated beyond speaking. A few minutes later she kissed my temple and wandered upstairs to bed, looking frighteningly old and frail.

I got up at the crack of dawn and made a pot of coffee, and went out to the big freezer and rummaged around and found some bagels that looked pretty good, and brought them in and warmed them up and tried to arrange them attractively with some butter and jam, hoping to give my grandmother a ray of hope this chill and drizzly morning.

She came downstairs in her robe, which wasn’t like her, and when she was seated at the table with a cup of coffee in her hand she said without looking at me, “You win.”

“Hm?”

“You win,” she said with some annoyance. “This sort of thing is what I was worried about if we hired the Ruizs, and we already have it. We may as well have them, too. You win.”

I rested my elbow on the table, lips against my knuckles, and contemplated her for a while in silence, trying to think of something to say that wouldn’t make things worse, or more hopeless, or drive a wedge further between us. “Gram, do you ... blame me for what happened yesterday? I’ll understand if you do, but ...”

“Actually, I hadn’t thought of that,” she said, “but now that you mention it, you are a handy scapegoat. You are the one who brought those people into our home in the first place, aren’t you?”

I just nodded, feeling a little sick inside. The fever was squeezing me again, which wasn't helping things any. I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep, steadying breath. "If you do not absolutely want and desire the Ruizs to come here and take care of this household, I will not ask them. The only reason I asked them here in the first place is because I thought they could make you feel happy and secure. I thought we could go anywhere, do anything, and not worry about this house or these grounds. I still feel that way."

"What about the house in Malibu?"

I just shook my head. "When we drove in here yesterday afternoon and I saw what those men were doing ... I knew ... this was the most precious place in the world to me. I think it always will be. And you will always be precious to me. We're a team, Gram. This thing with the Ruizs wasn't meant to be a contest with a winner and a loser. It was meant to be a situation where everybody won. We had the couple of our dreams, and they had a beautiful place to raise their family. There wasn't supposed to be a loser and now there is. God," I said with sudden frustration, "how did this happen? Did I cause this?"

"No, Sweetheart," Gram said, and got up from the table to come and hug my shoulders. When she put her cheek against my forehead she pulled back and gave me a searching look. "I don't think that stuff they were spraying yesterday did you any good. Have you taken anything for that fever?"

I just shook my head a little and smiled. "Nothing I take does any good. Glory said she'd leave a note on the fridge – how to make an herb tea for this – but I don't see it."

"Better go ask her, then," Gram smiled. "And while you're at it, offer her a job, will you?"

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. What time does she start work?"

"Around five," I smiled. "Gram, thanks."

"You're welcome," she replied. "When the employment agency opens we'll call them and let them know we're officially offering the Ruizs a position here. Until then, I want you to go lie down."

"I should go outside and help you ..."

"No. End of conversation. At least stretch out in your easy chair."

"As you wish," I said, tossed down a couple of aspirin and took my coffee into the living room. I'd gotten my way. God, that sounded so petty even in my head, but still, I wanted to spray-paint it on a wall someplace. I'd gotten my way. I knew, I really did, that this was a decision that would affect us the rest of our lives. Had I known then just how deeply it would affect us, I would have been dumbstruck. As it was, I was delighted, and between catnaps I counted the hours until I could tell Mrs. Bartos that the unsuitables were coming to live with the unconventional.

When I called her, promptly at nine O'clock and told her we were hiring the Ruizs, she sniffed and said they were no longer available through her agency.

"What?" I gasped.

"I said, they're no longer available."

"Why is that, exactly?" I asked, amazed and appalled. Gram looked up from her garden charts, and I

gave her a puzzled look and shook my head her direction.

“They are no longer listed with this agency. They had a little accident, or so I hear.”

“What do you mean a little accident?” I snapped. “Are they all right? What kind of an accident?”

“That ... *thing* ...” I could see her gesture and her delicate shudder, “they drove around in caught fire, or so I understand.”

“Oh, my God,” I murmured. All I could think about was those little boys in that rusting deathtrap. “What about their children, are they all right – according to what *you* hear and what *you* understand?” Why did I have this sudden urge to start killing people who annoyed me?

“Mister Aarons, I really don’t know, and to be brutally frank, I don’t care. In order to be listed with this agency one must have transportation. They do not have transportation. They are no longer listed here. Is there anything else I can do for you this morning?”

“Yes! You can ...” I thought of whom I was representing, and what I’d been taught about *noblesse oblige*, and bit off my words. “No, thank you,” I said, and hung up.

“Aloysha, what is it?” Gram asked, eyes big over her reading glasses.

I told her, and she collapsed limply into her chair at the kitchen table. “All of the curse and none of the blessing,” she said yet again. “If we’d hired them right off the bat ...”

“Don’t go second guessing yourself,” I said firmly. “We’ll find them. If it had been a real tragedy of any kind like losing one or both of the boys, it would have made the paper someplace near the front page. I didn’t see anything like that, did you?” Gram shook her head. “Still, there has to be a police report. Maybe it will tell us something.” I picked up the telephone again and dialed the Highway Patrol office closest to us. There was absolutely nothing. Not in a half dozen more tries did I find anything. One of the people I talked to suggested that perhaps the vehicle was parked, not moving, in which case there would be no report. If they had no insurance, either...

I hung up and sat rubbing my face in frustration. “I’m going down to the place she worked,” I said rather abruptly. “Glory’s work was really important to her. She’d be there, or she’d call if she could.” If she could. It drummed in my feverish, uncomfortable, worried head. How had Mrs. Bartos known? Glory or Rafael had called her. Had to be. They’d probably told her where and how they were, but I knew she wasn’t about to tell me, bitch that she was. I gave Gram a kiss, said I’d be back, grabbed my jacket, and headed out the door.

“I have things to do,” she called after me, “so if I’m not here when you get back, don’t worry.”

“Well, don’t do anything stupid,” I hollered over my shoulder, and it still echoes in my mind as one of the dumbest things I’ve ever said to anyone my whole life.

It took me over an hour to get to the place where Glory worked, and by then it was nearly noon. Lunch crowd was settling in. My eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, and I spotted the man I’d talked to the first time I’d been in there. I caught his attention and motioned him to the end of the bar. “I don’t know if you remember me,” I said. “I was in here the other day to talk to Glory Ruiz.”

“I remember you,” he said.

“I ... have you heard anything about them being in an accident? I called the agency ...”

He nodded. “Glory called me to say she wouldn’t be in, that she’d have to give up her job without giving notice. She felt really bad, but she said they had no transportation. That old truck burned to the wheels, I guess.”

“Was anybody hurt?”

“I guess her husband burned his hands pretty bad trying to get some of their stuff out. She said otherwise she’d find a way to get in to work, but she had to take care of the boys because of his hands.”

“Did she say where they were?”

He shrugged. “Not really. She said they were staying with friends out near one of the orange groves, but that could just be pride talking. Didn’t want sympathy. You going to try to find them?”

“No,” I said firmly. “I’m not going to try. I’m going to find them, and offer them the job I should have offered them a week ago. When did she call?”

“Yesterday morning,” he said.

“Do you know for whom he worked, by any chance?”

“Bluebird, maybe? Bluebell? Blue something, I think.” Someone hailed him from down the bar, and as he turned away he added, “Good luck. I hope you find those folks.”

I thanked him and went back to my car. What to do next? There were a lot of orange groves around LA in the nineteen sixties. A lot of orange groves. Where did one begin to look for migrant workers? They were everywhere and nowhere. I sat a bit in the car, and smoked a cigarette and racked my brain, which kept announcing its intention to go to sleep on me. I needed to know who Rafael worked for, and I knew Mrs. Bartos knew. It had to be in their paperwork, didn’t it? I could find a pay phone and call her. And then she’d most likely hang up on me. Going over her head was not an option, unfortunately. I could drive over there and confront her, and she’d say she’d already thrown away their information, and I’d be out forty-five minutes I could have used more productively. Driving around blindly wasn’t a good option. Dad probably had some insight, but then I might, when I told him what I was up to, get a lecture instead, and I didn’t need that in my state. Kit was working. I called Gram, but she wasn’t home, and I wondered where she was. Stocking up on TV dinners, maybe. Or counting dead robins.

I’d had an early breakfast, and not a big one. I should probably stop for lunch, but something was pushing me – not urgently, but steadily. It was raining and chill, and those people with those tiny boys, were homeless. I put another coin in the phone and called Tommy. When I told him what was up, he suggested that I call one of the big produce distributors, or drive down to the market section of town and ask some questions. He asked me if I needed some company, and when I said no, he wished me luck and told me to call him back if I changed my mind or got hung up one way or another.

I wasn’t that far away, so I took his advice and went down into the market, weaving the Benz in and out through the lug nuts of the big rigs, dodging fork lifts and dollies in the narrow streets. It was kind of a colorful

place, really, moving with an entirely different pace and purpose than the rest of the city. I glimpsed a bright orange and blue sign mostly hidden behind an eighteen wheeler, and found myself, quite by God's mercy, at the citrus exchange. I parked my car and went inside. It was a rabbit warren of little offices and narrow hallways and people scurrying around, and I began to feel a little silly. If I could actually flag one of these souls to a halt, what was I going to ask?

I got my opportunity when a small man in shirtsleeves with a balding head and half steamed glasses looked up from his desk and blinked a smile at me. "Need to be loaded?" he asked.

"Uh ..." I had to think about it a moment to realize what he was asking me. I looked like a truck driver? I wondered for a moment what a truck driver, a stereotypical truck driver looked like, and realized I was definitely not at my best mentally. "No. I'm trying to locate a farm, I think. Bluebell, or Bluebird, or somesuch. They raise oranges."

"Ummm," he said, looking absently around his desk. "Blue Duck?"

"I honestly don't know, but I'm trying to locate somebody, and I think he works there."

"You with immigration?"

"No. God, no. I don't want to make life hard for anybody. I have a job for this guy, and I'm having a helluva time finding him. But I know he was working in the oranges a week ago, and I think it was for someplace with blue in its name."

"I hope you got a lot of patience," the man chuckled. He gave me directions to Blue Duck Farms, told me who to ask for, wished me luck, and sent me on my way.

By now the drizzle had turned to a cold, steady rain, and I was glad of both the heater in the car and my warm leather jacket. I got off the highway at the appointed place twenty miles or so out of town, and was almost instantly in a maze of orange trees, shining in rain-washed brilliance. I drove a few more miles in winding sameness, then saw the sign for Blue Duck Farms and turned left onto a gravel road. That road took me up and behind a hill to a complex of packing sheds, and a building that had the look of an office about it.

I walked in, and smiled at the woman behind the desk. "My name is Bud Aarons," I said. "I'm trying to locate Rafael Ruiz. I believe he works for you."

She just looked at me, and I wondered for a minute if she spoke English. She looked American in a WASP sort of way. She had gum in her mouth, and I noticed that she chewed side to side in comic little ellipses like a sheep or a goat. "Herb!" she bawled suddenly, "Herb, get outtheah!"

A corpulent gentleman in a white, outdated suit wedged himself through the doorway and gave me a look that was not particularly welcoming. "Whaddya want?" he demanded.

"Just a moment of your time," I said quickly, wondering at the hostility. A thought struck me. "I'm not with immigration or anything. I'm looking for someone I believe works for you, Rafael Ruiz? His wife applied for a housekeeper's job with us ..."

He snorted. "You sure you're not looking for Jesus Lopez, or Pancho Ramirez, or Speedy Gonzalez?"

"No," I frowned. "His name is Rafael Ruiz. His wife's name is Glory. They have two little boys ..." I made a

vague, thigh-high gesture, but I'd already lost him.

"Never heard of him," the man said, gave me a wave of dismissal, and waddled back the way he'd come.

"Sorry," the woman shrugged, cracked her gum and busied herself with some paperwork.

I stood for a few seconds, realizing I'd been brushed off and wondering why. I went back outside, leaned against the car, and lit a cigarette, trying to collect my thoughts. The rain had let up, and the smell of the orange groves was pleasant. I let my eyes wander over the place, and from around the corner of the building I'd just been in, a lanky, blond haired man appeared. He caught my eye, pointed further up the road, and then disappeared again. I was intrigued, so I got in the car and drove up the hill until I was out of sight of the sheds and the office, pulled over, got out, and waited.

In a few minutes he appeared behind me in a middle-aged Ford pickup with the farm's logo on it. He motioned me over to the open window and said, "I hear you're looking for Rafael and Glory?"

"I am."

"Why?"

He had kind eyes, so I said, "They interviewed for a job with my Grandmother and me. When I called the agency to offer them the job, there was some story about them losing their truck in a fire. Nobody knows where they are, and I want them to come to work for me."

He looked me up and down for a long minute in silence and then said, "Put your big fancy car in those trees over there and get in with me. You won't find anybody driving that thing. People see that, they think you're a government man looking for illegals. INS, you know."

I nodded, got back into my car and parked it under some willows along a small stream, noisy with the recent rains. When I got into the truck beside him the man said, "I'm Francis. Francis Monroe. Herb's an asshole. He's got so many wetbacks on his payroll, he's not going to talk to anybody about anything for fear of getting busted. He's got people camped all over in these hills back here." He squinted through the muddy windshield and waved a hand over the sagebrush and scrub oak in front of us. "No showers, no toilets, no housing, just tents and bushes. Washing themselves and their kids and their clothes in the damned cold crick. Then they gotta use that water for drinking and cooking. It's just not right."

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing, and in a minute or two Francis picked up the conversation. "Rafael and Glory were luckier than most. They had a camper. You better be serious about not meaning those people any harm. They're real nice folks. They burned out night before last, slept all night with practically no shelter, and nothing to tend Rafael's hands with. But you know the first thing Glory wanted yesterday morning? Right after asking for bandages, she asked me, please, to take her to a telephone so she could call her work. Tried to pay me for the gas to drive her to a phone. I know even dimes are precious to those people, and yet she used them to call her work, and the employment agency. They're real nice folks."

"All I want to do is offer them a job, I swear," I said. "I'm Bud Aarons." For some reason I added, "My dad is Peter Aarons." And I offered him my hand as he drove.

"You have the look of an honest man," he chuckled, taking my hand in his firm grip, and as we drove

slowly up the brush-lined road he told me a little about how the fruit business worked, and how necessary it was to keep labor costs to a minimum, and how that led, however unfortunately, to the use and abuse of those who were most vulnerable. It was Steinbeckian, and disturbing. “But that Rafael, he’s different,” Francis said. “I never got any sense from him that he was here because he had to be. Every morning he’d take his wife to catch a bus for town, then he’d get those little boys all set comfortable in the truck, and he’d go to picking oranges with the best of them – always watching the little guys while he worked. Good father, he is. I was real sorry when he got burned like that.”

“I assume he has no insurance?”

“You are a sheltered one, aren’t you?” Francis snorted. “They have no nothing. Not a thing. They’re wrapped in the two blankets they managed to borrow, sitting under a borrowed tarp, because, for all his efforts, Rafael saved not one thing from that truck but his family. All day yesterday, they had oranges and a couple of potatoes that Glory bought from somebody in camp. This morning, they had oranges. Didn’t want to take food or drink out of the mouths of others. I was going to bring them a cooking pot and a sack of potatoes later this afternoon. I wasn’t sure how they’d react to that, but those kids gotta eat, you know?”

I nodded. Francis’ comment had alerted me to the fact that my hunting them down at this juncture might be construed as charity, and they might just tell me to take a hike. I worked on a bright line of patter to allay their reservations.

“When Herb hears they’ve been burned out, he’s gonna send them on their way for sure. Glory says she’ll go out and work the trees tomorrow, because Rafael can’t, but still, somebody’s bound to tell the boss. Nobody stays here who doesn’t earn his keep.”

“Hopefully that won’t apply to them after today,” I smiled. I grabbed onto the roof of the truck through the open window and listened to the stones rattling away beneath our tires as we wallowed down a steep little embankment, across the shallow stream, and up the other side.

Just at the edge of the embankment was the carcass of Rafael’s truck, burned clear to the tires. It was still smoldering in spots, and the smell made me a little queasy. A few feet later we were in an encampment of tarps, and tents, soggy cardboard and sagging plywood, with bits of cast off furniture and seats from old cars. It was utterly dismal, and I was appalled, though I tried manfully not to show it.

Francis looked at me and read my mind. “They do the best they can,” he said reprovably, and I felt myself flush uncomfortably under his scrutiny.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I was. We got out of the truck and wound around through a few of the tarps and tents. There were children laughing and playing, but I didn’t see Royal or Titus among them at first. Then, as we cut through some willows, Royal and three other little boys came running our direction, laughing and shouting back and forth in Spanish. When they saw us they skidded to a stop and immediately became shy. Three of them ran away, but Royal stood his ground, studying us, and after a moment, I smiled at him and said, “Hello, Royal Rafael Ruiz, going to be four years old in July. How are you today?”

His smile broke and he said, “Hello, Mister Aarons. You let me use your soap. I liked it at your house.

How is your abuela?"

With those words, Francis relaxed, and from the corner of my eye I could see him smiling. I was who I said I was. "Thank you for asking. Gram is a little sad today, and I'm hoping your daddy can help make her feel better. Can you tell me where he is?"

He came and took me by the hand. "Let me walk you there," he said formally, and led us over to where a brown canvas tarp was stretched into a tent, using a couple of the willows for support. Rafael was sitting with a blanket over his shoulders. His knees were drawn up and his bandaged hands were wrapped around them, his head resting against his legs. Glory, wrapped in a rag of a second blanket, had her back to us, tending to Titus as best she could. "Mama," Royal said quietly, "remember you said last night God was gonna send us an angel?"

"Yes, Baby," Glory said, intent on her task, "and he will."

"Well, I think this is him," Royal said, and Glory turned around.

"Lordy!" she gasped, and Rafael raised his weary head. He was bewhiskered, and he had burns and smudges on his handsome face.

"Aw, hell ..." he grimaced, and began shaking his head. "Who told you to come out here?"

"Sorry to pop in unannounced," I said with an apologetic smile. He was openly hostile, and I didn't have a clue how to deal with it. Luckily, I was an actor. I acted. "When I called the agency this morning they said you were incognito, and I really needed to find you. Rafael ..."

"I don't want your charity, and I'm in no shape to take a job right now," he growled. He put his head back down against his knees, and when I glanced over at Glory, her eyes were filled with despair.

"Please, listen to me," I said. "Three guys came yesterday and they sprayed herbicide all over that beautiful, wild meadow of Gram's. We don't know what to do, and I thought maybe you would. Gram thought you would. Rafael, the birds are already dying, and we need help."

Rafael winced visibly. "I might be able to give you some advice," he said, nodding slowly. "I'd offer you a chair ..."

"Let me offer you a position instead," I said quickly. "Glory, Rafael ... would the two of you please come and run our household for the two of us? I know you're in a bad spot right now, and that you wish the circumstances were better, but we really need you. Gram cried most of the night last night. Please don't turn me down, I'm a desperate man."

Rafael growled something under his breath, and slowly raised his head. "I told you, we are in no position to accept employment. We have no appropriate clothing, we have no transportation, I have no hands to work with. It would be charity for us to go with you."

"I don't need your damned hands, Rafael, I need your brains," I said tersely, which did nothing for the look on his face. Glory's eyes widened, and I realized I was losing ground.

"Okay," I sighed after a moment's thought. "I admit it. It is charity, if that's what you choose to call it. Gram and I are desperate. Mrs. Gustavson blackballed us before she left, and even the temp service won't come to our house. Gram's meadow was sprayed out of spite. I honest to God thought her tender heart was going to

break last night, weeping for her little innocent birds who will die. I need your help, your understanding, and your expertise, and I'm willing to pay you well for it, house you for it, and provide transportation for it. I'll beg for it if you make me, but I'd rather not. It's charity, all right. We need yours, and we need it now."

"You ..." Rafael began, then shook his head, and ever so slowly, he smiled at me. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just ... I've never had to accept a job ... I'm so dirty, and I have nothing to change into. I feel so inadequate."

"About like I felt yesterday afternoon," I muttered. "A good salary plus your housing, your utilities, medical insurance, and two vehicles replaced as needed. Oh, and a fence to keep the kids out of the pool. What say you?"

The two of them looked into each other, much as my mother and father did, and I was suddenly uncomfortable. "I can go someplace else for a few minutes if you need to talk. I've got about half an hour of life left in me before the fact that I only had bagels for ..." I realized what I was about to say, and got myself stopped. I'd had all the bagels and coffee I wanted while sitting in a warm kitchen, for Godssake. Where was my head? "Sorry. I skipped lunch, and it makes me stupid when I do that." Oh, God, that was an even worse thing to say, and I gave myself a good, swift mental kick in the pants. "I'll just ... walk around a bit, hm?"

I turned to leave and Rafael said, "That won't be necessary. I do think ... my wife and children would very much enjoy becoming a part of your household."

"And you?" I asked.

Our eyes met, and there was no flinching. He allowed me access to his thoughts for a moment, then veiled his black eyes again and said, "I want what is best for my family ... and for your grandmother's beloved birds."

"Then, you are hired. Both of you," I smiled, and took the hand Glory extended to me. "Do you need to stay to say goodbye to anyone? Is there anything you need to ... gather up? I'm sorry. I really don't mean to be insensitive. I don't want to rush you, but neither do I want to stay longer than we need to."

"Not comfortable here?" Rafael smiled, half accusing.

"He be worried about Mrs. Aarons, his head aches and he burnin' up with fever," Glory said calmly. "All we got's these two babies and my purse. The blankets is borrowed."

"Those two babies, are all the precious stuff," I said firmly. "We'll dig up the rest of what you need. I was so afraid you'd been hurt or..." I stopped myself again. "Never mind. My car's up the road a little way."

Francis, who had been quiet up until then, said, "I'll give all of you a ride, of course. Rafael, Glory, I'll return the blankets, and when it comes time to cut the checks, I'll see you get what's coming to you." He looked at me. "Can I have an address to mail it to?"

"Of course," I said, reaching for my wallet. I took out one of my cards, and handed it to him. "This is my home address, and theirs from now on."

"Are we coming to live with you?" Royal asked, looking up at me. I couldn't tell whether he was concerned, or merely curious.

"Yes," I said. "Hopefully for a very long time."

“Will we be a part of your family?”

“Absolutely,” I nodded before Rafael could open his mouth, and sealed that commitment in my heart.

“I better ride in the back,” Glory said, and her eyes didn’t quite meet mine. “You ain’t gonna like the smell of this baby one bit. I done the best I could, but after a while, it wasn’t near enough.”

“Hang in there just a bit longer,” I said gently, only to her. “It’s almost over.”

“Thank you,” she replied, almost in a whisper, and stepped gracefully onto the running board and up into the back of the pickup using my hand for support.

Rafael got in beside her, and I asked Royal what his druthers were – up front with Francis and me, or in back with his parents. “With my parents, thank you,” he said, and I put my jacket around his shoulders and swung him up beside his father.

By the time we got to the Benz, I was cold, and I could only imagine how uncomfortable the Ruizes were in the back of that pickup. We all thanked Francis, and after he had driven away, Glory turned to me and muttered, “I do so hate to ask, but do you have anything at all, clean rags, anything that I could use to change this child? He was pretty well potty trained, but with the shock and all ... anyway, by the time we get where we’re going we’ll have to burn this car, too.”

“I wondered what had happened,” I chuckled. “Now I know.” Glory smiled. Rafael didn’t. I hastened on. “Rafael, Royal, get in before you freeze. Glory, let’s check the trunk.” I remembered that Rafael’s hands didn’t work just so, and opened the door for them, got them inside, and went around to the back and popped the trunk.

In marked contrast to the orange groves so close below us, we were in a steep, dusty valley, full of grey rock, and we’d lost the watery afternoon sun that provided our only warmth. I dearly missed my jacket, and I was trying not to shiver. I pushed a couple of things around in the trunk and came up with my golf bag, which contained a good sized towel, and my gym bag, which contained another towel, a white tee shirt and some toiletries, among other things.

Glory gratefully took the towels and the soap from the gym bag and excused herself to take the baby down to the creek for a minute. She was going to put cold water on that poor child? Just the thought of it made my teeth chatter. “You get in, too,” she said firmly. “That fever got you freezin’ and fryin’ by turns. Just leave the trunk open and I be back in a flash.”

“As you wish,” I smiled. I watched her walk the few steps to the creek bank, then I got into the driver’s seat and started the car. There was still some warmth in the engine, and it felt wonderful blowing across my legs. “Are you two warm enough?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” Rafael said quietly. He was sitting in the passenger’s seat, Royal between us, still wrapped in my leather bomber jacket.

“How about you, young man?”

“I’m starved,” he sighed, and Rafael jerked up straight in a heartbeat.

“He asked you if you were warm enough, not if you were hungry, Royal.”

“It’s all right,” I said quickly.

“It’s not all right,” Rafael said. “He’s my son. The person he needs to listen to, is me.”

“Of course,” I murmured.

The time until Glory returned lasted about half a millennium, maybe more, and I had ample time to wonder just how big a mistake this was going to be. Rafael admitted later he’d sat there thinking the exact same thing. When Glory opened the door and got into the back seat with the much improved Titus, both of us breathed a sigh of relief. “What?” she said, but neither of us answered her.

We were out on the blacktop and headed toward the city when I said, “I hate to bring up the subject of food, but I did skip lunch, and I need to hit a store or a McDonald’s or something, so everybody keep their eyes peeled.” No drive-throughs to speak of back then, believe it or not. I knew better than to suggest a restaurant, and I could hear poor little Royal’s stomach growling even with the engine running and the windshield wipers going.

When the golden arches were spotted I lost no time in pulling in, asking if burgers were all right with everybody, and sprinting inside before Glory could offer me money or Rafael could chew on me about anything. I could feel another lecture brewing. His hands were wrapped in gauze that was by now dirty and ragged, and I knew he was probably hurting all over – inside and out. I didn’t want to run afoul of him, but I didn’t want to let him run over me, either. Most of all, I didn’t want to argue in front of the kids.

I ordered burgers, fries, coffee, milk, and while I was waiting for the order I went and called Gram. By now it was nearly dark, and I knew she was probably worried. To my relief she was home. I gave her a quick sketch of what was happening and told her we’d be home in a bit. I thought maybe I needed to offer Glory the chance to stop and do some shopping for the babies. Diapers, underwear ... things babies needed.

“Come straight home,” Gram advised. “We’ll improvise tonight and shop tomorrow when everyone is more rested and on an even keel. I’ll get Mrs. Gustavson’s old room ready for them until we can get the chauffeur’s quarters cleaned out.” There was a pause, then she said, “Good work, Sherlock. Drive carefully.”

I promised I would, the girl called my order number, and I went back to the car. Glory went inside to wash her hands, taking Royal with her, and through the window I could see her stiffen, aware of the eyes that followed them to the restroom and back. When they got in, Royal fell on his sandwich like he was starving. “Thank you,” he said between bites. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for letting me stop,” I said, taking a sip of coffee. “I was really hungry, too.”

Rafael was visibly forcing himself to eat nonchalantly, but I could tell that he was truly hungry, as was his wife, and I realized how long two whole days and nights can be when you have no hope. “Does anybody need anything else?” I asked. “Gram says this is dinner, so don’t be shy about speaking up. Until my new housekeeper goes shopping ...”

“Which she can do on the way home tonight if you’d like,” she said quickly.

I looked in the rearview mirror and made a face at her. “Holy Toledo, you’re nuts. I knew you were too good to be true.”

“Then don’t complain about breakfast,” she grinned, and Rafael chuckled softly, love for his wife shining from every frazzled inch of him.

“Do not worry, Senor. The woman has a recipe for stone soup.”

“Well, if it’s anything like those quesadillas you made the other night, I’ll be wanting it for breakfast,” I said, and lined the Benz out into traffic.

“I need to stop and buy some things for the baby,” Glory said, right on cue. “I have money to pay for them.”

“Gram says she has everything you need for tonight,” I said, meeting her eyes in the mirror. “She knows to the second when we should pull in that driveway, and I’d really like to make that happen for her. Two people you don’t cross in my family, are Gram, and my father. Can you make do until tomorrow?”

“I can make do for as long as I need to,” Glory replied, and I could see that she was relieved we didn’t have to stop.

Royal and Titus promptly went to sleep, and we spoke but little the rest of the way home. It was dark, and raining, and the lights from oncoming cars were hurting my eyes. I didn’t want to rub them for fear of getting a contact lens out of position and rendering myself instantly blind. My head still ached despite having eaten and I was overjoyed when the bucolic meander of Sweet Sage Trail culminated in the wrought iron gates of my driveway. “Home,” I said quietly, and I meant it with all my heart.

The patio lights came on to greet us with Gram close behind, and she hurried us into the warmth of the kitchen. “Let me show you right to your room,” she said. “You can all have a nice hot bath and just turn in, if you’d like. You must be exhausted.” She was talking to them, but she was looking at me, and I realized I was ready to fall over and not get up. “Billie and Kit brought over some baby things for Titus a bit ago, so he’s all set. Rafael, there must be something around here for those hands”

There were bags of groceries still on the counter, and Glory exclaimed, “Have you eaten, Ma’am? It won’t take but a minute to fix you ...”

“Tonight, I’m the one fixing you,” Gram said firmly, and when Glory’s mouth came open again, Gram shut it for her with a look.

I knew she had things under control, so I excused myself and staggered upstairs. My dinner was threatening upheaval, and I was so cold I was shaking. I stood in a hot shower until I stopped shivering, took out my contacts, put on some sweats, and crawled into bed. I felt bad abandoning Gram and the Ruizs, and when I was comfortable enough, and had rested a few minutes, I actually thought about changing that. I could at least have offered Rafael a clean tee shirt and some shorts, though he was more Kit’s size than mine. I made myself sit back up, and after a minute I crawled out of bed, put on my glasses, gathered up some clothes, a robe, a razor, and went back downstairs.

In the downstairs hall I met a freshly scrubbed Royal, scurrying toward the kitchen in one of Esther’s tee shirts to kiss his father goodnight. I walked the rest of the way with him, and again, he thanked me for the soap he’d just used. I told him he was more than welcome. To this day his eyes twinkle and he thanks me for soap,

and I give him soap for Christmas and his birthday, and whenever we want to laugh together and remember our past. I gave him soap for his college graduation, and as a wedding present, and he gave me soap when I married Meg – and then to celebrate when my divorce was final – and when I married Phipps, and to herald the arrival of our children. Each time I have gotten an Academy award, an Emmy, or a Grammie I have gotten soap from Royal Rafael Ruiz, who is going to be ... thirty-something ... in July.

“Forgive my momentary lapse in manners,” I said, walking back into the kitchen where Gram and Rafael were still talking. His hands were unwrapped and soaking, and they looked so bad I hurt for him. “I brought you some stuff you’ll need to get comfortable for tonight.”

“Thank you,” Rafael said, forcing himself to smile. “For everything.”

“Likewise, I’m sure,” I grinned. “You’ve done me the favor. If you’ll excuse me ...”

“Go to bed,” my grandmother smiled. “We’re fine here.”

“Goodnight, then,” I nodded, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and went back upstairs, considering it a day’s work well done. I fell on my face in the bed, noticing only momentarily that it was nine-thirty in the evening, not midnight.

At ten O’clock there was a rap on my door that I assumed was Gram, coming to check on me. “Come,” I croaked, blinking at the blur of clock next to me. I turned on the lamp and Glory walked in with a steaming mug in her hands.

“Got my family all tucked in nice,” she said quietly, “so now it’s time to tend you and that fever.” She put the cup on the nightstand and reached across me for another pillow. “I want you to sit up and drink this while it’s hot,” she said, and as I sat up she arranged the pillows behind me.

“Glory,” I said, “you do not need to be doing this tonight. I know you must be exhausted.” She did look better. She, too, was freshly scrubbed, and wearing one of Gram’s soft chenille robes.

“Already done,” she said, handing me the cup. “Here, drink this, it should help some, though Mrs. G. didn’t keep no fresh herb supply on hand. Come mornin’ I’ll go stock up, and I can’t very well do that if I got nobody to drive me, now, can I?”

“I don’t know. Do you have a driver’s license?”

“I do,” she smiled. “You need to drink that while it’s hot.”

I sipped obediently, trying not to grimace. “Thanks. It’s really ... ah ... What is this?”

“It got some ginger, and I found plenty of fresh yarrow in an unsprayed part of the meadow,” she grinned. “Awful, ain’t it?”

“Yes, it is. Anyway, if you have a license, you have a car. There’s a cream colored Volvo station wagon in the garage. Keys are on the peg in the kitchen. It was Mrs. Gustavson’s service car, so it’s yours, now. It’s only a year old, so it should be okay for a while.”

Her eyes widened a little. “I can just take it and use it anytime?”

“Glory, it’s your car. You’ll need it, and yes ... you can use it anytime for any purpose, personal or otherwise. It’s your family car, too. It’s part of our deal, remember? I’ll put you and Rafael on the insurance

tomorrow.” I mentally held my nose and drained the cup, and Glory took it back from me.

“You a good man,” she said quietly, gave me a pat on the hand, and turned out the light.