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If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that you have purchased stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the publisher nor the author will receive any payment from your purchase.

This, my first novel, is dedicated to

Carmel

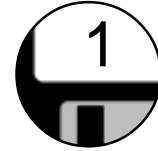
For all the reasons.

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You know who you are; you know what you did. I can't say I couldn't have done it without you, but you made it better, you made it happen faster, and you made it more fun. Infinite thanks.



The Summer of Love was a long time ago, Carter," Scott said. His hands moved idly across the tacky, green Formica. He pushed at the pepper shaker, then moved the salt shaker with a quick, furtive movement as if he were cheating at chess.

"Not so long. As these things go." I wasn't fidgeting like Scott, but something about the subject caused me to raise my arm without thinking. I smoothed my hair with my palm, wrapped my fingers around the band that held my greying locks in a ponytail.

"What do you mean 'as these things go'?"

"I mean in the larger historical sense." I forced the errant hand back into my lap.

"I don't see what's so historical about the sixties." He scowled. It seemed he was in a bad mood.

I was in a bad mood myself, and I wondered, not for the first time, why Scott and I had these occasional meetings. Our friendship was long-standing, going back to the sixties, though not quite as far back as the Summer of Love that had somehow entered the conversation.

"That's because you lack a sense of history," I said, trying to talk myself into a better mood. "No vision. It's a

problem. You should work on it."

"My vision's okay," he said. As if to prove it, he stared straight at me, but quickly got uncomfortable and returned to molesting the salt shaker. "Anyway, that's..."

"No. Don't give me this 'anyway.' You're avoiding the subject."

"What subject?"

"Historicity. Look. Take Martin Luther."

"I don't know him. Listen, Carter..."

"Picture yourself in Germany in the early fifteen hundreds."

"Fuck Germany."

"None of that. Martin Luther is celibate. A highly religious man absorbed in the study of the Bible. It's his entire life. At night he lies down to sleep with Latin ringing in his ears."

"Latin? I thought you said he was German."

"He was. The so-called Holy Scripture had yet to be translated into the languages of the common people. Latin it was, and Latin it would remain if the church had its way. But that was to change. Not least because of our boy Luther."

Scott settled back in his chair, no longer resisting. He was probably wondering why I did these things, something that puzzled me as well. "Go on," he said.

"He's a pious young man, but away from his books, he's just one of the boys," I said, departing from history and beginning to improvise. "His friends call him Marty when they all gather at the local Hofbrau to quote Ecclesiastes and lift a few steins."

At this point the waitress brought our tea. I was glad for the distraction. I'd been on the verge of getting carried away.

"So what did you want to see me about?" I asked when the waitress had gone.

Scott looked puzzled. "But you didn't finish. Marty Luther and all."

"Forget it. I was just talking."

"No. Really. I know you think I'm stupid, but I like to learn stuff."

"Okay, listen. Martin Luther wrote a protest against Catholicism's abuses and excesses. He tacked this little pamphlet on a door where all and sundry would be sure to see it. It was a small act that seemed to lack historical importance. But eventually it brought on the Reformation, the effects of which are still with us today." I suddenly realized that I'd picked a bad example. Luther's theses, if I remembered correctly, had caused an almost instantaneous effect by the slow standards of the time. Oh, well. Scott wouldn't know. "So don't close the book on the sixties. Twenty-some-odd years isn't such a long time."

Scott nodded and took a sip of tea. "So how is it...I mean, what effects are we feeling today? From Luther and his Reformation?"

"Ah. Before Luther's small act of rebellion, the whole of the church apparatus consisted of a few ignorant old men in Rome. Today it consists of millions of ignorant men, women, and children in every corner of the globe."

Scott allowed this negative evaluation of the dominant force in his culture to pass without comment.

"So you're still into religion and stuff?"

I thought of my two wasted years spent studying Eastern philosophy. "Religion and stuff" probably described it as well as anything. "I still read about Zen," I answered. "As a system of thought. I still meditate sometimes. Religion holds no interest for me. All that sin and redemption. Omnipotent gods who create fallible humans and despair of them when they don't make the grade. Who could care?"

As if considering the question, we both toyed vaguely with our cups.

"Carter?"

I looked up. "Yeah?"

He began to fidget again. "I wanted to see you about something."

"Is that why you brought me to this godforsaken place?"

"I know you hate this kind of place, but the places in Berkeley would all be crowded, and we'd never find anywhere to park."

He'd used the same two excuses to get me into the restaurant, and I had to admit they were both true.

"Besides," he went on, "this place isn't so bad. It's nice and clean."

"Doesn't all that cleanliness make you feel like they're hiding something?"

"Hiding what?"

"Bloodstains maybe."

Scott shuddered. "Don't talk about blood."

I glanced around at the restaurant. Its eco-disaster furniture would last a million years in a landfill, and the leftovers would probably last nearly as long. But the customers looked happy. I was the only malcontent there. Scott had even finished his tea.

"So what's it all about?" I asked.

"This." He reached into his coat pocket and produced a small, flat square of plastic. He laid it on the table and pushed it toward me. It was blue with some silvery metal parts. It looked vaguely like a technological soda cracker, something you might expect to find in the metallic jaws of a robotic parrot.

"What is it?" I picked it up and looked it over very closely.

"What is it? Is that a joke?"

"No."

"You can't really be that out of it."

"Apparently I can. Is it a new form of credit card? I've never had any credit, so I wouldn't know about it."

"It's a diskette. A computer diskette."

"Out of my field, I'm afraid. Technology and I have

never been on good terms. What's so special about it?"

Scott looked around in that surreptitious way that immediately alerts anyone interested that something clandestine is going on. Fortunately, no one was interested.

"I found this diskette. I think weird things are going on in my office."

"All office work is weird as far as I can see."

"I mean really weird. We even had a murder, did you know that?"

"A murder?" I had to admit that was weird.

"Her name was Marty Hancock. Her throat was cut."

Marty. Marty Hancock. Marty Luther. How had I managed to do that? It gave me the creeps, especially in view of Marty Hancock's grisly fate.

"I've got a clipping." He obligingly produced it. It was neatly cut out and labeled with the date at the top.

I looked at the clipping. "The paper says 'Martha.'"

"Yeah. But everybody called her Marty."

I scanned the article. Killed at her desk, no sign of a struggle. The killer had cut her throat. She was twenty-seven, a computer programmer. The company had offered a substantial reward for information. After these bare details came the sort of lurid information you learn to expect from the San Francisco papers. The basic facts were lurid enough, and I could see why Scott had shuddered at my mention of bloodstains. I shuddered myself.

"So?" I asked when I'd recovered my composure. "A white-collar murder. I'm surprised it doesn't happen more often. The invisible hand goes berserk."

"Carter, this is serious. It's scary."

"For the women in your office who like to work alone at nine at night, it's scary."

"This isn't some sex pervert. She was fully clothed."

Something about the disdainful tone of those last words intrigued me. "So you made an attempt at getting the late Ms. Hancock out of her clothes," I ventured. "That

wasn't in the papers."

"No. I mean that's..."

"That's off the record, shall we say. Don't worry. I won't notify your insignificant other that you had the hots for the deceased."

I reread the clipping while Scott wondered whether to make a protest. He didn't. When I looked up, the waitress stood by our table.

"Anything else for you?" she asked.

"No."

"More tea?" she asked, looking at my still-full cup.

I could see Scott about to say yes, so I said quickly, "Just the check." When she left, I said to Scott, "We can talk in the car. I've got to get out of here."

I couldn't take the place another minute. I kept telling myself it was just a cheap restaurant and not a metaphor. Just a place where people eat food that clogs their arteries and their bowels and their brains, and not a microcosm of everything I hated about America. I kept telling myself, but I didn't listen. I never do.

We left the restaurant and got in Scott's Volvo. We were in Oakland, a more or less halfway point between our respective residences. I lived in San Francisco, and Scott lived over the hill in Concord.

"Drive up in the hills," I said. Scott pulled out of the parking lot, and I let my mind wander back to the clipping. "Tell me about her. Was she attractive?"

"Yeah, but she could be sort of obnoxious."

"Then why did it mean so much to you to get into her pants?"

"It didn't." He waited for me to accept or deny that, but I said nothing. "Maybe it did. I don't know. I didn't actually make a pass at her or anything. But yeah, I wanted to. She was good-looking, but it was more than that. Maybe it was *because* she was obnoxious."

I knew what he meant. I've often thought that the perversity of sexual attraction explained a good deal of

the world's misery. The absurdity of it cheered me up.

"Okay, tell me about the diskette."

We were climbing into the hills now, the road dark and twisty. A slight mist glowed in the headlights, and the sky was a silky, white net that caught the light from below and tossed it gently back. I rolled down the window to breathe the night air and the smell of eucalyptus.

"There's a file on it. Wait. Let me start at the beginning."

"A novel and potentially useful idea."

"You'll never guess where I found it."

I couldn't resist. I made my voice deep and deadpan and said, "Somewhere in close proximity to coffee."

Fortunately the road was empty when Scott hit the brakes. The Volvo spun sideways, blocking both lanes. "Shit! Goddamn you, Carter! Don't fuck with me. You used to do that when we smoked weed. Goddamn." He pounded his fist on the steering wheel, then rested his head on it, swearing softly.

I checked the road in both directions, but no cars appeared. "Take it easy," I said. "I found a little piece of ground coffee stuck in a crack behind that silver thing."

Scott raised his head from the steering wheel. "You could've killed us. Jesus." He turned the car back up the hill and drove on slowly. "I'm nervous enough, with the murder and all."

I reached into my shirt pocket. "Want to smoke a joint?"

"No. Put it away. I don't even want to know you have it."

"Suit yourself. It'd calm you down, though."

"I'm calm," he said. Then, after a moment, "All right, I'm not calm. But a joint would make it worse."

"Okay. So what were you about to tell me?"

It was the day after Marty's murder, he told me, and the office was full of police. Most of the staff went home for the day or temporarily moved to another floor. Scott

worked as best as he could, trying to stay away from the action and the blood. Things returned to a semblance of normality by late afternoon, so he thought he might as well have some coffee and stay late. The coffee pots were empty, and he'd started to make more when he found the disk in the coffee tin. He pocketed the disk and forgot the coffee.

"There was only one file on the disk. A word processing document. I tried to open it, but the program asked me for a password. So I still don't know what's in the file."

"And why do you want to know?"

"Just to see what's on it," Scott answered lamely.

"Pull over here," I said.

We stopped in a parking area high in the hills. The Bay Area below us shone with its myriad lights, and the bay itself showed only as a dark void. "I can tell you what it probably says."

"What do you mean?" Scott was wary of more cheap conjuring tricks.

"Use your head. Who has access to the coffee room?"

"Everybody."

"And who makes the coffee?"

"Whoever wants it when the pot's empty. Except the first pot in the morning. I think it's Sandra who makes that one."

"The file says something like 'Dear Sandra. I yearn for you tragically. Meet me tonight at our special spot. Love and kisses, Cuddles.'"

Scott exhaled a brief laugh. "That's ridiculous. Sandra's fat and fifty."

"You'd be surprised at what the fat and fifty crowd can get up to." I felt a need to stick up for Sandra. She needed some romance in her life.

"I don't believe it."

"It might have been for someone else. It might even have been for you." I thought that an unlikely scenario.

A tryst with Scott would be arranged by a brief phone call followed by a confirming memo in triplicate.

"If it was for me, how come I didn't get the password?"

"Probably shyness on the part of your secret admirer. I bet it was from Sandra."

"Jesus. Don't gross me out."

I wanted to do just that, but I felt bad doing it at Sandra's expense, so I let up and looked at the view. Mist rose up the hillside in front of us—tiny, helpless particles of vapor scattered by the larger forces of nature.

"Anyway," Scott startled me out of my reverie, "I want to know what it says. If it's a love note, okay. But I'm trying to figure out what's going on."

"You should give up trying. Just accept that some things are bigger than you. We're just mist, buffeted by the breeze." I relaxed and imagined myself rising, flying over hillsides, brushing the highest branches of the trees.

"Carter, stop."

I stopped. I suddenly realized I had no idea why Scott was telling me this story.

"Scott, why are we here?"

"Don't start any of that meaning-of-life bullshit. You know I hate it."

"I wasn't getting metaphysical. I mean why are you telling me all this?"

He looked surprised. "I want you to find out what's in that file."

"Me? When it comes to computers, I don't even know where the on-off switch is. If there *is* an on-off switch."

"I know that. I want you to get somebody to do it. But completely secret. You always know people who are willing to do things that aren't quite...ethical."

What he meant was that I knew dope dealers and people who refused to pay taxes. I started to protest that these people might be breaking the law, but they were completely ethical, and that furthermore none of them knew anything about computers. Then I realized that I

knew someone who was exactly what Scott wanted.

"I can't do it."

"I'll pay you. You're still driving a cab, right? You need money like always, right?"

"Money doesn't interest me," I said, suddenly very interested.

"Two hundred dollars if you get into the file."

"I need more. Five hundred."

"Five hundred? Are you out of your mind?"

"I'd be out of my mind to ask for less. We might be talking about suppressing evidence in a murder case."

Scott shivered. "I can give you four. But only if you get into the file."

"Agreed. But I need expense money. Fifty bucks up front."

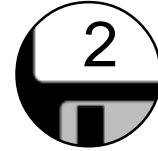
"All right." He switched on the dome light and took out his wallet. He counted out five tens. Even in the dim light, the paper shone with all the contradictions of the human condition. Green—the color of trees and oceans, the color of envy and jealousy, the color of human history, and the only thing that might grow in the brown desert of our future. I took the bills.

"I'll call you," I said, opening the door.

"Don't you want a ride to BART?"

"I'm going to float down."

I walked to the cliff edge and waited until I heard him drive away. I leaned out over the void, feeling the mist in my face and the possibilities of freedom. But I was too heavy to float. I started walking. It was cold, and I had a long way to go, and I didn't even have a light for my joint.



If you take the butt end of a two-piece pool cue and roll it across an uneven hardwood floor, the resulting noise, slight but irritating, will eventually rouse even a deep sleeper. My cat Mad Tom puts this unusual bit of knowledge to frequent use, as he did the morning after my meeting with Scott. I reached out and took the pool cue and tucked it under my pillow, but there really wasn't much point. It was time to get up.

Other than my books, Tom and the pool cue are my only possessions that have any sort of history. Mad Tom is about ten years old and goes back to when I still lived in Berkeley near the campus. Some fraternity boys in the building next to mine acquired a cat and named him Tom Cat, which they thought was very funny. Once the joke had run its course, they proceeded to ignore him. One fine day he fell out of their window, five floors up. No one saw him fall, and no one can even say that he didn't jump. The Greek lifestyle, after all, is not for the faint of heart.

He lay unconscious until I found him and took him to a vet. His right hind leg was considerably damaged, and he walks with a limp even now, a physical memory

of his encounter with academe. It could have been worse, I sometimes tell him. You could have been a PhD candidate.

When Tom returned from the vet, I waited for him to go home. He didn't. I waited for the fraternity boys to notice his absence. They didn't. Soon after, I moved to San Francisco, and Tom moved with me. He has medium-length grey hair and a white chin and bright black-and-yellow eyes. He's funny and affectionate and makes all the delightful noises cats make. He has a habit of seeing things that aren't there, or at least that aren't visible to humans, which is how I came to give him the moniker Mad Tom.

I dished out cat food for Tom and made myself reasonably presentable and walked to Twenty-fourth Street to wait for a bus to the Cal Cab lot. Most San Franciscans, including most drivers, think that the company name derives from California. In fact, it's short for Calloway, after Harry Calloway, the man who started the firm in the forties. I've never understood why he passed up the opportunity to call his business Calloway Cab, but maybe he didn't like music.

I got to the lot early enough to get a good cab, a Ford with less than 20,000 miles on the odometer. I took fares for a couple of hours, then I turned off the radio and drove to Santa Clara in Silicon Valley. I found the address I wanted and parked the cab.

"Nick? Is that you?" I asked when the door opened. I hadn't seen her recently, and she looked so different that I really wasn't sure. She was heavily made up: bright red lips, dark eyes, a pallor of powder on her cheeks. A broad swath of bare scalp ran behind her right ear. The rest of her hair was bundled over her left ear, held together by a clasp adorned with a grinning skull. The collar of her black T-shirt was so loose it exposed her tattooed biceps. She looked like the morning after the night of the living dead.

"Christ. You."

I recognized the voice at least. "What kind of greeting is that for a daughter to give her father?"

She smiled. "For this daughter and this father, it's the best you could expect. You might as well come in." She let me in and closed the door. "What the fuck do you want?"

What did I want? I wanted some technical advice, but seeing my daughter as an adult with her own apartment and her own life made me think of the question as something larger. The sentimental platitudes that came unbidden into my head were as unwelcome to me as they would have been to her. I pulled the diskette from my pocket.

"I've got a problem."

She softened immediately. Not at the prospect of her old dad needing help, but at the sight of the diskette. She took it from me. "What are you doing with this?" she asked. "I thought you were allergic to electronics."

"I am, actually. I'm helping a friend."

She looked at me suspiciously, as if she could see the money folded in my wallet. "So where do I fit in?"

"You enter stage right, the genius heroine of the show who solves the mystery and wins the hero's heart," I said, making our world a stage.

"Stuff the bullshit, Carter."

Exit Carter, chased by a bear. "Okay. There's a file on this diskette. I want to know what's in it, but I need a password, and I don't have it."

"Jesus," she said. "When you decide to get into something, you don't mess around. If you're looking for a cryptologist, I can't help you."

"I thought getting in where you aren't wanted is what you computer freaks did best."

"If you're talking about hacking, yeah. You're right. A little bit right. Hackers break into computers all the time. But they don't break codes. They steal passwords. Or

guess."

"How can a...hacker guess a password?"

"By knowing something about the people who use the system. Users aren't always real bright?"

She looked at me as she said it, but I realized she was only talking in the way young people talk, and the rising tone didn't mean she expected an answer.

"People use their initials as their passwords," she went on. "Or their birth dates. You'd probably use 'love' or 'LSD' or something like that. A lot of guys use their wives' names. Or maybe some babe they're fucking. Or wish they were fucking."

She waited for me to be shocked, but I refused to give her the satisfaction.

"I could give you a list of the most common passwords," she went on. "You have to match the password to the user, of course."

"Of course," I said with the vigorous assent of the hopelessly ignorant.

"That's for logging into a system. For a file, we just need a password. We might be able to guess it, but I doubt if we can decode it. Most applications use something more sophisticated than a substitution code. This is all going to get kind of technical. Do you want to go into it?"

"No. But I need to know what's on here if I can find out."

She shrugged. "We'll look at it."

The living room contained a jumble of what I assumed was computer equipment. I recognized the screens and the compact metal boxes and the keyboards. But the gaping wire-infested devices might have been anything from food processors to time bombs. Nick plugged the diskette into one of these and poked a few keys and looked at a screen. "It's an Alphabet document. That's a word processing program." She worked for a few seconds. "Yeah. It recognizes the document, and it wants a password. If I was a cryptologist, I'd read the raw data off the disk and

analyze it. We'd probably use another program, but I don't know much about that."

As she talked, her hands constantly moved from the keyboard to the strange plastic object that sat nearby, attached by a cord, like a spaceman to his mother ship. Words and images flashed on the screen. She was fluent in whatever alien language these machines talked.

"What do you mean 'raw data'?"

"Look at the sectors in the file," she said offhandedly. Then, remembering whom she was talking to, she tried to explain. "A disk is divided up into sectors. When you put data—words or numbers or whatever—into a file, you use one or more sectors. They may be together one after another, or they may be spread all over the disk. The operating system keeps track of them and remembers that they're all in one file. We talk to the Alphabet program, and it talks to the operating system. But you don't *have* to use Alphabet to read those sectors. You can read the file with a text editor if you want. You don't even have to use the operating system. You can bypass it and look at the sectors that make up your file, but the data would still be encoded. Too technical?"

"Way too technical. But tell me anyway, how do you bypass the operating system?" I pictured years of rigorous training in the hacker equivalent of a monastery.

"There are programs that do it." She named a program. It sounded like Sexpot.

"Sexpot?"

"Yeah. Secspot." She spelled it for me. "It stands for sector spot. We'd give Secspot the name of the file, or the sector number we wanted. Then we'd try to decode the data. If we had any idea how. But we may not have to."

"May not have to?"

"Yeah. I think I know what's in this file."

"You do?"

She pointed at the screen. "Bingo. That was easy enough."

"You got into it?"

"I don't need to. It's empty."

Empty. Would Scott pay for an empty file? The word made me think of empty pockets.

"What do you mean?" I asked weakly.

"Look." She pointed to different places on the screen as she explained. "Here's your file. S32D. That's the file's name on disk. This is the size of the file—432 bytes. That's characters to you technophobes. Now look at this file on this other disk. I just created it. I didn't key anything into it, I just saved it empty, using a password. See—432 bytes. Get it? Or is it too logical for you, Mr. Mystic?"

"I get it. All empty files are 432 whatever's."

"Bytes. With a y."

"Right. Bytes. And this file is 432 bytes. Therefore, this file is empty and Socrates is mortal."

"Socrates?"

"Never mind. It's too logical for you. Nick, you're a genius."

She snorted and tossed her head. The skull in her hair danced wickedly. "What, all of a sudden I can be a genius without studying a lot of boring novels and dead Chinamen?"

Without realizing I had left the solid shore of her approval, I found myself on the thin ice of her disdain.

"You may hate computers, but they can do something besides contemplate their navels, you know," she went on.

"Maybe you should tell me about it sometime," I said in what I hoped was a mollifying tone. "And I could recommend a good novel for you to read or tell you about Zen," I couldn't stop myself from adding.

"Not me. I'm zenophobic."

I laughed. "That's very good," I said, impressed with her spur-of-the-moment pun.

She crinkled her eyes in a puzzled impatience. "What's good? That I hate Zen?"

"Never mind," I said.

The bewilderment left her face, but she still looked slightly impatient.

"I guess I'd better go," I said.

Without hesitation, she retrieved my diskette and handed it to me. I followed her to the door, but I felt reluctant to leave. "I really appreciate your help with my problem."

"That's okay, Carter. I like problems. That kind anyway."

"Do you think having a father is a problem?"

She rolled her eyes and stepped away from me. "Carter. Don't get mushy. It doesn't suit you." She leaned against the wall. Behind her hung a poster that showed a lot of straight lines crossing at regular intervals. It looked like a road map of a city designed by some very anal planners. The caption told me it was a blow-up of a computer chip. Techno art. God help us.

"You know I don't want you to call me Dad or Father or whatever, but if you ever get the idea..."

"I think I'm getting the idea that I should call the police and tell them there's a strange man in my apartment." The smile on her lips hardly softened her features, defined as they were by the grinning death's head and the hardware dangling from her ears and the white expanse of her scalp.

"Okay, I'll go. Thanks for explaining the empty file." Saying the words made me realize I was still confused. "But if the file is empty, why does it have 432 bytes?"

She shrugged. "Just control data. Stuff so the program knows it's really an Alphabet document. Like, I don't know, maybe the table of contents in a book."

She opened the door, and I went out. "Nick," I said. "If you ever find yourself wanting to talk to a parent or have lunch with a parent or something, give me a call."

Again the smile was hard to discern in the punk-rocker paraphernalia. "Go fuck yourself. Dad." The door

slammed.

I sped back to the city wondering how Scott would react when he found out the file was empty. I decided to get the money before I told him. I turned on the cab radio when I hit South City. I got off the freeway at Army Street and got a flag outside the medical center at Army and Valencia—a four-dollar fare to Fifteenth and Harrison. The dispatcher called an airport fare from Sixteenth and Mission. I picked up the microphone, but another driver bingoed, indicating he was at that location. I doubted it, but there was nothing I could do.

I kept cruising and stayed away from downtown. Early in the day the fares downtown tend to be tourists, and the rides tend to be short. Some tourists tip big, but you have to wait for the kids to get in and out, and it's usually more trouble than it's worth.

Maybe that could apply to cab driving in general, I thought as I stopped for a fare at Twenty-fourth and Valencia. I checked the man out carefully as he got in. Crime is never far from your mind when you drive a cab, but lately a spate of kidnapping had made drivers more than usually paranoid. Drug dealers seemed to have hit on the idea of using cabdrivers as chauffeurs, forcing them at gunpoint to carry the dealers to pickups and deliveries. "Cabjacking," the papers had quickly dubbed it. Four drivers had been victimized, though no shooting had occurred. The man I picked up turned out to be law-abiding enough, and I dropped him at a pharmacy.

At 11:30 a man flagged me at California and Van Ness. He bundled his wife and two sons into the back seat, then got up front with me.

"We just rode the trolley," he said with a broad smile. "Now we want to go to the zoo."

I took them to the zoo without telling him that he'd just ridden a cable car and not a trolley. I didn't think the distinction would matter to him. After I dropped them off, I parked off of Sloat Boulevard and called Scott from

a pay phone.

"Scott, it's Carter."

"Carter. Hey. How's it going?"

"I took your disk to an expert," I said with a touch of impatience.

He immediately canned the small talk and lowered his voice. "That was quick. So what's the story?"

"It's complicated. I'll tell you when we meet." Preferably after I have the three hundred and fifty dollars, I didn't add. "When do you want to get together?"

He thought for a second. "The sooner the better. After I get the disk, I'll still have to go to the police."

"The police?"

"Yeah. They'll want to know about whatever's in that file."

"Scott, there's nothing in the file. It's empty." My reluctance to be involved with the police turned a few hundred dollars into a trivial matter.

He thought for a second before he said, "I don't know what else to do. I mean, it's got to be evidence."

I sighed. "I don't see how it can be evidence of anything. But it's your disk; you do what you want. Just keep my name out of it."

"I can do that," he answered.

"So let's get it over with. Where do you want to meet?"

"I drove in today, so why don't I just meet you where you are now? Or any place convenient."

"I'm way the hell out at the zoo. Do you want to come out here?"

"Sure."

"Okay," I said. "Why don't we meet at the beach? Do you know where Fort Funston is?"

"I don't think so."

I told him how to get to Fort Funston, a small park on the ocean. He painstakingly repeated my instructions back to me word for word.

Just as I got in the front seat of the cab, a woman got

in the back and barked out her destination. I hesitated. It's against the law for a cabdriver to turn down a fare under most circumstances, but especially once the person actually gets in the cab, or "gains possession" as the ordinance puts it. Most drivers ignore the ordinance, and most stranded passengers don't bother to file a complaint. But in my experience, the ones most likely to complain are well-to-do women like the one I was looking at now. Her makeup was as thick as her fur coat, and her sour expression made it clear that money doesn't buy happiness. If I tossed her out, I faced a possible seven-hundred-dollar fine. I started the engine and lowered the flag.

She gave me an address west of Twin Peaks, but she had me stop at a liquor store on the way. She entertained herself there for a good ten minutes and returned clutching an oversized bottle to her oversized bosom. When we reached her address, she paid me and gave me a reasonable tip. I watched her make her way along the walk through the soft, green grass up to the front door that would probably be opened by a servant, and I wondered what in the name of God she'd been doing at the zoo.

I saw Scott's Volvo as I pulled into the Fort Funston lot. I parked opposite him and got out of the cab. I could see him through the back window, slouched against the door in an uncharacteristically relaxed pose. His worries about the disk and the murder seemed to have vanished. I hopped into the front seat and turned to him.

"Okay, Scott..."

But I couldn't finish the greeting. And he couldn't answer. I was right in thinking that his troubles had left him. They were far from his mind, as was everything else. I had no doubt he was dead. His eyes gaped, wide open and unblinking, and there was a bloody hole in his chest. Scott was dead. He'd been shot, murdered, and I was staring into his dull, blind eyes. I felt my blood pressure fall and the contents of my stomach threaten to rise. I turned away from the body and put my head in my

hands. I didn't want to pass out, I didn't want to throw up. I wanted to leave. I wanted to get somewhere else so fast I would think I had dematerialized.

Gradually, I got my head and guts under control. I couldn't slow my heartbeat, but I had to get control of my thoughts and figure out if I was in any danger. The parking lot held about fifteen cars. I couldn't see any people on the lot or on the boardwalk that led to the cliff. Hikers strolled in the distance, and hang-gliders drifted over the ocean, but they posed no threat.

Threat? What threat was I worried about? A murderer doesn't hang around the scene of the crime, I assured myself. Unless he's looking for a second person, a discordant voice in the back of my head added. If the killer had picked Scott for a reason, that reason might be the disk in my pocket.

This internal dialogue was pointless. I opened the door, and suddenly a car started up. I closed the door and locked it. A black Volkswagen pulled out of a parking space to my left. I slouched down in my seat, covering my face with my hand. The black car crossed behind the Volvo and came to a stop. I saw Scott's keys in the ignition. I could drive away, but I'd have to dump his body onto the pavement. I steeled myself, preparing to slide into the driver's seat, but the Volkswagen suddenly accelerated toward the highway.

I didn't waste any time getting out of the car and into my cab. I picked up the microphone to get the dispatcher to call the police. And then what? Imagining the long interviews with the police was enough to make me put down the microphone. I realized that I was now a small part of the suspicious activity going on in Scott's office. Two murders and a mysterious hidden disk. And I had the disk. If my name got into the papers, Scott's killer might come looking for me. And one day I might pick up a passenger and take a long drive for no compensation.