

  
ONE  


*Brother Fire*

The fog lay close over San Francisco the morning the homeless gathered in the park to cremate Theophilus.

Brother Erasmus had chosen the site, the small baseball diamond in the western half of Golden Gate Park. Only one or two of the men and women who came together recognized the macabre irony in the site's location, which adjoined the barbecue pits, and wondered if Brother Erasmus had done it deliberately. It was his style, to be sure.

The first of the park's residents to wake that gray and dripping January morning was Harry. His awakening was abrupt as always, more a matter of being launched from sleep by the ghosts in his head than

it was a true waking up. One moment he was snoring peacefully; the next he snorted, and then there was a brief struggle with the terrifying confines of the bedroll before he flung it off and scrambled heavily upright to crash in blind panic through the shrubs. After half a dozen steps his brain began to make its connections, and after three more he stopped, bent over double to cough for a while, and then turned back to his bed beneath the rhododendrons. He methodically loaded his duffel bag with the possessions too valuable to risk leaving behind—the photograph of his wife and their long-dead son taken in 1959, one small worn book, a rosary, the warm woolen blanket some kind person had left (he was certain) for him, folded on their front steps—and began to close the duffel bag, then stopped, pulled it open again, and worked a hand far, far down into it. Eventually his fingers closed on the texture they sought, and he pulled out a necktie, a wadded length of grubby silk with an eye-bruising pattern that had been popular in the sixties. He draped it around the back of his neck, adjusted the ends in front, and began the tricky loop-and-through knot with hands composed of ten thumbs. The third time the slippery fabric escaped his grasp, he cursed, then looked around guiltily. Putting an expression of improbable piety onto his face, he returned to the long-unused motions. The fifth try did it. He pulled the tie snug against the outside collars of the two shirts he wore, then after a moment of thought bent again to the duffel bag. This time he did not have to dig any farther than his forearm before encountering the comb, as orange as the tie and almost as old. He ran the uneven teeth through his thin hair, smoothed the result down with spit-wet

palms, straightened his wrinkled tie with the panache of an investment banker, and pulled the top of the duffel bag shut.

Harry took a final look around his cavellike shelter beneath the shrubbery, swung the bag over his right shoulder, and pushed his way back out into the clearing. He paused only to pick up the three dead branches he had leaned against the tree the night before; then, branches upraised in his left hand, he turned west, deeper into the park.

Scotty was awake now, too, thanks to Harry's convulsive coughing fit 150 feet away. Scotty was not an early riser. He lay for some time, listening through a stupor of sleep and booze to the preparations of his neighbor. Finally Harry left, and the silence of dripping fog and cars on Fulton Street lulled him back toward sleep.

But Theophilus was your friend, he told himself in disgust; the least you can do is say good-bye to him. His hand in its fingerless glove crept out from the layers of cardboard and cloth he was swaddled in, closed on the neck of the bottle that lay beside his head, and drew it back in. The mound that was Scotty writhed about for a moment; gurgles were followed by silence; finally came a great weary sigh. Scotty evolved from the mound, scratched his scalp and beard thoroughly, drank the last of the cheap wine against the chill of the morning, and then with a great heaving and crashing hauled his grocery cart out of the undergrowth.

Scotty did not bother with self-beautification, just set his weight against what had once been a Safeway trolley and headed west. However, he walked with his eyes on the ground, occasionally stopping

and bending down stiffly to pick up pieces of wood, which he then arranged on top of his other possessions. He seemed to prefer small pieces, but he had a sizable armful by the time he reached the baseball diamond.

As he went under the Nineteenth Avenue overpass, which was already humming with the early bridge traffic, Scotty was joined by Hat. Hat did not greet him—not aloud, at any rate—but nodded in his amiable way and fell in at Scotty's side. Hat almost never spoke; in fact, he had received his name only because of the headgear he always wore. Brother Erasmus might know his real name—Harry had once said that he'd seen the two men in deep conversation—but no one else did. Hat migrated about the city. For the last few weeks, he had taken to sleeping near the Stow Lake boathouse. Today's hat was a jaunty tweed number complete with feather, rescued from a bin outside a health-food store; it was marred only by three small moth holes and a scorch mark along the back brim. He also wore a Vietnam-era army backpack slung over his shoulder. In his right hand he held a red nylon gym bag that he'd found one night in an alley. (He had discarded most of the burglary tools it contained as being too heavy, though the cash it held had been useful.) In his left hand he clutched the pale splintery slats of a broken-up fruit crate. His waist-length white beard had been neatly brushed and he wore a cheery yellow primrose, liberated from a park flowerbed the previous afternoon, in his lapel.

From across the park the homeless came, moved by a force most of them could neither have understood nor articulated. Had you asked, as the police

later did, they could have said only that they came together because Brother Erasmus had asked them to. That good gentleman, though, despite appearing both lucid and palpably willing to help, proved as impossible to communicate with as if he had spoken a New Guinean dialect.

And so, despite their lack of understanding, they came: Sondra from the Haight, wearing her best velvet; Ellis from Potrero Street, muttering and shaking his head (an indication more of synapse damage than of disapproval); Wilhemena from her habitual residence near the Queen Wilhemena Tulip Garden; her neighbor Doc from the southern windmill; the newlyweds Tomás and Esmerelda from their home beneath the bridge near the tennis court. Through the cultivated wilderness of John McLaren's park they came, to the baseball diamond where Brother Erasmus, John, and the late, lamented Theophilus awaited them. Each one carried some twigs or branches or scraps of wood; all of them tried to assemble before the sky grudgingly lightened into morning; the entire congregation came, each adding his or her wood to the pile Brother Erasmus had made beneath the stiff corpse, and then standing back to await the match.

Of course, there were other people in the park that morning. Cars passed through on Nineteenth Avenue, on Transverse Drive, on JFK Drive, but if they even noticed the park residents drifting through the fog, they thought nothing about it.

Other early users, however, did notice. The spandex-and-Nike-clad runners from the neighboring Richmond and Sunset districts had begun to trickle into the park at first light. Committed runners these,

men and women who knew the value of sweat, unlike the mere joggers who would appear later in the day. They thudded along roads and paths, keeping a wary, if automatic, eye out for unsavory types who might beg, or mug, or certainly embarrass. It was actually relatively rare to see one of the homeless up and around at this hour, though they were often to be glimpsed, huddled among their possessions in the undergrowth or, occasionally, upright but apparently comatose.

This morning, though, the natives were restless. Several runners glanced at their chronographs to check that it was indeed their usual time, two or three of them wondered irritably if they were going to have to change where they ran, and some saw the sticks the tatterdemalion figures carried and abruptly shied away to the other side of the road.

The morning's injury (aside from the blow that had downed poor Theophilus—but then, that was from the previous day) happened to a bright young Stanford MBA, a vice president's assistant from the Bank of America. He was halfway through his daily five-mile stint, running easily down Kennedy Drive past the lake, the morning financial news droning through the headphones into his ears and the thought of an ominous meeting in four hours' time looming large in his consciousness, completely unprepared for the apparition of a six-foot-four bearded lunatic crashing out of the bushes with a huge club raised above his head. The MBA stumbled in sheer terror, fell, rolled, struggled to rise, his arms folded to protect his skull—and watched his would-be attacker give him a puzzled glance and finish hauling the eucalyptus bough out from the bushes, then walk away with

the butt end of it on his shoulder and the dead leaves swishing noisily and fragrantly behind him.

By the time the trembling jogger had hobbled painfully onto Park Presidio, hitched two rides home, iced his swollen ankle, and telephoned the police, the assembly in the glen was complete: some two dozen homeless men and women, arrayed in a circle around a waist-high heap of twigs and branches, into which was nestled a small stiff body. They were singing the hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful," painfully out of tune but with enthusiasm, when Brother Erasmus set the match to the pyre.

The headline on the bottom of page one of that afternoon's *Examiner* read: HOMELESS GATHER TO CREMATE BELOVED DOG IN GOLDEN GATE PARK.



Three weeks later, his breath huffing in clouds and the news announcer still jabbering against his unhearing ears, the physically recovered but currently unemployed former Bank of America vice presidential assistant was slogging his disconsolate way alongside Kennedy Drive in the park when, to his instant and unreasoning fury, he was attacked for a second time by a branch-wielding bearded man from the shrubbery. Three weeks of ego deflation blew up like a rage-powered air bag: He instantly took four rapid steps forward and clobbered the unkempt head with the only thing he carried, which happened to be a Walkman stereo. Fortunately for both men, the case collapsed the moment it made contact with the wool cap, but the maddened former bank assistant stood over the terrified and hungover former real estate bro-

ker and pummeled away with his crumbling handful of plastic shards and electronic components.

A passing commuter saw them, snatched up her car telephone, and called 911.

Three minutes later, the eyes of the two responding police officers were greeted by the sight of a pair of men seated side by side on the frost-rimed grass: One was shocked, bleeding into his shaggy beard, and even at twenty feet stank of cheap wine and old sweat; the other was clean-shaven, clean-clothed, and wore a pair of two-hundred-dollar running shoes on his feet. Both men were weeping. The runner sat with his knees drawn up and his head buried in his arms; the wino had his arm across the other man's heaving shoulders and was patting awkwardly at the runner's arm in an obvious attempt at reassurance and comfort.

The two police officers never were absolutely certain about what had happened, but they filled out their forms and saw the two partners in adversity safely tucked into the ambulance. Just before the door closed, the female officer thought to ask why the homeless man had been dragging branches out of the woods in the first place.

By the time the two officers pounded up the pathway into the baseball clearing, the oily eucalyptus and redwood in this second funeral pyre had caught and flames were roaring up to the gray sky in great billows of sparks and burning leaves. It was a much larger pile of wood than had been under the small dog Theophilus three weeks earlier, but then, it had to be.

On the top of this pyre lay the body of a man.

◆  
TWO  
◆

*The Little Brothers lived at the  
Portiuncula, without comforts,  
without possessions, eating anything  
they could get and sleeping anyhow  
on the ground.*

"God Almighty," muttered Kate Martinelli, "what'll you bet Jon does a barbecue tonight."

She and Al Hawkin stood watching the medical examiner's men package the body for transport. The typical pugilist's pose of a burned body was giving the men problems, but they finally got the fists tucked in and loaded the body onto the van. The cold air became almost breathable.

"You know," remarked Al, squinting up at a tree, "that's the first joke I've heard you make in—what, six months?"

"It wasn't a joke."

"It'll pass for one."

"Life has not been funny, Al."

"No," he agreed. "No. How is Lee?"

"She's doing really well. She finally found a wheelchair that's comfortable, and the new physical therapist seems good. She wants to try Lee in a walker in a week or so. Don't mention it, though, if you talk to Lee. She'll want to do it then and there."

"I'll remember."

"Did I tell you she's started seeing clients again?"

"No! Now, that is good news."

"Only two of them, and on different days, but it gives her a feeling of real life. It's made a hell of a difference."

"I can imagine. Do you think she'd like a visitor?"

"She always loves to see you, Al."

"I got the impression it tired her out."

"Tires her for that day, cheers her up for the next two. A good trade. Just call before you go; she doesn't deal too well with surprises."

"I'll call. Tomorrow, if I can swing it. I'll take her some flowers."

"Don't do that. Lee hates cut flowers."

"I know. It'll give us something to argue about."

"So thoughtful, Al."

"That's me."

"Well," said Kate, pulling her notebook and pen from a jacket pocket, "back to work."

"Martinelli?" She stopped and turned to look at her partner. "It's good to have you back."

Kate ducked her head in acknowledgment and walked quickly away.

Al Hawkin watched her walk toward the motley congregation of homeless, her spine straight and her

attitude as quietly self-contained as ever, and found himself wondering why the hell she had come back.

The last months must have seared themselves straight down into the bones of her mind, he reflected, but aside from the increased wariness in her already-wary eyes, she did not show it. Oh, yes—and the white-eyed terror with which she regarded the three newspaper reporters who slouched behind the police tapes.

Last spring the media had seized her with sheer delight, a genuine San Francisco lesbian, a police-woman, whose lover had been shot and left dramatically near death by a sociopath who was out to destroy the world-famous artist Eva Vaughn—the combination of high culture, pathos, and titillation were irresistible, even for serious news media. For a couple of weeks, Kate's squarish face and haunted dark eyes looked out from the pages of supermarket scandal sheets and glossy weekly news journals, and ABC did a half-hour program on homosexuality in the police force.

And while this jamboree was going on, while the hate mail was pouring in and the Hall of Justice switchboard was completely jammed, Kate lived at the hospital, where her lover teetered on the edge of death. It was six weeks before Kate knew Lee would live; another six weeks passed before the doctors voiced a faint hope that she might regain partial sensation and a degree of control below the waist.

At this juncture Hawkin had done something that still gave him cold sweats of guilt when he thought about it: Guided by an honest belief that work would be the best therapy for Kate, he had taken ruthless advantage of her newfound optimism

and yanked her back onto the force, into their partnership, and straight into the unparalleled disaster of the Raven Morningstar murder case. And of course, when the case blew up in blood and scandal back in August, the media had been ecstatic to find Kate right in the middle. That she was one of the few out of the cast of dramatic personae not culpable for any fault greater than a lack of precognition mattered not. She was their prize, their Inspector Casey, and she bled publicly for the nation's entertainment.

Why she had not resigned after the Morningstar case, Hawkin could not understand. She hadn't put her gun inside her mouth because Lee needed her; she hadn't had a serious mental breakdown for the same reason. Instead, she had clawed herself into place behind a desk and endured five months of paper shuffling and that special hatred and harassment that a quasimilitary organization reserves for one of their own who has exposed the weakness of the whole. Two weeks ago, pale but calm, she had appeared at Hawkin's desk and informed him that if he still wanted her as his partner, she was available.

He held an enormous respect for this young woman, a feeling he firmly kept from her, and just as firmly demonstrated before others in the department.

However, he still didn't know why the hell she had come back.



At four o'clock that afternoon, across town at the Hall of Justice, the question had not been answered so much as submerged beneath the complexities of the case.

"So," Hawkin stretched out in his chair and tried to rub the tiredness from the back of his neck. The coffee hadn't helped much. "Have you managed to make any sense of this mess?" He might have been referring to the case in general, or to the unruly drift of papers covering the desk's surface, which now included roughly transcribed interviews, printouts of arrest records for the people involved, as well as the records from the earlier dog incident. This last report had been couched in phrases that made clear what the two investigating officers had thought of their odd case, wandering as it did between a recognition of its absurdity and downright sarcasm at the waste of their time. The recorded interview with the dog's owner had been perfunctory and less than helpful, and Hawkin's interview with the officer involved had stopped short of scathing only because he knew that his own reaction would have been much the same as the younger man's.

"A bit, but we have to find this man Erasmus. He organized the cremation of the dog last month, though everyone was quite clear—those who were clear, that is, if you know what I mean—that he wasn't here this time. They seem to have decided that what was good enough for the dog was good enough for the dog's owner. Crime Scene's going back tonight to check the whole area with Luminol, but it looks like one patch of blood that bled slowly and stopped with death rather than blood pouring out from, say, a knife wound. Could have been shot, but Luis, one of the men who found him, said his head looked bashed. And of course we know what happened to every loose stick in the whole damned park. Sorry? Oh, yes, I'll have another cup, thanks.

"Where was I?" Kate thumbed through her notes a moment. "Okay, who found the body. Harry Radovich and Luis Ortiz both claim they saw him first, but they were together, and their stories mesh—though Harry's is a little clearer in the details. They saw his kit abandoned behind a bench at about six P.M., went looking for him, and found him. You saw the place, about three hundred yards from where they tried to burn him this morning. At first they thought he was asleep, lying face-down, slightly tilted onto his right side, under that tree with the branches that touch the ground. They were worried, seeing him lying on the ground just in his clothes, and thought he might be sick, this flu that's going around. So they shook his legs, got no response, pushed their way in and turned him on his back. There was dried blood covering the right side of his head and face, his eyeballs were slightly sunken and dry-looking, the corneas cloudy, his facial skin dark with no blanching under pressure, and he was getting pretty stiff in his upper body."

"A couple of drunks told you all that?" asked Hawkin, turning from the coffee machine to look at her in astonishment.

"Luis was a medic in Vietnam for three years; he knows what a dead body looks like."

"So you think his judgment's good on this?"

"Large grain of salt, but he swears he didn't get truly smashed until after finding the body, and he seems shaky now but sober. His testimony is worth keeping in mind, that's all, until we hear the post-mortem results."

"Which probably won't tell us much about time of death unless the stomach contents are good."

"Any idea when they'll do the postmortem?"

"First thing in the morning."

"Good," she said evenly, as if talking about the arrival of a tidy packet of information instead of the participation in an ordeal of burned flesh and the smell of power saws cutting through bone.

"Meanwhile, though," he said, "what are we talking here? Middle-aged alcoholic on a night just above freezing, how many hours of rigor?"

"John didn't drink. They all agree on that. Or use drugs."

"Okay. So assuming they recognize liver mortis when they see it, which I doubt, that'd put it, oh, say some time before noon on Tuesday morning. Just as a guideline to get us started."

"I agree, though I'd lean to the later end of that. His body looked on the thin side."

As Hawkin had studiously avoided any close examination of the remains, he couldn't argue.

"Any of them have a last name for him, any ID?" he asked.

"Nope. They just knew him as John."

"Theophilus's owner."

"Who?"

"The dog. Means 'one who loves God,' I think."

"What is this, a mission to the homeless? Lover of God and Brother Erasmus. Batty names." Kate snorted.

"Erasmus was a philosopher, wasn't he? Wrote *The Praise of Folly*. Seventeenth century? Sixteenth?"

"I'll take your word for it. Anyway, this Erasmus is across the Bay somewhere, Berkeley or Oakland, not due back until Sunday, and they were afraid the body would smell, so they didn't wait for him to get



back. Just hauled in every scrap of wood they could find, shoved his body on, added a few bottles of various flammable liquids, and lighted it. With prayers, read by Wilhemena and one of the men. Rigor mortis may have been beginning to wear off, by the way, at six this morning. His head was floppy when they moved him onto the woodpile."

"Right. Let's hang on to Harry, Luis, and Wilhemena, at least until we get the postmortem report to give us a cause of death. Charge them with improper disposal of a body, interfering with an investigation, whatever you like. The rest of them can go. And we might as well go, too. There's not much more we can do until the results come in, except find the good Brother Erasmus. You want to do that?"

"Tonight?"

"Tomorrow. I'll take the postmortem."

How interesting, Hawkin thought. I've only worked with Martinelli for a total of a few weeks, and most of that was months ago, but I can still read her face. She's trying to decide if she should insist on taking the shit job, to prove herself capable. No, can't quite do it. Can't quite admit she's relieved that I took it, either.

Kate was still wrestling with gratitude when Hawkin's phone rang.

"Hawkin," he said, and listened for a minute. "I am." Another longish pause, then: "Sure, bring her up." He hung up and looked at Kate. "There's a homeless woman downstairs, came in with information on the cremation."

◆  
THREE  
◆

*. . . Water his sister,  
pure and clean and inviolate.*

The woman who entered a few minutes later wasn't quite what Kate had expected. She was quite tidy, for one thing, her graying hair gathered into a snug bun at the nape of her neck; her eyes darted nervously about, but they were clear, and her spine was straight. She wore the inevitable eclectic jumble, long skirt with trouser cuffs underneath, blouse, vest, knitted shawl, and rings on five fingers, but she wrapped her clothes around her with dignity and sat without hesitation in the chair Hawkin indicated. Kate turned another chair around to the desk and took out her pen. Hawkin looked down at the paper he'd just been

given and then up at her, a smile of singular sweetness on his rugged face.

"Your name is Beatrice?" he asked, giving the name two syllables.

"Beatrice," she corrected, giving it the Italian four.

"Any last name?"

"Not for many years."

"What was it then?"

"The men downstairs asked me that, too."

"And you didn't give it to them."

"I was not impressed by the manners of your police department."

"I apologize for them. Their youth does not excuse them."

She studied him thoughtfully.

"Forgive them; for they know not what they do. That's what Brother Erasmus would say, I suppose."

"Who is this Brother Erasmus?" he asked her.

"Jankowski."

"Erasmus Jankowski?" Hawkin said, polite but amazed.

"No! I hardly know the man," Beatrice protested. Kate rested her elbow on the desk and pinched the bridge of her nose for a moment. "Well, no, I admit I do know him, as well as anyone you brought in this morning, which isn't saying much."

"It's your last name, then? Beatrice Jankowski?"

"You can see why I gave up the last part."

"Oh, I don't know," said Hawkin, rising to gallantry. "It has a certain ring to it."

"Like a funeral toll," she said expressively. Hawkin abandoned his flirtation.

"What do you know about what happened in

Golden Gate Park this morning, Miss—is it Miss Jankowski?"

"Call me Beatrice. I told them they were imbeciles, but even men who fry their brains on cheap wine don't listen to women."

"You tried to dissuade them . . . from the cremation."

"There is a difference between a man and a dog, after all."

"You were there when the dog was cremated—what was it, three or four weeks ago?" Hawkin asked.

"That had a certain beauty," Beatrice said wistfully. "It was appropriate. It was also—well, perhaps not strictly legal, but hardly criminal. Wouldn't you agree?" she asked, and blinked her eyes gently at Al Hawkin. He avoided the question.

"Did you know the dead man?"

"I knew the dog, quite well."

"And the man?"

"Oh dear. He was . . ." For the first time Beatrice Jankowski looked uncomfortable. "You don't really want to know about him."

"I do, you know."

She met his eyes briefly, looked down at her strong fingers with their swollen knuckles, twisting and turning one ring after another, and sighed.

"Yes, I suppose you do. I'd rather talk about the dog."

"Tell us about the dog first, then," Hawkin relented. Relief blossomed on the woman's weathered face and her hands lay still.

"He was a real sweetheart, white, with a black patch over his left eye. His coat looked wiry, but he was actually quite soft, picked up foxtails terribly.

John—that's his owner—had to brush him every day. Very intelligent, particularly when you consider the size of his skull. I saw him cross the road once, looking both ways first."

"So how did he die?"

"We . . . They . . . No one saw. He must have made a mistake crossing the road. John found him, in the morning. He'd hit his head on something."

"Or something had hit him." She nodded. "Or kicked him." Her face contracted slowly and her fingers began to wring each other over and over.

"How did John die?"

"I don't have any idea. I didn't even see him."

"How did you hear about his death?"

"Mouse told me late last night. He was sorting through the bins behind a restaurant on Stanyon Street."

"Which one is Mouse?"

"They call him Mouse because he used to be in computers, before his breakdown. Lovely man. His other name is Richard, I believe."

"Richard Delgado. Tall black man, hair going gray, short beard?"

"Is that his last name? Delgado. What a lovely sound."

"What time did he tell you about John's death?"

In answer, the woman pushed her left sleeve up her arm and looked eloquently at the bare wrist.

"Roughly what time, then?" Hawkin asked patiently.

"Time," she mused. "Time takes on rather a different aspect on the streets. However, I do remember that the dress shop was closed, but the bookstore was

still open, so that would make it between nine and eleven. Is it of any importance to your investigation?"

"Probably not." Beatrice giggled, and Hawkin gave her a smile. "But you didn't go to the—what did they call it? The cremation?"

"I did not. I told Mouse then and there he was a cretin and a dunderhead, and that he should tell Officer Michaels about John."

"Michaels is one of the local patrolmen?"

"He's a hunk."

"Sorry?" Hawkins asked, startled at the unlikely word.

"He is. Gorgeous legs, just the right amount of hair on them. Don't tell him I said anything, though. He might be embarrassed."

Kate thought she recognized the description.

"Is this one of the bicycle patrol officers?" she asked.

"Gorgeous," Beatrice repeated in agreement. Al Hawkin's mouth twitched.

"But you didn't report John's death?" he asked.

"It was not my place."

"You knew they were planning on burning the body first thing in the morning."

"Mouse found a half-empty bottle of paint thinner and asked me if it would burn. And I saw Mr. Lazari at the grocer's giving Doc and Salvatore a couple of old wooden crates. I told him, too."

"Mr. Lazari?"

"Of course not. He's quite sensible."

"You told Doc. That John was dead?"

"Inspector, are you listening to me?"

"I am trying, Ms. Jankowski. Beatrice."

"Ah, you are tired, of course. I apologize for keep-

ing you. No, I told Doc that he and Harry and the rest were a parcel of half-wits and were going to find themselves in trouble. I told them Brother Erasmus would be unhappy. Doc listened; Salvatore didn't. He even had a Bible, although I didn't think much of his choice of readings. Song of Songs is hardly funereal."

"Salvatore had the Bible? So Salvatore led the . . . funeral service."

"I was surprised, too, considering."

"Considering what, Beatrice?"

"Well, you know."

"Actually, I don't."

"Oh, of course, how silly of me. You never met the man."

"Salvatore Benito? I spoke with him earlier."

She sat in her chair and gave him a look of sad disappointment.

"Or do you mean John? No, I never met him."

"Lucky old you," she muttered.

"You didn't like John?"

"He did not deserve a dog like Theophilus."

"That surprises me. The others seemed to think he was a nice guy."

"One may smile, and smile, and be a villain. Did Erasmus say that, or did I read it somewhere? Oh dear, I am getting old."

"John was friendly on the surface but not when you got to know him? Is that what you mean?"

"I did not know him," she said firmly. "Unfortunately, he knew me. But he couldn't make me go to his funeral, and now he can't—" She caught herself, looked down at her hands, and twisted her rings

before shooting a chagrined glance at the two detectives. "He was not a nice man."

Hawkin leaned back in his chair and studied her.

"He was blackmailing you?" he suggested.

"That's a very ugly word."

"It's an ugly thing."

"I didn't like it, but it wasn't anything nasty. Maybe a wee bit nasty," she amended. "Just a sort of encouragement, to make me do things I otherwise might not have."

"Such as?"

"They were such big shops, they could afford to lose a bit to pilfering."

"He had you shoplifting for him?"

Her head came up and she flushed in anger.

"Inspector! How could you think that of me? I would never! There's a world of difference between actually doing something like that and just not . . . tattling."

"I see. You witnessed John shoplifting and he made you keep silent," Hawkin translated.

"After that he would show me things he'd taken. He knew I didn't like it, that it made me . . . uncomfortable."

"Did he blackmail others?"

"It wasn't really blackmail," she protested. "He never wanted anything. It was just a sort of . . . control thing. He liked to see people squirm."

"Who were these others?"

"I've only known him for two years."

"Their names?" he asked gently.

"I . . . don't know for sure. I wondered, because there were a couple of men he seemed friendly with who suddenly seemed to be uncomfortable around

him and then moved away. One of them was named Maguire—I think that was his last name—and then last summer a pleasant little Chinese man named Chin.”

“Any who didn’t move away?”

“Well, I . . .”

“Salvatore, perhaps?”

“It did seem very odd, him conducting the funeral like that, when he’s never been all that close to Brother Erasmus.”

“Was John? Close to Brother Erasmus, I mean?”

“He thought he was.”

“But you felt Brother Erasmus was keeping some distance?” Kate was very glad that Al seemed to be following this woman’s erratic line of thought, more like a random series of stepping-stones than a clear path.

“Brother Erasmus has no friends.”

“But John thought he was Erasmus’s friend?” Hawkin persisted.

“Undoubtedly. He always steps in when Brother Erasmus is away. Stepped.”

“Do you think John was blackmailing Erasmus?”

“I don’t think that is actually his name.”

“John? Or Erasmus?”

“Why, both, come to think of it.”

“Was John blackmailing Brother Erasmus?”

“Brother Erasmus isn’t the sort to be blackmailed.”

“Do you think John was trying?”

“Oh, Inspector, you are so pushy!”

“That’s my job, Beatrice.”

“You’re as bad as John was, in a way, though much nicer with it, not so sort of slimy.”

“Do you think—”

“I don’t know!” she burst out unhappily. “Yes, all right, it seemed an unlikely friendship, partnership, liaison, what have you. But Brother Erasmus is not the sort to submit to overt blackmail.”

“But covert blackmail?” Hawkin seized on her word.

“I . . . I wondered. There was a sort of—oh, how to describe it?—a manipulative intimacy about John’s attitude toward Erasmus, and in turn Erasmus—Brother Erasmus—seemed to be . . . I don’t know. Watching him, maybe. Yes, I suppose that’s it. John would kind of sidle up to Erasmus as if they shared a great secret, and Erasmus would draw himself up and, without actually stepping back, seem to be stopping himself from moving away.”

Considering the source, it was a strikingly lucid picture of a complex relationship, and Kate felt she knew quite a bit about both of the men involved. She continued with the motions of note-taking until Hawkin finally broke the silence.

“Tell me about the man Erasmus.”

“You haven’t met him yet?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Oh, you’d know it if you had. He’s a fool!” she said proudly, varying her terms of derision to include a monosyllable.

“He’s a sort of informal leader of the homeless people around Golden Gate Park?”

“Only for things like the funeral.”

“John’s funeral?”

“I told you, Inspector, he wasn’t there. He brought us together, said words over Theophilus, and lighted the pyre. Today’s lunacy would never have

happened on a Sunday or Monday, but instead those morons Harry and Salvatore and Doc—and Wilhemena! God, she's the worst of them—decided they could say words as well as he could. I should have insisted, I know," she admitted sadly. "There's not a one of them playing with a full deck."

"And Brother Erasmus is a bad as the others, you said."

"I never!" she said indignantly.

"But you did. You called him a fool."

"A fool, certainly."

"But the others are fools, too?" asked Hawkin. He spoke with the caution of a man feeling for a way in the dark, but his words were ill-chosen, and Beatrice went rigid, her eyes narrowing in a rapid reassessment of Inspector Al Hawkin.

"They most certainly are not. They haven't any sense at all."

Kate gave up. The woman's occasional appearance of rationality was obviously misleading. Even Hawkin looked lost.

"I think we should talk with your Brother Erasmus," he said finally.

"I'm sure he'll straighten things out for you," Beatrice agreed. "Although you might find it difficult to talk with him."

"Why is that?"

"I told you, he's a fool."

"But he sounds fairly sensible to me."

"Of course. Some of them are."

"Some of whom?"

"Fools, of course."

Kate was perversely gratified to see that finally Al

was beginning to grit his teeth. She'd begun to think she was out of practice.

"And where is this foolish Brother now?" he growled.

"I told you, it's Wednesday. He'll be on Holy Hill."

"Holy Hill? Do you mean Mt. Davidson?" There was a cross on top of that knob, where pilgrims gathered every year for Easter sunrise services.

"I don't think so," Beatrice said doubtfully. "Isn't that in San Francisco? This one is across the bay."

"Do you mean 'Holy Hill' in Berkeley, Ms. Jan-kowski?" Kate asked suddenly.

"That sounds right. There's a school there, in Berkeley, isn't there?" The flagship of the University of California fleet, demoted to a mere "school" status, thought Kate with a smile.

"Yes, there's a school in Berkeley."

"Brother Erasmus is in Berkeley every Wednesday, Ms.—Beatrice?" continued Hawkin. "Just Wednesday?"

"Of course not. He leaves here on Tuesday and is back on Saturday. Although usually he doesn't come to the Park until Sunday morning, when he conducts services, which is the excuse those idiots used to cremate John right away. They said he'd stink; personally, I think the weather's been too cold."

"Good. Well, thank you for your help, Ms. Jan-kowski. We'll need to talk with you again in a day or so. Where can we find you?"

"Ah. Now that's a good question. On Friday night I am usually at a coffeehouse on Haight Street, a place called Sentient Beans. Some very nice young

people run it. They allow me to use their washing machine in exchange for drawings."

"Drawings?"

"I'm an artist. Or I was an artist—I never know which to say. My nerves went, but my hand is still steady enough. I do portraits of the customers sometimes while my clothes are being cleaned—I do so enjoy the luxury of clean clothes, I will admit. And a bath—I use the one upstairs at the coffeehouse on Fridays, and occasionally during the first part of the week the man who runs the jewelers on the next street lets me use his shower—if he doesn't have any customers. But I'm never far from that area if you want to find me. It's my home, and the people know me. It's safer that way, you know."

"Yes," agreed Hawkin thoughtfully. "Unlike some of the gentlemen in this case, you are certainly no fool."

"I told you," she said with a degree of impatience, "they are not fools. But then," she reflected sadly, "neither am I. I'm afraid I haven't enough strength of character."