

The Lovable Rogue

THE LOVABLE ROGUE

BY
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Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time. It doesn't matter what you're doing or where you are, if you have style, you have style. It's as simple as that. Take horse racing, for example. While many punters wear gym shoes and dungarees to the track, I typically attend in nothing less than an impeccably tailored double-breasted suit accented with a foulard tie made of Italian silk so smooth you could skate on it. If I'm feeling particularly sporting, I'll replace the foulard with one of Milan's more adventurous cravats. The deciding factor is always the stature of the track. The more elegant the venue the more conservative my attire.



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Today I was at Golden Gate Fields and was dressed rather sportingly in a double-breasted blue blazer, off-white, cotton slacks, ultra-soft brown loafers, all topped off with a light gray fedora. That should tell you something about the stature of the track. Golden Gate Fields is not exactly the most glamorous place to view equestrian competition; it's not a dump but it's not Churchill Downs. The people are urban not urbane, the grass mowed not manicured. It's a pure venue for horse racing, an aging track next to the San Francisco Bay on a piece of land real estate developers would kill for. My bet is one day they will.

My other bet was on the long shot of the final race. She was a scraggly hag that looked like the kind of horse that was once used to pull milk carts. But I had good information that she was faster than she looked.

The class of the field was *Family Affair*, the sure-thing favorite that the pundits thought just might be good enough for the Kentucky Derby. High expectations, indeed! He certainly oozed the kind of arrogance that gives winning racehorses their championship looks. But oozing arrogance was not good enough for me. A good tip was much better.

From the beginning my hag ran neck and neck with *Family Affair*. In the end she nipped the favorite by a nose. This heart-stopping result was not met with widespread approval. The loss of a sure thing seldom is. But in horse racing there are no sure things - only favorites and long shots. And I'll give you some valuable advice about long shots: never bet on one unless you're lucky or you know what you're doing. I may not always know what I'm doing but I'm always lucky, lucky enough to have the right information at the right time. I



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suppose that's why San Francisco's Upper Crust frequently call on me to get them out of trouble. There are worse occupations.

I stored my binoculars, adjusted my tie and went off to find my chauffeur, James. Do you know how hard it is to find a chauffeur named James? No, you probably don't. Well, let me tell you - it's damn difficult. It took me quite a while to find mine so I wasn't too keen on losing him. "A proper chauffeur is worth his weight in spare parts," someone once told me. My James was certainly a proper chauffeur, always wearing leather gloves and never driving with one arm on the windowsill. Very fastidious.

I had successfully kept an eye on him all day until the final furlong of the final race. The favorite's dramatic failure had diverted my attention just long enough to allow him to vanish into the mob. I waded through the drunks and discarded programs and finally spotted him collecting a tidy sum at the payoff window. I'll admit to you that I don't really like him gambling. It's not that I have anything against a good wager it's just that he was so hard to find. Do you know how hard, no, of course not. Anyway, the point is I don't want him to accumulate huge gambling debts and then have to run off to avoid paying them. He never seems to lose, though.

I was on my way to collect him and my winnings when I was intercepted by Bernie Ives, a highbrow sort of fellow with a home in San Francisco's pricey Nob Hill district, another one in Carmel, and maybe one in Palm Springs. His face was made of putty and carried a perpetual look of mild disappointment. His eyes darted like moths around a streetlight and they never focused on any one thing in particular. The wind tugged at his hair but not a strand would budge because it was held tightly in place by a beeswax type of substance. His



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dark blue suit was made of a fabric too heavy for the weather. That's a crime in my book.

I wasn't the only one to notice his fashion faux pas. A couple of polyester mugs also had their eyes on him. Now if you ask me, wearers of synthetic fabric garments have no right to pass sartorial judgment on anyone. But there they were looking at Bernie as if he was a criminal.

"Winnie! What a surprise meeting you here," he said.

"Bernie, it's good to see you again. And my name's Winston." I hate Winnie.

"What a coincidence running into you," he said.

Nothing in Bernie's life was ever a coincidence.

"I haven't seen you in a while." I said.

"I just returned from Mexico. Thought I'd come here and watch the races." His feet shuffled like a stallion in a stall. I kept one eye on him, the other on James.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Me? I came here to place a few wagers, of course."

He nodded and looked past me.

"Say, I'm having a party tonight," he said. "Why don't you come?"

In case you don't know, Nob Hill parties are not to be missed. A summons to the pantheon of San Francisco's self-appointed gods is indeed a remarkable event - but one that is expected to be observed with quiet smugness. Satisfaction with one's inclusion is best radiated, not shouted.

"Yes, I suppose I can do that," I yawned.



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"Good." His face almost lost its look of disappointment. "I'm so glad I ran into you." He gave me one of those Hollywood handshakes and shuffled off.

James hid his winnings and strolled my way. The abnormal bulge on the left side of his chest betrayed his good fortune.

"Successful day?" I asked.

"Sir?"

I winked at him and started for my car. And what a sight it was! The magnificent bodywork sparkled in the sun and the flying lady soared on the elegant chrome grill. I slowed my walk to admire what in my opinion is the world's most beautiful automobile: a 1963 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud III. You know, I couldn't resist that car. The first time I saw it I knew I had to have it. It was a steal, really. Its previous owner ran a limousine business. When the business suddenly fell into severe financial difficulties I got the car and he got the insurance money.

James opened the rear door and I poured myself into the luscious, leather-upholstered back seat. The fine Connolly hides emitted an intoxicating aroma. Breathing it was similar to sniffing a glass of excellent single malt Scotch. James shut the door and it closed with a solid, reassuring thud. He then slid behind the steering wheel and tilted his head slightly toward the back seat.

"Home, James," I said.

I love those words! In fact, it's the only reason I wanted a chauffeur named James. I could have done a lot worse, mind you. My James, in



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addition to being a superb driver, can fly airplanes and knows how to handle himself in combat. Knows a thing or two about horses, too, I suspect.

We returned to San Francisco and he eased the Rolls onto Seacliff Avenue, a mansion-laden street that served as home to the City's aristocracy. Out on the bay thin lines of fog drifted under the Golden Gate Bridge like fingers stretching into too-tight gloves. I was staying, uninvited, in a very comfortable house owned by a couple who were vacationing in Europe. You may raise your eyebrows but they should never have left the place vacant. These old architectural jewels, like Italian sports cars, require constant attention. And who better to give them that attention than me? The neighbors never bothered me. In this neighborhood no one ever bothers someone with a Rolls. There is, however, the ever-present danger of the owner's unexpected, premature return. It's worth the risk in my opinion.

With the car securely in the garage, I sauntered into the kitchen, pulled a Bass Ale from the refrigerator and sat down in front of the panoramic living room window. The chair was leather covered, had a great aroma, and was comfortably stuffed. Very much like my Rolls. The Bass Ale, however, was too cold. I suppose not everything in this world is perfect.

I turned my thoughts to Bernie Ives while I waited for the Bass to warm. What can you say about a man who made his fortune from pet mortuaries? I mean, really! Apparently there are an abundance of pet owners who are willing to pay top dollar to see their furry loved ones go out in style. It's hard to figure some people.

The thing about Bernie, though, was his lack of self-discipline. To put it bluntly, he was a sucker. Women played him like a roulette wheel and their



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numbers always came up. That weakness cost him quite a bit of money. Do you recall the time he was mixed up with the daughter of a powerful San Francisco political figure? Perhaps not. Well, Bernie thought she was after him but she was actually after the use of his pet mortuary. She wrapped him around her finger the way butchers wrap paper around meat. Once he was properly wound she started using his mortuary for some very unpopular cult activities. The potential scandal would have not only destroyed her father's political career but also ruined Bernie's business. In the end I saved the day by employing, at Bernie's expense, a fictitious film crew to convince everyone that what was going on in the mortuary was simply the filming of a movie.

It is this kind of quick thinking that encourages Bernie to call on me to help him get out of girl trouble. The party invitation was, no doubt, a summons to duty. So what had he gotten himself into this time?

* * *

The bay was smothered in fog when James rolled the Rolls out of the garage. A strong breeze blew the fluffy gray stuff over the Presidio and over the links at Lincoln Park. The sun was setting somewhere and it was getting dark. James flipped on the headlights and we were off to the exhilarating heights of Nob Hill.

In case you don't know, Nob Hill is all high-rent townhouses and haughty hotels. The lights in the splendid homes glittered like candles on an altar.

James guided the Rolls onto California Street and stopped at 1001. I emerged from the Rolls. A brass railing rose from the center of the concrete steps. It glistened even in the fog. I climbed five steps to the entrance of the



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somewhat ordinary but tasteful building. A Chinese man in a semi-tux greeted me at the door. His thin hair was matted to his head with a shiny varnish. We fondly referred to him as the Peking Penguin although he had been born in San Francisco and had never been anywhere near Peking (I know, it's called something else now but I don't remember what). He was a real good man, someone you could depend on.

"Good evening, Mr. Churchill," he said with his usual tight smile.

"Good evening. Has Bernie remembered to put my name on the guest list?"

"It's all right if he hasn't. You're always welcome here, Mr. Churchill."

"Thanks." Fine man, the Penguin. I pulled a few Cubans from my vest pocket and gave them to him.

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Churchill. You're a real good man."

"Smoke them in good health," I said. I turned away and walked to the elevator. My footsteps were absorbed by a red oriental rug that clung to an aging but highly polished marble floor. The elevator was already on the ground floor so I didn't have to wait.

"Have a nice time, Mr. Churchill," the Penguin said.

"Thanks."

"Hey, wait a minute!" he yelled.

I held the door open and peered into the lobby. A petite blonde stood in front of him.

"Another guest, Mr. Churchill. You wouldn't want her to have to wait for the elevator, would you?"



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"Of course not." A true gentleman would never make a woman wait. I smiled and waited for her to enter.

"Thank you," she said in a voice as dry as the Sahara.

Elevators tell a lot about people. Most try to find something to read until they reach their floor. An elevator safety certificate must be the most widely read piece of paper in the world. Others try to make idle conversation. I prefer the readers. This woman was neither. She stared at me the way a viper stares at its prey. If she wasn't the cause of Bernie's troubles she ought to have been. Her hair was a bit too blonde, her eyes a bit too deep, and her gait a bit too thoroughbred.

"Friend of Bernie Ives?" she asked as the doors opened. It was a disappointedly uninspired first line.

"Yes. And who are you?"

She flashed an evil grin and disappeared into the party without answering. I shrugged, searched for a glass of bubbly and waited for Bernie to find me. He did.

"Winnie!" his voice roared across his living room like a 747 at takeoff. And it was a big living room.

He still had beeswax in his hair and he wore the same suit he had worn to the races. Quite inappropriate sartorial behavior. Have you noticed how so few people dress for the occasion these days? I have. And it has nothing to do with money. It's all about style. If you have it, well, you know the rest.

Bernie slid past his quests and tramped across the room with the petite blonde firmly glued to his side. Her face puckered into a cynical grin at the mention of my name.



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"Winnie, so glad you could make it," he said with more relief than joy.

"The name's Winston," I said.

"Winston?" the blonde chuckled. "Winston Churchill?"

"No relation," I muttered.

"Oh, this is Jill," Bernie nodded toward his companion.

"We met in the elevator," I said.

"Yes, he was a perfect gentleman." A sarcastic grin marred her pretty face. Bernie smiled even though he didn't feel like smiling.

"I need to talk to you," he said. He glanced at Jill.

"I can take a hint," she growled. More like an angry purr, actually. She tossed her head back and sulked off to wherever it is that women sulk off to when they sulk.

"Come on, let's go over here." Bernie led me to a small balcony overlooking the Mark Hopkins hotel.

"In some trouble?" I asked.

"You can always tell, can't you?" he snickered.

I didn't have to answer.

"It all started with Jill," he said, staring at the street below. "She's beautiful, don't you think?"

I shrugged. She wasn't ugly.

"Well, I got so involved with her that I would have done just about anything to impress her."

"And you did?" It was the typical scenario.

"And I did," he nodded.

"What have you gotten yourself into this time?" I asked.



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"Well..." Something inside of him held his voice back. His words were on a leash and they wouldn't come out.

"What is it, Bernie?"

"This girl Jill," he said. "She's a real high roller. I didn't know it when I met her but she has family ties."

"Nothing wrong with good breeding," I said.

"Family as in mafia," Bernie said.

"What?" A pair of pliers gripped my stomach. Bernie had really done it this time.

"And that's the good part," he rolled his eyes. "You see, Jill knows I've got a plane, the one I use to spread a pet's ashes over the ocean."

"You use an airplane for that? Are you serious?"

"Yes. I cremate the pet and after the funeral I put its ashes into an urn and dump them over the ocean."

"Why don't you use a boat?"

"I enjoy flying," he shrugged.

"Oh." I guess I'll never understand some things. "So what about Jill?"

"Well, she arranged for me to fly to Mexico, meet this man, and bring back some cocaine."

"What!"

"I wanted to impress her."

"Bernie..."

"So I did it."

"How in the world did you get away with it?"



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"I don't know," he shrugged. "There's a legitimate organization that arranges group flying trips to Mexico. I was part of the group. The man I met in Mexico said it would be all right and it was."

"So where does the bad part come in?"

"Well, I've since learned that the Feds are on to Jill and they're just waiting for her to make her move. If I deliver the cocaine to her I'll be arrested, too."

"That's how you got away with it," I said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"The Feds let you get away with it. It's a setup, Bernie. Don't deliver the cocaine."

"But if I don't deliver it to her by tomorrow her mob friends are going to kill me."

"Doesn't Jill know the Feds are on to her?"

"I've told her but she doesn't believe me. She thinks I'm stalling, that I'm trying to sell the cocaine myself."

"What kind of mob girl doesn't know when the Feds are on to her?"

He shrugged and then turned his stare back to the street. San Francisco's summer fog had chilled the sidewalks and the natives who walked below walked in heavy coats; the tourists shivered like oysters on a bed of ice. Several minutes passed before he spoke again.

"So, what should I do?" he pleaded.

"Where's the cocaine?"

"It's hidden in my mortuary," Bernie shivered. Poor lad.



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Bernie ran his hands over his beeswax until a guest spotted him and started toward us. He made a gesture toward her that was intended to be a wave but looked more like the hand movements of a pantomime.

"Will you help me?" he finally asked.

"I'll see what I can do."

Our conversation was cut off by the arrival of an aging femme fatale dressed in a metallic gown that looked as if it had been assembled from spare airplane parts.

"Bernie, how are you?" she asked, her intrusion made more irritating by a squeaky voice that sounded the way her clothes looked.

"I'm fine," Bernie said to her. Then he glanced at me. "This is my friend, Winnie."

I cringed. If he expects me to continue helping him he's going to have to get my name right.

"Nice to meet you," she said in a strained monotone. She then ignored me and turned to Bernie.

"Guess what?" she said. "I received a call today from the Chestermans. They're in Belgium and they don't like it. Can you believe that? A call all the way from Belgium. I've never had a call from Belgium before. Anyway, they've decided to come home early. I'm having my man pick them up at the airport tomorrow."

I was jolted by the news. The Chestermans owned the house I was staying in.

"I've got to go, Bernie. I've got to pack."

He looked at me funny.



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"And my name is Winston!"

* * *

Okay, so this time Bernie had gotten himself in a little bit deeper than usual. But I figured it would be fairly easy to get him out of it. I figured that Jill, although she roared like a lion, was actually just a pussycat. She didn't seem like much of a mob girl to me. It was even possible that she was bluffing about that. I figured all I had to do was tell her about the Feds and exercise my powers of persuasion and the incident would be over. Clean and simple. I figured wrong.

Jill was a high roller all right, the kind of woman you see attached to the arm of a prominent politician or clinging to the coat of a compulsive gambler on a Las Vegas winning streak. You don't find women like that at the Laundromat or in line at the local super market. You find them at places like the Starlight Room at the top of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel.

And that is where I found her, holding court with a small cadre of gadflies whose only goal in life was to be seen in the company of the right people at the right time in the right place. She wore a slinky, sparkling silver smock cut low at both ends - a very dramatic effect spoiled somewhat by a hair style more suitable to a dance club than a night club. The dress shimmered when she moved and when she moved she moved in all the right places.

"Hello," I said.

She turned and stared at me the way she had stared at me in the elevator.

"Remember me?" I asked.



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"Of course I remember you," she replied. Her voice had not left the desert. "You're Bernie's friend, the one with the funny name."

"I see nothing humorous about Winston," I mumbled.

"Oh, yes, that's it, Winston Churchill," she laughed. "You're Winston Churchill."

One of her companions turned and faced me with a semi-sneer.

"And I'm the Duke of Earl", he driveled. Drink had severely impaired his motor skills. "But I'm a friendly Duke." He held out an unsteady hand and the shift in balance nearly tossed him from his stool. "Nice to meet you."

Jill shoved him aside with a deep-freeze shoulder and gave me her undivided attention.

"Well now, is this a chance meeting or were you looking for me?" she asked. Her moist lips made it obvious which answer she preferred.

"Actually, I was looking for you."

"Now that's exactly what I wanted to hear," she purred. Her eyes blinked slowly.

"Hey," the drunkard on the stool slobbered. "Are you trying to steal my girl?" The act of speaking was enough to once again disrupt his equilibrium. He steadied himself against the bar. Jill's gaze pinned him there. "Okay, I guess you can borrow her." Another drink pushed him deeper into his stupor and a tiny Martini river trickled down his cheek on to his shirt. "I'm a good Duke..."

"Come on, let's go where we can talk," she said. She took my arm and led me to a table by a window. Outside, the City was once again being eaten by fog. Inside, I was determined not be eaten by Jill.



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"Now, Winston Churchill," she said in that way she had of saying my name as if it was a punch line. "Why were you looking for me?"

"Bernie told me about your little secret."

Her reaction made me wonder how many other secrets she had.

"Little secret? Just what do you mean?"

"I mean his little excursion into Mexico and the 'gift' he brought back to you."

She was startled for just a second.

"Bernie's got a big mouth," she said. "If he's not careful someday someone's going to close it permanently."

I snickered to myself. She was a tough-talking temptress, just the kind of woman Bernie always fell for.

"So why did he tell you and why are you telling me he told you?" she said. "No, let me guess. You're going to reason with me and explain why I should let Bernie out of his commitment. You're going to explain how much trouble we're in."

She laughed a cheeky laugh and I'll admit that it was not the response I had expected. Still, it takes more than that to throw me off my game.

"You do know that the Feds are on to you, don't you? You're being set up."

"Ha, Bernie's told me that joke before." She threw in another cheeky laugh.

"What if it's not a joke?"

"How could someone like Bernie know what the Feds are up to? He's way too innocent. Poor little man."



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I have to admit that for a moment she made sense but there was no other explanation for Bernie's escape from Mexico.

"But I had my people check it out anyway," she said. "And it's not true."

"Maybe your people are setting you up."

"Hah!" She hurled another scoff at me. "Another comedian."

"I am very disappointed in you," I sighed.

"Disappointed?" Her blush was genuine. "What do you mean?" She would have lit a cigarette if her diamond and silver cigarette case hadn't been empty. I wasn't going to fill it for her.

"If Bernie was going to get himself mixed up with a mob girl at least he could have gotten mixed up with one who knew the score."

She looked at me that special way that mob-girls-in-the-making look at men they don't like.

"I was beginning to like you," she said. "Now you're just boring me." She rose from her chair.

"I'd double check on the Feds if I were you," I said

"I'd mind my own business if I were you, Winston Churchill. I am not impressed by your fancy clothes and eloquent talk. Because to me it's simply talk." She slithered back toward the bar stopping once to flash me a final look of disdain. "And be careful," she purred. "Whatever happens to Bernie could also happen to you." She winked and returned to humoring the Duke of Earl.

This was not going to be as easy as I figured.

* * *

I spent my last evening in the Seacliff Avenue mansion sitting in front of a well-stoked fire thinking of ways to get Bernie out of his delicate situation. A



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plan didn't come easily but when it came it came to me as quickly as an ember snapping off a burning log. I immediately called Bernie.

"Winnie, do you know what to do?"

"Yes," I said. "You're going to have to deliver the cocaine to Jill."

"What! But you told me not to."

"I've changed my mind."

"What about the Feds?" Bernie gasped.

"Don't worry about the Feds. I'll take care of them."

"You will? How?"

"Don't worry about it. Can you cremate a dog tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Good. Tell Jill you'll deliver the cocaine to her tomorrow and have her meet you at your plane at eleven."

"Okay."

"And my name's Winston!"

* * *

The fog broke early the next morning. It was one of those days where nothing could possibly go wrong.

"James," I said. "This is one of those days where nothing can possibly go wrong."

"Yes, sir." His voice was a bit hollow but that's how he is sometimes.

"Bernie told Jill to be at the airport at eleven. So if you are there by ten we should be fine."

"Are you sure you do not need my assistance at the mortuary?" James asked.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Positive. You go along to the airport, I can take care of things with Bernie."

"As you wish, sir." Sometimes that hollowness of his can be a bit annoying. But with the fog burning off and a toasty morning sun baking the City nothing could dim my spirits. There's nothing quite like the thrill of the hunt to get the old juices flowing.

I finished packing and helped James load the Rolls.

"To the mortuary, James." Those words had no charm at all. Despite the absence of charm he did an expert job of easing the Rolls into the traffic.

Bernie's pet mortuary was located in a typically foggy neighborhood of small homes and ordinary shops. Even here the fog was burning off.

James stopped the Rolls a block away from Bernie's.

"Good luck, sir."

"Thank you, James"

He left for the airport and I walked to Bernie's mortuary. It was a white, church-like structure with a chapel in front and a workroom in back. Bernie emerged from his workroom with a cremation urn.

"All set?" I asked.

Bernie nodded. His eyes were moist and his face was long.

"What's wrong?"

"I always get emotional at times like this. It was a fine little mutt. I knew him personally. It makes me sad."

"If it's any consolation, that fine little mutt is going to save your fine little life."

"I know, but it still makes me sad."



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"What was its name?"

"Fifi."

"Fifi?"

"Yes."

I followed him to the small chapel. A real minister waited behind the altar. Fifi's owners sat in the front pew. The wife wore a flowing, flowery dress totally inappropriate for a funeral even if it was a pet funeral. The husband wore a suit that, from its poor fit, had apparently been purchased at a time of slimmer anatomical proportions. And near the door were the two polyester suits from the racetrack. Odd that.

The minister started the ceremony. Latin incantations echoed off the walls. When the echoes ceased the ceremony was over. The minister tended to Fifi's owners while Bernie took the urn back to his work area. I followed and locked the door behind us. I had a feeling that proved to be right.

The door handle turned and when the door wouldn't open the pounding started. It was, no doubt, the polyester suits.

"Who's that?" Bernie asked.

"You don't want to know."

"Shouldn't we let them in?"

"Not if you want to remain a free man."

"What?" His voice had more cracks than the Black Rock Desert.

"Get the cocaine," I said.

Bernie took another cremation urn from the top of a high shelf.

"Is that it?"

"Yes."



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"You hid it in a cremation urn?"

"Yes."

"Why Bernie, I'm impressed."

"Really?"

"Yes. But is that all there is?"

"Yes."

I shook my head.

"What kind of mob girl is this Jill?" I muttered. I mean, really. Why take such a big risk for so little cocaine?

Bernie shrugged.

"Come on, let's go," I said. I grabbed Fifi and started for the back door. Bernie reached for the knob but I had to stop him.

"Hold it," I said.

"What is it?"

I peeked through a window near the door and saw two human bulldogs, much too conspicuous in their attempt to be inconspicuous.

"Do you know those canines?" I asked.

"No. Who are they?"

"I don't know but it could be trouble. Jill probably sent them here to make sure we don't double-cross her."

Bernie shivered then jumped when the polyester suits increased their effort to knock down the door. Bulldogs outside, polyester suits inside. Quite a fix. So much for nothing going wrong. So what would James do in such a situation? I had an idea.

"Where's your car?" I asked.



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"In the alley, about a half a block away."

"Give me the keys."

"What for?"

I gave him Fifi.

"Hang onto the urns and when you see me drive up run to the car."

A terrified look crossed his face. The poor boy didn't have the stomach for this kind of stuff. Maybe the next time he'll choose his women more discreetly.

"What are you driving these days?" I asked.

"A Mercedes." The words barely left his lips.

"What color?"

"Green."

"One of those sick, pea green ones?"

"Yes."

"I thought so." People who do not dress for the occasion cannot be expected to drive properly colored automobiles. "All right," I said. "Wait here. I won't be long."

I opened the door quickly. The sound jolted the bulldogs into action. I ran for the alley and they pursued me. Fortunately, they ran more like bulldogs than greyhounds and I was able to get a lead on them. A quick glance behind: the men were out of breath but giving it the old college try. I reached the Mercedes, opened the door, jumped in, locked the door and put the key in the ignition.

"It's a diesel!" I cried out loud. And an old one at that. I'd have to wait for the glow plug to warm before I could start the engine! I adjusted the rear



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view mirror so I could watch the progress of my pursuers. They were nearly to the bumper. The Mercedes was finally ready. I started it, rammed the gearshift into reverse and backed into one of the men. He screamed and held his thigh. His partner, showing no compassion for his injured colleague, kept after me. He gripped the locked passenger door and tried to pull it open. I hit the gas and left him struggling for balance.

I drove down the alley then punched the brakes with my left foot. The Mercedes slid to a halt in front of the mortuary. I unlocked the passenger door and waited for Bernie. He didn't come out. I honked the horn. Jill's men limped toward the car. They were hobbled by bruised bones but were not yet ready to give up the chase. Then the polyester suits appeared around the other corner. I honked the horn again. Finally, Bernie timidly came through the door.

"Come on!" I yelled.

He ran and nearly dropped the urns. I couldn't watch. He opened the passenger door and got in. I mashed the accelerator to the floor and left the polyester suits and bulldogs behind. James would have been proud of me. However, I didn't have long to gloat. The car in the rearview mirror was following us.

"Must be the Feds," I said to myself. The polyester suits. I kept a steady pace for the airport and was able to keep them at bay.

Bernie's plane was at a small airport south of San Francisco on the Bay side of the peninsula. Jill was there tugging on the plane's door. James was in the pilot's seat and was preventing her from entering the plane.



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"Hey, that's Jill!" Bernie said. "She can't get into the plane. Say, who's in my plane? Who's not letting her in?"

"It's James. He'll be flying today."

"What?" Bernie disapproved but he had little room to complain and he knew it.

Jill saw Bernie and ran up to the car.

"There's a man in your plane and he won't let me in!" she howled. Then she noticed me. "You!"

"Me," I smiled.

"What's going on here?" she screamed.

"Just relax and do as I say."

"Why should I do anything you say?" Then she noticed the urns.

"Is that the cocaine?" she asked.

"You'll find out later," I said.

"Winnie, don't be so tough," Bernie said. He was beginning to soften. Jill could turn him into melting ice cream with one look from her torrid eyes.

"Let's go," I said, opening the door. "And for the last time my name's Winston."

"I'm not going anywhere!" Jill screamed. "Give me the cocaine!"

"Look," I pointed toward the car speeding toward us. "Those are the Feds and they're coming to get you. Now get in the plane."

Jill's eyes narrowed then widened until they became the size of silver dollars. Then she did as she was told.

I grabbed Bernie and she followed us to the plane. It was a nice, four-seat Cessna 175 Skyhawk. James opened the door. I climbed in and sat in the



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front next to James. Bernie and Jill squeezed into the back seats. I placed my urn on the floor, and took the one from Bernie and placed it on the floor next to mine.

James received clearance, started the engine and taxied the plane to the runway.

"Why are there two urns?" Jill asked.

"As you can see, the FBI really is on to you. If Bernie had simply handed over the cocaine you both would have been arrested. I don't really care about you but I'd rather keep Bernie out of jail."

"So why two urns?" Jill growled.

"To decoy the Feds," I said. "We're going to have to pull a switcheroo and outsmart them."

"Which urn has the cocaine?" she asked.

"This one." I pointed to the one next to my left foot.

"What's in other one?"

"Fifi."

"Fifi?"

"Doggie ashes."

"Oh, God!" She shook her head and gave Bernie a look of complete, utter, total disgust. She crossed her arms and stared out the window.

James was able to take off before the Feds could interfere. We flew West and were soon over the mountains.

"When do I get the cocaine?" Jill asked. The girl did have a one-track mind.

"After we put Fifi to rest."



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The plane crossed the coastline and when we were out over the ocean James put the plane into a long circle.

"Is this all right, Bernie?" I asked.

"Yeah, fine," he replied. He wasn't enjoying himself. Poor Bernie. Jill had insulted him and he was sulking.

I nodded to James. He pulled his window open and reached for an urn. He quickly tossed it out the window.

"Hey!" Jill screamed. "Was that the right one?"

"Of course it was," I said.

She reached into the front of the plane and grabbed the remaining urn, opened it, and stared at the powder. It wasn't quite white enough. She frowned until her face contained more furrows than a newly plowed cornfield. She wet her index finger, dipped it into the powder and brought it to her lips. Her face turned crimson and her eyes nearly exploded.

"You're dead, Bernie," she shouted.

"What?" Bernie gasped. His voice creaked like old, wooden stairs. Then he looked at me. "Winnie!"

I ignored him. He's just going to have to learn to get my name right.

Bernie moaned and buried his head in his hands. Jill fumed all the way back to the airport. James landed the plane and when he brought it to a stop she immediately opened the door and jumped out. She was still holding the urn.

Quicker than charging polo ponies a half dozen men surrounded the plane.

"FBI!" one of them shouted.



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"Oh, no!" Bernie stepped from the plane and fell to his knees.

Jill scowled.

"What do you have there?" the FBI agent asked. He was a sardonic little man, pudgy at the waist and gray on the head.

Jill kept quiet. The FBI agent stepped forward and looked into the urn.

"Cocaine?" A smug grin formed around his mouth.

I stepped from the plane and stood next to Jill. The FBI agent dipped his fingers into Fifi and tasted the powder.

"Poor Fifi," I said.

The agent got a strange look on his face.

"Hey, this isn't cocaine," he said. "What is it?"

"It's Fifi," I said.

"Fifi? What the hell's Fifi?"

"A dog. My friend down there runs a pet mortuary," I nodded toward Bernie. "He cremated the dog this morning. We were supposed to dump the little guy's ashes over the Pacific but the wind wasn't right."

The agent turned pale. I don't think he was very happy at having put dog ashes into his mouth.

"Let's get out of here," he barked. He took his men and went home.

"I think you owe me a debt of gratitude," I said to Jill.

She stared at me, viciously at first, then with some small degree of admiration as she realized I had saved her from jail.

"Leave Bernie alone," I said. "He's not worth the effort."

She looked down at Bernie. He was indeed a pathetic sight.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"You're right, he isn't," she said. Then she gave me a luscious look. "But what about you? Are you worth it?"

I grinned and shook my head.

"No, I'm not a family man."

I lifted Bernie by his collar.

"Home, James."