

Chapter 2

I woke up the next day pretty early and lay in bed for a minute, listening to the sounds down on Steiner street. It looked grey and cold outside, but it often did at this time of day; the clouds would almost certainly burn off by 10 or 11. Two women were arguing in Italian on the street below my window, going at it hammer and tongs. It had to be the sisters who lived on the first floor.

I got out of bed and went to shave. As I looked in the mirror something jogged my memory, -- jostled it, like somebody behind you while you're at the bar. My memory turned around, but the somebody was gone, melted into the crowd. Through the waterstains and flecks of toothpaste and soap on the mirror's surface I saw: a tan face; a nose that had been broken, but not too badly; a shock of brown hair over a high forehead; light brown eyes; a thin white scar like a knife-blade at the upper edge of a mobile mouth. I touched the back of my hand to my lips and thought; it was something about a dream, I guessed, but I didn't remember. I shook it off and continued with my ablutions.

After eggs, bacon, toast, and a whole pot of coffee I felt ready to take on the world. Ted would be busy all day today getting his gear together. I got out my phone book and looked up Evelyn Callaway's number: ANza 3-5946. I always liked to have the phone book open at a time like this because it let me pick names at random. I lit a cigarette and dialed.

"Is Miss Evelyn Callaway in, please?" I pitched my voice a little lower than was natural.

"She's still asleep," said a woman's voice, sharply. I couldn't tell whether she was irritated at me for not knowing Miss Callaway would still be asleep, or at her for sleeping. The woman on the phone had an accent, probably Mexican, but the edges had been rubbed off it. "Can I take a message?"

"Well, this is Sam Bartlett at Heyman shipping, and I've got a package coming in; it's Aquavista Estates 7, right?"

"Yes, that's right." She relaxed a little; the address wasn't listed in the phone book.

"Well, will someone be there all day?"

"Yes, I'll be here till five."

"What about the next day? I'm not sure when our guy will make it up to your area."

"Saturday is my day off and *she'll* be gone all afternoon." She said this resentfully. Either she didn't like days off or she didn't approve of where her employer was going; I guessed it was the latter.

"I'm sorry, I meant the next business day; we don't do deliveries over the weekend," I said apologetically.

"I'm always here except on the weekends, like I said. What is this package, anyway?"

"Something from a Mr. McIlhenny," I improvised, ready to get off the phone. "Thanks, you've been very helpful Miss..."

"Salinas. But that's strange. I wonder what Mr. McIlhenny could be sending her?" I didn't have an answer to that. "Well, goodbye Mr. Bartlett."

"Goodbye Miss Salinas."

I sat and smoked the rest of my cigarette and hoped I hadn't just outsmarted myself. It had been known to happen. "That's what the damn phone book is for," I told myself. I thought about making another pot of coffee, but I was wired already,

and having to piss every twelve minutes the whole day is a definite impediment to a tail. I settled for making myself a glass of orange juice and felt virtuous.

Mr. Callaway's number was unlisted, but I remembered that Mausestod had given it to me with his notes. I hadn't read them all yet and decided to have a look. His handwriting was precise, controlled, like a note from the last century to this one.

"Miss Callaway has been in analysis with me for just under one year, meeting three times per week. She shows definite passive-aggression in her frequent lateness, but she rarely misses her sessions altogether. Initially she came to see me complaining of depression and persistent suicidal ideation. She made a rather half-hearted suicide attempt last year, with sleeping pills stolen from her father. He pays for her analysis, although he does not approve and considers it a waste of money. Why? Similarly, he has set her up in an expensive new house while she is at an age at which many young women live at home, and he gives her an allowance substantial enough to withstand the raids made upon it by her drug habit. Yet he is a very controlling and jealous father. (I have good cause to know this, as he came to see me three weeks ago and almost attacked me physically in my office when I noted that there was an inappropriately sexual tone in his remarks concerning his daughter.)

"Obviously she has some kind of hold on him, something which gives a neurotic girl the upper hand in her dealings with a powerful man of business. She refuses to address the subject directly in our sessions. For his part, he is afraid I will learn something serious, and he tried first to tell me to ignore whatever his daughter says because she is unstable and prone to fantasy. Then he more or less offered to bribe me to keep the analysis on a superficial level and wean her off the sessions and onto an experimental drug treatment, a combination of a powerful sedative and a new amphetamine derivative. He has a family doctor willing to prescribe it to her, a Dr. Laussat, a very unscrupulous man. He is an odious little fellow, and he thinks the talking cure should be abolished in favor of an ever-expanding pharmacopia. As you can well imagine, I refused, and Mr. Callaway left in a rage after making some oblique threats, even casting aspersions on my Jewish descent (although, as you know, I am far from being a religious person and really nothing could be of less relevance to me.)

"All of this has made me realize how crucial it is that I be able to confront Miss Callaway with the truth if we are to make any progress. Naturally I suspect some form of incestuous contact, but I am also interested in the death of Miss Callaway's mother, which occurred when Evelyn was twelve. Suicide, in the home; a single gunshot wound to the head from an old revolver, but barbituates were also found in the bloodstream. Dr. Laussat was 'treating' her at the time and no doubt prescribed the drugs. Find out all you can, because even incidental details will contribute immeasurably to her picture of me as the all-seeing father, from whom nothing can be hidden. I am certain I can crack this wall of resistance in her with the truth."

I contemplated my orange juice for a moment and then returned to the kitchen to add a healthy slug of vodka. I was feeling less virtuous. Mausestod had indicated to me several times that he thought I had self-destructive tendencies and might benefit from analysis, but I was more certain than ever that I wouldn't like it. It was pretty easy to see why the practice of 'aletheiotherapy' had given Mausestod a bad name in analytic circles. I wasn't sure why I wanted to find all this out for the good Doctor when I was more or less rooting for the 'wall of resistance.' Often

when I shone light into these dark places I didn't like what came scuttling out. I assuaged my conscience with the thought that Mr. Callaway was obviously riding for a fall, and probably deserved whatever I could come up with, and something else besides. Fiat lux.

I got his number off the sheet. The Negro butler answered it on the second ring.

"Mr. Callaway's residence, may I help you?"

"Yes, this is Hartman Associates calling to make a follow-up appointment; will someone be in during afternoons this week?" Many people will answer 'yes' or 'no' to this question before figuring out what I was talking about. But the butler was not one of them.

"I'm sorry, what is this in reference to?"

Now I played my weaker card, but you'd be surprised how many people go for this one too. "This is just a routine follow-up to a previous visit and we can only do afternoons this week; I just wanted to check on your availability."

He was unmoved. "What type of service is it that you provide?"

My third card was pretty much worthless, but I played it anyway. "Inspection for termites and fumigation."

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid you must have made a mistake. We have a contract with Johnson's Exterminating."

"Isn't this 26 Seacliff?" I asked, ruffling some papers near the phone as if I were checking my manifest.

"No, sir, it is not."

"Well, I'm sorry to trouble you then." I hung up. It had been a wash. They always say it's hard to find good help nowadays, but Mr. Callaway didn't seem to have this problem. It looked like I would have to stake the place out after all, and we'd probably have to go in at night with the bugs. Not the best situation. I finished my drink and decided against having another. Outside the clouds had broken up and then burned away in the span of ten minutes, and the familiar deep blue shone in, implacable.

I called Callaway's office to prep for the phone repair con, asking the receptionist if they'd had any problems with the service. I explained we were doing some work on the substation and that they might experience some trouble with outgoing calls, and if they did, to call me, Mr. Bartlett, directly at HYde4-8932. Then I called my 'answering service' and told Sherie that I had re-christened myself Bartlett and to be the phone company if anyone called that number, but that I didn't think they would.

Sherie didn't run any ordinary answering service. She was a fat woman with dirty-blond hair and a deep streak of laziness. She had figured out a number of ways to make money without stirring from her apartment, and the answering service was probably the closest of all her schemes to being legal.

"You got it, Ma Bell," she purred. She had a gorgeous voice that didn't go at all with her heavy body and pale moustache. When you saw her in person you wanted to look around and see whether there was some sex-pot redhead ventriloquizing from behind a potted palm. It had to be the voice that had attracted her husband, a crooked phone company employee with matinee-idol looks. With his eyes closed he was a very lucky man.

There were at least twenty lines coming into Sherie's apartment. She had a big deal table set up as a desk and all the phones stood on it drawn up in neat rows.

Little notes were taped to each one saying things like “MAsonic4-5789, Joey, his sick aunt Mabel’s house,” or “LAurel6-1132, Dr. Anson’s office.” It was a phone bank for grifters and people like me. The beauty of it was that the numbers changed all the time, so you could never run into too much trouble with it. If someone tried to check up on the numbers, the real phone company would say they weren’t in use.

Sometimes, when she thought her distinctive voice might be a problem or was just feeling especially lazy, Sherie would hire the girl from upstairs to man the phones in exchange for a rebate on the rent, and then she didn’t have to do anything at all. Sherie also kept the books for a number of small time criminals who were no good at math, which none of them are. She had a real knack for it and an extraordinary memory, and her word was considered final in all kinds of disputes. She brokered the rental of various flops to customers in trouble, pocketing a share of the rent without risking anything. She could also supply you, on very short notice, with business cards claiming you were whoever you wanted to be, and a new number on them. A guy with his own printing press owed her a big favor.

You might have thought that with all this she would be pretty busy, but she was so quick at doing what needed to be done that she had all the time in the world left to do nothing at all. She was lazy without being a procrastinator -- an unusual person. She was quick on her feet, too, with thinking up what the marks needed to hear on the phone and improvising something that filled the bill. She had saved my bacon several times, and whenever I complained about her prices she would just say, “I’m worth it.” She was right.

“Thanks, Sherie.”

“You’re welcome, handsome. Keep out of trouble.”

I told her I would do my best.

“Lord knows that’s none too good, but I’ll take it.”

I started to think about Evelyn Callaway, about her taut white face as I’d seen it on the path at her father’s the night before. I told myself I’d better earn my pay and got ready to go up to Twin Peaks. I slowed as I drove past the Aquavista Estates. Although it was past 11, there was no work going on at the half-finished houses. The gate was open, and a black Ford Anglia stood outside the model home. Further up the slope I could see the rear of the Packard next to number 7. Up at the top of the cul-de-sac there was a young child playing in the yard of the other house I’d noticed last night. A woman sat on the front steps, watching him with her chin in her hands. I parked where I had last night, under the big eucalyptus. I had smartened myself up for my role as prospective homebuyer: I was wearing my most expensive hat and a thin gold wedding band. Both were gifts from a grateful client who had washed her hands of their original owner. I rapped smartly on the door of the model home.

A puffy-looking middle-aged woman blinked at me nervously through the half-opened door. Her hair was an indeterminate shade of orange-blond, and she had drawn in stark brown eyebrows over her own illegible ones. They gave a somewhat clownish expression to worried, watery blue eyes that were in danger of being overcome by the crinkled flesh around them.

“Hello?” She made it sound like a question.

“Yes, I’m interested in seeing your model home. I’m looking for a new house in this area.” I showed her my teeth in what I hoped was a friendly smile.

"You want to see the house?" She sounded surprised or skeptical. But why wouldn't I want to see the house?

"I assume some are still available."

"Yes...yes they are." She seemed to have come to a decision about me and began bustling about ineffectually. "May I offer you a cup of coffee Mr...?"

"Lenox, and thanks, I'd love one."

"I'm Mrs. Slotkin although," she giggled incongruously, "I'm a divorcée." She went out to the kitchen and I began looking the house over in a proprietary way. "The architecture is quite interesting," I half-shouted to her. I made polite noises of astonishment over the view from the living room, which was now clear all the way to Ocean Beach, and then headed upstairs. I closed myself into the bathroom at the rear of the house, stood on the toilet, and opened the window. As I thought, I could see into Evelyn's room, though not perfectly, because I was still a little lower down. I could see the top of a three-way mirror, probably on a dressing table. I got out my binoculars and looked. One of the wings of the mirror reflected a big mahogany bed with a scarlet cover. It was unmade, and the sheets and cover were tangled up with a sleeping form. I could just see a white leg, bare to the thigh, and a fall of chestnut hair. As I watched she turned over in her sleep and the sheet fell away from her back. I could see all the way down to the two dimples at the bottom of her spine, soft bluish hollows against the white.

"Are you all right in there Mr. Lenox? I've got your coffee."

I flushed the toilet to cover up the sound of closing the window and splashed a little cold water on my face. "Thanks a bunch Mrs. Slotkin," I said cheerily, taking the mug from her. She had a burgundy manicure, but the nails were chipped and dull. "Tell me, what are the neighbors like?"

"There's Miss Callaway, who lives just there. It's her father, a *very* close friend of mine, who developed the Aquavista Estates. I kind of look out for her while I'm here."

My face must have expressed some puzzlement, because she went on hurriedly, "not that she's any trouble, of course. And then there's the Hansons, who live up at the top. They're a young couple, with one child, a *boy*." She emphasized the word. I wondered if it would be better somehow if they had a girl. "Do you have any children, Mr. Lenox?" she asked, eyeing my ring.

"Not yet, but by gosh we're hoping! Say, I think I might walk up there and have a little chat with that Mrs. Hanson. I bet she'd be nice company for my Nancy, and I could learn a bit about the neighborhood."

It was clear from her reaction that Mrs. Slotkin didn't think this was such a hot idea, but she couldn't think of any reason why I shouldn't. "Don't you want to look around here a little more?" she asked lamely. "And you'll need the application..." She held a sheaf of papers in her left hand. I extracted them and folded them until they would fit in my jacket pocket. "You've been real helpful Mrs. Slotkin, thanks."

She looked blankly at the place where the papers had been. I brushed past her and walked down the stairs and out the door. As I glanced back towards the house I noticed that she was on the telephone in the kitchen. I averted my face as I passed number 7, since I didn't particularly want to be seen. The little street -- Aquavista Court, they had called it -- was short, but so steep that I was puffing a little when I reached the Hansons' house. Mrs. Hanson was still sitting on the steps, and both she and the boy had watched my progress with some interest.

"Mrs. Hanson?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Sam Lenox; Mrs. Slotkin told me your name." Her nose wrinkled up in a way that suggested this was not the most impressive introduction. It was a nice nose. "I was looking at the model house down there, and I was thinking you might be able to tell me more about the neighborhood," I went on. I was still standing at the edge of the lawn. Her boy had picked up the ball he dropped to watch my ascent, and he was throwing it up in the air and trying to catch it again, without all that much luck.

She looked at him, then at me. She stood up and smoothed the wrinkles out of her apron. "I guess you can come in. I can't talk for very long, though." She was about thirty, with a good figure, and straight, dark-brown hair cut in a pageboy. The bangs were a little severe for her face, which looked tired. Her eyes were dark brown too, and shifted under my gaze. She invited me to sit down in the living room, which was furnished very traditionally, with oriental rugs on top of the white wall-to-wall carpeting and substantial-looking oak and cherry pieces.

"There's not much to tell really. I mean...I like it just fine."

"You liked the other house a lot better." The boy had walked in from the yard, carrying his ball. "You said so."

She turned a fierce glare on him, love mingled with alarm. "Go back outside and play, Jack." He turned on his heels with a rebellious air and left. She continued, "it's nice, of course, having a place that's so new. I mean, everything works perfectly. We have a dispose-all, and a garage with an automatic door opener."

"Where did you move from?" I asked.

She looked around the room, as though the chintz sofas and faux-colonial oak coffee table would suggest something to her. Very quietly, she said, "just across the road."

I remembered the sudden drop-off and the churned up earth. "But there's nothing there," I said, a little puzzled.

She twisted her short fingers together and laughed nervously. "You mean *just* there. No, there's nothing at all *there*."

I was at a loss. I began, "Mrs. Hanson..."

"Oh, please call me Jane. You'll make me feel like an old woman." She stood up suddenly with a jerky, mechanical movement and went over to the reproduction low-boy against the far wall, on which bottles and a silver-plate ice bucket gleamed. "Would you like a drink...Sam?" She flashed me a smile.

I accepted and got up to stroll around the room and admire things. I complimented her on her taste. In the reflection on the glass in a framed winter landscape I watched her prepare the drinks. Without asking my preference, she poured one stiff gin and tonic and one weak one. I sat back down. She offered me the strong one and sat back down on the sofa, closer to my chair this time than before, and began gulping her drink in a way that suggested she wanted to get drunk -- or would have suggested it had the drink been stronger. Everything about her seemed to indicate that she was flirting with me, except her eyes, which darted around like those of a cornered mouse. And yet she didn't seem to be afraid of me.

I returned to my previous question, "you lived right across the road, then?"

She set the now empty drink down on the table with a determined clink. Her cheeks were flushed. "Not right across, of course, I didn't mean that, but lower

down." She nodded forcefully. "Lower down the hill." She stared at me, her head still nodding a little as if the original force was dissipating only slowly. As I sipped at my drink I could hear the dry rustling sounds her hands made as they fought in her lap. "We thought it would be better for Jack up here; it's so quiet. He needs -- he needs a lot of quiet."

I finished and stood up, suddenly a little light-headed. My vision swam for a second. "Well, I won't keep you any longer Mrs. Hanson. Thanks so much for your hospitality."

She showed me to the door, obviously relieved. "It was my pleasure, really. I hope we'll be neighbors!" She didn't look as if she meant it. I walked across the empty yard and back to the sidewalk. I waved at Mrs. Slotkin, now a blurred shape behind the wall of glass in the living room, as I passed the model home and then walked out the gate. There was no sidewalk here, just the crumbling verge of the road and the smell of eucalyptus released by the seed pods and ribbon-like leaves as I crushed them underfoot. Just as I got to my car I heard a small voice call to me from the wooded yard adjoining Aquavista Estates. It was the boy.

I had judged him at first to be only four or five, but I saw now that he was just very small and clumsy for his age, which his lean face and intelligent expression advertised as six or seven. There was something sickly about him, but it was difficult to pin down whether the sickness was entirely physical -- or mental. His eyes, which were dark brown like his mother's, shone too brightly. He motioned to me conspiratorially, and I joined him in the rough scrub.

He looked me over for a minute, as if he was judging my fitness for something. His steady regard made me feel a little uneasy and I wondered if I smelled like gin. Finally he seemed to come to a decision. "Do you want to know what really happened to our house?"

"Yeah, I do." I was actually quite curious about what he was going to say.

"Well, before this we lived right across the street." He pointed to where the empty lot sloped away. "Our house was brand new but they's made it so it would look old-fashioned." He rolled his eyes. "Mom and Dad liked it better that way, and Mom bought all that furniture to match even though it was *so* much money. So they bought it on the installment plan. It was a *lot*." Something about his tone suggested he was repeating an argument he had heard many times before. He looked down at the ground where he was rolling a stone around under his dirty sneaker. He kept losing it. "So one night these men came to our house, and they said we had to move, that they were tearing the place down, all the houses in the place. It was called Twin Peaks View and it was only just finished. Only a few people lived there yet. Mom and Dad were crying and everything but they had to."

It was clear that the boy was mentally disturbed, and had been agitated by the recent move. I understood Mrs. Hanson's behavior a lot better now; she hadn't wanted me to stay in the yard and possibly talk to her son, but once I was inside she wanted to get me right out again. She was ashamed of him. I let him go on.

"Mr. Greenwood next door wouldn't go. He said he wouldn't move again so soon after all that trouble and his wife had just died there." He looked up from the ground to my face. "I saw her when she was dead. I went over to take them some chicken casserole that mom cooked and Mr. Greenwood was just sitting on the floor crying. *She* was sitting in a chair, all slumped over. She looked like...like soap." His solemn voice was barely audible over the sussurations of the eucalyptus. "They said I didn't see nothing but they lied. Grown-ups lie a lot, you know."

"That's true," I admitted.

"That night the men came Mr. Greenwood locked himself in the house with a gun. It was his army pistol from the great war, he showed it to me before a lot of times. All night they were packing our stuff for us and moving it across the road but Mr. Greenwood was just marching up and down in the living room and they couldn't go in or make him come out."

"Why didn't he or your parents just call the police?" This was a stupid question, but I had to ask.

"They did, of course." He shook his head, "but the policemen who came were on the same side as those guys who wanted us to move, they said it was a consolidation" -- he stumbled over the word -- "and the mortgage had been transferred and my mom and dad would get a lot of money out of it, enough to pay for all the furniture, and more too. And there was something else, too, that the main guy said just to my dad. I could see them out there smoking, from my window. Something that scared my dad, like a secret." His story was interesting me in spite of its ridiculousness; there was something unusual about a child who could put all this together.

"Mom gave me some medicine and it made me sleepy even though I tried to watch everything. Then when the sky was turning white dad carried me over here, to our new house." I could hear the voice of his mother floating down from the top of the cul-de-sac, calling his name. "They brought big yellow earth movers and wrecking balls over and they knocked everything down and ploughed it under the ground into a grave."

"And Mr. Greenwood?" I asked. Mrs. Hanson's worried voice was getting closer.

"I don't know for sure, but I think they just pulled down the house with him inside and crunched him up with machines and put him down under the dirt." He said these last words with a kind of morbid fascination that chilled me. I wondered if his mother was afraid of him.

"It sounds like your mom's looking for you; do you want me to walk up there with you?"

"I better go by myself; she gets kind of mad sometimes. Well, that's all. I just thought since you're finding out things you should know the truth."

"How do you know I'm finding things out, Jack?" I asked. I realized I wasn't all that surprised.

"I can just tell those kind of things sometimes, just like I can tell when people are lying." This made me wince a little. He turned and began laboring up the slope. I got into the flivver and lit a cigarette. I drove about a block down the hill towards the Sunset and then sat on the brake for a minute with the engine idling. It was obvious that Jack's story was made-up, but at the same time it had the ring of truth about it in parts. I tried to think of what really could have happened to produce just that tale as a result.

Feeling like a fool, I backed up to just above where the Aquavista houses began, pulled over, and got out to look at the ruined slope across the road. There were indeed the tracks of some kind of heavy vehicle at the edge, dried and crumbling. Probably a bushhog, I thought. Weeds that looked like dirty straw had sprung up and then died in the summer dryness. An empty Fresca can and a hamburger wrapper huddled together in a shallow ditch. Beyond that...nothing. Just a sagging slope, bare of brush or trees. There was no indication that any houses

had ever stood there. In fact, it looked like they might be preparing the ground for an extension of the Aquavista Estates, though the new houses would have to be cantilevered all to hell.

It was just this work, combined with sadness about the move and the knowledge that his old home was across the road somewhere, that had led Jack's imagination down that morbid path. I carefully put my cigarette in the dust at the top of the slope and got back in the flivver. As I passed by Aquavista court again I could see the small figures of Jack and his mother at the edge of their yard, leaning against each other for support.