

CHAPTER 1

“Excuse me, Mr. Lomax, may I have a word with you?”

I had just left the Magic Castle—Hollywood’s famed magician’s club—when the old lady buttonholed me. She was big. A good six feet tall running around two, two hundred twenty-five pounds. She was dressed in a grey seal skin overcoat with a fox fur collar. A diamond choker glittered at her neck. Her perfectly coiffed hair was a shimmering copper-brown. I recognized her right away. She’d been sitting in the back row of the audience during my show. Hadn’t so much as cracked a smile the entire night, despite my delightfully engaging performance.

I looked her up and down. There was a lot to see.

“What can do for you?” I asked.

“I would like to discuss employing you. As a private investigator.”

Made sense, since that’s what I do for a living.

“What sort of work are we talking about?” I asked.

“It’s...rather complicated,” she said. She drew her overcoat tighter even though the temperature was mild. “Perhaps you would care to follow me to my car? We can talk there.”

I checked my watch. I had an hour to kill before I had to pick up Fran, so—why not?

She led me down to the lower parking lot to her car—a 1950s vintage Rolls-Royce Phantom V—a half-million dollars worth of chrome, rubber, steel, glass and British arrogance. Standing at attention next to it was a chauffeur dressed in a dark blue suit and a peaked cap. He had a faintly military air, like one of those fur-hatted guards you see outside Buckingham palace. I had an impulse to waggle my fingers in front of his face to see if he’d flinch, but I restrained myself. The old girl gave him a nod, he opened the rear door for me, and I climbed inside.

The interior of the Rolls was enormous, bigger than my entire apartment. Better furnished, too. Creamy leather upholstery, burnished wood trim, polished chrome fixtures. Looking out the rear window I could see the main spire of the Magic Castle glittering like a delicate Victorian Christmas tree ornament. Gives me a thrill every time I see it. I perform sleight-of-hand magic there a few nights a month, strictly as a hobby. Small stuff. Cards. Coins. I’ve been in love with magic and magicians ever since I was a kid. I’d rather hang out with magicians than just about anybody else in the world. Why? With magicians there’s no pretense. No subterfuge. You know exactly what you’re getting. They’re out to fool you. Trick you. Hoodwink you. Consequently, magicians are some of the most honest people I know.

The Rolls rocked gently as milady entered from the opposite side. She slid in beside me, unbuttoned her coat and took a moment to settle herself against the baby-soft backrest. Between us was a maple center console holding a decanter of expensive-looking brandy. She caught me eyeing it.

“Would you care for a brandy?” she asked.

Not wishing to seem antisocial, I accepted. She poured a couple of fingers into the bottom of a cut glass snifter and handed it to me. I swirled it around. Gave it a sniff. Seemed like the thing to do.

“Mr. Lomax,” she began, “allow me to—”

“Jolly,” I said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Call me Jolly, everybody does.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t...”

“A nickname,” I explained. “When I was a kid my little sister couldn’t pronounce my name, Charles—Charlie. It came out *Jolly*. ‘Jolly did this’ or ‘Jolly did that’ she would say, and everybody thought it was just the cutest thing. I guess it was back then. Now I’m stuck with it.” I shrugged. “What can I say?”

The old girl nodded vaguely. “Oh, yes. Yes, I see.”

She didn’t see at all, but I let that pass.

“My name is Mildred verDorn,” she said, pausing for me to either bow or faint, I wasn’t sure which. When neither event occurred, she continued. “I have a rather unusual problem and I was hoping you might be able to help.”

“And what is the nature of your difficulty?” I asked. The faint trace of a British accent had crept into my speech. It was the Rolls. And the brandy. I felt like a Duke. Or an Earl. A Baronet, at the very least.

“It’s a rather delicate situation,” Mrs. verDorn explained. “A family matter. It would need to be handled with the utmost discretion.”

“Discretion is my middle name,” I said, saluting her with my glass.

Mildred verDorn paused. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of me. That was understandable. I was still dressed in my stage clothes: a red Scotch plaid shirt, tan Dockers, maroon vest and a yellow bow tie with tiny blue polka dots. Not exactly your standard private detective couture. You know, trench coat, fedora, cigarette dangling from the lower lip.

“Er, before we begin,” she said, fingering her diamond choker like a string of worry beads, “may I see your license? You are licensed, aren’t you? By the State of California?”

I smiled to myself. I’d been waiting for this. Without hesitation I reached out, flicked my wrist, and appeared to pluck my PI license out of the air just inches from her nose. It was a trick I’d been working on for some time, designed to dazzle and amuse my clients. Mrs. verDorn remained unimpressed. She peered at the card for a moment then gave a curt little nod. Glumly, I returned the license to my pocket.

“It’s my daughter, Mr. Lomax,” said Mrs. verDorn. “I believe she’s been stealing from me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Stealing, eh?”

“Yes. Pilfering funds from my bank account.”

“I see.”

“I’ve done everything I could think of to stop her, but thus far I have been unsuccessful.”

“Have you tried talking to her? Your daughter.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“You two are estranged?”

“Not exactly.”

“She’s out of the country?”

“In a way.”

I ran my finger around the rim of my glass. Round and round and round we go.

“Well, what about the police?” I asked. “Have you tried them?”

“Under the circumstances the police would be of little help.”

“I don’t know, they’re pretty good at that sort of thing. Catching crooks and such.”

She shook her head. Her diamond choker threw off rainbow sparkles.

“I’m afraid you don’t understand, Mr. Lomax. You see, my daughter is...”

About a thousand possibilities flitted through my mind in the space of a second: hearing impaired, brain damaged, in an iron lung, a mime...

“...dead,” the old lady finished for me.

There was a pause. The interior of the Rolls was so quiet I could hear my nails growing.

“So,” I ventured, after a cleansing moment of silence, “you believe your dead daughter is embezzling funds from your bank account, is that about the size of it?”

Mildred verDorn flushed slightly. “I know how it sounds, Mr. Lomax, believe me. But under the circumstances it is the only explanation that makes any sense.”

The chauffeur had closed the moon roof and switched on the dome light, giving me a better view of Mrs. Mildred verDorn. In her mid-to-late sixties, she had a round but not unattractive face with wide-set eyes, full lips and a small

upturned nose. She had probably been quite a looker in her youth. Her makeup was applied with precision. Her eye shadow matched her gown which matched her purse which matched her shoes. This was one put-together lady, no doubt about it. But beneath the carefully crafted exterior was a sense of deep unease. It was in her eyes. You can always tell by the eyes. Camouflage the rest, the eyes always give you away.

"Why don't you fill me in on the details," I suggested, carefully placing my brandy glass on the polished wood countertop.

Mrs. verDorn stared at the glowing dome light for a moment as if drawing energy from it.

"My husband passed away some time ago," she began, "leaving me the bulk of his estate. In addition to stocks and bonds and various investment properties was a large sum of cash, held, for tax purposes, in an offshore account in the Bahamas. The money was to be used by both my daughter and myself to cover our day-to-day living expenses. It was my husband's belief that, prudently handled, it would last us for the rest of our lives."

I nodded. "I'm with you so far."

"About a year ago money began disappearing from this account. Large sums of money. At first it was thought to be a banking error, some sort of computer malfunction, nothing more. But upon further investigation it was discovered that the funds had been extracted by legitimate means, through legitimate channels. Or at least they appeared to be. The only other person with both knowledge of, and access to the account is—was—my daughter Pamela."

"Who is now deceased?"

"Correct."

"And you believe she's the one responsible for the withdrawals?"

"I do."

"A sort of 'ghost in the machine' type thing."

She nodded uncomfortably.

I reached into my vest pocket, took out my lucky silver dollar and began to run it back and forth between my fingers. It's an old magician's exercise. The feel of smooth metal skipping over my knuckles always helps me think.

"With respect Mrs. verDorn" I said, "isn't it possible that before your daughter died she told someone else about the money? And about how to get it?"

"Yes, that's possible. But it wouldn't explain the continued withdrawals. The passcode on the account has been changed numerous times, the bank has added extra security, but the money continues to flow out."

"How much money are we talking about? In all?"

"A little over seven million dollars over the course of year."

Expensive tastes, this ghost.

"Well, why not move the money to a different account?" I suggested. "A different bank?"

"I'm afraid that is not possible. My husband left explicit instructions in his will that the money be left in that particular account at that particular bank. He had done business with them all his life. I suppose this was his way of showing his gratitude. I don't imagine he foresaw any of this happening."

"And what's the bank's position on all this?"

"They disclaim any responsibility in the matter. They have furnished my lawyers with all the relevant paperwork—transaction records, computer printouts, routing numbers—everything appears to be in order. It's been made to look as though the withdrawals were made by me from my home computer and deposited into my stateside bank account, although I can assure you they were not."

"Could someone in your employ be using your computer without you knowing it? A maid? Or a housekeeper?"

"Possibly, yes. It takes a great many people to keep my household functioning."

I started to speak but she stopped me.

"But they would need to know the numerical passcodes to the account. Those I keep in a locked safe in my study. Additionally, a rotating series of passwords must be entered before access is granted. Those I keep here." Mrs. verDorn touched her temple with a neatly manicured forefinger.

"And you believe your daughter's spirit..."

"Is somehow extracting that information from me, yes." She paused and drew a breath. "Sometimes I believe I can actually feel her rooting around inside my head, probing, searching. It's really quite...distressing."

Mrs. verDorn's mouth was drawn tight. A thin film of perspiration coated her upper lip. She seemed to believe what she was saying.

I shoved the coin I'd been fingering back into my pocket and drained the last of my brandy.

"Mrs. verDorn," I said, "I don't think I'm the right man for the job. What you need is a forensic accountant. A computer specialist. Someone familiar with international banking laws."

The widow verDorn shook her head so violently her hair almost moved.

“I have already been to all the experts,” she said. “The lawyers. The accountants. The technical experts. No one has been able to help. I was told that you were different. That you had some experience in these matters. The out-of-the-ordinary. The unexplained.”

A bit of brandy splashed up into my throat. I winced and swallowed it back down.

“I’ve...brushed up against in the past, yes, but—”

“Then please, Mr. Lomax, help me. My daughter—her spirit, at least—is in trouble, I’m convinced of it. This is not about the money. The money is of secondary importance. What this is is a cry for help. A signal flare from the Great Beyond. For whatever reason my daughter has been unable to make the transition between worlds. She cannot find peace. Help me, Mr. Lomax. Help me put my daughter’s soul to rest.”

Outside in the parking lot I saw a young couple walking hand-in-hand to their car. They looked happy. At peace. Without a care in the world. They might have been headed for a late supper. Or a drink with friends. I wished to hell I could join them.

“If I were to take your case,” I said, returning my attention to the matter at hand, “and I’m not saying I will, I would need access to all of your records, both personal and financial. I would have to talk to your friends, your relatives, your business associates. It would be incredibly invasive. Are you sure you want to let yourself in for that?”

Mildred verDorn reached for the brandy, poured herself a short one and downed it in one long gulp. “At this point, Mr. Lomax,” she said, baptizing me in brandy fumes, “I would gladly grant you the deed to my home and everything in it for an end to this torment.”