

Chapter 1

October, 2005.

ON A SUNNY SAN FRANCISCO MORNING after a string of foggy days, I sat on the red exercise ball in my office, wondering how I was going to pay the rent. When Grace Valdez walked in the door I stood up, and the ball rolled away from me on its slow trajectory along the sloping floor.

“I saw your sign,” she said. “I want to talk to you about finding something I’ve lost.” I held out my hand. “My name is Sadie. Sadie García Miller.” We shook hands. Hers was cool and dry.

“Grace.” She paused. “Valdez.”

“Please have a seat.”

She surveyed the rolling ball and my chairless office. I pulled out a folding chair and set it up for her. I retrieved the ball and sat back down behind my desk.

Grace Valdez looked like she had blown across town from a more upscale neighborhood, the Marina or Pacific Heights. She looked about ten years younger than me, around thirty. Her jagged-cut hair was shot through with subtle blond highlights, and her tawny skin seemed to glow. She wore designer jeans and a nice pair of strappy heels.

“What is it you’re looking for?” I asked.

She picked at her thumbnail cuticle. “My brother....”

“Ms. Valdez.” I hesitated. I needed the money. “I’d like to help you, but I don’t find missing persons. I find lost objects. I can refer you to an excellent private investigator.”

“No—no.” Her voice was breathy, Marilyn-Monroelike. “I mean, my brother has what I’m looking for. The book. My brother has it.”

“A book.” Maybe I said it too loudly. Ms. Valdez flinched.

Pretty jumpy for a woman in search of a simple book. But then, nothing is as it seems in my line of work. People say they’re looking for an object, but they’re really looking for a whole lot more. A way to fill up the emptiness, a way to cover the gaping hole. I’m an expert on that.

“Mind if I smoke?” I said.

She smiled for the first time and, taking out a pack of Camel filters, offered me one.

“Thanks.”

I lit our cigarettes with the snap of my lighter.

She drew on her cigarette. “This is nice. You don’t get to smoke indoors much anymore.”

“I know.” I usually didn’t smoke in the office, actually, because most of my clients or would-be clients would run screaming from the smell of cigarette smoke. But this was clearly an exception. I reached into the desk drawer, brought out the ashtray, and put it between us

“This might seem obvious, but—have you asked your brother to give the book back?”

“Of course. He says he doesn’t have it. But he does, I know he does. He stole it from me, the—” she stopped herself— “jerk.”

“I see. What’s the value of the book?”

“I don’t think it has much financial value.”

“Sentimental value, then. You want that particular book, no other copy will do, is that right?”

“That’s right,” she said, and her eyes darkened. “The book is inscribed to me from my mother. She used to read it to me when I was a child. Since she’s been gone, I have always treasured it.”

“Gone?” I said. “Do you mean—”

“Heart attack. When I was twelve.”

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t tell her we had something in common. I chased away the hollow feeling in my chest.