

*Chapter 1: Pink Jello. Excerpted from [Beyond the Trees](#).*

*Los Angeles, 1963*

Dressed in a black coat and striped vest, a rather rugged-faced man opened the door and ushered me into a raised front room and changed my life forever.

“Mr. Cranston will be with you soon.” He gave a curt little bow and disappeared.

Reflections, skipping off the sea, streamed in through a huge picture window. Bookcases, paintings and artistic do-dads lined the walls. A grand piano supported a tall silver vase holding a single red rose. I pulled a book from a shelf, a cloth bound early edition of “Moby Dick”.

“Do you appreciate literature?” I turned quick. My host had padded in hush across thick Persian carpet.

“I read,” I said.

“What, the Sunday comics?”

The book returned to its appointed resting place. “Raymond Chandler or Hemingway keep me entertained sometimes.”

“Commendable, very commendable. Care for a whiskey?”

Uncorking a cut-glass decanter, he poured us both a stiff one and handed me the drink, straight, no ice. Blonde, limp hair reclined in short curls on his skull. He appeared to be in his mid-forties, although his mustache had found the secret of agelessness, not having evolved far beyond puberty.

“It’s good of you to come right over, Mr. Biggs. Pardon me for being abrupt. How much do you charge?”

“That depends. You want a cat rescued from a tree? If you possess a tall ladder, my rates are reasonable and thrifty. As the task becomes more complicated, the price goes up.”

“Understandable.” Cranston coughed delicately into a handkerchief. A plaid sports coat, a blue dress shirt, a yellow scarf precisely crossed and held together by a jade stickpin, black slacks and boat shoes completed his fashion ensemble. He looked in good condition for a man of his age, if two hundred and fifty pounds of blubber is your idea of good condition.

“My wife has left me. On her way out the door, she stole a valuable artifact from my collection. It’s absolutely imperative I retrieve my property.”

“Why not let the police handle it?” I said.

“Whether she wishes to return home or not, I don't want Melinda going to jail. This must be handled with discretion.”

“Two hundred dollars a day.”

“That’s ROBBERY!!”

“You damn right it is. A week in advance. On the promissory note spell it, Jessup T. Biggs... Biggs with two g’s, by the way... artifact? What are we talking about?”

Cranston paused long enough for his blood pressure to approach some kind of normal. Pearly peepers contemplated a high rent view of Pacific vastness.

“I’m an antiquities dealer. The missing relic is an Assyrian king's ceremonial drinking cup, circa 700 BC, nearly priceless. Along with other investors, I’m part owner.”

Finishing off the liquor, I walked over to the grand piano and struck a few notes at random-plink. Below on the beach, touched by wind and waves, strolled a young couple.

“Alright, my secretary will send over the required paperwork. Any ideas where I might look for the Missus, perhaps a forwarding address, or maybe a *boyfriend’s name*?”

His ever-expanding frame shuffled to a carved wooden desk. A drawer, festooned in gold filigree, squeaked open.

“She’s acquired religion, some sort of holy man with a hard-on for rich bitches.” Cranston handed me a scrap of paper with an address written in pencil, 8386 Mulholland Drive. “Melinda was approached on the street by disciples handing out literature and fanciful stories concerning a yogi named Jath. She became obsessed with the fakir. I instructed my driver to accompany her on excursions to a mansion up in the Hollywood Hills where lectures on so-called cosmic enlightenment took place. On the day of the theft, she drove the car herself and never returned. This SWAMI BASTARD has vanished off the planet accompanied by his followers and my wife. Other detectives worked the case. They were useless and fired without notice. You come recommended as a man of extreme perseverance, a real Fire-Eater is how one of your colleagues described you.”

“You employed amateurs before,” I said. “Now you’ve hired a professional.”

“It’s been two months since Melinda made the mistake of leaving me. I want results. I’ll pay you a five thousand dollar bonus when the artifact is in my hands.”

“Do you have a recent photo of your wife?”

His big mitt pulled an eight by ten glossy print from the drawer and shoved it at me. The image, shot in the style of an actress publicity picture, displayed a woman a good fifteen years younger than my new found employer. She had long dark hair and radiant bedroom eyes.

Cranston gave me a penetrating look he must have picked up from watching gangster movies. “You carry a gun I suppose?”

“It’s part of the mystique of my occupation, but rarely used,”

“You won’t hurt my feelings if you use it on that yogi.”

“I’m not a hired killer.”

I offered him a gold inlaid pen. Opening a small leather case, he turned away from me. As he scribbled, the back of his neck jiggled like pink Jello. Cranston tore along the dotted line. I grabbed the check.