

# California Street

## Chapter One

On Tuesday afternoon, Joel's office phone rang, just after his last patient, and he recognized Margot's voice, husky and blue.

"Doctor," she said, "I need your help."

Anyone could have said that, and with anyone else -- five billion people on the planet! -- he would have known how to respond. But with Margot... She was the wife of Joel's oldest friend (although the word friend was generous), and as of five days ago, Joel has promised himself that he would never see either of them again as long as he lived. It was the rational way to behave; it was how a directive therapist would have advised him to handle it. Quit cold turkey. Dry out.

True, since he hadn't informed either Margot or her husband of this decision, and since he usually spoke to one or both of them several times a week, he could reasonably have expected Margot to call him at some point. Still, he had the odd feeling of surprise.

"What can I do for you?" he asked in his best psychoanalyst baritone.

"Can you come over here?" Margot asked. "Right away?" She sounded calm enough but now he knew it was something serious, because she usually began her phone calls with five minutes of did-you-hear-abouts and wait-till-I-tell-yous.

"To Playground?" In the background he could hear the squalls of children and a high-pitched woman's voice parroting, There, there. There, there.

"Yes. And if you could hurry --"

"What's wrong? Is someone hurt?"

"N-no."

"Shall I call the police?"

"Oh, God, no." Joel distinguished another voice. This is ridiculous, absolutely...

"I'd rather not involve the police. I know you can help us. Do hurry, if you can." Now she had the clipped, only slightly harried tone of an heiress in crisis. "You're so close." Then she clicked off.

Joel hopped into his car. He indulged himself in the metaphor of a fireman sliding down a pole into his truck, although he knew he didn't exactly have the dimensions of a hero: He was no more than average height, with the slim build of a runner. His curly brown hair and brown eyes, enlarged by stylishly outsized tortoiseshell glasses, didn't add to the image; and certainly his nose, just large enough to give his face "character," didn't, either.

But he was close, as Margot had said. His office was in "therapy row," nine square blocks in San Francisco which, because of its proximity to two hospitals, had attracted a number of his fellow practitioners. This quiet army of Ph.D.'s, M.F.C.C.'s and L.C.S.W.'s had gradually taken over flats here in the quasi-commercial section of Pacific Heights, where the hills, stuffed with old money, descended into trendy shops along upper Fillmore, that same street which had once given its name to a famous concert hall.

Margot was all of twelve blocks away. But in San Francisco you could travel through as many income

levels, ethnic groups and religious doctrines in the same distance. You could go from boutiques to dime stores, nouvelle cuisine to packaged sandwiches, BMWs to battered Buicks, and back again. Once you passed California Street, though, a subtle shift occurred: Even though gentrification was reaching down here, too you were definitely in “the Fillmore.”

California Street separated many neighborhoods like that – Chinatown and downtown, Presidio Heights and Jordan Park, Seacliff and the Richmond – but here, Joel thought, it was like crossing the river Styx, with souls from both sides washed up on the shore. As he waited for the light to change, Joel recognized the woman in the fuzzy yellow bedroom slippers who sat on the sidewalk with her back against the wall of the croissanterie, laughing and then crying, with her head in her hands. Across the street, above the liquor store, hung a large banner: the lottery is here.

The Playground Center occupied an old Victorian on Eddy, a couple of blocks from the projects. A private, nonprofit corporation, which had been formed “for the purpose of providing free day care for the children of qualified parents,” it was Margot Harvey’s creation, calling, and *raison d’être*. The house itself was blue-gray, and covered with little brown scabs, the mementos of last year’s rainfall; the maintenance budget had all gone into plumbing repairs.

Joel parked in the driveway.

Margot was standing on the porch. Like the old woman who lived in a shoe, she was surrounded by children: One little girl was rubbing her face with the hem of Margot’s blue-and-white flowered dress, while another, who had wriggled between Margot’s legs, appeared headless. Margot herself held a baby in her arms; there was a wet spot on the front of her dress where the baby had drooled. Margot wore a modern rendition of the cloche hat – white, with the whisper of a blue veil – but it was knocked askew, apparently by the same baby, who was now trying to clutch at her dark hair.

And this was how Joel knew that he was really in love: that she could have been standing there in a wrinkled flannel nightgown and argyle socks and he still would have found her as sexy as when she had sprawled on his bed the week before, showing her thighs in rose-patterned white stockings.

Behind her, Joel could see Mrs. Tuttle – turtle-necked, too skinny, white-haired – and Rosa Avera, Margot’s assistant. Rosa was a hard-eyed Filipina, who, although she did not resemble Margot otherwise, was of the same height and build. Her long black hair, when loose, reached to her waist, but it was braided today, wrapped in a coronet around her head. When she smiled (which she did occasionally), she revealed a sparkling set of braces. She went everywhere she could with Margot, and had even adopted Margot’s preference for lacy, drop-waisted dresses.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Margot said, and her greeting was a limp version of her usual welcome: There you are. She handed the baby to Mrs. Tuttle, and gently pulled her hem from the little girl’s fingers. “The children should be in the playroom, don’t you think, Mrs. Tuttle? Rosa, perhaps you wouldn’t mind giving Mrs. Tuttle a hand.”

“What’s wrong?” Joel asked quickly. He had never heard Margot use that tone of voice before: stiff, formal.

Mrs. Tuttle was muttering oh-dears as she shoed the children ahead of her, but Rosa did not move. “Why did you call him?” she demanded, indicating Joel with a sideways jerk of her head. “He’ll get us in worse trouble.”

Nice to see you, too, Rosa, Joel thought. But Rosa hated everyone who was close to Margot. He took Margot’s arm. “Let’s go inside.”

“You’ll be sorry,” Rosa humphed behind them.

Margot seemed to revive at his touch. Once inside the foyer she hissed, “You know, I do think we should hurry. Come upstairs with me.”

Upstairs? He didn’t trust himself alone with her anymore. But he followed the switching blue of her skirt up to the second floor. She was wearing those white lace stockings again, too... From the second floor, Margot led him up another flight of stairs – long and narrow – which dead-ended at a door. He counted as they climbed, one, two, four, six... From the light shining underneath he knew that it opened onto the roof. Margot reached for the door with her long, square-tipped nails, then dropped back a step. “There’s a woman up there,” she whispered to Joel. “I didn’t see what happened exactly. Mrs. Tuttle was alone with the kids for awhile. She’s so good with them, but... this woman came in and said she wanted to take her little boy home. Mrs. Tuttle almost let them leave before she realized that the woman wasn’t Horatio’s mother. Then she tried to stop her and the woman ran up to the roof. I just happened to be on my way over, to check on some things.”

“Horatio’s one of the kids.”

“That’s right.” Margot rubbed the back of her hand across her forehead, under the little veil. Her hat was still crooked; he had to resist an urge to straighten it. “He’s up there, too.”

“You’ve got to call the police.”

“We—we can’t,” she said.

“If something happens – ”

“Please. Trust me. I trust you. I know you can help us.” Her eyes were big and blue with thick dark lashes; she wasn’t wearing makeup, and they were a child’s confiding, unspoiled eyes. How could he say no to her, act like a wimp, when he could be a hero?

“Has she threatened anything? Said anything she wants?”

Margot shook her head. “I wasn’t here. I didn’t see.”

He sucked in a breath. “All right. You’d better go downstairs.”

She squeezed his arm. “Thank you.”

He watched her descend, turn at the banister, and disappear. After a moment he cautiously opened the door and stepped onto the roof.

The light blinded him. Then gradually he saw the expanse of tar and gravel glittering in the afternoon sun; the line of chimneys stretching across the row of houses; and at the edge of the roof looking over the façade to the street below, a middle-aged woman in a rumpled camel-hair suit stood holding the hand of a black child about two years old, who chewed on his free wrist. At the sound of Joel’s arrival, the woman turned around.

“Hello,” Joel said.

The woman held up one hand to shield her face from the sun, and stared at him. She was framed by a net of telephone wires.

“I’m Joel.”

“Oh, terrific.” The wind lifted her wispy, bleached yellow hair, and blew the jacket of her suit open; her large bosom was shaped into the twin points of ice cream cones. “This is a pretty kettle of fish. You a cop?”

“No, a psychoanalyst.” Joel smiled.

“I shoulda known. A shrink. I’ve met a lot of you guys. You all look the same.” She added grudgingly, “You’re cuter than most.”

“I was hoping we could talk,” he said casually. He didn’t like how near the edge of the roof she was. And why didn’t they keep the roof door locked?

“I don’t have time. We’ll be taking off soon.”

“Where are you going?”

“There’s a helicopter that’s going to land here and take us home. I have a nice house in Pacific Heights. I’ve got lots of toys for him there. My ex-husband my try to stop us, though. Al. He’s a loser.” ...