

Leap of Faith

By Sandra C. McKinnon

Houston, 1996. For now.

It started out rather innocently. Jake Mulray had suddenly moved out of the Laurel Street apartment and a new tenant had moved in. As often happens when one leaves suddenly, the new tenant began receiving the old tenant's mail. Had the newcomer not been a single young woman, one who knew very few people in Houston, Jake's mail might have gone unnoticed. But Rosemary Brecht was lonely enough to take an interest.

So it was that early one September evening, Rosemary arrived at her new home after a long day of work, eager to review her mail. She parked her car and, in the warm setting sun, walked up to the Laurel Street apartment building. With its grand Moorish style and shabby palm trees, the building had the air of an aging beauty who had hit the bottle perhaps a few times too often. The apartment had appealed to Rosemary's romantic inclinations--as had Mulray.

She opened the front door and walked into a little hallway. There, set into a wall, were two rows of brass mailboxes. The mailboxes had a murky glow, having been in need of a good polishing for some years. Each had a slot for a white card that announced the name of the tenant. Rosemary glanced at the white card for Apartment 8. Jake's name had been scribbled out, and her own written above it. Under the landlady's heavy scribble she could still make out the letters of his name.

Jake Mulray. That was a name for you, she thought. She could just see a dark office, a bottle of whiskey in the lower right desk drawer, a .45 on the blotter. He resembled Glenn Ford, one of her neighbors said, so Rosemary gave him black hair and a fedora pulled down to dark, glittering eyes. Baby cheeks you wanted to pinch, but wouldn't dare.

She took a prim little key out of her pocketbook and opened up the mailbox. Inside were a few pieces of mail. Most of them were trash--fliers offering services--but one caught her eye. It was a letter to Jake from a credit agency in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles. Had he lived there before moving to Houston? she wondered. If so, why

had he left? Obviously, because he owed money, she thought. But how much? She was tempted to tear open the envelope and find out, but stopped. In her mind, a sinister aura was beginning to surround Mulray; sinister, but not unattractive. She wrote "Please Forward" on his mail in attractive, feminine writing that perhaps might catch Mulray's eye. She placed the letters back in the mailbox and then locked it up with her prim little key.

Rosemary walked on, into a hallway with four closed doors and a stairway. She climbed the stairs to the second floor, and heard a door open upstairs. She heard the footsteps of someone heavy moving down the hall above. She walked to her own apartment and then saw a large shadow coming down the stairs. Then, Ms. Mahler, her landlady, rounded the corner. Ms. Mahler was an older woman--a big woman--who looked, Rosemary felt, like an anarchist from the 1920's. She had a bland face and wore bland clothes. She lived above Rosemary and would often play the piano, favoring pieces apparently written by deeply depressed individuals.

Rosemary self-consciously touched her ginger-colored hair and said, "Good morning, Ms. Mahler."

"It's evening," said Ms. Mahler, her hand firmly gripping the bannister.

"Oh, so it is," said Rosemary, with a little uncomfortable laugh. "Say, I got some mail for the old tenant--. I just put it back in the mailbox, 'Please forward.' I hope he gets it."

Ms. Mahler said, "You may get it right back. I doubt Mr. Mulray notified the postal authorities of his new address."

"Really?" said Rosemary, hoping to get more out of her.

"He left rather suddenly. He said something had come up. He gave me one day's notice that he was clearing out," said Ms. Mahler.

"I guess that was kind of a hardship to you."

"No. He kept his place clean. There were no nail holes in the walls, no cigarette burns anywhere. I asked him for his new address so that I could mail him his deposit. He said he'd let me know it when he got there," said Ms. Mahler. "I do not expect to hear from him."

"Why not?" asked Rosemary.

“I suspect he doesn’t want to be found. But that, I suppose, is his business,” said Ms. Mahler.

And none of mine, was the message Rosemary caught. “Well, have a good day. Night,” she said.

Ms. Mahler nodded and went on.

Despite her spooky manner, Greta Mahler did add to the character of 120 Laurel Avenue, Rosemary had to admit. The apartment was a three-story built in 1920's, and looked like somewhere the Black Dahlia might have lived. But the residents were mostly old ladies and students, and a rather nutty old man who spent most of his hours on his balcony, watching birds.

Rosemary opened her door and walked in. The living room was dark, with only a few patches of warm light sent in by the setting sun. The apartment had come furnished with a few dark and heavy antiques upon which, Ms. Mahler told her, she was not to use “commercial furniture polish.”

Rosemary had added a few personal touches to the apartment, items that she had made from old clothes brought into Mr. Peabody's, the vintage store where she worked. The fake leopard skin pillows on the sofa had come from an old coat; the organza curtains were once a matching pair of wedding veils. The veils had belonged to twins who were married on the same day.

Rosemary opened a window to listen to the sounds outdoors. Later she ate a quiet dinner, and then stretched out on the couch to watch a little television. She pulled one of the fake leopard skin pillows under her head, feeling more tired than usual. She'd only gotten four hours of sleep last night--worrying about nothing again--and she'd been on her feet all day.

She started to doze off, just as the distant *bong! bong!* of piano keys began. Ms. Mahler always played songs that sounded like they were about 200 years of communist oppression in Poland. A cool breeze moved the organza curtains about the open window and brought in the gummy sweet smell of gardenias from the garden. The piano music made her feel like she was in another time. She wondered what Jake Mulray was doing right then.

* * *

The next morning, Rosemary was back at Mr. Peabody's. It had been a slow morning, and so she took the opportunity to catch up on the books. She used an old-fashioned ledger, and, as she pencilled in the numbers, she felt like a Girl Friday--the type Judy Holliday might have played.

Around noon, Holly, the owner, came in. Holly was only 28. Her father had given her the down payment for the store. She always wore spiked heels and suits from the '40s that she hemmed above her bony knees. Working, for Holly, meant coming in for an hour and picking out a cute outfit to wear that night.

"*Bonjour, bonjour,*" said Holly, speed-walking over to the display case. "How goes it?"

"Pretty slow," said Rosemary, sitting up.

"Well, damn, that's not going to pay for my new Ferrari," said Holly. She opened up the display case and started looking through it. "I've got a date tonight with Stan. I thought I'd wear that little orange suit. What do you think? I need some earrings."

"What about the zebra-striped ones?" said Rosemary.

"Mmm, maybe," said Holly. But she didn't reach for the zebra-striped earrings. Instead she picked up a pair of red dangling earrings. "What do you think?"

"Red? With orange?"

"I'll throw on a red scarf or something," said Holly. She tried on the earrings and looked in the mirror, turning her chin this way and that. "What do you think?"

"You look good in long earrings," said Rosemary. She did, too, with her short hair and long, thick bangs. Rosemary could never wear her hair like that.

"I don't know." Holly snapped off the earrings--click-click--and set them on the counter. Then, bored, she turned on a portable jam box and a loud, shrieking song came on.

Rosemary cringed, then went back to penciling in numbers. When Holly wasn't here, which was most of the time, Rosemary listened to the oldies station, the one that played the Dorsey

Brothers and Frank Sinatra.

The door tinkled and a young woman with dyed black hair and a big box in her hands came in. She wore jeans, a black T-shirt, and red hi-tops, and a leather jacket with the Grim Reaper on the back. She set the box on the display case in front of Rosemary.

"How much can I get for these?" she asked.

Rosemary began to pull items out of the box as Holly, the scavenger, came over. Among the items were a pink nightgown with feathers, two cotton dresses in good condition, alligator pumps and a matching purse, and a Tupperware bowl filled with rhinestone jewelry.

"What's this?" said Holly, as she yanked a kelly-green suit out of the box. "It's from The House of Dior," she squealed, as she looked at the big, curvy, handwriting on the faded label.

"Size 10. Too bad it's not my size," said Holly, tossing it aside.

Good, thought Rosemary, because she liked the suit herself.

"This stuff belong to my great-aunt Martha," the young woman said. "We found it in the attic, and my mother gave it to me. Like, what am I going to do with it?"

Rosemary should have been used to this attitude by now, but that didn't mean she understood it. How could anyone give away family heirlooms?

After the young woman left, Rosemary snapped open the purse. Inside she found old, worn matches from Las Vegas casinos, and restaurants in Beverly Hills and Palm Springs. She found three yellowed photographs of a woman she presumed was Aunt Martha--one with her family, one playing tennis, and a formal portrait. She also found a photograph of Aunt Martha with a woman who looked like a fat Joan Crawford. They were both in swimsuits and laying on striped chaise lounges near a hotel pool. The fat woman held the hand of a dark-haired man who stood behind her chaise. She looked at the man closely, feeling that she had seen him before.

Holly snatched the photos out of her hands and flipped through them. She tossed them on the glass display case--*bing, bing, bing*. "Sell them as Instant Relatives," she said. Then she popped her cassette out of the machine, scooped up the red earrings, and bounced out the door. After she left, Rosemary turned on the radio. Frank Sinatra was crooning "Green Eyes."

* * *

Rosemary drove home by way of Sunset Boulevard. The street was darkened by a canopy of oaks, and lined with turn-of-the century mansions behind iron gates. In the back yard of one, a dinner party was being set up. A white-jacketed servant moved between the tables that had been covered with yellow tablecloths, and he placed silver forks that glinted in the setting sun.

Rosemary remembered a time, not long ago, when she believed she would have dinner parties and servants and iron gates. Then one day it no longer seemed possible.

Her brass mailbox was filled with letters today, but none for her. Inside, some of Jake's "Please Forward" letters had come back. Ms. Mahler was right. Apparently, he had not yet told the "postal authorities" his new address. Rosemary wrote "Return to Sender" on these and put them back in the mailbox. She decided to claim as her own the letters addressed to "Jake Mulray or Current Resident," and also decided to borrow a mystery magazine that apparently Jake subscribed to. "I will put it back in the mailbox when I am finished," she thought, but felt a little--and not unpleasantly so--like a thief.

Once inside her apartment, she got a glass of wine and changed into casual clothes because, like always, she had nowhere to go on Friday night. She sat on her sofa and reviewed the mail. A postcard offering a steam cleaning service. On the other side of the postcard were two blurry photographs. A mother and child who were missing. What became of all these lost people? Were they all on a farm in Montana? She was the type to look at every missing person photo she came across, and she always read the personal messages in the classifieds.

She discarded a few other pieces of mail, then opened the mystery magazine. As she did, another piece of mail fell out. Apparently it had gotten stuck inside the magazine. There was no return address, just a hastily scribbled "Jake Mulray" and the Laurel Street address.

What should she do? She couldn't write "Please Forward" on it because Jake had not yet given a forwarding address. She couldn't write "Return to Sender" because there was no return

address. She could open the letter to see if there was a return address inside. No, it was wrong to open someone else's mail, she reminded herself. But what else could she do?

Satisfied with her rationalization, she tore it open. The letter was written on heavy, cream paper that did not match the envelope. It smelled faintly of perfume. Attached to the letter was a note in the same hastily scribbled writing as on the envelope. It said: "Jake--Thought this might interest you." Rosemary peeled off the note and read the letter, which had been written by someone with neat, loopy handwriting.

"Dear Robert," the letter opened. Robert? Why would someone send Jake somebody else's mail? There was no return address for this letter either. "Dear Robert, Why won't you return my calls? It's obvious how you feel about me, but still you owe me a little something, don't you agree? I'm sure you think me a fool, but I don't care. I love you too much that nothing else matters." Rosemary knew she should put the letter down right now, but she kept reading.

"You're too good for that woman, you know, but you won't listen. I am prepared to tell Denny all about us unless you call me soon." She'd underlined "soon" three times. "Let's meet at our old haunt--the B.H.H. All my love, Laura."

Rosemary stared at the loopy, flourished writing. Who was Robert? Laura? Laura was obviously married to Denny, but was holding a torch for Robert. Why would Jake be interested in the letter? Was he, in fact, a private investigator, and this was some sort of evidence for a case? If so, who had sent him the evidence? What was the B.H.H.?

Intrigued, and wondering if Jake was still around, she dialed Information in Houston. She felt excited just calling to get his number. She knew she would never be brave enough to actually talk to him.

"Do you have a listing for a Jake Mulray?" she asked.

"How are you spelling Mulray?" the operator asked.

"M-U-L-R-A-Y."

"Hold on." The operator checked her records. "We show a listing for a Jacob L. Mulray, but the number is unlisted."

“Oh,” she said. She hung up the phone, disappointed. Then she thought maybe the listing was for a different person and that the right Jake Mulray--the one she was looking for--might be back in Los Angeles. She dialed Information there, and again spelled out the name to the operator. She felt her heart beat faster as the operator said, "There's a Jacob L. Mulray but the phone number is unlisted." Rosemary hung up.

It had to be the same person. The name was just too unusual. But why would he have unlisted phone numbers in two different cities? Jake was on her mind as she fixed dinner, then later, as she sat on her sofa reading an Agatha Christie story in his mystery magazine.

As the darkness of Friday evening slowly descended upon her apartment, she began to feel lonely. Ms. Mahler's piano playing wasn't helping, nor was the wine. Rosemary opened the French doors, and a cool breeze pushed the long white sheers into her room. She sat on her couch, her knees tucked up to her chest.

She listened to the distant squeals of cars and imagined teenagers drag racing down Main Street. She remembered what it was like to be seventeen and be driving around on a summer night. The street lights and neon seeming to go on forever, and giving her a sense that somewhere was a secret group of people, perhaps in a hidden nightclub, who could understand her, understand her completely, and that one day they would find them if they just kept looking.

What she wanted, in those days, and even nights like tonight, was someone who could see her soul. Thinking about it now, she imagined herself as a rock, the kind of rock that was plain on the outside but filled with glittering amethyst crystals inside. It would just take someone to crack the rock, and she would be free to be the kind of person she always wanted to be. She just needed some verification, a leap of faith on a stranger's part. She held this belief as closely now as she did when she was seventeen, but the difference now, she thought, as she poured another glass of wine, was she had been to all the hidden clubs, and no one had even come close.

One good thing came of the night, and that was the late night movie. A Bogart/Bacall noir. What Rosemary loved about these movies was the directness of the relationships. Bogart and Bacall could size each other up in an instant, and tremendous things were said by the way he

noticed she wanted to scratch her leg. It wasn't the innocence of youth that gave them this directness, but rather, a jadedness from having lived too much. This gave her hope, great hope, as she laid down on the couch and watched the flicker of the television.

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She woke up with the sensation someone was watching her. The station had shut off and the screen was filled with buzzing flakes of static. She went to close the doors to her balcony and noticed the full moon, bright and sharp against the black night. She wondered if a man who looked like Glenn Ford was waiting out there for her somewhere. Then she noticed, out of the corner of her eyes, a figure standing on the balcony one story down and to the right of hers. It was Mr. Jones, the bird watcher. He stood there in his striped pajamas, his bald head tipped upward to the moon. He didn't see her as she rubbed her arms from the cold, then shut the French doors and went to bed.

* * *

The next day at work, Rosemary tried on the Dior suit. It fit like it was made for her. She turned from side to side, looking at herself in the mirror. She had decided to buy the suit and the alligator pocketbook with the old pictures inside.

The front door tinkled. A customer walked in, a striking woman, with black hair curled back from her face in two rolls. On her cheek she had a black, oddly-shaped mole. The woman wore a fitted black suit and a large, black and white striped hat with a matching purse.

Rosemary said hello, then she walked behind the register and started pricing clothes. She turned on the radio and filled the store with big band music. Rosemary could almost see the band in their white dinner jackets, brass instruments flashing, and a dance floor filled with swirling couples.

The woman tried on a long, black dress with a slit in the front. She looked like she should be singing in front of a big ball microphone at a nightclub. She ended up buying the dress.

"Is it for a special occasion?" asked Rosemary.

"Yes," said the woman with a smile. Rosemary could see that her mole was a black satin butterfly.

Rosemary usually felt depressed when she heard others talk about special occasions, but not today. She could barely wait to get home and check her mail. Maybe it was the kelly-green suit, but she felt like today something special would happen.

The woman was half-way out the door when she turned and said, "Oh--Tell Mr. Peabody Ida said her dress was a smash."

"What?" Rosemary stared at the woman. "There's not really a Mr. Peabody."

"Oh, sure there is. You're new, aren't you? I haven't seen you before. I'm Ida Jeffries." She smiled, red lips parting to reveal white, shining teeth. "I've been a customer of Mr. Peabody's for years."

"Could there be another Mr. Peabody's? See, the only ones who work here are me and Holly. Maybe you're confused," said Rosemary.

"I don't think so," said the woman angrily. She walked out the door. Rosemary watched her shoulder pads swish back and forth as Ida Jeffries sauntered down the street. Then she called Holly.

Holly answered it on the fourth ring. "Hello?" Music blared in the background.

"Holly? I can't hear you. It's Rosemary."

"Oh, hold on a sec." Holly tossed the phone down with a thump, then turned the music down. "Better?"

"Yes. Listen, you know a woman named Ida Jeffries? Regular customer?"

"I don't think so."

"Real pretty. Black hair."

"Doesn't ring any bells."

"Well, she was in here a minute ago, claiming she was a regular customer of Mr. Peabody's," said Rosemary.

"She must have been another nutcase," said Holly. Being close to downtown and the social service agencies, meant bums, alcoholics, and mentally unstable people would occasionally drop in the store. "I swear, I'm ready to move to the 'burbs."

"Ida Jeffries didn't seem crazy," said Rosemary. "Did this store used to be run by a Mr. Peabody before you bought it?"

"No, goof. It was a Chinese restaurant," said Holly. "I got the name from a cartoon."

"What about before that?" asked Rosemary.

"Who knows?" said Holly. "Who cares?"

But Rosemary cared, or at least she couldn't get it out of her mind. Ida Jeffries didn't seem crazy. She shivered. The whole thing gave her the creeps.

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The weird feeling came back when she got her mail. She had a couple letters to a generic "Resident" and two pieces of mail for Jake: A letter from the credit agency, and a postcard from the Beverly Hills Hotel. B.H.H.! When she turned it over she saw Jake's name and address and a five-word message: "I saw what you did." There was no signature, but it looked like the same hastily-scribbled writing on the envelope of the love letter to Robert from Laura.

She glanced behind her, as if someone was looking at her, then slipped the postcard into her alligator pocketbook. "I saw what you did." Why did these five words frighten her so? They seemed drawn from her childhood memory, a scary story told at a slumber party. "Humans can lick too." "Give me back my bloody finger." Murder, that's what "I saw what you did" meant in her memory. Absurd, but yet why hadn't Jake left a forwarding address? What did that letter mean? Was Jake hired to rub out Laura? At the Beverly Hills Hotel? She suddenly felt like an accessory.

She heard the tinkling of piano keys. Ms. Mahler! She had to know something. She walked down a flight of stairs. The music grew louder and louder as she approached Ms. Mahler's, and she recognized it as a Chopin nocturne. Not wanting to interrupt, she stood outside the door, breathing quietly while the melancholy music played. She stared at the art deco sconces that dimly lit the empty hallway and that, with the melody, made her feel like someone in a film noir. What if when she knocked at the door and no one answered? What if she walked into the parlor and Ms. Mahler was laying on the carpet with a knife stuck in her chest? And what if she screamed and the piano player turned around and it was a young Glenn Ford?

The piano music ended. She knocked.

She heard heavy footsteps and then Ms. Mahler answered the door. She had on a grey dress, with no knife sticking out of it. "What is it?" Ms. Mahler asked.

"Ms. Mahler, I have to find Jake Mulray." It came out a little more dramatically than she intended.

"Come in."

Funny how Ms. Mahler's requests always sounded like orders. She had never been in the woman's apartment before. The parlor looked just as she expected: closed velvet drapes; heavy, large antiques; dark shadows; a mahogany upright piano; and shelves of cracked, leather-bound books.

Rosemary sat on a mildewy, velvet chair. She glanced at a stack of papers resting on a desk.

As if responding to Rosemary's glance, Ms. Mahler immediately stuffed the papers and then pen into the top drawer of the desk.

"I enjoyed your piano music," said Rosemary.

"How long were you standing there?"

"What?"

"Never mind, I heard your footsteps. You were there at least two minutes."

Rosemary picked at a fingernail. "I didn't want to disturb you." But she wondered why

Ms. Mahler hadn't come to the door if she'd heard her. Of course, you can't answer a door that hasn't been knocked.

"I have very good ears," Ms. Mahler said, which seemed to have a layer of subtext as thick as the drapes. "Do you want to hang that up?" She nodded at the suit.

"No, I'll just be a minute," said Rosemary. "I need to get in touch with Jake--he's received some important mail."

Ms. Mahler didn't press for details. "I already told you I don't have his new address. He was a secretive man. He seemed to keep everything tucked away in that fedora he always wore."

So he did wear a fedora, Rosemary thought, just as she'd imagined.

"We talked at length once, about music," said Ms. Mahler, "He was knowledgeable on the subject, which of course is something I respect."

"You don't know where he worked?"

"No."

"But didn't he have to fill out one of those application forms like I did?"

"Of course he did."

"Can I see it?"

Ms. Mahler squinted her eyes at Rosemary, sizing her up. "All right." Ms. Mahler stood up and walked into another room. Rosemary heard drawers sliding open. Carefully, she slid open the desk drawer. Inside she saw a stack of fliers that said "Don't Be Mislead By These Anti-Americans." There was a picture of a man and the caption beneath it read: "Congressman Martin Dies, Jr. wants to turn the U.S. into a fascist state." The flier was filled with single-spaced type, and at the bottom had "CPUSA" in large letters. Remembering the acronym from a history class, Rosemary wondered if it stood for the Communist Party of the U.S.A.. She slid the door closed, just in time.

Ms. Mahler came back, with an application in her hand. "Here," she said, handing it to Rosemary.

Rosemary glanced at the top of Jake's form. The date was listed as 1946. "The date says

1946."

"No it doesn't." Ms. Mahler glanced at the form. "It says 1996. That's a nine."

"It looks like a four. Oh well. Can I take this?"

"If you bring it back."

Ms. Mahler walked her to the door. "I have very good ears."

Rosemary knew Ms. Mahler had heard the desk drawer, but acted innocent.

Ms. Mahler ran a hand along the door frame and said, "By the way, you might try the City Directory. You can find it at the library. I have one myself but it's not the current edition."

"Thank you," said Rosemary. She wondered why a Ms. Mahler would have a copy of the City Directory, but didn't want to press her luck any farther.

Back in her apartment, Rosemary looked at the form. Jake had listed "entrepreneur" as his job. Sure, Jake, she thought. Under "References" he had written "Edward Darby" and a Los Angeles phone number. She spun the heavy dial on her rotary phone. Every time she dialed the phone, she half-expected someone to jump out of her curtains and stab her in the back with a pair of sewing scissors. There were two old-fashioned, wobbly rings, and then a an older-sounding man said, "Hello?"

Her heart beat against her Dior jacket. "Mr. Darby?"

"Yes?"

"I'm a friend of Jake's."

"Who is this?" His voice suddenly had a sharp edge.

"My name is Rosemary."

"I don't know any Rosemary."

"I realize that, but I'm trying to get in touch with Jake."

"I haven't talked to my son in six months. Listen--if this is regarding that Collins woman, Robert had nothing to do..."

"Collins? Are you referring to *Laura Collins*?"

The phone went dead. What was going on here? Edward Darby was the father of Jake

Mulray, only he called him “Robert.” It appeared that Robert Darby had changed his name to Jake Mulray. The father had seemed suspicious of her, maybe because she knew Robert Darby’s new identity. Maybe the father had thought she was the one writing the threatening letters. Why did he hang up when she said “Laura Collins?” It seemed to her that the Laura who had written the letter to Robert and “that Collins woman” were one and the same. But what had happened to her?

She dialed Mr. Darby's number again. It rang twice, then a woman’s voice came on.

“Martin and Martin,” she said cheerfully.

This was strange. “Is Mr. Darby there?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, you must have the wrong number. This is the Law Firm of Martin and Martin.”

Rosemary hung up. She must have misdialed. She carefully dialed the number again. It rang once, then the cheerful woman came on again.

“Martin and Martin,” she said.

“I’m sorry, I was sure I had dialed it right that time,” said Rosemary.

“What number are you trying to dial?” the cheerful woman asked.

Rosemary repeated the number.

“Well, that’s us,” said the woman.

“That can’t be right. That’s the same number as Mr. Darby’s,” she said. “I just called it.”

“Well, there’s no Mr. Darby who works here,” said the woman.

Rosemary hung up. She didn’t know what was happening, but she had to find out. She called Information in Houston and Los Angeles, but there were no listings for Robert Darby. She decided to go to the library and look up the City Directory as Ms. Mahler suggested.

The residents were listed first by phone number, then by name, then by address in the directory. Robert Darby wasn't listed, but Jake Mulray was. He lived at fifteen hundred Bellaire, Apartment 430. She slapped the directory shut and bounded out the door.

Fifteen hundred Bellaire was a ten-story building called The Carlyle. The building was in

an art deco style and had a row of tall palm trees out front. She knew it had to be the right one. The same person who had lived at her apartment on Laurel would graduate to this building, in the way that a lady might switch from smoking More cigarettes to Sobraine Black Russians. She parked her car in the cul de sac in the front of the building and went inside.

She went up to the desk clerk. "Excuse me."

"Yes ma'am."

"I'm trying to find out if a Mr. Mulray still lives here."

"Yes. As a matter of fact, Mr. Mulray is dining in our dining room this evening. May I ask--"

But she was half-way to the dining room. She noticed a coat rack, with a fedora hitched to a hook.

She looked around the dining room, which was a big open room with circular tables covered with white linen tablecloths. Scattered around the room were palm trees, and from the ceiling hung an ornate chandelier. There were about ten or so parties.

A maitre'd in a long black dress approached and said, "Good evening. Are you joining a party or will you be dining alone this evening?"

Rosemary noticed an empty bar to the left. A good place to see but not be seen. "I'm just here for a cocktail."

"Very good, madame. Please follow me."

The bar was separated from the rest of the restaurant by an eye-level glass partition that had an etched calla lily design running throughout. Rosemary sat in a mahogany booth, and when a waiter in a tuxedo shirt and bow tie approached, she ordered a Manhattan because she thought it sounded sophisticated. She peeked into the dining room.

A laugh tinkled like chandelier crystals. She saw in the crowded dining room elderly women in frilly hats, middle-aged man snapping their fingers to the band, and a young woman in a silver dress with a martini on her right and a sugar daddy to her left. Then she noticed a dark-haired, baby-faced man sitting alone. It was Jake Mulray, she just knew it. He looked so

familiar--but that was impossible. He was mid-thirties and he did look like Glenn Ford with those dark, brooding eyes and those baby cheeks.

Laura Collins, the name came into her head, and just as she thought it, Jake's eyes shifted towards hers. She looked away quickly, and sipped her dark drink. Their eyes met again, later, after he had finished his meal. She met his stare, and this time felt a flush over her body; not like a school girl's blush but a golden tingling of self-confidence. *I know who you are*, she thought.

She had the evidence right here in her purse. But what could she do? Confront him? Say, "I know who you are and I know what you did." But what did she really know? She knew there once was a man named Robert Darby and he was intimate with a woman named Laura Collins who was married to a man named Denny. She knew Laura had loved Robert, but he had loved someone else. She knew Laura had threatened to tell Denny about their affair. Then something had happened to Laura--but what? And then Robert had skipped town and changed his name to Jake Mulray. And there he was sitting right over there.

She began to lose her confidence. Maybe she should just hand him his mail. She had the letter and the postcard right there in her pocketbook. She opened it up and found the letters; as she was picking them up, she noticed the old photographs. Then she remembered something. She found the picture of the fat woman holding hands with the young man near the hotel pool. She looked at the young man, then she looked up at Jake Mulray across the room from her. They were one and the same. Could the picture have been taken at the Beverly Hills Hotel? It couldn't have been. That would have been just too much of a coincidence.

She turned the photograph over and read, with a shock, "Mrs. Denny Collins and friend at the Beverly Hills Hotel, July 1946." Her fingers trembling, she looked at the photograph again, then again, at Jake. It couldn't be. The photograph had been taken fifty years ago. This couldn't be happening, and yet, some how it was. Only one person could clear this up, and he was about fifty feet away. If she said anything to him, she could wind up looking like a fool.

Maybe, but maybe not. Because, what if her hunches were right and it did make sense? What if she was the only one in the world who truly knew the real Jake Mulray? If she left, she

would never know and maybe she would ruin the one chance she had to make a real connection with another person.

She heard his voice, low and melodic, when he asked for the check. Her heart started pounding and her self-confidence slipped away. What should she do? she wondered. She watched the waiter bring Jake the check. She had to act quickly.

Drawing a deep breath, she stood up. She felt self-conscious in the clinging Dior suit, but forced herself to go on. She walked across the crowded room past the laughter that tinkled like champagne and the young woman in silver and a waiter with a tray filled with flaming desserts. As she moved closer to Jake's table, he looked up, and when he saw her, he smiled and his dark eyes twinkled.

The band played the beginning chords of a song.

She cleared her throat, about to confront an absolute stranger with an impossible-sounding accusation.

But before she could speak, he rose from his seat and took her hand in his, which felt warm and familiar. "Would you like to dance, Rosemary?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, her voice breathy and light.

Hand in hand, he led her to the dance floor. The musicians looked crisp in their white dinner jackets; their brass instruments flashed under the slowly revolving mirrored ball. The spotlight beamed on Miss Ida Jeffries as she took the stage in the long black dress that she had purchased earlier that afternoon. In a husky voice she began to sing, "Tangerine..."

Jake pulled Rosemary in close and began gliding her backwards around the floor. "So," he said in a mock-jazzy voice, "haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"You could say that," she said, suddenly confident as a Lauren Bacall character. But rather than feeling like one who had lived too much, she felt like one who was just starting to live.