



Stalking the Angel

Robert Crais

The blonde who walked into Cole's office was the best-looking woman he'd seen in weeks. The only thing that kept her from rating a perfect "10" was the briefcase on one arm and the uptight hotel magnate on the other. Bradley Warren had lost something very valuable—something that belonged to someone else: a rare thirteenth-century Japanese manuscript called the Hagakure.

Just about all Cole knew about Japanese culture he'd learned from reading *Shōgun*, but he knew a lot about crooks—and what he didn't know his sociopathic sidekick, Joe Pike, did. Together their search begins in L.A.'s Little Tokyo and the nest of the notorious Japanese mafia, the yakuza, and leads to a white-knuckled adventure filled with madness, murder, sexual obsession, and a stunning double-whammy ending. For Elvis Cole, it's just another day's work.

By Robert Crais

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STALKING THE ANGEL

Robert Crais



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For Lauren,

whose parents will always love her,
& for Carol and Bill,
who have made me larger
by sharing their lives.

I love to hear the story
which angel voices tell.

—*The Little Corporal*

Emily Miller

When the truth is found to be lies,
and all the joy within you dies,
don't you want somebody to love?

—Jefferson Airplane

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About the Author

Excerpt from LULLABY TOWN

I was standing on my head in the middle of my office when the door opened and the beautiful looking woman I'd seen in three weeks walked in. She stopped in the door to stare, then remembered herself and moved aside for a grim-faced man who frowned when he saw me. A sure sign of disapproval. The woman said, "Mr. Cole, I'm Jillian Becker. This is Bradley Warren. May we speak with you?"

Jillian Becker was in her early thirties, slender in gray pants and a white ruffled shirt with a fluffy bow at the neck and a gray jacket. She held a cordovan Gucci briefcase that complemented the gray nicely, and had very blond hair and eyes that I would call amber but she would call green. Good eyes. There was an intelligent humor in them that the Serious Businesswoman look didn't diminish.

I said, "You should try this. Invigorates the scalp. Retards the aging process. Makes for embarrassing moments when prospective clients walk in." Upside down, my face was the color of beef liver.

Jillian Becker smiled politely. "Mr. Warren and I don't have very much time," she said. "Mr. Warren and I have to catch the noon flight to Kyoto, Japan." Mr. Warren.

"Of course."

I dropped down from the headstand, held one of the two director's chairs opposite my desk for Jillian Becker, shook hands with Mr. Warren, then tucked in my shirt and took a seat at my desk. I had taken off the shoulder holster earlier so it wouldn't flop into my face when I was upside down. "What can I do for you?" I said. Clever opening lines are my forte.

Bradley Warren looked around the office and frowned again. He was ten years older than Jillian, and had the manicured, no-hair-out-of-place look that serious corporate types go for. There was an \$8000 gold Rolex watch on his left wrist and a \$3000 Wesley Barron pinstriped suit on the rest of him and he didn't seem too worried that I'd slug him and steal the Rolex. Probably had another just like it at home. "Are you in business by yourself, Mr. Cole?" He would have been more comfortable if I'd been in a suit and had a couple of wanted posters lying around.

"I have a partner named Joe Pike. Mr. Pike is not a licensed private investigator. He is a former Los Angeles police officer. I hold the license." I pointed out the framed pink license that the Bureau of Collections of the State of California had issued to me. "You see. Elvin Cole." The license hangs beside this animation cel I've got of the Blue Fairy and Pinocchio. Pinocchio is as close as I come to a wanted poster.

Bradley Warren stared at the Blue Fairy and looked doubtful. He said, "Something very valuable was stolen from my home four days ago. I need someone to find it."

"Okay."

"Do you know anything about the Japanese culture?"

"I read *Shōgun*."

Warren made a quick hand gesture and said, "Jillian." His manner was brusque and I didn't like it much. Jillian Becker didn't seem to mind, but she was probably used to it.

Jillian said, "The Japanese culture was once predicated on a very specific code of behavior and personal conduct developed by the samurai during Japan's feudal period."

Samurai. Better buckle the old seat belt for this one.

“In the eighteenth century, a man named Jōchō Yamamoto outlined every aspect of proper behavior for the samurai in manuscript form. It was called ‘Recorded Words of the Hagakure Master,’ or, simply, the Hagakure, and only a few of the original editions survive. Mr. Bradley Warren had arranged the loan of one of these from the Tashiro family in Kyoto, with whom his company has extensive business dealings. The manuscript was in his home safe when it was stolen.”

As Jillian spoke, Bradley Warren looked around the office again and did some more frowning. He frowned at the Mickey Mouse phone. He frowned at the little figurines of Jiminy Cricket. He frowned at the SpiderMan mug. I considered taking out my gun and letting him frown at that, too, but thought it might seem peevish. “How much is the Hagakure worth?”

Jillian Becker said, “A little over three million dollars.”

“Insured?”

“Yes. But the policy won’t begin to cover the millions our company will lose in business with the Tashiros unless their manuscript is recovered.”

“The police are pretty good. Why not go to them?”

Bradley Warren sighed loudly, letting us know he was bored, then frowned at the gold Rolex. Time equals money.

Jillian said, “The police are involved, Mr. Cole, but we’d like things to proceed faster than they seem able to manage. That’s why we came to you.”

“Oh,” I said. “I thought you came to me so Bradley could practice frowning.”

Bradley looked at me. Pointedly. “I’m the president of Warren Investments Corporation. We form real estate partnerships with Japanese investors.” He leaned forward and raised his eyebrows. “I have a big operation. I’m in Hawaii. I’m in L.A., San Diego, Seattle.” He made an opera out of looking around my office. “Try to imagine the money involved.”

Jillian Becker said, “Mr. Warren’s newest hotel has just opened downtown in Little Tokyo.”

Bradley said, “Thirty-two stories. Eight million square feet.”

I nodded. “Big.”

He nodded back at me.

Jillian said, “We wanted to have the Hagakure on display there next week when the Pacific Men’s Club names Bradley Man of the Month.”

Bradley gave me more of the eyebrows. “I’m the first Caucasian they’ve honored this way. You know why? I’ve pumped three hundred million dollars into the local Asian community in the last thirty-six months. You got any idea how much money that is?”

“Excuse me,” I said. I pushed away from my desk, pitched myself out of my chair onto the floor, then got up, brushed myself off, and sat again. “There. I’m finished being impressed. We can go on.”

Jillian Becker’s face went white. Bradley Warren’s face went dark red. His nostrils flared and his lips tightened and he stood up. It was lovely. He said, “I don’t like your attitude.”

“That’s okay. I’m not selling it.” I opened the drawer in the center of my desk and tossed a cream-colored card toward him. He looked at it. “What’s this?”

“Pinkerton’s. They’re large. They’re good. They’re who you want. But they probably won’t like your attitude any more than I do.” I stood up with him.

Jillian Becker stood up, too, and held out her hand the way you do when you want things to settle down. “Mr. Cole, I think we’ve started on the wrong foot here.”

I leaned forward. “One of us did.”

She turned toward Warren. “It’s a small firm, Bradley, but it’s a quality firm. Two attorneys in the prosecutor’s office recommended him. He’s been an investigator for eight years and the police think highly of him. His references are impeccable.” Impeccable. I liked that.

Bradley Warren held the Pink’s card and flexed it back and forth, breathing hard. He looked the way a man looks when he doesn’t have any other choice and the choice he has is lousy. There’s a Pinocchio clock on the wall beside the door that leads to Joe Pike’s office. He has eyes that move from side to side. You go to the Pinkerton’s, they don’t have a clock like that. Jillian Becker said, “Bradley, he’s who you want to hire.”

After a while the heavy breathing passed and Bradley nodded. “All right, Cole. I’ll go along with Jillian on this and hire you.”

“No,” I said. “You won’t.”

Jillian Becker stiffened. Bradley Warren looked at Jillian Becker, then looked back at me. “What do you mean, I won’t?”

“I don’t want to work for you.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like you.”

Bradley Warren started to say something, then stopped. His mouth opened, then closed. Jillian Becker looked confused. Maybe no one had ever before said no to Bradley Warren. Maybe it was against the law. Maybe Bradley Warren’s personal police were about to crash through the door and arrest me for defying the One True Way. Jillian shook her head. “They said you could be difficult.”

I shrugged. “They should’ve said that when I’m pushed, I push back. They also should’ve said that when I do things, I do them my way.” I looked at Bradley. “The check rents. It doesn’t buy.”

Bradley Warren stared at me as if I had just beamed down from the *Enterprise*. He stood very still. So did Jillian Becker. They stood like that until a tic started beneath his left eye and he said, “Jillian.”

Jillian Becker said, “Mr. Cole, we need the Hagakure found, and we want you to find it. If we in some way offended you, we apologize.”

We.

“Will you help us?”

Her makeup was understated and appropriate, and there was a tasteful gold chain around her right wrist. She was bright and attractive and I wondered how many times she’d had to apologize for him and how it made her feel.

I gave her the Jack Nicholson smile and made a big deal out of sitting down again. “For you, babe, anything.” Can you stand it?

Bradley Warren’s face was red and purple and splotched, and the tic was a mad flicker. He made the hand gesture as quick as a cracking whip, and said, “Write him a check and leave it blank. I’ll be down in the limo.”

He left without looking at me and without offering his hand and without waiting for

Jillian. When he was gone I said, "My, my. Man of the Month."

Jillian Becker took a deep breath, let it out, then sat in one of the director's chairs and opened the Gucci briefcase in her lap. She took out a corporate checkbook and spoke while she wrote. "Mr. Cole, please understand that Bradley's under enormous pressure. We're on our way to Kyoto to tell the Tashiros what has happened. That will be neither pleasant nor easy."

"Sorry," I said. "I should be more sensitive."

She glanced up from the check with cool eyes. "Maybe you should."

So much for humor.

After a while, she put the check and a 3 × 5 index card on my desk. I didn't look at the check. She said, "The card has Bradley's home and office addresses and phone numbers. It also has mine. You may call me at any time, day or night, for anything that pertains to this case."

"Okay."

"Will you need anything else?"

"Access to the house. I want to see where the book was and talk to anyone who knew that the book was there. Also, if there's a photograph or description of the manuscript, I'll need it."

"Bradley's wife can supply that. At the house."

"What's her name?"

"Sheila. Their daughter Mimi lives at the house, also, along with two housekeepers. I'll call Sheila and tell her to expect you."

"Fine."

"Fine."

We were getting along just great.

Jillian Becker closed the Gucci briefcase, snapped its latch, stood, and went to the door. Maybe she hadn't always been this serious. Maybe working for Bradley brought it out in her.

"You do that well," I said.

She looked back. "What?"

"Walk."

She gave me the cool eyes again. "This is a business relationship, Mr. Cole. Let's leave it at that."

"Sure."

She opened the door.

"One more thing."

She turned back to me.

"You always look this good, or is today a special occasion?"

She stood like that for a while, not moving, and then she shook her head. "You really are something, aren't you?"

I made a gun out of my hand, pointed it at her, and gave her another dose of the Nicholson. "I hope he pays you well."

She went out and slammed the door.

When the door closed I looked at the check. Blank. She hadn't dated it 1889 or April 1. It had been signed by Bradley Warren and, as far as I could tell, in ink that wouldn't vanish. Maybe a better detective would have known for sure about the ink, but I'd have to risk it. Son of a gun. My big chance. I could nick him for a hundred thousand dollars, but that was probably playing it small. Maybe I should put a one and write zeros until my arm fell off and endorse it Elvis Cole, Yachtsman.

I folded the check in half, put it in my wallet, and took a Dan Wesson .38 in a shoulder rack out of my top right-hand drawer. I pulled a white cotton jacket on to cover the Dan Wesson, then went down to my car. The car is a Jamaica-yellow 1966 Corvette convertible that looks pretty snazzy. Maybe with the white jacket and the convertible and the blank check in my pocket, someone would think I was Donald Trump.

I put the Corvette out onto Santa Monica and cruised west through Beverly Hills and the upper rim of Century City, then north up Beverly Glen past rows of palm trees and stucco apartment houses and Persian-owned construction projects. L. A. in late June is bright. With the smog pressed down by an inversion layer, the sky turns white and the sun glares brilliantly from signs and awnings and reflective building glass and deep-waxed fenders and miles and miles of molten chrome bumpers. There were shirtless kids with skateboards coming their way into Westwood and older women with big hats coming back from markets and construction workers tearing up the streets and Hispanic women waiting for buses and everybody wore sunglasses. It looked like a Ray Ban commercial.

I stayed with Beverly Glen up past the Los Angeles Country Club golf course until I got to Sunset Boulevard, then hung a right and a quick left into upper Holmby Hills. Holmby is a smaller, more expensive version of the very best part of Beverly Hills to the east. It is old and elegant, and the streets are wide and neat with proper curbs and large homes hidden behind hedgerows and mortar walls and black wrought iron gates. Many of the houses are near the street, but a few are set back and quite a few you can't see at all.

The Warrens' home was the one with the guard. He was sitting in a light blue Thunderbird with a sticker on its side that said TITAN SECURITIES. He got out when he saw me slow down and stood with his hands on his hips. Late forties, big across the back, in a brown off-the-rack Sears suit. Wrinkled. He'd taken a couple of hard ones on the bridge of his nose, but that had been a long time ago. I turned into the drive, and showed him the license. "Cole. They're expecting me."

He nodded at the license and leaned against the door. "She sent the kid down to tell me you were on the way. I'm Hatcher." He didn't offer to shake my hand.

I said, "Anyone try storming the house?"

He looked back at the house, then shook his head. "Shit. I been out here since they got here and I ain't seen dick." He shot me a wink. "Leastways, not what you're talking about."

I said, "Are you tipping me off or is something in your eye?"

He smirked. "You been out before?"

"Uh-uh."

He gave me some more of the smirk, then ambled back to the Thunderbird. "You'll see."

Bradley Warren lived in a French Normandy mansion just about the size of Kansas. A large Spanish oak in the center of the motor court put filigreed shadows on the Normandy's steel roof, and three or four thousand snapdragons spilled out of the beds that bordered the driveway and the perimeter of the house. There was a porchlike overhang at the front of the house with the front door recessed in a wide alcove. It was a single door, but it was a good nine feet high and four feet wide. Maybe Bradley Warren had bought the place from the Munsters.

I parked under the big oak, walked over to the door, and rang the bell. Hatcher was twisted around in his T-bird, watching. I rang the bell two more times before the door opened and a woman wearing a white Love tennis outfit and holding a tall glass with something clear in it looked up at me. She said, "Are you the detective?"

"Usually I wear a deerstalker cap," I said, "but today it's at the cleaners."

She laughed too loud and put out her hand. "Sheila Warren," she said. "You're a good-looking devil, aren't you." Twenty minutes before noon and she was drunk.

I looked back at Hatcher. He was grinning.

Sheila Warren was in her forties, with tanned skin and a sharp nose and bright blue eyes and auburn hair. She had the sort of deep lines you get when you play a lot of tennis or golf or otherwise hang out in the sun. The hair was pulled back in a pony tail and she wore a white headband. She looked good in the tennis outfit, but not athletic. Probably did more hanging out than playing.

She opened the door wider and gestured with the glass for me to come in. Ice tinkled. "I suppose you want to see where he had the damn book." She said it like we were talking about an eighth-grade history book.

"Sure."

She gestured with the glass again. "I always like to have something cool when I come in on the court. All that sweat. Can I get you something?"

"Maybe later."

We walked back through about six thousand miles of entry and a living room they could rent out as an airplane hangar and a dining room with seating for Congress. She stayed a step in front of me and swayed as she walked. I said, "Was anyone home the night it was stolen?"

"We were in Canada. Bradley's building a hotel in Edmonton so we flew up. Bradley usually flies alone, but the kid and I wanted to go so we went." The kid.

"How about the help?"

"They've all got family living down in Little Tokyo. They beat it down there as soon as we're out of the house." She looked back at me. "The police asked all this, you know."

"I like to check up on them."

She said, "Oh, you."

We went down a long hall with a tile floor and into a cavern that turned out to be the master bedroom. At the end of the hall there was an open marble atrium with a lot of green leafy plants in it, and to the left of the atrium there were glass doors looking out to the back lawn and the pool. Where one of the glass doors had been, there was now a 4 × 8 sheet of plywood as if the glass had been broken and the plywood put there until the glass could be replaced. Opposite the atrium, there was a black lacquer platform bed and a lot of black lacquer furniture. We went past the bed and through a doorway into a *his* dressing room. The *hers* had a separate entrance.

The *his* held a full-length three-way dressing mirror and a black granite dressing table and about a mile and a half of coats and slacks and suits and enough shoes to shod a small American city. At the foot of the dressing mirror the carpet had been rolled back and there was a Citabria-Wilcox floor safe large enough for a man to squat in.

Sheila Warren gestured toward it with the glass and made a face. "The big shot's safe."

The top was lying open like a manhole cover swung over on a hinge. It was quarter-inch plate steel with two tumblers and three half-inch shear pins. There was black powder on everything from when the crime scene guys dusted for prints. Nothing else seemed disturbed. The ice tinkled behind me. "Was the safe like this when you found it?"

"It was closed. The police left it open."

"How about the alarm?"

"The police said they must've known how to turn it off. Or maybe we forgot to turn it on." She gave a little shrug when she said it, like it didn't matter very much in the first place and she was tired of talking about it. She was leaning against the door-jamb with her arms crossed, watching me. Maybe she thought that when detectives flew into action it was something you didn't want to miss. "You should've seen the glass," she said. "He brings the damn book here and look what happens. I walk barefoot on the carpet and I still pick up splinters. Mr. Big Shot Businessman." She didn't say the last part to me.

"Has anyone called, or delivered a ransom note?"

"For what?"

"The book. When something rare and easily identifiable is stolen, it's usually stolen to send it back to the owner or his insurance company."

She made another face. "That's silly."

I guess that meant no. I stood up. "Your husband said there were pictures of the book."

She finished the drink and said, "I wish he'd take care of these things himself." Then she left. Maybe I could go out and Hatcher could come in and question her for me. Maybe Hatcher already had. Maybe I should call the airport and catch Bradley's plane and tell him he could keep his check and his job. Nah. What would Donald Trump think?

When Sheila Warren came back, she had gotten rid of the glass and was carrying a color 8 × 10 showing Bradley accepting something that looked like a photo album from a dignified white-haired Japanese gentleman. There were other men around, all Japanese, but not all of them looked dignified. The book was a dark rich brown, probably leather-covered board, and would probably crumble if you sneered at it. Jillian Becker was in the picture.

Sheila Warren said, "I hope this is what you want." The top three buttons on her tennis outfit had been undone.

"This will be fine," I said. I folded the picture and put it in my pocket.

She wet her lips. "Are you sure I can't get you something to drink?"

"Positive, thanks."

She looked down at her shoes, said, "Ooo, these darn laces," then turned her back and bent over from the hip. The laces hadn't looked untied to me, but I miss a lot. She played with one lace and then she played with the other, and while she was playing with them I walked out, wandered back through to the kitchen and from there to the rear yard. There was a dichondra lawn that sloped gently away from the house toward a fifty-foot Greek Revival swimming pool and a small pool house with a sunken conversation pit around a circular grill. I stood

the deep end of the pool and looked around and shook my head. Man. First him. Now her. What a pair.

Whoever had gone into the house had probably known the combination or known where to find it. Combinations are easy to get. One day when no one's around, a gardener slips in and finds the scrap of paper on which people like Bradley Warren always write the combinations, then sells it to the right guy for the right price. Or maybe one day Sheila flexes a little too much upper-class muscle with the hundred-buck-a-week housekeeper, and the housekeeper says, Okay, bitch, here's one for you, and feeds the numbers to her out-of-work boyfriend. You could go on.

I walked along the pool deck past the tennis court and along the edge of the property and then back toward the house. There were no guard dogs and no closed-circuit cameras and no fancy surveillance equipment. The wall around the perimeter wasn't electrified, and if there was a guard tower it was disguised as a palm tree. Half the kids on Hollywood Boulevard could loot the place blind. Maybe I'd go down there and question them. Only take me three or four years.

When I got back to the house, a teenage girl was sitting on one of four couches in the den. She was cross-legged, staring down into the oversized pages of a book that could've been titled *Andrew Wyeth's Bleakest Landscapes*.

I said, "Hi, my name's Elvis. Are you Mimi?"

She looked up at me the way you look at someone when you open your front door and see it's a Jehovah's Witness. She was maybe sixteen and had close-cropped brown hair that framed her face like a small inner tube. It made her face rounder than it was. I would have suggested something upswept or shag-cut to give her face some length, but she hadn't asked me. There was no makeup and no nail polish and some would have been in order. She wasn't pretty. She rubbed at her nose and said, "Are you the detective?"

"Uh-huh. You got any clues about the big theft?"

She rubbed at her nose again.

"Clues," I said. "Did you see a shadow skulk across the lawn? Did you overhear a snatch of mysterious conversation? That kind of thing."

Maybe she was looking at me. Maybe she wasn't. There was sort of a cockeyed grin on her face that made me wonder if she was high.

"Would you like to get back to your book?"

She didn't nod or blink or run screaming from the room. She just stared.

I went back through the dining room and the entry and out to my Corvette and cranked it up and eased down the drive. When I got to the street, Hatcher grinned over from his T-bird and said, "How'd you like it?"

"Up yours," I said.

He laughed and I drove away.

Three years ago I'd done some work for a man named Berke Feldstein who owns a very nice art gallery in Venice on the beach below Santa Monica. It's one of those converted industrial spaces where they slap on a coat of stark white paint to maintain the industrial look and all the art is white boxes with colored paper inside. For Christmas that year, Berke had given me a large mug with the words MONSTER FIGHTER emblazoned on its side. I like it a lot.

I dropped down out of Holmby Hills into Westwood, parked at a falafel stand, and used their pay phone to call Berke's gallery. A woman's voice answered, "ArtWerks Gallery."

I said, "This is Michael Delacroix's representative calling. Is Mr. Feldman receiving?" A black kid in a UCLA tee shirt was slumped at one of the picnic tables they have out there reading a sociology text.

Her voice came back hesitant. "You mean Mr. Feldstein?"

I gave her imperious. "Is *that* his name?"

She asked me to hold. There were the sounds of something or someone moving around in the background, and then Berke Feldstein said, "Who is this, please?"

"The King of Rock 'n' Roll."

A dry, sardonic laugh. Berke Feldstein does sardonic better than anyone else I know. "Don't tell me. You're trying to decide between the Monet and the Degas and you need my advice."

I said, "Something very rare from eighteenth-century Japan has been stolen. Who might have some ideas about that?" The black kid closed the book and looked at me.

Berke Feldstein put me on hold. After a minute, he was on the line again. His voice was flat and serious. "I won't be connected with this?"

"Berke." I gave him miffed.

He said, "There's a Gallery on Cañon Drive in Beverly Hills. The Sun Tree Gallery. It's owned by a guy named Malcolm Denning. I can't *swear* by this, but I've heard that Denning is occasionally a conduit for less than honest transactions."

"'Less than honest.' I like that. Do we mean 'criminal'?" The black kid got up and walked away.

"Don't be smug," Berke said.

"How come you hear about these less than honest transactions, Berke? You got something going on the side?"

He hung up.

There were several ways to locate the Sun Tree Gallery. I could call one of the contacts I maintain in the police department and have them search through their secret files. I could drive about aimlessly, stopping at every gallery I passed until I found someone who knew the location, then force the information from him. Or I could look in the Yellow Pages. I looked in the Yellow Pages.

The Sun Tree Gallery of Beverly Hills rested atop a jewelry store two blocks over from Rodeo Drive amidst some of the world's most exclusive shopping. There were plenty of boutiques with Arabic or Italian names, and small plaques that said BY APPOINTMENT ONLY. The shoppers were rich, the cars were German, and the doormen were mostly young and handsome and looking to land a lead in an action-adventure series. You could smell the crim

in the air.

I passed the gallery twice without finding a parking spot, continued north up Cañon above Santa Monica Boulevard to the residential part of the Beverly Hills flats, parked there, and walked back. A heavy glass door was next to the jewelry store with a small, tasteful brass sign that said SUN TREE GALLERY, HOURS 10:00 A.M. UNTIL 5:00 P.M., TUESDAY THROUGH SATURDAY; DARK, SUNDAY AND MONDAY. I went through the door and climbed a flight of plush stairs that led up to a landing where there was a much heavier door with another brass sign that said RING BELL. Maybe when you rang the bell, a guy in a beret with a long scar beside his nose slithered out and asked if you wanted to buy some stolen art. I rang the bell.

A very attractive brunette in a claret-colored pants suit appeared in the door, buzzed me in, and said brightly, "I hope you're having a good day." These criminals will do anything to gain your confidence.

"I could take it or leave it until you said that. Is Mr. Denning in?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid he's on long distance just now. If you could wait a moment, I'd love to help you." There was an older, balding man and a silver-haired woman standing at the front of the place by a long glass wall that faced down on the street. The man was looking at a shiny black helmet not unlike that worn by Darth Vader. It was sitting on a sleek red pedestal and was covered by a glass dome.

"Sure," I said. "Mind if I browse?"

She handed me a price catalog and another big smile. "Not at all." These crooks.

The gallery was one large room that had been sectioned off by three false walls to form little viewing alcoves. There weren't many pieces on display, but what was there seemed authentic. Vases and bowls sat on pedestals beneath elegant watercolors done on thin cloth that had been stretched over a bamboo frame. The cloth was yellow with age. There were quite a few wood-block prints that I liked, including a very nice double print that was two separate prints mounted side by side. Each was of the same man in a bamboo house overlooking a river as a storm raged at the horizon and lightning flashed. Each man held a bit of blue cloth that trailed away out of the picture. The pictures were mounted so that the cloth trailed from one picture to the other, connecting the men. It was a lovely piece and would be a fine addition to my home. I looked up the price. \$14,000. Maybe I could find something more appropriate to my decor.

At the rear of the gallery there was a sleek Elliot Ryerson desk, three beige corduroy chairs for sitting down and discussing the financing of your purchase, and a good stand of the indoor palms I am always trying to grow in my office but which are always dying. These were thriving. Behind the palms was a door. It opened, and a man in a pink LaCoste shirt and khaki slacks came out and began looking for something on the desk. Mid-forties. Short hair with a sprinkling of gray. The brunette looked over and said, "Mr. Denning, this gentleman would like to see you."

Malcolm Denning gave me a friendly smile and put out his hand. He had sad eyes. "Can you give me a minute? I'm on the phone with a client in Paris." Good handshake.

"Sure."

"Thanks. I won't be any longer than necessary." He gave me another smile, found what he was looking for, then disappeared back through the door. Malcolm Denning, Considerable Crook.

The brunette resumed talking to the older couple and I resumed browsing and when everything was back the way it had been, I went through the door. There was a short hallway with a bathroom on the left, what looked like a storage and packing area at the rear, and a small office on the right. Malcolm Denning was in the office, seated at a cluttered rolltop desk, speaking French into the phone. He looked up when he saw me, cupped the receiver and said, "I'm sorry. This will take another minute or so."

I took out my license and held it for him to see. I could've showed him a card, but the license looked more official. "Elvis Cole's the name, private detecting's the game." One of those things you always want to say. "I've got a few questions about feudal Japanese art and I'm told you're the man to ask."

Without taking his eyes from me, he spoke more French into the phone, nodded at something I couldn't hear, then hung up. There were four photographs along the top of the desk, one of an overweight woman with a pleasant smile, and another of three teenage boys. One of the pictures was of a Little League team with Malcolm Denning and another man both wearing shirts that said COACH. "May I ask who referred you to me?"

"You can ask, but I'm afraid I couldn't tell you. Somebody tells me something, I try to protect the source. Especially if what they've told me can be incriminating. You see?"

"Incriminating?"

"*Especially* if it's incriminating."

He nodded.

"You know what the Hagakure is, Mr. Denning?"

Nervous. "Well, the Hagakure isn't really a piece of what we might call art. It's a book, you know." He put one hand on his desk and the other in his lap. There was a red mug on the desk that said DAD.

"But it's fair to say that whoever might have an interest in early Japanese art might also have an interest in the Hagakure, wouldn't it?"

"I guess."

"One of the original copies of the Hagakure was stolen a few days ago. Would you have heard anything about that?"

"Why on earth would I hear anything about it?"

"Because you've been known to broker a rip-off or two."

He pushed back his chair and stood up. The two of us in the little office was like being in a phone booth. "I think you should leave," he said.

"Come on, Malcolm. Give us both a break. You don't want to be hassled and I can hassle you."

The outer door opened and the pretty brunette came back into the little hall. She saw me standing there, broke into the smile, said, "Oh, I wondered where you'd gone." Then she saw the look on Denning's face. "Mr. Denning?"

He looked at me and I looked back. Then he glanced at her. "Yes, Barbara?"

Nervousness is contagious. She looked from Denning to me and back to Denning. She said, "The Kendals want to purchase the Myori."

I said, "Maybe the Kendals can help me."

Malcolm Denning stared at me for a long time and then he sat down. He said, "I'll be right out."

When she was gone, he said, "I can sue you for this. I can get an injunction to bar you from the premises. I can have you arrested." His voice was hoarse. An I-always-thought-this-would-happen-and-now-it-has voice.

"Sure," I said.

He stared at me, breathing hard, thinking it through, wondering how far he'd have to go he picked up the ball, and how much it would cost him.

I said, "If someone wanted the Hagakure, who might arrange for its theft? If the Hagakure were for sale, who might buy it?"

His eyes flicked over the pictures on the desk. The wife, the sons. The Little League. He watched the sad eyes. He was a nice man. Maybe even a good man. Sometimes, in this job, you wonder how someone managed to take the wrong turn. You wonder where it happened and when and why. But you don't really want to know. If you knew, it would break your heart.

He said, "There's a man in Little Tokyo. He has some sort of import business. Nobu Ishida. He told me where I could find Ishida. He stared at the pictures as he told me.

After a while I went out through the gallery and down the stairs and along Cañon to my car. It was past three and traffic was starting to build, so it took the better part of an hour to move back along Sunset and climb the mountain to the little A-frame I have off Woodrow Wilson Drive above Hollywood. When I got inside, I took two cold Falstaff beers out of the fridge, pulled off my shirt, and went out onto my deck.

There was a black cat crouched under a Weber charcoal grill that I keep out there. He's black and he's mean and he's black all over except for the white scars that lace his fur like spider webs. He keeps one ear up and one ear sort of cocked to the side because someone once shot him. Head shot. He hasn't been right since.

"You want some beer?"

He growled.

"Forget it, then."

The growling stopped.

I took out the center section of the railing that runs around the deck, sat on the edge, and opened the first Falstaff. From my deck you can see across a long twisting canyon that widens and spreads into Hollywood. I like to sit there with my feet hanging down and drink and think about things. It's about thirty feet from the deck to the slope below, but that's okay. I like the height. Sometimes the hawks come and float above the canyon and above the smoke. They like the height, too.

I drank some of the beer and thought about Bradley and Sheila and Jillian Becker and Malcolm Denning. Bradley would be sitting comfortably in first class, dictating important business notes to Jillian Becker, who would be writing them down and nodding. Sheila would be out on her tennis court, bending over to show Hatcher her rear end, and squealing, *Oh these darn laces!* Malcolm Denning would be staring at the pictures of his wife and his boys and his Little League team and wondering when it would all go to hell.

"You ever notice," I said to the cat, "that sometimes the bad guys are better people than the good guys?"

The cat crept out from beneath the Weber, walked over, and sniffed at my beer. I poured a little out onto the deck for him and touched his back as he drank. It was soft.

Sometimes he bites, but not always.

The next morning it was warm and bright in my loft, with the summer sun slanting in through the big glass A that is the back of my house. The cat was curled on the bed next to me, bits of leaf and dust in his fur, smelling of eucalyptus.

I rolled out of bed and pulled on some shorts and went downstairs. I opened the glass sliding doors for the breeze, then went back into the living room and turned on the TV. News. I changed channels. Rocky and Bullwinkle. There was a thump upstairs and then the cat came down. Bullwinkle said, "Nothing up my sleeve!" and ripped off his sleeve to prove it. Rocky said, "Oh, no, not again!" and flew around in a circle. The cat hopped up on the couch and stared at them. *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle* is his favorite show.

I went back out onto the deck and did twelve sun salutes to stretch out the kinks. I did neck rolls and shoulder rolls and the spine rock and the cobra and the locust, and I began to sweat. Inside, Mr. Peabody and Sherman were setting the Way Back Machine for the Earth to the Mesopotamian Age. I put myself into the peacock posture with my legs straight out behind me and I held it like that until my back screamed and the sweat left dark splatters on the deck, and then I went into the Dragon *kata* from the tae kwon do, and then the Crane *kata* driving myself until the sweat ran in my eyes and my muscles failed and my nerves refused to carry another signal and I sat on the deck and felt like a million bucks. Endorphin heaven. So clients weren't perfect. So being a private cop wasn't perfect. So life wasn't perfect. I could always get new cards printed up. They would say: *Elvis Cole, Perfect Detective*.

Forty minutes later I was on the Hollywood Freeway heading southeast toward downtown Los Angeles and Little Tokyo and feeling pretty good about myself. Ah, perfection. It lends comfort in troubled times.

I stayed with the Hollywood past the Pasadena interchange, then took the Broadway exit into downtown L.A. Downtown Los Angeles features dirty inner-city streets, close-packed inner-city skyscrapers, and aromatic inner-city street life. The men who work there wear suits and the women wear heels and you see people carrying umbrellas as if it might rain. Downtown Los Angeles does not feel like Los Angeles. It is Boston or Chicago or Detroit or Manhattan. It feels like someplace else that had come out to visit and decided to stay. Maybe one day they'll put a dome over it and charge admission. They could call it Banal-land.

I took Broadway down to First Street, hung a left, and two blocks later I was in Little Tokyo.

The buildings were old, mostly brick or stone facade, but they had been kept up and the streets were clean. Paper lanterns hung in front of some of the shops, and red and green and yellow and blue wind socks in front of others, and all the signs were in Japanese. The sidewalks were crowded. Summer is tourist season, and most of the white faces and many of the yellow ones had Nikons or Pentaxes slung under them. A knot of sailors in Italian naval uniforms stood at a street corner, grinning at a couple of girls in a Camaro who grinned back at them. One of the sailors carried a Disneyland bag with Mickey Mouse on the side. Souvenirs from distant lands.

Nobu Ishida's import business was exactly where Malcolm Denning said it would be, in an older building on Ki Street between a fish market and a Japanese-language bookstore, with

yakitori grill across the street.

I rolled past Ishida's place, found a parking spot in front of one of the souvenir shops they have for people from Cleveland, and walked back. There was a little bell on the door that rang as I went in and three men sitting around two tables at the rear of the place. It looked more like a warehouse than a retail outlet, with boxes stacked floor to ceiling and lots of freestanding metal shelves. A few things were on display, mostly garish lacquered boxes and miniature pagodas and dragons that looked like Barkley from *Sesame Street*. I smiled at the three men. "Nice stuff."

One of them said, "What do you want?" He was a lot younger than the other two, maybe in his early twenties. No accent. Born and raised in Southern California with a surfer's tan to prove it. He was big for someone of Japanese extraction, just over six feet, with muscular arms and lean jaws and the sort of wildly overdeveloped trapezius muscles you get when you spend a lot of time with the weights. He wore a tight knit shirt with a crew neck and three-quarter sleeves even though it was ninety degrees outside. The other two guys were both in their thirties. One of them had a bad left eye as if he had taken a hard one there and it had never healed, and the other had the pinkie missing from his right hand. I made the young one for Ishida's advertising manager and the other two for buyers from Neiman-Marcus.

"My name's Elvis Cole," I said. "Are you Nobu Ishida?" I put one of my cards on the second table.

The one with the missing finger grinned at the big kid and said, "Hey, Eddie, are you Nobu Ishida?"

Eddie said, "You have business with Mr. Ishida?"

"Well, it's what we might call personal."

The one with the bad eye said something in Japanese.

"Sorry," I said. "Japanese is one of the four known languages I don't speak."

Eddie said, "Maybe you'll understand this, dude. Fuck off."

They probably weren't from Neiman-Marcus. I said, "You'd better ask Mr. Ishida. Tell him it's about eighteenth-century Japan."

Eddie thought about it for a while, then picked up my card, and said, "Wait here." He disappeared behind stacks of what looked like sushi trays and bamboo steamers.

The guy with the bad eye and the guy with no finger stared at me. I said, "I guess Mr. Ishida keeps you guys around to take inventory."

The guy with no finger smiled, but I don't think he was being friendly.

A little bit later Eddie came back without the card and said, "Time for you to go."

I said, "Ask him again. I won't take much of his time."

"You're leaving."

I looked from Eddie to the other two and back to Eddie. "Nope. I'm going to stay and I'm going to talk to Ishida or I'm going to tip the cops that you guys deal stolen goods." Mr. Threat.

The guy with the bad eye mumbled something else and they all laughed. Eddie pulled his sleeves up to his elbows and flexed his arms. Big, all right. Elaborate, multicolored tattoos started about an inch below his elbows and continued up beneath the sleeves. They looked like fish scales. His hands were square and blocky and his knuckles were thick. He said something in Japanese and the guy with the missing finger came around the tables like he

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