



CANDLES  
ON THE  
CORNER

Janet Dawson

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## Candles on the Corner

by

Janet Dawson

Twelve candles, one for each year of Emily Gebhardt's life, stood in a row on the grassy strip between sidewalk and curb. Each evening, Emily's parents lit fresh candles. The flames flickered like beacons in the darkness, burning out long before morning.

At each end of the row were plastic vases filled with fresh flowers—roses, tulips, iris, daffodils—in Emily's favorite colors, pink and yellow. A pink umbrella, its handle lengthened by a broomstick stuck into the ground, sheltered a small easel from the spring rain. The easel held a color photograph of Emily and a newspaper clipping.

The shrine—that's what it was, really—had been on the corner where I stood for the past month. I stepped up to the easel and examined Emily's picture. I saw wide blue eyes, a cheerful smile on a round face, and brown curls tied back with pink and yellow ribbons. Emily had been a pretty girl poised on the verge of adolescence, just twelve years old. She'd never see thirteen.

I turned from the shrine and looked out at Grand Street. Emily's parents had spray-painted slogans on the pavement in the middle of the intersection. They'd done so without the blessing of the Alameda authorities, who'd nevertheless let the words stay there, to be gradually worn away by rain and the tires of passing vehicles. I read the messages, painted in eye-catching Day-Glo pink and yellow: "Slow Down," "Drive 25," "Children Crossing," and "Emily Died Here."

Emily's parents said most people in the neighborhood seemed protective of their makeshift memorial. But not everyone respected the shrine. Several times the Gebhardts had arrived with fresh flowers and candles to discover all the items missing. Not vandalized, just gone. Each time, they simply rebuilt the memorial to their daughter.

I'd read the police report and talked with the investigating officer. On a Wednesday afternoon in April, Emily and two friends had just been released from the confines of the nearby middle school. They were crossing Grand Street at this corner when Emily dropped something. She went back to retrieve it.

The witnesses all agreed on one thing—the vehicle that raced down Grand Street and smashed into Emily was going much too fast for a residential area, much faster than the 25 miles per hour limit posted all over Alameda. The impact tossed the girl into the air. She died a short time later.

Now there were candles on the corner.

The vehicle didn't stop after hitting Emily. The driver sped down Grand Street and hung a left on Otis Drive, narrowly missing other pedestrians and cars, weaving in and out of traffic as it raced past the nearby shopping center. At Park Street the vehicle ran a red light and left squealing brakes in its wake. A few moments later a vehicle traveling at a high rate of speed crossed the drawbridge at the southern end of the island that is Alameda. Once it reached Doolittle Drive, the vehicle vanished. Perhaps the driver

had turned right on Island Drive, or continued south, toward Oakland International Airport, or detoured onto Hegenberger Road or 98<sup>th</sup> Avenue to cut over to the freeway.

When it came to a description, the witnesses diverged widely, as witnesses do. People saw a flash of silver, gold, blue, green, brown, red. No one was sure whether the vehicle was big or small, a car or an SUV, what make or model. No one offered a description of the driver's gender or appearance. No one could recall license plate numbers or letters, or whether they were California plates. No one knew where to find the vehicle or the driver who'd been at the wheel.

Emily Gebhardt's parents grieved, full of sadness, anger and frustration, dissatisfied with the slow progress of the police investigation. They wanted answers. They wanted someone to blame, someone to pay. So they came to me, Jeri Howard, private investigator working out of Oakland. I wasn't sure I could give the Gebhardts what they wanted. But in the face of that much raw pain, I had to try.

I took a small digital camera from my purse and shot photographs of the intersection, from different angles, then pictures of the shrine. As I lowered the camera, a woman came out the front door of the big two-story Victorian house on the corner. She stalked across the lawn toward me, a decidedly belligerent look on her face.

"Are you one of those people who's been leaving this stuff here?" she demanded. I guessed she meant the easel, the flowers, the candles on the corner.

"Why? Are you one of those people who's been removing this stuff?"

She looked nonplussed. I looked her over. She was in her mid-forties, blond hair coiffed into a head-hugging style, lots of makeup and flinty hazel eyes. She rethought her opening and dredged up a smile that curved her lips only slightly. "Look, I own this house. I'm tired of those people leaving this stuff in my yard."

I glanced at Emily's shrine. "It's here for a reason."

"I know why it's here." She sounded exasperated and glanced dismissively at the shrine. "But it's been a month."

"A month is a short time when you've lost a child." That's the loss many people never get over.

The woman's mouth tightened. "There's such a thing as excessive grief."

Okay, I was ready to declare her winner of the insensitivity sweepstakes. I guess she figured now that their only child's funeral was over, the Gebhardts should just get a grip and go on with their lives.

"Did you remove the items?"

"I just put my house on the market," she snapped. "The real estate agent's showing the place to prospective buyers. This stuff looks tacky and garish. Do you see my problem?"

"You certainly have one. You didn't answer my question. Did you remove the items?"

She glared at me. "Who are you? Why do you want to know?"

I handed her one of my business cards. She held it gingerly between thumb and forefinger as though she was afraid she might catch something.

"A private detective? Surely those people didn't hire you to find out who took the stuff. For God's sake, those people need to get a life."

I bit back the words that sizzled on my tongue, instead asking the question again. "Did you remove the items?"

She backed away from me, sputtering angrily. "It's my property. You tell those people I want that stuff gone, permanently. I've complained to the police and they won't do anything. Next I'll be talking to my lawyer." She turned and stalked back to her house, slamming the front door for good measure.

Talk about excessive. Her reaction to the shrine was just that. Why was she so discomfited by the memorial? Who was she? I could find out easily enough from the Alameda county property- tax records. I glanced at the For Sale sign near the woman's front walk, noting the name of the real-estate agent and firm.

"Don't pay her any mind."

I turned and saw a man walking a dog. The man had white hair and a stiff, arthritic gait. The dog, a sturdy brindle mongrel, was white around the muzzle, as elderly as the man who held her leash. Cataracts clouded the dog's eyes, but the old man's eyes were sharp behind his glasses.

"Who is she?" I gestured at the house on the corner.

"Peggy Blaine," he said. "She owns this house. I'm Fred Sutton. I live next door, with my daughter and her family. Peggy's nice enough, most of the time. But she's got a mouth on her when she gets going."

I hauled out another business card and introduced myself to Fred Sutton and his dog Aggie, who very much liked being scratched between her floppy ears. I told Mr. Sutton I was looking into the hit-and-run that killed Emily Gebhardt.

"Dreadful, awful thing." He shook his head, a frown pulling down the corners of his mouth. "I saw it. Wish I hadn't. Me and Aggie was out for our afternoon constitutional. We walk down by the beach every afternoon, rain or shine. Keeps us both from getting too stove up. Me and Aggie was just over there." He pointed to the other side of the cross street. "That car zoomed past like it was in a race. Didn't even brake. At least I didn't hear any screeches like brakes. Just screams. The car slammed right into that poor little girl. She went flying through the air and landed here by the corner. Died before the paramedics got here." He shuddered. "Horrible, just horrible. I'll never forget it, try as I might."

Fred Sutton's description of the vehicle was predictably vague. "I don't recall the color. Happened so fast it was just a blur. These days I can't tell one car from another. And those boxy SUVs all look alike to me."

I glanced at Peggy Blaine's driveway and saw a maroon SUV. From this distance I couldn't tell the make or model. I pointed at the For Sale sign on the front lawn. "When did Ms. Blaine put her house on the market?"

He rubbed his chin. "I think it was right after that little girl got killed. Can't say I'm surprised she's selling. Peggy and her husband split up a few years back. Her son lives with her, but he's in college now, commutes over to San Francisco State. I figure it won't be long before he moves out. Then Peggy will be rattling around like a pea in a jar, all by herself in that big house."

Emily Gebhardt had died the second week in April. It was now mid-May. Peggy Blaine told me she'd just put her house on the market, making it sound as though the For Sale sign had gone up in the past week or so. Why the discrepancy? Maybe Peggy Blaine had another reason for feeling uncomfortable about the candles on the corner, sprung up near her house like toadstools after rain.

I shook Fred Sutton's hand and scratched Aggie between her floppy ears. As he walked away, I took additional pictures of the area, maneuvering close enough to snap a shot of the plate number on Peggy Blaine's SUV. The curtain on the living room window twitched, as though someone stood there watching.

I retrieved my car and drove down Grand Street, turning left on Otis Drive, as the hit-and-run driver had. Then I parked and walked toward the group of girls in shorts and T-shirts who were kicking a ball around the grassy expanse of Rittler Park. I'd arranged to meet Emily's friends, Lauren Fisher and Dana Robledo, at their after-school soccer practice, under the watchful eyes of their mothers. I introduced myself to the adults who were gathered on the sidelines. When the girls took a break, the mothers called over their daughters and we moved away from the group.

"Tell me what happened," I said.

A month hadn't lessened the horror of seeing their friend struck down. Tears flowed from two pairs of eyes. "We were walking home from school," Lauren said, her voice breaking.

"Do we really have to do this?" Mrs. Robledo said with a frown as Dana sniffed and wiped her eyes.

Mrs. Fisher was having second thoughts, too. "Lauren had nightmares for weeks. I really don't want her to start up again with those bad dreams. I only agreed to this because Mrs. Gebhardt asked." She sighed. "That poor woman."

"I'll be brief." As gently as possible, I led the girls through the events of that afternoon. Both Lauren and Dana had been interviewed at the scene and again a few days after the fact. They'd been unable to give the police a description of the vehicle. I hoped in the intervening weeks some details may have percolated to the surface.

Dana screwed up her face and told me she thought it was a car, not an SUV. "It wasn't boxy, it was lower. I didn't see the driver or the pass . . ."

"Passenger? There was someone else in the car?" I asked. Maybe a break.

"Yeah." Dana looked surprised, and so did her mother. "There were two people."

"Brown," Lauren said suddenly.

"Brown?" Mrs. Fisher repeated. "You told the policeman you didn't know what color it was."

Lauren looked perplexed. "I know. But when I see it in my head, I see brown."

"You see brown in the bad dreams?" I asked. "Or when you're awake and thinking about it."

"No, not the dreams," Lauren said slowly. "When I'm awake. I think about it a lot. I see it like a movie in my mind. I see a brown car."

Maybe two breaks. "Brown like a penny? Or like hot fudge?"

Lauren shook her head. "Neither. It's . . . like a drink."

"Iced tea?" I suggested. "Cola? Cocoa?"

She shook her head again, considering the images. Then she looked at her mother. "That coffee Mom drinks. With chocolate and whipped cream on top."

"Caffe mocha," Mrs. Fisher said.

I pictured the concoction of espresso, chocolate syrup and steamed milk. "When you see the brown car in your mind, is there anything else you notice?"

Lauren closed her eyes and pursed her mouth. "Something green, hanging from the rear view mirror."

“Tassels from a graduation cap?” I asked. “Plush dice? A little teddy bear?”  
“More like a piece of cloth.”

Three breaks, I thought. Details had indeed come to the surface. Lauren recalled a brown vehicle, possibly a car, with something green, possibly cloth, dangling from the rear view mirror. Dana thought there were two people in the vehicle. Memory is notoriously unreliable, but I’d take whatever leads came my way.

I handed out business cards and asked the girls and their mothers to call if any other bits of information surfaced. Then I headed back to my office in Oakland and downloaded the images on my digital camera to my computer. I looked at the shot of Peggy Blaine’s red SUV and wondered if she had access to a brown car. But had the vehicle that struck Emily actually been brown?

The Alameda detective I’d spoken with shared the information that Emily’s clothes and skin bore physical evidence, from the vehicle that struck her and from the pavement where she landed. Minute paint chips—blue, green, silver, and black. But no brown, not even gold or bronze. There had been rust and primer, and bits of glass, probably from a smashed headlight. And dirt—street grit from the pavement, mixed with bits of asphalt, a few clots of dried mud, and dust, the kind that collects on a car that hasn’t been washed in awhile. Had the hit-and-run vehicle been so covered in dirt that it looked brown? I pictured a blue car with an overlay of road dust, wondering if it would look the same brown as a caffe mocha. No, I didn’t think so. Nor green, nor silver. Black? Maybe.

Peggy Blaine’s reaction to Emily Gebhardt’s memorial waved a red flag. I started a background check. By the next day I had a clearer picture of the woman who lived in the house on the corner.

Margaret Blaine, age 44, had been divorced from Ralph Blaine for nearly four years. Her ex lived in San Diego. In the settlement, she got the Grand Street house and custody of the couple’s only child, a son named Charles, now nineteen. She had a good credit rating and a job in the human resources department of a large bank in San Francisco. She’d bought the maroon SUV two years earlier. There was no hint of a brown car in her present, or her immediate past.

During our confrontation the day before, Blaine implied the For Sale sign in front of her house was new. When I called a friend who worked in real estate, I discovered that the house went on the market the week after Emily Gebhardt’s death.

“Lookers but no takers,” my friend told me. “The housing market’s slow right now. The house needs work. The agent told Blaine it would make more sense to wait, replace the carpet, spiff up the kitchen and bathrooms, then put the house on the market later this spring. But Blaine insists she has to sell right now. For someone who’s in a hurry to move, she’s asking too much. If she’s selling ‘as is’ she needs to drop her price.”

Why did Peggy Blaine need to sell her house right now? My background check didn’t reveal any financial difficulties. Was there something she wanted to get away from?

There were no databases to tell me whether Peggy Blaine had been at work the day Emily Gebhardt died, but I could gather information with phone calls directed to the right places. That’s when my theory about her involvement went awry. She’d been in a workshop with a group of other bank employees.

Scratch that theory. Still . . . Why was the woman so testy about Emily's shrine? It had to be more than the candles on the corner.

According to Fred Sutton, Charles Blaine lived at home and commuted to San Francisco State University. My databases had no evidence that he owned a car. Either he used his mother's SUV or took public transit, probably both. I logged onto the university's website and checked the academic calendar. Spring break at SFSU coincided with the week Emily died.

Had Charles been somehow involved? That was a stretch. I had nothing to go on, except speculation—and his mother's behavior.

Carol Gebhardt admitted me to the bungalow where the Gebhardts lived, half a block from the corner where their daughter died. Both husband and wife worked in Alameda. Carol was an administrative assistant at a real-estate office. Steve owned a dry-cleaning shop. It was late afternoon and they'd just gotten home from work.

The living room was full of photographs, Emily captured in frames. On the mantel I saw her wearing a pink party dress and a wrist corsage of yellow flowers, in her soccer uniform with her arms around Dana and Lauren, all three Gebhardts in front of a Christmas tree wearing Santa hats and silly grins. More photos crowded the table next to me—the Gebhardts hiking in Yosemite, fishing in a tumbling mountain river, putting up a tent at a campsite. One snapshot caught my eye, Emily and her father on a hunting trip. Steve Gebhardt carried a rifle and his daughter proudly displayed the pheasant he'd shot.

My clients showed two different faces of grief. Carol sat motionless, hands folded on her lap, dark circles around her eyes, as though her daughter's death had sucked all the life from her. Steve couldn't sit still. His hand slapped his knee in an agitated rhythm, his eyes flashed with anger.

"How are you holding up?" I asked.

Carol's voice was dull. "Managing, just barely. It's so hard. I took a couple of weeks off work. Everyone is understanding and supportive. But I have trouble getting through the day. Trouble sleeping. I think of Emily all the time. The grief counseling helps, but . . . I need closure, I guess. Maybe if you can help us find out who . . ."

Steve's rage erupted. "I want to get my hands on the son-of-a-bitch that did this." He slammed his hand down on the arm of his chair. Carol winced. "Hit a little girl on the street and run away. What kind of scum-sucking toad does that? I can't get my mind around it. Grief counseling, hell, I'm going for Carol's sake. But damn it, I want to find out who killed my little girl. I want justice for Emily. That's the only kind of closure that will work for me. Whoever did this to my baby has got to pay." Tears streamed from his eyes. "Why? Why did this happen? My baby girl. She was all we had."

Carol wept, with deep, wrenching sobs that finally subsided. Steve put his hands over his face and his shoulders shuddered. I felt awkward, unable to help, as though my presence made the pain worse. When they'd hired me, they'd insisted on regular progress reports. That's why I was here. I waited until they were more composed, then I told them I'd talked with Emily's friends and had some leads, without providing details. I suspected Steve might take it upon himself to help me investigate. I didn't want him looking over my shoulder while I was doing my job.

Carol looked wrung out, as though she had no more tears. She took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh, then thanked me for coming over. We rose from our chairs. Carol

went to the kitchen and returned with two bouquets of colorful spring flowers. On the floor near the fireplace was a flat-bottomed canvas tote bag. I picked it up, surprised at how heavy it was. I looked inside and saw big round pillar candles, pink and yellow, six of each color.

“I’ll take that.” Steve reached for the bag. Carol cradled the bouquets in her arms as we left the house. I watched them trudge slowly toward the corner where Emily died.

Saturday afternoon I was working on another case, parked outside an apartment building on Alameda’s west end. My cell phone rang. I flipped it open. “Jeri Howard.”

“Hi, this is Lauren Fisher. I hope it’s okay that I called. You gave me your card, remember?”

“I remember. It’s okay. Why did you call?”

“I saw this car,” she said. “It’s not brown. Not even close. But there’s something about it . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Where are you, Lauren?” I heard people talking in the background.

“Mom and I are in the Starbucks on Park Street.”

“I’m on my way.” I started my car and headed for downtown Alameda. The parking gods were good to me. As I neared my destination, a car vacated a space. I slipped mine into the spot, got out, and fed coins into the meter.

Caffeine Corner is what I call the intersection of Park Street and Central Avenue, with three coffee houses cheek-by-jowl—Peet’s on one corner, Starbucks on the opposite corner, and nearby, a local establishment called Java-Rama. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon. Tables and chairs outside all three places were full of people getting their caffeine fix. The Fishers were inside Starbucks, seated near the front window. Mrs. Fisher nursed a caffè mocha with whipped cream on top. Lauren drank lemonade through a straw as she peered anxiously through the window.

“It’s probably nothing,” Mrs. Fisher said when I joined them inside. “But she insisted on calling you.”

“I like to play the hunches. Where did you see the car?”

“Down the street.” Lauren pointed. “It’s still there, in front of the bookstore.”

“It’s purple,” Mrs. Fisher said.

“It certainly is.” The car stood out like the proverbial sore thumb, with a paint job in a color that resembled grape soda. If this was the car Lauren had seen hit Emily, it hadn’t been purple at the time. Surely she and the other witnesses would have remembered such a distinctive color.

“Lauren, you said there was something about the car. What do you mean?”

Lauren sucked on the straw. “Maybe it’s the shape. Maybe it’s because there’s two people in it. We were at the bookstore. When that car backed into the parking space, I said, Mom, look at that weird color. Then I looked again and the car seemed familiar. That green thing is hanging from the rear view mirror, just like what I saw.”

“It looks like an Oakland A’s pennant,” Mrs. Fisher said. “Pretty vague hunch.”

“Who knows? I’ll take a look at the car.”

I left the coffee house and walked toward the purple car. It was a mix of designs, its hood sleek and streamlined in front like a car, the hatchback at the rear square and boxy like an SUV. The green cloth hanging from the rearview mirror was indeed a small pennant bearing the logo of the Oakland A’s baseball team.

According to the police, the hit-and-run vehicle probably had front end damage—the left front fender, bumper, and grille—and a broken headlight as well. If this was the car, any dents and breakage left by the impact had long since been repaired. But sometimes repairs left evidence. I stepped off the sidewalk, between vehicles, peering at oncoming traffic as though I were going to jaywalk across Park Street. I shaded my eyes with my hand and glanced down at the purple car. I didn't see anything that looked like a dent that had been hammered out. But the left headlight and rim looked newer than the right.

As I expected, the steady stream of cars prevented me from having to actually jaywalk. I walked slowly along the left side of the car, gazing at traffic and surreptitiously examining the car. I saw an area on the left front fender that could have been crumpled. It wasn't as smooth as the rest of the car's body. There was a small rectangular sticker affixed to the lower left windshield, but the angle of the sun created a glare and I couldn't read it.

When I reached the back end of the car, I saw another sticker, this one on the rear bumper, with the familiar name of a big insurance company. I stood there long enough to memorize the California license-plate number, then shrugged as though I'd given up the idea of jaywalking. I stepped back onto the sidewalk and into the bookstore's doorway, where I pulled pen and notebook from my purse, and wrote down the plate number, make and model of the purple car.

When no one approached, I left the doorway and strolled toward the car again. When I reached the front, I unzipped my purse and dropped it between the purple car and the one in front of it, intentionally spilling several items from the purse to the gutter. I stepped off the curb and used my foot to nudge my sunglasses case under the purple car, near the left front wheel.

"Oh, damn," I said, feigning exasperation as I knelt to retrieve the items I'd dumped. Then I got down on my hands and knees for a look at the purple car's undercarriage.

Two sets of sandal-shod feet appeared, on either side of me. I looked up at a young man and a young woman who evidently went with the car. They looked at me with alarm.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I dropped my purse. A bunch of stuff spilled out. What a pain. My glasses case went under this car. Now where did it go?" I stretched my body under the car and took another look. "There it is, over by the tire. Got it." I backed out and scrambled to my feet, brandishing the case. Then I tucked it into my purse and brushed dust from my clothes. "Yuck. What a mess."

I headed for the bookstore, plucked a hardback from a table near the front window, and pretended to read while I cataloged what I'd seen. Tiny droplets of purple paint on the undercarriage told me the car had recently been painted. The spot I'd seen on the left front fender had definitely been crumpled, then hammered out, and right at the bottom, black finish showed through the purple paint. Would a black car with an overlay of dirt look brown? I thought so.

I glanced over the top of the book. The two people I'd just encountered stood in front of the purple car, heads close together as they talked. They were in their late teens, similarly attired in shorts and shirts. He was medium height, with a mop of sandy brown

hair. She was short, with long black hair and a slender figure. He unlocked the driver's side door, slid into the seat, and started the engine as she got into the passenger seat.

I dropped the book and left the bookstore, heading for the nearby crosswalk. The walk signal flashed green and I hurried across Park Street as the young man angled the purple car into the traffic lane. I ran up the sidewalk on the other side of the street, dodging pedestrians. The purple car and I reached the intersection of Park Street and Central Avenue just as the signal turned yellow. The driver gunned the engine and the car sped through as the light turned red.

My car was just around the corner. I had the green light so I made a left from Central onto Park, and managed to catch up with the purple car, keeping a few car lengths back. Then the purple car made a left onto Lincoln Avenue, just as the traffic signal changed from yellow to red. I was stuck, no chance of following.

I had the plate number. Soon I'd have a name and an address to go with it.

Fred Sutton had told me he and his dog Aggie walked every afternoon, usually along the beach. I parked my car near the end of Grand Street and walked across Shoreline Drive to the paved path that paralleled the wide sandy beach. Next to the path the low dunes were planted with wildflowers and sea grass, and beyond that, I saw driftwood piled on the sand. Wind ruffled the surface of the bay. In the blue sky above me, seagulls wheeled and cried. As I strolled along the path I saw in the distance the Bay Bridge and the tightly-packed cluster of buildings that was San Francisco.

Suddenly I got a prickly feeling between my shoulder blades, as though someone was watching me. I turned slowly, scanning street, path, and beach, my guard up. Then I saw Fred Sutton and his dog Aggie walking toward me. I quickened my pace to catch up with them. When I scratched Aggie's ears, she responded with pleasurable groans and a wagging tail.

"The week the little girl got killed was spring break at SF State," I said. "Was Charles Blaine home that week?"

Fred rubbed his chin. "He went camping. The Saturday before the little girl got hit I saw him and some other kids, packing up some gear. I stopped to say hello. Charlie said they were going camping. Don't know when they got back, but I didn't see Charlie again till Friday of that week."

Which was two days after the hit-and-run vehicle ended Emily Gebhardt's life. "What do you remember about his friends?" I asked. "How many people were there? And what were they driving?"

"Three guys and three girls," Fred said. "They were packing the camping gear into an SUV and a black car, what I'd call a roadster."

That sounded like the car I'd seen on Park Street, the one that had recently been painted purple. "Does Charlie have a girlfriend?"

"Oh, yeah, since high school. Anita, I think her name is. She's a pretty little girl with long dark hair. Come to think of it, she drives that black car."

"Have you seen her lately?"

"She was at Charlie's house this morning. She's gone and painted that car the damndest shade of purple."

"The car was black last month and now it's purple. I wonder why."

Fred frowned. "I get your drift. You think Charlie and his girlfriend had something to do with that hit-and-run?"

"Maybe. I'm using some random pieces to assemble the puzzle."

"That might explain why Peggy's had such a burr under her saddle these past few weeks," he said. "I hope you're wrong."

"If I'm not?"

"They need to face the music."

I left Fred and Aggie and walked back toward my car. The prickly feeling was still there. Was someone watching me? I considered the possibilities. Peggy Blaine? Had the two young people in the purple car—Charles Blaine and his girlfriend Anita—turned the tables on me? Or was Steve Gebhardt looking over my shoulder, as I'd feared he might?

Gebhardt's dry-cleaning and tailoring shop was on Lincoln Avenue near downtown Alameda. The woman at the counter was middle-aged and talkative, which suited me just fine. She shook her head when I asked to see her boss. "I'm sorry, he's not here. Can I help you?"

"No, my business is with him. I've been trying to catch him, but I keep missing him here at the store."

"He hasn't been in much lately," the clerk confided.

As far as Carol Gebhardt knew, her husband had been going to work every morning. So where was Steve Gebhardt when he wasn't at his store, particularly on a busy Saturday afternoon?

"Poor Mr. Gebhardt," the clerk went on. "He and his wife suffered a terrible loss. Their little girl was killed by a hit-and-run driver, about a month ago."

"I know. He's taking it hard."

"He's devastated. Who wouldn't be? How do you get over something like that?" She shuddered. "I can't imagine what I'd do I lost one of my kids, especially that way."

"People have different ways of coping. Some cry, others get angry."

"Mr. Gebhardt is angry. He talks about what he'll do if he ever catches up with the driver of that car. Normally he's the nicest, most even-tempered man. But he hasn't been himself since it happened. Poor man. I'm really concerned about him. Not that I think he'd actually do anything. It's just talk. Maybe it will help get him through this difficult time . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Would Steve Gebhardt actually do something if I did what he and Carol had hired me to do—find out who drove the car that killed his daughter? Gebhardt wasn't in his store. That didn't prove he'd been following me. I recalled the photo I'd seen at the Gebhardts' house, of Steve and his daughter on a hunting trip. I took the precaution of finding out what guns were registered to Steve. He had a hunting rifle and a shotgun, but no handgun. But handguns were easy to get.

By the following week I'd learned the purple car was registered to Lewis Montano, who lived on Pacific Avenue in Alameda's west end. He'd purchased the car new five years earlier and the vehicle was black when it left the dealer's lot.

When I drove past the house on Thursday afternoon, a white sedan was parked in the driveway but the purple car was nowhere in sight. I left my own car at the end of the block and knocked on a few doors. I found stay-at-home moms and retired couples, and

gleaned some information about the Montanos. They had three children, all living at home. The oldest, Anita, had graduated from Encinal High School two years earlier. She was in college but no one was sure where.

I was walking toward my car when the purple car whipped around the corner, moving fast. The young woman I'd seen the previous Saturday was at the wheel. Anita Montano—I assumed that's who she was—zoomed past me and parked at the curb in front of the Montano house. She got out of the car, carrying a backpack, and went inside the house. The living-room curtains were closed. I stopped when I reached the purple car. Piled in the passenger seat were an assortment of magazines and mail-order catalogs, an open box of granola bars, a program from a basketball game, and a student newspaper from Chabot College in Hayward.

I walked around to the driver's side, for a closer look at the sticker on the lower left corner of the windshield. It was printed with the name, address and phone number of a repair shop in Oakland. A date had been written on a line that said "Last Service." The car had been in the shop the Monday after the hit-and-run.

I moved away from the car and walked toward my own, just as the front door of the Montano house opened. Anita came out, minus the backpack. I didn't think she'd seen me. She walked straight for the purple car, got in and drove away.

I drove to Oakland and located the repair shop, telling the owner I was following up on the Montanos' insurance claim. Yes, his crew had worked on the car for several days, doing a tune-up and an oil change in addition to repairs and a paint job. He frowned when I asked him what the Montanos told him about how the car got damaged. "You should know that, if you're investigating the claim."

"Just want to see if the girl's story matches with what her father told me."

"Mr. Montano is a straight-up guy. He wouldn't lie about something like that."

Montano might not have lied, but I wasn't sure about his daughter's veracity. I shrugged. "I'm just doing my job. He wasn't driving when the accident happened, right?"

"No, his daughter was driving. She was camping with some friends, had the car off-road and ran into a rock. Must have been a big one. There was a lot of damage. Crumpled left front fender and a broken headlight. I had to replace the rim, too."

"Why did the Montanos paint the car purple?"

"I know the paint job is over and above what you'd authorize for repairs. After we fixed the fender and headlight, we were going to touch up the black paint, but the girl wanted purple, her favorite color. Mr. Montano said to go ahead. Wouldn't have been my choice. Looks like grape soda."

"Thanks for your help."

I went back to my office. The Chabot College website confirmed the dates of the college's spring break—the week Emily Gebhardt died. Anita's story about the car hitting a rock was plausible. I made some phone calls. Lewis Montano told his insurance company the same story he'd told the repair shop. Anita hadn't reported the accident to anyone. She said she didn't think the damage was that bad until she got home and her father saw it.

Maybe. The insurance agent heard similar stories, day in and day out. Besides, he knew Lewis Montano and was willing to accept the story at face value.

But why paint the car purple? Disguise, camouflage? No one was looking for a purple car with no visible front end damage.

I considered a couple of scenarios, assuming the purple car was the hit-and-run vehicle. Anita been driving the car and she'd lied to her father and the insurance company. But that wouldn't explain why Peggy Blaine was upset about the memorial to Emily on the corner, so upset she was ready to sell her house. What if her son Charlie had been driving the car? What if Anita was covering for him, out of love or mistaken loyalty? Or was it the other way around?

I staked out the Montano house on Pacific Avenue. Late Saturday afternoon Anita drove the purple car to Grand Street. She honked her horn twice. Charlie Blaine left his mother's house and hopped into the passenger seat. They drove downtown, parked on Santa Clara Avenue, and walked to a Japanese restaurant. When they finished dinner I was waiting for them at the purple car, my business card in my outstretched hand.

Charlie stared at the print on the card. His eyes widened. "You're that private eye my mom told me about."

"Yes. I know about the hit-and-run. Either you go to the police, or I will."

Anita started crying. Charlie's face crumpled. "It was an accident," he said.

"Yes, it was. But someone died. Tell me how it happened."

They'd had a fight while on the camping trip. They'd decided to leave their friends at the state park up in Sonoma County and go back to Alameda, arguing all the way. Charlie drove Anita's car that afternoon. He was speeding, as he often did, but he'd never been caught. He had a lead foot when he was distracted. And he had been distracted. He and Anita had been yelling at one another as he sped down Grand Street.

"You've got to believe me," he said. "I didn't see the little girl. I didn't know I'd hit her until I heard the thump."

"But you kept going."

"I panicked," he wailed.

"We both did." Words poured from Anita's mouth as though she'd kept them back too long. "We didn't know what to do. So we ran. I told my dad I drove the car into a big rock at the campground. He bought it. We got the car fixed and painted."

"And your mother put her house on the market," I told Charlie. "She thought you could run away from this. But that shrine on the corner is a daily reminder. You know what you have to do, both of you. You go to the police, or I will."

He ran his hands through his sandy hair. "I've got to talk to my mom. Let me talk to her first."

Anita took out her cell phone and called her father, asking him to meet her at the Blaine house. I followed the purple car as Anita drove slowly back to Grand Street and parked in the driveway, behind Peggy Blaine's maroon SUV. Then the white sedan I'd seen at the Montanos' house pulled up to the curb. An older man got out and walked to where I stood with Charlie and Anita, on the sidewalk leading up to the porch. Anita threw her arms around him, sobbing into his shoulder.

He looked alarmed as he patted her on the back. "What's wrong, honey?"

Peggy Blaine opened her front door, stepped out on the porch and glared at me like a mother lion defending her cub. "You. What are you doing here? Get off my property. Leave my son alone."

I directed my words to Charlie and Anita. "I'll give you fifteen minutes."

They went into the house and shut the door. I retreated to the corner where Emily's shrine stood, with burned-out candles and flowers wilting in buckets. When I

looked up, I saw Carol and Steve Gebhardt exit their house in the middle of the block, heading this way. Steve carried the tote bag with its heavy pillar candles and Carol held a large colorful bouquet, ready to perform their evening ritual of lighting candles and putting out fresh flowers in memory of their daughter.

“Hello, Jeri,” Carol said when they reached the corner. “I called and left a message at your office. Are you making any progress?”

“Some,” I said. “Is that why you called?”

“Not exactly,” Carol said. “It’s the woman who lives here.” She pointed at Peggy Blaine’s front porch. “I’m afraid she doesn’t like us putting out flowers and candles for Emily. Last night she came outside and yelled at us to stop. She was very nasty about it.”

Trouble. I’d been concerned about a confrontation between the Gebhardts and Peggy Blaine. I had to ward off another one. “Did you respond?”

Steve’s mouth tightened. “It was all I could do not to say something. But if she starts in again tonight—”

Carol put a placating hand on his arm. “Just ignore her. She doesn’t understand. She doesn’t know what it’s like to lose a child. Maybe if we explain . . .”

“She told me it’s because her house is on the market,” I said.

Steve stared at the For Sale sign in the yard. “That sign went up the week after Emily died, about the same time someone started messing with Emily’s memorial. Did you check her out?”

“I did. She was at work on the day Emily died.”

“She has a son, doesn’t she? I’ve seen him. And his girlfriend. In a purple car.”

Since the Gebhardts lived nearby, it was possible Steve had seen Charlie and Anita in the purple car. But I suspected he’d been following me. The situation was building an uncomfortable head of steam. I hoped the Gebhardts would finish their evening ritual before anyone came out of the Blaine house. “Let me help you put out the candles and flowers,” I said. Then you can leave. You don’t have to see her or talk with her at all.”

Steve shook his head. “No, it’s something we have to do.”

He set the canvas bag that held the candles on the pavement. The umbrella that sheltered the easel was askew, the duct tape fastening it to the broomstick torn. Steve closed the umbrella and tugged the broomstick from the ground, then he pulled a roll of duct tape from the bag. While he replaced the old tape with new, Carol leaned over the vases, carefully removing flowers that were dead or dying, adding fresh flowers from the big bouquet she’d brought. Then she gathered up the burned-out candles and put them in a plastic sack she tugged from her pocket.

Steve plucked two big candles from the canvas bag and handed them to her. She set them on the sidewalk. I glanced at my watch. Ten minutes had passed since Charlie and Anita went into the house. When I looked up I saw Fred Sutton and his dog Aggie come out of the neighboring house where he lived with his daughter. He waved at me.

Then Peggy Blaine’s front door opened. She stormed out and down the porch steps, followed by Charlie and the Montanos. She ran toward the corner. “Get out, get out,” she screamed, her hands balled into fists, her arms raised.

Carol backed away from the shrine, frightened. She started crying. Steve moved forward, raising his angry voice. “Don’t talk to my wife like that.”

I got between Steve and Peggy. “Calm down, both of you. This isn’t doing any of us any good.”

From the corner of my eye I saw Fred Sutton hustling toward us, his dog at his heels. “Peggy, you need to stop this nonsense,” he said. “Leave these people alone. They’ve lost their child and they need to mourn.”

“You don’t understand,” she cried.

But I did.

Charlie raced across the lawn and grabbed his mother, pinioning her arms. “Mom, please. Don’t do this.”

She struggled free, whirled and pushed him away, her voice low, urgent, imploring. I strained to hear what she was saying. “Get away, get away, they’ll find out.”

Anita reached for Peggy’s arm and the older woman slapped the girl. “Look what you’ve done,” Peggy snapped. “It’s all your fault. If you hadn’t been fighting—”

Anita burst into tears. “It was just an argument, a silly argument. Charlie was distracted.”

“It was an accident,” Charlie said, his voice anguished as he faced the Gebhardts. “We didn’t mean for it to happen.”

Sometimes a public confession wasn’t a good idea. The situation was too volatile. I pulled out my cell phone and flipped it open, quickly thumbing through the contacts for the number of the Alameda Police Department. I hit the send button and spoke urgently to the voice that answered.

“You killed my little girl.” Carol shook like a tree not strong enough to stand up to a hard wind. She fell to her knees. I moved toward her. Then I saw Steve reach into the bag that held the candles. I realized there was another reason the bag was so heavy. Steve’s idea of closure was revenge.

“He has a gun,” I shouted.

I dropped my cell phone and lunged at Steve, but I was too late. He fired three shots, astonishing loud. Then it was quiet as death. Steve stood there, the gun in his hand as he stared at the scene. He dropped the gun. He’d done what he intended to do.

Fred had picked up my cell phone from the grass and was talking into the mouthpiece. His dog Aggie barked frantically as he pulled her away. Sirens wailed in the distance and people poured from nearby houses.

Someone started screaming. Anita Montano sat on the grass, her hand touching a crimson wound on her arm, as though she couldn’t believe that was her own blood.

She’d gotten off easy. Peggy Blaine and her son Charlie lay crumpled together on their front lawn.

Carol sat on the sidewalk near Emily’s shrine as the sirens got closer and finally stopped at the corner. Tears streamed down her face. She kept crying as the paramedics worked on Peggy, Charlie, and Anita. Then I saw one of the EMTs shake his head and pull a sheet over Charlie’s face. The EMTs loaded Anita and Peggy into an ambulance.

The police cuffed Steve Gebhardt, put him into the back seat of a cruiser and drove away, leaving me to follow with the wreckage of his wife. In my head I heard Peggy Blaine’s voice saying, as it had the day I met her, “There’s such a thing as excessive grief.”