The woman across from me had assembled herself to match her office, or maybe she'd simply come with it. The desk she sat behind was as long and wide as two of her together, and the rest of the furniture was as solid, thick, and brown as she was thin, frail, and white, but they complemented each other. Eternally correct, with a helping of formidable thrown in for anyone who might twig that something was out of joint. Money had that effect. It bought expensive rugs to throw over the world's nastiness. Nastiness had a way of seeping through, though, even if I couldn't smell it yet. I didn't get calls from people whose lives ran along the straight and narrow.

If the woman knew that something in her world was crumbling, she hadn't let it touch her. Her pale hair was scraped back into a bun and she wore a black dress that was exactly right for the occasion in a way I couldn't put my finger on. I was the occasion. Her name was Emily Rutledge and she was the president of Westwood College for women. My name was Rita Mitchell and I was a private investigator for all sorts of people. I matched the office about as well as an alligator suits a Beverly Hills swimming pool.

I'd been there for seven minutes, making myself uncomfortable on the other side of the desk. I'd hung out my shingle at the beginning of the year and the only thing I'd learned in the month since was that I didn't like divorce business. That—and that my father's old bookie, a man by the name of Ghazaryan, hadn't forgotten what I owed him even though he'd moved to Reno. The Rutledge woman was the first client who'd come to me with a halfway interesting problem and the money to back it up. And I needed money, as quick as I could get my hands on it, because I was running out of time to make what I needed.

"Miss Rutledge," I said. "You said one of your students had disappeared. Seems to me you should've rung Missing Persons."

"Oh? I understand that they've developed rather a standard line about these kinds of

matters, with their declining resources. They seem to think that most people have gone to—well, to the United States."

Three months before, California had voted itself out of the union and back into Mexico, thanks to a petition that put secession on the ballot. There had been talk of war and sanctions and now some sort of diplomacy. A few old Californio families had gone out to Washington, D.C. to meet with Mexican and American officials. In the meantime some Mexicans had come up to San Diego and Los Angeles and a surge of Anglos and other Yanquis had packed their bags for Nevada and Arizona. Plenty of others had stayed, though. Miss Rutledge had stayed. I had stayed. At the moment I couldn't think why.