

FROM COSMOS DESOTO AND
THE SEARCH FOR GOMEZ MOXLEY
(copyrighted material)

CHAPTER ONE

“Cosmos.”

“What?”

“Time to board.”

Cosmos and his mother, Viva, were at Union Station in Los Angeles. They'd been waiting for the Southwest Chief, the train that would take them to Las Vegas, New Mexico. They'd arrived early to get out of the heat. They didn't live in Los Angeles. They were from Jasper, Washington. But mostly they lived on the road. Their food truck was securely garaged. When they returned, they'd drive directly to their next job, a movie shooting on location near San Diego.

They found their reserved seats on the upper level of a coach car. The seats were wide and comfortable, with foot rests and pull-down trays. The seats reclined. There were reading lights and overhead racks for their bags. Cosmos settled in by the window.

Viva smiled. “This will do just fine,” she said.

They were on their way to visit Hank and Hasty. There had been an immediate spark of romance between Viva and Hank when they met in Horse Neck, Oregon on her first movie job. Hank owned the honeywagon. Hasty worked with him. Since then Hank had visited Viva on two other movie locations. They'd talked often on the phone. He wrote letters. Hank was old-fashioned that way. Their romance grew.

Cosmos was looking forward to seeing Hank's ranch. He was excited to be riding on a train. He was glad he had nothing to do for a few days. He helped his mother with their food business, which involved long days of

hard work. He was home schooled, which required studying every day. This was his reality. The unusual and happy life of a thirteen-year-old.

Then there was the other Cosmos DeSoto, the hardboiled private detective of his imagination. Who was still in business. His hero was still Benny Lemon, the private eye in a series of books written by Gomez Moxley. Right now, Cosmos the detective had a case to wrap up. An unpleasant one. Sometimes that happened.

Cosmos stood at the end of a pier in the foggy city by the bay. The mist bathed his face. It was windy. There was a chill in the air. He was wearing the fog like an overcoat. He felt like he should be walking through a car wash. He needed this. He had to get himself together. Maybe he was getting burned out. How much disappointment in the human race could a private detective take? How many lousy cases did he have to accept to pay the rent?

He crossed the street and entered the old, three-story brick building. He climbed the stairs to the second floor. He unlocked the door at the far end of the corridor and turned on the light. This was it. The whole shebang. Two rooms that contained the bare essentials of work and sleep. It was all he needed. The paint was peeling. The rent was cheap. He checked for messages. Nothing. The only mail was a bill for electricity and an advertisement for hearing aids. He rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter, a Royal office manual. A classic. He wanted to get the paperwork over with. The case had stunk from the beginning. Find a stolen car. Not the kind of job he usually took on. But there was the matter of the rent, and there was something about the short, round man named Jester that Cosmos didn't like. Jester tried too hard to be a funny guy.

"Knock, knock," Jester said when he first showed up outside Cosmos' door.

"It's open," Cosmos replied.

"You're supposed to say, 'Who's there?'" Jester had a big smile, like he'd had surgery to double its size.

"What's your business?" Cosmos wasn't amused.

"Somebody stole my wheels," Jester said.

Cosmos knew right away that there was more going on than a heisted car. "Go to the cops. They're in the finding stolen car business.

"Cops," Jester laughed. "Can't live with them, can't live without them.

"You have a problem with the law?"

"I need discretion with this matter." Jester winked. "You get my meaning?"

"For you, discretion costs extra," Cosmos said.

"No problem," Jester said. He laid ten Benjamins on the desk.

"That's a thousand bucks," Cosmos said.

"You come highly recommended."

If it was just the money, Cosmos would have said no. But Jester was clearly up to something and he wanted to find out what the something was. That was his nature. He was stuck with it.

He'd found the car easily enough. He had contacts. Favors owed. It was exactly as Jester described. New. Black. Tinted windows. Leather seats. All the bells and whistles. Not a scratch on it. He got the engine started, a secret of the trade, and drove it to a pal's garage. He took it apart, piece by piece, until he found an extremely large amount of money hidden in the side panels and sewn into the seats. He put the car back together and delivered it to Jester. Who was at first delighted, then not pleased at all.

"Who did that? Who cut my seats?" Jester wasn't trying to be funny anymore.

"I did," Cosmos said. He moved closer to Jester. Closer was safer.

"Where's my money?" Jester was turning bright red and starting to shake.

"I gave it to a kid's shelter."

"You did what?" Jester reached for his gun.

Cosmos grabbed Jester's arm and twisted it. Hard. The gun dropped to the ground. Cosmos picked it up.

"That was my money," Jester cried, holding his arm.

"Where'd you get it?"

"I earned it."

"Yeah, and I'm Moby Dick," Cosmos said. "You had me steal the car so you could steal the dough. None of it belongs to you. I left word with the owner that it was you. I wouldn't want him after me."

"I paid for your discretion," Jester yelled. "I want my thousand back."

"Complain to the Chamber of Commerce," Cosmos said. "Personally, if I ever see you again, I'm going to pull your lower lip up over your eyes and tie your ears together."

Cosmos finished typing up his notes, put them in a folder and stuck it in the back of a file drawer. He stood at the window and looked out at the harbor, shrouded in its early morning fog stew. He had nothing pending, businesswise or otherwise.

"Cosmos."

He snapped around to look at his mother.

"We're on our way," she said.

The Southwest Chief was pulling free from Union Station.

"You okay?" she asked.

"I was thinking."

"I won't ask."

The conductor came by to collect their tickets. "Las Vegas, New Mexico," he said to Viva. "Enjoy the ride. Any questions, let me know." He nodded to Cosmos and moved on.

A man in a white jacket came through, asking passengers who wanted to eat in the dining car to make a reservation. Viva asked for 7:15. She got 7:45.

"I'm going to catch a few," she said. She closed her eyes and quickly drifted off.

Cosmos unfolded the road map he'd marked with their route. There would be fourteen stops before they got off the train tomorrow afternoon.

With the map he'd know what towns and rivers and lakes they'd be passing. Cosmos liked maps. He liked knowing where he was. He liked knowing where he was going.

The train stopped briefly at Fullerton. Viva woke and stretched. "Are we there yet?" She smiled.

Cosmos smiled back. "Almost," he said.

The train started moving.

"Let me know." She closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

Inside Cosmos' head a phone was ringing.

He picked it up.

"I need you, Cosmos." It was Symphony Fairchild, the beautiful young movie star who'd hired him to protect her life during the filming of the imaginary horror movie, TEETH, which her company also produced. First he'd saved her from herself, then from the giant steel TEETH which were being manipulated by the villain to eat her. Symphony had fallen for him. He'd almost fallen for her. He'd walked away. He had to. A private detective can't afford a personal relationship. They always end in disappointment. Somebody always gets hurt. Even so, he could feel his heart beating faster.

"What kind of trouble?" he heard himself ask.

"I'm being blackmailed."

Part of Cosmos wanted to pull back. To say he couldn't help. He'd recommend somebody else.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Home. In L.A."

He wanted to tell her that Benny Lemon would be a better bet. That Benny was located in Los Angeles. That Benny was the best. But he didn't. He had to take care of this himself.

"It came in the mail," she said.

Cosmos waited for the rest of it.

“Proof that I tried to sabotage TEETH. My own movie. They said they’d send it to the media if I didn’t pay up. It would ruin my career.”

“How much do they want?”

“What difference does it make? You’re the one who said to do the right thing. If I pay, they’ll keep asking for more. You told me that too. I need you to help me, Cosmos. I need you to come down here.”

“How much?”

“A million.”

“This isn’t like the last time you needed me?”

“I’ve changed. Maybe you have too.”

Maybe he had. It wasn’t something he wanted to talk about. “When do they want the money?”

“The note said they’d send instructions.”

“I’ll be there tonight.”

The announcement for Riverside brought Cosmos back to the train. The voice reminded passengers to place the items they’d brought with them in the overhead or under the seat, so there would be room for boarding passengers. Cell phone users were asked to be brief, or to go to the vestibule area below where they could talk freely. A few minutes later they were underway again. Viva took a swallow of water from the bottle she’d brought and passed it. Cosmos took a swig. He asked his mother if he could take a walk.

“Be careful,” she said. She looked at her son’s feet. His sneaker laces were tied. He’d told her on his thirteenth birthday that she didn’t need to remind him anymore.

“Don’t go where you don’t belong,” she said.

The door wooshed open and Cosmos moved to the next car. There were a number of double-deckers like the one he and his mother were riding in. Filled with passengers who were reading, dealing with various digital devices, sleeping, talking, or gazing at the world outside. A small boy picked his nose. Cosmos reached the Sightseer Lounge and decided to

stay a while. It offered the best view from the train. There were sandwiches and drinks and snacks for sale. He sat and counted his pocket money and ordered an orange juice cooler.

“I like it one-third orange juice, two thirds soda water, with a slice of orange,” he said. “Please.”

A few minutes later his orange juice cooler was sitting in front of him. This was Symphony Fairchild’s favorite drink. He took a sip. He found himself back in the world of Cosmos DeSoto, private detective. He had arrangements to make.

TWO

Cosmos packed his gym bag. He traveled light. His plane to Los Angeles was leaving in an hour and a half. Outside, he hailed a cab. His phone vibrated.

"Mr. DeSoto?"

"Speaking."

"This is Benny Lemon."

"Mr. Lemon."

"Call me Benny."

"Call me Cosmos."

"I've been following your career," Benny said. "You get results."

"Coming from you, that's a compliment. "What's on your mind?"

"Gomez Moxley."

"Gomez Moxley?"

"I gotta find him," Benny said.

"He's been missing a long time."

"Too long," Benny said.

"He could be dead."

"I'd have heard about it,"

"When's the last time you saw him?"

“Not since the last book he wrote about me came out. I haven’t had a case to solve since. I’m getting rusty. I need to find Gomez so he can write a new book about me, so I can get back to work.”

“You been looking all these years?” Cosmos asked.

“For a while I thought he was writing the next one. When nothing happened, I went to have a talk with him. He was gone. No forwarding address. No way to track him. Turned out nobody knew anything about him. Not his editor. Not his agent. Nobody ever saw him. He didn’t have any friends. He never had a photograph on a book jacket. He just vanished. I’ve been looking ever since.”

“So, nothing.”

“Every lead I follow ends up nowhere. Dead end time. You’re the only one smart enough to find him.”

Cosmos had vowed to look for Gomez Moxley on his own someday. The writer was his favorite. He figured there would never be a better time than now. He was on his way to L.A. anyway. And he’d be working with the one and only Benny Lemon.

“I have business in L.A. tonight,” Cosmos said. “I’ll meet you in the morning.”

“Cantor’s deli on Fairfax,” Benny said.

“Ten o’clock.” Cosmos said. He contemplated his situation. Benny was the man. There never was a better private detective. There never was a better writer about that murky world than Gomez Moxley. Cosmos would find him and take care of Symphony’s problem. In less than an hour life had become interesting again.