



JOSH
LANYON

including
Fatal Shadows
&
A Dangerous
Thing

Adrien English
MYSTERIES

Loose Id

ADRIEN ENGLISH MYSTERIES

Josh Lanyon

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ADRIEN ENGLISH MYSTERIES

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FATAL SHADOWS

Chapter One

Life will show you masks that are worth all your carnivals.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Illusions*

Cops before breakfast. Before coffee even. As if Mondays weren't bad enough. I stumbled downstairs, unlocked the glass front doors, shoved back the ornate security gate and let them in: two plainclothes detectives.

They identified themselves with a show of badges. Detective Chan was older, paunchy, a little rumped, smelling of Old Spice and cigarettes as he brushed by me. The other one, Detective Riordan, was big and blond, with a neo-Nazi haircut and tawny eyes. Actually I had no idea what color his eyes were, but they were intent and unblinking, as though waiting for a sign of activity from the mouse hole.

"I'm afraid we have some bad news for you, Mr. English," Detective Chan said as I started down the aisle of books toward my office.

I kept walking, as though I could walk away from whatever they were about to tell me.

"...concerning an employee of yours. A Mr. Robert Hersey."

I slowed, stopped there in front of the Gothic section. A dozen damsels in distress (and flimsy negligees) caught my eyes. I turned to face the cops. They wore what I would describe as "official" expressions.

"What about Robert?" There was a cold sinking in my gut. I wished I'd stopped for shoes. Barefoot and unshaven, I felt unbraced for bad news. Of course it was bad news. Anything to do with Robert was bound to be bad news.

"He's dead." That was the tall one, Riordan. He-Man.

"Dead," I repeated.

Silence.

"You don't seem surprised."

"Of course I'm surprised." I was, wasn't I? I felt kind of numb. "What happened? How did he die?"

They continued to eye me in that assessing way.

"He was murdered," Detective Chan said.

My heart accelerated, then began to slug against my ribs. I felt the familiar weakness wash through me. My hands felt too heavy for my arms.

"I need to sit down," I said.

I turned and headed back toward my office, reaching out to keep myself from careening into the crowded shelves. Behind me came the measured tread of their feet, just audible over the singing in my ears.

I pushed open my office door, sat heavily at the desk and opened a drawer, groping inside. The phone on my desk began to ring, jangling loudly in the paperback silence. I ignored it, found my pills, managed to get the top off, and palmed two. Washed them down with a swallow of whatever was in the can sitting there from yesterday. Tab. Warm Tab. It had a bracing effect.

"Sorry," I told LA's Finest. "Go ahead."

The phone, which had stopped ringing, started up again. "Aren't you going to answer that?" Riordan inquired after the fourth ring.

I shook my head. "How did --? Do you know who --?"

The phone stopped ringing. The silence was even more jarring.

"Hersey was found stabbed to death last night in the alley behind his apartment," Chan answered.

Riordan said, without missing a beat, "What can you tell us about Hersey? How well did you know him? How long had he worked for you?"

"I've known Robert since high school. He's worked for me for about a year."

"Any problems there? What kind of an employee was he?"

I blinked up at Chan. "He was okay," I said, at last focusing on their questions.

"What kind of friend was he?" Riordan asked.

"Sorry?"

"Were you sleeping with him?"

I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

"Were you lovers?" Chan asked, glancing at Riordan.

"No."

"But you are homosexual?" That was Riordan, straight as a stick figure, summing me up with those cool eyes, and finding me lacking in all the right stuff.

"I'm gay. What of it?"

“And Hersey was homosexual?”

“And two plus two equals a murder charge?” The pills kicking in, I felt stronger. Strong enough to get angry. “We were friends, that’s all. I don’t know who Robert was sleeping with. He slept with a lot of people.”

I didn’t quite mean it that way, I thought as Chan made a note. Or did I? I still couldn’t take it in. Robert murdered? Beaten up, yes. Arrested, sure. Maybe even dead in a car crash - or by autoerotic misadventure. But *murdered*? It seemed so unreal. So...Film At Eleven.

I kept wanting to ask if they were *sure*. Probably everyone they interviewed asked the same question.

I must have been staring fixedly into space because Riordan asked abruptly, “Are you all right, Mr. English? Are you ill?”

“I’m all right.”

“Could you give us the names of Hersey’s -- uh -- men friends?” Chan asked. The too-polite “men friends” put my teeth on edge.

“No. Robert and I didn’t socialize much.”

Riordan’s ears pricked up. “I thought you were friends?”

“We were. But --”

They waited. Chan glanced at Riordan. Though Chan was older I had the impression that Riordan was the main man. The one to watch out for.

I said cautiously, “We were friends, but Robert worked for me. Sometimes that put a strain on our relationship.”

“Meaning?”

“Just that we worked together all day; we wanted to see different people at night.”

“Uh huh. When was the last time you saw Mr. Hersey?”

“We had dinner --” I paused as Chan seemed about to point out that I had just said Robert and I didn’t socialize. I finished lamely, “And then Robert left to meet a friend.”

“What friend?”

“He didn’t say.”

Riordan looked skeptical. “When was this?”

“When was what?”

Patiently, long-suffering professional to civilian, he re-phrased, “When and where did you have dinner?”

“The Blue Parrot on Santa Monica Blvd. It was about six.”

“And when did you leave?”

“Robert left about seven. I stayed and had a drink at the bar.”

“You have no idea who he left to meet? A first name? A nickname?”

“No.”

“Do you know if he was going home first or if they were meeting somewhere?”

“I don’t know.” I frowned. “They were meeting somewhere, I think. Robert looked at his watch and said he was late; it would take him ten minutes. If he had been heading back home it would have taken him half an hour.”

Chan jotted all this in the small notebook.

“Anything else you can tell us, Mr. English? Did Mr. Hersey ever indicate he was afraid of anyone?”

“No. Of course not.” I thought this over. “What makes you think he wasn’t mugged?”

“Fourteen stab wounds to his upper body and face.”

I felt the blood drain out of my brain again.

“Those kinds of wounds generally indicate prior acquaintance,” Riordan drawled.

I don’t remember exactly all they asked, after that. Irrelevant details, I felt at the time: Did I live alone? Where had I gone to school? How long had I owned the shop? What did I do with my spare time?

They verified the spelling of my name. “Adrien, with an ‘e’,” I told Chan. He almost, but not quite, smirked.

They thanked me for my cooperation, told me they would be in touch.

Before he left my office, Riordan picked up the empty can on my desk. “Tab. I didn’t know they still made that.”

He crushed it in one powerful fist and tossed it in the trash basket.

* * * * *

The phone started ringing before I could relock the front door. For a moment I thought it was Robert calling in sick again.

“Adrien, *mon chou*,” fluted the high, clear voice of Claude La Pierra. Claude owns Café Noir on Hillhurst Ave. He’s big and black and beautiful. I’ve known him about three years. I’m convinced he’s a Southland native, but he affects a kind of gender-confused French like a Left Bank expatriate with severe memory loss. “I just heard. It’s too ghastly. I still can’t believe it. Tell me I’m dreaming.”

“The police just left.”

“The *police*? *Mon Dieu!* What did they say? Do they know who did it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What did they tell you? What did you tell them? Did you tell them about me?”

“No, of course not.”

A noisy sigh of relief quivered along the phone line. “*Certainement pas!* What is there to tell? But what about *you*? Are you all right?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t had time to think.”

“You must be in shock. Come by for lunch.”

“I can’t, Claude.” The thought of food made me want to vomit. “I -- there’s no one to cover.”

“Don’t be so *bourgeois*. You have to eat, Adrien. Close the shop for an hour. *Non!* Close it for the day!”

“I’ll think about it,” I promised vaguely.

No sooner had I hung up on Claude than the phone rang again. I ignored it, padding upstairs to shower.

But once upstairs I sank on the couch, head in my hands. Outside the kitchen window I could hear a dove cooing, the soft sound distinct over the mid-morning rush of traffic.

Rob was dead. It seemed both unbelievable and inevitable. A dozen images flashed through my brain in a macabre mental slide show: Robert at sixteen, in his West Valley Academy tennis whites. Robert and me, drunk and fumbling, in the Ambassador Hotel the night of the senior prom. Robert on his wedding day. Robert last night, his face unfamiliar and distorted by anger.

No chance now to ever make it up. No chance to say goodbye. I wiped my eyes on my shirt sleeve, listened to the muffled ring of the phone downstairs. I told myself to get up and get dressed. Told myself I had a business to run. I continued to sit there, my mind racing ahead, looking for trouble. I could see it everywhere, looming up, pointing me out of the lineup. Maybe that sounds selfish, but half a lifetime of getting myself out of shit Robert landed me in had made me wary.

For seven years I had lived above the shop in Old Pasadena. Cloak and Dagger Books. New, used and vintage mysteries, with the largest selection of gay and gothic whodunits in Los Angeles. We held a workshop for mystery writers on Tuesday nights. My partners in crime had finally convinced me to put out a monthly newsletter. And I had just sold my own first novel, *Murder Will Out*, about a gay Shakespearean actor who tries to solve a murder during a production of *Macbeth*.

Business was good. Life was good. But especially business was good. So good that I could barely keep up with it, let alone work on my next book. That’s when Robert had turned up in my life again.

His marriage to Tara, his (official) high school sweetheart, was over. Getting out of the marriage had cost what Rob laughingly called a “queen’s ransom.” After nine years and two-point-five children he was back from the Heartland of America, hard up and hard on. At the time it seemed like serendipity.

On automatic pilot, I rose from the sofa, went into the bathroom to finish my shower and shave, which had been interrupted by the heavy hand of the law on my door buzzer at 8:05 a.m.

I turned on the hot water. In the steamy surface of the mirror I grimaced at my reflection, hearing again that condescending, “But you *are* a homosexual?” As in, “But you *are* a lower life form?” So what had Detective Riordan seen? What was the first clue? Blue eyes, longish dark hair, a pale bony face. What was it in my Anglo-Norman ancestry that shrieked “faggot”?

Maybe he had a gaydar anti-cloaking device. Maybe there really was a straight guy checklist. Like those “How to Recognize a Homosexual” articles circa the Swinging ’60s. Way back when I’d one stuck to the fridge door with my favorite give-aways highlighted:

Delicate physique (or overly muscular)

Striking unusual poses

Gushy, flowery conversation, i.e., “wild,” “mad,” etc.

Insane jealousy

What’s funny about that? Mel, my former partner, had asked irritably, ripping the list down one day.

Hey, isn’t that on the list? “Queer sense of humor?” Mel, do you think I’m homosexual?

So what led Detective Riordan to (in a manner of speaking) finger me? Still on automatic pilot, I got in the shower, soaped up, rinsed off, toweled down. It took me another fifteen numb minutes to find something to wear. Finally I gave up, and I dressed in jeans and a white shirt. One thing that will never give me away is any sign of above-average fashion sense.

I went back downstairs. Reluctantly.

The phone had apparently never stopped ringing. I answered it. It was a reporter: Bruce Green from *Boytimes*. I declined an interview and hung up. I plugged in the coffee machine, unlocked the front doors again, and phoned a temp agency.

Chapter Two

“Silence equals death.” This was Rob’s favorite quote when I’d ask him not to come out (or on) to customers.

I’m running a business, not a political forum here, Rob.

You can’t separate being gay from the rest of your life, Adrien. Everything a gay man does makes a political statement. Everything matters: where you bank, where you shop, where you eat. When you hold your lover’s hand in public -- oh, that’s right...

Go to hell, Rob.

And his smile. That wicked grin so at odds with his golden boy good looks.

Reminders of his presence were everywhere. A rude sketch on a note I’d left him. Sunday’s *Times* folded open to the half-finished crossword puzzle. A bag of pistachio nuts spilled on the counter.

I turned on the stereo in the stockroom, and music flooded the store aisles. Brahms’s *Violin Concerto*: sweet and melancholy and incongruous with the idea of Robert hacked to death in an alley.

Despite the music it was too quiet. And cold. I shivered. It was an old building, originally a tiny hotel called The Huntsman’s Lodge, built back in the ’30s. I’d first stepped through its doors on a foggy spring day not long after I’d inherited what my mother refers to as “my money.”

I remembered the echo of our footsteps as Mel and I wandered through the empty rooms with the real estate agent. We could have been in two different buildings.

Mel had seen the holes in the walls, the scarred wooden floors, the money pit. I’d looked past the peeling wallpaper, and the bare and flickering light bulbs in the watermarked ceiling to see the sagging staircase peopled by ghosts from the black and white movies of my childhood. Women in hats and gloves, men with cigarette holders clamped between jaunty smiles. I’d imagined them checking their valises and Gladstones at the mahogany lobby desk

that now served as my sales counter. When the real estate agent casually mentioned there had been a murder here fifty years before, I was sold. Mel was resigned.

He must have seen the "S" for sucker stamped on your forehead.

Is that what that stands for? I thought it stood for something a bit more entertaining...

Followed by one of our brief wrestling matches, which ended unsurprisingly in Mel losing his temper.

Adrien, are you nuts? There's mouse crap everywhere.

Those were the good old days before I knew how much it cost to rewire a two-story building, or how the concept of modern plumbing has changed since the '30s. That was before I learned the hard way that you need more to compete with the low prices of Borders and Barnes and Noble let alone Amazon.com. Back before I learned there really is no such thing as Happily Ever After. But I did learn. I learned to stock backlist titles, to invest in variety and selection, to cater to the book groups, and reach out to the community. To put my heart and soul into my business. What I lacked in capital, I made up for in ambiance.

"Ambiance" meant placing comfortable old leather club chairs in strategic corners, "lighting" the fake fireplace on rainy days, and offering iced coffee during the summer. In our quest for ambiance, Mel and I raided local junk stores, lugging home an old gramophone, stacks of 78 records, kabuki theater masks, and a peacock fire screen. Ambiance earned us a write up in the *Times* Calendar Section, but it was hard work and long hours that kept me in business.

It was unusually quiet for a Monday morning. A couple of regulars browsed. A new face cleared the shop of all Joseph Hansen's Brandstetter series. Mrs. Lupinski brought in another sack of Harlequin Intrigues and tried to convince me they were real mysteries. I tackled the stuff Rob had left undone, feeling guilty for the lick of irritation over an unopened crate of hardbacks I'd purchased at an estate sale the previous weekend and the untouched stack of search lists he was supposed to check against the computer inventory.

I gathered up his scattered belongings. His coffee mug, which read, "Drink your coffee -- people in Africa are sleeping." A couple of CDs. The razor and toothbrush he left in the washroom for those morning-afters. Most of it I packed in a box for his father, who lived now in a Huntington Beach nursing home.

I didn't want to keep playing it over in my mind, imagining what Rob's last moments must have been like. I bustled around facing books out, cutting strays out of the wrong shelves, pestering customers with offers of help and coffee. Over and over I asked myself the useless but inevitable *Why? Why Robert? Why kill him? Robbery? Maybe some coked up junkie?* The police said no. The police thought someone Robert knew had slain him. I heard again Detective Riordan's sardonic, "prior acquaintance." Did that mean Robert's killer was someone I also knew? I remembered Claude's anxious, "Did you tell them about me?" Was that the normal reaction of an innocent man?

It was hard to imagine stabbing a person fourteen times. I couldn't believe anyone I knew would be capable of that. Easier to believe it of a stranger, a hustler. Easier to believe Rob was the victim of a hate crime or random violence.

The day dragged. A few friends called asking about Rob, offering condolences, expressions of horror and sympathy, speculation.

About two o'clock, the silence got to me. I closed the shop and drove over to Claude's.

You can't miss Café Noir. Outside it's kitschy pink stucco, black grillwork and black shutters. Inside it's too dark to tell what the hell the decor might be. The floors are like black ice and just about as dangerous; the feathery outline of potted trees was barely discernable in the gloom.

Claude made clucking sounds when I walked in. He ushered me to one of the high back booths, promised to fix me something special and vanished. It was Monday and the café was officially closed, but Claude never seemed to leave the place.

I tried to relax. Tilted my head back and closed my eyes. Overhead Piaf trilled, "*Non, Je ne Regrette Rien*." Easy for her to say.

After a time Claude reappeared and set a plate of linguine before me. The sharp-sweet scent of garlic and basil wafted from the tangle of pasta. He opened a bottle of wine, filled two glasses, and sat across from me.

"Have I ever told you, you look like Monty Clift?" he inquired in a deep, seductive voice.

"Before or after the accident?"

Claude tittered. Pushed my glass forward. "Red wine. Good for the heart."

"Thanks." I inhaled. "This smells heavenly."

"You need someone to look after you, *ma belle*." Claude wasn't smiling. With his sad, brown-velvet eyes he watched me spear a soft-shell crab bathed in tomato and herb sauce.

I took a bite. "I'm a born bachelor."

"Bah! You just need to meet Mr. Right."

This is one of Claude's favorite themes. In fact, it's a favorite theme with a lot of my friends. Gay and straight. Certain things are universal.

"Are you proposing?" I batted my eyelashes.

"Be serious," Claude insisted. "It's been how long since What's-His-Name walked? You've been alone so long you think it's normal. It's not normal. Everybody needs somebody --"

"Sometime?" I supplied helpfully. I twirled a forkful of linguine.

Claude sighed. Propped his chin on his gigantic paw. He watched me eat with an artist's satisfaction.

"So what really happened between you and Rob?" I asked.

"*Quelle est la question?* Fireworks then fizzle."

"So?" I took a sip of wine.

"So that was between me and Robert. Nobody else. I don't want cops fucking around in my life."

"That was -- what? Six months ago? Why would the cops be more interested in you than anyone else?"

Claude's eyes slid away from mine. "I wrote him ... letters, poems. Some of it was kind of ... dark."

"No pun intended?"

Claude playfully slapped my hand. "I don't expect The Man to understand the creative mind."

"How dark *were* these poems and letters?"

"Pitch."

"Swell. You think Robert kept that stuff?"

Claude gnawed on his lower lip. "He could be sentimental. In the French sense."

What was the French sense? I rolled the wine over my tongue, savoring it, and considered Claude. "Who was Robert seeing after the two of you split up?"

"You should know."

I shot him a quick look. "Rob and I were never lovers."

Claude shrugged. One of those speaking Continental gestures. He didn't appear to be convinced. If Claude didn't believe me, did that mean other people suspected Rob and I were involved? And were they likely to share that suspicion with the cops? Watching me twist another forkful of pasta, he whispered hurriedly, "You could get those letters back, Adrien."

The fork froze a few centimeters from my lips. "Say again?"

"You've got a key to his place."

"Whoa, Nellie. Rob died in the alley behind that apartment building. It's a crime scene. Or as good as. The cops could be watching."

"Listen, *petit*, you're his best friend. Were. You're his boss. You could come up with a legitimate excuse for going over there."

"No. No. No."

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't --"

"Read my lips. *Non*."

Claude fell silent, gazing at me reproachfully.

I lowered my fork. "Is that why you asked me over here?"

"*Absolument pas!* The idea!"

"Yeah, right."

He bit his lip. I shook my head. His dimples showed.

* * * * *

I unlocked the side door to the shop. Pushed it open against an unexpected weight.

There were books everywhere: dumped in the aisles, scattered across the polished wood floor. A couple of shelves had been pulled over, the gramophone smashed to pieces beneath. The stack of Decca 78s had been sent flying like Frisbees. One had landed on top of a shelf. Another lay at my shoe tip like a black half-moon. I stooped to pick it up. Bing Crosby and The Andrew Sisters would never warble “Life Is So Peculiar” again.

My heart began to thud in a slow heavy pulse beneath my breastbone; the funny thing was that it was more in anger than fear. I took in the counter swept bare of everything except the computerized register, which was bolted into the mahogany. It was unplugged, its drawer open and empty. A coherent thought finally appeared. I went behind the counter, found the phone and dialed 9-1-1.

My call made, I put the phone back on the counter, took another look at the wreckage. I wanted to break something myself. That was when it occurred to me that whoever had broken in could still be hiding in the shop.

I grabbed the poker from the fireplace and headed for my office.

In the office the desk drawers had been pulled out and emptied, the file cabinet locks were broken, their contents dumped. My pills were crushed and sprinkled throughout the papers. Boxes of books, extra stock, now covered the wooden floor like crooked tiles of multicolored murder and mayhem. I slipped and slid my way across.

Poker raised, holding my breath, I stuck my head in the bathroom.

White tile, white porcelain, white paper towel dispenser -- granted none of it as white as it could have been. The open window looked out on the alley behind the building.

I yanked the door forward.

No one lurked in the space between the door and the wall.

I backed out of the office and headed upstairs. The door to my flat was locked. Maybe there hadn't been time to pick the lock, but they had been up here. At the top of the stairs sat the grinning skull from the fireplace mantle below. Nice touch. A *memento mori*.

I made it halfway down the stairs before my legs gave out. I was still sitting there taking slow careful breaths when Detectives Chan and Riordan showed up.

Riordan stood surrounded by piles of books like Atlas or some bloke of equally mythic proportions: long legs encased in Levi's, powerful shoulders straining the seams of a surprisingly well-cut tweed jacket. He looked about himself dourly, all set to reject my application for the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

Chan hiked up the stairs to me.

“Are you all right, Mr. English?”

“Fine.”

“Coming back inside here was a bad idea, sir. You should have gone next door and called for help.”

“Yeah, I realize that now.”

“Can you tell us if anything appears to be missing?”

“Money from the register.” I stared at the toppled shelves. Light flashed off the scattered pieces of glass from the broken mirror. Was that seven years of bad luck for my burglar or for me? I rubbed my forehead. “I don’t know.”

Chan observed me without speaking then turned away.

“They didn’t break in.” Riordan rejoined Chan at the foot of the stairs and they held a brief undervoiced conference.

“They must have used Robert’s key,” I said, digesting this. I thought of the bathroom window, but it was too small and too narrow, unless the burglar was a pygmy or a monkey.

Riordan glanced back. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Maybe?”

Chan intervened, always urbane, easy. “Why don’t you come downstairs where we can talk, Mr. English? Figure out if anything’s missing. Figure out who might have done this.”

Riordan said, “Give me your keys, Adrien. I’ll check out upstairs. Make sure nobody’s hiding under the bed.”

“Rob didn’t have a key to my apartment. And I’d have noticed if they’d kicked my door in.”

“Let’s just make sure, okay?”

I tossed my keys with more irritation than accuracy. Riordan caught them one-handed and stomped up the stairs past me. We heard him reach the landing. Heard the scrape of the key in the lock. Heard the creak of floorboards as he walked overhead.

Chan took out a stick of gum and folded it into his mouth.

In a few minutes Riordan was back with us. I saw him exchange one of those looks with Chan. He lifted a fake Chippendale chair to its feet, shoved it forward. I ignored the invitation.

“You don’t look so hot, Adrien.”

“Yeah, well I’m having a bad heart day.”

His upper lip curled in a semblance of a smile. “Tell me about it.”

I decided I would. “My best friend was murdered last night. My shop was burglarized today. This may be routine for you. It’s not for me.”

“Well,” he drawled, “let’s talk about that. About *Rob*. You didn’t tell us everything this morning, did you?”

There was something different in their faces, in their voices, in the way Riordan was calling me “Adrien” instead of “Mr. English.” It started the hairs on the back of my neck prickling.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

Riordan smiled. Lots of perfect white teeth, like a shark who saw his dentist regularly. Chan said, “We were just over at the Blue Parrot, interviewing the bartender when your call came over the radio. We thought we’d clear up a couple of points with you.”

“Such as why you lied.”

My head jerked puppet-like toward Riordan. “Lied?” I echoed.

“The bartender at The Blue Parrot said that you and the vic --” Chan corrected himself. “You and Mr. Hersey quarreled during your dinner, and that Mr. Hersey walked out and left you to pick up the check.”

“I ... invited Robert.”

“I don’t think that’s the point, do you, Adrien?” Riordan inquired. He picked up a copy of *China House*, studied the two men embracing on the cover, snorted, and tossed it onto an empty shelf. “Why didn’t you tell us you had a fight with Robert?”

“It wasn’t a fight. It was a ... disagreement.”

“And eight hours later the garbage men find what’s left of the disagreeable Robert in a dumpster.”

Distantly I wondered if I was going to pass out right there at their feet.

Cold sweat was breaking out all over my body.

“You think *I* killed Rob?”

“There’s a thought. Did you?”

“No.”

“Sure?”

“Of course I’m sure!”

“Just relax, Mr. English,” Detective Chan said. “These are routine questions, you know.”

“What did you disagree about, you and *Rob*?”

I scrutinized Riordan. His eyes were hazel, I realized.

“About work,” I said. “I felt like Rob didn’t take it seriously. He was late, he left early. Sometimes he never showed at all. I’d give him stuff to do and he wouldn’t do it. Petty stuff. I regret it now.”

“Regret what?” Chan asked alertly.

“Regret arguing with him. Regret our last conversation being a fight over --” Tears itched down my cheeks. I wiped them away fast, knowing what these two would make of a grown man weeping.

"The bartender says before he walked out, Hersey yelled, 'If I'm a thief, fire me.' What did he mean by that?"

I viewed them. Chan was chewing gum tempestuously, studying his notepad. He looked tired, but his pudgy lined face was kindly. Riordan on the other hand.... How old was he? Thirty-five? Forty-five? He looked like a guy who expected the worst of people and was rarely disappointed.

"There was money missing from petty cash a couple of times."

"And you thought Hersey might have taken it?"

"I just wanted to hear his answer."

"Did you believe him?"

"Yes, of course."

Riordan laughed; a hard sound. "Why lie about that?" he asked. "If you lie about the little things, why should we believe you about the big things?"

"He was my *friend*."

He lifted one shoulder. "People kill their friends. They kill their wives, their husbands, their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. They murder their own children. You have to do better than that."

"The most I would have done is fire him, and I wouldn't have fired him. Why the hell would I murder him? For pinching the petty cash? For being late? Jesus! And you're supposed to be detectives?"

Chan said soothingly, "Sure, you were friends a long time, you and Mr. Hersey. You were best man at his wedding, and when he came back to LA you gave him a job and helped him find a place to live. And became lovers. Again."

"We were never lovers."

"That's not the way we hear it," Riordan said. "We heard you and Rob were hump buddies from way back when Hersey used to cheat off your chemistry exams."

It occurred to me that I had it all wrong in my book. My cops were too abrasive. Riordan and Chan were courteous and careful. So when the contempt slipped out it was as shocking as a fist in the face.

I said as calmly and quietly as I could, "Robert left before I did last night. He left to meet someone. Didn't the bartender confirm that?"

Chan snapped his gum. "Sure did. Robert left at 6:45 and you stayed and had a second Midori margarita. You left about 7:30. Fifteen minutes later Robert showed up again looking for you."

Chapter Three

Tara called that night.

“Tara,” I floundered, when I recognized the tight voice on the other end of the line. “I was going to call you.”

Two months after Rob split, Tara had miscarried their third child. It made a painful situation worse. It also made for stiff conversations the few times I had been unlucky enough to field her calls.

In my mind’s eye I could see her as clearly as if I were studying a page in my high school yearbook: tall and slender, pale blue eyes, long blonde hair. The girl who is always picked to play the Virgin Mary in the Christmas pageant.

“You killed him.” Her voice was so low I almost couldn’t hear her. When I realized what she had said I felt my hair stand on end.

“What are you talking about?”

“You killed him just as surely as if you’d stuck the knife in his chest.”

“Look, Tara, I know you’re upset.”

“You’re the reason he came back here.”

“He came back here because his family’s here. Because he grew up here. Because his friends are here.”

“Because *you’re* here, Adrien, you faggot. You *pervert*. Do you think I don’t *know*? Do you think Bob didn’t tell me about you?”

The acid in her voice should have melted the phone line. I didn’t know what to say. What the hell had Rob told her? “We were friends, that’s all, Tara.”

“Bullshit! *Bullshit*. We were happy, Adrien. Everything was going great for us. We had a great house. Great kids. A great life. Then you had to come along and screw it all up again.” She sounded like she was crying. Hell.

“Tara, please believe me. Rob called *me*. I never -- I sent a Christmas card every year. To both of you. That’s it. That’s the only contact I tried to make.”

“LIAR!”

I held the phone away listening to her scream, “You are a goddamn liar, Adrien. You’ve ruined my life and you’ve killed Bob, so I hope you’re happy. No, you know what I *really* hope, Adrien? I hope you die of AIDS. I hope you die with your body rotting and your brain eaten away....”

* * * * *

I shoved the sofa in front of the door, fixed a double brandy and fell asleep watching *The Crimson Pirate* with Burt Lancaster. But even the vision of Burt in his molded red and white striped breeches couldn’t cheer me.

It’s never fun knowing another human hates your guts, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that I had wronged Tara. Not in the way she thought, but I felt guilty all the same.

About three o’clock in the morning I woke from chaotic dreams to find the lights on and the TV blasting infomercials. I turned off the television and lights, and dragged myself to bed. But once I’d lain down my brain kicked into high gear, and I kept reliving that final scene with Rob.

* * * * *

To say everything looked brighter in the morning would be an overstatement. For one thing it was pouring rain. Water rolled along the eaves like silver beads and poured off the striped awning. By mid-morning the streets were flooding. You feel rain in a used bookstore. The old pages pick up the damp and mustiness like old bones do rheumatism.

I dug out the powder blue cashmere cardigan my mother, Lisa, gave me the Christmas before last, pulled on my oldest, softest Levi’s. Comfort clothes, the next best thing to a hug from a warm, living body. Lately there had been a shortage of hugs in my life. Lately there had been a shortage of warm, living bodies.

It was hard not to be depressed at the sight of yesterday’s assault. Although I’d got the shelves back up with the help of the people who owned the Thai restaurant next door, the empty bookcases and bare walls were a chilling reminder. Suppose I’d walked in on the guy mid-rampage? There are things you can’t insure against. Freaking lunatics are one of them.

The temp agency sent over Angus “Gus” Gordon. Angus was a pale, gangly twenty-something with John Lennon specs and a wispy goatee. Whether Angus had heard about Rob’s murder and was unnerved by it, or whether he was just neurotically shy, he seemed unable to meet my eyes for longer than a second. His voice was so soft I had to ask him to repeat himself every time he spoke.

I put him to work stacking books back on the shelves. I didn't care if he couldn't alphabetize. Hell, I didn't care if he couldn't read. I just didn't want to be alone in the shop.

In the back office, I waded through the drifts of papers: catalogs, old receipts, invoices, shipping documents. Nothing seemed to be missing. There was nothing of value to anyone except possibly the IRS. It felt like the place had been trashed out of spite. I didn't see why this burglar should have such a grudge against me, but maybe it wasn't personal. Just an animal instinct for destruction.

The most unnerving thing was that I knew the police, as represented by Detectives Chan and Riordan, figured I'd faked a break-in to divert suspicion from myself. As Riordan put it, "This seems like a lot of trouble for sixty bucks in loose cash."

"You don't think this is connected with Robert's murder?" I'd demanded.

"Oh, I'm sure it's connected," he said obliquely.

"Were Rob's keys found?"

Riordan said reluctantly, as though it caused him physical pain to part with information, "No. There were no keys on the body or on the premises."

Which to his little gray cells could mean that I'd taken them away with me after I'd finished carving up my old "hump buddy."

The only reason I wasn't already sitting in jail watching Oprah was the cops hadn't finished building a slam dunk case against me. Imminent arrest, like their stale aftershave, hung in the air following Chan and Riordan's reluctant departure. They'd cautioned me about remaining available for further questioning.

I had a locksmith in before lunch to change the locks. The paper came and I read the details of "West Hollywood Man Murdered," sitting on the floor amid my sorting. According to the *L.A. Times*, thirty-three-year-old Robert Hersey had been found in the early hours of Monday, February 22nd, by sanitation workers making their daily rounds. Hersey had been stabbed repeatedly in the face, throat, and torso by an unknown assailant. The murder weapon had not been recovered. Police had questioned an unidentified man observed arguing with Hersey hours before his murder, but had made no arrest. "We are still trying to determine the identity of a man Hersey allegedly met later that evening," stated LAPD Detective Paul Chan.

A hoarse whisper from behind had me starting up off the floor. Angus stood there, glasses glinting blindly.

"Jeez! Don't do that!"

He was silent for a moment and then croaked, "Can I go to lunch now?"

"Yeah, of course. What time is it?"

"Noon."

"Okay."

Angus didn't budge. I felt a tickle between my shoulder blades -- as though a knife were aimed at my back.

"How long do I get?"

"What?"

"How long can I take for lunch?" he whispered patiently.

"Oh. An hour, I guess."

I leaned back, watching him walk through the aisles of books, then I got up, stepped out of the office to see him go through the glass doors past the locksmith busily drilling away.

The phone rang and I picked it up. It was Bruce Green, the reporter from *Boytimes*.

"Don't hang up, Mr. English," he said right off the bat.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm trying to help you. My informant tells me LAPD plans to make you the scapegoat for Hersey's murder."

My finger hovered over the disconnect button, but I waited.

"You're gay and that's good enough for LAPD."

"I don't believe that," I said. I didn't know if I believed it or not. "Anyway, you're wasting your time. I don't know anything. I didn't kill Robert; that's the only thing I know."

"You'd better talk to somebody, Mr. English. Tell your story," advised Green. "Your next interview with Riordan and Chan will be downtown, take my word for it. They plan to have an arrest by the end of the week."

I tried to speak around the heart suddenly lodged in my throat. "What is it you think you can do for me?"

"I can get the support of the gay community behind you. We'll put your story on the front page: the story of how LAPD is trying to railroad an innocent gay man because they're too prejudiced and lazy to do their job."

I thought of "my story" on the front page, my photo in smudgy black and white, and I quailed.

"Mr. Green, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I don't have anything to say."

"Just talk to me, Mr. English. Five minutes. That's all. Off the record."

"No. Really. Thank you, but no."

"You're making a mistake, Mr. English. Sooner or later --"

"Thank you, Mr. Green, but no thank you." I pressed disconnect.

I went behind the counter and started dialing customers whose search lists we'd matched. There was a 1972 first edition of Robert Bentley's *Here There Be Dragons* which had taken nine months to locate, and which I was tempted to keep for myself. A paperback

copy of Ngaio Marsh's *When in Rome*, several Patricia Wentworth hardcovers: Ah, the thrill of the hunt!

The locksmith finished up and gave me the new keys. I paid him. A few customers wandered in and then straight out again, put off by our new and highly original floor display. I checked Angus's re-shelving of the books and was relieved to see he could alphabetize.

After Angus returned from lunch I boiled water for Cup-a-Soup and returned to sorting through the piles and piles of paper littering the office. A forest's worth of bills, catalogs, bibliographies, press releases. It seemed as good a time as any to purge the files, do the spring cleaning I'd been putting off for the past couple of years.

It had been nearly twenty-four hours since I'd heard from Chan and Riordan. No news was good news, I told myself, and hoped it was true.

I was afraid the reporter from *Boytimes* was right, that with me as a convenient scapegoat, the police weren't interested in looking further. Motive and Opportunity. Those are the main two angles in any criminal homicide investigation. Since I had no alibi after leaving the Blue Parrot, the police would certainly conclude I had opportunity. Now they were hunting for motive. I was afraid that motive might be subjective.

I wondered if I needed to get hold of a lawyer? There was always the family firm. I tried to picture the ultra-conservative institution of Hitchcock & Gracen defending me in a homo *crime d'passionale* (as Claude would say), and wondered if it might not be easier to just shut up and go to prison. On the bright side, since Lisa only read the Society pages and the Calendar section, chances were she'd never hear anything about this, barring my arrest. For all I knew, I might be able to stall her through the first couple of years of my sentence with the skillful use of phone messages. *Do they let you keep your cell phone in prison?*

I sound more flippant than I felt. Each time I considered the real threat of arrest -- *jail* -- my brain seemed to flatline.

Angus turned out to be a hard worker. By late afternoon, he had half the books back on the shelves. Another day or two and we would be back in business for real.

Bundled in an army fatigue jacket, he appeared in the doorway of the office.

"Mr. English?" he mumbled, addressing the shelf above my head. "I'm going now."

I rose, dusting my knees off. "Sure." I looked at my watch. "Oh, sorry. You should have told me it was so late."

"Do you want me tomorrow?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, if you want to come back."

He gazed at me, owlish and unsmiling. "I like it here."

"Good. Then I'll see you tomorrow."

I walked him out, locked the door behind him. Maybe he was just socially backward. Maybe it was his first job.

Maybe I was imagining things.

* * * * *

On Tuesdays, the Partners in Crime mystery writers group usually met in the store after hours to critique each other's work in progress, tear published writers' books apart, and argue hot topics like who was bringing what refreshments next time.

That evening I half-expected, half-hoped everyone would cancel. It didn't happen. In fact all five members showed up early, with Claude arriving first. He wore a white raincoat, looking as suave as Shaft at a New Orleans funeral.

"*Mon chou*, have you reconsidered what we discussed yesterday?" He helped me set chairs in a semi-circle: a fake Chippendale, a fake Sheraton, and four genuine folding metal that pinched your butt if you didn't sit up straight. Cheap thrills.

We dragged the long library table to the center.

"If you're still talking career ops in B & E, no."

Claude made distressed noises.

"I can't believe you're serious about this," I said. "The police already suspect me."

"*You!*"

"*Moi*. Even if I --"

We were interrupted by the arrival of Jean and Ted Finch.

"Adrien, you poor baby!" exclaimed Jean, giving me a hug.

The Finches are writing partners, which seems like a surefire way to destroy a healthy marriage, but what do I know? My social life was pronounced DOA many moons ago. She's small and slim and dark, and so is he; a matched pair, like bookends. They met at one of the Bouchercon mystery conferences. Love among the midlist.

"It's raining cats and dogs!" Ted announced, which gives you an idea of the sort of thing they write. He collapsed a rain-spotted red umbrella, adding, "We were sorry to hear about Rob, Adrien."

"Thanks." I felt awkward in my role as bereaved.

Jean, spotting Claude at the coffee maker, darted away to contest his decision to serve Godiva Cinnamon Hazelnut over Don Francisco's Moka Java.

Ted sidled over to me. "Do the police know who did it?"

"I don't think so. I'm not exactly in their confidence."

"Jean thinks it's a serial killer preying on the gay community."

"A serial killer with only one victim?"

"It has to start with someone."

I was still mulling over that happy thought when tall, well-built Max Siddons blew in. Max threw off his yellow poncho, shook himself like a dog, and made straight for the coffee and the chocolate pecan brownies provided by Jean. She giggled nervously as he flirted with her.

None of that awkward sentimental stuff for Max. I remembered that Robert had hit on Max once or twice when Rob first came back to LA. That was before the thing with Claude. Rob had briefly joined our writing group but gave it up after we ran out of eligible men. Max was aggressively heterosexual which Robert had been convinced was just a façade. I never knew exactly what happened, but Max was coldly civil to Robert after the misunderstanding. Luckily duels were no longer acceptable social behavior.

Studying Max as he flattered Jean out of one side of his mouth and crammed brownies into the other, I wondered just how offended he had been.

Max finished grazing and sat down with Ted. They held a breezy post-mortem over Rob. Ghoulish but probably inevitable with mystery writers. Wasn't I standing here considering whether muscular Max would be capable of tossing Robert's body into a trash dumpster? I shoved aside that mental picture, but as I went to get more pens I could still hear Max and Ted -- now joined by Jean -- comparing their theories against the newspapers' conjecture. As they knowledgeably debated the possibilities of disorganized lust murder over organized lust murder, and demonstrated their technical expertise by discussing types of blades, defense wounds, stab vs. slash injuries, I realized that Rob's death wasn't real for them. They could have been playing a grisly version of Clue.

"Are we going to get any work done tonight?" Grania Joyce demanded while I was in the storeroom.

"If Adrien ever stops futzing around," Max returned easily.

"I'm ready." I left the storeroom, pens in hand and joined them at the circle. Grania, head bent over her manuscript, reached for a pen without looking up. She's tall, red-haired, the Boadicea type. She turns out hard-boiled feminist stuff and informs me regularly that my writing is "anemic." Tonight she wore a T-shirt that proclaimed, *Listen to Girls*, which we did, settling down to the dissection of the first three chapters of Claude's *The Eiffel Tower Affaire* with huffy rustles of paper and under-breath comments from Max.

Robert's funeral was Friday.

It was one of those perfect days when the Santa Ana winds sweep the smog out over the ocean; the sky looked as uncannily blue as if it had been colorized by Ted Turner.

The mourners didn't outnumber the church officials by many. I recognized a few people but most were strangers. Strange to me anyway. Rob had always been popular. Where were the people we had gone to school with? The friends who, like me, stood by while he married Tara in a chapel very similar to this one? Where was all the extended family? The aunts,

uncles, cousins? Where were the cronies of the last few liberated months? Claude did not show. Nor any of Robert's numerous lovers -- at least none that I recognized.

The media were represented by a local news van parked by the cemetery gates. The murder of one gay man was hardly a Stop-the-Presses event. A bored reporter waited outside the vaulted-ceiling chapel kicking pebbles back and forth. There were a few sightseers. And, of course, the police. Detectives Chan and Riordan looked suitably grave in dark suits and sunglasses. I think I did a kind of guilty double take when I spotted them. Chan nodded affably.

I found a place behind Robert's father, shrunken in his wheelchair, and Robert's sisters. The younger one had had a crush on me in junior high. She could barely meet my eyes now.

Tara sat on the other side of the first row of pews, the kids with her, wide-eyed and scared. She looked like hell beneath her chic Princess Diana hat. Like she hadn't slept in days. That made two of us.

My mind kept wandering during the generic service. It was obvious the minister had never met Robert. Rob's sisters took turns getting up and speaking huskily about his qualities as a brother and husband and father and son. The church felt stuffy, airless. I viewed the rosewood casket. How quickly, how neatly the chaos of a living person could be reduced to an insignificant box.

When the service ended I hung back while everyone shuffled outside into the windy, sunlit afternoon. I wasn't sure how Tara would react to my presence. I didn't feel up to hysterics: hers or mine.

"Adrien? Mr. English?"

I turned around. Next to me stood a very tall man with strong features and black, lank hair. Kind of attractive in a homely way. He offered a hand.

"Bruce Green. *Boytimes*."

We shook hands. His grip was warm, firm.

"I just came by to pay my respects." Brown eyes held mine. "Have you changed your mind about talking to me?"

"Man, it must be a slow week for news." I broke off as Chan and Riordan materialized beside us. There was an uneasy pause. Perhaps I looked as tense as I felt. Bruce Green gave my hand a meaningful squeeze before letting it go.

"What are you doing here?" It came out roughly because I was afraid I knew what they were doing there.

Chan said quietly, "Just paying our respects like everyone else, Mr. English."

"This could be viewed as harassment," Bruce Green said.

They stared at me. Stared at Green.

Riordan inquired, "And you are --?"

“Bruce Green. *Boytimes*.”

Their faces said it all.

Green turned to me. “You don’t have to talk to them, you know?”

Chan looked pained. Riordan ... well, I momentarily expected a MegaMan reaction of nuclear proportions.

“It’s routine, so they tell me.”

“I’ll be in touch.” Green’s gaze locked once more with mine.

I nodded. He gave the cops a curt inclination of his head before turning away and vanishing into the line of mourners still filing out through the double doors. He looked too well-groomed, too well-dressed to fit my image of a reporter.

Riordan made a sound of contempt. “Reporters.”

Chan said, as though it had just occurred to him, “Mr. English, were you aware that Mr. Hersey had taken out a sizable life insurance policy a few months before he died?”

“No. How sizable?”

“People have committed murder for less,” Riordan said.

I was afraid to ask. “Who’s the beneficiary?”

Riordan’s brows shot up. “Can’t you guess?”

I stared at them dumbly. Whatever I said, I knew they would think I was lying. The more I tried to explain, the worse it would look. It was like being in quicksand. The more I struggled, the faster I would sink.

“Excuse me.” I pushed past them, following the scattering of mourners down the slope toward the ornamental lake. The ground was soggy from previous days’ rain. My shoes squelched in the grass as I made my way to the green canopy positioned a yard from the grave.

I didn’t see Bruce Green in the crowd. I was sorry because I had changed my mind about talking to him.

I had changed my mind about a lot of things.

Chapter Four

Robert's apartment was not sealed. No official yellow tape stretched across the front door proclaiming it a crime scene. As I hesitated on the walkway it seemed to me that it looked like it had always looked. California standard issue white stucco, complete with yellowing palm trees and the soothing rumble of the nearby Hollywood Freeway.

I let myself in using my key. Locking the door behind me, I leaned against it breathing softly, eyes straining in the darkness.

From the other side of the wall came the muffled bawl of heavy metal music, but inside the cold apartment all was silent.

I didn't want to risk turning on the lights. I switched on my pocket flashlight and swung it slowly around the room: your typical West Hollywood studio apartment furnished in early Montgomery Ward. A white sofa bed sat across from an "oak" armoire that doubled as an entertainment center. A Bowflex exercise machine took up half the living room. I glanced over the counter into the kitchenette. There was a sink full of dirty dishes. The apartment smelled stale -- worse. I traced the stench to dead flowers in a wine bottle on the counter.

Pressed for time, I crossed to the armoire. Opening the top drawer, I sifted through the undershirts, underpants: several packs of condoms, shirt studs in a leather box, a packet of drugstore prints. I thumbed through the prints quickly. Tara and the kids building snowmen, raking leaves, celebrating a birthday, trimming a Christmas tree. Life without father. I tucked them back between the Lycra leopard bikinis.

It was weird going through Rob's stuff. More painful than I expected. Pretty stupid getting choked up over his sock drawer, I jeered at myself. I wasn't even sure what I was looking for. I raked a latex glove through my hair, wincing as fine hairs pulled.

Rising from my haunches, I moved to the closet. On the upper shelf were two bulging shoe boxes fastened shut with straining rubber bands. When I reached for them a hard and flat object dislodged and fell, whacking me on the head. I swore then waited tensely to see if there was any response to that bump from the apartment next door.

Nothing. The neighbors were probably deaf, judging by the muted thump of drums and bass guitar. I recognized Great White's "What Do You Do for Love."

My flashlight picked out a high school yearbook, loose Christmas cards and a dildo. A dildo in a coat closet?

"For God's sake, Rob!" I muttered, as I had been muttering for years. Like it was Rob's fault he was dead and I was nosing through his personal belongings.

I snatched the dildo up, tucking it deep in the kitchen trash bin, freaking at the idea of Rob's sisters or Tara going through his apartment and finding it. Just who was I trying to protect?

Returning to the living room, I lifted down one of the shoeboxes, folded myself cross-legged on the carpet and removed the lid. Bills, bills and more bills. Paycheck stubs. So many bills. So few paycheck stubs. I wished like hell our last conversation had not been about money.

I finished flipping through the stuffed box admitting that even if there was something there to find I probably wouldn't recognize it. People don't keep bank registers like they used to. There wasn't a lot to make of some loose ATM slips and several returned checks in their envelopes.

I moved on to the next box. Bingo. Letters. Packs of photos. I pulled out the first envelope, recognizing that wild, green ink scrawl. I smoothed out the letter, scanned it quickly. It was signed "Black Beauty."

Talk about your purple prose. "*Sacre bleu*," I murmured.

I folded the letter up again, stuffed it in the envelope. From outside came a soft brushing sound against the wall.

I went rigid.

There was the scrape of a key in the front door lock. I crunched the lid back on the box and scrambled into the closet, pulling it closed.

Through the wood I heard the front door open and then shut. A band of light appeared beneath the bottom of the closet door. I stared at it in fascination.

A floorboard creaked.

I wondered if Robert's murderer was prowling around on the other side of the door.

In the crowded darkness Robert's clothes brushed against my face, Robert's scent filled my nostrils. It was as though he stood there beside me during any one of the dozens of pranks we'd played as kids. I felt like if I reached out I would brush his hand. I realized I needed to take a piss.

Sweat poured out all over my body as I waited in the stifling darkness. I was surprised the intruder couldn't hear my heart booming away; to me it sounded as loud as if someone were kicking an empty oil drum.

I stiffened as I heard a voice, low. The words were indistinct. Were there two of them? I pressed closer to the door, trying to hear, trying to recognize the voice.

Male. That's all I could tell.

A few more unintelligible words, and then the unmistakable ping of the phone being hung up.

The floor creaked again. The band of light beneath the door vanished. The front door closed as quietly as it had opened. I heard the snick of the lock.

Silence.

I waited quite a while just to be sure.

I expelled a long sigh. Cautiously, I opened the closet and stepped out.

The overhead light switched on. Detective Riordan leaned against the front door, one hand resting casually on his jacket lapel, shoulder holster within easy reach.

"That's one of the oldest tricks in the world, Adrien-with-an-e."

I wasn't sure if he meant his or mine. I stood there breathing in and out in time to the heaving of the beige carpet. From a distance I heard Riordan drawl something else, and then the floor rose up and hit me in the face.

* * * * *

I came to lying on Robert's sofa. Riordan bent over me, sharply, insistently, patting my cheek.

"Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty. Come on. Open those baby blues. Wake up."

I fluttered my eyelashes. Unglued my mouth. "I'm awake."

Riordan quit patting my cheek. Stared down at me.

"Jesus," I mumbled as the full picture sank in.

"Wrong again." He took my wrist in a cool, professional grip. Looked at his watch for a moment. Grunted.

I watched him passively. I mean, the thing had gone way past humiliation. I couldn't feel much beyond a mild curiosity. Had he been following me? Would he have shot me? And why is it the best looking ones are always straight?

"You know, English, maybe you should consider another line of work. I don't think you're cut out for burglary."

"Are you going to arrest me?" Like I said, it was just mild curiosity. I was too tired to get worked up about it.

His eyes flickered. "I don't know. What are you doing here?"

I pushed up on elbow, fumbled in my breast pocket for my pills, managed to get the cap off. "Could I have a glass of water?"

"You're stalling." But he went into the kitchenette and returned with half a glass of water.

I sort of think if (God forbid) I had HIV or AIDS it would be more acceptable. If you're gay and ill people half expect that anyway. But this ... I can't expect another guy to have patience with it. I don't have patience with it myself.

He regarded me in silence as I sat up gingerly, popped the pills, took the glass and swallowed some water.

"Thanks. How did you know it was me?"

Riordan snorted. "That's your black Ford Bronco parked a block down, isn't it?"

"Oh." I took another swallow and set the glass on the carpet. I raked the hair out of my eyes. My hand was almost steady. I realized he had removed my gloves. I glanced around but didn't see them.

He shook his head. "Listen, Brain Guy, I thought you wrote a book once or something. Didn't it occur to you that we would be watching this place? Don't you think we've gone through all this?" He indicated the shoebox lying where I'd dropped it. "What were you looking for?"

I didn't like to say what had been in my mind: that maybe Rob had tried to blackmail someone. It seemed disloyal, though it was exactly the kind of far-fetched thing he would do.

I said, "Something you missed. Something that would point to who really killed Robert." I met his gaze squarely. "I didn't."

Riordan grinned a crooked grin. "You do know, English, that that is what they all say?"

"I didn't kill him."

He considered me for a long moment with those light, keen eyes. He rubbed his nose thoughtfully. Then he said, "Suppose we go some place and talk about it?"

* * * * *

We went to Café Noir. Claude greeted us with menus, beaming at what he imagined to be my first date in eight months. I'm not sure if Riordan picked that up but he brusquely excused himself and started for the washroom, feeling his way through the gloom.

"Oooh la la," twinkled Claude, leading me to an empty booth. "*Très magnifique.*"

"He's a cop," I cut him off. "One of the detectives investigating Robert's murder."

Claude looked aghast. "Why did you bring him *here*?"

His voice rose to a small shriek on the last word.

"Shhhhh," I hissed. "Listen up. They know about the letters."

"*They've got them?*"

"I saw them in a shoe box at Robert's. Riordan made a point of telling me that they'd already been through all Robert's stuff."

"It was a *trap*?"

I opened my mouth but broke off as the men's room door opened and Riordan stepped out. Claude jerked guiltily up from the table and hastened away toward the kitchen, giving my police escort a wide berth.

A second later Riordan dropped down across from me and said, "So tell me, Jonny Quest, just exactly what were you up to in Hersey's apartment?"

"I already told you. You people have me pegged as the fall guy -- or gay."

His dark brows rose. "Excuse me? Have you been arrested? Have you so much as been officially interrogated? Even after I find you breaking and entering --"

"I have a key."

He sucked in a peremptory breath. "Come on, English, I'm trying to be straight with you."

I flicked him a deliberate look under my lashes. "Well, you can see what a waste of time that is."

Our glances held -- locked. After a moment Riordan laughed. Short and crisp, but a genuine laugh.

"You're kind of a smart ass when you're not flat on your face."

Claude returned with gigantic foam-topped mugs of cappuccino. "De-caf for you, *mon petit*," he informed me. He slopped Riordan's in front of him and stalked off. I just hoped he hadn't laced the detective's with strychnine.

I sipped my decaf. I hate decaf.

"While I'm thinking of it, what's the name of your doctor?" Riordan took out a notebook and pen.

"Why?"

"Why do you think?"

I gave him the name of my doctor and he put the notepad away. That was a relief. I didn't know if I was up to another interrogation right then.

I said, "There's such a thing as patient-doctor confidentiality."

"Relevant medical records can be subpoenaed. A doctor is not a priest. Besides, this might work to your advantage. You never know." He rubbed the back of his neck, his restless gaze wandering over the other tables, the other customers. I deduced he was uncomfortable lest he be mistaken for one of my kindred. He needn't have worried. Café Noir was not a "gay" restaurant, whatever that is.

"Have you found whoever it was that Robert was meeting that night?"

"We have only your word that Robert left to meet someone else. He went back to the Blue Parrot looking for you."

I put my cup down with a bang. "Tell me this. Do you have any other suspects or am I it?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"I'm not asking you to name names. Are you considering the possibility that I *didn't* kill Robert?"

His face hardened. "Hell yes. If we weren't, you'd be wearing orange PJs right now."

Not exactly words of comfort but I relaxed a fraction. If he planned to arrest me we'd be going directly to jail, not sipping cappuccino like civilized folk. For some reason I had been granted a reprieve. Why? Because the cops' grounder case wasn't such a ground ball after all? Riordan felt around in his pocket and then set something small and white on the granite table between us. I felt him observing me for any change of expression.

"What is it?"

"You don't know?"

"I know it's a chess piece."

"You play chess?"

I answered warily, "Yeah."

"What piece is this?"

I picked it up. "Queen." It was one of those cheap pressed plastic pieces. Nothing unique or memorable about it.

"You and Robert play chess?"

"When we were kids. I haven't played in years."

"Why's that?"

I shrugged, replaced the piece on the table top. "I don't know. No one to play with."

"Boo hoo."

I re-revised my original opinion. Riordan was indeed an asshole. But he was probably pretty good at reading people -- and manipulating them.

He added, "A piece exactly like this was found on Hersey's body."

"On his body?"

"Clutched in his hand." Riordan studied me, and a weird half-smile curved his lips. "As Hersey lay dying, his assailant pressed this into his hand and folded his fingers around it. Held it closed. There were bruises on Hersey's hand."

"Fingerprints?"

"No fingerprints."

I swallowed hard. Riordan reached across and pocketed the game piece. "Keep that to yourself. We haven't released it to the press yet."

"Why tell me?"

I couldn't read the expression on his face. "Because I think you know what this chess piece means."

I shook my head. "No. Unless the reference is to a queen. To Robert's being gay."

"That's one explanation obviously."

"I don't have another."

Riordan sipped his cappuccino. He did not look like a cappuccino kind of guy. "You think about it, Adrien-with-an-e. I bet it comes to you."

* * * * *

The first Saturday of each month meant brunch with She Who Must Be Placated.

Lisa, my mother, has never forgiven me for a number of things, but being gay is not one of them. My main offense was my decision at age twenty-five that I was well enough to live outside the parental holdings. Worse, to start a "grubby little shop" on the money left to me by my paternal grandmother. As Lisa has no interest in my life as an autonomous adult, our brunches make for rather superficial conversation. Yet neither of us quite likes to give up this delicate tradition of chitchat over blueberry cream cheese blintzes and pots of Earl Grey tea.

Today, the weather being sunny, we brunched on the terrace overlooking the scrubby green hills of Porter Ranch. The February breeze whipped the white linen and scattered *Sombreuil* rose petals from the garden into the blueberry sauce. Lisa, still trim as a dancer in an Aran knit sweater and lavender leggings, was pouring tea into fragile china cups as I stepped through the French doors.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming, darling. What do you think of my hair?" she invited as I kissed her cheek.

"You look like Audrey Hepburn's little sister."

"Liar." She preened.

I steadied the table as a gust of wind rocked it. The china rattled in genteel protest. "Maybe we should do this inside."

"Why? I love this weather. It's very nearly spring. The daffodils are out."

"So is a hurricane advisory." But I sat down across from her, shook out my napkin -- barely kept it from blowing away.

Lisa placed a cup in front of me. "And how are you darling? You look tired. You're not overdoing again?"

"No. I'm fine."

"You know what the doctors said."

"Mm. How was the SPCA Ball?"

Lisa sat back and laughed her pretty silvery laugh. "Darling, it was a fiasco! You'd have laughed yourself sick. You *must* come next year, now promise, Adrien!"

"We'll see."

"You always say that." She pouted briefly. She's the sort of woman who looks delightful pouting -- of which she is well aware. "It would do you good to get out. To meet people. To have fun."

She was probably right about that, but somehow I didn't think hanging out with a bunch of cat-crazy geezers was going to cure what ailed me.

I murmured noncommittally and picked up the gold-edged pink tea cup. The handle was too small to actually get my fingers through. I always felt like I was playing house at these brunches. All that was missing was a giant imaginary friend. I could have used a friend here.

Leaning forward, her violet eyes brimming with a melting tenderness, she said earnestly, "I know Mel hurt you terribly when he left."

Oh God. "Lisa, really ..."

She sat bolt upright. "Darling! I'd nearly forgotten. I have some *awful* news."

I waited, my gaze wandering over the manicured lawn, the pool glittering in the sunshine, the apricot and coral rose bushes trembling in the wind.

"You remember that little friend of yours from high school? Oh what *was* his name? Well, he's *dead*."

"I know."

Her eyes went wide like a startled fawn. "How can you know? I only heard from Jane Quinn this morning and she'd only talked to Annette Penick last night."

I'd forgotten the maternal communication system, even more complex and infallible than Holmes's Baker Street Irregulars.

"He worked for me, Lisa," I reminded her patiently.

"Worked for you? When?"

"Up until he ... died."

"In Buffalo?"

"You're thinking of Sioux City."

"I am? I'm sure Jane said Buffalo."

"It was Sioux City, but he's been living in West Hollywood for the past nine months."

My mother bit her lip, looking adorably perplexed. "Darling, what *are* you babbling about? This happened a couple of months ago -- and he died in Buffalo. Oh, Adrien, you'll

never believe! At least ... ” She paused, looking troubled. “Darling, *you* don’t wear dresses, do you?”

I choked on my Earl Grey. “I’m not a transvestite, no. Neither was Robert.”

“*Who?*”

“Robert Hersey. The friend who died.”

“Robert Hersey is *dead?*” Her tea cup hit the saucer with a clatter. She gaped at me. “Darling, *when?* That’s horrific. Why you were *such* chums. Whatever happened? Not” Her voice sank. “*AIDS?*”

Sidetracked, I tried to explain, leaving out the awful parts, which didn’t leave much to say. Lisa was appalled and wanted to know all the awful parts. I did manage to avoid telling her I was the police’s favorite suspect, but with all the hedging it took awhile before I remembered the original point of our conversation.

“Lisa, you said another friend of mine had died?”

She hit mental rewind and her eyes grew saucer-like once more. “Oh! Yes. In Buffalo.” She gazed at me sympathetically. “I shouldn’t laugh because it’s really quite *tragic*. What if it was suicide? Think of his poor mother. It’s just that it’s *so* undignified. And what a spooky coincidence! Skippy or Corky or Whatever-His-Name was Corday fell out the window of some posh hotel. Twelve stories down in a polka dot cocktail frock and white pumps. *White* pumps, darling, and that was *weeks* past Labor Day!”

Chapter Five

"The police were here," Angus informed me when I got back to the shop that afternoon.

My heart sank. "Again? Why? What did they want?"

Angus mumbled something. I snapped nervously, "*What?* Can't you speak up?"

"There was just one of them this time. A Detective Regan, I think."

"*Shit*. What does he want *now*?" This was merely a rhetorical whine because Angus clearly had no idea.

"Well, is he coming back? Am I supposed to call him?" *Is there a warrant out for my arrest?*

Angus shrugged. Not really his problem. His problem was those tiny agitated twins of me mirrored in the lens of his glasses.

I headed upstairs and Angus called softly, "Some flowers came for you."

The flowers lay outside the door to my flat in one of those long white florist boxes.

I don't get many flowers. In fact, I don't know if I've ever gotten flowers. I pulled the lid off and gawked. Black hollyhocks and a dozen blood-red roses, perfect to the last thorn -- which pricked my thumb. I sucked on my thumb and gingerly lifted out the card.

Nothing to him falls early, or too late ...

No signature.

For one crazy moment the thought flitted through my brain that Riordan had left them. Don't ask me why. He didn't look like a hearts and flowers kind of guy, not even for his best gal (of whom, I'm sure, he had many).

The roses were beautiful and no doubt expensive, but as I beheld them, nestled in their silvery tissue, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise. Something about the black hollyhocks and the black satin ribbon looked funereal. And a handwritten unsigned card? Was that romantic or plain old sinister?

Goin' to the chapel and I'm gonna get buried?

I tried to think of someone who might send me flowers. Anyone. I couldn't think of a single person I was on flowery terms with -- let alone flowers with cryptic notes.

Downstairs the cash register rang; I heard the rustle of paper and Angus thanking a customer for their business. I heard the shop bell jingle.

A simple explanation occurred: a screw-up at the florist's. Flowers meant for Robert's funeral had been sent in care of me.

Of course. It made perfect sense. What else could it be?

But even while I assured myself that this was the only plausible explanation, I felt uneasy. Because if it wasn't a screw-up and the roses weren't from anyone I knew ...?

Nah. Too far-fetched.

Unlocking the door to my flat, I carried the box inside and dropped the roses in the trash bin. I don't care that much about flowers, really. And these were a little too elegiac.

Or maybe I was getting superstitious in my old age. First Robert's murder, and now this gruesome coincidence of Rusty -- Richard Corday -- dying in Buffalo.

Rusty. I hadn't thought of him in years. He was the first of our clique to come out -- and what a misery his adolescent life had become. I hoped like hell he hadn't jumped. I hoped like hell the last fifteen years of his life had been happier than the first.

There was a small sound behind me. I whirled to find Angus standing in the doorway to my kitchen.

"Jesus Christ! What are you doing?"

No doubt he heard the fright in my voice. No doubt people on the street did. He raised his hands apologetically. "Sorry, man," he said quietly. "I forgot to tell you. Your friend's been calling all day."

"What friend?"

"Mr. La Pierra."

Claude. I relaxed. "Right. Thanks."

He continued to regard me. Then he looked at the box of flowers in the trash. He looked back at me.

"Hay fever," I offered. "The antihistamines make me jittery." I smiled tentatively but Angus did not respond. He nodded and edged out of the kitchen as though afraid to turn his back on me.

I locked the door after him and sat down to call Claude.

"Where the hell have you been?" Claude greeted me, sounding less French Quarter and more South Central than usual. "You led them straight to me, you -- you -- *imbecile!*"

"What are you talking about?"

"The one! The cops! They were *here. Here* in my *restaurant*." He made it sound like the Huns were marching on Paris.

"I told you they had your letters. How long did you think it would take to put a name to 'Black Beauty'?"

There was a silence filled by the background noise of voices and clanging pots and pans, and then Claude said spitefully, "Ha! And as to that, *ma belle*, he was asking as much about you as me, your blue knight in shining Armor All."

"Who? Detective Riordan? What do you mean? What kinds of things was he asking?"

"*Personal* things!" shrieked Claude. "Who, what, where, when, and how often! I don't trust him, that cop. He's up to something."

I bit back a flare of panic and said, "It's normal procedure, right? They have to check up on everybody who knew Robert."

Claude made a sound that in English translates to "Paugh!" "There's something about that dick. Dick -- that's the operative word. Yeah, I know him from somewhere. ..."

He brooded without speaking for a moment. I wondered if the cops were tapping either or both of our phones?

"Claude, who was Robert seeing? Who did he go to meet that night?"

He put his hand over the mouthpiece and yelled unintelligibly before returning to the line to say in a surly voice, "How should I know?"

"You know," I coaxed. "You always know."

"People tell me things," Claude admitted grudgingly. "I hear things."

"He had started seeing someone, hadn't he?"

"*Someone*? He wasn't a one-man woman, Adrien. He was a *slut*."

The bitterness in Claude's voice took me aback. Had it been serious on Claude's side?

I persisted slowly, "Robert left in the middle of an argument with me to go meet someone. Someone he couldn't -- or wouldn't -- put off."

Claude's laugh was shrill. "And he winds up doing the Ginsu with a trick in an alley. It slices, it dices, and *that's not all*."

For a second I wasn't sure what Claude meant. Was he joking or was there an underlying message? Did he know about the chess piece Robert's killer had left?

I said, "Was Robert with a trick? Or was *he* hustling?"

"Suddenly I'm the expert? The girl liked to fuck, *mon ange*. He wasn't particular."

"He needed money. Was he tricking?"

"I don't know."

"You said he was with a trick. Why? You must have had some reason."

Silence.

"Stay out of it, Adrien. Let the cops handle it," Claude said finally.

"You just said you don't trust the cops."

"I know what I said. Better jail, than dead. *N'est-ce pas?*"

I opened my mouth but the phone disconnected. Slowly I replaced the receiver.

I sat there staring at my grandmother's violet sprig-pattern china gleaming behind the cupboard windows. A trick, Claude said. I didn't think so. It didn't fit with Robert's mood in the days before his death. He had been happy -- hell, *gay*. And secretive.

Robert loved secrets. His own and other people's. And he wasn't above dropping hints. It amused him to watch people sweat. That was one reason I thought he might take it a step further (admittedly a big step) and offer to exchange silence for money. The trouble was I couldn't imagine Rob privy to any information worth paying for -- let alone worth killing for. Homosexuality just wasn't what it used to be in the Golden Age of mystery writing.

Why had he come back to the Blue Parrot that night?

Would it have changed anything if I had still been waiting?

Why had he come back? Had his date bailed? Had they argued? Or had Robert changed his mind before he ever got there?

Why hadn't he come back to the shop if he wanted to talk to me?

I realized that I would never know what Robert had wanted to tell me.

Depressed, I went into the bedroom, lost the Hugo Boss blazer and the kicks, changed into black sweats. Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror I thought, *if you died tomorrow who would grieve for you?*

Whatever Robert had been and done, he had people to grieve for him. Not just the usual suspects, but children. Hell, even an ex-wife.

Tara had caught me up as I was leaving the funeral.

She avoided my eyes, scraping a grass divot from her high heel. "Adrien, look -- I apologize. I shouldn't have said all that. I'd been drinking. I never could handle it."

After a moment I said, "Sure. You were upset. I understand."

"It was just a phase Bob was going through. He was upset about a lot of things. But he still loved me. He told me that the last time we talked. I know we would have worked it out eventually. I shouldn't have taken it out on you. You were a good friend in your way."

"Forget it, Tara."

She looked up then, her hands fluttering helplessly as though she wanted to make a gesture but didn't know how. I moved to hug her. Dodged her hat. We embraced awkwardly, stepped back. I looked at the kids: Rob's kids. The boy, Bobby Jr., was one of those golden-curved adorable tykes.

Holding his hand was a cherub-like little girl, equally golden-curved and rose-lipped. I could never remember her name. Twin pairs of green eyes gazed up at me. Rob's eyes gazing at me. I felt unutterably sad. I wanted to do something for them.

"Tara is there anything --?"

She shook her head quickly. "It's sweet of you, Adrien, but no. There's nothing. Not now." Behind the veil her pale eyes were unwavering and tearless.

I had never understood her. Never understood what Rob saw in her. Even back in high school she had been a total mystery to me. Granted, all girls had been a mystery -- and pretty much still were.

Remembering the adolescent Tara reminded me of Rusty.

I dragged out the storage trunk in the spare room and began rummaging through it: photo albums, letters from Mel (why did I keep this stuff?), half-finished manuscripts, college magazines, and finally, bottom of the chest, my high school yearbook. Gold script on blue vinyl lettered out: *West Valley Academy*. "West End" the public school kids called it.

I wasn't sure what I was searching for as I glanced over the faded inscriptions, trite then, but sort of poignant now. *Good luck in college. Let's stay friends 4-ever. Luv, Brooke*. Who the hell was Brooke? What had happened to all these "Friends 4-ever?" Mostly I recalled my senior year as a panicked struggle to catch up while my mother and her Greek chorus of doctors waited in the wings for my anticipated collapse.

Memories wafted out of those glossy black and white pages like the scent of formaldehyde in biology class. I studied a photo of Rob. This was one of those carefully staged candid shots taken in the journalism club. Tara stood in the background watching Rob pretend to load film in his camera. I shut the yearbook with a snap and went downstairs.

"If you want to take the rest of the day, go ahead," I told Angus.

He shrugged. "I don't mind if you want to work in the back. It's pretty dead."

I must have winced because he whispered, "Sorry."

I looked at the book he was reading: *The Encyclopedia of Demonology*.

Catching my gaze, Angus muttered, "It's for my thesis."

The hell you say. I opened my mouth, decided I didn't really want to know, and went into my office. Sitting at the desk, I thumbed through the mail for the past week. It all seemed to be addressed to someone else. Someone who gave a damn.

The phone rang next to my elbow. I ignored it. It stopped ringing abruptly.

"Phone call for you," Angus yelled from the store floor, and I nearly fell out of my chair. The good news was that there was nothing permanently wrong with his vocal cords. Though we probably needed to work on his phone skills.

I picked up.

Silence.

"Can I help you?"

Click. Dial tone.

I shrugged. Hung up.

So what was my next move? Robert was dead and the police thought I had killed him. At the very least they were convinced I knew something about his death.

Maybe the police would figure it all out. That's what they did for a living, right? Stranger things had happened.

Still, it couldn't hurt to be a bit proactive here. Detective Riordan believed I knew more than I thought I did -- assuming that whole tête-à-tête hadn't been some kind of trap.

I opened a drawer and pulled out a pad of legal paper. *Great. Good start.* I picked up a pen, neatly numbered one through ten. *Okay. First thing ...*

I eyed the blank page. Just in time I stopped myself from writing DO LAUNDRY.

Focus.

After a moment I drew a chess piece. A pawn. Was that Freudian or Jungian or plain doodling? Where the hell did one begin? Who would want to kill Robert? Tara? Claude? It was preposterous. Yet someone *had* murdered him.

Most murders are not committed by strangers. But I couldn't help coming back to the theory of a random act of violence. Someone who hated gays in general? Someone who left a "queen" as a calling card? Maybe even a serial killer. Although in that case where was the series of victims?

The police were investigating Robert's death as an isolated event -- and me as the prime suspect.

Or were they?

What had Riordan been up to showing me that chess piece? Was I supposed to betray myself with my sinister knowledge of advances, gambits, jeopardy and end game? Was I supposed to turn white as the plastic queen and confess all?

Or did he really want my help?

That evening I was watching *Frenchman's Creek*-- is it just me or does Basil Rathbone look hot in that long curled wig? -- eating a bowl of Apple Crunch Muselix when Riordan returned.

He was on his own, wearing Levi's and a white Henley, and looking good enough to eat.

"I take it this isn't a social call," I said as he followed me up the stairs to my flat. "I won't offer you a beer."

"You can offer me a beer," he said. He leaned against the kitchen counter studying the grape leaf stencil border on the opposite wall. He crowded my kitchen -- and it was a large kitchen. He made me self-conscious, which was annoying as hell.

I got a couple of Harp beers and earned the first flicker of approval I had seen from the man. Our fingers brushed exchanging the frosty bottle. There was a snap of static electricity. I'm surprised it wasn't spontaneous combustion.

“Can I sit?” Riordan indicated the table.

“Sure. Where are my manners? I was just waiting for you to arrest me.”

He shot me a sardonic look and sat down, tilting the chair back on its legs.

“So what have you got for me?”

“I ... beg your pardon?” I think I actually blushed, that’s the direction my thoughts were going.

Riordan’s dark brows shot up in that supercilious way. “You’re supposed to be helping save your sorry ass by figuring out the connection between Hersey and that chess piece. Remember?”

“I told you what I thought it meant.” I leaned against the fridge. I felt safer on my feet when I was around him.

“That’s it? Queen? You think we’re facing some chess-playing fag-hating Mr. Stranger Danger?”

I shrugged. “What do you want? The history of chess? It’s a game of intellect played between two people. Each player has sixteen pieces. So if you’re dealing with a serial killer maybe he plans on killing sixteen people. Or sixty-four. There are sixty-four squares on a game board.”

“We’re not dealing with a serial killer.”

“How do you know? Maybe Robert was the first.”

“I know.” He took a swig of beer. Looked me over. “How tall are you? Five ten? Five eleven?”

“Six feet.”

“In your dreams.”

Five foot eleven and a half actually, but I wasn’t going to argue the point.

“Hersey was what, five nine? Short but built. Worked out regularly. Anyway, the ME’s findings indicate his assailant was probably four to five inches taller. You could have done it, but you’d have had to stand on your tippy toes.”

We both stared at my feet in their white crew socks. I curled and uncurled my toes nervously.

“I think you’d have had trouble hoisting the body into the trash bin.” Riordan added, “I had a talk with your doctor, by the way. He says your overall health is good, although you work too hard and drink too much caffeine. If I understood him correctly your main trouble is an irregular heartbeat.”

“I had rheumatic fever as a kid. The valves of my heart are damaged.”

“Yeah, so he said. But he said normal physical exertion isn’t so much the problem for you as sudden shocks. You don’t react well to surprises; that I’ve seen.”

“He didn’t rule out the possibility of my stabbing someone to death,” I concluded.

Riordan smiled that crooked smile. "He said it would be a strain, but he didn't rule it out; no."

That meant zero. Lisa had a string of doctors who could testify I was practically an invalid. "Isn't it true that for every expert witness the prosecution presents, the defense can find an equally credible witness to challenge?"

"Sure. But we're not going to trial, English. We're trying to find out who actually killed your old -- er -- pal. See, I'd just as soon arrest the right perp to start with. Saves the taxpayers money."

"How noble." I drank from my beer. Beer and Muselix. It's what's for supper.

"Hey, you may find this hard to grasp, but I believe in the system. It works, so long as everybody does their job."

I said dryly, "You're going to tell me cops never make a mistake?"

"Not as often as the movies would like you to think. Our legal system may not be perfect, but it's a hell of a lot better than anything else going."

I met his eyes briefly, considered those rough, masculine good looks, considered a nose that had obviously been broken more than once -- and no wonder.

"Robert owed a lot of people money -- including me."

"You think one of Hersey's creditors called in his loan? Not a very profitable way to do business."

I set my beer aside, turned, rinsed out my cereal bowl. I turned off the water. Through the sink window the moon hung in the night smog looking old and tarnished. From the other room Basil in the role of Lord Rockingham was purring threats in that wicked public school accent, filling the silence between us.

Riordan said idly, "Chan thinks you killed Hersey. Chan has pretty good instincts."

"So arrest me."

"I would if we had enough to convict. Right now I don't need the ACLU breathing down my neck."

I turned to face him, asked flat out, "Do *you* think I murdered Robert?"

Riordan shrugged. "I've been wrong before. Not often." He scraped at the label on the beer bottle with his thumbnail. "For the record, you're right about the money angle. Hersey owed big time. Credit cards, child support and some of the less -- conventional -- money stores."

"Loan sharks?"

His lip twitched at my tone. "Uh huh. We are pursuing that angle."

"But you don't think maybe some street thug --?"

"Like I said, it's not a profitable way to do business. You generally don't start by killing the borrower. First you loosen a few teeth. Break a few bones."

I got Riordan a second beer. He didn't seem to notice. No doubt used to being waited on hand and foot by doting females.

"I've been thinking," I said slowly. "Robert was seeing someone. Not just a pickup stick. There were flowers in his apartment. Roses. Hustlers don't bring you flowers. Rob wasn't the kind to buy himself flowers. Find the guy Robert went to meet that night and I think you'll nail whoever killed him."

"Unfortunately there was no card," Riordan pointed out. So much for thinking the police might have missed this. "*You* could have sent Hersey those flowers for all we know."

That reminded me. I pushed away from the counter, pulled the box of flowers out of the trash and threw them on the table.

"Gee, this is so sudden," he drawled.

I ignored him. "These arrived today. There's a card somewhere." I returned to the trash bin, rifling around 'til I found the card between the empty cans of Tab and frozen food boxes. I slid the paper rectangle across the table to Riordan. "I tried to tell myself there was a mix-up at the florists."

He picked it up. Read it. Shrugged. "You could have sent these to yourself."

"You could at least go to the florist and find out."

"What am I finding out? You want me to believe there's a connection here?"

"I don't know. I just have a feeling. ..."

"Feminine intuition?"

"Fuck you!"

Riordan pushed his chair further back, precariously balanced, as immune to civility as he was to gravity. "Temper, temper." He raised those reckless brows. "Ready to start reaching for the kitchen knives?"

"I think you've already checked out the cutlery."

He grinned, unperturbed. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Monday when you pretended to be looking for prowlers in my closet."

He laughed. "Hey, it's not much of a closet is it?"

"No. It's not. I don't like closets. Life's too short to spend hiding in the dark."

He stuck the florist's card in his shirt pocket and said, "Tell you what. I'll check out this flower shop. You do me a favor. Tell me about Claude La Pierra."

"Great. Now you want me to rat out my friends."

"If he killed Hersey, he's no friend. Are you and La Pierra lovers?"

"No." I must have shown my surprise.

Riordan said, "You took a helluva chance going after those letters. That is what you were after in Hersey's pad, wasn't it?"

"I told you why I went there."

"Uh huh. And then you suggested we swing by La Pierra's so you could warn him we'd already found them." He laughed at my expression. "You've got balls, English. I'll give you that."

"Look, Claude's one of the kindest, most generous --"

"Blah, blah, blah. Did you know La Pierra a.k.a. Humphrey Washington has a juvenile arrest sheet as long as your arm?"

That stopped me cold. It took a moment to recall my argument. "I thought juvenile records weren't admissible?"

"Like I said, nobody's on trial yet. I'm just telling you that homeboy has done time for assault with a deadly weapon. He carved his initials in a playmate's buttocks."

For some reason I wanted to ask, which pair of initials? The ones he was born with or the set he chose? Instead I said, "People change, right? That's the point of prison."

"Not always. That's the point of the death penalty."

His face was hard. Not a guy with much sympathy for weakness. I said, "People grow up."

Riordan rolled his eyes. "Did you happen to read any of what he wrote your friend Hersey? And I quote, 'To say goodbye to the thing that was peeled back and pulpy like a grape. And I press my mouth and unpeel your moans, and my tongue flicks out switch blade fox red tongue, and I kill the thing I love. Love the thing I kill.'"

I blinked. "Okay. So he's not Robert Frost."

"Or how about this gem? 'Harvest in the midnight of your body, betrayed and fucked by a smile you practice in the bath of your urinal. I carve the entrails from your ego, bleating bleeding mouth.'"

"The scariest part is you memorized this stuff."

"No, the scariest part is what Hersey looked like when La Pierra, or someone who thinks like him, got finished."

I swallowed hard. "Bad poetry is not a crime. Not that you can prosecute anyway. I don't think you understand the -- um -- creative temperament. A guy like Claude gets the violence out of his system by writing."

"And what lovely writing he has -- depending on the medium."

Chapter Six

Bad dreams. That's one of the downsides of living alone: Waking in the middle of the night with no one to reach for. No warm sleeping body to snuggle against. No reassuring snores from beside you. Nothing but queen-size 500-thread cotton percale solitude.

I don't remember what I dreamed, but I woke drenched in sweat, my heart banging away like a broken shutter. It took a moment or two to realize where I was; that the tangle of sheets was all that held me prisoner, that the threatening rumble was only rain drumming on the roof, gurgling in the rain gutters.

I sat up, switched on the bedside lamp. The light from the pink glass shade was soft and mellow, illuminating the heavy walnut furniture I'd inherited from my Grandmother Anna's Sonora horse ranch.

My grandmother was a kind of family legend. Back in the '30s when divorce was still a scandal, she had left her husband and gone off to breed horses in what was, in those days, desolate country. She wore pants, smoked cigarettes, and could throw a lasso and shoot a rifle like Annie Oakley. I used to spend summers there, to the chagrin of my mother, tied to her husband's family by the purse strings. When I was eight my grandmother died and left her money to me. The ranch was mine too, but I had never been back.

This bedroom suite had been her own: no Bombay Company knock-offs; the four-poster bed and clawfoot dresser with green marble top were built back in the days when one's furnishings outlasted generations of one's family -- and in this case a couple of world wars. Vintage books, old china, antiques; maybe I love old things so much because I feel impermanent myself.

I shook out the blankets and sheets, punched up the pillows. The clock said 2:02 a.m. The street lamps outside the rain-starred windows glowed dimly. It was very quiet. This mostly commercial part of the city was like a ghost town after business hours. I lay back and tried to convince myself I could go back to sleep.

As Riordan would say, uh huh.

When I was younger I used to lie awake listening to my heartbeat, breaking into a sweat when it seemed to skip or double beat. Fortunately I've got over that, developing what Mel called a "healthy fatalism."

A hot drink would be nice, I thought. But the idea of cold wooden floors and the dark beyond my locked bedroom door was discouraging.

To distract myself I started mentally blue-penciling the sequel to *Murder Will Out*. I realized I was increasingly dissatisfied with my series protagonist, Jason Leland. I wished now I had made him bigger and blonder and a little rougher around the edges.

That was when the phone rang.

The shrill of bells went through my nervous system like an electric shock. After a second I hung over the side of the bed, fishing underneath for the phone. I found it, knocked the receiver off, found it again and dragged the phone out.

"Hello?" I rasped.

Silence.

No, not silence. The line was live, and faintly I could hear breathing.

I opened my mouth. Then I closed it. I waited.

I could hear him -- her? -- breathing.

How long? A few seconds? A minute? It felt like forever before, eerily, the person on the other end giggled and hung up.

I finally fell asleep with the phone off the hook and the lights blazing.

Sunday passed without incident.

I called a few of Robert's friends, trying to get a lead on who he had been seeing. *Nada*. If Rob had been involved, it must have only been very recently. I knew he would not have confided in his family, who still refused to believe he was gay.

On Monday I called the West Hollywood office of *Boytimes* and was informed they had never heard of Bruce Green.

I was still chewing over that one when Tara showed up with the kids. As usual they looked like a picture out of *Family Circle*. Perfectly groomed and color-coordinated.

"I want to apologize again for the things I said to you on the phone. I don't know why I said them," she said.

There was an awkward pause while we both considered why she had said them. Before I could respond she added, "We're flying back to Sioux City tomorrow. Before I go I wanted to give you this. It was Bob's. It must have meant something to him. He asked me to send it to him a few weeks ago."

She handed me the book she had under her arm.

I took the yearbook, examined gold print on blue. *West Valley Academy*.

"These are your memories too, Tara."

"No. This was Bob's junior year. My family didn't move to California until that following summer. You were still in the hospital."

"That's right. I'd forgotten."

"All Bob's friends forget that." She smiled oddly. "I used to think it was because I fit in so well; like I'd always been part of the group. Now I realize it was because I made so little impression on his friends. In his life."

"That's not true."

"Of course it is," she said impatiently.

The girl, Hannah, pointed at the Tab I held and said, "Coke. Want." Bobby Jr. nudged her in warning.

Relieved at this interruption I fled upstairs, grabbed a couple of Cokes, brought them down and handed them out. Tara looked slightly exasperated but set about popping tops and mopping the instantaneous spills off her pristine children and my hardwood floor.

When she got back to her feet, she said deliberately, "The fact is I was always a little jealous of you, Adrien. Even before I really knew about you. Sometimes I think that if you hadn't gone off to Stanford, Bob wouldn't have married me."

"Rob never did anything he didn't want to."

Was that supposed to cheer her up? She wasn't dumb. She knew what I wasn't saying.

Tara said, "A couple of years at JC. The job at IBM. Then the move to Iowa. He couldn't settle into anything."

"He couldn't settle here either."

She glared at me for a moment, then some of the rigidity left her face. "Thank you for saying that." She seemed to be looking past me into the distance. "It's so *weird*. I remember when I transferred into West Valley. Bob seemed so -- so -- *together*. I could never have imagined how it would all turn out. Everyone liked him. He was on the tennis team and the school paper. He belonged to all those clubs. Really, he barely had time for me, but I still loved being with him. Well, he wrote me songs, poems. That was part of it: he was different from other boys."

This is the point where Riordan would have snickered.

I said, "He was a good friend."

She smiled that funny smile. "You would say that. I remember how he was always taking off to see his sick friend. The rich kid with the heart condition. And I liked that about him. I thought that showed the kind of person he was."

"That *was* the kind of person he was," I said. "Rob was the only guy who came to see me in the hospital. When I got home he used to bring my classwork over, library books,

whatever I needed. He used to sit there and talk about the tennis tournaments and who was boffing who, and Mrs. Lechter's wig falling off in biology."

Those were things I hadn't thought about in a long time. Remembering them, I thought that maybe that was one reason, despite all that had come later, that I had never stopped loving him. When I had been sick and scared and lonely he had been there with the dirty jokes and the Tears for Fears CDs.

Her gaze zeroed in on mine. "Did he talk about me?"

I hesitated. "I don't remember most of it. It was a long time ago."

Tara said shortly, "He didn't talk about you either. He cut classes, he forgot our dates, but he never missed going over to your house. You two must have been laughing behind my back the whole time."

"No, we weren't. I didn't even know about --" I thought better of that. "We didn't even realize we were -- we didn't admit it anyway."

"I guess it should have occurred to me. Just the fact that he never pushed for more. My God, I was naïve!"

Well, she was past the denial stage. Maybe it was a good thing.

I said, "Tara, I'm not sure what you want. Why are you belittling what you two shared? He married you, you had a family together. Robert had a lot of problems. I don't know that they even had anything to do with his being gay."

She flinched at the word. Looked automatically to the kids. Hannah was dribbling Coke down her pink overalls. Bobby Jr. stared at me with those tilted green eyes that reminded me of Robert.

Her laugh was brittle. "You must be a terrible writer. You always want a happy ending. Well, there isn't one. I can't forgive him." For a moment tears glittered in her eyes. She blinked them away. "At least ... I've been talking to my therapist." She drew a deep breath. "We've agreed that I need to move on. To let go. That's why I'm here. To close this chapter. To do that I have to set it right with you."

Closure. Who couldn't understand that? But I wasn't the one she needed to make peace with; I was just the only one available.

We hugged, another one of those minimal body contact embraces. I realized it was probably the last time I would see her or the kids.

"Let me know how you get on, Tara," I urged.

She smiled, made some vague reply. I understood that I was just something else she wanted to close the book on.

On her way out, kids in tow, Tara paused and wrinkled her nose. "You know, Adrien, you might want to check for mice."

* * * * *

At noon Angus asked if he could take the rest of the day off. As still as he was, the shop seemed uncannily empty without him. Every creak, every rustle had me looking over my shoulder.

The phone rang twice. Hang-ups both times.

Around three in the afternoon I poured boiling water into one of those Styrofoam cups of Nissin noodles for a late lunch. By then the shop was busy again, and when Claude called I was in the middle of adding up credit for two boxes of 1960s paperbacks coated in layers of nostalgic dust that had me sneezing my head off.

"Can you talk?" Claude demanded.

"No, I'll have to call you back."

"Listen, I remember where I know him from!"

"Know who?" I tried to cradle the phone between my shoulder and cheek while I continued calculating.

Claude mumbled something I assumed was gutter French ending in, "-- dick-head!"

"Are you addressing me?"

"*Oui*. I'm addressing you about that dick-head, Reargun, or whatever his name is. The dude's a freaking faggot. He's as queer as a Susan B. Anthony dollar. He's --"

The phone slipped off my shoulder. I lost my place on the calculator. Accidentally hit "clear" instead of "total." "What are you talking about?"

"I saw him, *cherie*, last night at Ball and Chain."

"What's Ball and Chain?"

"*Morbleu*, I forget the sheltered life you lead. Ball and Chain is a leather club."

"*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*" I said faintly.

"*Vous m'avez entendu, bébé*. Guys in black leather. Handcuffs and chains."

The kind of thing Robert toyed with.

"He was probably undercover or something."

"No! You're not listening to me. I've seen him there before. He's a *member*. He's a *master*."

"He's a --" I couldn't finish the thought, let alone the sentence. My mind literally boggled at the idea of Riordan decked out in black leather. Riordan in a biker cap. Riordan in black leather pants. Was some guy wearing Riordan's collar right now? Was some guy wearing Riordan's marks on his ass right now? It seemed comical, ludicrous.

Then I got another mental image of him, broad chest covered in blond pelt, muscular forearms, big smooth cock jutting out of a silky nest. Riordan ordering me down on my

knees, his hand tangling in my hair as he pulled my head toward his heat. The laugh died in my throat.

Claude was running on, jubilant at “catching *le grand gros porc* out.”

I interrupted. “Claude, shut up for a second. Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure! I *told* you I recognized him. I *told* you I didn’t trust him. Well, doesn’t *this* simply change everything!”

“What does it change?”

“*Everything*. I’m going to have it out with him. I’m going to warn him that if he doesn’t back off maybe his pals downtown would like to know about Detective Reargun’s extracurricular activities.”

“Holy Hell!” I caught the face of the woman who stood at the counter, a stack of The Cat Who books in hand. I turned away, lowering my voice. “Are you *nuts*? You’re going to threaten a cop?”

“Not any old copper,” cooed Claude. “Mr. Tie-You-Up-And-Beat-The-Shit-Out-Of-You-Before-I-Shoot-My-Load-Up-Your-Ass *Detective* Reargun.”

I closed my eyes, the better to focus -- or maybe to hide my eyes from the launch of Claude’s Hindenberg. “Let me get this straight. Are you *trying* to get arrested? Even if you’re right, Riordan won’t stand down. You’ll only make him determined to nail *you*. Jesus, you’ll be lucky if he doesn’t find an excuse for blowing your head off.”

“We’ll see.”

I couldn’t believe Claude was this dim. Riordan was not the right temperament for a blackmail victim. Even I could see that. Although he apparently engaged in activities that made him a prime target.

“Claude, snap out of it! If Riordan really believes you killed Robert --”

“*Moi*?” he shrilled. “What about him? He’s as much a suspect as I am now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Robert used to go to that club. Maybe he met Riordan there.”

Robert had kinks -- enjoyed his kinks -- but BDSM? I couldn’t see him putting up with the restraints and discipline of being a bottom -- he wouldn’t have been able to remember half the rules -- and no sane person would allow Rob to be his Top.

“Come off it!”

“You come off it! Why are you defending the dude?”

“I’m not.” Hastily I scribbled down the three Cat Who books and a copy of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, took the customer’s money, nodded thank you. She grabbed her books and stalked off.

“You are,” Claude insisted. “You *are*. You’ve got a thing for that -- that --” His French having failed him, Claude concluded, “fucking *oaf*.”

“Claude, just use your head for once.”

“Sounds to me like *head* is what you’re using.”

“Give me a damn break!”

The dial tone met my ears. I ground the words I wanted to say between my teeth, then replaced the phone.

Glancing up, I stiffened. I hadn’t heard anyone come in, but Bruce Green stood on the other side of the counter.

Chapter Seven

“Hi,” he said. “Can I buy you a cup of coffee?”

“Now is not a good time,” I said.

If Green felt the frost in my voice he gave no sign.

“Trouble?” He nodded at the phone. “I couldn’t help overhearing. The police again?”

“No. Look, I called *Boytimes*. They never heard of you.”

Green regarded me, looking genuinely perplexed. If he was acting he deserved better roles than this. Then a slow tide of red swept across his raw-boned features. “Uh, the truth is, I’m not on *staff* at *Boytimes*. I do freelance work for them.”

“Yeah, right.” I started to turn away and he grabbed my arm. Not roughly, but with force enough to stop me. I gazed at his hand. Fine dark hair sprinkled the back of his long strong fingers. His nails were trimmed, buffed, the cuff of his shirt snowy white. But what I thought was, *I bet you’re hefty enough to stab a man to death and toss his body in a dumpster*. To say I was fixated was to understate the case.

“Did you talk to Kelly Abrahms, the managing editor? Or did you just talk to the switchboard?” His eyes were dark and sincere.

I shrugged. “I talked to a couple of people. I don’t remember their names.”

Green smiled. The smile was surprisingly attractive in his plain face. “Want me to show you my bylines?” His tone grew teasing. “Or better yet, my etchings?”

I found myself responding to the smile, although my suspicions were not completely allayed. I don’t trust the media. Not even the gay media.

“No. But thanks.”

“Listen, I’m serious,” coaxed Green. “Give me a chance to explain over a cup of java.” He checked his watch. “Or better yet, how about a real drink? I know this pub a few blocks from here. You’ll like it. It’s comfy. Cozy. We can talk.”

Although he had removed his hand I still felt the warmth of his skin against mine. Maybe I did need to talk to someone -- anyone -- even a reporter. Or maybe I just found the guy attractive. It had been so long I hardly recognized the signals.

* * * * *

The pub was called Doc and Doris's. It was decorated in a Scottish motif: red and black tartan carpet, blackened beams. And it was indeed comfy cozy with giant leather booths for privacy and a roaring fire at the end of the room. I ordered a Drambuie, and Green ("Call me Bruce") had a Rob Roy. Bruce touched his glass to mine.

"From bad beginnings great friendships have sprung," he quoted.

"Cheers."

Bruce took a long swallow, set down his glass and leaned forward on his elbows. "I have a confession."

"Another one?"

He met my eyes. "I didn't lie to you, Adrien. I wanted to write your story for *Boytimes*. You may not like it, but I think I have a responsibility to our community. You're not the first gay man to be railroaded by the cops. Besides, think of the publicity for your bookstore."

"Is this supposed to be convincing me?"

He flicked me a look under his eyelashes. He had very long lashes. "Past tense. It turns out you're not the only gay man to attract the fascist eye of LAPD. Besides," he offered another of those engaging smiles, "in theory I respect the right to privacy for non-celebrities."

In theory but not in practice? I said, "There wasn't any story, Bruce."

"I wouldn't say that." He sipped his drink. "Don't misunderstand me; I did dig up everything I could about you. Everything the cops know, I know."

"What's to know? My life is an open book. No pun intended." I sat back, swirling the Drambuie, watching it catch the firelight. It had a soothing, near hypnotic effect. My nerves uncurled.

"Let's see. You're thirty-two years old. A Virgo. Unmarried. No children."

He paused. I had nothing to say.

"No priors. No convictions. Even your video rentals go back on time. Affluent, white and well-educated, you fit the old gay stereotype to a 'T'."

"That's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Bruce chuckled. "See, that's a turn-on for someone like me."

What was someone like Bruce, I wondered?

I took in the expensive haircut, the just-right clothes, the manicured hands; I recognized the scent he wore. “The world’s only patented fragrance,” so the department store displays read. And if I wasn’t mistaken he’d had his nose fixed a while back. He was a man who paid attention to details. A good trait in a journalist.

“Father deceased. Mummy is English. Formerly a dancer with the Royal Ballet. She never remarried. Question mark by Mummy. You graduated from Stanford University with a degree in literature, which is civilized but useless, but then you don’t have to work for a living.”

“You don’t think so?”

Bruce studied me speculatively. “Orange groves and horse ranches on Daddy’s side. Going by your TRW, no, I don’t think so.” He straightened his immaculate cuffs. “You currently live alone. Your former roommate, Mel Davis, has since moved to Berkeley where he teaches film studies.”

Clark Kent had certainly done his homework on me -- and I didn’t care for it. “Am I right or am I right?”

I gave him a perfunctory smile. “I’m impressed.”

He regarded me. “Actually, you’re pissed. Why?” He seemed hurt. “I’ve told you I’m not doing the story. This is off the record. Just you and me.”

I finished my drink. Bruce beckoned imperiously to the waitress. The minute she was out of earshot he said quietly, “I don’t want to do or say anything to bitch this up.”

I nearly said, “Bitch *what* up?” but he seemed genuine. I shrugged. “Okay.”

After a moment his gaze fell. He said awkwardly, “Am I coming on too strong? I feel like there’s kind of a connection between us. I felt it that first day. At the funeral. Is it just me?”

I opened my mouth, couldn’t think of anything intelligent and, for once, closed it.

Bruce chinked the ice in his empty glass. “It’s been long time since I felt this way.”

“I’m flattered.” Mostly. Also vaguely alarmed. It had been a long time for me too. Mel hied off to his ivory tower five years ago. Hell, I hadn’t had a date in eight months.

“But --?”

“No buts.”

He laughed. After a second it clicked and I laughed too.

“Not on the first date anyway,” agreed Bruce.

* * * * *

When I meet someone I always want to know who and what they read. A writer’s natural curiosity. Bruce said he read strictly nonfiction. Mostly biography. Right now he was reading *Auden in Love*, which he offered to loan me when he finished.

Can this marriage be saved? I read mysteries. For one thing, it's my job. For another, it's what I like to read. One of my favorite crime writers is Leslie Ford. Ford was just one of the pen names of Zenith Jones Brown, an American who wrote prolifically from the '30s through the '50s. Her Grace Latham series is one of my never fail "comfort reads."

For some reason the fact that my favorite mystery writer should be a heterosexual woman irritated the shit out of Rob.

Not just a heterosexual woman, Adrien. A white, rich, Republican heterosexual woman.

Republican? Where do you get that?

You know what I mean.

No, I didn't a lot of the time.

Rob's own favorite mystery writer was Michael Nava. But any gay writer would do. Maybe he read my attitude as disloyal. Maybe having spent years of playing Happy Families, of pretending his square peg was comfortable in a round hole, Robert just didn't have any patience left. He was militantly gay: *We are at war, Adrien. We are under siege.*

I was thinking about it that night as I lay in bed skimming Ford's *Date with Death*. I looked across to the empty half of the bed and sighed. I laid the paperback aside -- carefully, because the browned pages were fragile -- and folded my arms behind my head, thinking again about Robert.

When I told Chan and Riordan and Claude and everybody else that Robert and I were never lovers it hadn't exactly been the truth. It hadn't exactly been a lie either. You couldn't call the panting, fumbling first sexual explorations of adolescence a love affair. But whatever you called it, Robert and I shared a lot of history, and the fact that we had matured into adults who couldn't understand each other didn't change that.

Robert believed no one could ever really know anyone else.

Come off it, Rob. Doesn't that depend on the person?

No. Because people don't see you. They see their perception of you. They see what they want to see.

Another cosmic rift between us. But maybe Robert did have more experience there than I. If Tara had really never suspected ...?

I considered what I knew of Tara. Not much. She had simply been an ever-present accessory of the teenage Rob. Like his Datsun B210. Or his fake ID. Always in the background, like in the yearbook photo. Thinking back, I was horrified at how careless -- and callous -- we'd been. And yet Tara said she'd never known, never suspected until they were married. Until, in fact, they were separating.

There's a reason whenever homicide occurs that spouses and ex-spouses are the hands-down favorite suspects of law enforcement. But there was no way Tara could overpower Rob, stab him to death and lift his body into a dumpster. Besides, she had been in Iowa.

Of course Tara could have an accomplice. I could picture the type: a manly, brawny regular guy who knew exactly how to take out the trash. That was the way he'd put it too, taking out the trash. Hell-hath-no-fury? Was that a realistic motive for murder? Divorce hetero style? But that would mean Tara was involved with another man even while she was begging Rob to come back to her.

Was she that devious?

Was she that sharp?

I snapped out the light, scooted down in to the blankets.

Ex-lovers were another popular choice for homicidal maniacs both in fiction and real life. Robert had broken plenty of hearts, and in particular Claude's. But despite Claude's hard feelings, which he hadn't bothered to hide (and wouldn't he, if he had a murder to hide?), I didn't believe Claude had killed Robert. He was heavy and muscular enough, and the news about his violent youth nonplussed me, but I still couldn't credit the police's suspicion.

Because I didn't want to?

Or because my gut told me Claude's gay blade days were far behind him? Despite the bloodcurdling poetry, I didn't believe Claude could stab Robert to death. His pride had taken a beating, but did people kill over wounded pride? Claude was a gentle man. Sure he could get loud and emotional, but before Riordan had crossed our path I had never heard anyone accuse him of even so much as verbal cruelty. I thought of the many ways he cosseted me and other friends. I thought of his generosity: the ex-lovers he helped out, the free dinners he supplied to organizations like Project Angel Food, the donations he made to The Cause -- whatever cause someone talked his soft heart into supporting.

I sure as hell couldn't imagine him premeditating a murder. Didn't the presence of the chess piece indicate premeditation?

All the same, where had Claude been that night? He must have had as lame an alibi as me, or the police wouldn't still be snooping around. Unlike me, Claude enjoyed a busy social schedule. He should have witnesses to his innocence standing in queue, but apparently not.

He was jealous. I did remember Robert commenting on that once. But then Robert thought anyone who couldn't cheerfully accept his revolving door relationships was insanely possessive.

Anyway, I couldn't think of any connection between Claude and chess. I doubted if he knew castling from cholesterol.

I snorted. Sat up and punched my pillow. I was still betting on the mystery man Robert had gone to meet that night. The man who had sent Robert roses. The man Robert had gone to meet when he walked out on me.

I tried to think back to the days before Robert had died. Had he said anything that might give me a clue? I considered snippets of overheard phone conversations. The sad truth was I'd been so busy bottling my anger at his haphazard work, his obvious indifference to the job,

I hadn't paid much attention. I had noticed -- and been irritated -- by his sunny indifference in the face of my glowering disapproval. That in itself indicated his attention had been elsewhere, because when he had first returned to LA he had definitely been interested in picking up where we left off.

What if Rob's death hadn't had anything to do with romance, ill-fated or otherwise? If Rob had been in some kind of trouble, would he have confided in me?

I wasn't sure. He confided in me less and less. *You're turning into an old maid, Adrien*, he'd said when I lectured him about promiscuity in the age of AIDS.

Only ten percent of people infected with the virus even know they've got it, Rob.

It would have to be immaculate contagion in your case, wouldn't it, Adrien?

He hadn't told me he was having serious money trouble. That news had come from Claude, and he had assumed that I already knew.

But the eighty bucks missing from petty cash would not have solved Robert's credit problems. So what did he need the eighty for? My best guess: To take someone out. To buy someone dinner. It kept coming back to this unknown other. Mr. X.

Why hadn't Rob just asked for the money?

Because he didn't want to hear it, Adrien, I answered myself. Only he had to hear it anyway. And my last memory of Robert amounted to me calling him a liar and a thief, and Robert telling me to fuck off. Now there's a Kodak moment for you.

I sighed. Tossed against the pillows. I watched the shadow of lace curtains patterned against the wall. Listened to pinpricks of rain against the windows. The wettest winter since El Niño, everyone kept saying. That's something I missed, lying in bed listening to the rain with someone I loved. That's something I missed, having someone I loved.

But in the meantime there were still methods that worked. I rolled onto my side, face buried in the cool linen, one hand between my legs. Solo sex. The cheapest and safest of dates. I closed my eyes and Robert's face floated into my mind. I pushed it away. Thought of Riordan. Thought of a big hand wrapping around my shaft, sliding up and down, pumping hard ... harder. The head of my cock leaked a single salty tear to slick my own hand's efforts. Yikes. Think of Bruce. Yeah. Better. Safer. Saner ...

* * * * *

Tuesday afternoon Angus and I were sorting through a shipment from St. Martin's Press when he found the card slipped in between some copies of *Crime Scene*.

"This must be for you." He handed over a large, square envelope. I noticed the fingernails on both his little fingers were about two inches long. I tried to remember from my reading what that meant. Lead guitar or warlock? Or maybe just a nice normal cocaine addiction.

"Thanks." A plain white greeting-sized envelope. I opened it, drew out the large *In Sympathy* card. Red roses and a pair of praying hands. My own hands were none too steady as I opened the card. The inscription was standard fare. I'd sent something similar to Robert's father. Below in familiar black calligraphy someone had written:

*Our acts our angels are --
For good or ill*

"When did this come?"

Angus shrugged, having already lost interest.

"How long have those magazines been stacked there?"

"Since Saturday," he breathed.

I contemplated the black script. There was something about those lines. They were from a poem, I thought. Not Shakespeare; I knew my Shakespeare pretty well, thanks to old Jason Leland and *Murder Will Out*. Bacon? Marlowe?

I tried to remember what the note on the roses had read. Something about all things in their time.

I slid the card back into the envelope. Glancing up I caught Angus watching me with an enigmatic expression.

Angus could have slipped the card in there, I realized, and then pretended to find it. Tara had also been standing in front of the counter when I ran upstairs to get sodas for the kids. And Riordan had been in the shop on Saturday. Hell, Bruce could have slipped it in yesterday. For that matter dozens of people had stood by the counter, by the magazines. It needn't have been anyone I knew.

I had given Riordan the florist's card so that he could double-check whether there had been a screw up. Had he bothered to confirm one way or the other?

With a word to Angus, I went into my office and dialed the number on the card Chan had left me that first morning. I got the Hollywood Area Homicide Unit. Neither Chan nor Riordan was available. I left a message.

After I hung up I sat there idly tapping the card against the clock on my desk.

It occurred to me that I hadn't heard from Claude following our spat yesterday. That seemed odd.

It occurred to me that since the card had been left for me, there probably hadn't been any mix-up at the florists. The roses with their cryptic message had also been intended for me.

It occurred to me that Tara was right about possible mice. There was definitely a peculiar odor permeating the shop. Here in the office it was quite pungent.

It occurred to me that I didn't know what any of that meant, but I didn't like it.

Chapter Eight

In the week since Robert had died he had gone from second page news to a blurb filling space between the Robinson-May and Nordstrom shoe ads. The investigation was “ongoing” in the police vernacular.

On Tuesday night the Partners in Crime writing group met again. The main topic was still Rob’s murder or, more accurately, the ensuing investigation. It seemed as though everyone had been visited by Chan and Riordan. I think for the most part they found it mildly titillating, and yet it did seem to me that I was being surreptitiously observed by my partners in crime. Was there something artificially eager in their conversation? Was there something awkward in the pauses?

Eight o’clock came and went with no sign of Claude. Grania’s little cobblestones (she swore they were granola cookies) were handed out (although I didn’t notice anyone risking their dental work on them), a gallon of coffee was poured, and the discussion moved from Robert to other topics.

“It’s not a crime film, but the worst movie I ever saw,” Max volunteered, “was *Bwana Devil* with Robert Stack.”

“I saw that,” Ted volunteered. “Sunday before last when I was waiting up for Jean.”

“I was home last Sunday,” Jean said instantly.

“Sunday evening before last, sugar pie.” Yes, he calls her “sugar pie,” and she calls him “honey bun.” I don’t get the pastry thing myself.

“I was home Sunday evening. It was Saturday evening I was out late,” she protested. “I went to the movies with a girl from the office,” she added for the rest of our benefit.

Oh yeah, the world famous I-was-at-the-cinema alibi. So had Jean been MIA on Sunday night or Saturday night? Not that it mattered to me, but it seemed to matter to Jean -- and that in itself made it worth checking the previous week’s TV Guide to see what night *Bwana Devil* had been televised.

That's how bad I had it. I was actually considering whether diminutive *Jean* could have slaughtered Robert. Never mind trivial considerations like motive. I mean, what possible motive could she have? I couldn't remember Robert ever having spoken to her.

"Yeah," Max was saying, apparently seeing nothing odd in Jean and Ted's tiny disagreement over her alibi. "The best part is toward the end when the lions have eaten this native kid, and the white hunter's wife screams at one of them, 'animal!'"

"You know, that movie is based on a true story," Jean informed Max.

Grania cut across his guffaws. "Are we going to wait all night for La Pierra?" Tonight she wore fatigue pants and a black chemise. Her wide mouth was outlined in poppy red. I wondered what the occasion was. Chapter meeting of her paramilitary cooking club?

Max stopped laughing and fixed her with his eye.

"It's pretty damn rude. This is the Finches's night," Grania continued. "We all showed up for *Homicide les Hommes* or whatever it's called."

"Always thinking of others, eh, Toots?"

Grania flushed and tossed her head.

I wondered if this was the adult heterosexual version of pigtail pulling.

"We may as well get started," I agreed with one last look at the door.

Max smirked, swiped the last cookie and crammed it in his mouth. I wondered if that crunching sound we all heard was the last of his fillings.

"Well, we re-wrote Chapter Two," Jean began, handing copies around the circle.

Someone groaned. I hoped it wasn't me. I wasn't sure.

Jean said defensively, "Well, we thought Claude made some good points about angle of entry and blood spatter patterns on a raincoat. And even a highly disciplined mime probably *would* scream --"

"So where *is* La Pierra?" Max interrupted, propping his feet on the long table.

Ted looked irritated. "Who cares? Jean is talking."

"Sorry, Jean."

Jean handed Max a copy. She and Ted performed a little You-First-No-You-First routine and Jean finally plumped down in the Sheraton chair.

"Jean will read tonight," Ted announced. He beamed at Jean.

Grania sighed in the manner of one exerting inhuman patience.

Jean read, and I sat there mechanically following along, all the while mentally turning over and over the Rubic cube of Claude's absence. Was he still pissed off? Despite leaving two messages, I hadn't heard from him since his phone call Sunday. That wasn't like Claude. His sulks never lasted more than a few hours.

Jean had a soothing voice. Perfect for reading kids to sleep.

Absently I made notes in the margin. Robert had been killed in the alley outside his apartment. Why? Why not in the apartment? Because he didn't bring his killer home with him? He had gone to meet someone. Yet he had come back to the Blue Parrot alone. Then, instead of looking for me, he had gone home. And someone had killed him out in the alley. What would lure Robert out into the alley?

Everyone turned to the next page. I followed suit.

Let's say I was a homicidal maniac who wanted to kill Robert someplace where we could have a little privacy. How would I do that? I might go up to his door very late at night and say, *Sorry about standing you up earlier but I had car trouble. In fact my piece of junk is parked out back blocking the alley right now.*

And Robert, not famous for caution or second thoughts, would be happy that I'd turned up after all, and naturally offer to lend a hand, and out we would go.

And when it was over, I could drive away in my bloodstained clothes unseen. Robert hadn't had time to put up much of a fight, but his attacker had not been willing to take any chances. Thumps and groans from the apartment next door might generate concern. Not so from an alley where bums and winos prowled.

I glanced up, caught Max staring at Grania intently. Feeling my gaze he gave me a cool look, turned to the manuscript he held. Grania pulled a pencil out of her hair, lined out what appeared to be a paragraph.

"Avery narrowed his eyes in thought at the inspector's question," read Jean. "Why would anyone want to kill a mime?"

"Go figure," muttered Grania.

Max smothered a laugh.

* * * * *

When the meeting was over and my partners in crime had left, I felt restless. I went around locking and bolting every conceivable entryway. Then I went upstairs and prowled around my flat. I turned on the computer, logged on and realized my brain had less going on than my screen saver. I signed off again, and popped *The Black Swan* into the video machine, went into the kitchen, and started stacking dishes in the dishwasher.

I needed to keep busy, needed to avoid thinking in order to relax enough to go to sleep without resorting to chemicals. I filled the solitude with the rumble of the dishwasher and Tyrone Power and Maureen O'Hara in a "Tale of the Spanish Main -- when villainy wore a sash." I do like well-dressed villainy.

In the living room I stretched out on the floor and practiced deep breathing. I could feel the hard wood hitting all the sharps and angles of my bones. My spine felt kinked in a dozen places. Crikey. Middle-age was catching up to me. I stood with a groan and made myself go

through the motions of my Tai Chi routine. Touch the South Wind. Touch the East Wind. The Tide Comes In and Out.

The funny thing was I did feel better after a few minutes. More tranquil. Like I could bend without breaking -- emotionally and physically. I moved on to the hard style movements. Defy the Dragon. Defy the Leopard. Defy the Cops. I first started doing Tai Chi in college, and besides promoting a relaxed mental attitude -- something I don't come by naturally -- it does result in greater flexibility, coordination, and balance. Which is not to say it's everyone's cup of tea. I couldn't, for example, picture Detective Riordan giving up beating the shit out of a punching bag, or rowing frowning, sweat-streaked odometer miles in favor of Bird with the Folding Wing.

Thirty minutes and I headed for the shower. When I got out I noticed the light blinking on my answering machine. Abstracted as I'd been, it could have been flashing away all evening. I played back the message, but it was not Claude. Bruce Green had called. Despite his words he sounded unexpectedly diffident.

"Hi, Adrien. It's Bruce. I was just wondering when you'd like to have dinner? Give me a call."

I picked up the phone then slowly replaced it. Too late to call now. Besides ... the habit of solitude had become ingrained. Other than the occasional twinge of loneliness, my single status was as comfortable as a mole snuggled in its hole -- and as safe. Did I really want to risk that hard-won equilibrium?

I thought of the long, painful months after Mel left.

Wandering into the kitchen, I made a glass of Ovaltine, trailed back to the sofa and propped my feet on the sofa arm, watching the tail end of *The Black Swan*. Idly, I flipped through the yearbook Tara had left me.

Tara was right. Robert had belonged to just about everything going. There he was, left from bottom with the Tennis Team. I was scrunched in right next to him, smiling at some long forgotten joke. I recalled that photo had been taken a few weeks before I'd gotten sick.

Another photo of Rob with the Journalism Club -- and I knew by that familiar grin he had just made some crack. Everyone around him was laughing. I turned the page and there was old Robert squiring Homecoming Queen Brittany Greenwahl. Man, they looked young. She smelled like cheese macaroni, he'd said. I'd been in the hospital for the junior prom, but that started me remembering. Hadn't there had been some scandal right before summer vacation? Something to do with....

I flipped back to the index, ran my finger down the Clubs & Activities. Something for everyone: Choral, Creative Writing Hey, how come I hadn't joined the Creative Writing club? Rob must have had another plan for us.

Wait, I had missed it. I started with the "C"s again. There it was: *Chess Club*. I found the page, and there in nostalgic black and white, just like a chess set themselves, were the five

would-be Bobby Fischers: Robert Hersey, Andrew Chin, Grant Landis, Richard Corday, Felice Burns, and Not Pictured -- Adrien English.

For the longest time I sat there staring at the photo, a funny flutter in the pulse point at the base of my throat.

The Chess Club? How could I have forgotten?

But how the hell could Robert's death have anything to do with what had happened back in high school?

Then again, both Robert and Rusty were dead. Murder and suicide. Two violent deaths. Surely that couldn't be a coincidence, not with Robert found holding a chess piece.

I tried to imagine one member of the Chess Club stalking the others. Talk about bad losers. Talk about delayed reaction. It was nearly fifteen years since we'd graduated. I rubbed my forehead as though that could stimulate my memory. It all seemed so long ago. I probably remembered the games more clearly than the players.

Yeah, now that I thought about it, there *had* been some kind of dust up. Something that happened while I'd been ill. Something that even Robert had been close-mouthed about ...

I bolted upright at the clatter of trash cans in the alley below. Slapping shut the book, I walked back to the bedroom.

Pushing back the lace drapery, I stared down at the moonlit alley. Light lanced off the lids of the trash dumpsters against the back wall. Everything else was in shadow. I could just make out the edge of some trash cans stacked by the back entrance of the Thai restaurant next door. The trash cans were a point of contention. I didn't get why my neighbors had to have smelly trash cans by their back entrance (and mine) when the dumpsters were just a few feet away. The food scraps in the cans attracted cats and stray dogs and bums.

As I watched, starting to feel silly, there was another clang of metal on metal and then the reverberation of a lid hitting the pavement. Something round and shiny rolled into view and fell over, like a miniature moon.

A shadow detached itself from the others. I had to wipe the glass where my breath was fogging. The figure in the alley stepped back and looked up. It wore a mask. A grinning skull.

I gripped the window sill as my heart lurched and began that frantic ticking like a turn signal about to short out. I must be clearly outlined by the hall light behind me. I ducked back, like 14 point lace would be useful concealment. I risked another look.

Not sharing my fear, the figure in the skull mask waved to me. It was bizarre. A cheery little salute from the image of death. As I stood there gaping, the dark-clad apparition turned and sprang away down the alley with un-apparition-like vigor.

Belatedly my brain kicked in. I scrambled across the bed, found the phone and called the police. Then I lay flat on the mattress and gave myself a chance to catch my breath while I waited for the squad car to come.

Damn.

Just calm down.

Relax.

When I felt better, I pulled out a notepad from the side table and jotted the names of the remaining members of the Chess Club.

Andrew Chin

Grant Landis

Felice Burns

Me

I remembered Felice pretty clearly. She had been exceptionally poised and unreasonably focused for a girl her age. I seemed to recollect that she had been headed for med school. She could have married, but she might use her maiden name professionally. Perhaps I could track her through the AMA.

I barely remembered Andy Chin or Grant Landis. Chin, I thought, had been one of stronger players, Landis one of our weaker. My own membership in the Chess Club had been brief and unremarkable. The life span of the Chess Club itself had been brief and unremarkable, now that I thought about it. Still there was no other connection I could think of linking me and Robert to "The Royal Game."

The fact Rusty was also connected to the Chess Club seemed conclusive to me.

At last the squad car arrived. The uniformed officers took my report and poked around the alley and side streets, their flashlights picking out empty corners and cardboard boxes. A stray cat rocketed out of its hiding place like a cartoon character. Lights went on in the building across the cinderblock wall.

Though inclined to think "the disturbance" was kids playing a prank, the cops promised to swing around the block once on their way back to patrolling.

After they drove off, it seemed very quiet. Up and down the boulevard, the neighboring businesses stood dark and silent. Inside my building, aged joints popped and creaked, settling for the night -- that would be the architectural joints, though mine weren't in much better shape.

I paced around, tried calling Claude. There was still no answer. I considered driving over there -- I'd have liked the company -- but I was too skittish to face the alley on my own.

Finally I fixed another cup of Ovaltine and curled on the sofa, rewinding *The Black Swan*.

* * * * *

By the next morning that indefinable bad smell in the shop had become a decidedly putrid stink.

"It smells like something died in here," Angus complained.

I don't know why it didn't click until then. I slammed down my coffee cup and hauled ass back to the office where I started shifting boxes, pulling stuff off the metal shelves.

"What's wrong?" Angus inquired from the doorway.

"Help me lift this."

Gingerly he picked his way through the rubble, helping me lower an old trunk with a broken lock to the floor.

The stench of decay was practically overpowering.

"Shit, man," Angus breathed. "There are ants everywhere." He wiped his hands on his 501s and stared at me. His eyes looked huge behind the specs.

I opened the trunk. There was a dead cat and many, many ants.

I closed the trunk.

Angus brushed by me. I could hear him vomiting in the bathroom off the office. After a moment I realized I was just standing there rubbing my hand across my mouth, listening to Angus. I phoned the police. By now I had the number memorized. The squad car showed up followed shortly by Chan and Riordan.

"Somebody doesn't like you, Mr. English," one of the uniforms remarked, closing his notepad on my second complaint in twenty-four hours.

They nodded in passing to Chan and Riordan.

"What's up?" Riordan asked.

"Someone put a dead cat in the trunk in my office."

Riordan and Chan exchanged The Look.

"Who?" Chan asked.

"Who? Is that a routine question? How do I know who? The same person who sent me black flowers and a sympathy card, and broke into my shop, and was skulking around the alley last night!"

"Am I missing something here?" Riordan asked his partner. Chan reached for a cigarette then recalled himself. He started patting his pockets for gum.

"If people would be candid to start with, it would help," Chan returned.

I gave an incredulous laugh. "*I'm* not being candid? I am a victim here. I am being stalked."

"Run that by me again," Riordan requested.

Actually until I put it into words the notion was nebulous, half-formed, but now I found myself stubbornly clinging to it. "I am being stalked."

"Who do you think is stalking you, Mr. English?" Chan asked politely, unwrapping a stick of gum.

"Whoever killed Robert." I caught sight of Angus loitering palely behind them. "Come upstairs. I have to show you something."

They followed me upstairs in silence. I could imagine the long-suffering looks exchanged behind my back.

In my living quarters I showed them Rob's yearbook. I told them what Tara had said about Robert asking her to mail it to him right before his death. I turned to the page with the Chess Club and pointed out Rusty. I explained about his taking a walk out a hotel window.

"I think his death might be related. Maybe he didn't kill himself."

"You're suggesting that someone killed Corday?" Chan was still neutral.

"I'm not sure what I'm suggesting. It's not impossible, is it?"

"Hard to say without seeing the police report," Riordan said.

Chan did a kind of double take in his partner's direction. "Mr. English," he said carefully, one eye on his partner, "What possible motive do you believe someone would have for killing members of your high school Chess Club?"

"I've no idea. I didn't participate in the Chess Club that long. But maybe one of the surviving members would know."

"*Surviving* members? Do you have some reason to believe something has happened to the other members?"

"Well, no, but isn't this too much of a coincidence?" I glanced at Riordan. He was looking around my living room curiously. I wasn't sure what he found so interesting -- it would have been nice if he'd paid attention to what I was saying.

"No, not really, Mr. English," Chan answered. "In any high school graduation class there's going to be a number of deaths, suicides, even homicides by the time your tenth reunion rolls around. It's the law of averages."

"Whatever. What about this?" I thrust the "In Sympathy" card at Riordan, who seemed to recall himself.

He glanced at me under his brows, took the card, read it. He turned it over. Handed it to Chan. Said gravely, "It's not a Hallmark."

I grabbed the card from Chan, bending it in the process. "This is just one big fucking joke to you, isn't it? Well, it's my life being threatened. Robert is dead, remember, *Detectives?*"

"Calm down, for Chrissake," Riordan muttered. He took the card back from me. "No one has threatened your life, have they?"

"It's implied by this card, by funeral flowers. Are you telling me it's not against the law to leave a dead animal on someone's property? That it's not illegal to break into someone's business? Obviously whoever burglarized my shop left this dead cat --"

"It's harassment, certainly," Chan agreed.

"Harassment!" I heard my voice shoot up like the Vienna Boys choir, and Riordan's eyebrows rose with it.

"Look, Mr. English," Chan began plaintively, "try to see it from our point."

"Oh, I get it." I stopped cold. "You still think I could be doing this to myself. That I'm trying to throw you off my trail. Red herrings, right?"

Chan interjected smoothly, "That's a good point, Mr. English. This book of yours that's going to be published; it's about a man who stabs to death an old friend, isn't it?"

I blinked once or twice. These two really did their homework. They must have learned about my book when they questioned the rest of the writing group -- and really, the fact that they had questioned the writing group when Rob had spent so little time in it, had to be significant. They had to believe that either Claude or I was guilty.

"Actually, it's about a man who finds out who stabbed to death an old friend. He's an amateur sleuth."

"He's a homosexual." Thus spake Riordan. The kind of guy who probably slept in flannel sheets patterned with bears and pine trees and tiny lassos. A scratch-and-sniff-hygiene Real Man kind of guy. The kind of guy who circled the Chuck Norris marathon in the TV guide.

"You seem obsessed with my sexuality, Detective."

Something dark and shadowy slid across his eyes. I decided I didn't want to piss him off too much.

"Who identified Robert's body?" I asked suddenly.

"His wife."

"Tara? When?"

"She was here in LA when it happened," Riordan replied. "They were working on getting back together."

My jaw must have dropped. Chan stated the obvious. "You didn't know?"

"No."

Riordan, still holding the sympathy card, was running the edge underneath his thumbnail. He queried amiably, "Are you aware that Mrs. Hersey is the sole beneficiary of the million-dollar insurance policy left by Robert Hersey?"

"T-Tara?" I stammered. "Tara is Robert's beneficiary?"

Riordan looked at me and smiled oddly. "You didn't know."

"This is strictly confidential, Mr. English," Chan warned.

No it's not, I thought. This is another trap of some kind.

"Your life is not in danger, English," Riordan drawled.

I could feel myself turning red with anger.

"Did you actually bother to check out the florist?"

Riordan sighed. “Yes. The flowers came from the Conroy’s on Balboa. It’s a busy place. They were paid for in cash and no one remembers anything about the purchaser.”

“So that’s it? Did you bother showing pictures of anyone in case it jogged --”

“Pictures of *who*?” Riordan snapped. His anger was unexpected. “Yeah, as a matter of fact we showed *your* picture. Nobody remembered you.”

Chan blew a gum bubble. Popped it. “Hersey’s flowers came from the same place. One dozen red roses paid in cash. You got the deluxe arrangement, English.”

“Lucky me. A stalker with good taste.”

“Did Robert receive a card?” Riordan questioned.

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

“What did he say? Did he seem nervous, preoccupied?”

“No.”

“So he didn’t feel threatened? Stalked?”

I stared at them.

“We’ll be in touch,” Riordan said.

Chapter Nine

I couldn't find anything to wear. Laundry had not been a major priority the last few days, and as I dug through the hamper seeking something I could iron into presentability I realized that Robert's death had put my own life on hold. It was like being shot but waiting to hear the crack of the rifle before you fell down.

I hadn't worked on my new book in over a week. In fact already the threads of plot seemed to be unraveling in my brain. I was afraid to look at the damn thing. And why had I ever thought of centering the plot around *Titus Andronicus*? I hate that play.

I had a stack of phone messages I hadn't answered, and so many DOROTHYL digests in my e-mail it was a wonder I hadn't crashed my computer. And, in case I wasn't feeling harassed enough, Jean and Ted were hounding me about putting out the bookstore newsletter the group had been discussing for the past six months. My feeble excuses were brushed aside and I was being dragged over to the Finches with the bribe of dinner.

"I know you, Adrien," Jean had said when she'd phoned a couple of hours earlier. "You're probably living on coffee and minute rice."

Hey, if God had intended me to cook he wouldn't have created Trader Joe's.

"Jean, you're confusing me with the helpless heterosexual male."

Jean just laughed. She's the most easygoing woman writer I've ever met.

Since my friends insisted on rallying round, the least I could do was wear a clean shirt.

In the end I had to settle for a white T-shirt under a black blazer and a pair of black jeans that I'd quit wearing because they made me feel I should be out waving down cars on Santa Monica Boulevard, except that they were too tight to walk in.

"Ooh, don't you look handsome," Jean chirped when Ted ushered me into their kitchen about forty-five minutes later.

Ted shoved a glass of red wine into my hand. "Good for the heart," he said, and gave my shoulder a nudge with his own.

I like Jean and Ted, don't get me wrong, but a little bit does go a long way. In their manuscript, *Murder He Mimed*, they have a gay character, Avery Oxford. Avery is thirty-two, single, with black hair and blue eyes and my wardrobe right down to my BVDs, which, in point of fact, Jean quizzed me about: "Do Gay Men Prefer Boxers or Briefs?" Every time I give an opinion I can see Jean perking up, taking mental notes. I'm terrified some day some fool may actually publish their magnum opus and Avery Oxford will be let loose as the quintessential gay stereotype.

"How are you holding up?" Jean asked, turning the heat off on the stove.

"I'm holding up." I sipped my wine, an unexpectedly smooth merlot.

Ted brought Jean a platter and she began spearing pork chops out of the pan. I was struck by their concord. I've never met any two people that seemed more truly two halves of one whole. The fact that they looked like fraternal twins heightened the effect.

"Gosh, it's sad," Jean said as Ted whisked the platter past me into the dining room alcove. "Robert was such a vibrant person. So ... alive."

"Yes." I half-drained my wine glass. I really didn't want to think about Rob for one evening. "I'm sorry about the police. I hear they've been asking more questions."

Jean laughed. "Really, that's been kind of helpful. Getting to watch detectives on the job."

"What kinds of things did they ask you?"

Jean went over to the fridge. She sounded vague. "Oh, you know. The same kind of stuff they asked you, probably."

"They asked about Claude," Ted offered from the alcove. He was lighting candles on the dining room table.

"What's that? Oh." Jean took the salad out of the fridge. "Well, *Claude*. He is pretty emotional. Some of the things he says, you might think -- I mean, *I* know he wouldn't hurt a fly, but if you don't know him you might think he's a violent person."

"Can I do anything to help?"

Jean smiled, shook her head, cocking her ear for Ted's next words. When none were forthcoming she called, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Max?"

"Exactly."

I asked, "What about Max?"

Jean shooed me off into the dining room with one hand. With the other she balanced the salad bowl, waitress style. "Don't be shy, Adrien. Just sit anywhere."

I stepped into the alcove. One wall was solid books; the entire top shelf of the bookcase was lined with *How to Writes*. This was one of those small Westwood apartments made functional and attractive with the help of the local Ikea and gallons of peach and coral paint.

Jean called it the “Southwest Look,” and stuck cactus plants in every corner. I nearly backed into one as I made room for her to set the salad on the table.

“What do you think, Adrien?” Ted inquired as I sat.

I shook out an apricot colored napkin. “About what?”

“Max’s homophobia. Do you think he could have killed Robert?”

It was clearly an academic question to them. I found that a bit scary. As scary as the notion that someone might want to kill me because of whom I’d slept with.

“Is Max a homophobe?”

“Of course,” Jean stated unequivocally. She hopped up and disappeared into the tiny kitchen. “He hated Robert. *Hated* him.”

“Well,” Ted hedged. “Maybe homophobe is too strong. He doesn’t hate *you*.”

“He just thinks you’re seriously screwed up,” Jean volunteered.

I wished I hadn’t come to dinner.

“You’re not eating,” Ted said and passed the platter of chops my way.

Jean set a bowl of mashed potatoes before us and lit once more. She cocked her head like a friendly robin. “It does sound like a hate crime from what the papers say.”

“All murder is a hate crime.”

“No. Not really. Sometimes people are just in the way.”

“Whoops! You’re dry,” Ted said and refilled my wine glass.

I drank up. Lowered my glass. “So what did the police ask you about me?”

Jean flew up again and dimmed the overhead light. In the moody candlelight they looked unnervingly like a pair of the Bobbsey Twins.

“Do you think he could have killed Robert?” they quoted together. Then they looked at each other and laughed merrily.

I opened my mouth, but Jean cut in, “We know you didn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“You just -- you’re not the type. You’re too civilized.”

“Doesn’t that make me the prime suspect? By all the laws of mystery fiction? The least likely character?”

“That’s fiction, Adrien,” Jean explained kindly.

“Mostly English mysteries,” Ted put in. “In those Golden Age classics it’s always some smart-ass, over-refined *chap*. I guess half of them were probably supposed to be gay. Doesn’t matter,” he had to stop to chew and swallow. “Doesn’t matter. Bad heart.” He thumped his own chest for emphasis.

Not bad; just misguided, I wanted to say. I was still smarting over those smart-ass, over-refined, probably gay villains. As I trimmed the fat from my chop I became aware that Jean

was watching attentively. She smiled, meeting my gaze. No doubt Avery Oxford would start exhibiting the “Continental” method of fork wielding. I couldn’t wait for them to kill him off, but they couldn’t ever seem to get beyond Chapter Three.

“If you don’t mind my asking, what else did the police want to know?”

Jean and Ted exchanged a silent look.

She said off-handedly, “Oh, you know, they were asking about Claude and you. If you were an item. And if you needed money. And who you ... well, you know, *dated*. We told them about the thing with Max.”

For a minute I wondered if they thought *I’d* had a thing with Max. Exactly what were people telling the police?

“They didn’t seem to find it very interesting,” Ted opined. “Very close minded.”

“We told them you couldn’t have done it,” Jean reassured me once more. “Claude is a different matter. He’s homicidal if you argue cooking fats.”

“I thought you didn’t think Claude killed Robert?”

Jean looked up surprised. “Well, you never really *know* anyone, Adrien.”

It was late when I left the Finches. I’d had several cups of coffee on top of half a bottle of wine; so I was driving more defensively than usual through Westwood. As ever the streets were crowded with college kids, the shop doors open and ablaze, theater lines wrapped around corners. On the radio Sarah McLachlan was singing “Building a Mystery,” which seemed, in my alcohol-tempered state, significant.

I pulled up at a light, singing along under my breath. Two girls in fringed jackets walked arm in arm through the crosswalk. Sweet. Maybe the times were a-changin’. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, glanced at the jammed sidewalk outside a cinema.

Did a double take.

There in the queue for *Scary Movie* stood Detective Riordan, larger than life. Yes, it was definitely him. All six foot three of prime USDA beef in a leather bomber jacket. He had his arm around a red-haired girl and he was laughing down at her. Thanks to the music on the radio, it was like a scene out of a music video, with the shifting crowd cutting them off from view every couple of beats.

It struck me as more than coincidence. More like fate. Like when you’ve been thinking about someone so hard you seem to conjure him.

The light changed. The car behind me honked. I pulled away, my eyes glued to the rearview mirror till Riordan was lost to sight. No kidding; the guy had a life outside of being a cop. So much for Claude’s leatherman scenario.

Right?

Unless the chick was a beard.

What the hell did I care? Unless there was some truth to Claude's theory about Riordan knowing Robert. About Riordan having some involvement in Robert's death.

Otherwise I had zero interest.

Riordan was not remotely my type. Even without the whips and canes and butt plugs. I don't understand the wish -- let alone the need -- to be dominated, controlled. Not presuming to judge, just not something I wanted for myself.

And yet.

And yet there was something about his strength, his arrogance, his sheer size that got under my skin. He probably didn't couldn't even spell vanilla. He was probably selfish in the sack. Probably selfish and greedy and ... unsophisticated. And hung like a horse.

When I got home there was a message on my machine.

"Adrien? It's Bruce. I was hoping maybe I'd hear from you." Silence. Giving me a chance to pick up. "Call me some time."

I hit rewind, listened to the message again. He had a nice voice. Maybe he sang in the shower. Would that be a plus or a minus? Was he a morning person or a night person? Did I have a preference?

I undressed, lay on the couch in my white boxer briefs balancing the phone on my stomach, and called Bruce.

"Well, hello there, stranger," he greeted me with pleasure. My heart warmed. Nice to be appreciated.

Bruce had just come in and wanted to talk. It went pretty well. No awkward pauses. We made plans for dinner the following night.

I spent Thursday morning letting my fingers do the walking through rows and rows of "Chins" in the White Pages. Two or three calls into it, my lame story about an alumni newsletter was coming more glibly, but I still wasn't having any luck locating Andy Chin. I didn't even know if he still lived in the state.

This, of course, is what comes of ignoring all those invitations to high school reunions.

"Darling, are the police after you?" my mother inquired when I picked up the phone that afternoon.

"No more so than usual. Why?"

"Because I had two police detectives to lunch yesterday --"

"*Lunch?* You fed them lunch?"

"Well, it was noon, darling. I couldn't very well eat in front of them."

"What did you serve them? Never mind. What did they ask about?"

"Grilled baby salmon, wild rice and asparagus with that luscious cream sauce that Maria makes," Lisa rattled off cheerfully. "They were quite civilized. For the most part. They asked about your friends. About Robert. When *did* Robert become gay, Adrien?"

Through dry lips, I asked, "What else did they ask about?"

"Your inheritance."

"My what?"

"Your finances. That led to your inheritance. I told them about Mother Anna and that *insane* will. Splitting the money that way. I don't care what dear little Mr. Gracen says, the woman was *gaga*. Giving a boy your age that much money."

I waited for the pause and then got in, "Lisa, what did you tell them exactly?"

She said plaintively, "Darling, I've just *told* you. I explained you got half your money when you turned twenty-one, and shortly after *squandered* it on that grubby little shop."

I could feel sweat popping out over my forehead. "Lisa, I make a perfectly decent living."

My mother made a sound that from a lesser woman would have been a snort.

"What else did you tell them that was none of their damn business?"

"Don't start cursing, Adrien. They were rather nice. Very polite. Not at all what I expected."

I bet that worked both ways.

"And I did warn them darling that you were simply *not* up to being badgered. I told them what the specialist said -- the first one, not that horrid quack from the Cleveland Clinic Heart Center. I think I made it very clear that if you were harassed any further I would set Mr. Gracen on them."

"Set Mr. Gracen ..." I hadn't the strength to finish it. Set loose the dogs of war in the form of "dear little Mr. Gracen" who was seventy if he was a day and could barely manage to dodder around the golf course? "Lisa, no one is badgering me. It's just routine."

"Say what you like, Adrien, but you looked very white and strained when you were here the other day. I really think you should consider coming home for a while."

Here we go again. "Lisa, I *am* home. Remember? I'm a big boy now. Don't start fussing."

"I never fuss." She grew lachrymose as another wrong occurred to her. "Did you know that Inspector Chan wants to write mysteries too? He was asking where you get all your ideas from. And you know, Adrien, I simply didn't *know*. I'm rather hurt that you've never let me read your book."

"It's not published yet." I was thinking rapidly. "Lisa --"

"Anyway, don't worry," she reassured. "I pointed out that you could have no *possible* motive for killing poor Robert Hersey."

"Did you mention to them when I get the balance of my money?"

"When you turn forty? It's none of their affair."

I sighed. "Well, at least they provide medical coverage in prison."

"That's not funny," Lisa said sharply. "It's in extremely bad taste."

"I know. Sorry."

She hung up, which is her jolly way of having the last word.

* * * * *

The conversation with Lisa convinced me that if I didn't come up with a suitable alternate, I was destined for San Quentin and an orange jumpsuit. Orange is not my color, and I've never wanted to go steady with a guy with hair on his back.

It wouldn't take the dynamic duo of Chan and Riordan long to establish that I was over-extended financially. Nothing too serious when you consider the average American is four paychecks from the street, but inheriting a "sizable" life insurance policy would have eased things up considerably. I knew that Chan and Riordan speculated that I had believed myself Robert's beneficiary. That gave me a motive. A strong motive.

In Leslie Ford mysteries money is nearly always the motive. But it's not the only motive. Not in real life. I could think of other motives. Maybe they didn't make sense to me, but the news is full of people killing each other for reasons that seem senseless. Senseless violence? I suppose it must make sense to the perpetrator.

It was in this mood that I went to see Max.

Max lived in a small house on the wrong side of Ventura Boulevard. Seashell wind chimes hung on the front porch and a white-muzzled German Shepherd barked at me through a wooden gate.

I walked up the steps, rang the bell, and Grania Joyce opened the door.

I think we must have looked mutually startled. She recovered first, holding the screen open for me and inviting me in.

"Max!" she yelled toward the back of the house.

"Sorry for barging in."

"You're not." She was wearing an oversize sweatshirt which read, *Pasadena City College*, and a pair of granny glasses. If she had shorts or anything on underneath Max's old sweatshirt, I couldn't see them. "We were brainstorming," she said. Then she winked at me and strolled off to vanish into the bathroom.

The front room had been done in a minimalist bachelor-pad motif. There were a couple of antique typewriters on some oak bookshelves, a couple of wide comfortable chairs and sofas, a vintage Varga poster over a fake fireplace.

A moment later Max appeared, tucking a flannel shirt into his faded jeans.

"Yo, Adrien. What's up?"

"Two things," I said. "First off, you and Grania and the Finches are set on this newsletter. I'll finance it, but that's the extent of my involvement. I don't have time for another project. The Finches want to contribute with reviews, but they don't want to manage the thing. Either you or Grania will have to play editor."

Max scratched his chest reflectively. "Grania, huh?"

"You can always arm wrestle her for it."

Max laughed as though I'd said something witty. "About Grania," he said. "We're collaborating. I'm helping her with her male point of view."

I couldn't help it. "Oh yeah? What's she helping you with?"

"Sentence structure." His grin was wry. He shifted his weight. "Sure. What the hey, I'll edit your newsletter. Why not?"

"There's something else." Mentally I closed my eyes, pinched my nose and jumped. "A day or two before he died, Rob was talking to me about something that happened between you two, something he regretted."

Max hadn't moved. His narrowed eyes watched me closely.

"Yeah?"

"I thought you should know that."

For a moment Max didn't move. Then he snorted. "Bullshit. I don't know what he told you, bud, but that asshole didn't have any regrets. He was *sick*."

"Because he was gay?"

"No, because he was sick. Okay? I'm sure he didn't give you the whole picture. I mean fags, I just don't get it. What is wrong with you guys?"

"Nothing that I'm aware of."

"Yeah, well there's a difference of opinion there, no offense. And Hersey -- that little shit follows me into a pub one night and wants to get it on in the john. He won't take no for an answer." Max laughed angrily. "I mean it was fucking ridiculous! The pip-squeak. And the rougher I get the more he likes it! Did he mention that?"

"No."

He shook his shaggy curls. "It makes me want to puke to think about it. The shit he was saying. His face --" Max shuddered with revulsion. "Did he tell you I shoved his head down a toilet?"

I felt numb in the face of his naked loathing. It was like picking up a rock and glimpsing the slimy things that lived beneath. After a moment I said, "No."

"I did. Since he liked to stick his face in assholes it seemed appropriate." Whatever he read in my face caused him to add harshly, "I have no regrets. He was out of control."

"Didn't it occur to you that maybe he needed help?" Despite myself I was angry.

"He was beyond help."

“He is now, isn’t he?” I pointed out bitterly.

Chapter Ten

The phone rang, splitting the quiet of the back office.

For a minute I thought the whispering on the other end of the line was my stalker.

"Hello?" I asked sharply, "Who is this?"

"I've got to talk to you."

"Claude? Where the hell have you been?"

"Jail, if you must know."

"J-Jail?" I think I stammered it. "Why didn't you call me? Why didn't you let me know?"

"I wasn't under arrest. They were holding me for questioning."

"Technically that *is* an arrest."

"Whatever! I wasn't formally charged. Shit, Adrien, will you focus here?" No trace of the gay Parisian now. He sounded angry and accusing. "I'm not going to jail, man. Not for anyone."

"Why would they arrest you?"

"Because they think I did it! They brought every knife in the café in for tests. Listen to me. I need money."

"How much money?"

"Serious money. As much as you can lay your hands on."

"Have you spoken to a lawyer yet?"

"I don't need money for a lawyer, man, I'm splitting."

"Wait a sec. What do you mean you're splitting? Where are you?"

"That doesn't matter. I'll be at the café at 6:00."

Bruce. I was supposed to meet him at 6:00. Shit. I thought fast.

"Claude, that's less than an hour. It's going to take some time to get the money together. Why don't we meet somewhere and talk?"

"I don't have time, Adrien. I know a man with a private plane who can sneak me out of Burbank Airport, but it's got to be tonight."

My inner child was hugging himself and keening, "This can't be happening!" With comparative calm, I said, "Claude, you don't know what you're doing."

"Are you going to help me or not?"

He sounded like a stranger. Almost threatening. "Of course I'll help you, but --"

"Good. Bring the money to the restaurant at six. Come alone."

I tried to joke. "This sounds like one of those scenes in a slasher movie --"

Dial tone.

* * * * *

I called Bruce and got his machine. I disconnected without leaving a message.

By the time I finished pulling on a pair of khakis and a V-neck sweater over my white T-shirt, it was five-thirty. I tried Bruce again. After a succession of clicks and static, while I mentally bit my nails, Bruce picked up.

I said awkwardly, "Bad news. I've got to take a rain check on tonight."

Silence.

I could hear the line crackling.

"Are you there, Bruce?"

"Yes," he said ungraciously. "Why?"

"Why?"

"Why are you canceling?"

"I can't -- this sounds ridiculous, I know. I can't explain why. Yet."

Another silence. A very bad connection. In more ways than one.

"Yeah. Okay. Well, another time." He sounded extremely cool.

"Bruce, it's something I can't get out of."

"Sure. No problem."

It obviously was a problem. I said, "I'm free Friday. Tomorrow night."

"I'm not."

Ouch.

"I'll call you," I said to the unfriendly static.

"Do that."

Click.

I broke every speed law and ran three ambers in my haste to get across town before Claude did something really dumb.

When I got to the restaurant, which should have been packed at this time of the evening, a placard in the window read CLOSED. I looked up. Tire treads of black clouds tracked ominously across the gray sky. More bad weather on the way.

I parked in the back and walked around to the rear entrance. I tried the door. It opened with a screech of hinges more suitable for a haunted house than haute cuisine. Memories of all these scenes from all those movies where the dumb heroine goes to meet the murderer in an abandoned warehouse or a park at night or the backstage of a theater flickered through my brain. Except this was Claude I was going to meet, and I knew he hadn't killed Rob.

"Claude?" I stepped into the kitchen, my eyes adjusting to the gloom. Rows of kettles and pots gleamed dully above the counters. The smell of disinfectant hung heavily in the air mixed with the ghostly memory of garlic, basil, thyme -- and a hint of cigarette smoke.

I wandered through the counters and cutting boards, guided by the emergency lights to the dining room. A tiny red dot in the darkness pinpointed Claude's whereabouts.

"What are you doing sitting here in the dark?"

He must have been lost in thought because at the sound of my voice he started and called out shakily, "Adrien? Shit, man. You scared me."

I started across the black ice floor. "Who'd you think it was?"

"That cop. Riordan."

I sat down across from Claude in the booth. He was like a phantom in the gloom, just a glimmer of eyes and teeth and the glint of the glass at his elbow.

"Did you bring the money?"

"No."

"Jesus fucking Christ! Why not?"

"Because I don't have it," I explained patiently. "If I did have it I wouldn't have brought it."

"*Why?*" Claude cried. "Why?"

"Because I'm trying to keep you from self-destructing. Because I'm your friend."

"*Friend?* You just signed my fucking death warrant. That cop is going to kill me. He killed Robert and he's going to kill me."

I ran both hands through my hair. "Would you listen to yourself? Why would you say that?"

"Because he *told* me." He stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray.

"He told you he killed Robert?"

"He told me he was going to kill me."

"When?"

"Right before the pigs turned me loose."

"Those were his exact words? I'm going to kill you?"

"Yes! Yes!" Claude's shadow moved and I saw the glitter of wet on his cheeks. "Adrien, I'll give you the title to this place. You know what it's worth. I can't go back to prison. *Please.*"

I covered his hand with mine. "Is it prison or Riordan you're afraid of?"

"Both."

"Listen to me. If you run, it's as good as a confession."

"I didn't *do* it!"

"I know. But it won't matter. You'll look guilty all the same. They'll arrest you and you will go to jail. I think they can extradite you from France."

"They would have to find me first." He wiped his cheeks with the back and then the palm of his hand. Picked up his glass.

"I can't believe we're even discussing this. Don't you understand? They had to let you go because they don't have enough to hold you."

"But they'll find it."

"They can't find what doesn't exist." I hesitated. "Right?"

Claude drank from his glass, set it down hard. Nodded. "Right. Okay." He nodded again, sucked in his breath. "But I am *begging* you, Adrien"

"I don't have it."

He stared. "You could get it. Your mother --"

"I'm not asking my mother."

"A couple of thousand. That's all I'm asking. I know you have that much."

"Didn't you hear what I said? If you run, it's all over."

"What did you come here for?" Claude demanded loudly. He shoved the table at me, catching me hard below the ribs.

"Damn it!" I shoved the table back and slid out of the booth. "I'm trying to keep you from wrecking your entire life. I'm trying to keep you from losing everything you've worked for."

"Yeah, well with friends like you, who needs enemies?" Claude surged to his feet. Jabbed his hand toward the kitchen. "Go! Get the hell out! I don't need you. I don't need your kind of help."

"Sure," I shot back. "You've got it under control. I can see that." I gestured to the sign in the shuttered windows and him skulking in the dark.

"Fuck off!" he shouted. He picked up the ashtray and threw it at my head. I mean, pitched it with a force that would have knocked me cold if it had connected. But I ducked, and the ashtray hit the post so hard it shattered.

I gave Claude the universal sign for *au revoir asshole* and headed for the door.

"You little prick, Adrien," he called after me. "I'd have done it for you."

I kept hearing his words over and over as I drove away. I'd have done it for you. And I knew it was true. Were our positions reversed, Claude would have done whatever I asked. Who the hell was I to decide what was best for him?

Halfway home I swung the Bronco around and started back for Café Noir.

It took a while to find an ATM. I pulled two hundred from the business account, another two hundred from my personal, and finally the last eighty bucks I had in my savings. It wouldn't take him far but it was the best I could do.

By then it was dark in the empty parking lot. The sagging power lines hummed overhead as I got out of my car.

I slipped through the back entrance, found myself in what Wilkie Collins would have called "complete obfuscation." I felt around the wall, found the light switch. The fluorescent lights threw hard white light on steel sinks, polished floors, spotless trash pails.

It was absolutely still.

For a moment I thought Claude must have left -- but he would never forget to lock the café. Not even if he was never coming back.

I opened my mouth to call out. Some instinct held me silent. From the dining room I heard a faint sound. Slowly I walked to the doorway and, as I reached it, someone hurtled through, crashing into me, knocking me to the glossy floor.

I looked up, bewildered. I had a glimpse of dark raincoat, a hat pulled low, a skeleton face, a butcher's knife. A vision straight out of a Wes Craven movie.

Terror galvanized me. I rolled over, scrambled under the nearest table, grabbed for a chair to use as a shield. But the figure in the raincoat was running for the back door, black raincoat flapping like a scarecrow's overcoat.

Though my heart was in full gallop, my mind was strangely cool. Each moment, each detail, seemed clear and focused as I crawled out from under my flimsy fortress of table legs. I considered and instantly discarded giving chase.

"Claude?"

No answer but a strange sighing like the tide sougning against the shore. I felt my way through the gloom to the wall switch. Mini white lights like Christmas tree lights flared on all over the room like tiny stars.

Claude lay by the front door, a dull puddle widening beneath him, slowly covering the black and white checked floor. I found my way to him. His pastel silk shirt was splotched with red; violent polka dots.

At that point my brain shut down. I was seeing it, I was taking it all in, I kept twisting the key but the engine wouldn't turn over. I dropped down on my knees. I touched Claude's face and I noticed detachedly that my knuckles were grazed.

Claude's eyes, which were staring at nothing, blinked.

He opened his mouth and blood spilled out in a gush. I put my hand over his mouth as though I could stop it from pouring out. I heard myself whispering, "Oh God, oh God, oh God...."

* * * * *

Police car lights cut swaths of red and blue through the thick night. There were uniforms everywhere, making room for each other as they passed in and out the narrow rear entrance of Café Noir. I leaned against a police car. From inside, the radio was transmitting to nobody. I hugged my arms against the cold and my nerves.

Riordan strode out of the kitchen doorway and spotted me. His shoes crunched on gravel as he approached.

I remembered that Claude said Riordan threatened to kill him. I hadn't believed him. Now Claude was dead.

"How are you doing?"

I nodded tightly, having found that little movements made it easier to hide the fact I was still shaking.

He scrutinized my face. "How's the heart?"

"Takes a licking, keeps on ticking."

He continued to stare. Asked curtly, "You want my jacket?"

I didn't think I heard him right so I gave my stock response. "Thanks. I'm fine."

"Do tell." He shrugged out of his suede jacket, tossed it to me. It felt like something newly dead hanging there in my hands. After a moment I fumbled my way into it. It was warm from his body and carried the scent of his soap.

"When did you hurt your hand?"

I looked dully at my scraped knuckles. "I don't remember. When I crawled under the table, I guess."

"Uh huh." He started to say something, then seemed to change his mind. "Feel up to telling me what you saw?" His breath hung in the light from the parking lot overheads.

I nodded toward one of the uniforms. "He took my statement."

“Now tell me.”

I told him what I'd seen. He took it in, not taking notes, just nodding slowly.

“Skull mask? You mean like the mask you saw on the prowler outside your apartment?”

I assented.

“Or do you think you saw something, say a white ski mask, and your mind made the connection?”

“No.”

“You said yourself it all happened pretty fast.”

“I know what I saw. A skull mask. Like you buy at Halloween. The same mask. The same man. Hefty. Your height. Your build.” I was having trouble controlling my voice.

Riordan's eyes flickered. “Okay. Bring it down a notch, Adrien.”

“See, I have this problem,” I told him. I told myself to stay cool but my hands balled into fists and my voice rose. “There is such an obvious link between everything that has happened that a blind man could see it, but somehow *you* don't see it. So I am asking myself, *why* don't you see it? Because you don't want to? Or because you don't want anyone else to?”

“Lower your voice.”

A plain blue sedan pulled into the parking lot, shelling gravel, rolling up beside us. Chan got out in a cloud of tobacco smoke, ground a cigarette underfoot. He looked even more tired and depressed than usual.

Riordan walked over to him. They conferenced briefly. Riordan hiked a thumb over his shoulder at me. Chan nodded politely. I nodded back. Crime scene etiquette, I guess.

Chan and Riordan disappeared into the kitchen. A few minutes later a gurney bearing a black body bag was wheeled through the doorway.

I closed my eyes. Immediately I saw Claude's mouth open and blood spilling out. I scrubbed my face with both hands.

More time passed.

The adrenaline which had originally kept me going seeped away, leaving me cold and sick and exhausted. I'd have given anything just to sit. I considered dropping down on the parking lot gravel and leaning back against the police car tire. From the kitchen I listened to raised voices. One of them was Riordan.

Finally a young woman in uniform with French braided hair came out. “Mr. English? I'm Officer Montoya. Detective Riordan has instructed me to drive you home now.”

“Thanks. I can drive myself.”

She was polite but firm. “You may not realize it but you're still in shock, sir. Best to let someone else drive you.”

I decided this was probably their means of making sure I didn't make my break for the border.

“What about my car?”

“The Ford Bronco? My partner, Officer Lincoln, will drive it back for you.”

Thus the prim and lovely Officer Montoya escorted me back to Pasadena and saw me to my door like the little gentleman she was.

“Would you like me to check the premises, sir?” One small hand rested on her night stick.

“Thanks anyway.”

“Sure?” She smiled. It reminded me of the professional smile nurses give you when they see you’re starting to fray around the edges.

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

“Lock yourself in, sir.”

“You betcha.”

Officer Montoya strolled confidently off into the night and I locked the door against the darkness, against the unknown. Locked myself in with the silence and memory.

Chapter Eleven

The answering machine was winking at me as I shrugged out of Riordan's jacket and hung it on the iron coat stand.

I hit Play. A pause and then Bruce's voice said awkwardly, "I guess I was kind of an asshole earlier. If you want to call me I'll be home all night."

I called him. He picked it up on the fourth ring just as I was getting ready to hang up.

"Hi. It's me."

"Adrien." He cleared his throat nervously. "I hoped you'd call."

"I'm sorry about tonight. It was unavoids --" My voice gave out right then and there.

Bruce made alarmed noises. "What is it? The cops? What's wrong?"

It took a minute or two but finally I managed to be coherent.

"Adrien, my God," Bruce kept murmuring while I told him in terse sentences what had happened. "My God, Adrien. You could have been killed."

I closed my eyes, resting my forehead on my hand.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes."

"You don't sound all right. Do you want me to come over?"

"No. No, I shouldn't drag you into this."

"Yes, you should."

I was torn between guilt and relief. I thought I'd go nuts if I had to spend the night alone.

"Give me thirty minutes."

"You don't have to."

"I want to."

* * * * *

His body was beautiful: long-limbed, strong and beautiful. It felt good rubbing naked against mine. Everything he did felt good, despite the fact that it had clearly been a long time for him as well.

Our cocks slid together, the pleasurable scrape and thrust. Like bucks locking velvet-covered antlers in the spring. Testing, pushing.

Bruce's hand closed around my dick, working us together. Rigid thickness poking belly and thigh, rolling against each other.

"Do you like this?"

"God, yes."

"Good. I aim to please." He did too, despite the fumbling, the lack of choreography, the absence of what Mel used to call "simpatico." We were groping our way through the dark, literally, trying to find each other.

His mouth found mine, hot and wet. Hungry. I liked the hunger. Feeding it left me no time to think. I opened up, let his tongue shove in, let him explore. His fingers dug into my shoulders wanting closer, needing closer. I pressed closer, arched against him. He humped furiously. I rocked my hips welcoming the release roiling up inside. It was okay to take this. He needed it just as much as I did. His desperate cries spilled into my mouth. I kissed him, hips jerking. We pounded against each other and then he was coming, wet heat filling his condom. He groaned, his hand clenching spasmodically around my shaft. I groaned too, twisted, ground my hips. My balls tightened, my whole body stretching bow tight -- and then that singing release.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he asked later.

"I'm not thinking. It's wonderful." *You think too much*, Robert had said. *You analyze everything to death*, Mel had said. I closed my ears to Mel's voice, to the memory of Robert. I gave myself to the moment, rubbed my cheek against Bruce's chest feeling the soft wire of his black hair. His arm tightened around my shoulders. I nestled into him, kissed his nipple.

"Can you see in the dark?"

"Hmmm?"

"I used to have a Siamese cat with eyes just the color of yours. He was the prettiest thing." He had that chatty note in his voice, the rare guy who is energized by sex. Not me. A police raid wouldn't have kept me awake at that point. Feeling safe and comfortable and warm, I let go.

Warm blood soaking the knees of my khakis, blood sticky on my fingers. Claude's eyes focused on mine, beseeching, trying to tell me ... what?

"Who?" I whispered.

Claude's face shuddered. His whole body shuddered, the red slices welling blood, little mouths trying to speak. His lips unstuck. A gush of blood, bright red blood splashing out. A gurgling wet sound as he struggled...

"Jesus!" I sat bolt upright, lungs laboring, heart racing in blind terror.

There was commotion beside me. Books sliding off the bedstand as Bruce flailed around trying to find the lamp.

The light came on, rocked wildly, throwing menacing shadows before Bruce steadied it.

"What's wrong?" His lank hair was flattened to his head. He fingered it out of his eyes, staring at me. "What's the matter?"

It took a second to get my breath. I waited to see how upset about all this my heart was going to be. Finally I exhaled and leaned back cautiously into the pillows.

I shook my head. "Nightmare. Sorry. I'm okay now."

He was frowning. "What did you dream?"

"I don't remember." I nodded to the night table. "Could I have some water?"

Bruce picked up the glass of water, handed it over. I met his eyes and looked away. He looked out of place in my bed with his heavy three o'clock shadow, the brown protuberant nipples against his white skin. He looked ... strange. It came hard to me that this was because he was ... a stranger.

"Talk to me," urged Bruce. "What the hell did you see tonight?"

"I just want to sleep. Okay?"

He nodded slowly. Took the glass from me. Pulled me into his arms cautiously as though he sensed I might resist.

He fell asleep long before I did.

I was letting Bruce out the front entrance when Riordan showed up early the next morning.

Natural enemies, the Press and the Police -- they gave each other wide berth like well-trained but suspicious dogs.

I could see Bruce was hoping for a farewell smooch. I felt uncomfortable under Riordan's sardonic eye -- what the hell was he doing there so early, anyway? I returned Bruce's embrace as stiffly as a Ken doll without the bendable knees.

"I'll call you," Bruce said, releasing me.

I nodded.

"Well, well," Riordan commented, clomping up the stairs behind me.

I ignored him, went into the kitchen and poured myself a cup of coffee.

"Sugar. No milk," he requested, pulling a chair from the table.

I poured him coffee. He took the cup in two big hands manly-man style. He looked like I felt, as though he hadn't slept all night, but he'd at least had time to shave and comb his hair.

He wore jeans, a gray sweatshirt and Reeboks, as though he had been on his way to the gym. Now that was kind of curious. He wasn't dressed for work and he had been lurking outside my shop at the crack of dawn. Early for a social call. Was he planning to knock off a potential witness?

"For the record," he began crisply, "There was no chess piece at the scene. We vacuumed it. Twice."

"Maybe I interrupted him before he could plant it."

"Maybe. But you didn't go to high school with La Pierra did you? La Pierra was never a member of any Chess Club?"

"No."

He sipped his coffee. Felt his point had been made, I guess.

Two separate killers preying on the gay community at the same time? I didn't buy it.

I said, "Maybe Claude was killed for another reason."

"Like?"

"He thought he knew who killed Robert."

"And that would be --?"

"You."

He was expecting this it seemed. His lips quirked in a half-smile. "You do have balls, English." He took another swallow of coffee.

When nothing else seemed forthcoming I said, "Claude said you were gay."

This did get a reaction, although not what I expected.

"Gay." Riordan made a sound of disgust. "What a stupid term."

"What do you prefer?"

"Homosexual. Having sexual desire for those of the same sex."

"Yeah, such a mouthful though."

He slanted me a tawny look. "You don't seem surprised."

"I've had time to adjust to the idea."

"Me too, but it still comes as a shock."

When he moved, the outline of the powerful muscles in his arms and shoulders was plainly visible beneath the soft material of the sweatshirt. Same with the taut outline of his thigh muscles in those comfortably faded jeans. He would have made quick work of Rob or even Claude. He'd make quick work of me, no doubt, but somehow the fact that he smelled like deodorant soap and April-fresh fabric softener disarmed me. He smelled -- and looked -- like he grabbed his clothes straight out of the hot dryer. The sad thing was the overall

impression was as groomed and confident as Bruce who spent three times the effort and money in getting that I-was-an-International-Male-model effect.

Life ain't fair.

I asked, genuinely curious, "How do you function? Does anyone know?"

"No. I kill everyone I fuck," he said derisively. "What do you think?"

"I mean anyone close to you. Family or friends?"

He met my gaze levelly. "No. And no one's going to." That was certainly straight enough for anyone.

"Is that a threat?"

"Do you really think I killed La Pierra?" He seemed amused.

"He said you threatened him."

"Oh, I did. And I meant it. It's as much as my life is worth out there." He jerked his head indicating the mean streets of Old Pasadena I suppose.

"What do you do? You date women?"

"I like women." After a moment he added wryly, "I just like men better."

I stared, trying to make sense of him. Now I knew why that old Sarah McLachlan song had seemed so appropriate. Especially the line, "You're so beautiful. A beautiful fucked up man." That about summed it up.

"So, do you have relationships with men?"

"Relationships?" He was sneering openly now. "Yeah. I have relationships with men. My father, my brothers, my partner. I have sex with queers. Don't confuse the two."

"Queers and men?"

"Sex and relationships."

"You've never had a healthy, satisfying homosexual relationship." It wasn't a question, but he answered anyway.

"That's a contradiction in terms."

Probably for him it was. If Claude was right, Riordan's playground was the dark world of S/M. Masters and slaves. Pain and bondage and humiliation and punishment -- everything he felt he deserved, no doubt.

"Claude said you're into the whole leather scene. That he used to see you at a club called Ball and Chain."

His eyes were very green as they held my own. If this was the secret he had killed to protect, I had just put the finishing touches on my death warrant.

"Is it true?"

"Why? Looking for sponsor?"

"I'm strictly a safe sex kind of guy."

“Yeah?”

I didn’t understand that odd smile. Maybe he thought finding a guy leaving my apartment in the a.m. was a normal occurrence for me.

I was afraid to ask. I asked anyway. “What about Robert?”

“What about him?”

“Did you know him?” What I meant was, *did you kill him?*

“No.”

I don’t know if I believed him or not. I wasn’t sure why he had revealed as much as he had to me. International Coffee Moment? Or because there was simply no one else in his life he could confide in? I couldn’t imagine what it would be like trying to live under so much pressure, the strain of a double life. Small wonder if he wasn’t schizoid.

He said casually, “By the way, we ran that card for fingerprints. Clean -- other than yours.”

“Mine?” Where would he get a comparison set of my fingerprints? I opened my mouth to ask, then caught his expression.

“Rob’s apartment,” I said. I remembered that before we left he had picked up my glass and carried it to the kitchen. At least that’s what I’d thought; apparently the glass and my gloves had been removed for evidence.

As though I hadn’t spoken, he added, “The flowers were a dead end.”

“I hate for you to keep wasting your time. Maybe you should just plant evidence against me.”

He let that go too. “It’s interesting about the cat, though. It had been asphyxiated. It was too old and well-fed to be a stray. Any of your neighbors missing a cat?”

“I don’t know.” I dragged my thoughts back from the realization that the bastard had taken advantage of my moment of weakness. Why not? He was a cop and I was his numero uno suspect. This was a good reminder that I could not let my guard down with him. “Asphyxiated, huh?”

“Right.” He watched me speculatively.

I said, “There’s a Thai restaurant next door. If someone’s missing a cat, you should probably talk to them.”

His laugh sounded like it caught him off guard.

“I didn’t kill someone’s cat and stow it in the stockroom to lend weight to my story of being stalked.”

“It does seem unlikely,” he admitted.

I said, “Thanks for that much. So why didn’t this freak chop the cat up too?”

“Maybe he liked the cat,” Riordan commented. “Maybe he’s kind to small animals and little old ladies.”

"Then he wouldn't be the normal serial killer."

"Normal serial killer ..." he repeated thoughtfully.

Was I totally off the mark? Shortly before his death Robert had been romantically involved with someone none of his friends knew -- someone who might or might not be his killer. The same person who had killed Robert had broken into my shop. Whoever had broken into my shop was almost certainly the same person sending threatening cards, flowers, etc. My anonymous phone caller was someone I knew or someone who had access to the phone directory of someone I knew, namely Robert.

That all added up, right? Logically, Robert's killer and my stalker had to be one and the same.

And while I was the one who had originally suggested the possibility of a serial killer -- and as popular as barking mad, opera-playing, Chianti-swilling serial killers are in fiction -- I was more and more inclined to believe that whoever had killed Robert had some discernable motive.

I was thinking aloud, "He lets himself in with Robert's key. He trashes my place, leaves the cat in the trunk to rot and lets himself out again. Why didn't he just wait and kill me?"

Riordan traced the painted leaf on the cup with his thumb. "Harassment? Dirty tricks? Maybe someone who knows you've got a bum ticker."

"You think someone's trying to scare me to death?"

Riordan shrugged.

"Why not just kill me?" I repeated.

"I'll play. Why not?"

As they used to say in those B sci-fi movies from the Fifties: Reverse polarization! What was the motive for *not* killing me?

I rose, refilled my cup. "Was the same weapon used to kill Claude and Robert?"

"Won't know for sure till we see the ME's report. I'd guess yes. I'm not big on coincidence. I'll tell you something, though. The wounds were not the same. The level of rage was not there."

I remembered how the newspapers had described the viciousness with which Robert had been attacked. His face slashed, stab wounds in his throat, his eyes --

"Claude was killed more ... conventionally?"

He smiled faintly. "You could put it that way. Hersey's killer was acting out some fantasy. An orgy of violence. La Pierra's was in a hurry."

"He couldn't have known I was coming back."

"Right."

"Unless you think I killed Claude?"

He glanced at the slightly puffy knuckles of my hand resting on the table. "Not nearly enough blood on your clothes. And no murder weapon."

"Not even in the Bronco?" I inquired blandly. "I wondered why you were so considerate as to have me driven home."

"You're so cynical." Riordan was grinning.

He drained his cup. Rose to leave. I rose too and went to get his jacket. Brown leather and no epaulettes. So maybe the S/M thing was more of a hobby than a vocation.

At the door I asked, "Have you had any luck tracing Felice or any of the others from the Chess Club?"

He shrugged into his jacket, not meeting my eyes. "No."

"No. You haven't even tried."

I must have sounded bitter enough that he said after a moment, "Look, I did run some inquiries. Okay? Nothing yet."

* * * * *

Friday afternoon brought galleys from my publisher. This proof that my first novel was fast approaching the reality stage took my mind off my other problems. I went upstairs, made myself a cup of Special Roast, got out a box of Belgian chocolate almond cookies, and began pouring over the galleys. Soon I was lost again in the world of my own imagination, wincing at certain phrases, pleasantly surprised at others. Absorbed in the pages before me, I was amazed when I came up for air and it was nearly five o'clock.

I went downstairs. Angus was eating a subway sandwich and pondering the obituary section of the *Times*. Bits of lettuce and salami dotted the newsprint like confetti.

"Dead you wail the western male," he enunciated through layers of sandwich.

"Come again?" Not that anything surprised me at this point. If he'd started spouting Chaucer I'd have taken it as par for the course.

Angus masticated ferociously, swallowed, and repeated as though for the deaf, "Did you want the rest of the mail?"

"Thank you. I did." I picked up the bundle of mail and felt around under the counter. "Do you know what happened to the letter opener?"

"No."

"It was right here." I squatted down, running my hands along the shelves. "It looks like a miniature dagger. Mother of Pearl handle?"

Actually it was a witch's bolline, a long ago Halloween gag gift from Mel.

"I never saw it," said Angus.

I stared at him. He blinked nervously behind his specs, bit his lip. I had no idea if he was lying or not. He was the kind of kid who acts guilty even when he isn't.

I tried to think of the last time I'd seen the letter opener. I'd been using the one in my office for the past few days. I didn't remember seeing the bolline since Robert had opened the mail Friday last.

It wasn't like I still had any special attachment to the thing. I couldn't rid myself of the suspicion it had been taken during last Monday's break-in, but that didn't make sense. Still, the feeling of unease persisted.

I went back to the office and began shuffling through the post. Along with the usual books and magazines and catalogs (how did I get on the *Things You Never Knew Existed* mailing list?) was a flat, square package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. The writing was crooked, a child's scrawl in red crayon.

I used my pen knife on the string. Slid the blade beneath the brown flaps. A CD lay on my desk. Verdi's *Requiem*.

"God damn it!" I picked the plastic case up and threw it across the room. The case pinwheeled through the air, hit the metal shelf and broke open. Two parts landed on the floor. The CD rolled in a neat circle, flipped over and lay face up.

I jumped up, crossed the room in two strides and picked up the CD. Across the front in black Sharpie were printed the words, "*Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.*"

Fatal shadows. Fatal shit. I reached for the phone.

But then, slowly, I replaced the receiver. What was the point in calling the police? Messrs. Serve and Protect had me pegged as a hysterical faggot who had only himself to blame if a disgruntled suitor was stalking him. Riordan was obviously undecided as to whether I was capable of sending myself gruesome presents for attention. Not amazing if he still suspected me of offing Robert.

I went upstairs, put the CD on the player. Immediately the music spilled out, silken and somber, gliding around the sunlit rooms, trailing after me into my study. I pulled out my *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and scanned the index. I found what I was looking for under "Fatal." English Dramatist John Fletcher (1579-1625) -- of whom I'd never heard -- had written something called "Honest Man's Fortune."

*Man is his own star; and the soul that can
Render an honest and perfect man,
Commands all light, all influence, all fate,
Nothing to him falls early or too late.
Our acts, our angels are, for good or ill
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.*

Chapter Twelve

What would Grace Latham have done in my position? Well, in close to twenty mystery novels she would have run straight to the murderer with the only piece of proof, and placed herself in mortal jeopardy. That was the difference between me and Grace -- she usually managed to stumble onto a piece of evidence, a useful clue, *something*. Grace also had dapper Colonel Primrose to feed her inside info and to save her well-bred ass at the last minute. I had no such ally.

So despite the blue skies smiling at me that early Saturday morning, my mood was gloomy. I stood at the kitchen window watching white clouds gambol playfully across blue fields of sky, the sun shining with relentless cheer, drying out the rain puddles, the wet roofs, the glistening streets -- and my soggy brain.

Over a can of Tab I jotted down what I thought I knew so far -- what I believed to be the facts of the case.

Tara had motive: according to the police she stood to inherit a sizeable chunk of change. That was usually sufficient grounds for murder in most Leslie Ford novels, but how did it apply to knocking me off? I didn't benefit from Robert's will, and when I died whatever I left went to various gay men's organizations.

I could think of other reasons someone might decide to get rid of Robert: jealousy, for one. Claude had been sick with jealousy after Robert dumped him, but Claude had been killed too. Of course Claude was just one of many, so maybe another of Robert's discarded lovers was out there evening the score. But again, why come after me? Robert and I had not been romantically involved.

Maybe Robert *had* been the victim of a hate crime. Max certainly loathed Robert, but I couldn't quite picture Max killing Robert except in the heat of the moment. Robert's murder had been premeditated. No one randomly carries chess pieces around, except maybe disgruntled Russian ex-champs. Besides, while Max might not care for my lifestyle -- or me,

for that matter -- I couldn't believe my existence troubled him enough for him to bother killing me.

I scratched my nose with the end of my pen. Yeah, lots of possible reasons, and each more improbable than the last. Maybe the blackmail theory wasn't so far-fetched. Rob desperately needed money and he would get a kick out of watching someone squirm. He'd never had any sense about taking a joke too far. And Detective Riordan, for example, didn't seem to enjoy much sense of humor. But while I could see it might be to Riordan's advantage to frame me for Robert's murder, I couldn't see him risking a third homicide.

So while I could think of a number of reasons -- bad and good -- for killing Robert, I couldn't arrive at a common motive for eliminating both Robert and me. And I was convinced that Robert's murder was not a unique and separate event. It was connected to ... my murder.

Though apparently the cops didn't share my vision, I believed this indicated a larger pattern. But that's where my tidy logical equation fell apart. Why hadn't I been killed? Why instead had Claude been killed? What did Claude have to do with anything?

I sighed and tossed my pen down. Went to put on Verdi's *Requiem* once more. Though it had probably been intended to strike terror in my heart, ironically, as I listened absently to the haunting beauty of "Libera Me" I felt calm, certain that if I just kept at it, the answer would come to me. So what if the police wouldn't help me? The police didn't have a vested interest. I did.

The problem was, I kind of had to agree with Riordan and the inscrutable Chan. A motive for murder stretching back to adolescence seemed farfetched.

What the hell did it mean? That I could add the facts of the case all day, and not get any closer to the truth?

I glanced at the clock, got out the phone book and tried calling all the numbers under "Landis." As it was Saturday I hit fewer answering machines and more real people, but eight phone calls later I still had no leads. I didn't get it. It always worked in mystery novels.

Right before eleven o'clock I went downstairs to spell Angus. He was reading about Claude's murder in the paper which he folded guiltily and shoved beneath the counter when I appeared. I'd already caught the headline, "Slasher Targets Gay Community."

We had a writer's signing scheduled for the next weekend -- provided we were all still alive for it. A lot of preparation goes into a successful signing: having enough of the author's books on hand, advertising ahead of time, planning the refreshments. I put as much time into it as I hoped someone would do for me one day.

Since this author was gay, I knew we'd have to prep harder than usual. Claude had been lined up to handle the refreshments; now it was back to me and Trader Joe's.

Angus returned from lunch and we worked out the menu; which is to say I threw ideas out and Angus made faces and simulated gagging motions.

"Cheese puffs," he advised.

"Powdered cheese gets all over the books."

"Everybody loves cheesy puffs. Even f --"

"Even fags?"

He started coughing as though he'd inhaled one of his own cheesy puffs.

I eyed him. "From your vast culinary expertise what do you think about water chestnuts wrapped in bacon?"

"Uh ... yeah, whatever. I mean. ..."

I waited.

Angus fiddled with a paper clip. "Do you need me that day?"

"Some reason you don't want to be here?"

Angus turned red everywhere his skin showed and I felt a little sorry for him.

"No," he squeaked.

"Good. Because I need you here."

"It's just -- it's a full moon."

I bit back my first comment and said, "There will be other full moons, Angus."

* * * * *

Bruce called a couple of hours later. I was doing the bills. Not my favorite thing.

"What are you doing?" His voice was low, intimate.

"Working."

Quiet laugh. "Doing what?"

"The usual. What are you doing? What are you working on these days?" Two phone calls in less than twelve hours. Wow. At long last I was winning friends and influencing people.

"I'm freelance. I pick and choose." He talked about what he was picking and choosing. I listened absently, totting figures. "I don't like to travel though," Bruce was saying. "I must be getting old. I try to find stuff that interests me close to home."

"Must be nice." I squinted at my calculations.

A pause and then, "Is something wrong?"

"No. Of course not."

"Yeah. Something is. Look, Adrien, I told you the truth. I'm not working on this Gay Slasher story. *Boytimes* put a staffer on it. I just want to see you again."

"I believe you."

"So when can I see you?"

I don't know what the problem was. I'd been celibate -- which is a more dignified word for lonely -- for years. Now I had someone in my life saying all the right things, doing all the right things, and suddenly I felt pressured. So much for preaching to Riordan about healthy, satisfying homosexual relationships.

"I don't know," I said finally.

"Tonight?"

I tried to think of a good reason not to. There wasn't one.

"Tonight is fine."

"I'll pick you up."

* * * * *

Late afternoon trade picked up and I had to put aside the amateur sleuthing for the day.

After an initially slow start, business was improving steadily. That was one reason I had been able to offer Robert a job when he needed one -- the store was really more than I could handle on my own -- although I had tried. I had been reluctant to end my period of suspended animation by letting a living breathing person invade my space. Now I couldn't help feeling like maybe that instinct had been a good one.

When we finally had a lull, I took a quick break, eating an apple and half a chicken salad sandwich in my office while I thumbed once more through Robert's yearbook. I studied the immature, unformed faces of the Chess Club as though it would be possible to read their thoughts. That's when the light bulb went on.

Tara.

No, she hadn't belonged to the Chess Club. No, she hadn't even attended West Valley Academy till the following year, but she had spent that long hot summer with Robert, and she had been eager to know everything about him. And Robert had liked to talk.

I dialed Tara.

She wasn't thrilled to hear from me. I could hear a TV blasting and kids yelling in the background. Sioux City Serenade.

"Adrien, it was a long time ago," Tara protested finally when I'd explained what I was after.

"I know, but try to remember. The Chess Club broke up after one semester. Why?"

"It's a boring game."

"Come on, Tara."

A heavy sigh all along the miles of corn fields and rolling prairie.

"I don't really know. That's the truth."

"What did Robert say?"

I could hear her hesitation, her doubt. "If he'd wanted you to know, Adrien, he'd have told you."

"Oh for -- !"

Irritably, she said, "Somebody cheated, I think. There was this big match. Tournament, I guess you'd call it, between all these schools. Someone from West Valley cheated. West Valley was disqualified."

I absorbed this doubtfully. "That can't be it." I don't know what I was expecting. Yes, I do. Reason for murder.

"Well, that's the only thing I know of. Think about it, Adrien. It was very embarrassing. Kids don't like to be embarrassed. Especially teenagers. Robert was still fuming months later."

Robert did not like to be embarrassed, that had never changed. He did not like to seem foolish. He did not like to appear in the wrong. But Robert had not cheated. He would never cheat in a million years -- and Robert was the one who was dead.

I tried to remember, but my perceptions of that year were colored by the two main events of my life up to that point: nearly dying, and realizing I was gay. The two had seemed inextricably linked.

"Who cheated?"

"Bob never said."

"Come off it, Tara. Rob told you everything."

"Not everything," she said bitterly and covered the mouthpiece to snap at one of the kids.

This reminded me of something that had been nagging at me. "Tara, why were you in LA before Robert was killed?"

Her breath caught sharply. "How do you know that?"

"Robert told me."

"Bob didn't --" she broke off and said, "I've got to go."

Huh? "Wait! One more question, please, Tara. Why did the Chess Club fall apart?"

"Mr. Atkins, the sponsor, pulled the plug."

"Why?"

"I guess because of the cheating incident. I don't know. Look, Adrien, you'd better not be sticking your nose in my personal life."

"I'm not. Why did Atkins pull the plug?"

"Well, Nancy Drew, why don't you ask him?" she said and hung up.

Chapter Thirteen

Mr. Atkins had retired from the thankless task of trying to force-feed knowledge to children who now packed guns. The “Head Master’s” secretary took my name and number and promised to pass them along.

I went downstairs and freed Angus from the shackles of slavery -- you would have thought so anyway from the way he hightailed it. I locked up.

As I started up the staircase I thought I heard a soft rustling from the rear of the shop.

I went back downstairs, walked down the narrow aisles, through the towering paperback canyons. Allingham to Zubro, there was nothing out of order. I poked my head in the office.

“Hello?”

Nothing.

Feeling silly I snapped the light off again and went upstairs to dress for meeting Bruce.

I had a drink while I shaved. I spent a long time trying to decide what to wear, settling on a dress shirt in a shade the sales associate at Saks called “curry,” and a pair of black trousers. I felt ridiculously nervous. When the phone rang I snatched it off the receiver.

It was Detective Riordan and he sounded grim. “Two things: we just got the paperwork from Buffalo PD. Richard Corday died from injuries sustained falling twelve stories onto a cement poolyard.”

I swallowed hard. “Was it suicide?”

“It was a suspicious death. Corday checked in alone, and only his personal effects were found in the room; but one of the maids said she had accidentally walked in on Corday and a guest a few hours earlier.”

“A man?”

“A woman, she thought. She saw women’s clothes tossed around the room.”

“That’s impossible.”

"I'm just giving you the facts."

"Wait a minute." I was thinking out loud. "Suppose the women's clothes were Rusty's? He died in drag."

Silence. "It's a possibility," he said grudgingly.

"Could he have fallen accidentally?"

"No way. They faxed over photos of the room, including the windows. He could have jumped or he could have been stuffed out, but he couldn't have lost his balance. He was drunk however, and he was wearing women's clothing, which sounded enough like reason for suicide to the boys in Buffalo."

"Was there a chess piece anywhere?"

"I was getting to that. In Corday's color-coordinated handbag were his American Express card --"

"Don't leave home without it," I murmured.

"His keys -- including his room key, a clean white hanky, a MAC lipstick -- Pink Glaze, if you're interested, and one chess piece. A queen."

Never had I felt so little pleasure in being right.

Could Rusty's death be unconnected? After all, he didn't even live in the same state.

But then what about the coincidence of his belonging to the Chess Club? The Chess Club had to play into it -- how else could one explain a game piece clutched in a dying man's hand? There was no chess set in Robert's apartment that I'd noticed. His killer had to have left it as a calling card.

I said, "You told me Tara was in LA when Robert died. Do you know why?"

"To get back with him."

"She told me Robert didn't know she was here."

"She was here to ask his family to pull an intervention."

"An *intervention*? What were they going to intervene with? His being gay?"

"That's the story."

"And you believe it?"

"Hersey's sisters corroborated her story."

I started as I heard the downstairs buzzer. Bruce was early.

"You still there?" Riordan asked.

"Hmm? Yes, I'm here. You said two things."

"Second thing. Remind your mother," his voice crackled with hostility, "and her mouthpiece that you have been handled with kid gloves up until now. We could have hauled your bony ass in for interrogation anytime we chose. We haven't done that, have we?"

"No." I was barely able to form the word.

“No. In fact, I went out of my way to keep you off ice. And that was before I knew Mommy Dearest and the police chief’s wife are on the same Save-the-Spaniels committee. I don’t appreciate getting called on the carpet. Got that?”

I could feel myself turning into an ice sculpture: the chilling effect of humiliation. Before I could explain, Riordan’s voice altered, grew brisk, impersonal. I knew someone was standing near him. “I’ve got to go.”

He rang off and I went downstairs to meet Bruce.

* * * * *

We dined at Celestino on the patio. It was crowded and chilly. People talked and smoked at other tables, but even after a couple of drinks I felt removed from my surroundings, detached. I blamed it on Riordan’s phone call and tried to shake off my preoccupation.

Over swordfish carpaccio with orange and fennel salad, I got Bruce to tell me about himself. Used to doing the interviewing, he was clearly not comfortable on this side of the questions, but I’d had enough of my own problems for a while. I kept turning the conversation back to Bruce, and gradually, soup through dessert, I got his life story. Like me he’d grown up in the Valley. Unlike me he’d attended public schools, graduating from Chatsworth High and going on to CSUN. Like me, he’d realized he was gay his last year of high school. Unlike me, his family had disowned him the minute he came out of the closet.

“In retrospect it would have been wiser to wait, like you did, to break it to them.”

“It wasn’t wisdom,” I told him. “My motto growing up was always, ‘Discretion is the better part of valor.’ ”

He said reflectively, “I think they would have come to terms with it, but both my parents died right after I graduated from college.”

“I’m sorry.”

He smiled awkwardly. “Your family was more enlightened, I take it?”

I shrugged. “In a weird way I think my mother is relieved there will never be a young Mrs. English to contend with. She’s not keen on competition.” I grinned wryly meeting Bruce’s sympathetic gaze.

He didn’t talk much about his work, seeming reticent, as though he suspected I might not approve. I tried to make all the appropriate noises and faces. I realized though that I was trying too hard.

Bruce realized it too. “I’m boring you, aren’t I?”

“Hell no!”

His lopsided smile was rueful and appealing in his homely face. “It’s okay. I bore myself.”

“No, Bruce. I’ve just got a lot on my mind.”

"Were you lovers?"

"Who?"

"You and Hersey."

"No. A long time ago." I didn't want to talk about it. I had to work through those memories on my own.

"What about you and -- what was his name? Pierre?"

"La Pierra. No. He was" I took a breath. "A good friend. I should have --"

"What?" His solemn dark eyes were curious.

I shook my head. I didn't want to share those thoughts either -- maybe not the most promising indicator of a change in my emotional litmus. I put my hand over my glass when he raised the wine bottle. He frowned. "What's the problem?"

"Two of my closest friends have been killed."

"Do you think there's a connection?"

"Of course there's a connection."

"I mean to you."

"Me?"

He nodded gravely. "Was there anything else they had in common?"

I looked at him, but I was seeing Robert. What did Robert and I have in common?

We were both gay. We were the same age and race. We went to the same high school. We belonged to the Chess Club in high school -- as well as the tennis team and sharing many of the same classes. We both knew Claude. We both knew Tara. We both knew a lot of the same people. So what?

The truth was, Robert and I had very little in common besides being gay and going to high school together.

Into my silence, Bruce said softly, "There is something isn't there?"

I barely heard him. Had Claude hedged about knowing who Robert was seeing before his death? Maybe he really hadn't known. Whoever Robert had been seeing it hadn't been for long or openly, because none of Robert's crowd knew anything about the guy. Claude had claimed Riordan had killed Robert. Claude had claimed Riordan was going to kill him.

Something didn't make sense. Should I assume that Robert's killer and Claude's killer were the same? Did that only hold true if Robert's killer and my stalker were the same? Why kill Claude? Why not kill me?

Were the flowers and CD a prelude to murder? Had Robert also received these tokens of esteem? If so, he hadn't considered himself "stalked." Maybe I was more insecure.

Robert had not been stalked. Claude had not been stalked. But Claude and Robert were both dead. I was being stalked but I was not dead. Not yet.

I became aware that Bruce was waiting for an answer. I said, "You probably know more about that than me."

"I'm off the story, remember? Conflict of interest."

I wondered if he resented that conflict? How much did his career mean to him? How far could he be trusted?"

"Do you play chess?" I asked suddenly.

He smiled. "Sure. You?"

"Not for years. I was thinking -- if there's some special significance to chess."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." I sighed. Ran a hand through my hair. I was tired. And once again I'd had too much to drink.

"There's something you're not telling me," Bruce's gaze held mine.

"It's just a theory."

"Tell me."

Belatedly, I remembered Riordan had warned me to keep my mouth shut. "No. It's nothing." I looked at my watch. Tried not to yawn.

"Did you want to get out of here, Adrien?" he asked abruptly.

* * * * *

It was just a couple of minutes drive back to the bookstore.

"I had this planned so differently," Bruce said in the quiet of the car.

"I had a good time."

In the silence that stretched, he asked diffidently, "Will you come back to my place?"

We drove back to Bruce's. He lived in one of those quiet Chatsworth neighborhoods in one of those sprawling brown and yellow ranch-style houses. The grass was getting long, there were dandelions in the flower beds, and the asphalt driveway needed resurfacing.

Bruce let us into the dark house. My nostrils twitched at the faint scent of air freshener and cat.

"Sorry it's such a mess." He switched on the lights as we went through the rooms.

It wasn't a mess. It was spotless. It also wasn't like anything I'd imagined. Plastic fruit in bowls, the Leaning Tree gallery of Indian paintings, a bookshelf full of stuff like Dr. Spock on raising kids, Barbara Cartland romances, an out of date set of *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The china cabinet was full of pink stemware. The kind of stuff you get at markets for buying so many dollars worth of produce. It didn't strike me as Bruce's taste.

"Did you want a glass of wine?"

May as well be drunk as the way I am, I thought. "Sure."

There were plenty of those multi-picture frames featuring a nice middle-class American family, mom and dad and a cute little girl who went from pigtails to wedding gown. There were even photos of assorted dogs and cats, but no photos of Bruce. Pale squares and ovals on the wall indicated where his pictures once hung.

"This was your Mom and Dad's house?" I lifted up a figurine. A dog tugging on a girl's dress.

"Yeah. I'm not here enough to bother clearing this junk out," Bruce explained, again reading my thoughts. He brought me a glass of wine.

We touched glasses and Bruce kissed me.

* * * * *

Moonlight flooded the room but Bruce slept peacefully on. I eased gingerly out from under his arm, padded over to the window, put one hand on the cool glass.

The backyard was vaguely familiar like so many yards out of my Southern California childhood. There was a cactus garden in the center of the patio, which featured a built-in barbecue. In the jungle of weeds stood a rusted swing set, gilded in moonlight. I could make out the roof of an empty dog house behind tufts of dead ornamental grass. And, unless I missed my guess, around the corner of the house would be a narrow walkway with steps leading up to a side door. Potted palms on either side.

"What are you thinking about?" Bruce's whisper behind me had me starting. He put a hand on my shoulder, warm, possessive.

"Nothing."

"More bad dreams?" His voice was as low as though he feared his parents could still hear. I shook my head.

He kissed my shoulder. "You're so beautiful."

There was a sudden blockage in my throat. "Bruce --"

"You don't know how long I've dreamed of you here. With me. Like this." He guided me back to bed.

We lay down, put our arms around each other. Already this was becoming familiar.

I wanted it to be familiar. I wanted it to be right. I rejected the disloyal thought that Bruce was clutching me too tightly, that his urgent gasps didn't leave me room to breathe, that he was rough when I needed tenderness, and tentative when I needed sureness.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking."

"I love you," Bruce murmured against my ear. I turned my head quickly, stopping his words with my kiss.

* * * * *

The answering machine was signaling disaster when I finally got in. Some impulse made me hit Play despite my exhaustion.

“Where the hell are you?” Riordan sounded ... angry wasn’t quite the word. “Call me when you get in. I don’t care what time it is.” He recited a couple of new numbers to phone.

I didn’t think he meant five-thirty in the morning, and I didn’t have the energy to deal with him right now anyway. I stripped, dived into bed, loving the cool kiss of my own sheets on my nakedness. The bed did a spin. I closed my eyes. Passed out.

* * * * *

I was surprised when Mr. Atkins called. He said he always enjoyed meeting with former students, and we arranged to meet for lunch at the Denny’s on Topanga Canyon.

I recognized him immediately in blue-tinted spectacles that matched a baggy sleeveless sweater. I recalled that he had a sleeveless sweater in every shade of blue. His hair was thinning but still longish. It occurred to me that while he had seemed ancient and venerable to my 11th grader eyes, he couldn’t have been that old. He was only about sixty now.

“I come here for the early bird specials,” he informed me with a wink, and poured a second packet of C&H into his tea. “That’s the beauty of early retirement, son. You’re still young enough to enjoy life.”

We ordered, and while we waited to be served Mr. Atkins said, “I was very sorry to hear about Robert Hersey. I told my wife when I read the story in the paper what a waste it was. Such a bright, handsome kid.”

“This may sound crazy,” I said, rearranging the salt shakers. “But I’m afraid Robert’s death could have something to do with what happened with the Chess Club.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Mr. Atkins pushed his glasses back up his nose and frowned at me.

“No. Rusty Corday’s dead too -- also under suspicious circumstances. Both Rusty and Rob were found with ... well ... chess pieces.”

“What do you mean “found” with them?”

I explained what I meant. Mr. Atkin’s eyebrows shot up. “Well of course the whole school knew about Corday, but Hersey. I just can’t believe that. Hersey a queer?” He considered me, and I saw the light dawn. “Ah, I see,” he said regretfully.

Maybe at some point that doesn’t sting any more. I said stiffly, “The thing is, two people dead out of such a small group seems like too much of a coincidence.”

“Don’t get me wrong, son,” Mr. Atkins said. “Moralizing went out with Henry James. But it’s an unhealthy way to live, isn’t it?”

There were a number of responses to that. None conducive to getting more information.

The waitress brought our lunches. As soon as she was out of range, Mr. Atkins said, "I think you're wrong, though. I admit at the time there might have been reason for murder, if you listen to the talk show hosts. There's nothing more unstable than the adolescent male."

"What actually happened?"

"You were there. Oh, that's right. You came down with mono or something, didn't you?"

"When I got back you had quit sponsoring the club."

"Hell. I should hope so. What a mess!" He shook his head and ate a french fry. "Well, it's no mystery. We were invited to the All City Tournament, and Grant Landis, the big doofus, cheated. Tried to cheat anyway. Knocked the board after making an illegal move or some such crap. You can't cheat at chess. Not like that."

"What happened?"

"We were disqualified." He made a face. "The kids were humiliated and angry. Landis was -- well, I felt sorry for the kid. Poor bastard. All he wanted was to fit in. You know the kind of kid who tries too hard to be funny. Gets a laugh and then keeps telling the same joke over and over. He had a knack for irritating and annoying the kids he most wanted to impress -- like your pal Hersey."

I tried to remember Landis. I thought maybe Rob and I had gone over to his house once or twice for study groups, but I couldn't put a face to the name. Dark, I thought. Bushy dark hair when nobody was wearing bushy dark hair. Glasses, maybe.

"And you quit sponsoring the club? Why not just throw Landis out?"

"He quit." Mr. Atkins looked uncomfortable at some memory. "Kids are merciless. One of the pack shows weakness and the others'll devour him."

"And that was it? They drove Landis out and you quit sponsoring the club?"

Mr. Atkins ate another french fry.

"There's something else, isn't there? Can't you tell me? It might be important."

"It was a long time ago, son." He chewed thoughtfully.

"What happened to Landis? I don't remember him my senior year."

"Transferred out. Public school." Behind the blue shades his eyes met mine and flicked away.

I said, "Mr. Atkins, it's not curiosity. I've got to know."

Mr. Atkins finished chewing and seemed to come to some conclusion.

"Suit yourself. About a month after the whole fiasco Landis was jumped one night coming home from the library. Well, Landis was a strapping kid. Skinny but substantial. So there had to be a gang of them. Anyway, they held him down, shaved his entire body, smeared make up all over his face, and put him in a dress. Then the little shits took photos which they handed round the school."

I was silent trying to imagine this.

"Of course there was a stink to high heaven. We had everyone from the cops to the school board breathing down our neck. But nobody ever squealed."

"Landis must have known who did it."

"He said they wore masks. Maybe they did, but I always thought he was lying. I think he knew who it was, but what the hell. It wouldn't have made his life any easier to finger them." He added caustically, "Nowadays he'd have just come back with an automatic weapon."

"Why did you assume it was somebody in the Chess Club? It sounds more like something a bunch of asshole jocks would do."

"The Chess Club *was* a bunch of asshole jocks," Mr. Atkins retorted. "Hersey was on the tennis team. So were you for that matter. Felicity, or whatever her name was, was the shining star of women's softball. And Andrew Chin was a diver."

"What about Rusty Corday?"

"Corday? Was he the wispy little red-haired queer bait?" He caught my eyes. "Sorry, but the kid was flaming."

I was silent. I had to give old Mr. Chipps credit. I'd never have dreamed he was so full of biases back in the days of chalkboards and report cards. He'd seemed the epitome of the open-minded nonjudgmental educator.

I said slowly, thinking aloud. "Rob, Rusty and I were all gay. Not that Rob and I would have called it *that*, even to each other. Not then. Although what the hell we thought we were doing ..."

Mr. Atkins cleared his throat uneasily, recalling me to the present.

"Was Landis gay? Or Chin?" I asked.

"Kids that age don't know what they are."

"But they dressed Landis in drag?"

"That doesn't prove he was queer."

"That could have been the message though. Maybe it was an accusation aimed at the entire club."

"No."

"You seem pretty sure."

"You teach a few years and you get an ear for lies. I don't know who, and I don't know why, but it was the kids in the Chess Club that humiliated Landis that way. The photos were developed in the journalism class."

Robert.

I began to understand why Robert had sort of forgot to mention any of this to me during the long months of my convalescence. He'd had a tendency even then to resent "Tiny Tim's lectures."

Mr. Atkins finished his french fries. "All the same, son, I think you're reaching. I don't believe there could be any connection between Hersey's death and the Chess Club."

"Why's that?"

"The one with the -- er -- motive would be Landis. Right? Well Landis is dead. He died right after high school."

Chapter Fourteen

"I need to see you tonight," Bruce's voice said on my answering machine.

I fast forwarded through the rest of his message. A lot of tape.

Three hang ups and then Riordan, terse and to the point. "Call me when you get in."

I called the Hollywood Investigative Services Unit and asked for Homicide. After a couple of transfers I got Prince Charming himself.

"Yeah? Riordan here."

"It's me. Adrien," I said ungrammatically.

"Where the *hell* --" There was a pause. Then, "Hang on a sec." I was back on hold. A couple of minutes later Riordan came back on the line. "Still there?"

"What are you doing, tracing my call? I'm at home."

"I told you to call me last night."

"I wasn't home last night. I left a message for you this morning."

"Just shut up and listen."

"Well since you ask so nicely"

There was silence. I listened. He didn't say anything.

"Are we communicating through the Psychic Hotline or what?"

"Shut up a sec," he said from between his pearly whites.

I shut up. Welcome to the closet, I thought. Is it dark in here or is it just me?

Riordan said very quietly, "Listen, I don't want you to overreact, but I think you may be ... next."

"*What?*" I guess it was the uncharacteristically subdued way he spoke. It scared the hell out of me. "I *told* you!"

"Yes. I owe you an apology. Well, sort of."

"You got that right." Though it was what I'd been yelping about all along, it suddenly seemed preposterous. "What makes you think I'm ... next?"

"It's this frigging Chess Club thing. I spent the last forty-eight hours checking into it."

"And?"

"They're all dead."

That hit home like a punch to the solar plexus. I managed, "All of them? They're *all* dead?"

"All but you, buddy boy."

I closed my eyes. "How?"

"Landis committed suicide."

"Right after graduation. I know."

"Andrew Chin died in a car accident three years ago. The brakes failed on his BMW."

"And Corday shuffled off to Buffalo."

"Uh huh, but the clincher is Burns. Two years ago Dr. Felice Burns was stabbed to death in the hospital parking lot where she worked."

I sucked in a sharp breath. "Then why did no one connect it?"

"There was nothing to connect at the time. Besides, Burns died out of state. She lived in Seattle."

Riordan had managed to gather a lot of information fast. Either he had connections or he had pulled in favors. I said slowly, "But the MO keeps changing: stabbing, cutting brake lines --"

"How do you know Chin's brake lines were cut?"

"Because I cut them! Jesus, I assumed, okay?"

"God save me from amateurs."

I allowed myself one sweet moment of satisfaction. "You're just pissed because you were wrong and I was right."

"And I have to live with it the rest of my life." He sounded sarcastic, not sorry.

"So how was Andy murdered?"

"I didn't say he was murdered. As a matter of fact, from everything we can find out, it looks like it really was just an accident."

"I don't believe that."

"I hate to disappoint you, but accidents do happen."

"Yeah, mostly within five miles of home. You don't think Felice was accidentally stabbed to death, do you?"

He sounded like someone struggling for patience. “Obviously *she* was murdered. Obviously I think the odds are against coincidence. But I have to tell you, there was no chess piece found on Chin’s body or in his personal effects.”

“Maybe they missed it.”

“That’s not the kind of thing that gets missed in an investigation.” His tone had become chilly at this implied inefficiency of brother law enforcement.

“So what are you saying? You *don’t* think there’s a connection?”

“Ease up, English. There *was* a chess piece found in Felice Burns’ purse. A black knight.”

“Why a knight? Why black?”

“My guess? She was African-American. Black. Secondly, she was not a queen. She was not even a lesbian. She was a happily married pediatrician with a kid of her own. Maybe the horse symbolizes something? Maybe it’s an insult. She was a good ride? I don’t know how some sick bastard might reason.”

“It doesn’t make sense. If everyone’s dead, who’s doing this?” I filled him in on what I had learned from Mr. Atkins.

When I had finally run to a stop in the face of his daunting silence he said very mildly, “Not too bad for an amateur, English. I’ll give you that. Now listen to me very carefully. I will take it from here. You keep your god-damned nose out of it. Is that clear? Do I make myself understood?”

Not that I had any idea of how to proceed even if I wanted to, but I heard myself say, “Sorry? I’m next on the Hit Parade, remember?”

“That’s right. I’m sharing information that I could get my ass canned for sharing so that you can protect yourself, not so that you can play amateur sleuth like some character in your book.”

“And how am I supposed to protect myself?”

“By letting the police do their job.”

I heard the edge in my laugh and knew he did too. “Yeah, right. Twenty-four hours ago the police thought I was a hysterical faggot making this up, if not actually a murderer. Sorry if I don’t have a lot of faith in the p --”

He interrupted, “I said I was sorry. Okay? That’s a murder investigation. Feelings get hurt. Hell, why am I explaining?”

I sure didn’t know. Into my silence he said more reasonably, “I believe we’re dealing with a possible serial killer. I believe you could be targeted. That’s just my gut. I have yet to convince my superiors of this. Chin’s death doesn’t fit and neither does La Pierra’s.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that we need to follow procedure in order to nail this guy. See -- we don’t actually have a suspect.”

Me. I was the only suspect still standing. Reading between the lines, I grasped what Riordan was actually saying. Since the departmental view was that I probably was the killer, they weren't going to expend a lot of energy on protecting me.

"What you're saying is, no one is going to take this seriously until they find me carved up in an alley."

"I'm saying -- I'm saying you need to be careful."

"I can't stay locked up twenty four hours a day! I can't even leave town because he travels, right? He found Rusty in Buffalo. Felice in Seattle."

"Do you have a gun?"

"Me? No."

"That's probably just as well," he said dryly. "Okay, do you have someone you can stay with? Hell, stay with your mother. The Pentagon doesn't have the security system she's got."

I really *would* rather die. "I'm not putting my mother in the path of a serial killer. Thanks for the thought."

"God help the serial killer who tackles your mother," Riordan muttered. "Listen, just use common sense. Your friends had no warning. You do. If you're by yourself, keep the doors locked and have a phone handy. Avoid alleys."

"Thanks," I said sourly.

"I'll have a squad car swing by every couple of hours. How's that?"

"Great."

"And don't go anywhere without letting me know. I mean *anywhere*."

"Wow," I blurted. "It's like we're going steady. How long am I under house arrest?"

It was the loudest silence I'd ever heard. No sense of humor, this lawman.

He said finally, very reasonably, "I have a lead. Nothing solid yet. I'll let you know how it turns out. Fair enough?"

"Hell no."

He smothered a laugh. "You'll be fine. But if you see or hear anything suspicious, dial 9-1-1."

* * * * *

The rest of the day passed uneventfully; yet I felt increasingly keyed-up, strained. Despite the Technicolor azure skies the air felt snappish, like right before a storm. Late afternoon the wind picked up. The old building creaked and muttered. I concurred.

I found the bolline in my office desk drawer -- where it had never been before. So much for my theory it had been taken during the break-in. Angus avoided my eyes when I

mentioned I'd found it. I let him go early and locked the door after him. I drew the security bars across. Watched him to his car.

But the minute Angus's Volkswagen buzzed out of the lot I became uneasy, looking over my shoulder at every creak in the timbers, starting when I caught a glimpse of my own reflection in the oval mirror over the fireplace. It could take years to catch this maniac. Look at the Zodiac killer. Look at all those people on *Unsolved Mysteries*.

Why come after me? I protested mentally. I wasn't even there! I wouldn't have gone along with the public humiliation of Landis. But maybe my stalker was someone who didn't know that I hadn't been there. Or maybe he didn't care because he had grown to like killing people. Or maybe he was a freaking nutcase and the rules of sanity didn't apply.

I thought of Mr. Atkins and his view of "emotionally unstable adolescent males." I considered the thing that had happened to Landis. It was horrible and cruel. I hated thinking Rob had been part of that, and yet I believed it. It was the kind of thing he deeply regretted as an adult. He didn't like hurting people; it just seemed to come naturally to him.

And what about poor Landis? Kids felt everything intensely. They reacted intensely. Had he lived, he probably would have put that night in perspective. Not that the wounds of adolescence couldn't still hurt. I thought about Bruce's parents and their rejection. And I can still remember my mother saying sadly, "Your father would be *so* disappointed in you, Adrien." I don't remember what it was over, just the pain of believing my father would not have wanted me for his son.

Time heals ... if you let it. Big if.

Who knew why Landis had taken his own life? He might have been gay; a third of all teen suicides are, but even if he hadn't been, that kind of humiliation would have been hard to get past. I tried to remember the adolescent mindset, the social hierarchy of high school life. Looking back from a safe distance, I think a shrewd eye and a sharp tongue had shielded me from my peers. *You're a sarcastic shit*, Rob used to say in compliment.

* * * * *

Bruce called as I was opening a can of dinner. I realized I hadn't finished listening to his earlier message.

"Where have you been all day? Why didn't you call?" he demanded first thing.

"I haven't had a chance." I filled him in briefly on what had been happening. Bruce listened impatiently and then said, "You shouldn't be alone."

"I'm okay." Here was one solution to spending a night alone with my memories and fears.

"I miss you."

"Bruce ..."

"Let me come over."

"Not tonight." I tried to soften it. "I'm going to have an early night."

"You sound strange. What's wrong? We can have an early night together. Come on. Let me take care of you."

You need someone to take care of you, ma belle, Claude's ghost whispered. I felt that burn behind my eyes.

"Bruce," I said gently, "I need time to myself. I'm whipped."

"Why are you pushing me away?"

"I'm not. Bruce ..." I took a deep breath. "You're moving too fast for me."

There was a pause. "What does that mean?"

"It means, I need a little time."

"Space. You need space." I could hear the bitterness in his voice.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Why don't you just say what you mean?"

"I'm trying to."

"No. If I was the right person you wouldn't want time or space. You'd want to be with me like I want to be with you."

I didn't know if that was true or not. I said quietly, "Bruce, don't back me into a corner. It's just one night."

"That's what you think." He hung up.

I went through the video library seeking solace. Finally I settled on 1940's superb *The Sea Hawk* with Errol Flynn. They just don't build men like Errol anymore, I thought regretfully. I poured some brandy into my Ovaltine.

Not bad.

Next round I poured some Ovaltine into my brandy.

* * * * *

When I woke the lights were on, the TV was blaring commercials, and I had the echo of the phone in my ears. I lay there for a few moments blinking at the ceiling, wondering if I'd dreamed it.

The phone rang again.

I jumped off the couch and sprinted for the phone. I'm not sure who I was expecting. I picked the receiver up, croaked out something.

Dead air.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. My heart skipped a beat.

“Hello?” I tried to sound flat and unimpressed. I should have stopped with one. The rest came out sounding like one of those woman-in-jeopardy extravaganzas on the Lifetime channel. *Hello? Hello? Hello?* when any rational person would have hung up and gone back to sleep.

I hung up.

The phone rang again.

I picked it up.

Heavy breathing. “*Adrien...*” A hoarse whisper that, despite common sense, turned my heart stammering and scared.

Up until then I guess I’d hoped the breather calls and frequent hang ups were random and unrelated.

“Adrien. I’m going to kill you.”

The caller hung up.

*I’m getting some weird calls, I’d told Jean at dinner. And Jean, always practical, responded, Don’t you have Caller ID? Did you try return dialing? Dial *69.*

I had Caller ID. I didn’t recognize the number. I dialed *69. The phone rang and rang and then ... noise. Yelling ... cheerful yelling, like at a bar. Or was that a TV?

“Hello?” said Bruce doubtfully.

I hung up.

* * * * *

Two minutes after the emotional supernova, the phone rang again. My hand seemed to reach for it of its own accord.

Silence.

I managed to get the word out. “Bruce?”

“*Adrien?*” I knew his voice so well by now, and yet it was the voice of someone I didn’t know at all.

I could sense him thinking it through, trying to read my mind. Wondering if I knew. Wondering how the hell I *couldn’t*. Wondering why I didn’t say something. I took a deep breath. “I-I hoped it was you. You’re right. I don’t want to be alone tonight.”

There was bewilderment in the pause. Then, “What’s happened?”

“Nothing. I just got this phone call awhile ago. I ... need you.” I didn’t have to fake the choked voice. There was a rock in my throat.

This time he didn’t hesitate. “I’m on my way.”

I left a message at Hollywood Homicide. Then I dialed Riordan's home number. A woman's voice on the answering machine asked me to leave my important message at the beep. I sweated bullets then made my decision.

"It's Adrien English," I said. "My friend Bruce just called. Bruce Green, the reporter. I think he may have ... may be"

Even now it felt impossible to say what I believed. I already questioned my deductions. Bruce was jealous, possessive. Okay, maybe it was a bit adolescent, but who hasn't, at some point, driven past an ex-lover's house or been tempted to place an anonymous phone call? It wasn't wise, but was it necessarily sign of a deranged mind?

Was that all my suspicions were based on? I had no *proof* that these calls came from the same person sending flowers, stalking me. I had no proof my caller was my stalker. I had no proof my stalker had killed Robert and Claude. Hell, I had no proof that Robert and Claude's killer were the same.

The answering machine was recording my indecision. "I'm going over to his house." I didn't remember the house address, but I gave him the street and what the house looked like. "It's nine-thirty. If something happens to me" I couldn't finish it. If I was wrong about Bruce this was an unforgivable betrayal. I had just offered his name up as a possible murder suspect to a homophobic cop -- based on nothing more than his infatuation with me. I finished, "I'm going to try to get proof."

* * * * *

Bruce's house was dark but the porch light shone welcomingly as I walked up the sidewalk. I unlatched the side gate and walked around the back. Like I'd thought, a paved walkway with steps leading to a side entrance -- nice to know my instincts were occasionally right. I skirted past the doorway and the requisite potted palms. Dry bougainvillea leaves crunched under foot, scuttled across the patio. The play-set in the jungle of weeds creaked, one swing swaying in the wind.

I took out my pocket knife and started prying at the screen fastenings of Bruce's bedroom window. I didn't know how long Bruce would wait at my place before he started back for home, but I was dogged by a frantic sense of hurry and danger.

I was lifting the screen down when a hand clamped down on my shoulder. I let out a muffled shriek before a second hand clamped over my mouth.

I swung blindly with the screen. It banged into the bushes and against the house.

"Knock it off!" hissed a voice against my ear as we grappled clumsily.

Recognizing the voice, I dropped the screen and quit struggling. Jerked my head free. "Are you trying to give me heart failure?" I gasped out.

"What the hell are you doing?" Detective Riordan's hands bit into my shoulders. "Why are you here?" His face in the moonlight was frightening and unfamiliar. When I realized what he thought I just stood there gaping.

"You don't think I --"

He yanked my sweater up and felt around my waist. Instinctively, I grabbed at his hands; he knocked them away. "Put 'em up." He wasn't kidding. One look at his face was all I needed. I locked my hands behind my head. Amazement held me silent as he roughly patted down my hips. One hand hooked in my belt, he nudged my legs apart with his own, and then knelt, running his hands down my legs. I stood there like an inner-city lawn ornament, arms over my head, as though I'd been getting frisked all my life.

Riordan stood up. "Are you crazy?"

"No, I --"

It was rhetorical because he bit out, "Hasn't your boyfriend given you a key yet?"

I took a couple of deep breaths. I was still shaky from the recent surge of adrenaline and fear. "It's not what you think. Whatever it is you're thinking now."

He said bleakly, "I'm thinking I've caught you breaking and entering twice. I'm thinking I told you not to go anywhere without notifying me first."

"I tried to call you. I left a message."

"For Christ's sake, are you" Words seemed to fail him.

"Listen to me." In my urgency I reached toward him. He looked down distractedly at my hand resting on his sleeve. "Something happened tonight. I think -- I think Bruce --"

"No shit, Sherlock," he said grimly.

"I should have known," I said miserably. "The first guy I get involved with in years."

His laugh was nasty. "You sure can pick 'em. Do you know whose house this is?"

"Bruce's."

"This is where Grant Landis lived growing up. This is the house he supposedly died in."

I blinked up at him. "Supposedly?"

"Landis isn't dead. There's no death certificate."

"But" My voice died.

"His parents spread the word he was dead. He attempted suicide after graduating high school. He was institutionalized. After his release he disappeared."

"Why would his parents do that?"

He said acridly, "My take? They wished he *was* dead. I think he was kept locked up as much for being queer as for trying to off himself."

My throat hurt. I said, "But Bruce --"

"Bruce *is* Landis. Until six years ago Bruce Green didn't exist. No DMV records, TRW report -- there's no trace of him before that." His hand closed on my arm, steering me toward the gate. "We don't have time to chat. I don't know where he went but he's liable to be back any minute."

"He went to see me."

"Huh?"

"I called him. Asked him to come over so I could --"

"So you could *what*? Jesus H. Christ! Don't you get it? This guy kills people!"

"Yes, I get it! You said you had to have proof. *I* had to have proof before I could -- turn him over."

That grip on my arm was going to leave bruises. "I asked you to stay out of it. I specifically told you. What do I have to do? Arrest you?"

"Anything to get me in handcuffs?"

I don't know why that popped out, but police brutality seemed imminent.

I rushed on, "You're a cop. You said yourself, your hands are tied."

"Look ma, no hands." Riordan showed me his empty hands. "Fine. You wanted to help. You helped. Now get your ass out of here."

"You're not listening. I may be able to --" Finish a sentence? Not likely with Detective Riordan. Once again he cut over me.

"No, *you're* not listening. This is a police investigation. I'm already hanging in the wind conducting an unauthorized surveillance." He gave me a slight shove. "Vamoose."

I shoved back. "Stop pushing me."

For a minute I thought we were going to get into a wrestling match. The tension wasn't all due to the uncertainty and threat.

"This is my life. I have a say in what happens to me."

"What does that mean?"

I had no idea, but I was tired of being on the receiving end. I ignored him, started walking back to the gate.

Riordan called suddenly, "Damn. Adrien, wait. Wait. Change of plan. I want you to go swear out a complaint against Green. Will you do that?"

I stopped walking. "What? Why?"

His expression was unreadable in the moonlight. "Chan's trying to get a search warrant, but if you swear out a complaint we can pick Green up immediately on the stalker charge."

"You think a restraining order is going to stop him?"

"Trust me, would you?"

He was kind of asking a lot, seeing my life was at stake. When I didn't instantly react he ran both hands over his pale hair and exclaimed, "Adrien, would you GO?"

Until then I hadn't realized how on edge he was. Now I could feel it, like an electrical field around him.

"I'm going."

* * * * *

I vamoosed back to where I'd parked the Bronco a couple of blocks down.

I was crossing the street when an approaching car caught me in its headlights. It slowed. Stopped. The window rolled down.

"Adrien?"

I froze.

"What are you doing here? I went to your place."

Say something, I urged myself. Say something before he stomps on the accelerator and mows you down. "I'm sorry!" I called. "I was too jumpy to wait. I'm ... uh ... I'm afraid I'm being watched."

"By the police?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." Brilliant. Grace Latham herself couldn't have done better.

"What did you park down here for?" The frown was in his voice.

"I'm not thinking clearly," I said honestly. "I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

Of you. I wasn't sure I could make it across the street, unlock the Bronco and get in before he overtook me. I could start yelling for Riordan, but I doubted if he'd hear me this far down the block. Proof. We needed proof.

I shivered and said, "Are we going to stand out here talking all night?"

I saw him reach across and unlock the door. "Get in."

I got in.

In silence we drove up the street to the yellow and brown house. The garage door opened and we slipped under into the close darkness. The garage door rumbled shut.

Bruce turned off the car engine.

I've never been claustrophobic but I felt an overwhelming sense of danger pressing in on me as I sat next to Bruce in the dead of night.

Finally he moved and said, "Well? Coming?"

Chapter Fifteen

"You're so tense tonight." Bruce leaned over on elbow and kissed the nape of my neck.

I lay naked on my stomach beside him, feeling vulnerable with my back exposed; but the less he read of my face the better. The screen was still off the bedroom window. Bruce hadn't noticed in the darkness, but I had. I kept reassuring myself that Riordan was out there -- somewhere. Nothing would happen to me if I kept my head.

Then I started worrying about what might happen if the police suddenly burst in on us. How might Bruce react? I didn't want to be caught in the crossfire.

"I'm not feeling too hot," I excused myself to Bruce. "My heart's bothering me a little."

"Yeah?"

Not completely a lie. I felt sick with nerves and dread. But my heart was holding steady despite its desire to climb into my mouth and hide.

What if Riordan had gone haring back to my place before Bruce and I drove up? What if he had no idea where I was? What if right this minute he was busy getting paperwork together so I could swear out a complaint against Bruce?

Bruce slid a hand down my spine and I gave a shudder. He chuckled.

"Cold?" He rubbed his foot up and down my calf.

I listened tautly to what sounded like a floor board creaking. Rolled onto my side and wound my arms around Bruce's shoulders. He kissed me hungrily, his mouth wet and hot. I made some small sound. Mostly dismay.

Bruce whispered, "Hell, your heart *is* beating fast." He let go of me, rolled over and off the bed. "I'll get your pills."

"No --" I dived, grabbing his arm before he could walk back into the living room where we'd shucked our clothes fifteen minutes earlier. Bruce gazed down at me, his face unreadable in the light from the hall.

"It's okay," I babbled. "I'm not sick. Just wound up. Hand me the wine."

I reached for the pink goblet on the bedstand and nearly knocked over the clock. The luminous numbers flipped over like game show cards ticking off the last minutes of my life.

Bruce sat down beside me once more, stroking me while I sipped.

"I love you, Adrien."

I lowered my lashes. Not even to save my life, I thought. To lie about that seemed worse than anything anyone had done to him yet.

"Tonight I thought...."

I put the glass down, leaned back into the pillows. I reached out to him.

"I thought you didn't want me," he muttered. He sounded close to tears. I felt like crying myself. I stroked his back.

"I couldn't bear that, Adrien."

"Don't."

"It's been different with you from the beginning. From the first time I ever saw you. I didn't think I could still feel this way, but I do. I do."

"You don't have to tell me."

He put his hand between my thighs, cupping my balls. I caught my breath.

His lopsided smile was intimate. "Is this good?"

"You know it is."

He nodded, fingering me knowledgeably. "I know you."

The incredible thing was that knowing what I knew, scared to death as I was, and even conscious that Riordan might be somewhere nearby, my body did respond. I did feel something for him, beyond the horror and fear. I couldn't forget the teenage boy who had wanted to die. I couldn't forget what had happened to him, the pain and fear and isolation that turned him into a monster. A monster whose tears wet my fingertips.

He got on his knees in a quick move. Leaned forward, his breath hot against my face. "Tell me what you want, Adrien." He was poised over me. Massive. A mountain. A landslide ready to fall and bury me alive. "Say it. You know you want it."

I rested my hand against his face, feeling the bristle on his jaw. He turned his head. Bit my fingers.

"You want me to fuck you?"

Guilt? Grief? Reciprocity?

"Yes," I said huskily.

He guided me back onto my belly. His hands were shaking and he wasn't the only one. I rested my face on my folded arms, heart thudding. His hands slid over my ass, caressing roughly, spreading my cheeks. Two wet fingers slid in without ceremony. I bit my lip, trying to relax rigid muscles. I wasn't a virgin, but it had been a very long time for me.

Bruce mumbled inarticulate words of apology and love.

"It's all right," I said.

He pushed in and I had to bite my arm to keep from crying out. It wasn't just the lack of preparation; he wasn't wearing a condom. Jesus. I remembered telling Riordan I was strictly a safe sex guy, and now here I was engaging in unprotected sex with a homicidal maniac. Define safe, Adrien.

I closed my eyes, tried to regulate my breathing while Bruce humped against my ass. Awkward and anguished, his fingers clawed into my hips, trying to position me, thrusting wildly, frantically; an angry blind man flailing out with his cane.

I agreed to this, I thought dizzily. I let myself in for it. *Shut up and deal with it because if you yell, someone is going to die. Probably you.*

My breath huffed out in pained pants as Bruce rocked harder, faster. He reached beneath my belly and gave my cock a yank. It hurt.

I smothered my groan in my arm. Fought the pricking behind my eyes.

"I love you. I love you," he panted. "You're mine. You know that. Mine. Forever."

He began to come, collapsing on top of me in a shuddering sweaty heap. His silent tears trickled down my back.

* * * * *

Once Bruce fell asleep it was eerily quiet. I was afraid to move.

I lay still, ears attuned, waiting.

A soft sound from down the hallway.

I lifted my head. Hesitated. Bruce slumbered on, sleeping the peaceful sleep of the conscienceless. Cautiously I inched away, eased off the bed. The springs protested. I stopped. No movement from Bruce. I tiptoed to the door.

We'd left the lights on when we had retired, and I had a clear view of Riordan standing at the far end of the hall. He had his gun out. It looked like a cannon. He stared at me for a long moment. Then he gestured soundlessly, beckoning me toward him: *Get out now.*

Bruce sat up in the bed behind me. I froze.

"What are you doing?" He sounded fully awake.

"Nothing." I hesitated. Everything in me said "run." But the realization of what was about to happen ... it's difficult to explain how terrifying I found that vision of impending violence. I don't know if I thought I could avert it, but I was compelled to try and postpone it.

"What are you looking for? Come back to bed."

I said huskily, "It's late. I should go."

"Come back to bed, Adrien." There was something in his voice. A short while ago I had lain in his arms. I could still taste him. I came back to bed. Sat down as gingerly as though on broken glass.

He said tenderly, indulgently, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Even I could hear the strain in my voice.

Silence.

Then he said flatly, "Oh."

One scant syllable, but I knew. I knew and he knew. All evening we had pretended. Postponed what we both knew in our hearts.

In one fast, lithe movement, Bruce was off the bed. He walked over to the bedroom door and slammed it, shutting us into total darkness. I could hear my quick breaths and the scratch of the twigs at the window. There was just enough light from the waning moon to see his silhouette unmoving where he stood by the door.

I sat there wordlessly reassuring myself that he couldn't have seen Riordan hovering down the hall. Riordan would have ducked back, right?

"Bruce," I began.

"I know, Adrien." He spoke consolingly, as though he understood why I had done what I had. His silhouette moved over to the dresser and vanished into the deeper shadows. I heard the slide of the drawers. The soft rustle of clothes. It was more terrifying not to be able to see him. Then I caught his reflection in the mirror, the pale glimmer of his body. He turned, and in the gloom I could just discern the outline of white -- a grim smile that wasn't Bruce. Wasn't human in fact. A mask. A skull mask which he was unhurriedly adjusting over his head.

I backed off the bed, knocked into the bedstand and reached automatically to save the lamp. Bruce felt around in the drawer, the mask still staring my way. Hypnotized I watched him raise something up, saw the glint of light on silver. A blade.

"What are you doing?" I was surprised to hear my voice at all, let alone sounding almost level.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" He walked toward me, knife upheld. It was stagy. Unreal.

I reached over and turned on the lamp beside the bed.

Like a true creature of the night he paused. There's something about light. Even 60 watt household variety.

"Turn that out," he said hoarsely.

I shook my head. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the knife. It looked huge. Sharp. A butcher's knife. I pictured it sliding into my chest. With an effort I kicked my brain into gear.

"Bruce, why are you doing this?"

"Now *that's* a silly question."

"Bruce --"

"Don't call me that."

"What do you want me to call you? Grant?"

He stood motionless as though testing the power of his name on himself.

"Take the mask off," I said. "Since we're not pretending."

"I like it. You know why? Because it's symbolic. You know? Everyone wears masks. Everyone puts on a face of what they want you to see. Even death."

Murdered *and* lectured in one night. It really was too much.

He laughed muffledly. "And the main thing is, it scares you. I like that. You should see your face. I'm surprised you haven't keeled over yet. That would be ironic, wouldn't it?"

"I don't think ironic is the right word." I wondered what Riordan was doing. What was he waiting for? In five minutes I could be dead. In three minutes. In fact, it wouldn't take Bruce more than a minute to take care of me. I tried to imagine wrestling him for the knife and knew talking was my best bet.

"What is the right word?" Bruce inquired. "Betrayed? *Fucked*?"

I swallowed hard.

"What? No famous last words?" Bruce advanced. "Truth hurts, doesn't it?" He gave that unnerving rubbery laugh. "So does this, by the way."

I licked my lips. "Don't I get to hear why?"

"Why what?"

"Why you killed Rob and the others. Andy" Suddenly I couldn't remember their names.

"I didn't kill Andy." He sounded offended. "God killed Andy. That was the sign I was on the right path."

"You think God wants you to kill people because of a high school prank?"

"*Prank?* That prank destroyed my life. Ruined me. You have no idea what you're talking about!"

"So explain it to me."

His eyes studied me through the eye holes in the mask. "Believe me, you won't agree with my reasoning. I've tried explaining before. How's this? Everything that has happened to me happened because of Robert Hersey and his sycophantic buddies. Everything."

"That's not reasonable, Br -- Grant. You're too smart to believe --"

He interrupted casually, "But enough about me. This is about you."

"Me?"

“Yes, you. YOU, YOU, YOU!” He started jabbing at the air, yelling it.

Something horrifyingly like a sob tore out of my throat.

Bruce stopped. “Don’t cry,” he said kindly. “Everything dies eventually.” He pointed the knife at me, like a professor with a pointer.

“Anyway, it’s your own fault, isn’t it? I want you to know that I would never have hurt you. Never. You made this happen. Not me. I always liked you, even though you *never* noticed me.” His hand slashed through the air. “NEVER NOTICED --”

I flinched as the knife carved a long rip through the flowered wallpaper. I tried to think what to do if he came across the bed. I’d be cornered. I was cornered now. I’d be cornered in a tighter space. Less time to die in.

He calmed again. “I tried to get all my classes with you. I used to always sit behind you. Remember? Pathetic, isn’t it? You even came to this house once, you know. I couldn’t believe you didn’t remember.”

I got control of my voice. “Did you want me to remember?”

He seemed to consider this. “When I saw you in the church I wanted to protect you from those fucking cops. But the truth is, you like those fucking cops, don’t you? You like that blond one.”

“Speaking of cops,” I got out. “Bruce, you have to know you aren’t going to get away with this. They will lock you up forever.”

“I don’t want to get away with it. Not anymore.” He added, “And no, they won’t.”

Keep him talking. Riordan had to be on the other side of that door. If I could just get to it before Bruce stabbed me. “If I can figure it out, the cops can.”

“Don’t bet on it.”

I edged toward the door. “Tell me something. Why Claude? What did he ever do to you?”

“Who? Oh, the black dude. Well, that was your fault too, Adrien. You canceled our evening together, didn’t you? You wouldn’t explain why, you just blew me off. So I followed you to see where you were going. I was parked down the street the whole time we were talking. I was on my cell phone.” He sounded innocently pleased with his own cleverness. “Call forwarding.”

“You were spying on me?” Don’t ask, but my life probably forfeit, I still felt a flare of indignation.

He answered defensively, “I couldn’t wait to see you again. I used to park there under the trees and watch that asshole Robert. And then I started watching you. I followed you that evening to see what you were up to, and once I knew, I took care of that black bastard.” He shrugged. “I thought that would get your attention.”

My nerve gave out and I ran for the door. Bruce got there first and blocked it squarely. He raised the knife. His laugh was coming out weirdly behind the plastic face. He adjusted his grip on the knife handle, the better for slicing me to ribbons. I took a step back.

"I wondered what this would feel like when it happened," he said slowly.

"Me too." I couldn't take my eyes off the knife.

"I think it could have worked for us."

My heart was pounding so hard in my throat it was hard to get the words out. "It would have been hard with you murdering my friends every time you needed my attention."

Bruce reached up with the knife to scratch his forehead. The point punctured the mask and a tiny drop of blood showed. As I stared, it welled and then trickled slowly down the skull face.

"I do love you," whispered Bruce. "There's nothing left for me without you." There were tears in his voice.

"Bruce," I pleaded, "Think it through." *Riordan, where the fuck are you?*

"We'll die together like true lovers should. Like Romeo and" unnervingly he giggled. "Romeo."

Blabbing the first thing that came to me, I said desperately, "Sure, but *then* what happens?"

"What?"

There was movement outside the window. We both looked around and then Bruce grabbed me with his free arm, dragging me in front of him as an iron lawn chair came crashing through the bedroom window, followed by Riordan.

It was like in the movies. He hit the floor in a shoulder roll and came up on one knee with his gun aimed at us. The detached part of my brain that was still taking notes admired the smooth efficiency of that.

Bruce kept me pinned close, arm about my throat using me as a shield. His breath was hot in my ear, his cheek resting against mine. I could feel his sweat against my skin -- or maybe it was my own sweat. I could also feel that he had a hard on, and that was the most unnerving thing of all.

I was pretty sure that I was really going to die in the next minute or two. I'd thought a lot about death over the years, but I never pictured checking out like this.

"Put down the knife." Riordan sounded calm and instructive.

Bruce on the other hand was shaking with excitement. The hand holding the knife to my throat was so rigid it had a tremor.

"No! Put down the gun. I'll kill him if you don't!"

I heard myself say, "He'll kill me anyway."

A bar seemed to clamp down, closing off my windpipe. "Shut up!" Bruce said from underwater. Stars shot through the darkness flooding up around me. I wheezed, let myself go heavy.

Bruce's arm eased up. I gulped oxygen. Heard Riordan soothing, "No he won't. That wouldn't be smart. Bruce is too smart for that, right Bruce?"

"Shut up," Bruce said again.

I gulped oxygen. Regained my footing.

Riordan was still trying to reassure us all that it was under control. "Bruce doesn't want to hurt you, do you, Bruce? Let's talk for a minute. Let's talk about --"

"Let's talk about this!" Bruce made a sudden gesture. There was a bright pain beneath my ear.

At the same instant Riordan yelled, "*Bruce* -- I'll blow your fucking head off!" He was standing just a few feet from us. The gun aimed at my head seemed huge. I could look right down the barrel. It was like a tunnel.

Riordan said, "I'll splatter your brains all over that goddamn wall." He sounded a little breathless.

"I don't care," sobbed Bruce. He could cry and still hold the knife in place. The pain at my jaw seemed to pause. I could feel something hot trickling down my neck. Jesus, had he cut my throat?

"Yes, you do. You want all the world to know how smart you are. You want Adrien to know how smart you are."

"Wrong again. WRONG! You don't know shit!"

"I know that I've radioed for help. I know that in minutes this place will be swarming with cops. Listen."

We listened. The wail of sirens had been growing steadily louder, but I don't think I'd heard it until then. Now it was earsplitting.

Bruce's hold shifted. "It doesn't matter." He said, and all at once he sounded calm. Serene. Not a good sign, I recognized instinctively.

I met Riordan's eyes. Up until now he had not looked directly at me. I didn't know if I was reading him right or not, but I dug my fingers into the pressure point of Bruce's forearm. At the same time I hooked my right foot around his and yanked him off balance. Textbook Tai Chi. I couldn't believe it when it worked.

There was an incredible explosion that seemed to ricochet off the walls. Plaster peppered the side of my face and hair. The arm holding me fell away. The blade at my throat dropped, scratched a crescent across my chest and ribs, tore the fleshy part of my forearm as it sliced downward.

I stumbled away in a kind of daze.

Riordan fired again looking like a poster boy for the NRA. Perfect stance. Perfect aim. As I stared a great red bloom seemed to blossom in the center of Bruce's chest. The crimson spread. In slow motion he slid down the wall. Languidly he sprawled onto the carpet. Red black smeared the wall behind him. The bedroom door opened, swinging silently wide.

Bruce's fingers slowly released the knife, uncurling gently. The eyes behind the mask were closed.

The dead don't close their eyes. As this thought ran through my brain, Bruce's eyes opened. They gazed at the carpet with a fixed look that living eyes never have.

"Okay, baby?"

Riordan was walking toward me. I realized he was talking to me.

I rummaged around inside my head. Found words. "Yeah." My voice cracked and I had to try again. "Thanks. Thank you."

His hand slid across my bare shoulder, fastened around the back of my neck, drew me forward. I reeled against him, my head resting for a moment in the curve of his neck and shoulder, tried to catch my breath. His heart was thudding a million miles an hour. His chest rising and falling. Neither of us said a word.

The sirens sounded like they were in the kitchen. The banging on the front door seemed to shake the whole house. Riordan holstered his gun, pulled his ID, and stepped in front of me as the front door gave with a crash and a dozen uniforms burst into the living room with weapons drawn.

* * * * *

"It was a righteous shooting," Chan said for the third time.

It was close to dawn. I was dressed. My chest was taped and my arm and throat bandaged by the paramedics. I had answered a million questions, and now I stood with Chan outside the house while the crime scene team bustled about their grisly business.

Black-and-whites were angled all over the street. The Landis yard and sidewalk had been sectioned off. Even at this hour of the morning a crowd was forming behind the yellow crime scene tape. Overhead, birds were starting to twitter in the trees.

"I've been writing a book myself," Chan said confidentially, taking a long drag on his cigarette. "I was wondering if you might be willing to read it sometime. You know, give me your honest opinion."

"Sure." Vainly I searched the swarm of uniforms and plainclothes for Riordan.

"It's a police procedural."

I nodded, not listening.

Riordan materialized before us. He said to Chan, "I think I'll drive Mr. English home, Paul."

Chan had a funny look on his face. "Uh ... What about IA?"

"What about 'em?"

Chan glanced at me and shrugged. Flicked the cigarette onto the porch and ground it out with his heel.

We slipped under the crime scene tape. Made our way through the crowd that parted warily before us. In silence we walked down the shady street to where I'd left the Bronco -- a lifetime ago.

Riordan reached his palm out. I handed my keys over. He unlocked my door. Walked around, unlocked the driver's side, and climbed in beside me.

He started the engine.

I said, "I don't know your first name."

"Jake." He looked at me briefly. Looked away.

More silence while the engine warmed. Riordan yawned hugely, scrubbed his face with his hands. His glance slid my way. "You know, this won't be an easy thing, Adrien."

An officer-involved shooting was not going to be fun, righteous or not.

"The investigation you mean?"

"No." He gave me that crooked smile. "No, I don't mean that."

I stared out at the first blush of sunrise lighting the surrounding Chatsworth hills.

Despite myself, I started to smile.

 THE END 

A DANGEROUS THING

Chapter One

She was young and she was lovely and she was dead. Very dead.

And this was bad. Very bad.

What had once been Lavinia was now an ungraceful sprawl of long blonde hair and long white limbs -- and then Jason's horrified brain recognized what his eyes had refused to see: Lavinia's slender arms ended in two bloody stumps.

I stopped typing, read it back and winced. Poor Jason. We had been stuck discovering Lavinia's body for the past two days and we still couldn't get it right.

I hit the delete key.

Lousy as was *Titus Andronicus*, my second Jason Leland mystery, *Death for a Deadly Deed*, was even worse. I guess basing Jason's second outing on Shakespeare's infamous play was only the first of my mistakes. I was still brooding when the phone rang.

"It's me," Jake said. "I can't make it tonight."

"It's okay," I said. "I wasn't expecting you."

Silence.

I let it stretch, which is not like me, being the civilized guy I am.

"Adrien?" Jake asked at last.

"Yo?"

"I'm a cop. It's who I am. It's what I do."

"You sound like the lead-in to a TV show." Before he could hit back, I added, "Don't sweat it, Jake. I'll find something else to do tonight."

Silence.

I realized I'd deleted too much from my manuscript. Was I supposed to hit Edit and then Undo? Or just Undo? Or Control + Z? Word Perfect I am not.

"Have fun," Jake said pleasantly, and rang off.

"See ya," I muttered to the dial tone.

These dreary dumps I call my life, as the bard would say.

For a moment I sat there staring at the blinking cursor on my screen. It occurred to me that I needed to make some changes -- and not just in *Death for a Deadly Deed*.

Swearing under my breath, I hit Save and closed the document. Exit and Shut Down. See how easy that was?

I went downstairs to the shop where Angus, my assistant (and resident warlock), was slicing open a shipment of books with a utility knife.

"Hey, I'm going out of town," I announced as Angus gazed entranced at a best-selling cover featuring a blood-spattered ax.

I wasn't sure if I had a dial tone or not. He didn't blink. Angus is tall, rawboned, and pale as a ghost. Jake has a number of unkind sobriquets for him, but the kid is smart and hardworking. I figure that's all that is my business.

"Why?" he mumbled at last.

"Because I need a vacation. Because I can't write with all these distractions."

At last Angus tore his bespectacled gaze from the gory dust jacket. "Why?"

After a couple of months I was becoming fluent in Anguspeak.

"The way it is, man. Can you keep an eye on things?" Keep the Black Masses to a minimum and not eat all fifty boxes of gourmet cookies in the storeroom?

Angus shrugged. "I guess. Class starts back up in two weeks though."

I've never been able to ascertain exactly what Angus is studying at UCLA. Library Science or Demonology 101?

"I'll be back by then. I just want to get away for a few days."

"Where are you going?" This was the most interest in my actions Angus had shown in two months.

"I own property up north in Sonora. Accurately, outside of Sonora near a little town called Basking. I thought I'd drive up there." I added, "Tonight."

"Tonight?"

"It's four-thirty now. It shouldn't take me more than six or seven hours."

Angus mulled this over, absently testing the point of the utility knife with his thumb.

"It's not like you to be impulsive, Adrien," was his verdict. "What do I tell that cop of yours?"

"He's not my actual personal property," I said shortly. "He's a public servant." In more ways than one. "Anyway you won't have to tell him anything because I don't plan on seeing him anytime soon."

“Oh.” Angus looked down at the knife with a small smile. Tiffs among the faggots were apparently the stuff of quiet merriment.

I left Angus with visions of dismemberment still dancing in his head and went to pack. It didn’t take long to throw a couple of pairs of Levi’s and a toothbrush into my Gladstone. I emptied the fridge into an ice chest, dug out my sleeping bag and tossed computer disks and a couple of CDs in with my clothes and laptop.

By a quarter after six I was fighting the workday traffic as I headed the Bronco out toward Magic Mountain and the 5 Freeway. Over the pass it was bumper to bumper, but what the hell, I had a thermos full of Gevalia Popayan coffee, Patty Griffin’s *Flaming Red* rocking on the CD player, and I was heading in the right direction -- away from Jake.

* * * * *

Outside Mojave I pulled in for gas at a quaint filling station surrounded by Joshua trees and stacks of old tires. An enormous purple gorilla balloon floated overhead as an advertising gimmick. I pumped gas and enjoyed an *Apocalypse Now* sunset while the giant balloon bobbed gently on the desert breeze. For some reason the grape ape reminded me of Jake.

Jake. If only it were as easy to leave behind my preoccupation with Jake as it was to leave the city lights now twinkling in my rearview mirror.

Two months earlier Detective Jake Riordan had saved my life in what the papers unimaginatively called the “Gay Slasher Killings.” When it was all over, Jake had received an official reprimand from the LAPD brass -- and I had received an overture of sorts from Jake, a homosexual cop buried so deep in the closet *he* didn’t know where to look for himself.

Riordan was tough and smart and handsome; and, other than that self-loathing hang-up, pretty much all I could have asked for in a potential mate. But gradually little things -- like the fact he couldn’t bear to touch me -- began to take their toll. Okay, I exaggerate. He did put an arm around my shoulders once when we were watching a PBS documentary on hate crimes against gays. And he had taken to hugging me goodbye. It wasn’t that Riordan was a virgin. Far from it. He was heavily into the S/M scene. But when it came to face-to-face, eye-to-eye, mouth-to-mouth, the Master turned into a schoolboy.

Witness our first and only necking session.

Riordan’s mouth was a kiss away from my own when he gave a strange laugh and pulled back.

“Shit. I can’t do this.” He ran a hand through his blonde hair, looked at me sideways.

“Can’t do what? Kiss me?”

He shook his head and then nodded.

“My mouthwash isn’t working? What’s the problem?”

Jake made a sound that was supposed to pass for a laugh. He didn’t answer.

"Why, Jake?" I asked quietly.

He blurted, "I open my eyes and I see the pores of your skin -- your skin's okay, don't take this wrong -- but you've got five o'clock shadow. You smell like aftershave. Your lips --" He gestured briefly and hopelessly. "It's just -- you're not a chick."

"You noticed." I sounded flippant but I was thinking hard. "So this is a new experience for you? You have sex with guys but you don't --"

"It's nothing like this," Jake interrupted. "This is like *dating*. This is ... weird."

Yeah, and whips, chains, scourges and blindfolds were normal?

"I could let you tie me up and beat the shit out of me, but will you still respect me in the morning?"

"I don't want you that way," he said. "I know you. It wouldn't be the same."

Swell. He preferred humiliating strange men in costume to kissing a man he knew. And presumably liked.

"Let me get this straight. You don't want to have sex with me?"

"Obviously I want to have sex with you."

Obviously. What was *I* thinking?

"But?"

He said impatiently, "I don't know! Why don't we watch a video or something?"

We watched a lot of videos. I was now an expert on the films of Steven Seagal and Vin Diesel, and I'd seen more Super Hero movies in the past month than I'd seen my entire childhood. It wasn't all *cinéma vérité*. We even went out for a couple of tense dinners. I guessed that Riordan was wary some of his copper pals might spot him fraternizing with a known homo, although he was too gentlemanly to say so aloud.

Mostly we talked. At my place. Behind closed doors. Not exactly heart to heart, but Jake talked about his work and his family: Mom, Dad, two brothers (one in the Police Academy) all under the delusion that James Patrick Riordan was as straight as the proverbial arrow.

Or mostly Jake talked. My role was usually listener. Occasionally he'd asked me questions which I labeled under the general heading of Gay Lifestyle: How many times a month did I have sex? (Uh ... were we going by Terrestrial Dynamical Time?) When had I come out? (After college -- when it was too late for mother to ground me.) Where did I go to meet guys? (Crime scenes?)

Even though Jake was older and probably more experienced, I sometimes felt like his gay mentor or Fag Big Brother. What I didn't feel like was his lover.

A month of tentative keeping company and then a month of excuses and canceled engagements.

It was over before it began.

"Look," I told him one night when he arrived four hours late for another dinner under wraps, "You're just going through the motions. Why bother?"

That tawny gaze lit on mine. Jake said bluntly, "I never meant to get involved with you, Adrien."

"Rest easy; you're not."

"Yeah, I am." And he put his big paw over mine.

Pathetic, but this is the kind of thing that kept me holding on. I use the term "holding on" loosely, because for the most part life went on exactly as before, with the exception of the funny flutter my heart gave when I'd hear Riordan's voice on the other end of the phone -- and for all I knew that was incipient heart failure.

It sure as hell wasn't love, because I refused to do something so self-destructive as love a man who hated himself for being homosexual -- which, by extension, probably meant he subconsciously hated me too. I reassured myself that although I liked Riordan, I wasn't closing any doors, wasn't missing out on any opportunities; I was still open to meeting new people, making new friends and lovers.

So why the frustration and anger, sure, even hurt, when the big guy pulled the plug as he had this evening?

* * * * *

Outside Bakersfield I made a pit stop at a rest area. I walked around and stretched my legs, bought a stale blueberry bagel from a catering truck and rechecked my *Thomas Guide* in the cab light of the SUV.

The full moon shone brightly, illuminating rolling hills dotted with oaks and occasional farmhouse lights. Miles of nothing but empty highway and starry skies. Miles of nothing but more miles as I headed north with the big rigs. I was doing about eighty-five, kicked back on cruise control with nothing to do but think and remember.

It was twenty-four years since I had last seen Pine Shadow Ranch. That was the summer before my Grandmother Anna died. I was eight years old, and summer vacations with Granna were the happiest times of my life.

Granna was kind of a family legend. One of those Roaring Twenties gals, she'd ditched her society husband and returned to her birthplace to raise horses and hell, as the mood took her. I remembered her as a rail-thin, tall woman with a silver bob and deeply tanned skin. My granny rolled her own cigarettes, rode like a bronc-buster and cussed in Italian -- which was the language of her childhood nanny. It must have been some childhood judging from the frequency and fluency of her swearing.

There had been no hint that particular summer was to be the last. But two weeks after I returned to my mother's fretting bosom, my grandmother had been killed in a fall from a horse. To my mother's chagrin Granna bequeathed her entire estate to me. True, Granna's

estate was nothing to rival the fortune left in trust to Lisa by my dear departed dad, but it was enough to ensure financial necessity would never tie me to Ma's apron strings.

I inherited half that money when I turned twenty-one, and I had spent it purchasing what was now Cloak and Dagger Books. I would inherit the balance when I turned forty, which around tax time seemed like a lifetime away. As for Pine Shadow Ranch, I'd had some furniture shipped down to me but had never gone back, preferring to remember it as it had been. There was a caretaker who kept an eye on the holdings, but for all I knew the place could have fallen to rack and ruin by the time I decided to take my 400-mile drive down memory lane.

* * * * *

It was nearly eleven when State Highway 49 narrowed to pine trees and mountains. I cracked the window. The night air was startlingly cold and clean with the bite of distant snow.

The next eighty miles of winding road were spent sandwiched between one of those monster trucks (high beams trained on my rearview) and a battered pickup with the license plate URUGLY. At five-mile intervals we would come to another blind curve and the monster truck would swing out in the opposite lane in a playful gambit of vehicular Russian roulette. And thirty seconds later he would drop back into formation just in time to avoid plowing into an oncoming car.

At last he made his big play, risked his all, and roared off around a bend, just missing a head-on with a logging truck. He vanished into the diesel-scented night.

Now it was just me and the 45-mile-an-hour wit in the pickup. Emptying the last of the Popayan coffee into my thermos cup, I fiddled with the radio trying to find a station that varied the thematic content of tears-in-the-beer, crying-on-the-shoulder-of-the-road, and hanging-onto-nothing-but-the-wheel. Despite the caffeine overload I was beat and my eyes felt ready to drop out of my head.

Fast approaching the stage of exhaustion where I wasn't sure if I was still driving or if I was only dreaming I was still driving, I nearly missed the turn off. The next ten miles were a challenge to the Bronco's shocks as well as my own, but at last I recognized the landmark of Saddleback Mountain and knew the Pine Shadow Ranch lay right around the next bend.

I downshifted as we began our descent. The Bronco rattled across a cattle guard. Ahead, the ranch lay motionless in the bright moonlight; from a distance it seemed untouched by time. Despite the dark windows and empty corrals I could almost convince myself that I was coming home, that someone waited to welcome me.

Drawing closer, I discerned the sign mounted on wooden posts above the open gate. Wood-burned letters had once spelled out, *Pine Shadow Ranch*. I slowed; the Bronco's high beams picked out a number of forms in the darkness: the ramshackle barn behind the house,

a tilting windmill, a fractured swing dangling from one of the trees -- and something on the ground.

I braked. I was so wired I was willing to believe my eyes were playing tricks, but as I waited there, the Bronco's engine idling, the thing on the ground showed no sign of disappearing.

Too tired to be cautious, I climbed out of the Bronco. It was no trick of light, no play of shadows. A man lay face down in the dirt.

I circled him, my footsteps unnaturally loud in the clear night. From across the yard I could hear a broken shutter banging. Wind rustled the tall winter grass. I knelt beside him.

I could see in the headlights that his face was turned to the side. His eyes were wide open, but he wasn't alive. His breath didn't cloud the raw air, his shoulders didn't rise and fall. There was a neat hole the size of a quarter between his shoulder blades.

I sucked in my breath. This wasn't my first contact with murder, but I still got that sensation of watching from a separate solar system -- which usually precedes passing out cold. I rubbed my hand across my face. It was like one of those party games where you have thirty seconds to memorize a dozen objects; inevitably you see details instead of the big picture.

The dead man looked to be in his sixties maybe. His hair was thin, plastered to his head. He was grizzled, his fingernails were dirty. He wore faded jeans, a plaid flannel shirt and cowboy boots. I had never seen him before, or if I had I didn't recognize him.

Reaching out to touch his wrist, a shock rippled through me like I had not been properly grounded.

He was still warm.

I jerked my head up and stared at the silent house. I looked to the surrounding hills, the sentinel trees.

The wind whispered in the pines. Otherwise nothing moved. All was still. In fact ... too still.

Staring into the windswept darkness I became convinced someone was out there watching me. The hair prickled at the nape of my neck. My heart began to give my ribs the old one-two; a left and a right and then a left left left.

I don't have time for this, I warned my uncooperative ticker as I slammed back into the Bronco. Reversing in a wide arc, I put pedal to the metal, bumping and banging down the pot hole-riddled road racing back the way I had come.

While I bounced along the road I felt around for my cell phone. Finding it at last, I dialed emergency.

It rang -- and rang -- and rang. Finally I got through to a sleepy someone in the Sheriff's Department. I opened my mouth and was instantly placed on hold. About one second before I spontaneously combusted, the line was picked up once more, and the voice, still sounding

sleepy -- had she dozed off the last time? -- returned asking what the nature of my emergency was. After running through it a couple of times, she eventually seemed to understand what I was squawking about and promised to send help.

True to her word, the dispatcher sent the cavalry. A black and white four wheel drive met me at the mouth of Stagecoach Road twenty minutes later, lights flashing, siren blaring.

"What seems to be the trouble, sir?" The man in uniform was middle-aged, well-fed and a different species from the cops I'd come to know in the past few months.

I explained the trouble.

"Okay dokey," said Sheriff Billingsly, scratching his skunk-striped beard. "You hop in the truck and we'll go have a looksee at this alleged dead man."

I piled into the cab with the sheriff and his waiting deputy -- Dwayne. Dwayne looked like he had just walked off the set of Dukes of Hazzard. He shifted his chaw to his other cheek.

"Howdy."

"Hi," I said through teeth starting to chatter with nerves.

Dwayne put the truck into gear and we headed back down the road.

"It was up here," I said as we clattered over the cattle guard. "Just outside the gate."

"Right along here?" the deputy asked, slowing as we approached the gate. The headlights fell on empty dirt road.

"Stop," I ordered. "It was along here that I found him."

The deputy braked hard and the three of us lurched forward and then back.

"Here?" the sheriff demanded.

The three of us stared at the lone tumbleweed somersaulting across the deserted yard.

"He was right there," I said.

Silence.

"Well he ain't there now," said the sheriff.

Chapter Two

I awoke after a long, dreamless sleep. Slowly my vision focused on two beady eyes gazing into my own. A squirrel stood inches from my nose, whiskers twitching in alarm.

The alarm was mutual. I yelped and swung the makeshift pillow of my jacket at my bedmate. The squirrel scampered off in a cloud of newly disturbed dust and disappeared up the chimney of the fireplace at the far end of the room. Coughing, I staggered to my feet and looked about.

Layers of velvety dust covered everything not draped in sheets. Chairs, tables, lamps, most everything *was* covered in dust sheets. It was like waking up in the middle of a ghosts' tea party. Cobwebs draped artistically from the blackened ceiling beams.

When I'd finally collapsed on the overstuffed sofa the night before I had been too frazzled and exhausted to notice. In the cold light of day it was clear to me that I'd had some kind of breakdown. Only a lapse of sanity could explain what I was doing shivering in my skivvies in the room that time forgot.

April is plenty bitter in the mountains despite the sunshine and wildflowers. I pulled on Levi's, shrugged into a flannel shirt. In honor of Jake I fished a beer out of the cooler and swished a mouthful through my teeth as I sat on the ice chest lid considering my surroundings.

The long wide room had a huge stone fireplace at one end. The wooden floors were bare now; I recalled them covered by starkly beautiful Indian rugs. Black gargoyle feet stuck out beneath the dust sheets. If memory served, all those linen peaks and slopes concealed heavy walnut Victorian furniture upholstered in red velvet or smoky-gray tufted satin. Faded drapes framed picture windows and a view that was worth framing. Beyond the trees, in the distance, I could see mountains, still white-tipped with snow. The sky was cerulean -- a word we don't use much in LA. Not a cloud, not a plane, not a telephone wire to mar that wide blue yonder.

The silence seemed unnatural and would take some getting used to. I heard the sweet trill of a meadow lark, then nothing else. No distant roar of traffic, no voices. Pure silence. I listened to it for some time, waiting for something to break the spell.

Anything.

Then, lubricated by another swig of beer, the wheels began to turn. Already the events of the night before felt like some half-forgotten nightmare -- much the conclusion local law enforcement had come to after they were unable to find any trace of "my" dead body.

"Probably just the way the shadows fall here," the sheriff had said generously, not giving in to what was clearly his suspicious first thought.

"I'm telling you, it was a body."

"Coyote maybe," Deputy Dwayne suggested. "Could have been shot by a rancher and dragged itself off."

"There you go," the sheriff pronounced, pleased with this scenario.

"It was not an animal," I said. "I got out and knelt beside it. It was a man." I described the man to them for the second time.

"Could be Harvey," the deputy said reluctantly, with a look to his superior.

"Sure, drunk again. Or maybe stoned," the sheriff agreed. "I guess that's possible."

"Ted Harvey? The overseer?"

"*Overseer?*" repeated the sheriff. He and the deputy exchanged glances. "Sure, that's it. Probably came to and staggered on home to sleep it off."

"Probably puking his guts out right now," the deputy comforted. He shot a stream of tobacco juice at a mustard flower swaying in the night.

I was shaking my head, and the sheriff said shortly, "Sir, I believe you *think* you saw something this evening. I don't think you are *deliberately* wasting taxpayer money and tying up government officials for nothing"

"But?" Call me paranoid but I sensed an implicit threat.

"But you can see for yourself, there's nothing here. No blood. No body imprint in the sand."

"There goes the coyote theory."

They looked at me without favor.

"Whatever it was, it's gone now," Sheriff Billingsly said. "Not much we can do about that. Moon's setting. It'll be black as a nigger in a coal mine in half hour."

Charming.

I said, "You could check to see if Harvey made it home. He lives on the property in a trailer, I think."

"Sir, I don't have the author-I-zation to waste any more time on this bugaboo. There's nothing *here*."

So sayeth The Law.

They drove me back to the Bronco, advising me to head into Basking and get a room for the night at a motel. Charged to "Drive safe now," I was left yawning with nervous exhaustion in the glow of their taillights.

I climbed in the Bronco and crept back down the hillside to the ranch, scanning the side of the road for my missing corpse. Like we could have somehow missed it.

Reaching the ranch at last, I unlocked the front door, unloaded my gear and crashed on the nearest sofa. If the missing dead body had been propped in one of the chairs I wouldn't have noticed.

Four hours later I woke a little stiff, a little uneasy, but almost willing to believe I had been delirious with tiredness the night before. Almost.

Yet sitting there in the spring sunshine I felt oddly calm. Maybe it was the change of scenery. Maybe I was still too tired to feel much of anything.

I considered whether I had any responsibility to pursue the riddle of the riddled corpse. I had called the cops and they had investigated and dismissed the idea of foul play. So that was it, right? Case closed.

But it couldn't hurt to check one last thing. Just for form's sake.

Flapping into a shirt I strode outside to the trailer parked back behind the empty corrals. There was a battered white pickup, which I took to be Harvey's, beside the trailer. I felt the hood. Cold.

I banged on the rusting door of the trailer.

From inside I heard someone speaking, urging quiet.

"Hey! Anybody home?"

The whispering went on.

I tried the door. It opened.

I poked my head inside.

It took only a glance to ascertain the cautioning voice came from the television. An episode of *Bassmasters*. Ted Harvey might be living here -- it smelled like he had died here -- but there was no sign of him now. There was plenty of evidence he led a rich and full life if the stacks of *Playboy*, empty beer cans and dirty dishes were anything to go by.

Walking the length of the trailer, I half-expected a body to fall from the closet or slump out of the cupboard-sized shower. But dead or alive, nobody was home. I glanced around for a picture of Ted; there was nothing in the way of convenient snapshots. I turned off the TV, clicked off the still-burning lights. The lamps must have been on when I arrived the night before, but I had been past noticing. I didn't know what the cops would make of it; blazing lights and blaring TV indicated to me that Harvey had left after dark and unexpectedly.

I stood for a few moments staring out the 2 x 4 window at green hills splotted with snow; snow that was, in fact, white wild flowers. I asked myself what Grace Latham, would do -- Grace being the sleuth creation of Leslie Ford, one of my favorite mystery writers. I guessed that in my position Grace would have done a bit of discreet snooping through Harvey's personal belongings. Grace's snooping usually led to Grace getting knocked over the head.

I backed out, shut the door again.

Even if my eyes had been playing tricks on me last night, and I had mistaken a man dead-drunk for a man dead-dead, the drunk had not picked himself up and staggered home.

I retreated to the house, reassessed my options. In the cold light of day my flight from LA seemed extreme. But since I was here, and gas prices being what they were, I decided I might as well make the most of my spontaneous combustion. One thing for sure, I'd probably get plenty of writing done. There didn't appear to be a viable distraction in a thirty-mile radius.

In the kitchen I boiled a few dishes, scoured the stove and mahogany table, fried up some turkey bacon and the only two eggs that had survived the road trip. While I ate, I made my plans.

For the record, my plans had nothing to do with sleuthing, and everything to do with writing. I'd had enough sleuthing to last a lifetime.

The new year got off to a helluva start with the murder of one of my oldest and closest friends. For a while it had looked like, if I didn't actually end up a corpse myself, I would spend the next twenty years playing touch-tag in prison with guys who had nicknames like Ice Pick and Snake.

But that was all in the past. I was done with a life of crime -- except the fictional kind.

My own first mystery, *Murder Will Out*, featuring gay sleuth and Shakespearean actor Jason Leland, was now only months away from publication. I was hammering out the sequel between bouts of writer's block.

The funny thing was that I'd never suffered from writer's block until I sold a manuscript. That's when the creative paralysis first set in.

"You're probably thinking about it too much," Jake had commented with that unexpected and irritating perception that made him such a good detective.

* * * * *

After breakfast I climbed back in the Bronco and drove to Basking to pick up some supplies; not that fried eggs and beer for breakfast didn't make me feel macho as hell, but as a steady diet it gets old fast.

Basking is much smaller than Sonora, which is one of the better known of California's old mining towns, as well as being the County Seat. This is mother lode country, but

nowadays revenue comes from logging, tourism, and agriculture. Mark Twain and Brett Harte made the area famous, though the tourists had yet to zero in on Basking. It was a small town; some buildings dating back to the 1800s, which is old in California. The narrow, steep streets were partially bricked and lined with trees older than the town itself. Glass front windows were painted in old-fashioned script that spelled out things like: *Gentlemen's Haberdashery* or *Polly's Confectionery*. Victorian clapboard houses had been preserved to doll house perfection in kindergarten colors. .

There were few people about on that Friday morning; a couple of geezers sat outside the grocery store as I climbed the wide wooden stairs to the porch.

"So Custer says to his brother," one of the wizened ones said to the other, "I don't know what the hell's wrong with them Injuns -- they seemed okay at the dance last night!"

The second old timer cackled in toothless appreciation and slapped his knee.

I pushed open the peeling door. A bell rang noisily as I stepped inside the store. The first thing that met my eyes was a gigantic moth-eaten buffalo head mounted over the counter. My gaze dropped to meet that of a lady of about eighty (give or take a decade) calmly eyeing me as she probed her teeth with a blue toothpick.

"Help you, sonny? You look lost."

I told her what I needed and she directed me amiably down the aisles of pickled calves feet and pork rinds.

"Do you sell Tab?"

"Sonny, I haven't seen that stuff since the '60s."

Coincidentally that appeared to be the age of some of the cans on the shelves in front of me. Food or collectible? You decide.

"Passing through?" the proprietress inquired around the toothpick when I piled my groceries on the counter at last.

"No. I'm staying out on Stagecoach Road."

She contemplated me with her gimlet eyes and gave an unexpected cackle that I thought would end with her swallowing her toothpick. "I know you now. You're that skinny little kid used to come in here with Anna English."

"That's me."

She removed the toothpick and waved it at me to make her point. "Grandkid or something, ain't you? Only living kin. You're the one paying that no account Ted Harvey to sit around and smoke dope all day."

"I'm paying him to look after my property." Smoking dope was a perk.

"That's what you think, sonny," the crone informed me. She began to ring my groceries on an antique register, raising her penciled-in brows at such oddities as smoked almonds and apple-cinnamon instant oatmeal.

"Planning to stay awhile, I guess," she remarked.

"A week or so."

"You got company with you?"

"No." I said it and immediately thought better of it. "Not until tonight." Why advertise that I was by myself in an isolated valley?

"How come you never came back when your granny passed away?"

"I was eight. I didn't have my driver's license."

This reminded her of all the people who did have licenses and shouldn't. She treated me to a couple of traffic-death horror stories, finished bagging my groceries and remarked, "You better have a pow-wow with that no-account Ted Harvey. He'll burn the place down one of these days."

* * * * *

When I got back to the ranch I had another look for that no-account Ted Harvey. He was still missing.

The rest of the afternoon was spent making myself at home, home on the range. I threw open the windows and doors to air out the place, balled up the dustsheets and attacked the most noticeable cobwebs with a broom that looked like an antique itself. I dusted, scrubbed, swept -- anything to avoid writing. However, the war machine ground to a halt when I reached my grandmother's study.

There, long forgotten by me, were several glass-front cases loaded with books.

I dropped the broom and approached slowly, my pulse quickening in excitement known only to book lovers in the advanced stage of addiction. Wiping the dusty pane, I peered close. Cloth-bound hardcover, embossed white print and the words, *The Bride Wore Black*. Cornell Woolrich. A first edition. A rare first at that.

I pulled open the glass door and squatted down. Mysteries. Shelf after shelf of mysteries.

I expelled a long breath. Paperback and hardcover. Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler. All the good old stuff: Hammett, Tey, Stout, Marsh -- a couple of my fave rave Leslie Ford. Young Jim Hawkins couldn't have been more jazzed at a trunkful of pirate gold.

There were a couple of gothic romances but mostly my grandmother's taste seemed to lean toward the hard-boiled. No gay mysteries of course. The first "normal" gay detective didn't come out, literally speaking, 'til 1970 with Joseph Hansen's *Fadeout*. Hansen may not have hit the *New York Times* bestseller list with his Brandstetter series, but he set the standard for the rest of us.

The funny thing was that until that moment I didn't remember my grandmother being a mystery buff. Now I wondered if her reading habits had subconsciously influenced my own. Lisa, my mother, read nonfiction when she read anything at all.

About five o'clock I tore my nose out of the books long enough to fry up salmon and potatoes just the way Granna had taught me twenty-something years before. Jake would have been impressed. He was under the impression that I would starve to death if I ever lost my can opener.

I wondered how long it would take him to notice I'd left town -- if he ever did notice.

After supper I popped Andrea Bocelli into the CD player, found a couple of hoary logs in the wood carrier and tossed them in the fireplace. Curling up in one of the oversized Victorian chairs, I prepared to spend the evening with Grace Latham. Grace is the quintessential amateur sleuth of her post-WWII era. She's wealthy, well-bred, and usually way off the mark in her detecting, so don't ask why I feel kinship with her.

Several blissful hours passed before my concentration was disturbed by the distant grind of a truck engine.

Laying the book aside, I wandered outside onto the long porch that ran the length of the back of the house. In the distance I could see spectral lights drifting down the mountainside - - headlights. That road was the old stagecoach road and it led to this house which had originally been the old stage stop. Shoving my hands into my pockets, I waited. The night smelled of wood smoke and the roses growing wild beside the house. It was biting. I longed for the warmth of the house wafting out through the open door.

As I stood there rocking back and forth on my heels I began to feel very much alone, miles from town, miles from the nearest neighboring ranch, miles from nowhere. The wind through the trees sounded like rushing water, a mournful sound. It was a quarter of a century since I'd been out of hailing distance of other people. *City boy*, I jeered at myself.

After a time the sound of the engine died away with the lights. That was weird. Were they camping in the woods?

Rustlers? Slim pickings for rustlers these days. Briefly, I thought about investigating. Perhaps here lay the answer to my missing corpse. But unlike my intrepid Jason -- or even good old Grace Latham -- I concluded that night reconnaissance was not a hot idea. Even more briefly I considered calling the sheriffs, but after our last encounter I hesitated to look like the nervous nellie I knew they had pegged me for.

Going back inside, I threw a couple of logs on the fire and returned to my book. But shortly after, the lines began to run together. Worn out by more physical activity than I'd had in a month, I crawled into my sleeping bag and fell instantly asleep.

* * * * *

I woke to the hoot of an owl. For a moment I wondered where I was. The room was moonlit. The shadow of a tree swayed against the wall. I squinted at the red embers in the fireplace, listening intently.

At last I heard it again, the crunch of footsteps on gravel. Rolling out of the sleeping bag, I went to the windows. The night looked like it had been shot through a blue filter for a cheap horror flick.

All was silent. Still.

Had I imagined those furtive footsteps?

Pulling on a pair of jeans, I shoved my feet into shoes and grabbed my flashlight. The air was bitter as I stepped out onto the porch. The surrounding mountains prickled with gleaming arrowheads of pine. Soft-footing it across the porch, I froze as a wooden board cracked underfoot loudly as a bone break.

Nothing moved.

I continued on around the house.

The outlying sheds and barn stood dark and motionless in the moonlight. Frost glittered the rooftops. Quietly I picked my way down the steps. Nothing stirred in the yard. I stayed in the shadows of the house and waited.

Nothing.

Hours seemed to pass while I watched. I was dozy. I was chilled. I told myself that if there had been a prowler he was long gone now. I reminded myself that I needed my rest. I was a writer, not a detective, amateur or otherwise, and this was just a waste of time and valuable sleep.

Finally I convinced myself and headed back inside the house. I tossed another log on the dying embers in the fireplace and dived for the sofa, shivering into my sleeping bag.

After a few minutes my body defrosted and I sank back into confused dreams of Grace Latham sweeping cobwebs out of Ted Harvey's trailer.

We've got to get to the bottom of it, she informed me in my dream state.

The bottom of what?

The floor, Grace replied simply.

* * * * *

I was up with the birds, a meadow lark providing pleasant substitute for my alarm clock. In the fresh first light I cruised past the empty corrals, the empty stable and the empty trailer of my missing handyman, then up into the hills.

I roved out quite a way enjoying the warm kiss of sunlight on my face. Taking my time I climbed the hillside, which was really more of a small mountain. "Find the nearest mountain, climb it, and peace shall flow into you as the sun flows into the trees," said John Muir. At the crest of the hill I paused and inhaled a lungful of mountain air. When I stopped coughing I looked around.

That's when I noticed the field I was standing in was not of wild flowers, nor wild grasses nor bracken, familiar though those ragged green leaves seemed.

Running it through the old calculator I deduced that I was waist high in grass -- the kind you smoke, not mow. For a moment or two I stood there quietly aghast, and then I tore down the hillside and into the house to the telephone; I knew there was a reason I continued paying for the service. Instinctively I called my old pal Detective Jake Riordan.

Drumming my fingers on the scratched counter, I waited for the answering machine. After four rings Jake picked up and mumbled, "Lo?"

"Jake," I puffed, still out of breath from my sprint. "It's me. I need help -- advice. When I got here there was a body -- a dead man in the yard. He'd been shot. In the back. When the sheriffs got here he was gone. Vanished. Now I've just found grass -- pot growing on my hill."

Into my pause for oxygen Jake growled, "How the hell much coffee have you had this morning?"

In the background I heard a voice murmuring inquiry. A feminine voice.

I don't know why it hadn't occurred to me until then that Jake was still seeing other people. Female people. I figured he was still doing the leatherscene; I accepted that as a normal part of his screwed-up psyche. But dating women? Sleeping with women?

Where exactly *did* I fit in his life? Apparently he could sleep with everyone but me. Friends? I was the friend he didn't want to be seen with. So if we weren't friends and we sure as hell weren't lovers, why was I placing hysterical phone calls to him on a Saturday morning before breakfast?

"Never mind," I said. "Wrong number."

"*Adrien*, where --"

I replaced the receiver quietly and carefully, not slamming it down because I was an adult after all, and whatever I was feeling now was my problem, not Jake's. But the unrequited gig was getting old fast.

I tottered into the front room and dropped down on the nearest chair. After a minute or so my breathing returned to normal and I noticed how quiet it was. Way too quiet. I got up, punched Play on the CD player and stared out the window.

There's a phrase in *Titus Andronicus*: "the heart's deep languor." For the record it wasn't that I didn't understand. And it's not that I don't like women. Some of my best friends are women. Women intrigue me with their fragile little bones and Amazon loyalty. I dig their Jr. Scientist makeup kits, their Machiavellian reasoning, their extraordinary notions of nutrition and geography. I just wouldn't want my son to marry one. Okay, maybe my son, but not my boyfriend.

Spooky footfalls in the night are not nearly as frightening as the prospect of being alone and lonely.

One of life's ironic moments occurred then, as the next CD dropped on the player. "*Con Te Partiro*." Time to Say Goodbye.

Chapter Three

My first instinct had been to yell for help. As that was a scrub, I swung my sights toward a more realistic solution for my mounting problems.

No doubt your standard issue solid citizen would have promptly summoned Sheriff Billingsly and his tobacco-spewing sidekick. But experiences with the local law had impressed upon me the awe-inspiring dearth of imagination there. I started remembering search and seizure horror stories where innocent landowners had their property confiscated by the state because of dope-dealing tenants and guests.

On the other hand, I couldn't ignore the fact that I had hashish growing on the North Forty. Not the easiest thing in the world to conceal either. I considered a controlled burn and briefly dwelt on the mental picture of my stoned woodland friends falling out of trees and sky. Uh-uh, as my erstwhile pal Riordan would have said.

What I needed was some legal advice, so I placed a long distance call to dear old Mr. Gracen, the last surviving partner of the illustrious firm of Hitchcock & Gracen. It being Saturday my legal advisor was not in. The answering service asked if this was an emergency? I said I wasn't sure, left my number, and resumed my restless pacing.

After a couple of miles up and down the oak floors I realized I was as aggravated over what I was not letting myself think about -- Jake -- as I was over the marijuana. Since I couldn't do anything about either at the moment it seemed pointless to go on worrying. I told myself this several times.

Impelled by the kind of horrible fascination that draws people to the scenes of accidents, I scaled the hill once more and studied my former caretaker's vision of God's Little Acre. If Ted Harvey had planted this cash crop I didn't believe he would willingly walk away. So either he was due back shortly or he was indeed my now-you-see-him-now-you-don't dead man. Vaguely I considered drug deals gone wrong. Surely that kind of thing happened *after* the harvest?

As I stood there fretting and fuming I noticed a wisp of white smoke drifting from the valley on the other side of the mountain. Spaniard's Hollow. I'd forgotten the local legend if I ever knew it, but I remembered that on the steep vertical rocks above the glen were petroglyphs, Indian symbols carved into stone. Way back in the days before the stage stop had been built, even before the gold miners had arrived, the Kuksu, a secret Indian society, used to hold religious ceremonies in these hills. Deep in the hills, in the dark caves hidden in the ridges and crevices.

Naturally I was curious. Mainly because Spaniard's Hollow is still part of Pine Shadow property, not a campground.

I started down the uneven hillside, cutting a path through the trees. It was quite a climb for a guy whose extent of daily physical activity consists of running up and down a flight of stairs. As I chose my way down the slope I spied the tops of pitched tents and the topaz gleam of Lake Senex. I could see a couple of Land Rovers and a green pickup truck at the edge of the camp. A number of people moved between the tents. No one seemed concerned with concealment.

A branch cracked behind me and I turned.

"Stop right there!" a female voice commanded.

Halting mid-turn, I slid a few inches in the pine needles and loose soil.

"*Hold it!*" she shrieked.

I had an impression of dark hair, spectacles and a purple Icelandic sweater. She was a small girl but she was holding a big gun.

I retorted, "I'm trying."

"Put your hands up."

I put my hands up, slid again and grabbed for the low hanging branch of a pine tree.

There was a loud explosion and something tore through the branches over my head sending splinters and bits of pine everywhere.

"Whoops!" squealed the girl.

"Jesus!" I yelled, cowering behind the all too skinny tree trunk. "Are you *crazy?*"

"It just went off."

From the camp below us resounded sounds of alarm, and several flannel-shirted people swarmed up the hillside toward us, voices echoing in the hollow hills.

"Amy? Amy? Where are you?" Their voices drifted up to us.

"Here!" cried Amy. The gun wavered wildly in my direction.

We were reached first by a tall, gaunt middle-aged man wearing glasses, and a young, capable-looking guy in jeans and a camouflage vest.

I stepped from behind the tree. "What the hell is --?"

I barely had time to get the words out before the young guy grabbed and planted me face down in the dried pine needles with a speed and efficiency that left me speechless.

“Okay, Amy?” he demanded over my belated objections.

The older man was questioning, “What happened?” Trying to make himself heard over the general confusion.

“I found him trespassing,” Amy informed them excitedly. “The gun just went off.”

“*Gun?* What gun?” exclaimed the older man. The owner of the knee in my spine echoed that dismay. He relaxed his arm lock for a moment.

I wriggled free, rolled over and sat up, spitting out moldering tree bark and swear words.

“*Trespassing?* This is my property. Who the hell *are* you maniacs?”

The older man made ineffectual shushing motions. Amy pointed the gun at me again; it was snatched from her by the younger man who vaguely reminded me of Riordan with his blonde, built-for-action look.

“Hey!” protested Amy.

“Hey yourself,” he shot back. “You know you’re not supposed to be packing.”

Be packing? Was that the way college kids talk nowadays? Were weapons that common on campus?

Oh yeah, I had them pegged for academics despite the hardware; the possible exception was the young tough who had manhandled me so efficiently.

His eyes met mine. They were green and apologetic. I don’t subscribe to the gaydar theory but as our gazes locked, a flash of recognition went through me like a light turning on.

The older man was asking who I was as we were joined by two more field trip escapees: a middle-aged woman wearing a red bandanna, and a handsome silver-haired man who appeared to have just set off on safari.

“My name is English,” I bit out. “I own this land. Who are you?”

“Dr. Philip Marquez. This is Amy --”

“Dr. Lawrence Shoup,” the chap in the safari hat interrupted in one of those imperious English accents.

Neither of us offered to shake hands as we looked each other up and down; granted he had the advantage since I was still on my ass.

When the Snub Direct had reached a stalemate, the woman in the bandanna said, “But if you’re Mr. English, you gave us permission to dig here.”

“I gave you permission to dig? Dig what? Who *are* you people?” I made to stand and the blonde guy gave me a hand up. We hurriedly disengaged.

“Dr. Philip Marquez,” Marquez began again patiently. He was stopped short by Stewart Granger.

"I am in charge of this expedition," Dr. Shoup announced, "in the absence of Dr. Livingston. Dr. Livingston, the site supervisor, is the one who wrote you."

"Wrote *me*? Wrote me about what?" I paused in brushing down my clothes. Pine needles in my boots. Pine sap in my hair. I hated these people whoever they were.

Dr. Shoup frowned. "Regarding the excavation. The *site*. We are attempting to reconstruct the original site of the Red Rover mining camp."

At my incredulous look he said testily, "Perhaps you've forgotten? I assure you the proper forms have been filled out and documented with the Department of Parks and Recreation."

"This is private property not state land."

"Well ... that is, well" I could see he wasn't used to being contradicted.

"Can I see these consent forms or whatever they are?"

"They are at the university."

"What university?"

"He means the local JC," the blonde said dryly. "Tuolumne College."

"Yes, quite right," Shoup said as though this were a point for his side.

"They might be in Dr. Livingston's papers," put in Amy, teacher's trigger happy pet.

"Dr. Livingston took his briefcase with him," the middle-aged woman said.

"Not all his papers were in the briefcase, Bernice."

"Let's discuss this at base camp, shall we?" Dr. Shoup suggested.

* * * * *

At base camp I was issued a folding stool, a cup of chicory coffee and an explanation of sorts from Kevin, the blonde grad student, while Bernice, Marquez, and Amy searched the site supervisor's papers for proof that I had granted permission to dig the test pits now pockmarking the face of the hillside.

"I guess we're all jumpy," Kevin apologized. "Some weird things have happened lately."

"You're telling me."

"Let's not bore Mr. English with our problems, O'Reilly," Dr. Shoup put in.

Naturally this made me curious. "What kinds of weird things have happened?"

Kevin and Dr. Shoup exchanged one of those sliding glances people share when they aren't sure their stories will match.

Kevin said, "Noises and stuff."

"Coyotes," Dr. Shoup said.

The things coyotes took the rap for in these parts were quite extraordinary.

"Practical jokes in all probability," Dr. Shoup added.

"My dog was killed," Kevin said.

"That was certainly coyotes, O'Reilly."

Kevin looked unconvinced.

"What kind of dog?" I asked. Not that it was pertinent; I just wondered.

"Border collie. He was young and healthy and he'd been in fights before. I've never seen coyotes do that to a dog."

"Do what?"

"Tore him to pieces."

Shoup made an impatient movement. Kevin said, "Okay, what about the chanting?"

"Chanting?"

"Local yokels," opined Dr. Shoup. With that attitude he must be a real hit here in Hicksville.

About this time Dr. Marquez and his cohorts returned triumphantly waving a sheet of paper.

"I knew I'd seen it," Bernice announced.

Taking the letter, I studied it. There on a Xeroxed copy of my letterhead, someone had typed in effect that, for the sum of \$50.00 a week, the Archeology Department of Tuolumne Junior College had permission to dig for the Red Rover mining camp. There were no conditions and no restrictions.

"I never wrote this. That's not my signature." It was not my signature but it looked like a rough tracing of it. I scrutinized the date.

"This is p-preposterous," Dr. Shoup stuttered into the silence that followed my words.

"I agree."

"It's got your name on it," Amy informed me.

"I see that."

"This doesn't make sense," Dr. Marquez said, slowly scratching what appeared to be an impressive hickey on his throat. "Lawrence?"

"Lawrence" appeared to be Dr. Shoup, who lost no time launching his offensive. "What exactly are you trying to pull here young man?" he said to me.

"What is your precious Dr. Livingston trying to pull?" I retorted nastily. I'd had a bitch of a day, and getting shot at and thrown down a hillside had not improved my mindset. There were horrified gasps from the womenfolk as though I'd accused Louis Leakey of salting the fossil beds.

"Do you realize what you're suggesting, sir?"

"There's probably a simple explanation," Kevin interjected.

“Sure. It’s a forgery.”

They stared at me -- or glared, as dispositions warranted -- and I could see it cross a couple of minds that they should have let Amy shoot me back there in the trees.

Which reminded me of the man who had been shot. Suppose Annie Oakley had got carried away on guard duty and the others were covering for her?

Okay, thin, but I *had* seen a dead man in the middle of my dirt road and he had disappeared without a trace an hour later. Who shot him? Why? And what had become of his body? These folks were my nearest neighbors.

I said, “I never received this letter. I sure as hell never wrote this reply. Look, they’ve misspelled ‘gratuity.’” As though this were conclusive proof.

“Who did?” Kevin O’Reilly looked sheepish as soon as the words left his mouth.

“It looks to me like someone took a copy of a letter I sent them, typed their own message in the blanked out body, and then traced my signature.”

“Who?” asked Amy and Bernice, still kind of missing the point.

“Why?” Marquez and Kevin chorused at the same time.

I felt like I’d stumbled into an episode of *Scooby-Doo*.

“I don’t know. Someone who wanted fifty bucks a week.” I believed I had a pretty good idea, since I recalled mailing a check in February to my legendary caretaker, Ted Harvey.

“I suppose you’re going to try and renege on your agreement,” Dr. Shoup said.

“I’m not reneging on anything. I don’t know that I want you digging holes in the scenery until I hear more about your little venture.”

“Little venture?” The woman in the red bandana repeated indignantly. How to win friends and influence people: that was me.

“When Dr. Livingston returns, he’ll straighten this out,” Amy huffed. The rest of them looked less certain.

“I shall contact the university’s legal department,” Dr. Shoup informed me grandly.

I thought of dear old Mr. Gracen, our family solicitor, who’d spent the last sixty years writing and rewriting wills for clients even more aged and infirm than himself. I tried to picture him going toe-to-toe with lawyers who actually litigated for a living. I hoped the stress wouldn’t finish him. I said, “Fine. Maybe you can get together your paperwork so I can get an idea of what you’re trying to do here.”

“Accomplish” might have been a more tactful word, I realized, as they bristled and muttered amongst themselves.

Our meeting ended. In distrust and suspicion they watched me hike up the hill escorted by Kevin O’Reilly, who appeared uncomfortable in the role of bouncer.

At the crest of the hill Kevin said, “Uh ... sorry about this.”

"Me too." Somehow I never pictured myself standing in the way of higher education. "It could still work out, but I need a clearer picture of your operation. I've never heard of the Red Rover mine." (It would have made more sense if they were exploring the Indian caves -- not that I would have agreed to that either).

"I guess Dr. Shoup rubbed you the wrong way. He rubs everyone the wrong way, but he's the real thing."

"You don't have to tell me." A card-carrying prick if I ever met one.

"I mean, he's got the credentials. He trained at Oxford. He worked at the British Museum. He's a member of every society you can name: the Society of Historical Archeology, the National Science Foundation. He writes for *National Geographic*."

Uh huh.

"Anyway, Livingston's in charge here. He's cool. You'll see."

The boyish enthusiasm was kind of cute. "Sure."

Kevin hesitated. "So -- last night that was probably you blasting the opera?"

The hills are alive with the sound of Muzak.

"I thought I was alone out here."

He was smiling at me in a steady appreciative way and I quipped idiotically, "My mating call."

"Yeah?"

"No."

We both laughed and I trudged down my side of the mountain.

* * * * *

The rest of the day passed uneventfully and unprofitably. After lunch I got ambitious and hunted down the goose-feather mattresses, which had been wrapped in plastic and stored in the attic. After a wrestling match during which the mattress nearly threw me down the narrow stairs, I dragged its lumpy carcass into the bedroom I had used when I was a kid. Master of this house I might be, but I didn't feel ready to claim my grandmother's room as my own. I still felt like a visitor here.

The ground floor room had a stunning view of the distant snowy mountains. I made up the four-poster bed and spent the next couple of hours clearing bird nests out the chimney flue. Not that it didn't need doing, but I'd supposedly come up here to write and I'd yet to open my laptop.

When I'd finished amusing myself with mops and disinfectant, I settled down to inventorying the books in the cases. I worked for several hours checking and listing copyright dates and printings, and then I made the discovery that Zenith Ford Brown, a.k.a. Leslie Ford, had developed a second, masculine pseudonym. Under the *nom de plume*,

“David Frome” she wrote a dozen mysteries featuring a frail male sleuth named Mr. Pinkerton who, with the help of a stalwart Scotland Yard inspector, solved a variety of homicides. Comparisons were inevitable and depressing.

Fed up with Leslie and myself, I tossed aside *Mr. Pinkerton Finds a Body* and finally warmed up the laptop.

Several pages of data entry later, I concluded that the change of scenery had not improved my masterpiece. I was beginning to wonder if anything could.

The foil rolled drunkenly across the floor, the hilt nudging Jason’s toe.

“Pick it up,” ordered Lucius.

“Pick it up yourself.”

“Jeez, Jason. You can do better than that,” I muttered.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I typed.

Was I? Definitely not. Maybe a quote from the bard? I reached for my copy of *Titus*

?!

My copy of *Titus* was still in LA. I dealt with that for a moment, decided it probably wasn’t *really* the last straw, and resumed word-smithing.

On I slogged till about ten-thirty, developing carpal tunnel syndrome if nothing else.

Stopping for a breather, I ended up in the kitchen. I was pouring myself a glass of Merlot from one of the local wineries when I noticed the light was back on in Ted Harvey’s trailer.

Had the prodigal returned? I grabbed my jacket and trucked on out to the trailer. I was halfway across the yard when the light went out. I peered at my watch in the moonlight: 11:45.

Late for a social call, but I was way past the social niceties.

Reaching the trailer, I hammered on the door.

Nothing happened.

I pounded again and then I tried the handle. The door opened, hinges protesting loudly.

Dimly, I had an impression of movement above me and then an explosion of pain blew through my head.

Blackness descended like an anvil.

Chapter Four

I opened my eyes.

Fuzzy white ... ceiling. I turned my head. Mistake. Opened my eyes again. Something blurry stood to the side of me. I focused. Some kind of stand with an IV drip.

I was in a narrow hospital bed with railings. There were electrodes taped to my chest and an IV stuck in my arm. Not a good start to any day (or night, judging by the muted lights around me). Waking in hospitals is #1 on my Secret Dread list, but before I could really work myself into a sweat, the thumping started on the ceiling of my brain. I played dead hoping the pain would forget me and lumber on its way.

“What the hell happened?”

I thought I was complaining to myself, but I must have mumbled it aloud because a familiar voice to my left said, “I guess that’s more original than ‘where am I.’”

Very, very carefully I turned my head. The green line on the heart monitor jumped as I met the lynx-eyed gaze of LAPD Detective Jake Riordan.

“What are you doing here?” I guess I sounded more querulous than flattered. I suspected he was a hallucination; he sure wasn’t a result of the pain medication because I wasn’t getting enough to smother the kettledrum thudding behind my eyes.

“The cops were curious about why you had a homicide detective’s card in your wallet. They gave me a call.”

“Oh.” Did that answer my question?

He has nice eyes, does Riordan. Hazel in color with long dark lashes; almost pretty, though there is nothing pretty about six foot plus of USDA prime. He studied me out of his nice hazel eyes and his mouth gave a kind of reluctant twitch. He shook his head, apparently over my sorry state.

I licked my lips. My mouth tasted horrible. “Who clocked me?”

“No idea. You called it in yourself.”

"I ... what?"

"You picked your concussed ass up, walked inside and phoned 9-1-1 before you passed out again."

"No way." My lids drifted closed. I opened them with an effort. "I'd remember that."

"You were on automatic pilot maybe."

"I couldn't have." I didn't feel like I could manage it now, let alone minutes after I'd been coshed.

"Baby, I heard the tape. It was you."

I thought this over wearily. "How would you hear the tape?"

"The sheriffs had me listen to it, thinking maybe your assailant phoned for help."

This sounded confusing as hell.

Riordan stood up, checked the IV drip beside the bed. "Shit. You're running on empty." He went to the door and said something to someone outside.

A matronly lady in a mint-colored smock bustled in, clucked over my fallen form and went out. Jake looked pissed, which I didn't have the energy to deal with.

I closed my eyes.

* * * * *

"There *is* life after death," Jake remarked the next time I surfaced.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself." His eyes were red, like he'd spent a sleepless night. He was leaning over the bed rail, and I had the strangest impression that he had been holding my hand -- which tells you how doped I was. Yet I still felt the remembered warmth of fingers wrapped around mine.

I narrowed my eyes, trying to concentrate. "What were we talking about?"

"When?"

"Before."

"We were discussing how you managed to get knocked cold by someone searching Ted Harvey's trailer."

I rubbed my eyes with my free hand. It was still hard to focus. "How do you know someone was searching the trailer?"

"Baby, you explained it all when you made your famous 9-1-1 call." He looked like he was trying not to snicker at some memory.

"Famous?"

Jake nodded. "They were discussing it over at Granny Parker's Pantry when I had breakfast this morning."

Breakfast? What time was it now?

I tried to lift my head. Really bad idea. I bit back a curse and managed, "How long have I been here? Where *am* I exactly?"

"Almost forty-eight hours. You're in Calavares County Hospital running up a sizable bill even as we speak. I hope you've got health insurance."

I hoped I had enough. I've known solvent, gainfully employed people bankrupted by a hospital stay.

"Next question. When can I leave?"

Jake looked vague. "A day or two. They want to keep an eye on you."

I knew what that meant.

"Going by my missing clothes, they've had a plenty good look already." I hate hospitals. When I die, I don't want it to be in some hospital. I started feeling around the IV needle, raised my head and checked out the technology on my bare chest. Instant Panic: just add water. "I want to talk to the doctor," I jerked out. "I want to go home."

Jake planted his hand on my shoulder. It was like having a brick dropped on my chest. My head dropped back on the spongy pillow, pain thudding in dizzy time with my pulse beat.

"Simmer down, baby." He traced my collarbone with his thumb. I couldn't have moved if I had wanted to; I was too surprised to try. "Just relax."

The feel of his callused thumb on my sensitized skin was weirdly hypnotic. I blinked up at him like I had been shot by a tranquilizer dart.

"When they brought you in your heartbeat was a little funky. It's been fine for twenty-four hours so they're going to release you pretty soon. Okay?"

I assented weakly.

Jake made a fist and hooked a playful right to the angle of my jaw.

* * * * *

"Did they find Harvey?" I asked awhile later, a coherent thought bubbling up from the bog of physical misery.

Jake paused in squeezing drops into his eyes. "No. No sign of Harvey. Is he the one who crowned you?"

I tried to think back. My recollection was cloudy. "I didn't see who hit me. I remember walking out to the trailer. That's the last thing."

He frowned. "Why did you go out there?"

"I saw a light on. I thought maybe he was back." I tried again to force memory. It seemed like a long time ago. "The night before, someone was prowling around outside the house."

“Searching for something?”

“I guess. But what?”

“Harvey?”

“Unless Harvey is the prowler.”

Jake considered this from a cop’s perspective. “Then who was your DB in the road Thursday night?”

I looked up. “You believe me?”

“Yeah, I believe you.” His hands rested on the bed railing. “Why did you hang up like that on Saturday? And why the hell didn’t you tell that ghoul who works for you where you’d gone?”

This brought back a number of things I had conveniently forgotten, like the chick he was in bed with when I called. I said stiffly, “I got the impression you didn’t ... take me seriously.”

A couple of beats counted out by the heart monitor. Jake wore an odd expression.

“I take you seriously.”

Were we talking bodies in the road or in the bed?

A nurse entered from the wings and did the usual stage business with thermometer, blood pressure cuff, and clipboard. I tried to remain stoic under her icy hands.

“You’re obviously feeling better,” she said cheerfully. She appeared to be talking to Jake, who gave her a boyish grin.

“Those antihistamines worked like magic.”

The nurse dimpled.

I said irritably, “When can I go home?”

“Oh that’s up to Doctor.”

No definite article. “Doctor,” like in “God.”

“When does He show up?”

She said evasively, “He’ll be making his rounds this afternoon.”

“Could you let him know I plan on checking out today? Like now.”

Jake moved restively, but the nurse merely tittered at my pleasantry and departed stage right on a breeze of antiseptic.

* * * * *

The doctor hemmed and hawed and advised against discharging myself before he sounded the all clear. He talked about complex concussion, the dangers of a second injury to the brain, and the possibility of post-concussive syndrome. Jake folded his arms across his brawny chest, watching with interest as the doc and I duked it out. The doc had medicine,

experience and logic on his side. He was no match for me. Shaky but stubborn, I sat there peeling off the lime-green plastic hospital bracelet, demanding an “Against Medical Advice.”

“We can’t hold you prisoner,” the man of medicine admitted when pressed.

I delivered the coup de grâce. “My insurance won’t cover another day.”

Open sesame. Two hours later I watched Jake scowl as his Acura picked its city-bred way down the unforgiving dirt road that led to the Pine Shadow. We had stopped in town just long enough for Jake to pick his gear up from the Twain Harte Inn. He had traveled light, planning on nothing more than a stopover.

“Right up ahead is where I found him,” I said as we bounced over the cattle guard.

“Here?” Jake rolled to a stop.

Like yellow mist, mustard flower seemed to float across the valley, drifting over the green hillsides in the afternoon breeze.

I reached for the door handle, and Jake said, “Stay put, Adrien. I know how to investigate a crime scene.”

I subsided, watching through the windshield as he tiptoed through the tules. Walking out several yards, he studied the area and then circled back. At the side of the road he knelt, examining the brush.

Jake sneezed mightily, blowing petals from the surrounding wildflowers, and stomped back to the car.

“Well?”

He shrugged, mopping his nose with a flag-sized hanky. “Too much time has passed. The underbrush over there has been knocked down; possibly a car or a truck pulling around. That doesn’t mean it was used to cart off your DB.” He released the brake.

I said, “Jake, there’s something else. I’ve got a team of amateur archeologists from the local JC camped out on the back of my property. They’ve got a forged letter giving them permission to dig for a lost mining camp.”

“What do you mean ‘forged’?”

I didn’t have a chance to answer because as we drove into the front yard I spotted the sheriff’s black and white pickup. Billingsly himself stood on the porch flanked by his faithful deputy.

“What the hell now?” Jake growled.

We braked. I got out, reaching briefly to the door frame to steady myself. Whatever this was about, I didn’t have the energy for it.

The sheriff marched down the wooden steps. “English, you’re under arrest,” he announced.

“Say what?”

“You heard.”

My heart began to pound with adrenaline in the fight or flight response. Since my normal reflex is flight, I'm not sure why I reacted with a surge of scared aggression, but I did. My fists balled up and I launched forward, only to find my way blocked by Jake.

"Whoa," he said. He turned to Billingsly, asking, "What's the charge, Sheriff?"

Billingsly said flatly, "English has about an acre of pot growing on the hill behind this house. How about a charge of manufacturing marijuana with intent to distribute?"

"I've been here four days," I said. "How am I supposed to have achieved these results? Miracle-Gro?"

"It's your property, it's your pot," Billingsly said without emotion. "But if you don't think the charge fits, try this for size: aiding and abetting, or conspiring, in the possession and production of a controlled substance -- with intent to distribute."

So ... reducing the charges to "constructive possession," what was that? Five years minimum? It was so unreal, for a moment I felt like I was *on* drugs.

The deputy had the handcuffs out.

My voice rose in tempo to the blood beating in my temples. "Obviously you should be looking for Ted Harvey, the guy I apparently pay to sit in the sun and smoke dope all day. Obviously --" My heart was stuttering in fear and anger. Jake put his hand on my arm in warning -- which did not go unnoticed.

Jake said, "Can I ask you boys how you came to be searching the hill behind Mr. English's house?"

"We've got a warrant," Dwayne chimed in.

Billingsly looked annoyed at unauthorized vocal-I-zation. "We got an anonymous tip," he said.

"And that doesn't seem suspicious to you?" I cried, ignoring Jake's hand tightening on my arm.

"Listen, English, the pot is *there*. And I notice you didn't seem surprised to hear it."

"I notice you seem more interested in anonymous phone calls than the fact I nearly got brained on my own property. Why's that? One anonymous phone call and you're out here like a flash, but an honest taxpayer is in the hospital two days and you never even show up to take his statement?"

Yep, I was losing it. Jake must have deduced it was time to intervene. He said mildly enough, "I don't know how you boys handle things up here, but I'd say this is a lawsuit waiting to happen. English is barely out of the hospital."

"They released him. If he's well enough to leave the hospital --"

Dwayne jumped in. "Maybe you LA cops turn a blind eye to smokin' dope and --"

"AND YOU'VE GOT A FART'S CHANCE IN A HURRICANE OF BRINGING THIS TO TRIAL," Jake overrode them both loudly.

There was a pause in the wake of that lung power. The windmill screeched rustily in the breeze. Pretty much expressing my feelings.

“Before your DA laughs you out of his office you might want to consider the lawsuit English will slap on you,” Jake added coolly. “That’s you *personally*, you follow me? You’ll have liens on your wages, your home, and your car, if not your wife and kids. Think about it. Long after Mr. English has gone back to Los Angeles you’ll still be negotiating with his lawyers.”

I can’t say I appreciated this line of defense and the portrait of me as a litigation-crazed Angeleno, but it was effective as I could see by the way Deputy Dwayne sort of sidled away from his boss’s side. Billingsly’s piggy eyes flickered as he mentally squared-off against my high-priced, big-city lawyers, a long-distance nemesis he would have no power to touch.

A massive tumbleweed rolled by while we waited for the sheriff to make up his mind.

Billingsly stroked an uneasy finger down the white skunk stripe in his beard.

The sunlight shimmered blindingly off the dirt; I had to close my eyes against the glare. Jake’s hand was still fastened on me but it felt more like reassurance than restraint now. I told myself that, if they did arrest me, Jake would handle it. He would know what to do. He would have me out on bail in hours. No need to panic. I told myself this two or three times while the back of my shirt grew damp with perspiration.

“Let me give *you* a friendly piece of advice, *boys*,” Billingsly managed finally. “You rile the wrong folks, and you’ll be too busy planning your funerals to worry about going to court.”

* * * * *

“Never use the word ‘obvious’ to a hick cop,” Jake said as we watched the two-man posse ride away in a cloud of exhaust and dust. “Let alone three times in one breath.”

“Thanks for the tip. Any secret handshakes you can show me?” I turned toward the house. I needed to sit before I caved in; the roof of my skull felt like it was cracking apart, showering my brain with dust and pebbles.

Jake followed in silence.

“So how long are you staying?” I asked politely, trying to unlock the front door. My hands were shaking. Jake took the keys and let us inside.

“Just until you’re fit to drive back to LA.”

“I’m staying.”

“What do you mean, you’re staying? You live in Los Angeles remember?”

“I’m staying till I find out what the *fuck* is going on here!”

Jake said nothing.

I knew what he was thinking. “If I leave this place now there’s going to be a midnight barbecue to guarantee I never have reason to come back.”

“You stick around and you may wake up in the middle of a midnight barbecue.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

Jake snorted. “Tough guy, huh?”

“Oh yeah, that’s me.”

He gave me a level look.

“Reality check, tough guy. You’ve got a faulty pump, savvy? That automatically disqualifies you from the Hardy Boys Club.”

Now why this simple statement of fact pissed me off so, I’m not sure. Especially since it was what I’d been telling myself.

“Nobody’s asking you to stay.” More effective I guess if my voice hadn’t gone high and quavery with stress.

“I noticed.”

I mopped my wet forehead with my sleeve, lowered myself to the sofa. More calmly, I said, “Nobody asked you to ride to my rescue. You want to bail, don’t let me stop you.”

Jake’s lips quirked as though he actually found this funny. “This is the thanks the cavalry gets?”

“You want a big, wet, sloppy kiss hello?” I started to slap my forehead, but thought better of it. “I forgot. You don’t do that.”

Silence.

“Okaaaay,” Jake said finally. “You want to say what’s on your mind?”

“I’ve said it.”

Silence.

“I’m going to lie down. You know, get some shut-eye before the barbecue starts. Check and see if we have marshmallows, will you?”

I dropped back against the cushions too fagged for the moment to care what anybody, including Jake, did. The sofa made a couple of slow wide swoops, like a merry-go-round drawing to a standstill. I closed my eyes.

I could sense Jake standing there in the middle of the room, a perplexed Colossus of Rhodes. That’s right, big boy, I thought. Do the math.

I was drifting out on the tide of peaceful oblivion when he muttered, “Now who the hell is *this*?”

Chapter Five

I sat up. Jake looked as irritated as if the baby had been woken from its nap.

“Who is it?” I questioned, pinching the bridge of my nose.

He shrugged. “Some kid in a green pickup. I’ll talk to him. You take it easy.”

I pushed up from the sofa. “I’m fine.” The last thing I wanted was Jake thinking I needed coddling.

“Suit yourself.”

I went out onto the front porch flanked by Jake. Kevin O’Reilly, Boy Archeologist, was climbing out of one of those battered green forester trucks (minus the ranger insignia).

“Howdy,” he called strolling toward us.

Boy Howdy, in fact. He was a good-looking kid, no doubt about it.

“Hey.”

Kevin mounted the porch stairs, shooting a quick look at Jake, who stood there, arms folded like he was posing for *Bodyguard Magazine*. “I heard you had an accident. I came over to see how you’re doing.”

“A-okay.”

Self-consciously he handed over a two-pound box of See’s candy. “I don’t know if you like chocolate.”

I ignored the queasy roll of my stomach. “Who doesn’t like chocolate?”

“I don’t like chocolate,” said Jake.

Kevin looked Jake up and down. Jake looked Kevin up and down.

“This is my friend, Jake Riordan.” I introduced Kevin, “Kevin’s one of the archeologists I was telling you about.”

“Kevin O’Reilly,” Kevin said offering a hand.

They shook; I was relieved it didn't turn into an arm wrestling match then and there. It was funny because Kevin did look like a younger version of Jake. They could have been cousins. Same gene pool.

"A pleasure to meet you -- sir," Kevin added politely. Jake's eyes narrowed as though he were amused. I think it was amusement.

"Uh huh. You're camped where exactly, Kevin?"

Kevin pointed out the ridge. "We're right back behind that little mountain. In Spaniard's Hollow."

"Walking distance?"

"Sure."

"Come in and have a cup of coffee," I invited.

"No, I've got to get back." Kevin glanced at Jake standing there like a monolith at my shoulder. "Dr. Shoup wanted to invite you to have dinner with us. We can show you around the site, answer any questions. Maybe reach an agreement before the lawyers get involved."

"Sure. When?"

"Tonight."

God not tonight, I moaned inwardly in an unsleuth-like spirit that would have bitterly disappointed Grace Latham. So it was a relief when Jake ground out, "We've got plans."

"Tomorrow night?"

"Yes," I said with a glance at Jake.

"Great," Kevin said. He smiled at me, his green eyes warm. "Glad to see you're up and around, Adrien."

"Thanks."

Jake and I walked back inside as Kevin reversed in a wide arc and drove away.

"That was nice of him," I said.

Jake grunted.

"The others are more Poindexter. You'll see. If you stick around that is." I dropped the candy on the nearest chair and felt my way through the obstacle course of furniture. There was still something weird with my vision; it seemed cavern-dark inside the house after the brilliance of outdoors.

"Yeah?" Jake didn't sound particularly interested. "What's the fishing like around here?"

"Fishing or trolling?"

"Fishing." He shut the door with a small bang that sent my nerves jumping.

"Good, I think. I don't know about Lake Senex, but the rivers are full of trout and bass." We were talking about fishing?

Apparently we were. "I should have brought my poles," Jake said surprisingly. "I guess I can rent a couple in town when I pick up a fishing license."

"Planning on staying?"

"Just till you wise up."

"I'm flattered you think that's a possibility."

"Yeah, well it's lucky I've rolled a lot of vacation."

I tottered back to the couch and Jake asked, "You want some lunch?"

"Bastard." I added fretfully, "Can't you hear the tom-toms?"

"No. What do they say?"

"White man need more pain killer."

"I thought you were the strong silent type."

"*Me?* You're obviously thinking of one of your leatherboy friends."

I kept my eyes closed during the charged pause that followed this. At last Jake said mildly, "Since you're feeling chatty, maybe you'll fill me in on the drug charges."

I rubbed my temples and said, "It's a frame. My belief is Ted Harvey planted that crop."

"Ted Harvey being your handyman?"

"Not so handy as it turns out."

"What's your arrangement with him?"

I opened my eyes, surprising an expression on Jake's face I didn't recognize. His gaze met mine briefly, veered away.

I said, "He lives here rent free. I pay the utilities and a hundred bucks a month for him to keep an eye on the place. He's supposed to take care of any repairs, and arrange to have someone from town come and clean up every so often."

"Aren't you the guy always short of cash?"

"Yes, and if I had any brains I'd sell the place." But it had been in my family for over a century. Nor would I ever be able to afford anything comparable on my own.

"And your theory is that Harvey is growing and selling pot on the back of your property?"

"I don't know about selling it, although he seems like an enterprising chap; I think he forged a letter to the Tuolumne College Archeology Department."

"Why?"

"Why did he forge it?"

Patently Jake reined me in. "Why do you think Harvey forged it?"

"For one thing he's the only person in a four hundred mile radius who had access to my stationery or signature. For another, the college was instructed to make checks payable to the Pine Shadow Ranch."

"To the ranch?"

"As though it were a business entity, you see? Then Harvey, I'll make you a bet, cashed those checks locally without any hitch because everyone knows he handles the ranch maintenance."

"But you don't know this for a fact?"

"I didn't have a chance to check on it."

"It's not bad," Jake admitted. "Small towns tend to be informal about that kind of thing. Everybody knows Harvey, knows he works for you. Someone might assume you had authorized him to act on your behalf; that would set a precedent."

"A bit of forgery, a bit of larceny, a touch of chicanery. I wonder which one got him killed -- and why the body was moved."

"Now *that's* a jump."

"When I described the man I'd seen to the sheriff the first name he suggested was Ted Harvey."

"But he'd think of Harvey anyway since Harvey lives on the premises."

That was true. I hadn't considered that.

"But Harvey's missing."

"Says who? How do you know he's not on a fishing trip?"

"His truck is here."

"Maybe he's with friends. Or he could be laying low. How do you know *he* didn't hit you?"

"Why would he?"

"Maybe he doesn't like visitors after ten o'clock? Maybe he's used to dealing with folks less civilized than yourself?" He rose. "What do you have to eat around here?"

I left him to figure it out, leaning back and closing my eyes. Jake had a point. I needed to see a recent picture of Harvey. Criminal investigation begins with the victim. At this point we were not even sure who our victim was.

After a few minutes of listening to Jake bang around the kitchen, and trying to convince myself I didn't feel so bad, it struck me that I had really underplayed this concussion thing in my own writing. Jason Leland was routinely knocked on his noggin and an hour later was back to chasing bad guys backstage, upstage and all around the town. The reality was a shattering headache to end all headaches, blurred vision, a touch of nausea, and pulverized neck and shoulder muscles. But at least the old ticker was still keeping time.

* * * * *

When I woke several hours later, Jake was outside reducing the timberline to a pile of kindling. For a time I stood at the window admiring the bronzed musculature of his bare chest as he sweated and chopped wood with manly ferocity. He looked right at home, ax in hand, his blond hair shining like miner's gold in the mountain breeze.

Yep, my vision was definitely improved.

Wandering into the kitchen, I found canned stew simmering on the back burner. A taste off the wooden spoon informed me Jake had doctored it up with several cloves of garlic and the vintage Tabasco sauce in the cupboard. If anything could clear his sinuses it was this recipe.

I was having a bowl when Jake walked in buttoning up his shirt.

"You look better," he observed giving me a close look.

"I feel better."

He washed up at the sink then dished out a bowl of stew at the stove. Getting a beer out of the fridge, he sat down across from me.

"You know we could probably pay someone to drive the Bronco. You could come back to LA with me."

I put my spoon down. "I already told you --"

"I know what you said; now hear me out."

I waited.

"I think maybe you have stumbled onto something here. I checked out Harvey's trailer while you were sleeping and I'm pretty sure it's been ransacked."

"I think it always looks like that."

"Drawers emptied out; the couch cushions and bed mattress ripped open? The fridge dumped over?"

"Well ... no." No, that was different. That explained what had been going on in Harvey's trailer the night I'd been knocked out.

Jake studied me thoughtfully. "If Harvey's dealing then you may have wandered into the middle of a local drug war."

"*Here?* In Calavares County?"

"You scare me when you say things like that," he said seriously.

I guess it did sound a bit Our Townish. "Okay, I know the drug problem has reached the suburbs, but this doesn't *feel* like a drug deal gone bad."

"Please don't use the word intuition to me or I will slug you. Aren't you the guy who told me one of the golden rules of mystery fiction is that detectives may not solve the crime by use of intuition and/or acts of God?"

Jeez, who knew he was listening that closely? "That's in books, Jake," I protested. "Aren't you the guy who told me a cop's gut instinct is one of his best tools?"

"You're not a cop, baby. You're a bookseller. You don't have a gut instinct. You have a knack for nearly getting yourself killed."

I batted my lashes. "I didn't know you cared."

His eyes held mine briefly. "The hell you didn't."

"What can happen with you here to protect me?"

Jake made a sound somewhere between a snort and a laugh which blew soup from his spoon across the table. How could you resist such a big lug?

"Just don't say I didn't warn you," he said.

* * * * *

After dinner Jake built a bonfire in the fireplace and we had our coffee and See's candy in front of its crackling warmth. For a guy who didn't like chocolate, Jake consumed his fair share. He also showed a propensity to lick his fingers. I found this distracting: the slow slide of his pink tongue up his naked finger. He had big hands, strong hands, but the fingers were long and sensitive, and I kept wondering what those hands would feel like on my body.

Had he ever had sex with a guy that didn't involve ritual and role-playing? What was he like in bed with a chick?

"Here's mud in your eye," I said. We clinked coffee mugs. I'm not sure what was in his but mine was straight coffee. Concussion and alcohol don't mix, although by now my headache merely felt like the worst hangover of my life.

Despite his misgivings, Jake seemed more relaxed than I'd ever seen him. I speculated it was because we were so thoroughly alone, unobserved by curious or judging eyes.

"How's the book going?" he asked idly, glancing at my open laptop. "What's it called, *Death for a Ducat*?"

"Wrong play. You're thinking of *Hamlet*." Jake snorted at the idea he would be thinking of any such thing. "Mine's based on *Titus Andronicus*, the play so bad Shakespearean scholars have tried for centuries to prove Shakespeare didn't write it."

"Good choice. So tell me what your book's about."

I had told him several times what my book was about, but I had known even then he wasn't really listening. I offered the highlights and Jake rolled his eyes or shook his head depending on how far out of touch with reality my plot machinations seemed.

"Aren't you supposed to write what you know?"

"What do I know? I'm a thirty-something gay man with a dodgy heart. I sell books for a living. Who wants to read about that?"

"Good point."

"I don't have a lot of practical experience with crime."

"You seem to be a magnet for it though."

"Don't try to cheer me up."

Jake grinned his crooked grin and reached for another chocolate. "It is a little suspicious from a cop's perspective."

I set my coffee cup on the wooden floor and stretched widely. Despite the coffee I was crashing. This was the longest stretch of time I'd spent with Jake. I kind of hated for it to end.

"How old is this place?" he queried, staring up at the wide and blackened ceiling beams.

I focused on him with an effort. "This room was part of the original stage stop. It was built in 1847. The rest of the building isn't quite as old. My great great grandfather started ranching in the early 1900s. He added on to the existing structure."

"It's a nice chunk of property."

I nodded.

"Funny to think of your relatives walking around these rooms, sitting where we are."

"Yep." Not something I really thought about, but yes, I was the last of the line. At home in Pasadena that seemed incidental, but here I had a sense of history, of generations.

Jake seemed to be pursuing a train of thought. He eyed the stacks of books, which I had neatly separated between paperbacks and hardcovers. "So this is kind of a working vacation for you?"

I guessed that this was about as close as he would come to asking what had triggered my Bat-Outta-Hell. I prefer frankness, but our friendship was so delicately balanced, I wasn't sure it could survive plain speaking. Not at this point.

"Yeah, something like that," I replied. "Turns out Granna was a mystery buff. She's got a collection of first editions to rival the Library of Congress." I filled him in on the thrilling discovery that my favorite mystery writer had a male pseudonym. "I've got this theory that Inspector Bull and Mr. Pinkerton are closeted gays."

I was mostly joking but Jake said crisply, "See, that's the kind of queer thinking I despise. According to the fags everybody who's anybody was really homosexual. You name it. Michelangelo, Alexander Hamilton, Errol Flynn, Walt Whitman. It's pathetic."

His angry scorn silenced me.

"You're just kidding yourself if you believe being a fag is common or normal or some lifestyle choice." His gaze was hard and shiny like river pebbles.

"I don't think it's a choice. It isn't for me anyway."

He said bitterly, "It sure as hell isn't for me."

If it were, Jake would choose not to be gay. No news there.

I squeezed the back of my neck, trying to ease the pain knotting my bruised muscles. Jake continued to glower into the fireplace, the shadows flickering across his profile.

Cowboy wisdom: never itch for something you ain't willing to scratch for.

"I'm going to turn in," I said.

No answer.

I rose and went into the bedroom, stripped off and rolled myself in my sleeping bag, the flannel feeling like a caress on my aching body. The old feather mattress felt like a cloud beneath my tired bones. A dusty cloud, granted. I sighed and then nearly jumped out of my skin when Jake spoke from right above me.

"Roll over. I'll rub your back for you."

"Uh --" My voice made a sound it hadn't made since it changed.

I turned on my belly and Jake unzipped my bag like you'd unpeel something soft and vulnerable in its shell, which is how I felt as he laid his big hands on my shoulders.

"Relax."

Oh sure. I caught my breath then expelled it as Jake rested his palm on the small of my back. He didn't move, didn't speak. I waited; the hair at the nape of my neck prickled. There was something unpredictable and dangerous in the silent dark.

There was a whole lot about Jake I didn't know or understand.

"Stop thinking," he said quietly. "Just let go. Let yourself feel."

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the weight of his hand, the dry warmth of his skin, the length of his fingers. Hard hands. Callused fingertips. But the touch was comforting. You wouldn't think that something as simple as someone resting their hand on your back could comfort, but it did. The heat from his hand seemed to wash through my body, suffusing my nerves and muscles. I could feel that touch through to my genitals, as though he had cupped my balls.

He flattened the heel of his hand against the base of my spine, smoothing back and forth. I felt my spine lengthen, my hips spreading. It wouldn't take much to turn this into something else, but Jake's touch was non-erotic. He began to knead my back and shoulders, slowly, thoroughly, but still easy, still ... gentle. He worked his way along the length of my arms, lightly stroked the back of my fingers. I shivered. Within a couple of minutes I was utterly relaxed, basking in that healing warmth.

I murmured my pleasure. He made a soft sound that could have been a hushed laugh.

Resting his hand on my tailbone once more, Jake positioned his other palm in front and slid his hand up the length of my spine as though erasing the kinks, vertebra by vertebra, until the pads of his fingers pressed into the base of my skull. He gave the back of my neck a gentle squeeze and I gave another shiver.

"Better?"

I nodded.

Jake repeated that careful pushing motion over and over until I was melting through the flannel bag lining into the ticking of the old mattress. I felt flushed, boneless, totally at ease. My head stopped hurting for the first time since I'd left the hospital. You hear about the healing power of touch. I felt it now -- and from the last person I'd have expected.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd been treated to a simple back rub. There was a lot to be said for being touched, stroked, petted.

At long last Jake's hands stilled.

"Good-night," he whispered.

"Night," I mumbled on the edge of sleep.

A moment later sleep disappeared in a jolt of awareness as Jake kissed the nape of my neck and ... departed.

Chapter Six

Judging by the small off-color mushroom cloud hanging over the hill the next morning, Sheriff Billingsly and the county appeared to be waging war on drugs.

Jake suggested we drive into Basking for breakfast.

We wound up at Granny Parker's Pantry where we had the spacious dining room with its shady view of Main Street America Past all to ourselves.

We ordered from a large lady in a sunny yellow uniform that matched the building's exterior perfectly.

"After we eat I'm going to do some checking around," Jake remarked, tossing his menu aside. "Can you keep yourself entertained?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"I just want to check out a couple of things."

"Like what?"

He shrugged.

Into my silence he added, "One guy poking around asking questions is enough. Two is going to attract the wrong kind of attention."

I supposed I should be pleased that he was showing an interest. And this was his area of expertise, not mine. But his assumption that I would toddle off and amuse myself shopping or sightseeing nettled.

The waitress brought our breakfast. Jake had his usual smorgasbord: slab of ham, four eggs, biscuits & gravy, and large orange juice. He regarded my bowl of oatmeal, forehead wrinkling.

"That's it? That's all you're eating?"

"Unlike you I don't have to sustain the equivalent of a small country."

Unexpectedly he reddened. "This is muscle, not fat."

I didn't doubt it. What I'd seen of Jake so far was all lean mean fighting machine. I was surprised he'd be sensitive about it.

"I didn't say you were fat. I said there was a lot of you."

With an evil glance, he subsided into his coffee cup. I realized the waitress had heard this exchange and was scandalized to the fibers of her hair net. Do heterosexual males not discuss weight? Was it something in the tone of our voices? Or was she alarmed because she had pegged us as the infamous dope dealing, 9-1-1-calling foreigners? Whatever it was, I hoped Jake didn't take notice. He was so comfortable under his imagined cloak of invisibility. I didn't want this vacation from his warped reality spoiled.

I had my third cup of coffee as Jake polished off the last of his fried eggs.

"I guess I could drop by the library. I need a copy of *Titus*. I forgot mine at home."

Jake nodded, not really listening.

"I've been thinking," he said at last, wiping his plate down with biscuit, "about who tipped the sheriffs to the pot."

"It could have been anyone. Hikers."

"Where are these archeologists camped? Just over that little mountain, aren't they?"

"Yes." I followed his line of reasoning. "Anyone of them could have noticed the stuff growing and called the cops. But why?"

"Retaliation? You're threatening to pull the plug on their sandbox."

"Maybe." I dwelt on this. "That's pretty vindictive for a bunch of pothunters." But were they all amateurs? Students were not technically amateurs. Dr. Marquez and Dr. Shoup were not students and did not strike me as amateurs either. Dr. Shoup seemed like a man who took things -- himself in particular -- seriously. "Maybe there's another purpose behind calling the cops. Maybe they need me out of the way."

Jake looked pained. "Out of the way?" Adrien --

"No, listen a sec, Jake...." He listened grimly. "Suppose the point of that phone call was to keep me busy with legal hassles so I wouldn't have time to worry about who was digging what up where."

"Huh?"

"Suppose, just suppose, there's some -- some -- skullduggery going on in Spaniard's Hollow?"

"Don't tell me, let me guess," Jake said. "They're digging for buried treasure."

"Well, I don't know about that."

Jake's eyebrows rose. "You don't? That's something."

"It's just a theory."

"Or that crack on the head."

"Yeah, but that's to the point, isn't it. Who hit me on the head, and why?"

"They weren't trying to kill you or they would've finished the job."

"Not kill me, just get me out of the way."

"Agreed," Jake said crisply, "because you got *in* the way of searching Harvey's trailer. That doesn't have anything to do with skullduggery in the mountains."

"It might."

He pushed his plate away. "Last night you were talking about a cop's gut instinct. My gut instinct tells me these two things are not connected."

"Let's hope the equipment is functioning this time around," I commented. "Two months ago your gut told you I was a serial killer."

Jake's eyes narrowed like a tiger tired of playing with his food.

"Hit rewind." He tapped his forehead with his index finger. "I didn't think you were a serial killer. I thought you were not telling everything you knew, which was right. I thought you were not being stalked."

"Which was wrong."

"Which was" He took a deep breath.

"Wrong," I prompted.

"Wrong," he conceded.

I grinned. "Just wanted to hear it."

* * * * *

Following breakfast Jake and I went our separate ways, agreeing to meet back at the car by noon.

I suspected the real reason Jake didn't want me playing Watson was he would be homing for the sheriff substation where I would be even more persona non grata than he. That was okay by me. I had my own hypothesis, and I could do my own kind of footwork in the library.

I found the library wedged between a coffeehouse and a feed store. It was the kind of place I love, the kind of place they don't build anymore: weathered brick trimmed in white gingerbread. According to the brass placard by the front door Basking library had been built in the 1923.

Inside it was dark and quiet. Antique tables, lovingly polished over decades of dents and scratches, gleamed in the light of green banker's lamps. Ceiling-high bookshelves were crammed with faded volumes. This was my turf just as the mean streets of LA were Jake's.

There was one computer, monopolized by a pugnacious senior cross-referencing mysteries featuring feline detectives. Knowing that could take awhile, I bee-lined for the librarian, requesting books on local history. She directed me toward Mark Twain and *Roughing It*.

"I was hoping for something on Basking itself. The gold rush years, mining history. Maybe lost mines?"

She looked stumped but then brightened. "Our local historical society put together something like that a few years back. You can probably still buy a copy at Royale House. The museum is right around the corner."

"Great. Thanks."

From the way her eyes flickered behind the rhinestone-framed glasses I wondered if my reputation had preceded me. I gave her a reassuring smile and headed for the wooden card catalog located beneath a display of artwork by patients of the local hospital -- the mental ward apparently.

I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking for. I knew there were mines on Granna's property, no mystery there; this was mining country. I had never heard of the Red Rover, nor of any mine that had panned out in a big way. It was logical that archeologists would be interested in old mining camps. But why this mining camp? The Sierra Nevadas are sprinkled with abandoned mines and placers. I couldn't find a mention of the Red Rover in any book or article.

It was getting on toward lunch. I walked over to Royale House and bought one of their *Histories of Basking Township*.

"You're not taking the tour?" the girl at the counter inquired sardonically. She was tall and slender with long black hair shiny as a raven's wing and beautiful sloe eyes. Part Indian, I thought. The Tuolumne Reservation was on the other side of the pine forest, and the Tule Reservation by Porterville was one of the largest in the state.

"What tour?"

"For three dollars you can walk through the house. Three stories. Count 'em, three." She pointed to a shelf of Walkmans which must have taken the place of a decrepit tour guide. "For another two dollars you can enjoy high tea on the patio."

Soggy egg salad sandwiches and tea from tea bags if I knew my Historical Society high teas.

"Who were the Royales?"

She quoted, "In 1849, Abraham Royale came west to make his fortune in the gold fields." She paused to verify my rapt attention. "Abe wasn't much of a miner; however, he did make his fortune by marrying the only daughter of a wealthy Chinese merchant. Unfortunately polite society -- such as it was in Basking in those days -- would not accept the "slant-eyed" daughter of a Chinese immigrant. Royale was an ambitious man. He traded in his Chinese bride, minus her dowry, for a local girl."

Something told me this was not the official version. "What happened to the Chinese bride?"

She smiled, her teeth very white. "There's no record. Probably died of a broken heart like all gently reared girls of her era." So said the girl of this era.

"Tactful. What happened to Royale?"

"Ah. Now there's another story. Royale's golden-haired Anglo bride ran off with the smithy a year after their society wedding."

"The smithy?"

"The blacksmith. Smithing is an ancient craft you know. A real manly man kind of profession."

Her tone was needling although I couldn't imagine why. I asked, "Did Royale die of a broken heart?"

"No. They say --" her voice lowered dramatically "he died of the curse."

"Curse? What curse? Don't tell me the broken-hearted Chinese bride put a hex on him. What kind of gently reared girl behaves like that?"

She tucked a silky strand of black hair behind her ear. "To be honest there are several stories. The only thing we know for sure is Royale fell down the staircase right over there and broke his neck."

I turned to inspect the ornately carved grand staircase. Falling down that would be like tumbling down a cliff. I nodded toward the enormous portrait hanging over the marble fireplace.

"Is that Royale?"

"That's him."

At ten feet tall Royale made an imposing figure. Dark hair, dark eyes and curling mustachios. A man cast in the heroic mold.

"One legend goes that he saw the ghost of his first wife and fell to his death."

"Is the house haunted?"

She shrugged. "Not that I've noticed. Not that I believe in ghosts."

Wow. How unsterotypical Native American.

As though reading my mind she added dryly, "Don't tell the tribal elders."

"Which tribe?"

"Miwok. Penutian Family. You really don't remember me, do you?"

"Should I?"

Her eyebrows rose. "I thought you were Anna English's grandson?"

"I am." When she didn't offer her hand I offered mine. "Adrien English."

We shook hands. "Melissa Smith. My father used to work for your grandmother. You locked me in the fruit cellar once."

"I did?"

I did sort of remember her now. She had been small, skinny and irritating as a foxtail in your sock. "Not for long, I hope."

"I guess it was only a few minutes. It felt like hours."

"Sorry."

"I swore to get even but you never came back."

"I scare easily."

"Don't worry, you're pretty low on my hit list these days."

If she was as tough at thirty-two as she had been at eight I hoped she didn't hold a grudge.

"I'm not up on local history."

Her dark eyes met mine. She smirked. "No, but you're making it."

* * * * *

I had a brief wait for Jake at the Bronco. I washed down a couple of headache tablets with diet soda from a nearby vending machine. At last I spotted him striding up the tree-lined street, in and out of shadow, big and purposeful. Even in jeans and a flannel shirt he looked like a cop. Maybe it was the way he held himself. That mix of confidence and alertness.

He glanced up and saw me, and just for a moment something like a smile flickered across his impassive face.

I started the engine as Jake climbed in beside me.

"How did it go?" I questioned. "Were your fellow fuzz in a cooperative mood?"

He hmphed. Drummed his fingers on the door armrest as I pulled out into the light traffic of Tuesday afternoon Main Street.

"Are we playing twenty questions or are you going to tell me what you found out?"

"The last time anyone saw Harvey was Thursday morning when he picked up groceries at the general store. He promised he'd be back the next day to pay his bill."

"But he was killed Thursday night."

"Maybe." He glanced at me. "Harvey has a girlfriend. He might be hiding out there."

"A girlfriend?"

I'm not sure why I sounded so amazed; probably because Harvey had been presented as such a loser by everyone I'd talked to. Jake said, "Most unmarried adult males do have girlfriends, Adrien."

I asked innocently, "Including you?"

Jake's eyes slid away from mine. He said, "The girlfriend might have a photo of Harvey or another lead."

"Doesn't Harvey have a police record? Are there mug shots I could look at?"

"Harvey has a couple of drug-related busts from the '70s. In those days he wore long hair and a beard. I don't think a thirty second glimpse of a dead man in your headlights will make for an accurate ID."

He had that right. Already my memory of the man in the road was fading -- imagination adding details, time erasing others.

I pulled up at Basking's one and only signal light, and said, "So where does Harvey's girlfriend live?"

* * * * *

Marnie Starr lived at #109 Oakridge Drive in a green tarpapered house, at the top of a long flight of rickety stairs.

Marnie came to the door in a striped bathrobe though it was past noon. A tall woman, and built for comfort, she sized up Jake through the screen door mesh.

"Yes?"

"Marnie Starr?" Jake's stance, that official tone of voice, all spelled cop. I wondered if it was deliberate or something he couldn't help.

"That's right."

"I'm detective Riordan." He nodded my way. "English."

"Detectives?" She stared at us through the cigarette smoke. She was about fifty, long salt and pepper hair, freckled skin that had seen too much sun.

"May we come in?" Jake asked.

Automatically she unlatched the screen and let us in.

The front room was small and cluttered with battered furniture. Copies of *The National Enquirer* littered the coffee table, headlines screaming alien abductions and movie star infidelities. The room smelled heavily of cigarettes and orchid air freshener.

"Sit down," Marnie said, gesturing uncertainly. "Cops, huh? If it's about the dog, I'm bringing him in at night now."

Jake sat down in a wooden rocker that creaked anxiously. I walked over to study a collection of framed photos on the TV.

"It's not about the dog," Jake said. "We're looking for Ted."

"Ted? Ted Harvey?"

"That's right. When was the last time you saw him?"

"Has something happened to Ted?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, if you are detectives" she sketched the air with the cigarette. Jittery. Very jittery.

"We're looking for him, that's all, Ma'am. When was the last time you saw Harvey?"

"Monday night."

"Last Monday night? You haven't seen him since?"

Her eyes fell. "Er -- no."

"Did something happen Monday night?"

"No. No, of course not."

I picked up a photo of Marnie in fatigues and a duck-billed hunting cap. She was holding a rifle. Behind this was another photo of Marnie and a slight, gray-haired man in a sailboat. I studied the man.

"Is this Ted?" I asked Marnie.

She jerked her head around. "Yeah, that's Ted."

Jake's eyes met mine. I nodded.

"What is this?" Marnie demanded suddenly. "*You're* not from the Sheriff's Department." She indicated me.

"I'm with LAPD," Jake answered briefly.

"LA ..." Her voice gave out.

"What happened Sunday, Ms. Starr? Did you and Ted fight?"

"It wasn't a fight. Not really."

"But you argued?"

Marnie seemed divided. At last she mumbled, "People say things when they're mad."

"What kinds of things?"

"I was just angry. I was sick of the promises and the excuses and the big talk. I'm fifty-eight. No spring chicken. Is it so wrong to want a little security?"

I said, "You asked for a commitment?"

Jake gave me an odd look, but Marnie turned toward me eagerly, as though at last someone spoke her language. "*Yes.*"

"Did you threaten Ted?" Jake probed.

"Th-threaten? Not seriously. I mean, I love him."

"Uh huh. And how did Ted take this ultimatum?"

"He said he'd show me. That he was going to score big this time."

"What did he mean by that?" I asked.

She shrugged, stubbing out the cigarette. Then she dug in her bathrobe pocket for the pack. Her hands were shaking as she pulled another one out.

Jake said coolly, "Did Ted ever cheat on you, Ms. Starr?"

She flushed so that her entire face was the color of her freckles.

"No!"

"Did you threaten to kill him?"

"Who told you that?"

"Did you?"

"People say things when they're angry. It don't mean anything. Ted knew. Ted used to talk himself."

"Did he talk about his big score?" As I asked this question Jake shot me a warning look.

"No." She gestured vaguely. "What's to tell? He was just blowing smoke."

"Speaking of which, who's Harvey's buyer?" Jake took charge again.

"B-buyer?"

"You heard."

"I don't know what --"

"Skip it," said Jake. "We're just looking for Harvey. I don't care if he's wholesaling weed out of the back of his pickup."

"Why do you want him then?"

"Let's just say it's a matter of life and death."

She looked doubtful and I didn't blame her. I thought Jake should have come up with a better story than the truth.

We didn't get much further with Ms. Starr. She took the card Jake handed her and said she would call if Ted showed. I had no doubt it sailed into the trash before we were down the ramshackle steps.

* * * * *

While Jake vacuumed up a late lunch I moseyed on down to the corrals and, on impulse, went into the barn. Not that I expected to find marijuana drying from the rafters, but you never know.

I entered through the tack room which, even after all these years, smelled hazily of leather and liniment and sawdust. Bridles hung from the walls. A saddle still waited for repair. I walked down the row of empty stalls. In my grandmother's day the stable had been full of Arabian horses. Small-boned, fiery beauties with large liquidy eyes and graceful arched necks.

I'd had my own horse, a chestnut gelding I had named Flame (inappropriately, given his mild disposition). Following Granna's death, Flame had been sold with all the others, my mother no doubt fearing that I would break my scrawny neck.

I always assumed it was my father's early death that left Lisa so fearful about my own prospects. I was, as Lisa frequently pointed out, all she had. This was her own choice; my mother made a lovely, rich young widow. Maybe, as she always said, my father was the great love of her life. Or maybe she had been afraid to trust her luck a second time around. In any case Lisa had seen peril in everything from dogs to bicycles, and her worst fears seemed to have been confirmed when I contracted rheumatic fever at sixteen.

Now I stood in the empty stable breathing in the decaying memory of hay and horses and something bitter as wormwood. My childhood ambition had been to breed Arabians like my grandmother. What would my life have been like if I hadn't gotten sick? Would I still have ended up running a bookstore? I probably wouldn't have met Jake.

I recalled another of Lisa's strictures, the one about "rough boys," and grinned to myself. If ever anyone qualified as a rough boy it would be Jake.

There was a moth-eaten looking buggy at the far end of the stable. I wandered over to it, thinking what a shame it was to let all this go to the termites and wood rot. Maybe a donation or two to a local museum would earn me a much-needed tax deduction.

I could hear the buzz of insects unnaturally loud in the echoing silence of the cavernous building. I followed the sound back down the center aisle, stopping finally to look over the gate of a stall. Something lay half-buried in the old straw and sawdust. Unlatching the gate, I stepped into the stall.

I could make out the sprawled outline, the pattern of material -- plaid flannel.

My heart began to pound with revolted knowledge before my brain made the connection. How the hell had I missed the significance of that sweetish sick smell?

I pulled out my hanky, pressing the cotton folds over my mouth and nose. Within a foot of the thing, I stared down and the buzzing of the flies matched the buzzing in my brain. I desperately wanted fresh air and light. I wanted to run from the barn and close the doors on what lay there in the moldering hay. Close the door and lock it and forget about it.

The physical reality is so different from the academic puzzle.

I squatted down and brushed off pieces of straw.

The days had not been kind to him. But then again neither had been the person who shot to death Ted Harvey.

Chapter Seven

"It's not the same man."

Jake tore his gaze away from the official activity before us. The yard seemed full of black- and-whites, like a used police car sale. Men in uniform smoked and chatted -- obviously a slow day for crime-busting in the Sierra Nevadas. "What are you talking about?"

"It's not the same man I found in the road that night. It's not Ted Harvey."

"Maybe it's not Ted Harvey but it has to be the same man."

"It's not." I broke off as we were joined by Sheriff Billingsly.

"I guess I owe you an apology, English," he said grudgingly.

"Yes and no. That's not the man I found in the road that night."

"Come again?"

"It's not the same --"

Jake interrupted in a tone of voice I hadn't heard since the first grim days of our acquaintanceship, "For Chrissake, Adrien, the guy is exactly how you described him, right down to the plaid shirt."

"Superficially, yes."

Billingsly looked from Jake to me and said, "You gotta admit, English, the chances of *two* different dead men turning up on your property are mighty suspicious."

Suspicious, *not* coincidental? Call me oversensitive but my internal smoke alarms were going off. And where's there's smoke...

"Is it Ted Harvey?" Jake asked.

"Well no, it ain't," Billingsly admitted.

"Who the hell is it?"

The sheriff lifted his shoulders. "Don't know, but I'd sure like to have a word with old Ted."

We fell silent as the body was carried on a stretcher out of the barn and loaded into a station wagon marked Medical Examiner. One of the deputies slammed shut the stable doors. Another began unrolling yellow crime scene tape to seal off the building.

Billingsly said, "Some place we can go and talk, English? I need to hear more about that night."

We trooped inside the house and Jake listened silently as I once again ran over my discovery of the body in the road. The sheriff took slow and copious notes but he stopped when I tried to explain why I thought the body in the barn and the body in the road was not the same man.

"The guy I found that night was more grizzled looking. Weathered. He hadn't shaved in a couple of days and his fingernails were dirty."

"You don't think the deceased in the barn looks battered enough?" the sheriff asked dryly. "Given the decomposition of the body, how the hell could you tell whether his fingernails were dirty or not?"

"I guess I'm not explaining this well."

Jake said forbearingly, "Adrien, you had a few seconds to run a make on a DB in the moonlight. It's been nearly five days. I think you are doing the normal thing, which is confusing that memory with the photo you saw of Harvey."

Billingsly interjected, "What photo?"

"I don't think so," I answered Jake. "When I saw this body, just for a minute I could see the first guy's face, like it was superimposed. This corpse didn't look at all how I remembered. I think the bullet hole in his back was higher."

"It's been five days!"

"What photo of Harvey?" persisted the sheriff.

"Adrien saw a snapshot of Harvey somewhere," Jake replied vaguely. "Keep in mind, Adrien, you are not a trained observer." Then, like a born and bred asshole, he added to the sheriff, "He writes murder mysteries."

Billingsly took a moment, sliding the beads across his cerebral abacus one by one. "Oh, I gotcha. Like *Murder She Wrote!*" He guffawed, the sound ricocheting off the hardwood floor and my nerves.

I tried to hide my irritation. "I admit my memory of the first body is fuzzy, but when I saw this man's face it struck me as wrong. I know my first impression was correct."

Billingsly, at last containing his amusement, said, "English, you been through plenty, I give you that. Lots of material for stories, eh? You probably can't wait to get home to LA."

I sent Jake one of those poison pen looks. He met my eyes and glanced away, addressee unknown.

Billingsly made a few more notes, clearly humoring me. He thanked me for my time and trouble, and took himself off. His was the last of the fleet of cop cars to leave my property.

When the sound of engines had died away the kitchen seemed mighty quiet. The heavy, cool scent of just-bloomed lilacs drifted in the open window easing the memory of that other smell.

"That's that," Jake said, setting the coffee cups in the sink.

"Is it?"

"Yes." He turned to study me. "Don't start trying to make a mystery out of a molehill. Your missing body has been found. The vic was probably a confederate of Harvey's. Harvey killed him and now he's split."

"Harvey is dead."

After a pause Jake turned on the faucet. Over the rush of water I heard him say, "Maybe he is by now but that's not our problem."

"If you say so."

He turned off the water. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that I may not be a trained observer but I'm not blind either. Two different men. Two different bodies." I held my fingers in the peace sign though I was feeling anything by peaceable. "Why doesn't anyone want to believe that?"

He threw me a chiding glance. "Now it's a conspiracy?"

"Come on, Jake, you know what I mean. Everybody is too eager to accept the obvious solution. I know why you are, but why is the sheriff?"

Jake turned off the water. "Baby," he said finally and almost kindly. "You have too much imagination. That's good in a writer and bad in a -- um -- detective."

"I seem to remember you saying once that a good detective isn't afraid to use his imagination."

"Do you take notes on everything I say?" he inquired exasperatedly.

"There's so many contradictions it helps to keep track."

"Yeah. Which reminds me. Aren't you supposed to be writing or something? Isn't that why you came up here? I haven't seen you write a word since I arrived."

"And that's another thing: that *Murder She Wrote* crack!"

He avoided my eyes. "I didn't make that crack."

"You set me up for it."

Jake folded his arms across his chest like the Rock of Ages refusing to cleave itself for me or anybody else.

"Yeah, whatever." I know when I'm wasting my breath. Off I went to the study to give myself time to cool down.

I guess it was natural we were going to butt heads if we spent any amount of time together. Truthfully we butted heads when we didn't spend any amount of time together.

I recalled that impromptu backrub.

After a few minutes of brooding I got bored and picked up the yellow pamphlet I'd purchased at the museum.

According to *Histories of Basking Township*, Basking was first settled in 1848 by an ex-Cavalry scout named Archibald Basking. Basking was also an artist and his sketches of Indians and Indian life hung in local museums like Royale House. By 1860, Basking had moved on into the pages of history, but by then the gold rush was in full spate and Basking Township had a sizable population. After the gold rush ended in 1884, many citizens stayed on in other fields of enterprise. Basking survived and even flourished, unlike most of the 500 mining camps spawned during the gold rush which were now nothing more than crumbling foundations or faded names on signposts.

Blah, blah, blah.

Every now and then I looked out of my book and caught a glimpse of Jake outside the window hammering the broken shutter into place, taking his aggressions out in home improvement. I was surprised he didn't just spit the nails into the wood like Popeye the Sailor Man. As he worked he whistled grimly around the nails clamped between his lips. When he finished with the shutter he set about repairing the fractured rose trellis.

Snips and snails and puppy dog tails.

I read on till about five. By that time Jake was in the shower, where I could hear him swearing over the erratic water pressure and fluctuating temperatures. (Ah, the sounds of domestic bliss.)

I confess I was discouraged. By now Grace Latham would surely have found a torn scrap of an incriminating note or a bloody footprint or *something*. Detective work is not only easier in books; it's more fun.

And that's when I found my first clue. There in smudgy print was the name of the mine owned by Abraham Royale: the Red Rover.

I tossed the book aside.

In the front room I poured a couple of whiskies from a twenty-year-old bottle Jake had located in the back of the liquor cabinet. I downed mine staring out the front window, watching the wind rake the winter grass like an unseen hand through the fur of a sleeping animal.

Jake appeared in the doorway combing back his damp hair. The sun had deepened the color in his face. The bronze corduroy shirt made his eyes looked almost gold.

"You'd better wait a few minutes," he told me. "There's no hot water."

I handed him his drink. He swallowed and sighed appreciatively.

"Get a lot done?" he questioned.

“Enough.”

“Listen, just in case, if anybody at this dinner party mentions what happened here today, don’t start in about believing the dead man in the barn was not the guy you found the night you arrived.”

“Why?”

“Just do me a favor and keep your mouth shut.”

“Since you ask so nicely how can I refuse?”

He gave me that smile that was more of a grimace and said, “Please.”

“Hey, the magic word.” I clicked my glass against his and tossed back my drink on the way to the bathroom.

There was no hot water for my shower so I made it fast. Even so the bandage on the top of my head got soaked and fell off. I examined it, tossed it in the trash and hoped the tonsured look became me. At least it wasn’t permanent. Yet. I inherited my mother’s baby-fine dark hair, and plenty of it. As a matter of fact I needed a haircut even worse than I needed a shave. I was having a go at my forelock with a pair of nail scissors when Jake showed up in the doorway.

“You want another drink?” he inquired.

“No.”

He observed me snipping away and said, “The better to see you with?”

“I don’t get it.”

“The kid. O’Reilly.”

My hand jerked and I nearly put my eye out. “You’re kidding, right?”

But Jake had already disappeared. From the other room I heard him blowing his nose like the war trumpet of a bull moose.

I pulled on a semi-clean pair of Levi’s and dug a blue denim workshirt out of the bottom of my Gladstone, telling myself that the blue matched my eyes and the wrinkles matched the lines around them.

* * * * *

It was sunset by the time we reached Spaniard’s Hollow. Against a fiery sky the black tents stood like paper cut-outs illuminated from within by kerosene lamps glowing cozily like nineteenth-century lithophanes. We parked by the lake with the other vehicles. The sound of voices drifted across the clearing.

The nutty professors were all present and accounted for with the exception of Dr. Livingston who had been unable to make it back to camp in time for the festivities. Dr. Shoup did the honors, giving us the grand tour of the site.

Though the get-together had been Shoup's suggestion, his demeanor had thawed only slightly since our last encounter.

"The term 'archeology' refers to the systematic and methodical recovery of the material evidence of man's past life and culture. It is a *science*," he informed us as he led the way into a tent crowded with cardboard filing boxes and several long tables piled with miscellaneous artifacts: broken bottles turned purple with age, arrowheads, a rusted belt buckle.

Shoup paused, apparently waiting for comments. When we didn't argue he continued, "Our understanding of the past gives us the knowledge to shape the future."

I watched Jake size up Dr. Shoup, from the toe of his spit-polished boots to the crown of his khaki safari hat. I recognized the sardonic curve to Jake's mouth and looked forward to his commentary on the drive home.

"How many people do you have on staff?" he asked politely enough.

Dr. Shoup said, "There are eight of us. On the weekends, our volunteers pitch in. In the summer it will be different. The university sponsors an adult field school program."

"University?" The cop, always wanting the facts straight.

"Tuolumne Junior College," I supplied.

Dr. Shoup checked long enough to show us the improbably named proton magnetometer, explaining that the data collected by magnetometer surveys would be processed by the college computers, which would then produce a variety of detailed maps, profiles and three-dimensional views.

"Maximal information, minimal ground disturbance?" I suggested.

"Quite."

Jake met my eyes and arched his brows.

"We are professionals, Mr. English. We do not rape and pillage the countryside as you imply."

Jake said, "Huh?"

"Have you found the Red Rover mine yet?" I inquired.

Dr. Shoup's eyes narrowed. "Er -- no. Not yet."

"How can that be?"

He bridled at this. "To begin with, we don't have the exact location."

"It's a giant hole in the ground, right? Maybe boarded up? How hard could that be to find? Besides, mines had to be registered or staked, right?"

"We know the general area, but not the exact location. It's only a matter of time."

Shoup explained that in order to reconstruct the site a horizontal grid had been laid over the entire area. The object was to recover all items within the grid and place them in their related stratigraphic sections. He showed us grids, maps, a basic wall profile and the daily excavation notes.

"Everything is completely regulation."

Strictly regimental. I resisted the impulse to salute. "I'll take your word for it," I said.

"This mine worth a lot of money?" Jake asked.

"Certainly not. The mine played out long before the end of the gold rush. The Red Rover is strictly of historical and cultural significance." Shoup proceeded to explain why.

Kevin joined us as Jake's eyes were beginning to glaze. He looked good in khaki shorts and a rolled-sleeve denim shirt -- like a big Boy Scout. He and Jake briefly acknowledged each other, then Kevin grinned at me and held up the crescent-bladed shovel he carried.

"Number one tool of the archeologist," he said undervoice, with a nod at Shoup's back. "Equally useful for digging artifacts or shoveling through the bullshit."

* * * * *

Dinner in the main tent consisted of hot cornbread and hotter chili made of franks and beans. The flickering Coleman lanterns threw a cozy light over the faces gathered around the long table, several of whom I recognized from my first visit. It was warm in the tent, smelling of propane and damp earth. Jake and I were greeted like old friends as we squeezed in at the table. Clearly we were being courted.

"Coffee or box wine?" Bernice offered gaily.

Jake opted for the coffee and I had a plastic cup of boxed rosé.

"So what do you think of our operation?" Dr. Marquez, on my left, inquired. His melancholy dark eyes met mine as though waiting to hear the worst.

"It seems like you have a very professional operation here." Even while I chafed over the thought of test pits, I couldn't help but respond to the energy and camaraderie around us.

"Dr. Shoup has a great deal of field experience. He's ... on loan, you could say, from UC Berkeley."

"I thought Dr. Livingston was in charge here?"

"That's true."

"When does Livingston get back?"

He drained his coffee cup. "Late tonight or tomorrow."

"Is this what you do fulltime?" I queried.

Marquez smiled that mournful smile. "I'm an instructor at the JC. Geography and zoology as well as anthropology." He sighed. "Diversity means job security these days. Or the closest thing to it."

On my other side Jake was shoveling through his meal like a Forty-niner. He responded to Amy's overtures between mouthfuls. She related the amusing tale of how she had nearly blown my head off, and Jake nearly choked laughing.

About midway through dinner Melissa Smith, my childhood nemesis, showed up. We all scooted down, clearing space at the table. She wedged in between Kevin and Dr. Marquez and hailed-fellow-well-met me.

"I didn't realize you were a member of this expedition," I said.

Her look informed me that there were many things I didn't know. "I'm working on my Ph.D. in anthropology." She shook her hair back from her face and accepted a plate from Bernice.

Kevin said, "I hear you had some excitement at your place today."

"What's that?" Dr. Shoup turned his pale gaze our way.

"We found a dead body in the barn," Jake said. "Probably a vagrant."

"Yuck!" said Amy. "What was he doing in your barn?"

"How should anyone know what a vagrant might be doing?" Shoup barked like a bad-tempered Schnauzer. "Any more bright questions?"

Amy colored the shade of her red thermal undershirt.

Kevin refilled my plastic cup with more box wine. I smiled thanks. Kevin smiled welcome. Jake kicked my ankle.

"Ouch."

"Sorry."

Well, we *were* scrunched together pretty compactly at the long table.

Bernice said, "But aren't you the one who found a dead body last Thursday?"

"Adrien," Jake clarified. "Adrien's the one who finds the dead bodies."

"Yeah, well so far I haven't generated any."

"What's that?" Shoup's utensils clattered against his plate. He goggled at us.

Beside me, Jake went very still, the only person to understand my meaning. And considering the fact that Jake had killed in order to save my life -- and had nearly lost his shield over it -- it was a bitchy thing to say.

"Jake's a cop," I said. "He doesn't trust anybody."

"A cop?" Kevin repeated.

Was it my imagination or was there an uncomfortable silence?

"Now that must be interesting work," Dr. Marquez said heartily.

"What kind of cop?" Kevin asked.

"Detective. Homicide." Jake's voice was flat. He resumed eating, intent on spearing every last bean on his plastic plate.

Another of those weird pauses. Melissa chuckled then and said, "Well, well. Maybe we should ask Jake --"

"Smith, you know my feeling on the subject." Dr. Shoup cut her off with force.

As I studied the faces around us only Dr. Shoup met my eyes. I said slowly, "Is there something going on here that I should know about?"

"There is n-not," Dr. Shoup said with that small and revealing stammer.

"What about the weird noises? The chanting?"

Jake made a sound as though he had inhaled a bean.

"The hollow *is* haunted, you know," Melissa said slyly.

"Here it comes," Kevin said, "The legend of Big Foot."

"Don't be so quick to scoff at the beliefs of others, O'Reilly," Dr. Marquez said seriously.

"That's right," Amy said. "Melissa's people were here when yours were still scratching for potatoes in Ireland."

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

Amy's logic seemed to have confounded even her. She shrugged and popped a frank in her mouth.

"There are trees in this hollow older than your United States have been united," Melissa said. "Those juniper pines by the tarn are *four hundred* years old. The fucking insects inside them have a more complex civilization than your own."

"Language," Dr. Marquez cautioned.

"Mountains are considered strong power points," Bernice put in, handing over a bag of peanut butter cookies. "Water is another. There's your argument for the hollow being a portal to the spirit world."

"Psychic archeology!" hooted Kevin.

"This hollow has long been held a sacred place by the indigenous peoples," Melissa said. "The pictographs on the rocks above us tell the story of guardian spirits."

"Poppycock!" Dr. Shoup said. "Not another word about werewolves."

No one had mentioned werewolves. Jake and I exchanged a look.

I inquired, "Did you say --?"

Kevin met my gaze and grimaced. "Ask Melissa about 'The Devouring.'"

I turned to Melissa. She was still smiling but there was something in her eyes. Something black and unfathomable.

"Do you want to hear a spooky campfire tale, Mr. English?"

"Do Boy Scouts like to be prepared?" I ignored Dr. Shoup's obvious displeasure.

Melissa pushed back from the table and folded her arms comfortably, at ease in her role of storyteller. The rest of us fell silent and waited.

"According to the legends of my people, when the land and the water and the sky had been finished to his satisfaction, Coyote-man stabbed two sticks in the earth at all the places

he had chosen for The People. Half of those sticks became men, half became women. It's a Creation legend." She shrugged.

"The little ones learn the story of how Lizard-man convinced Coyote-man that it would be better for The People to have fingers instead of paws, and that is why, ever since, Coyote has chased Lizard in the rocks. But there is another story. An older story."

As Melissa moved into the rhythm of her story, her eyes half-closed, her voice grew low. There wasn't a sound all down the long table.

"This is the story my grandfather told me. My grandfather was a shaman. A wise man. He knew many stories. The story he told me was that Coyote-man would not listen to Lizard-man, not at first telling, and so the first people who came to life were given claws and fangs. Claws and fangs." Melissa held up her hands, curving them as though to show long claws. She curled her lip in a silent snarl.

You could have heard a pin drop.

"Perhaps Coyote-man wished these first people to look like himself. Perhaps he was mocking his brother, the Wolf. No one knows. Some say this first people came to be in the days of the great serpents whose footsteps shook the trees. Some say these beings were born into a world where mountains spouted flame, where the red lava bathed the earth in rivers of fire. Who can remember past the time of the storytellers? But it is true that these first people were so fierce that when they woke to life they sprang upon each other and began to devour each other, man and woman."

Sounded like your average high school. I glanced at Jake's profile. His gaze swerved briefly my way.

"Like wolves in winter, so did the first people feel the ravening for flesh and blood. Too late Coyote-man saw what he had done. He tried to stop it before all were devoured, but could save only five of these first ones, these First People. Yet, having saved them Coyote-man did not know what to do with them, for they were as much animal as human, and there were already all the animal spirits needed in this world. So he named them The Guardian and sent them to guard the door between the spirit world and this one, and if ever man should trespass too close to the gateway, The Guardian shall fall upon him in the devouring, and rend him limb from limb."

As though hypnotized we all stared at Melissa as she finished in a kind of sing-song, "He turned them into the darkness. The darkness of the deepest water or the blackest night, the black of the tree bark, the black of fur, the black of loam that sucks the unwary footstep. You will know them by the darkness if you stray too deep in the heart of night. But even before you feel their fangs and claws, you will see their eyes shining bright in the darkness like amber, like a hornet's sting, like fool's gold."

Melissa trailed into silence. No one spoke.

At last Dr. Marquez chuckled and said, "I'm afraid there are several -- um -- holes in that story, Smith."

Melissa laughed too, the spell broken. "It's just a legend. A story to keep small children from wandering too close to the caves."

Dr. Shoup snapped out like broken chalk, "It's this kind of irresponsible babble about legends and folk tales that inspire dolts to dig up and cart off every removable artifact, utterly destroying the sanctity of a site."

"We call it the Schliemann Syndrome," Dr. Marquez informed me.

"But if Heinrich Schliemann hadn't listened to and believed the old legends, he wouldn't have discovered Troy," I pointed out.

Dr. Shoup barked, "Troy? Which Troy? Troy One or Nine or Zero? A little learning is a dangerous thing."

* * * * *

The party broke up sometime after ten o'clock. As we cut across the wet grass to the Bronco, Jake held his hand out for the keys.

My car, I drive. That's the way I see it, but Jake apparently loses points anytime he permits another male to chauffeur him, so I tossed him the keys. I'd had too much cheap wine anyway and my headache was coming back.

We had gone a mile down the dirt road when I said, "That was stupid. The thing I said at dinner."

He said dryly, "Which stupid thing was that?"

Maybe I deserved that. I said, "About generating bodies."

Jake grunted which could have signified "you're forgiven" or "fuck off." After a moment he said, "But I wish you hadn't let it out that I was a cop."

"Then you agree that something is going on?"

"No. I find it ... socially awkward."

We landed in a pothole and I muttered as though my suspension had taken the hit.

"*Were* you ever a Boy Scout?" Jake inquired, shifting gears.

"No."

"Your mother, I suppose."

Jake has never forgiven my mother for trying to get him fired during his investigation of me. They are neither of them the forgiving kind.

"Were you? A Boy Scout, I mean."

"Hell, I was an Eagle Scout."

"Figures."

It was then, like straight out of *The X-Files* -- or one of Melissa's ghost stories -- that something flew out of the darkness. Something with burning yellow eyes and outstretched claws, shrieking down upon us.

There was a thud that should have broken the windshield. I had a wild impression of horns, a razor-sharp beak and those glowing eyes.

"*Shit!*" Jake swerved hard.

The Bronco bumped off the road. Jake tried to compensate but we slammed down in a rut, our heads grazing the ceiling. As though locked on train tracks we headed straight for a massive oak and the open sky beyond. Jake stood on the brakes.

Instinctively I threw my arm up so I don't know how the hell we missed the tree, but we scraped by, literally, twigs and branches scratching the sides and chassis of the Bronco. I banged hard against the side of the door despite the seat belts, and my arm went numb.

The next instant the Bronco clambered back onto the road, tires spinning and spitting gravel. Jake cut the engine. We were both breathing hard. He turned on the cab light.

"Okay?"

"Yeah."

"Sure?" His eyes looked black in the overhead light.

I nodded, rubbing feeling back into my arm. "Jesus, that was some driving, Jake. I thought we were going over the edge for sure."

He opened his door and got out, then walked back toward where we had hit whatever it was.

I unsnapped my seat belt and followed.

When I caught him up Jake was on one knee in the road, an owl flung out before him. It looked huge, the wingspan nearly six feet. It was still quivering.

"God damn it," Jake was saying. He spoke slowly as though in pain. "God damn it to hell. I couldn't miss it."

"It flew straight at the car. It's a wonder it didn't break the windshield."

"It was beautiful."

It was beautiful. The pale feathers were so perfect they looked hand-painted. I saw the tufts that gave the illusion of horns. The fierce eyes were already filming over.

I put my hand on Jake's shoulder, squeezed. He made no move.

I stared up. The mist turned the sky white behind the pines. All the world seemed blanketed in soft white silence. An owl, I thought. Age-old harbinger of darkness and death. In Native American lore the owl is a bird of wisdom and divination -- and still they are feared as omens of doom.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

One thing for damn sure, in no myth or legend in the world does killing one bring good luck.

Jake shook his head as though clearing it and said, "Christ, what a shame to leave it out here for the scavengers. It ought to be stuffed or mounted, donated to some museum."

I said slowly, "We can put it in the Bronco if you want. Tomorrow I'll try to find someone. A taxidermist."

He was silent. At last he shook his head and rose. "It's done," he said. "Forget it."

Chapter Eight

The next morning Jake rose at the crack of dawn to go fishing. I declined his invitation, burrowing under my pillow and telling him I was going to buckle down and work on *Death for a Deadly Deed*.

At a more civilized hour I drove Jake's Acura into Basking. But before I left the ranch I placed a call to my ex-lover Mel, who happens to teach film studies at UC Berkeley.

Lucking out, I caught Mel in his office between classes. We chatted briefly and then I asked my favor: What did he know about Dr. Daniel Shoup? "Mid-fifties, favors safari hats and Gestapo boots."

Mel thought it over and then laughed that husky laugh I remembered so well. "Like Stewart Granger in *King Solomon's Mines*?"

I knew he would think of that. "Or *Green Fire*."

That evoked memories of late nights cuddled on the couch, eating hot buttered popcorn and laughing our asses off at the worst movies in the world. Mel must have remembered too. His voice grew warmer.

"What did you want to know? He's kind of an odd ball, even for Berkeley."

"I'm not sure. The good stuff. Rumors, gossip, innuendo."

"You know, there is a rumor connected with him. The kids call him Indiana Bones, by the way."

"Bless their hormone-addled hearts."

"Yes. Well, he came to us from the British Museum -- at least, that's what everyone thought. It turns out the British Museum never heard of him."

"Seriously?"

"That's the word on campus."

"How reliable is the word?"

Another husky laugh. "Take it with a grain of salt. Although, the good doctor and the university did part ways a couple of months ago."

Aha!

"What's your interest?" Mel asked curiously.

I wanted to avoid getting into that. Funny to think he was the guy I used to tell everything to. Maybe that was the problem: I'd shared too much.

"I ran into him a few days ago. I'm vacationing in Basking."

"*You're* vacationing?" His laugh was disbelieving and a little tart. "And at the legendary ranch?"

"Things change."

"They do." He sounded oddly regretful.

I changed the subject back to Shoup, but though I pressed for details, Mel had little useful to add. He pointed out that the archeology department is a long way from film studies. Just as Berkeley is a long way from Los Angeles.

Before I rang off, he asked, "Are you taking care of yourself, Adrien?"

Kind of a sore subject between us. "Of course. Always."

"Are you --? Have you --?"

Found someone? "Sort of," I said. "I'm involved." It's involved. "Are you still with Phil?"

"Paul," Mel corrected gently.

"Right. The former student."

"Former grad student. And no. We split up. About six weeks ago."

"I'm sorry." No, I wasn't. I never was a good loser.

* * * * *

After hours of scattergun research I located a number of articles on the Miwok, including a couple that dealt with the creation legends. The People's tradition was of a world formed by half-human, half-animal spirit beings with supernatural powers. Confirming Melissa's tale, after Coyote-man made the world he argued with Lizard-man over whether The People would have fingers or paws. But I could find nothing about a first race of man called the Guardian born with claws and a job description that included protecting the spirit world entrance from mortal man. Nowhere did I find any mention of "The Devouring."

Which didn't necessarily prove a thing. The library was small and its resources were limited. I was trying to verify an esoteric point of Indian legend.

Still, it was interesting.

Another fact I found interesting if not useful: the Kuksu, whose mysterious art decorated the rocks above Spaniard's Hollow, was a secret society of the Miwok tribe. Melissa was a member of the Miwok tribe.

Now and then as I looked up from my reading I caught the gaze of a rather odd little man sitting on the opposite side of the railings. It was hard not to catch his gaze because he appeared to be glaring at me.

After the third time, I gathered up my books and notes and moved to the other side of the library. Despite what Jake thinks, I really don't look for trouble. Soon I was immersed once more in the story of the Chinese in California. I began to understand Abraham Royale's dilemma as I read of the anti-Chinese movement and the account of the "Caucasian Leagues."

Royale had married for money, but he had also desired status, and his second-class citizen bride was a liability there. Had he returned the dowry with the wife? I doubted it. What had become of her, this long dead woman? My understanding of Chinese culture was based on movies mostly, but I figured she must have been disgraced. What were the options of a "ruined" nineteenth-century woman -- let alone a nineteenth-century Chinese woman? Despite their part in building the railroads and their willingness to take on the jobs no one else wanted, the Chinese had been despised, even hated. The anti-Chinese movement culminated in 1880 with a proposed amendment to the California Constitution that would have prohibited employment of Chinese immigrants.

Capitalism came to their rescue.

The battle rages eternal, though the race, religion, gender or sexual orientation of those discriminated against changes regularly. Maybe man's need for a scapegoat is genetically programmed into him.

As I mulled over this notion, I glanced from my book to find the old man staring at me between shelves of the nearest bookcase. I kid you not, there was *dust* on the shoulders of his black ... what was that, frock coat? The latest from the Goodwill Signature Line?

I looked hastily down at the printed page. What next? Could this possibly have anything to do with what was happening in Spaniard's Hollow? I mean, the old guy looked like he belonged in the 1800s, but I kind of doubted he was a physical manifestation of a guardian spirit. Despite the dust.

Eventually he wandered away and I packed up my research materials and headed to the front desk only to find him there before me. Cravenly, I detoured to the Featured Selection shelf, trying to look inconspicuous. I wasn't more than a few feet away so I knew I was not imagining it when I heard the man in black mutter something to the librarian about "avowed homosexuals."

Though I don't recall taking my vows, my ears pricked up. I randomly pulled a book from the nearest shelf: it was about harnessing the electrical power of your heart. The idea was that by concentrating on positive thoughts, one could actually alter the heart's rhythm,

which would allow one to stay calm, cool and collected “even in the midst of chaos.” That sounded promising. I could try putting it into effect immediately.

“... filthy sodomites ... the wrath of God ... the Day of Judgment ...” The little man’s voice rose and then fell as the librarian made shushing motions.

More hissing. More shushing.

Rumplestiltskin finally took himself off with one final razing look my way.

The librarian’s cheeks were as pink as the rhinestones in her glasses when I reached the counter. I could see she was trying to decide whether or not ignoring the incident was the most tactful thing to do.

A piece of advice passed on from my social butterfly mammy: when in doubt, smile. I smiled tentatively. The librarian’s cheeks grew pinker still.

“I must apologize,” she said stiffly, stamping the inside covers of each book in my stack. “The Reverend is a -- an arch *conservative*.” I watched her small fist punching book after book, like an android running amuck.

“Reverend?”

“The Reverend John Howdy.”

“What denomination?”

“I believe he earned his doctorate of divinity through a correspondence school.”

Church of the Sacred Stamp?

* * * * *

I took my books, dropped them off in the car, and hastened around the corner to Royale House where I found Melissa organizing a rack of picture postcards.

“You just missed Kevin,” she informed me.

“That so? I thought I’d take the tour.”

“It’s your three dollars.”

I paid my three dollars, lingering for a time before the glass case displaying the first Mrs. Royale’s traditional wedding headdress and gown. The fabulous silk robes embroidered in scarlet and gold were doll-sized -- she couldn’t have stood over four feet tall. How old had she been? Seventeen? Sixteen? Younger?

I checked out Royale’s master bedroom which had a gigantic canopy bed that must have seemed like a boat to China Doll. There were sepia photos in silver frames on the bureau. I stepped over the velvet-covered restraints to get a closer look. I recognized one from my copy of *Histories of Basking Township*: Royale and his partner in the Red Rover mine, Barnabas Salt. Another photograph showed Royale formally posed with a blonde woman in a stiff-collar dress. The second wife? They both stood rigidly as all folks in those old tintypes

do; it would be a mistake to read anything into their body language. On the other hand, she *had* split with the smithy before the wedding cake was stale.

I stepped back over the velvet ropes. He had done all right for himself, had Royale, by nineteenth-century standards. He had a mansion on the hill full of furniture that must have cost a fortune in his day, let alone in mine. There were Aubusson rugs and crystal chandeliers. At night he had rested his head on Irish linen, and in the morning he had breakfasted on Wedgwood.

I strolled down the hall. In Royale's study there was a collection of baskets in assorted shapes and sizes woven by Miwok and Pomo women. Some were decorated with feathers, some were tall and closely knit for food storage. Designs in the basket weave symbolized arrow points or deer feet or rattlesnake markings. The collection might not have existed in Royale's day, the beautiful and primitive baskets possibly donated to the museum in the years following Royale's death.

The same could be true of the "Indian Life" sketches by Archibald Basking decorating the walls. More Miwoks? I examined ink sketches of conical Indian houses; scroungy children playing with scroungy dogs; Indian women weaving baskets. A third drawing over the fireplace caught my attention: this depicted a tribal dance. Warriors gyrated around a bonfire, a few of the dancers dressed in animal skins complete with the heads of their former owners: a bear, a white deer with antlers, a wolf.

I looked for the title. It read, *Medicine Dance*.

I went downstairs and located Melissa.

"Can I buy you lunch?"

She smirked. "Eat your heart out, Kevin."

"Sorry?"

"Kevin's got the hots for you, in case you haven't noticed."

I removed one of the faded color brochures from the spinning rack. "That picture in the upstairs study. The one titled *Medicine Dance*. Is that supposed to depict one of the Kuksu rituals?"

The smile died out of her dark eyes. "What do you know about the Kuksu?"

"Just what I've read."

"There's not much written."

"But I'm a voracious reader. Speaking of voracious ... lunch?"

Reluctantly Melissa laughed.

We found a coffeehouse down the street. Marnie Starr was our waitress. She did a double take when she spotted me and nearly spilled coffee on a customer, but by the time she reached our table she had regained her composure.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Fine. The special is meatloaf." She scratched at her pad with her pencil.

"Any word from Ted?"

"No." She looked up then, scowled. "There's a warrant out for his arrest, thanks to you."

"I can't take all the credit. Ted did his share."

Marnie gave me a long steady look like she was lining me up in her sights. She turned on her heel.

When she was out of earshot Melissa queried, "Is this a writer's curiosity?"

"What's that?"

"All these questions."

"I'm just making conversation."

"Come on, I know you didn't ask me to lunch because you're interested in *me*. Are you researching a book?"

"How did you know I was a writer?"

"That's a silly question. There are no secrets in a small town. Everybody knows everything about you."

I raised my eyebrows.

She shrugged. "Small towns, small minds. Let's just say you're something new to talk about."

Trying to analyze her expression, I said, "I admit I'm curious about things I've heard from Kevin. I feel responsible for anything that happens in Spaniard's Hollow."

Melissa did a creditable impression of the glowering face on a totem pole, finally pronouncing, "You cannot own the land. The land owns you."

"Are you referring to property taxes or something more spiritual?"

Marnie returned with our plates before Melissa could elucidate. I salted my french fries and Melissa checked under her rye bread as though expecting a bomb.

The tuna melt turned out to be the best I'd ever had in my life -- either that or I was hungrier than usual. Melissa tore into her meal as though I'd discovered her starving on the plains. I'd have put money on her in an eat-off against Jake.

Returning with a pot of coffee, Marnie topped off our cups. She seemed to linger over her task. Eavesdropping?

When at last she was out of earshot Melissa said, "Nobody wants to admit it, but something's wrong at the site. Maybe there's a simple explanation, but Kevin's not the only one who's heard things and seen things. I have too."

"Like chanting? Tell me about that."

"I've heard it. It could have come from the wind through the caves on the mountain, but I'll tell you, it raised the hair on the back of my neck and I'm not easily spooked."

"What happened to Kevin's dog?"

"Blue? Coyotes, I guess."

"Is that what you think? Kevin said the dog was torn to pieces."

Melissa said slowly, "I'll tell you what I think. I think somebody doesn't want the past disturbed."

"Are we talking supernatural somebodies or somebody from around here?"

"I don't believe in ghosts," Melissa said.

"Do you believe in sabotage?"

There was a certain glint in her eye. "I don't *practice* it, if that's what you're asking."

"Do you believe The Guardian protects the hollow?"

She stared at me and said bitterly, "People mock what they don't understand. What they fear."

"I'm not mocking. I'm asking."

"I suppose you're not afraid either?"

I was saved from answering as Marnie brought the bill. I picked it up.

"No you don't," Melissa said, snatching for it. I held it out of her reach -- old habits, I guess.

"Come on," I coaxed. "Let me see how it feels to be one of those good old fashioned oppressive landowners. Or maybe just a good old fashioned chauvinist pig."

She eyed me narrowly but subsided. I never met a grad student who wasn't short of cash.

"Since you like legends so much," she said, "I'll tell you another about Abraham Royale."

"Yeah?"

"After his second wife ran off, Royale began to remember how faithful and obedient his first wife had been. He remembered her gentle ways and sweet smiles. He remembered her devotion to him expressed in a hundred loving ways, and he went to San Francisco, to Chinatown, to find her."

Melissa paused. Looking up from figuring the tip, I nodded encouragement.

"Royale searched and searched but the girl's father had died. There was no other family. No one knew where Li Kei had gone, though Royale questioned all the neighbors. He spent all that day hunting her. At nightfall he came to what seemed to be an abandoned house in the worst part of the city. He went inside, and to his amazement his wife was there, spinning away --"

"Spinning?"

"Well, whatever Chinese girls did during the day. Embroidering or working at a loom or something."

"Gotcha." I noticed Marnie was hovering again. Maybe she needed the table.

“Li Kei seemed to Abraham almost unchanged. As though not a day had passed since he’d left her at her father’s doorstep. He stared and stared without the courage to speak. At last Li Kei looked up from her work and saw her former husband, who fell to his knees. He told her what a fool he had been, and how much he loved her, and how he had been searching for her high and low, and how she had always been in his thoughts, and how each night he dreamed of pillowing his head on the soft black silk of her hair.” Melissa brushed the soft black silk of her own hair over her shoulder.

“And she said?”

“Li Kei wept and said she still loved Abraham and had prayed night and day that he would return.” Melissa popped the last bite of dill pickle in her mouth. “So they went to bed --”

Crunch crunch.

“And?”

“And when Royale woke the next morning he found he was holding a skeleton with long black hair wrapped around his hands and throat.

She stopped as I chuckled.

“This sounds familiar. Like that Kobayashi movie, *Kwaidan*. ‘The Black Hair,’ segment I think.”

Melissa eyed me consideringly and then burst out laughing. “Or Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu*. You’re the first person who ever caught that.” She lifted a dismissive shoulder. “Anyway, it makes a good ghost story.”

* * * * *

By the time I left Basking, the blue skies had turned gray and April showers were falling. The mountains were wreathed in cirrostratus clouds promising snow.

I figured Jake would have to cut short his fishing trip. I didn’t know how long it would take him to get back because I didn’t know how far he had traveled in pursuit of man’s other favorite sport.

Weighing the chances of getting snowed in with Jake, I had to wonder whether that would be a good thing. Not if we ran out of supplies, I concluded with a glance at the paper sacks in the back seat. Lots of red meat, lots of chilled beer -- it was like feeding a lion with a drinking problem.

At the mouth of Stagecoach Road I parked, got out and checked the mailbox.

The rain was coming down hard now; everything green was somber and glistening. The scent of pine and wet earth filled my nostrils.

Rain ticked on the mailbox as I opened the door.

I'm not sure what saved me. I heard something above the rattle of the rain -- another rattle, a sizzling sound almost. I had an impression of motion inside the box, a couple of circulars moved. I yanked my hand away and jumped back.

The snake struck at the empty air.

As I stood there gaping I recognized the distinct triangular head of a rattler.

I backed up another foot or two, rubbing my hand, double-checking that I hadn't been bitten. I was so shocked I didn't even yell. The surprise was that my heart didn't give out then and there. In fact, once it started beating again, it was almost steady. Keep thinking those happy thoughts, I told myself, watching the rattler withdraw into the junk mail of the mailbox. From its hiding place it watched me, tongue flicking out.

I got back into Jake's car, found my cell and dialed for help.

In less than half an hour the now familiar black and white truck pulled up, giant tires shelling gravel and mud. Billingsly and the ever-present Dwayne fell out wearing yellow rain slickers.

"I might have known it was you," Billingsly said gloomily.

I explained the situation. As though it was perfectly commonplace, Dwayne reached back in the cab and pulled out a long hook-like rod. In a few minutes they had the snake out of the mailbox and on the road where they promptly dispatched it. So much for the Save the Wildlife Fund.

Billingsly scratched his skunk-toned beard. "Just a little one," he reassured me, "though their bites can be the worst. The young 'uns don't know how to judge. They shoot you the whole damn dose."

"Kind of a weird thing, that snake in there," Dwayne observed to his chief.

"Yep, that is weird, although I've seen weirder. I remember one time --"

"You're not telling me you think this is a -- a natural phenomenon!" I broke in.

Billingsly frowned at me. "What do you think it is, English?"

"I think someone put that snake in the mailbox."

He shook his head at my ignorance. "You'd be surprised at the places snakes crawl into. Dwayne had a snake wrapped around the towel bar in his john once."

"The *upstairs* john," Dwayne told me as though that should settle it.

I said, incensed, "A snake could not climb up into a mailbox and shut the door after itself."

They stared at me. Rain dripped off the brim of Billingsly's hat. "So what is it you're suggesting? You think someone *deliberately* dropped that snake in there? Why? To bite somebody? Maybe the mailman? Or maybe you?"

I hadn't thought about the mailman frankly.

"To bite me. Hell, I don't know! Maybe to scare me. I only know that snake didn't get in there by itself. Or by accident."

The sheriff said vexedly, "You know, nothing like this ever happened here before you came along."

"This is my fault?"

"I'm just calling 'em like I see 'em."

And apparently he couldn't see further than the end of his gin-blossomed nose.

I said as calmly as I could, "Thanks for your help. I take it you don't want to write a report or anything?"

Dwayne drawled, "Oh, we'll be writing a report."

I was already moving toward the car. Billingsly's next words froze me mid-step.

"Not so fast, English. We were coming to see you anyway."

I didn't like the sound of that. I didn't like standing here getting wetter and more chilled by the minute. I longed for the comfort and safety of home, my quiet shop, my ordinary boring life where my biggest problem was if I was ever going to find someone to share my ordinary boring life.

"What's up?"

"We're trying to put a name to that dead body you found."

"Which one?"

He let that pass. "Missus Jimson at the general store says you told her Friday morning that you were expecting company that night. Now, I know it wasn't your buddy the cop because I called him myself Saturday night. So where is this other guest of yours? What happened to him?"

My mouth dropped. I stood there, letting the rain in while I gaped.

"There wasn't one. I made him up."

Billingsly and his deputy exchanged a look and moved in -- actually I think Billingsly only shifted his weight, but I was rattled.

"But surely ..." My voice unexpectedly gave out and I had to try again. "The postmortem will tell you how long he's been dead."

"Yep."

Yep? What did that mean? Not that I was any expert, but the dead man looked as though he had been there awhile. Longer than a week.

Good-bye to pride, good-bye to dignity. I babbled, "You've got to believe me. There was no one else. I said that because it's isolated up here. I said it in reflex. I was jumpy. I'm used to living in LA."

They stared as stolidly as the white-faced beef cattle by the side of the road. An effect heightened by Dwayne chomping his tobacco cud.

Billingsly said slowly, grimly, "You're one of them funny boys, ain't you?"

It was hard to speak, what with my heart trying to climb out of my mouth. For every gay man this question comes at some point, in just such a tone, if not in those actual words. I don't know if real courage lies in storming barricades or simply not denying the truth. I know it took every ounce of strength I had to say, "I'm gay, if that's what you're asking."

"Your pal, Riordan. He one too?"

"You'll have to ask him."

Dwayne spat a stream of tobacco juice an inch from my boot.

They continued to stare at me.

Why wait for the law? Let's string him up! Except that they were the law.

"I'll tell you flat, I don't trust you, English," Billingsly told me flat.

"Listen," I said, "Why would I make a point out of the dead man in the barn not being the same man I found Thursday night? Why would I direct your attention to him if I'd killed him? Is that smart? Is that logical?"

"How the hell do I know how smart and logical you are?"

Seeing that I didn't have an answer to that, Billingsly added, "I done some checking. This ain't the first time you've been involved in a homicide."

"A *homocide*," clarified Dwayne.

"Someone tried to kill me."

"That happens to you a lot."

Dwayne laughed as though *that* were no wonder.

"Okay, okay. What about the gun he was shot with? I don't own a gun. You can search the place if you want."

I knew this was a mistake as the words left my mouth. My grandmother had a rifle and at least two handguns somewhere in that house -- assuming Ted hadn't pawned or stolen them. But surprisingly the sheriff didn't jump at this offer. Indeed, he got a suspicious look on his face as though he'd just been dealt his fifth ace.

"Sure, you'd like that. Then you could sic your ACLU shysters on me."

"We could get a search warrant," Dwayne suggested. His ears and nose were turning red with cold. It felt like snow in the air.

Maybe the words froze in my throat. Or maybe I honestly couldn't think of anything to say. It doesn't happen often. I just stood there as though struck dumb.

Billingsly jabbed his finger my way for emphasis. "Don't even *think* about leaving town, English."

* * * * *

"The only thing worse than opera is someone who hums along with opera."

It was nearly five before Jake walked in. He was sunburnt, wet, and smelled faintly of fish. Sexy as hell. Don't ask me to explain.

I stopped typing. "Turn it off."

Jake reached over my shoulder and turned off the CD player, cutting Bocelli off mid-high note.

In the silence I could hear rain drumming down on the roof.

"Get a lot done?"

"Sort of. Jake --" I started to turn in my chair.

He folded his muscular arms around me. "God, I'm starving." He pressed his mouth against my throat and growled from deep down in his own. The bristle on his cold jaw scraped my own.

My nerves being a tad frayed, I jumped a foot and nearly clipped him under his chin. He let go of me and laughed.

"How about fish for dinner?" His grin seemed more lopsided than usual.

Shit shit shit. The timing was all off. I was zigging, he was zagging.

"Fish is good if I don't have to clean it."

"I'll clean it," he said. "Hell, I'll even cook it if you take K.P."

"Deal."

He was heading back to the kitchen. I got up and followed him.

"Jake?"

On the other side of the kitchen he paused, his hand on the door to the yard.

"I -- uh -- there was a rattlesnake in the mailbox today."

He took it without blinking.

I plowed on. "I called the sheriffs and they didn't take it too seriously, but -- well, Billingsly told me not to leave town."

"Told you not to leave town?"

"Right."

I was waiting for the nuclear reaction, the meltdown. Jake said very calmly, "That's bullshit. Unless he's actually charging you, no cop can order you not to leave town. What aren't you telling me?"

"I'm telling you now."

"Where's this mailbox?"

"On the highway."

"What were you doing on the highway?"

I tried to keep it light; offered a smile. "This feels like an interrogation."

"Why were you on the highway?" Crisp and clean and no caffeine.

"I drove into town to pick up some groceries and a copy of *Titus*." At his blank look I said, "*Titus Andronicus*. The play I'm basing --"

"You were playing detective."

"Not really."

"Yes, you were."

"I did a little research, that's all. At the library. And Royale House."

He stared stonily.

"I know you think that I'm imagining things --"

Jake walked out. The screen door swung shut behind him with just a suggestion of a bang.

* * * * *

"You'd better tell me what you found out," Jake said pushing his plate away.

I had been staring down at the remains of my dinner, studying the fishy eye of the trout lying there. Jake's voice jarred me out of my none too pleasant thoughts.

Dinner had been civil but strained. The food was good, but I had no appetite. Jake fried up the fish, cooked rice with garlic, cilantro and green onions. Someday he was going to make some woman a wonderful wife. I tossed together an unimaginative salad of spinach and wild lettuce, and uncorked one of the unexpectedly nice bottles of California wine I'd picked up at the market. I thought the wine would help. Or at least dull my awareness of Jake's disapproval.

We moved around each other in the big kitchen, not speaking except when he asked me where something was.

I got the silent treatment during the meal too. I didn't like it. It reminded me of the way Mel used to clam up when he was angry. I reacted by drinking too much; it didn't help as much as I'd hoped.

I tossed my napkin over the remains of the fish. "Answer me this first. Suppose someone wanted to protect Spaniard's Hollow?"

"From?"

"Exploitation. Desecration? The hollow was considered a sacred place by the Kuksu."

"What's the Kuksu?"

I think it was Mark Twain who said, "Get your facts straight, and then you can distort them as much as you like."

“A secret society of men and women, a religious cult whose members dressed in elaborate costumes representing ghosts or divinities.”

“Impersonating the spirits of the dead?” Jake tilted back his chair, drained his glass. He was knocking the booze back himself, but he’d gone straight for the twenty-year-old whisky in the liquor cabinet.

“Right. The Kuksu is associated with the Miwok, the Miwok being one of the predominate tribes in this area. That story Melissa told us last night is a Miwok creation legend.”

“Is there a point to this?”

“Melissa is a member of the Miwok.”

Nothing from Jake.

I pushed on. “There’s something else. When we were kids Melissa used to talk about going on rattlesnake hunts with her father. I know that’s probably just a little kid bragging. I know it’s circumstantial, but ...”

Jack said impatiently, “It’s hearsay. It’s jack shit.”

“Look, I’m not accusing her of anything. You asked what I found out.” I decided to wait until later to tell Jake about my conversation with Mel.

“You think Melissa put the snake in the mailbox? Do you think she also killed the vagrant in the barn? Why?”

“I’m not saying that. I don’t *want* to think Melissa is involved. I’m theorizing. Maybe the two things are not connected. Maybe the snake was only meant to scare. She doesn’t know I’ve got a bad heart. Those stories that she told last night were sure designed to scare. Everything that’s happened at that camp has been designed to scare people off.”

Jake was silent. He shook the ice in his whisky glass. It made a chilly angry sound. At last he spoke, his comment being, “How did you not get snake bit?”

“Luck. It was cold inside the metal box. I guess the snake was sluggish.”

No comment.

“I’m not sure why you’re pissed about this,” I said.

He seemed to choose his words. “I’m not.”

“No?” I couldn’t help the sarcastic note.

“Let me finish. I think you’re in over your head. And that creates a problem for both of us.”

“It doesn’t have to. I didn’t ask you to come up here. I’m not asking you to stay.”

“Yeah. Right. We both know I can’t just walk away.”

I kept my temper. Barely.

“Fine, Jake, what do you think I should do? Go home to LA and forget about the fact that two men have been murdered?”

His eyes narrowed.

"Is that what you would do?"

"You're not me."

"But that's what you think I should do?"

Some kind of internal struggle seemed to take place.

"Adrien, people get killed all the time. Since when is it your job to find out what happened to them?"

"I'm not usually suspected of murdering them."

"You have been as long as I've known you." The dry humor of that caught me off guard. Jake said, "Do you have a plan? Or do you just intend to hang out here until someone puts a slug in you?"

Now there was a happy, positive thought to focus my heart's energy on.

"Do you understand that you could be arrested?"

I stared down at my empty glass. "I haven't done anything."

"Would you grow up? For Chrissake! What's happening to you? You have a business to run. You have to earn a living, remember? You leave town without a word. You hide out here -- have you bothered to check in with Angus since you arrived? Have you bothered to find out if your shop is still standing? Have you even called your damn mother?"

"My *mother*?"

But Jake was on a roll. "You want my take? I don't know what you're doing up here, but it seems to me like you're hiding out from something."

"Well hell, Jake, you missed your calling. You should be a shrink not a detective."

His chair slammed down on all fours. "Someone put a snake in your mailbox because you are going around asking questions. Do you get that? There's a direct correlation."

"Yeah, I get that," I returned caustically. "I'm surprised you point it out though, since according to you I'm making mysteries out of molehills."

He stared at me. "Who *are* you? I feel like I don't know you."

"You *don't* know me," I bit out. "But then you don't know yourself."

His face became a mask. Hard bone and tight skin. No emotion, no thought -- except for the eyes behind the mask. They were bright with fury.

I waited for him to say the bitter words trembling on his tongue, the words that would kill this frail stunted thing linking us together. My heart pounded with dread, my hands felt cold and clammy. I had ended it. I'd ended it without thinking through whether I really wanted to end it.

I waited.

Jake said tersely, "I'm going to bed."

Chapter Nine

When I woke the next morning I could hear Jake snoring down the hall. Either that or he was taking a saw to the wall.

Stumbling into the bath, I relieved myself and paused at the apparition in the mirror. I'm a lumberjack and I'm okay? I looked like one of the legends I'd been reading about till three in the morning: the Blue Lake Monster or Sasquatch. Splashing stinging water on my face, I combed my wet hair back and shook out a pair of jeans.

In the kitchen I fried up bacon and put the coffee on.

Jake, lured by the smells -- or the crash of the cup I dropped -- wandered in wearing a pair of Levi's and nothing else, and dropped down at the table. He scratched his very flat, hard belly in a leisurely fashion, brooding. I put a cup of coffee in front of him. He leaned over the table, both hands clasping his coffee cup as though in prayer.

"Fried or scrambled?" I held up an egg.

"Scrambled."

I scrambled and said, "Listen, Jake. I thought over what you said last night. The fact is, you're right. I've decided to go back to LA."

Watching him out of the corner of my eye I saw his head jerk up like a Smokey the Bear scenting forest fire.

"I've got a few things to wind up and then I'm out of here."

A beat.

"You're serious?" he said finally.

"Yes."

Another beat. He drank some coffee, set the cup down and said more cheerfully, "Well hell, maybe I should head back today?"

"That's what I was thinking."

"You think that would be a good idea?"

"I do. I think you should start packing right after breakfast. You don't have to worry because I'll be out of here by tonight myself."

He smiled. "Hey, so if I start packing right away I could be on the road by lunch?"

"You won't have to miss another day's work."

I stopped because he was laughing.

"Man, you are something else," he said shaking his head.

"I don't follow?"

"Don't give me that little boy blue look," he said. "You're trying to get rid of me."

"No. No, I thought about what you said last night. Really."

"Shut up, Adrien," he said. "I did some thinking myself last night."

He didn't say anything for a moment, then he admitted, "I was in a pissier of a mood at dinner."

"That so?"

He met my eyes. Looked away. "It was my birthday yesterday. I have a hard time with birthdays."

This was the last thing I expected. I mean, obviously Jake had birthdays like everyone else, but I guess it underlined how little I knew about him. Not the most basic things. Not his blood type. Not his birth date.

"Why didn't you say something?" I didn't like the tone of my voice but I couldn't help it. Jake shrugged.

"How old are you?"

"The big 4-0. Forty." He grinned sheepishly.

Eight years older than me. I'd wondered about that. And a Taurus. The bull. The bullhead.

"Happy birthday," I said cordially and turned back to the stove.

The bacon popped and spat my way.

I heard a chair scrape. Jake came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me. Big powerful arms that would be all too easy to find comfort in, to start relying on. Sniffing my ear, he said, "You smell good. What is that?"

"Bacon grease."

He grunted.

I could feel his body all down the length of my own; feel the hard muscles in his thighs and arms, feel the heat of him through our clothes. He smelled good too, warm and sleepy and himself.

"How about I let you treat me to dinner tonight?" His breath was against my ear.

"I could treat you to lunch and you could be back in LA by nightfall."

“Nah,” said Jake. “Today we’re going to see what’s up with our friends at the Red Rover mining camp.”

* * * * *

It looked like a town meeting was in progress when we reached the hollow.

“You don’t think --?”

“I think,” Jake said, opening his car door, “you need to decide what you’re going to do about all this. Pronto.”

Swell. I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do about all this.

Kevin detached himself from the crowd gathered around the supply tent and strode across the grass to meet us.

“We found the entrance to the mine,” he called.

Together we walked across the clearing while Kevin explained that the mouth to the Red Rover mine had been discovered a mile from base camp.

Discussion raged as to whether base camp should be moved or not.

Everyone but Melissa seemed to be there, and everyone seemed to have an opinion. Shoup and Kevin were all for pulling up stakes. Marquez led the others in loud objection.

“Isn’t it up to Dr. Livingston anyway?” I suggested to Kevin under-voiced, while the opposing arguments were being made.

“Sure, if we could get hold of him.”

“What does that mean?” Jake questioned in his official voice.

Kevin shrugged. “He’s not at his hotel, and he was due back two nights ago.”

“He checked out?” I asked.

“That’s just it. According to the hotel, he never checked in.”

“Could the hotel have made a mistake?” I inquired out of bitter experience. The generator kicked on. I had to strain to hear Kevin over the rattle and hum of mechanical indigestion.

“Sure. That’s probably it, but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s not here. No one at the JC has heard from him. His wife hasn’t spoken to him in almost a week. She didn’t know he had left the site.”

Kevin was summoned away by Dr. Shoup, who looked none too thrilled to spot Jake and me in the crowd.

I said to Jake, “Modern marriage, huh?”

“What’s that?”

“The Livingstons.”

He made one of those sounds that indicated he wasn't really listening, so I wandered over to Dr. Marquez who seemed about as animated as I'd seen him.

"They don't know what they're asking," he said to me hotly. "All these file cabinets, all these boxes of artifacts, we can't just throw them in a truck!"

"What happens if you don't move the camp?"

"Nothing! It just means we have to walk further to and from our digging. It's an inconvenience, but not as much an inconvenience as picking up stakes and dragging everything down the road."

He studied me, a speculative gleam in his dark eyes. "You could refuse to let them move the campsite. It's your land."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. Can I see the mine?"

After a hesitation, he nodded. I caught Jake's eye and indicated where I was going. He nodded.

Marquez seemed disinclined to chat as we left the camp behind us and walked into the woods. I didn't take it personally; he was not a chatty guy.

"So what's this about Dr. Livingston disappearing?" I asked as we followed the ruts of the old stage road. Grass and wild flowers covered the faint indentations, but the track was still there, leading straight into history.

Marquez paused mid-step. "Disappearing? What are you talking about?"

"Kevin said nobody's heard from him since he left here. He said that according to the hotel Livingston never checked in."

"That's not true. He's called several times." Marquez stopped dead. His dark eyes blinked at me through the thick lenses. "The hotel lost track of his reservation. What's unusual about that?"

"Nothing, I guess." Marquez turned and led the way through the undergrowth. I said to his back, "So if Livingston's due back any minute why not wait and let him make the decision of whether to move camp?"

I didn't think I was going to get an answer, but then Marquez halted again, turning to face me. "Why? I'll tell you why. Lawrence -- Dr. Shoup -- isn't about to wait for Daniel to return. Maybe I'm talking out of turn, but it's no secret he wants the credit for this find. He's not going to want to share that. Not if he has a choice."

This was the longest speech I'd heard Marquez make. I wasn't quite sure I followed his reasoning, but he clearly believed what he was saying.

"Am I missing something? What does moving base camp have to do with who gets credit for finding an old mine?"

Nothing.

"A lost mine," Marquez corrected finally.

“Okay, a lost mine.”

Marquez took a deep breath and said, “It probably doesn’t make sense to you, but a find, a significant archeological find, can mean the difference -- academically speaking -- between life or death.”

I ducked a tree branch as it swung back behind Marquez. “How does the Red Rover mine constitute a significant archeological find?”

He was silent.

He was right, it didn’t make sense. “I can barely find a record that this mine existed. Why is its discovery significant?”

“It could be.”

“Why?” I persisted.

Marquez said reluctantly, “Because Royale was a rich man when he died -- and it didn’t come from some wedding dowry.”

I turned that notion over, held it up to the light. “You think the mine is still workable?”

“Probably not, but you never know.” He smiled at me more cheerfully. “Nice for you, eh?”

Thar’s gold in them hills!

I opened my mouth to pipe up with the first of my many doubts, but was distracted by Marquez who pointed to the hillside before us.

“There it is. That’s the mine entrance.”

Staring past Marquez I spotted the half-boarded opening of what appeared to be a cave in the hillside; chill air whispered out of its snaggle-toothed mouth. Saplings grew out of the hillside, concealing the timber frame of the mine. Easy to see how it had been missed for so long.

“Who found it?” I asked.

“Melissa. And Kevin.”

“Has anyone been inside?”

“Not yet. It may not be safe.” Marquez’s glasses glinted blindly in the sunlight. “The stairs down appear to be rotted.”

Leery, I walked up to the opening and peered inside through the slats. It was pitch black inside. I couldn’t see anything. The breath of the mineshaft was gelid and dank against my face. I ducked back out.

“Watch for snakes,” Marquez warned. “We found a rattler in camp a couple of days ago. They’re irritable this time of year. They’re shedding their skins.”

I turned to stare at him. “What happened to the snake?”

“Dr. Shoup killed it and buried it.”

A thought went through my head -- and kept on going. I just couldn't picture Indiana Bones tucking baby rattlesnakes in among the circular fliers of my mail.

And yet someone had.

"Are you sure this is the right mine?" I inquired as we started back to camp.

Mid-step Marquez paused. He gazed at me as though he suspected I was trying to be funny.

"It's the only mine," he said with finality.

* * * * *

We celebrated Jake's birthday dinner at La Chouette, a century-old, two-story Victorian with a wisteria-framed verandah and a Parisian-trained chef.

"French food?" Jake said doubtfully. "What is that? Sauces and snails?"

"I'm sure they have a recipe or two for red meat. According to the Auto Club it's the best place in town."

He mulled this over. "So long as I don't have to wear a tie," he conceded at last, grudgingly.

Neither of us wore ties. In fact we wore Levi's which were all we had, Jake complementing his with a tight black turtleneck that looked so sexy he could have modeled for the *Under Gear* catalog.

We kicked off the celebration with drinks in the cozy saloon-bar and then moved out onto the verandah for dinner. It was a lovely, mild evening; outside heaters worked overtime to keep it that way. Lost mines, rattlesnakes and dead bodies all seemed like something that happened to other people in distant galaxies.

"How's your book coming?" Jake inquired, making civilized conversation halfway through his *delice de veau*.

"It's coming," I said, reaching for the thirty-dollar bottle of Merlot. "What were all those phone calls you were making this afternoon?"

"Just checking on a couple of ideas."

"Like?"

He pushed his glass my way. I filled it and signaled the waiter for another bottle.

I expected Jake to brush me off, tell me not to worry my pretty little head, but he said finally, "The problem is we don't have an ID for your stinker in the barn. Most homicides are solved within forty-eight hours, because most of the time there's a known connection between the perp and vic." He explained, "Cops ask themselves what would someone have to gain by the vic's death? Who profits? But if we don't know the vic, it's hard to draw a connection."

"We know about Ted Harvey."

He sighed, but apparently decided to let it ride.

I swallowed a forkful of my *coq au vin*, and proposed, "Suppose Harvey's death has nothing to do with drug running?"

He mulled this over. "Your supposition is based on what?"

"On the fact that someone was searching Harvey's trailer."

"I'm not tracking."

"What would they be searching for?"

"Harvey," Jake said unhesitatingly. "Or money. What do you think they were searching for?"

"Jake, if we were dealing with drug runners don't you think their approach would be more direct? Do drug lords typically waste time playing with snakes and knocking people out? Wouldn't they just come in with automatic weapons and mow us down?"

"You've seen way too many Steven Seagal movies."

I choked on my wine. "Whose fault is that? Besides, I think handling a rattlesnake demands a certain amount of expertise. You don't just buy them at pet stores. You have to find one, first off."

"Maybe."

"What do we know about Harvey? He was a dooper, yes, but he was also a small-time crook not above trying his hand at fraud. Maybe he got ambitious."

"You think Harvey did the DB in the barn?"

I moved the candle aside to see his face better. "I don't know. But you heard Marnie Starr say Harvey was boasting about a big score. What does that sound like?"

"A drug deal."

"Forget about the pot for a minute," I said, nettled. "What *else* does it sound like?"

"What?"

I pushed my dish out of the way. "That's what we have to figure out."

Jake shook his head and carved another hunk off his veal.

"I've been thinking about that corpse in the barn," I said.

"I don't doubt it."

"It's a small town. How come nobody has claimed him?"

"Maybe he's not from around here."

"Then how did he get here? Where's his car? The sheriff must have checked against missing person reports."

"I'm sure you've got a theory."

"Maybe no one knows he's missing yet."

A busboy whisked away my plate. I leaned forward on my elbows. "Maybe no one knows he's missing because until today everyone thought they knew where he was," I offered.

Jake looked up then, his expression wry. "Dr. Livingston, I presume?"

"You think it's crazy?"

He floored me by saying, "No. The thought occurred to me today too. I guess we ought to have Billingsly get someone from the site to take a look at John Doe."

The waiter brought the dessert tray and Jake selected a white and dark chocolate mousse with raspberry sauce. I ordered the Hot Brandy Flip which turned out to be three parts brandy and one part flip. A couple of swigs and I started wondering if Jake's mouth would taste like dark chocolate or raspberry?

To distract myself from my incredible shrinking jeans, I questioned, "So what's the deal with turning forty?"

Jake shrugged.

"You thought you'd be a lieutenant by now?"

"Nah." He met my eyes briefly. "I just thought I'd be ... I don't know."

I made a wild guess. "Married?"

His eyes met mine. "Yeah, maybe. I guess I expected to have kids by now. My own family."

"Kids?" I echoed.

He said defensively, "I like kids. I'm good with kids."

"You are?"

"I've got nieces and nephews."

Jake's biological time clock was ticking. Who'd a thunk it? I sighed.

"Okay, I'll do it. I'll have your baby."

He stared at me, unamused.

"It's a joke," I explained. "The truth is, I can't have babies. My doctor told me."

"See, you say I don't communicate, but when I do"

Damn. A billy club right between the eyes. I blinked at him a couple of times. "Sorry," I said. "I guess I don't get it."

His eyes looked amber in the candlelight. "You don't care that you'll never have kids? Your family line ends with you?"

"Probably a wise decision, don't you think?" At his expression I admitted, "Oh, hell. I'm not the paternal kind. Kids make me nervous. Kids and small dogs."

Jake finished his wine. The delicate crystal stem looked effete in his large, tanned hand. It was a hand designed for beer bottles and boxing gloves.

“So why don’t you get married?”

He said finally, “I plan to.”

Razors to my wounded heart, as Will put it in *Titus*. I drained my brandy and inquired, “Anyone I know?”

He probably would not have answered anyway, but right then the waiter brought the bill. I reached for the leather book.

“Thanks for dinner,” Jake said.

“My pleasure,” says I.

* * * * *

We were passing the old movie revival house when I spotted the marquee.

“Hey, they’re playing *Captain Blood*,” I said. “We could catch the ten o’clock showing.”

Jake, who hadn’t spoken since we left the restaurant, said, “What’s *Captain Blood*? Tell me it’s not another pirate movie.”

“You’ll love it. It’s got Errol Flynn, your favorite not gay actor.”

“What is it with you and pirates?”

“I don’t know. My deep and abiding love of the ocean, I guess.”

“Oh, what the hell,” grumbled Jake and we pulled into the parking lot behind the theater, Jake no doubt hoping to prevent any further spilling of conversational guts.

The theater smelled of old popcorn. The red velvet furnishings were as tacky as the Coke-stained floor, but the seats were Jake-sized and comfortable, and it was all ours, except for the row of teens making out in the back.

For 119 minutes we lost ourselves in the black and white swashbuckling romance of 1935’s *Captain Blood*, starring Flynn and Olivia de Havilland who early on proclaims herself familiar with pirates and their “wicked ways: cruelle and eville ...” At which point Jake, his carcass arranged so as *not* to touch mine at any potentially interlocking body part, snorted and offered his popcorn.

* * * * *

It was a long drive home for a man who hadn’t slept in two nights. Luckily Jake wasn’t someone who required bright conversation to stay sharp. I woke with a crick in my neck as we were bouncing over the cattle guard on the road to the ranch.

“Sorry. Was I snoring?” Gingerly I swiveled my neck.

“It’s more of a droning.”

At least I wasn’t drooling. I straightened up in the cramped seat.

We pulled into the front yard. Jake parked and we got out into the frigid night air. The wind blowing off the distant mountains tasted of snow. The clouds had cleared and the sky was brilliant with stars. Porch light spilled out over the steps and front yard.

When it happened we were walking toward the house; I was slightly ahead of Jake who was jingling the car keys in his hand. Something zipped past my ear followed by a crack that echoed through the mountains.

Behind me Jake uttered an oath, and the next I knew I was hitting the ground. Hard. There's nothing like being tackled when you're not prepared. And so much for all those Tai Chi exercises and instructions about sliding your palms and bending your elbows. I slammed down, the wind knocked out of me, with Jake on top. A second rifle shot split the night. The sound seemed to ricochet around the deserted ranch yard, rolling on forever.

I was trying to work out what was happening when Jake raised himself off me and fired his 9mm over my head. This took out the cheerful welcoming porch light.

"Move," Jake yelled in my ear. I could only hear him muffledly, due to the fact that I was half-deaf from the blast of the automatic a couple of inches from my eardrum.

Jake rolled off me and I got to my feet, sort of, and did a four-limbed running scramble for the porch steps. Not more than several yards but it felt like the LA marathon -- or a gauntlet.

Every second I expected to feel bullets thud into my body, tearing muscle, bone, vital organs. There's nothing more frightening than being shot at -- except maybe having a knife held at your throat. The fact that I had now experienced both was not a good thing.

As I reached the porch there was another shot. Jake, right on my heels, made an inarticulate sound and then yelled, "Stay low."

Yeah, no kidding. I had my keys out, though I didn't remember fumbling for them. I knelt in front of the door, jamming one key after another in the damn lock until I found the right one.

More shots. One hit the porch post behind us. The other rang off one of the cowbells hanging from the homemade chimes in the pine.

"Any time," Jake remarked a little breathlessly.

I pushed the door open and he shoved me into the room and slammed the door behind us.

No more shots. Just the sound of our panting filling the long room, tree branches scratching against the outside walls, the house creaking.

"Why didn't you fire back?" I gasped between breaths.

"He's got a rifle, probably with a scope. I've got a handgun. He could be half a mile away." Jake scooted over toward the window, a bulky shadow in the unlit room.

"Can you see anything?"

"No."

We waited while the wind moaned down the chimney. Jake muttered, "If he's got any brains he's halfway back to town."

"Or back to camp."

"Good point."

He rose, keeping clear of the window and yanked shut the heavy drapes, cutting off any outside view of the room. I did the same on my side. When the room was secured Jake said, "Okay, turn on a lamp. But -- Adrien?"

"Yeah?" I paused, my hand on the switch.

"Don't freak. I've been hit."

"*What?*" I snapped on the light.

Jake was on his feet, and sure enough, his left sleeve was soaked with something darker than the black knit material. Something that glistened in the gentle lamplight. The blood trickled down his hand, which he was wiping on his jeans.

"It looks worse than it is."

"Sure, just a flesh wound," I said stupidly.

"It *is* just a flesh wound." He gave me a sharp look. "You're not going to pass out, are you?"

I shook my head.

"Because you're sheet-white."

"Just my girlish complexion." I got a grip on myself and said, "We've got to get you to a doctor."

"No. What kind of first aid kit do you have around here?"

"You're going to a hospital, Jake," I said. "I'm not in the mood to play doctor."

"For this scratch?" He set his gun on the table and began struggling with his shirt.

I tore my eyes away from the Beretta. "You're damn right! You could get blood poisoning or lead poisoning or lose too much blood."

There was such a lot of blood. Blood smeared his breast and spilled out the ugly plowed flesh of his upper arm, in a slow but steady trickle. A fat drop hit the floor and splattered. The sight of it oxidized my brain.

"You're going to the hospital *now*." I headed for the door, and Jake, half in and half out of his shirt, intercepted me.

"Hold on. Maybe you're right, but let's do this by the book. We've got to make sure he's gone."

"He's gone! He's not going to come after us. He knows you've got a gun. We've got a phone. He'll think we've called the sheriffs."

Why the hell *weren't* we calling the sheriffs?

"Let's do this by the book," Jake repeated. "We'll go for the Bronco, it's closer. Got your keys?"

I held my keys up. They were jingling. I lowered them.

Jake returned to the window. He parted the drapes a crack and stood motionless, holding his injured arm.

It felt like forever before he gave me a twisty smile and said, "Stand by for action."

I opened the door. Injured or not, Jake moved fast. He brushed by me, and was out the door first. If I had been on my own, nothing on Earth would have got me outside. I'd have stayed put and called for the cavalry. But no way was Jake going out there without me. I followed him out onto the porch.

Nothing moved in the yard. The wind rippled through the waves of grass and wildflowers beyond.

"Stay low, stick to cover," Jake instructed. "Give me the keys."

"You can't drive."

"I'm going first." As I opened my mouth to argue he plucked the keys out of my unresisting fingers and slipped out into the windswept darkness.

I followed Jake along the porch. He climbed over the rail and dropped down to the ground. I followed suit, hitting the hard-packed dirt with a thud that jarred my shins.

I imitated Jake's awkward running crouch to the old water trough. We were still a few feet from the Bronco. Jake motioned me to stay put.

Waiting, I broke out in cold sweat while he sprinted across the open space and ducked behind the Bronco tire.

Silence.

The wind sighed through the cotton willow leaves.

Unlocking the Bronco, Jake slipped inside. I heard the engine roar into life. I saw Jake's bulk slide past the wheel.

It was now or never. I'd have preferred never, but that wasn't an option. Hauling ass across the lot, I jumped in and slammed shut the door. My hands were shaking as I threw the gears into reverse and we shot back in a wide arc, just missing the tree with its swing gently swaying in the breeze.

"Easy, easy," cautioned Jake.

I cranked it into first and we tore out of the yard like the starting moments of NASCAR. The Bronco's tires burned up the dirt road; we rattled across the cattle guard, bouncing down hard on every rut and rivulet in the road as we raced for the main highway.

"Shit, I'm getting blood all over your upholstery."

"I don't give a fuck about the upholstery!"

"I know, baby. Keep it together."

Second Action Figure not included. When I thought I could match Jake's neutral tone, I said, "Do we call the sheriff when we get to town?"

"Not unless you want to spend the rest of the night answering questions. There's nothing Billingsly can do tonight. Tomorrow I'll have a look around. I think one of those bullets hit the porch."

He gasped in pain as we hit a pothole.

"Sorry. Are you sure you're not --"

"The bullet nicked the fleshy part of my forearm." He tried to examine himself in the darkness. "I'm not saying it doesn't hurt like hell."

"I am so goddamn sorry, Jake."

"Knock it off," he growled. "It's not your fault."

"It is. If I hadn't insisted --"

"Shut up."

I shut up. Just as well. I had to concentrate on my driving since I was doing seventy on a winding mountain road.

Thirty minutes before I had been so tired I didn't think I could stay awake long enough to walk to the bedroom. Now I was on an adrenaline rush that felt like it would carry me into next week.

The road snaked through the silent forest as I decelerated into each curve, accelerated out, the tires squealing now and then when I turned the wheel too tightly.

Jake said nothing, his hand clamped over his arm.

I slowed to a sedate sixty as we tore through town, stopping at the twenty-four hour "doctor in a box."

We were the only customers past midnight. Jake calmly explained to the nurse behind the counter what had happened while drops of his blood pooled slowly on the Formica. I hovered anxiously.

"Gunshot!" the nurse exclaimed. "We have to report gunshot wounds."

"Not a problem," Jake said. "We plan on reporting it." He pulled out his wallet, but it was his insurance card he was after, not his LAPD ID.

The nurse shepherded Jake off to room number nine, and I dropped down in an orange plastic chair in the empty waiting room, feeling like someone had yanked my plug. Like I couldn't have moved if my life had depended on it.

A few minutes later I saw a white-coated doctor go into the room and close the door.

* * * * *

How long did I sit there petrifying in the orange plastic chair? It began to seem like a very long time. Too long. Not only was I the only person in the waiting room, I seemed to be the only person in the clinic.

At last a door opened at the far end of the corridor.

A doctor I hadn't seen before was walking toward me. He was dressed in surgical scrubs and his face looked weary and grim. It seemed like he was walking in slow motion. My heart began to slug against my breastbone.

I stood up instinctively.

"I'm sorry," the surgeon said. "We did everything we could."

I couldn't believe it. I stood there my heart banging like a battering ram against a drawbridge. My body seemed to turn hot and cold by turns.

"That can't be right," I said stupidly.

"I'm sorry."

"But it was just a flesh wound."

"Guys like Jake always say it's a flesh wound."

"But --"

"He went into shock and we lost him. It happens."

I couldn't think of anything to say. I thought probably I was going into shock too. It all began to seem far away, the hospital corridor receding, the bright overhead lights dimming, swirling away ...

Chapter Ten

“Adrien.”

Someone was shaking my shoulder.

I opened my eyes. Jake loomed over me, frowning.

My heart kicked into overdrive.

I croaked out some sound and leaned forward, holding my sides to keep my heart from bursting through my rib cage like the parasite in *Alien*.

Jake demanded, “What’s the matter? What’s wrong?”

I shook my head, unable to speak.

He began feeling around my shirt pockets. Irritating. I sucked air into my lungs, pushed his hand away and sat up.

“Hey,” Jake said. “Are you okay? Adrien?”

The strange doctor, his bizarre comments -- of course it had been a dream.

“I’m okay,” I managed. My heart was staggering along, punch drunk and swinging wildly, but still in the fight.

“You don’t look okay.” He turned to the reception desk like he was going to summon help.

Under other circumstances the concern in his eyes would have cheered me no end. Now I snapped, “Leave it! I’m fine.”

Jake was alive. His arm was bandaged, a neat cuff of white around his muscular forearm. Otherwise he looked A-okay. I scrubbed my face with my hands, took another long cautious breath. Everything seemed fully operational, but the dream had been so real that I still felt shocked and disoriented. Grieved.

“Here.”

He reappeared at my side with a paper cup of water from the cooler.

I got my pills out, popped the cap with my thumb and tossed two back for safety's sake. I took the cup from Jake. The paper felt squishy, too flimsy to contain the weight of the water -- kind of how I felt. Like I could tear apart at the slightest pressure.

If something happens to him because of me ...

If something happens to him ...

"You're sure you're okay?" The hazel eyes were keen.

"Great," I said impatiently. "How's your arm?"

"Kinda stiff. Funny thing. Usually bullets bounce off me." He smiled a rare smile.

I smiled weakly in response.

In the end we checked into the Motel 6, neither of us up to fending off another firefight that night.

There's something safe and sane about the generic comforts of a budget motel chain, even when you wind up with the room by the ice machine. One room with one king-sized bed. The walls were decorated with insipid watercolors of villas in the south of France for travelers whose idea of a dream vacation spot was Branson, Missouri. All I cared about was the deadbolt and chain decorating the door.

I slid the deadbolt, hooked the chain, and peered out the peephole. Nary a gunman lurked in the parking lot.

"Cable," Jake approved, switching on the TV.

I headed for the john. I turned the sink taps on full and proceeded to lose what remained of my expensive dinner. When the dry heaves were over I splashed a couple of gallons of arctic water on my face and brushed my teeth with the toothbrush supplied at no extra charge by the front desk.

Stepping out of the bathroom I found find Jake comfortably sprawled across the bed, propped by pillows, remote control in hand. He was watching *The Hunted*.

"I'm not going to say I told you so," he remarked, as I tottered toward the bed.

"I appreciate that," I said. I lifted my side of the blankets. He was wearing black briefs. His body looked as hard and sculpted as one of those underwear mannequins in department store displays.

"If it's any comfort to you, I'd say we're on the right track. Tonight's ambush proves it."

Flopping back on the bed, I moaned with relief. Clean sheets -- short sheets -- but clean. Jake shoved one of the flat, spongy pillows my way.

"Next vacation I'm going to ... I don't know ... Brittany," I informed him. It sounded so removed from reality. White sandy beaches, castles, and tiny fishing villages. Crepes and cider and cathedrals. What could be safer than that? "I don't think anyone speaks English. And I don't think they have guns."

“That’s right,” approved Jake. “Why stop at pissing off local law enforcement when you can get the Justice Department involved?”

I balled the pillow behind my head. It was weird lying next to him, feeling the sheets heated by his body. He took up a lot of space. If I stretched out my leg I could run my frigid foot down his hairy calf. I studied his profile.

Considering how long I’d waited for such an opportunity, you’d have thought I’d jump the big man’s bones, but, sad truth, I couldn’t have got it up to save my life.

“TV bother you?”

I shook my head and closed my eyes lulled by the slashing of a thousand swords. One thing I didn’t fear was a ninja attack. Although the way things were going

Dozing, I worked Jake’s dour commentary on the movie into my nap. I was vaguely aware when he snapped out the bedside light. I opened my eyes. The TV screen flickered in the darkness with images of gore and, more frighteningly, Christopher Lambert’s slightly crossed gaze.

Jake reached out, patting my face as though he were clumsily brailling me. I mumbled drowsily, and felt him ruffle my hair.

“You’re not going to die in your sleep or anything, are you?”

I slurred, “You’ll be the first to know.”

He laughed and tugged me his way. Extraordinary. And me too exhausted to do more than wonder at the extraordinariness of it. We lay against each other, chest to chest, cock to cock. Yep, it felt pretty comfortable even with my face smooshed in his armpit.

“Now why the hell would he?” Jake commented, his voice rumbling in his chest. He was focused on the movie once more.

Why the hell indeed? I put my arm around him. No objection from Jake. His skin felt smooth, the blonde hair crackled against my skin. He smelled of antiseptic and Jake.

My eyelids felt weighted. Listening to the reassuring thud of his heart, I let my body go slack and fell asleep in the crook of Jake’s arm.

* * * * *

I woke with a boner the size of a small torpedo. For a while I lay there and watched Jake sleep in the early morning light.

In sleep his face appeared younger, the line of his mouth soft. I studied the white gauze bandage around his muscular forearm. I remembered him telling me big arms and shoulders were a help to a cop; a deterrent to punks and drunks who thought twice about taking on someone who was obviously in great shape, who worked out regularly.

Jake was in great shape, he worked out regularly, but one well-placed bullet last night would have ended his life. I guess until he was the one at risk I hadn’t taken the threat to us

too seriously. Not that I thought I was invulnerable; just the opposite. When you live with a potentially life-threatening condition you get used to the thought of dying. You accept it, you push on. The thing that scared me was the picture of dying slowly and painfully, the loss of independence and identity to illness.

Or so I had thought until last night. Now I realized that I was even more afraid of something happening to Jake. He seemed so tough, so capable, but he was human, he was vulnerable. He could be injured, he could die. Maybe it was naïve that this thought hadn't struck me until a bullet struck Jake, but there you have it. And all the jokes in the world about being bulletproof didn't help.

Frowning in his sleep, Jake burrowed his face more comfortably in the pillow. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and reassure myself that he was safe and alive. Instead I edged out of the bed and headed for the shower.

By the time I finished shaving, Jake was sprawled on his back, arms outstretched, taking up 80% of the king-sized bed, being a king-sized guy. I sat down on the edge of the mattress, rolling my socks up.

I started as a warm hand slid down my bare back.

"Morning," I said, turning to inspect Jake.

"Morning."

"How's your arm?"

"Sore." He smiled faintly, ran his hand down my arm. His fingers encircled my wrist, his thumb stroking my pulse point.

I warned myself not to get too worked up. "What did you do with your prescription? I'll get it filled for you."

He tugged my supporting arm and I let myself topple on top of him. He was still smiling, but his eyes were intent.

I tried to think of something clever to say.

His mouth touched mine and it went through my mind that it was his first man-to-man kiss. I seemed to experience that kiss through Jake's virgin senses: the queerness of a man's hard jaw, a man's bare lips, the texture of a man's smooth shaven cheek, so different from a woman's soft skin. The taste of a man's mouth.

It was a tentative kiss, a first kiss. Surprisingly soft, surprisingly sweet.

The second kiss was not tentative, and I did not experience it through Jake's senses because my own were swimming.

Deep and slow, searching His hand cradled the back of my head, drawing me closer, tasting me. I tasted him back. We breathed in gentle unison, filling each other's lungs with our quiet exhalations.

Coming up for air, I said, "*Man!*"

He brushed his knuckles against my cheek. "How long have you been up?"

"Now there's a leading question."

His mouth twitched, but he corrected, "Awake."

I squinted at the radio clock. "About forty-five minutes. The game's afoot, Watson."

"Oh, I'm Watson, am I?"

"Well ..." I was hard pressed to be my usual witty self because Jake was tracing my bottom lip with his thumb, something I found distracting. My mouth tingled. How crazy was that?

"How do you like being a detective now, Mr. Holmes?"

Regretfully I shook my head.

"Scared?"

"You got that straight."

"Nice to know I got something straight." He kissed me again as I started to laugh. My mouth being open, he slipped his tongue in. I heard myself make some soft acquiescent sound. He was exploring, still gentle but not tentative. Tasting, testing. His tongue touched mine. I touched back. One of those blood-hot, dark-as-night kisses that usually leads to hot-blooded, dark-of-night acts -- but did not this time.

Jake broke away and tumbled me off him, his hand grazing my ribs and bare back in final caress. I let the motion carry me, rolling off the bed onto my feet. Hunting for my shoes, I pretended not to watch as he strode off to the bathroom, his heavy cock bulging against the soft cotton of his briefs.

He locked the door behind him; maybe he thought I might attack him in the shower.

I sat down to make a couple of phone calls, starting with Mr. Gracen the family lawyer. I explained the situation at Spaniard's Hollow. Between the stunned silences, Mr. Gracen cleared his throat and murmured, "I see." When I had finished outlining my latest adventures he cleared his throat a final time and said, "Mr. English, I shall have to consult my -- ahem -- associates. I shall have to consult the -- ahem -- penal and the health-and-welfare codes."

He promised to get back to me. I figured he intended to change his phone number the minute we said goodbye.

I called Angus but there was no answer at the shop. Mid-morning on a weekday, this was not a good sign. I needed to return to LA; Jake was right about that.

I tried the shop again, gave it up and phoned Lisa.

My mother was home prepping for one of her endless charity do's.

"Darling, why haven't you answered my calls? I've left simply *dozens* of messages with Andrew."

"Angus?"

“Angus, that’s it. And Adrien, I know you don’t like me to say so, but I do believe that boy is taking drugs.”

I scowled at my reflection in the dark TV screen. “Lisa, I’m at the ranch.”

“What ranch, darling? Oh, d’you mean that health farm I told you about?”

“What health -- never mind. Lisa, I’m at Pine Shadow.”

She gasped. “*Why?* Why on earth would you want to go back to that dreadful place?”

“I’m writing. Lisa, I just wanted you to know --” I stopped. I wanted her to know where I was in case anything happened to me. After last night I knew that something *could* happen. But I could hardly tell her that; she already believed I was heading the Endangered Species list. I finished, “In case you need to get hold of me.”

“Darling, I do wish you wouldn’t stay there. It’s not very sanitary. And it’s so far from ... well, everywhere. What if something were to happen to you?”

“It’s all right. I’m not on my own.”

“Who’s with you?”

“A ... er ... friend.”

“What friend, Adrien?”

I glanced at the closed bathroom door. I could hear the shower running.

“Lisa --”

“What friend?” she persisted. And then, astonishingly, “Adrien, please tell me it’s not that *awful* policeman?”

“Where the hell would you --”

“That boy told me he was at your shop asking about you. That big gruff one who kept trying to have you thrown jail.” She was still indignant at her version of past events. “I hope you’re not staying with *him*, Adrien. He’s not at all our sort of person.”

I opened my mouth but she wasn’t letting up.

“And even if he were someone you could rely on, neither of you should stay there. The place is haunted.”

“*Haunted?*”

“Oh, you know that silly Indian legend about the monsters in the caves.”

“What monsters in which caves?”

Lisa laughed her silvery laugh. “Don’t tell me Mother Anna never told you? Now that I think of it, she probably made the whole thing up to frighten me. That dreadful old woman always *loathed* me.”

Jake came out of the bathroom, toweling his hair. Definitely distracting. I made myself focus.

“What legend, Lisa?”

"Oh, heavens, darling. Every time a cow gets mutilated or a hiker disappears people always claim it's UFOs or the Wolfen or whatever they called them."

"The Guardian?" Out of the corner of my eye I could see Jake shaking his head.

"Was that it?" she mused to herself.

"Did Granna tell you that story, Lisa?"

"It may have been your father. He did like to tease." Lisa sighed, a sad, little heartfelt sound.

"But someone told you, right? It's a real legend?"

"A *real* legend? What does that mean, darling? Once upon a time someone told me a story. Your dreadful grandmama, I believe. It doesn't make it *true*."

She has her moments, does me mum.

When I put the receiver down at last I said to Jake, "Melissa didn't make up the story about The Devouring. There really is such a legend."

Jake had already caught the gist of my phone conversation. He retrieved his gun from under the bed pillow -- something that gave me a moment's pause -- saying, "Ghosts did not open fire on us last night, Adrien."

"I know that, but it proves Melissa is telling the truth."

"Which means zipola. So what if she didn't make up the story about The Devouring? Say she does believe it. Say she believes it with all her heart and feels obliged to act it out."

"What about the dog?"

"What dog?"

"Kevin's dog. Marquez confirmed the story that the dog was torn to pieces."

"Apples and oranges. A dog is killed by coyotes. That has nothing to do with someone shooting at us. Or with murdering Livingston -- if he is -- was -- the stiff in the barn."

"It might."

Jake put his hands on his hips. "Are you going to sit there and tell me you believe Livingston was killed by ancient Indian spirits using rifles?"

"Of course not."

"Coyotes using rifles?"

"Come on, Jake."

"No, you come on, Adrien." He unlocked the chain and opened the hotel room door. "Come on," he repeated.

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to eat breakfast and then we're going to file a report with the sheriff."

* * * * *

Leaving Jake at Granny Parker's Pantry, I darted across the street to get my own prescription filled on the pretext of filling his. No harm in providing a little backup for the happy, positive thoughts, but the last thing I wanted was Jake thinking I was a liability.

A few minutes later, watching Jake perform his own version of *The Devouring* I said, "If someone is up to something at the site, Professor Shoup gets my vote."

"Why's that?"

I told him Mel's story. Jake listened and at last said, "Mel Davis. Why's that name familiar?"

"I doubt if he has a record."

Jake looked unconvinced. At last he said, "Davis. Wasn't he the guy you were shacked up with?"

When I was suspected of being a serial killer Jake had investigated my background with the attention usually reserved for Supreme Court nominees by opposing political parties.

I said, "How romantic you make that sound."

"You stayed friends."

"Sure. Why not?"

Jake went back to shoveling through his eggs and bacon. He said finally, "So what happened?"

"Mel didn't know. The university may have released Shoup or he may have left on his own."

"No. Between you and Davis."

As flattering as this unusual interest was, I didn't want to talk to Jake about Mel. And it's not like I had a real answer; I was still working out for myself why it hadn't worked. Mel's version was he hadn't been ready to make a commitment. I was pretty sure it had more to do with his fear that he might get saddled with an invalid one day. I set down my orange juice and said colorlessly, "We went in different directions, that's all."

Jake snorted. "Yeah, about four hundred miles."

* * * * *

When the feeding frenzy was over, we repaired to the Sheriff's substation where I let Jake do the jawing. My popularity rating had not exactly soared since the snake-o-gram, and we all politely pretended I was not present. Jake gave the cops a brief, accurate account of the shooting the night before, which he signed in triplicate.

I studied the wanted posters on the bulletin board above a bank of dented filing cabinets while Jake asked whether they'd had any luck identifying the DB in the County Morgue.

No. They had not.

Jake inquired whether they'd had anyone in from the archeologist's camp in Spaniard's Hollow to try and make an ID?

A ripple of unease ran through the assembly. Sheriff Billingsly bristled. "What are you getting at, Detective?"

"Just an idea," Jake said off-handedly.

It was one that had not occurred to anyone else, and they seemed disinclined to discuss it.

Then Jake asked about the bullet that had killed John Doe. I thought for sure they would show him the door but they did not. After a moment Billingsly tossed a file across the desk. Jake told me later the report read that John Doe had been killed by a .22 caliber hollow point. He had been dead at least ten days.

As we started for the glass doors, Jake asked in apparent afterthought, "Any word on Ted Harvey?"

No word on Harvey.

* * * * *

When we got back to the ranch Jake insisted on swabbing down the Bronco. I felt queasy watching the soapy water in the bucket turn pink, and as Jake seemed disinclined to discuss "the case," I retreated to the house. Firing up the laptop, I re-read my half-hearted efforts of the past few days.

It didn't help that my characters were as unlikable as the originals in *Titus Andronicus*. Even my protagonist Jason was beginning to bug me. I was trying to decide if I could possibly kill him off in the middle of the book when Jake came in to inform me he was going to hunt for shell casings.

"Don't trip over the Sheriff's Department," I warned him, dragging my attention from my magnum dopus. We'd already been informed the law would drop by later that day -- apparently when they were done dealing with the important crime.

"I won't." He hesitated. "Hey, don't go wandering off, okay?"

"Like where?"

"Like anywhere."

"Oh." I weighed this nugget. "You mean you think someone might try to..."

Duh.

"Roger, wilco," I said and sketched him a salute.

Jake shook his head like it was hopeless, and left me to the murderous intrigue of the Andronici family.

I typed recklessly for an hour, refueled on coffee, and hit the book again.

The sound of a truck in the front yard jolted me out of The Zone. Muttering rude things, I padded out onto the porch. Kevin was swinging down from his green truck. Briefly it went through my mind that if Kevin were a bad guy, now would be the time to make his move; after all, he had the sunny disposition and All-American good looks enjoyed by TV serial killers.

It also occurred to me that having a truck that could pass, from a distance, as a forest ranger's vehicle could be a handy way of getting around unseen at night.

"All hell's breaking loose," Kevin informed me as he reached the porch stairs. His youthful face appeared older and strained. "They found Dr. Livingston."

I didn't quite know what to say. Kevin was staring at me expectantly.

"They found his car parked in town. It's been sitting in the parking lot of some hotel. No one noticed."

Did that mean Livingston had been killed in town? Or had his killer driven the site supervisor's car into Basking and then hitched a ride back? Pretty damn risky. Not as risky as killing Livingston in town and then transporting his body back to the ranch, though.

Maybe the killer had had an accomplice?

If Livingston had been killed at the site and his car moved, there had to be a reason for it. The most likely reason I could think of was that it was important to someone that it appear Livingston had left on his trip as planned. Someone was buying time.

In the face of my silence Kevin burst out, "They've confiscated all our guns. Amy's .45, Livingston's Ruger and my rifle. They think one of *us* might have shot him."

"Why?"

Kevin shook his head. "I couldn't believe it at first, but now"

"Now what?"

"Well, somebody shot him. I guess -- I mean --" He gave me a funny look. "You didn't ask where they found him. You already know, don't you?" His tone was accusing.

I admitted awkwardly, "That Livingston's was the body we found in the barn? We sort of -- Jake sort of put two and two together."

"Why would someone hide him in *your* barn? That's what we're all asking ourselves."

Among other things, I bet.

I said, "There's a good chance he wouldn't have been found for a long time. It seems like Harvey didn't go in the barn much."

"Harvey has to be the one who killed him."

I didn't say anything, but I was thinking, *then who killed Harvey?* To give myself time I offered Kevin a chair and asked if he'd like a beer. He accepted the chair, declined the drink, and then changed his mind.

I brought him a beer and he took it from me, saying, "It doesn't make sense. None of this makes sense. And another thing: there were a couple of nights when my truck was taken without my knowing. Probably someone just borrowed it, but what if -- what if --?"

"For what reason?" I asked neutrally.

"None. There is none."

"Think about it. There has to be some reason. When was your truck taken?"

"I don't remember for sure. Last week. Maybe Thursday."

Thursday night was the night Harvey had been killed.

My expression must have been odd because Kevin rushed on, "Livingston was shot with a .22 hollow point. My rifle is loaded with .22 hollow point." He shook his head, looking sick and scared. "A long-rifle cartridge is a hunting round, you know? It's not like I'm the only guy around here with a .22 caliber. And that's not the only weird thing."

"Let me guess. More ghostly chanting from the caves last night?"

Kevin looked puzzled. "No, but some bastard dumped our tools in the lake. Every shovel, pick, ax, you name it. We've been fishing equipment out all morning. The water's like ice this time of year."

"Don't you keep watch at night?"

"Sure, but no one saw anything."

"A likely story. Who was the sentry last night?"

Kevin drank his beer and then said, "Melissa took first watch. A guy named Bob Grainger took the second." He put his head in his hands. "Adrien, what am I going to do?"

I was afraid he was going to cry. I shifted over next to him on the sofa and put my arm around his shoulders. It was the big brother brand of hug, mind you.

But then Kevin wrapped his arms around me, and his mood seemed less fraternal than mine.

"Er ... Kevin," I began, trying to pry him loose.

And then with the timing of a French farce, Jake opened the door. He stood stock-still. I could hear the clock ticking on the mantel. I hadn't heard him drive up. I hadn't heard the front door. And I hadn't, off the top of my head, anything to say.

Jake did though. Right on cue he drawled, "Meanwhile, back at the ranch ..."

Chapter Eleven

"Kevin was just leaving," I said, managing to detach myself from Kevin.

"Did he mistake you for the door?"

"It's not what you think," Kevin chimed in. Not really a helpful remark.

Jake said, still cool but suddenly dangerous, "How would you know what I think?"

Now that I had Kevin on his feet, I steered him toward the doorway. He and Jake sidled past each other like tomcats from rival gangs. Jake was wearing the sort of sneer that begs someone to take a swipe at it.

"Does that asshole bully you?" Kevin demanded as I slid him across the polished floor.

I laughed. "You're kidding, right?" Handing Kevin his jacket, I thrust him out onto the porch.

"We have to talk," he protested.

"Later." I closed the door in his face.

"Kevin's worried about being arrested," I informed Jake finding him in the kitchen chugalugging from a milk carton -- a habit I hate.

Jake slam-dunked the empty carton into the trash bin with what I'd call a controlled use of force.

I rattled on to fill the silence, "The body in our barn was Livingston's. The cops are checking everyone's guns at the site for a ballistics match. Livingston was shot with a .22 caliber, and Kevin owns a .22."

"Maybe Kevin shot him."

I shook my head.

"I see, Mr. Pinkerton. And you base this deduction on the fact the kid has a nice ass and a freckled nose?"

"I base it on the fact that I don't think he did it. What motive would he have?"

"Maybe he didn't like the guy. Maybe Livingston was failing him in class or kicking him off the dig. Maybe the good doctor found out the kid was buying and selling pot from Ted Harvey. Maybe the professor tried to put a move on the kid; sexual favors for GPA points. It wouldn't be the first time in the history of the world."

I felt my jaw drop. "Where are you getting this from?"

"Hey," said Jake, "I'm just throwing out possibilities. One thing about a homicide investigation: you can always find a motive. If the rest of the case fits -- opportunity, means - - go with it. The motive will show eventually."

I chewed this over. Jake was the expert here, but I didn't peg Kevin for a killer. Not that I was dumb enough to say so.

I shrugged. "Maybe. I've got an idea or two of my own."

"I knew that was coming."

"But I need your help."

Jake raised his eyes as though seeking divine intervention. "Hell, I live to serve," he assured me, closing the fridge door with a little bang.

No doubt he was waxing sarcastic, but two hours later there we were, Mr. Pinkerton and Inspector Bull hot on the trail. Or, to be precise, off the trail and on the cliff overlooking Spaniard's Hollow.

"That's about a two hundred foot drop," Jake was saying, evidently triangulating in his head like a well-trained Eagle Scout. His nose was pink with cold or allergies. He wiped it on his sleeve.

"It's pretty steep," I agreed, squinting down at a dizzying panorama of treetops, grass, and the tarn shining like a mirror in the late afternoon sun. "There must be a path."

Keeping hold of the branch of the scrub oak growing over the drop at a gravity-defying angle, I leaned further out. Pebbles shifted under my boots and bounced down the mountainside, clacking off boulders.

"Watch it, for Chrissake!" His fist fastened in my collar and hair, dragging me back. I landed sprawled in his lap -- which in other circumstances I might have relished.

"Easy! Take it easy." I freed myself, yanking my shirt collar back into place. "I know what I'm doing."

"My mistake, Sir Edmund Hilary." Jake took my place at the edge and cautiously peered down. "There's no path."

"Well maybe not a path as you and I would recognize the word."

The edge, apparently only held together by the tree roots and tiny wild flowers, began to crumble beneath Jake. I yelled a warning.

Jake did a kind of reverse salamander as I grabbed for his legs and hauled, lying all the way back in the grass and pine needles. His boot heel grazed my jaw as he kicked around trying to save himself, and I had to let go of his shins.

With amazing agility in one so large, Jake rolled over and snapped into a crouch like a kung fu fighter.

"This is a lousy idea!" he snarled. His face had a *mal-de-merish* tinge.

"Are you afraid of heights?"

"No!"

Uh huh.

I thought it over. "I can do it."

His mouth worked but nothing came out. "You are fucking *nuts*," he managed at last, glaring at me.

"I'm also about fifty pounds lighter than you."

"What does that have to do with it? You can't fly. Not to mention you've got a bad heart."

I wished he hadn't brought that up because, despite the stress and strain of the past week, I was feeling healthier and stronger than I had in years. Maybe it was all that fresh air and exercise. Or maybe I was kidding myself. Whatever, I didn't want Jake thinking I was less of a man than he was.

"Forget about my heart. We can tie the rope to that tree." I pointed to a sturdy looking pine. "If it comes down to it, you can pull me up a hell of a lot more easily than I can pull you up."

"No." He shook his head. "No way, Adrien. Absolutely not."

"I can do this, Jake. Don't -- I don't have trouble with normal physical exertion."

"Scaling cliffs is not normal physical exertion!"

"I'm not planning to climb up. I'll follow the trail to the bottom." The more he argued against it, the more important it was to me to do it. I urged, "Come *on*, Jake, we're going to lose the light."

He wasn't budging.

I cajoled, "I'm just going to walk down this trail. How much of a strain could that be? Look, you spent how the hell many hours hunting for tire tracks and spent bullets and shell casings? And we've got *nada* to show for it."

Temper turned his eyes almost yellow. "So we start exploring Indian caves? Adrien, no secret Indian sect is hunting us. No ghostly Kuksu shot at us last night."

"You can't say that these things are unconnected. Kevin said that only last night someone dumped all the shovels and tools at the site into the lake."

He raked a hand through his crisp hair in a barely restrained movement. "Listen to yourself."

"It would be nice if someone would! I'm not saying I expect to find a ghostly assassin lurking in the cave. Although, you know, no one has ever seen a subconscious yet scientists believe in the subconscious. No one has seen the id, but Freud and plenty of psychiatrists believe in the id. Why is it so hard --?"

"I don't believe in ghosts," Jake interrupted. "I don't believe in extraterrestrials. You can find people who do believe in these things, *you* probably believe in these things."

"Do you believe in God?"

"God is different."

"Why is God different? Nobody has ever seen Him. Her. It."

Jake yelled, "I'm not going to sit on a mountaintop arguing theology, psychology, what-the-hell-ology with you! I don't think we have probable cause to risk our necks exploring this cave."

"I disagree."

"Then you can risk *your* neck."

I shrugged and turned back to the cliff edge. Jake grabbed my arm.

"Now wait a goddamn minute." His fingers dug in.

"Ow ... what for?"

"You can't do this on your own!"

"Watch me." I tried to stare him down.

Jake held my gaze for a long moment and then his mouth twitched. He gave my arm a shake and then released me. "You're supposed to give up now."

"We're wasting daylight."

"Shit!" Swearing under his breath, he tossed me one end of the line we had lugged up the mountain, and fastened the other end around the stalwart-looking pine.

I knotted my end around my waist. Tested it. I might not have been a boy scout but I did know how to tie a decent knot.

"This is a bad idea," Jake growled.

"You said that."

His scowl was my parting gift as I stepped carefully over the edge.

The rope was only a precaution; I figured I could find a way down the slope finding footholds among the rocks, and hanging on to the branches and wayward roots of hardy shrubs. But the first thing I discovered was that the incline was sharper than it looked; more suitable for repelling than strolling. Leech-like I clung to the mountainside and considered Plan B.

Sweat prickled along my hairline, trickled between my shoulder blades and dried in the crisp forest air.

A rock gave beneath my boot heel and I dropped down. It was only a few inches, maybe a foot, but my heart didn't seem to travel with the rest of my body, and for a few seconds I had a scared taste of what it would feel like to really fall. The rope scraped painfully over my ribs, nipples, and caught under my underarms.

I kicked around till my foot found a place to lodge; my clawing fingers dug in, and I was steady once again with the entrance of the cave just below me.

I looked up. Jake was about fifty feet above, still lowering. I gave him the thumbs up. If he responded I couldn't tell. Untying the rope, I jumped down to the cave ledge, landing in an awkward crouch. Picking myself up, I stood, brushed my hands off on my Levi's.

There was a yellow jacket nest right outside the cave; bees buzzed around my head in angry bullets.

Ducking a couple of dive-bombers, I switched on my flashlight, turning toward the heart of darkness. A mere few footsteps in, I realized I needed a stronger flashlight.

The feeble beam played over the walls. Faintly, I could make out paintings, figures scrawled in rusty brown like dried blood: wavy lines and circles which could have signified spacemen as easily as anything else. Nothing conclusive, mind you, no stick figures with fangs.

I walked further into the cave. It tunneled deeply into the hillside. Instead of the expected shallow recess, I had found a real cavern.

Follow the bouncing ball. The white circle of the flashlight beam danced along. Several yards in, my flashlight picked out a small skeleton. I stopped, nudging it with my foot. Too big for a rabbit, too small for a dog. A fox?

"Feet start moving," I said under-breath and was startled when my whisper came back to me in an eerie echo.

I went on for what felt like a mile or two.

The cave was as chilly as a cellar, and it stank with the decay of animal nests and animal droppings. I began to wonder why it had been so important to me to make this trek. The darkness seemed to press in from all sides.

After another dozen yards I decided that I had gone far enough; that there was no need to track the cave all the way to the end. I was losing my nerve, no doubt about it, and I wasn't quite sure why. I tried to distract myself by analyzing it. It didn't help.

Though I've never been claustrophobic, I began to feel trapped. The darkness was heavy, smothering.

I told myself to get a grip.

One more reluctant footstep. Then another shuffle forward. And right as I decided to call it quits, psych or no psych, the flashlight ray lit on something that at first glance I took to

be a log. I stopped dead. It was not a log. It was a body, filthy, covered with yellow jackets and insects.

I recognized the bedraggled plaid shirt. That was all that was recognizable by now.

"Jesus."

"Jeeeeeesuuuuuuus," a whisper echoed.

I started backing up, stepped on something round and hard, and lost my balance. I hit the floor of the cave, and the light went out.

Feverishly I groped for the flashlight. My fingers closed on something round, not quite smooth, which crumbled in my hand. I knew what that had to be, and I swore, tossing it away.

More fumbling before I found the flashlight again. I shook it hard into life, my relief disproportionate to that watery light -- which picked out the pieces of a small animal skull.

Scrambling to my feet, I ran for the mouth of the cave.

My boots pounded the hard-packed dirt as I chased the little white moon of my flashlight beam.

It seemed to take a long time to find the entrance. Too long. I stopped and tried to calm myself as the darkness closed in. That's all it was: darkness. An absence of light. But it seemed to stand beside me like a hostile physical presence. Beside me and all around me, looming, menacing ...

There were no branch tunnels. There was only the one way; so I was either running toward the opening or I was running deeper into the cave.

My pulse skipped a beat. Had I got turned around somehow? Was I running deeper into the bowels of the mountain? Why wasn't it getting lighter?

I stood there, huffing and puffing, my heart shaking with fright.

No damn way, I argued against my rising panic. *No damn way did I lose my bearings so much that I ran further into this fucking cave.*

When I had my breath back, I resumed walking, but slowly, fighting the conviction that with each step I was moving further from safety. Commonsense told me to keep going, to trust my instincts.

The longest journey begins with the first step, so the philosophers say, and so I said to myself over and over. Me and the Energizer Bunny, I thought. We keep going and going and going ...

To my everlasting relief I saw that the blackness *was* thinning, giving way to milky gloom. I had been deceived by the simple fact that daylight was fading. It was dusk.

Reaching the cave entrance, I ducked back as something stung my hand. An irritable yellow jacket. I swore, sucked the back of my hand, and reconnoitered.

There had to be a trail leading up from the glen below. It would be too risky, not to mention difficult, to have lowered that dead weight over the cliffside. Working from this premise made it easier. The path was there; I just had to find it. I sat on my haunches, catching my breath and scanning the pine-studded mountainside. Finally, I spotted a dirt path trickling down through the trees.

“Jake!”

With gratifying promptness Jake leaned over the edge at my shout. I gestured that I was heading on down, not coming back up. He made some kind of complicated hand gestures and withdrew.

I started down the path, taking it as quickly as I could without breaking my neck. It took about twenty minutes. Loose rocks and pine needles slowed my progress, and required my full attention. If I’d been carrying a dead weight uphill it would have taken even longer.

At long last I found myself on terra firma. This was an improvement but not as much as I had hoped. The surrounding trees effectively blocked the remaining light. It was very quiet. Too quiet? There’s nothing like finding a decayed body to throw the old radar out of whack.

Reassuringly, a cricket chirped.

Shaking off the jitters, I got moving. I knew it would take Jake at least half an hour to get back to the ranch, grab one of the vehicles and drive around to pick me up. Half an hour in Creepsville would be plenty. I booked.

It grew darker. I trudged on. The birds in the trees stopped sympathizing and fell silent. I heard a crack behind me like a twig snapping under foot.

I stopped. Tried to figure out where the noise came from.

The sound came again, closer. And with it came a scent I can’t quite describe. A musky odor, heavy and oily, animal.

It was hard for me to pinpoint my location since I was not familiar with this part of the woods. I took a moment to locate Saddleback Mountain and make sure I was heading east, toward the archeologists’ camp.

I paced myself, not wanting to risk a sprain on the uneven track.

Whatever followed me, moving through the bushes, could be heard plainly now. And I knew that if it was an animal, a bear or a big cat, running was liable to trigger an attack. When was the last time anyone in these parts had been attacked by a bear or a mountain lion? It was possible, but not probable, right? Maybe it was something harmless. A deer or a stray cow. Or a really big rabbit.

Reason told me to walk; I picked up speed, breaking into a lope.

My muscles burned, sweat soaking my shirt. I started worrying about pushing myself too hard. Hard not to, after sixteen years of hearing Lisa warn me to be careful, take things slowly, remember that I wasn’t strong. Kind of a drag if the last words I heard on earth were Jake’s “I told you so.”

Surely the camp couldn't be much further? Ahead I spotted the markers that staked out the location of the Red Rover mine. Maybe another mile? I ran faster, listening to the scared but steady thump of blood in my ears.

Jogging around a bend, I nearly got creamed by Jake who was tearing up the road in the Bronco.

I jumped left; Jake swerved right and braked.

I rolled out of the bank of leaves, picked myself up and clambered into the Bronco.

"For Chrissake, Adrien!" He swiped off the reflective sunglasses.

"There's something out there!" I gasped, double-checking that I had locked the door. My heart was going like a trip-hammer. I shut up and listened to its beat.

Jake's face fell into hard dangerous lines. Pulling his gun out of his shoulder holster, he reached for the door handle.

I forgot about my heart and grabbed for him. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think is out there?"

"I don't know. A bear maybe?"

I must not have sounded convincing. "That's what I thought." He gave me a long, level look. "Wait here." Shaking my hand off, he climbed out.

He just didn't get it.

I climbed out too, none too happy about it, watching tensely as Jake strode back up the road. He looked ready for trouble, though he clearly believed I was a victim of my own imagination. I trailed behind, wanting to keep the Bronco in sprinting distance, but not wanting to lose sight of Jake.

While we waited my heart slowed back down to a regular tempo. I relaxed a bit. Even felt triumphant. I had done what I had set out to do and I was none the worse for it.

A few yards ahead of me Jake stood still. I stopped in my tracks. Nothing moved in the twilight. Not a twig stirred, not a blade of grass bent. Beyond the sound of the Bronco engine running quietly down the road, there was utter and unnerving silence.

I could hardly make out Jake in the gloaming.

"It's gone," I called.

He shook his head.

He was right. I could feel it too; something *was* there, beyond our line of vision. Waiting.

Fear zinged up and down my nervous system, shorting out commonsense. Last night I'd had reason to be terrified. Today ... my reaction was illogical. If a bear had tracked me from the cave it wouldn't be hiding in the bushes now. And if it wasn't a bear or another large carnivore, what was the problem?

"Jake --" I broke off as a long, blood-curdling howl broke the stillness.

It was not a coyote. I've heard enough coyotes to tell the difference. It sounded like ... well ... a wolf. Close by.

Jake brought his gun up into a firing stance, but the echo didn't seem to come from any one direction.

"Christ," he said just loudly enough for me to hear him.

Without conscious decision, I started back for the Bronco. I meant to walk but somehow I found myself going hell-bent-for-leather.

Jake was right behind me, slamming and locking his door a half-minute after me.

"I'm not imagining it," I said.

"No."

I stared at what I could see of his face in the gloom. "What the hell was that? There are no wolves around here."

He shook his head.

We sat for a few moments while the shadows deepened around us.

"What are we waiting for?"

"Damned if I know." His eyes continued to search the side of the road.

"Maybe it's a werewolf." He turned my way and I added, "I'm kidding."

"I hope so."

Without further comment he shifted into reverse, resting his arm on the back of my seat as he turned to guide our backwards retreat.

We reached a point in the road where there was space for Jake to turn the Bronco around, which he did with smooth efficiency.

"I found something in the cave," I said abruptly. Proof of how disturbed I was by whatever the hell we had just experienced, the corpse in the cave had momentarily slipped my mind. "Not what I expected. I found a body."

Jake spared me half a glance. "Not what you expected? What did you expect?" His dark brows drew together. "Was it...?"

I knew what -- and why -- he asked.

"I think so." Belatedly queasy, I said, "Animals have been at it."

* * * * *

When we reached the ranch, Jake called my grisly discovery in while I poured us each a drink. When he got off the phone I said, "How long before we have to start back for the cave?"

He took his glass. Knocked back a mouthful of whisky. "You don't need to go. I'll handle it."

“Stop treating me like --”

He interrupted, “Look, you don’t have to keep proving yourself to me, okay? I think you’re plenty tough in the ways that count.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. It was hard to hold his gaze. Suddenly he seemed to see way too much.

“From here on out this has to be handled by professionals. Understand?”

“I guess so.”

We drank in a silence that was unexpectedly companionable. Jake swished whisky through his teeth and swallowed, making a kind of “Ahhhh ...”

“The thing I don’t get is why would anyone kill Ted Harvey *and* Dr. Livingston? What could they possibly have in common?”

Jake sighed as if he’d known the peace and quiet was too good to last. “If it *is* Harvey,” he replied.

“It may not be Harvey, but it’s the guy I saw in the road the night I arrived here. I recognized his shirt.”

He seemed to consider. “Okay, well, maybe one of them was killed by mistake.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You thought they looked alike, right?”

“No. I knew Livingston wasn’t Harvey. Everyone *else* thought my description of Harvey fit Livingston. I didn’t.”

Jake shrugged as though this proved his point.

“These two have nothing in common. One is a respected academic. The other is ... kind of a low life.”

“They’ve got something in common. Presumably, the same person killed them. Presumably, that person had a motive.”

I swiveled my glass on the table, clockwise, counter-clockwise. “You think it’s Kevin.”

Jake shrugged. “Suppose Harvey and the kid had a business arrangement. Suppose Livingston found out about it. The kid kills the professor. He falls out with Harvey, and kills Harvey.”

Jake’s tour of duty as a cop tended to color his worldview as through a glass darkly.

I blinked at him. The alcohol was hitting me all at once. I felt almost woozy with fatigue. “Jake, there’s no reason to suspect Kevin more than anyone else.”

“How about a .22 caliber rifle?”

“We don’t even know if ballistics got a match.”

“I think they will get a match, Adrien.” His eyes met mine. “I know you like the kid, but there’s usually not a lot of mystery about these things. You gather the facts and you put them

together, and they usually add up to one person, even if there's not always enough evidence for a conviction."

I didn't get a chance to argue this because the sheriffs drove into the yard then, and Jake left to show them the cave. I listened to the truck engines dying into the night and I decided to grab a quick nap, sacking out on my bed for a couple of hours of deep dreamless sleep. When I woke I felt like the new and improved model.

I treated myself to a long soak in the claw-foot hot tub, doctored up my yellow jacket bite, which was now an unattractive red welt, pulled on a pair of sweats and a soft T-shirt, and started dinner.

While the pork chops broiled, I sat down at the table with a legal pad and tried to make sense of what Jake and I had learned so far.

The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, I told myself. But what was the truth?

Someone had killed two men who, on the surface, had nothing in common. So ... maybe they did have something in common? Or maybe killing one had been an accident? Or maybe the same person hadn't killed both men?

Someone (I refused to think *something*) was harassing the archeologists at Spaniard's Hollow. Why? Because someone held that ground to be sacred? Or because someone *wanted* to bring attention to the dig? I thought about what Marquez had said about Shoup wanting a "big discovery." That meant publicity, right? Mysterious goings-on at a site could generate a certain amount of publicity.

I had another whisky and considered the possibilities.

Someone was willing to kill me and/or Jake. Why? It's not like I was such a threat as an amateur sleuth. Was there another motive for wanting to get rid of me and/or Jake?

The snake incident had happened after I let it spill that Jake was a cop, so maybe his being a cop figured in?

Except, as Melissa pointed out, there were few secrets in a small town. Billingsly knew Jake was a cop. The word could have spread before I ever opened my big mouth. Marnie Starr knew Jake was a cop.

Which meant?

The snake could have been intended for me, but Jake was the one who had been shot. And now that I thought about it, one of the pictures I'd seen at Marnie's had been of Marnie holding a rifle like she meant business.

Love American Style? Maybe Harvey's death was unconnected to Livingston's after all? Or maybe Marnie knew Livingston too? I tapped the pen on the yellow pad studying the myriad random dots as though I could connect them in a meaningful pattern.

* * * * *

It was several hours before Jake returned, looking weary and grim.

"Was it Harvey?" I asked watching him scrub up at the sink.

"Yeah, they're ninety percent sure it is."

"Was he shot?"

"Yeah."

I trailed Jake to the front room, watching as he poured himself a stiff drink.

"Do you think it was the same weapon?"

"Adrien, get real." Jake downed his drink in a gulp and poured another.

I understood why he might be feeling tense. "I simply mean, was there anything to indicate it wasn't the same weapon?"

Jake drifted into the kitchen as he answered, "It's not like I had -- or wanted -- a chance to examine the wounds." He opened the oven broiler. "Mm. My favorite. Charcoal briquettes."

"They're a little dried out. I didn't know how long you'd be."

He gave me a deadpan look.

"Why don't you have a shower," I suggested. "Take it from me, you'll feel better. I'll fix you a plate." He handed his glass to me. "And another drink."

A shower and another drink put Jake in a more agreeable mood -- or maybe my having another drink made it seem so. Anyway, over his withered chops and mushy vegetables he described for me how they had climbed down to the cave and retrieved Harvey's body, carrying it down by stretcher which, at night, must have been pretty grim.

"Are they going to arrest Kevin?"

He didn't meet my eyes. "I'm not in their confidence."

"Would you arrest Kevin if this was your case?"

He shrugged. "There are a lot of factors involved in timing an arrest. At this point, I'd want a tighter case. Something to take to court."

"Do you think I'm still considered a suspect?"

He pushed his plate away. Now his eyes did meet mine. "You're suspect all right. I just don't know that it's murder they suspect you of."

I considered this.

"Jake, you know what happened in the woods today --"

"Here we go," he muttered. "*The Blair Witch Project*."

"Hey, you were there."

"These men were shot to death. The Guardian did not rip them to pieces like that dog -- not that the dog was ripped to pieces by supernatural beings. The Guardian is a legend. A

folk tale. It's not -- I admit there was something funky about the woods today, okay? But I'm not prepared to -- I mean --" He shook his head, denying any and all paranormal possibilities.

Not that I blamed him. For all that I prided myself on keeping an open mind, I wasn't ready to log into the Twilight Zone.

I redeemed myself from the pork chop fiasco by coming up with raspberry and dark chocolate ice cream for dessert. There's nothing like a pint of ice cream to soothe the savage beast. He had quite a sweet tooth for such a tough guy. And a head for drink, but the latter was typical of cops, according to him.

Catching my speculative gaze, his mouth twisted. "You've had too much to drink."

"I have?"

He nodded. "I can always tell. You start giving me these looks." He propped his chin on his hand and dropped his eyelids to half-mast, imitating me I suppose. I have to admit it was a pretty sappy expression.

"Come hither," he stated.

"Pardon?"

"That's your come hither look."

Reluctantly I laughed. "And this is my go to hell look."

He sighed, a regretful sound like blowing into a beer bottle. "You're probably the best looking guy I ever knew."

"A bottle of whisky helps."

"No seriously. You are. Your eyes and everything. Not my type, but beautiful."

"What is your type?"

"A girl."

"Bullshit."

His head jerked up and he gave me a bright hostile look.

"Bullshit," I said again. Maybe I *had* had too much to drink because I wasn't backing off although I saw it go through Jake's soggy brain to pop me one.

Instead he said clearly and bleakly, "I've got nothing to offer you, Adrien." These were not the opening remarks to a proposal.

"I don't recall asking." For good measure, I added, "Hell, you came after me, Jake. Every step of the way."

I don't know how we jumped from mild flirtation to open hostility. A few too many drinks, I guess. I figured Jake's next move would be to push away from the table and call for another early night. I didn't want him to walk away, but I knew I couldn't stand down. Not about this.

He eyeballed me for a long moment then he shrugged. The tension was gone, just like that. He refilled his glass, held it up briefly in a salute and knocked it back.

“So,” he said casually, “You want to fuck?”

Chapter Twelve

“Sure,” I said.

But I was less sure when we walked into my bedroom and undressed. For one thing, I knew sex wasn’t going to solve anything, but it might change things. For the worse.

As I watched Jake unbuckle his belt in a business-like fashion, I remembered that this was guy who liked to do it with whips and chains -- and strangers.

If we could have fallen on the kitchen table, swept away on a tide of passion ... but the lag time of walking to the bedroom, stripping, lying down on the bed ... it gave time to think. To reflect. To pause.

To remember the last time I’d had sex with a guy I didn’t know that well. Not exactly a joyride.

It was cold in the room. The light seemed too bright. I crawled onto the bed and wondered what the hell to do next. Had he ever done this without tying someone to the bed? Assuming he even did it in bed. My knowledge of the BDSM scene was sketchy at best -- which was kind of the way I wanted to keep it.

Jake knelt on the mattress and slipped his condom on with a snap like a detective donning latex gloves to examine a crime scene. Not a romantic noise.

“Have you got lube?” he asked.

“Uh ... no. I wasn’t planning ...”

He glanced up and smiled. The smile disarmed me. He looked a little self-conscious. There was a flush across his cheekbones and his eyes were very bright.

I smiled back and he leaned forward and kissed me. The kiss reassured. His mouth was warm and already tasted familiar.

“I like kissing you,” he said softly. “I didn’t think I would. But I do.”

“Good,” I said. “I like kissing you too.”

We kissed again. I tasted the licorice-bite of the whisky on his tongue.

He kissed harder and said against my mouth, "I want to fuck you so bad."

I nodded.

"Lie back."

I stretched out. I wasn't exactly sexually active these days but I wasn't a virgin either. I knew what to expect and whatever Jake's range of experience, I figured it would be okay. Probably not great for him, without all his little toys and costumes, and maybe not great for me either since he probably was not much into giving pleasure that didn't involve the release of some serious endorphins. I'd do my best to make sure he enjoyed himself; I wanted him to see that it could be good without the improper use of kitchen utensils.

He touched my face. "Okay?"

"Yeah. Of course." Maybe a little puzzled that he seemed unsure about it.

I ran a light hand over the hard planes of his chest. Flicked one flat brown nipple with my thumbnail. He swallowed hard and I smiled. Teased the other nipple into a hard point.

He sucked in a breath, let it out slowly.

I'd had enough to drink that I should have been incapable of rational thought, but for some damn reason, the wheels were still turning. Way too fast. Spinning, in fact. I felt detached, a little distant as he bent over me, big hands denting the mattress, the muscles on his arms standing out like ropes. His cock looked like a warhead.

I remembered the last time -- and flinched at the sudden stark vision of all that strength and frustration slamming into me. I stared up into his hard face. He was watching me closely. My stomach knotted with anxiety.

But that other time hadn't been Jake. That didn't have anything to do with ... us. I wanted Jake. I did want him. And if I let myself think about that other time I was giving the memory power. And I'd been waiting for this moment for way too long.

He said, "What if I --"

"Maybe if I --"

Suddenly there seemed to be knees and elbows everywhere.

"Ouch," Jake said.

"Sorry."

He bent forward at the same moment I raised my head, and we banged noses.

"What the hell?" His voice came out muffled behind his hand.

"Sorry."

"You've done this before, right?"

I don't know why that hit me as funny, but I started to laugh, and Jake pushed back and said exasperatedly, "What the hell is so funny?"

I shook my head.

"You sure know how to break the mood." However he didn't appear to be giving up. His mouth found mine and he kissed me again, insistently. I felt myself quieting, giving into the unexpected tenderness.

He drew back, licked my mouth, which was different, sort of playful. My lips parted, anticipating, but he softly bit the side of my neck -- then harder.

I bit back a yelp.

"Going to behave?" His eyes were amused.

I said in my best hypnotic-subject voice, "Yeees ... Maaaster."

He nuzzled the bite mark and I shivered.

There was a lot of strength and heat in the body poised over mine. He smelled good, like my almond soap, and he tasted good, and he felt very good, his hand slowly stroking my belly.

I said huskily, "I'm having trouble believing this is you."

He reached across to the nightstand with his free hand and picked up my sunscreen. "Nah," he said. "You knew this was going to happen. Like I did. You called it right. I came after you. Every step of the way."

He squirted a glob of sunscreen on his fingers and warmed it. I bent my knees, opening wide for him. Focused on relaxing my muscles. Jake's fingers slipped along my crack, slick and silky. I'd wondered what those long sensitive fingers would feel like and now one of them was pressing against my hole.

I bit my lip, trying to keep it quiet, trying not to scare him away.

He pushed in. Just a fingertip. "You're so tight," he murmured.

He pulled out. Dipped in, dipped out. Pushed further in. That friction felt so good. I moaned. I couldn't help it.

"Yeah," he said with slow satisfaction. "You need it bad. Worse than I do."

I gasped, "Is it a competition? What do I win?"

"Shhh. Turn off for a few seconds, Adrien."

"A few seconds? Is that all it's --" I caught my breath as his finger moved knowledgeably, unerringly.

"*There's* the off button," he murmured.

I pushed back hard on his hand. Not like I'd never felt this before, and yet somehow I'd never felt it quite so intensely. It was like he was reaching right into me, stretching me open, finding every little secret place, stroking, smoothing, soothing the naked underbelly of need. I wanted to talk myself away from feeling too much, too keenly, but all that came out was a something unnervingly like a whimper.

So much for my theory on his lack of expertise. It was going to be okay. I was going to be more than okay.

"Baby, that little sound you made ..." He stroked with two fingers. "What about this? Is this good too?"

Where had I got the idea he might not be experienced at this? He was in total control, perfectly gauging my responses and expertly bringing me to the edge with each electric -- and deliberate -- stroke across the gland.

No way was that beginner's luck.

The pressure built unbearably. My eyes flew open. "I-I think I'm going to come."

"You think?" His eyes were crinkled at the corner, like he was laughing inside.

"But ..." *It's way too soon.* I let the half-formed protest go. Too hard to form thoughts, let alone words. I strained against his hand, aching for more, trying to capture that maddening touch, draw it deeper into my body, ease that screaming tension.

"Yeah, that's right. I've got you. Just let go ..."

The wildness welled up inside me and began to pump hard, spilling through my body, sizzling along nerve endings, shooting out in creamy plumes. A half-sob of relief tore out of my throat.

"Whoa," Jake murmured eons later. He traced some design in the sticky wet splash on my abdomen. I opened my eyes, blinked at him. He was smiling, looking as relaxed as I felt.

I managed a grin. He leaned over me, kissed me again, said quietly, "Yeah, I like that."

I ran a hand over the top of his head, feeling the crisp texture of his cropped hair. It was the first time in our friendship I felt free to look my fill: the hard line of his cheek and jaw at odds with the sensual fullness of his mouth, the knowing gleam of his hazel eyes. My breathing had slowed back down, my heart raced happily along like the start of summer vacation. "You'll like the next bit even more."

He was still smiling. "There's no rush."

"Speak for yourself," I said. I was tired, but it was a good tired. Loose and light. I sat up, but he pushed me back gently.

"On your back. I want to watch your face." He met my eyes. "And you'll like the ... stimulation."

We realigned ourselves, the mattress squeaking noisily, and I raised my legs over Jake's shoulders, leaving myself exposed and vulnerable, but I wasn't worried now. His warm hands slid over my ass, spreading me wider. His cock rested against my wet slick hole. Holding my gaze, he pushed in. "Christ, that's sweet."

I gritted my jaw, forced my muscles to submit.

He paused. Even stretched and prepped, my body needed a chance to adjust; he was a big man.

"Say my name," he urged.

"Jake," I said huskily.

Something lit in his eyes. He shoved the rest of the way in. I gasped, sphincter muscle spasming around his stiffness.

"Christ, you feel good. Like a glove." He thrust against me, just once like he couldn't help himself.

I panted, writhed a little, still trying to accommodate him. Making room for him in my head and in my body.

His hands covered my chest, tugging the nipples. I've never particularly got off on having my breast touched, but this felt weirdly good. I rubbed against his palm. He lowered himself, kissed me, hotly, hungrily, pushing his tongue in. I moaned into his mouth, wanting more, needing more.

His mouth ground down on mine, his fingers pinched my nipples. So much sensation distracting me from the massive cock crammed in my ass.

"What are you feeling?" Jake's breath was warm against my face, my bruised lips tingled. "Tell me what it feels like with me inside you." His hips thrust against me again.

What did it feel like? My legs felt weak and trembly, my belly soft and liquid; my channel felt scraped and burned with satisfying friction. It felt like invasion -- the invasion that comes with a liberating army. I felt my face quiver with that mix of pain and pleasure, lifted my lashes. He was staring into my eyes.

Something snapped inside me, relented, freed itself. I began to move, contracting my muscles around him, trying to arch up against him. My fierce response triggered him. He made some exclamation, began to move, hips pounding against my ass, impaling me with each thrust. The relief was that I could be rough back; I could let go and take what I needed too.

The mattress springs squeaked, the wooden frame creaked. Jake's hands closed on my hips. He redirected his efforts, thrust harder, deeper and hit the spot that sent exquisite sensation crackling through me. I cried out. Jake was grunting fiercely in time to the bang of the headboard against the wall. I gripped hard and felt him stiffen.

"Oh, *baby*," he groaned. His body went rigid, his face twisting in distressed delight. I felt him come hard, hot seed shooting into me.

Startled, I realized that I was coming too. Twice in one evening. It had been a long time since that happened.

"Adrien" His voice shook. His arms slid under me, gathering me against him. I wrapped my arms around him, and we rocked together while our bodies played out, cocooned in warm and sticky closeness.

* * * * *

"Christ, you're limber."

I turned my head. Jake leaned on the doorframe of the long front room observing me going through my bi-monthly exercise routine.

“Tai Chi,” I informed him, palms resting on the floor. Last night he’d had plenty of opportunity to evaluate my limberness firsthand.

“Looks a lot like ballet.”

“I took ballet. This is Tai Chi.”

“You took ballet?” Jake sounded horrified. He stopped scratching his sun-browned belly. “Your mother is an example of why people should have to have a license to have kids.”

I straightened up. “Lay off my mother.”

“Ballet but not the Boy Scouts? It’s your mother’s fault you’re queer.”

I exhaled fast, serenity vanishing in a puff of morning breath.

“Listen, asshole -- and I use the term deliberately -- my mother is not the reason I’m queer. If she’d opted for the Boy Scouts or military school I’d just be a different kind of queer, okay? Secondly, I don’t know that ‘fault’ is the right word. This is how God made me. You are how God made you. All God’s chillun are how God made ’em. You think God made a mistake, take it up with Him.”

I scrubbed my face with my towel, threw it at Jake, and stalked off to the shower.

By the time I was bathed and groomed and feeling like my normal mild-mannered self, Jake had breakfast on the table. I don’t know if this was a peace-offering or he simply didn’t trust my cooking after the night before.

“French toast?” I said doubtfully.

“The breakfast of champions. You want jam or shall I melt brown sugar for syrup?”

That sounded fairly ghastly. I said, “Maybe just coffee?”

My much-maligned mater couldn’t have looked more disapproving. I got my coffee with a plate of French toast spread thickly with crab-apple jelly, and Jake sat down across from me, elbows propped on the table. He applied himself to his vittles as though someone were paying him a bonus to finish ahead of schedule.

I said, “I thought I’d do some research in town this morning.”

He nodded, not glancing up from his plate. “Watch your back.”

Now that struck me as a little too disinterested. I speculated on what Jake’s plans might be?

“Eat your breakfast,” he growled.

I washed the sweet toast down with a mouthful of hot coffee while I reconsidered. Maybe he was trying to ditch me, but these days the majority of detective work is done by computer. Let Jake try his way, and I’d try mine.

* * * * *

My first stop was the local newspaper. Back in the glory days, *The Basking Express* had been called *The Basking Gazette*. The first issue had been printed in 1887.

There was a newspaper morgue, but it only went back ten years. Everything earlier had been shipped to the library where it had been copied on microfilm.

That was the story at *The Basking Express* anyway. The library had a different story.

"We never got the funding," Miss Buttermit, the rhinestone librarian informed me.

"So nothing is on microfilm?"

"Oh, it's not so bad as that. We were able to copy the newspapers back to ... well, circa the 1920s."

"What happened to the newspapers before circa the 1920s?"

Miss Buttermit's pale eyes flickered behind the kitschy glasses. "They've been preserved. To an extent."

"To what extent?"

"To the extent that they are bound in hardcover in the basement."

I asked tentatively, "Would it be possible to --?"

"Only library personnel have access to the basement," she regretted firmly.

I thought this over.

"What was it you were looking for, Mr. English?"

That was the crux of it. I did not have a theory; I did not really even have a hypothesis. Basically I had a hunch.

Handing Miss B. some meaningless response, I headed for the computers, and spent the morning pouring over microfilmed copy of *The Basking Gazette*, getting the *Gazette's* spin on such world-shaping events as Vietnam, Gandhi's assassination, and the completion of the Cascade Tunnel.

I read my great grandfather's obituary, and the announcement of my grandmother's engagement to Thomas English. Rolls of 35mm film later I read my grandmother's obit.

Interesting but not germane. If my hunch was right, the answer I was seeking was buried in the distant past, buried deep with the crumbling foundations of the early days of Basking Township.

I went out for a cup of coffee and returned to the library.

"Who do I have to talk to about getting access to the volumes in the basement?" I asked Miss Buttermit.

"You would have to call the Head of Reference and make an appointment. We have to know *why* and to what purpose you wish to examine those old and fragile research materials." Her faded eyes blinked suspiciously at me from behind the cat's-eyes lens.

I said, "I'm a writer. I'm researching a book."

She repeated as if by rote, "If I knew exactly what you were looking for?"

A voice behind me exclaimed, "Adrien, what are you doing here?"

I turned at this interruption to find Kevin standing there looking surprised and delighted all out of proportion to the circumstances. He wasn't the only one; Miss Buttermit's expression was close to beaming.

"Hey, Mitty," Kevin greeted her.

"Why, Kevin!"

I answered Kevin's question, glad to see that he was still at large, at least for the moment. "I'm trying to get access to the old newspapers in the basement."

"No problem," said Kevin. Then he caught Miss Buttermit's eye and looked guilty. "Oh. *Is it a problem?*"

"Apparently."

"Now, Kevin," Miss Buttermit cautioned. "You know there are *channels*."

"Yeah, but Adrien is ..." Kevin seemed at a loss how to classify me. "How about this," he suggested suddenly, "I'll go downstairs with Adrien and take responsibility for the papers?"

I opened my mouth to say that wasn't necessary, but shut it again. Maybe it was necessary. I sure wasn't having any luck on my own. I watched Kevin work that hopeful puppy dog look for all it was worth.

"This is a *great* responsibility, Kevin," Miss Buttermit observed after a moment, but she took a key off her Mrs. Danvers-like key ring and handed it over.

I followed Kevin past the water coolers and restrooms down two flights of stairs. Kevin unlocked the basement, and we stepped into a room as crisp and smelly as the vegetable bin in a refrigerator. I waited till Kevin pulled the chain to turn on the ceiling bulb. Garish light bounced off faded green walls and a cement floor discolored by water stains.

"Holy --" I didn't finish the sentence. There were filing cabinets, a few broken shelves, a chair minus a caster, but mostly there were books. We were surrounded by boxes and boxes and boxes of books.

"I think the newspapers are over on those metal shelves."

I stepped over a box of books stamped "Discard," steadying myself with one hand on the metal shelf stacked with hardbound volumes. The shelf wobbled alarmingly. "I wouldn't want to be here in an earthquake," I remarked.

"Yeah, really. But nobody ever comes down here."

I opened the cover of the nearest book.

A glance verified that we were indeed looking at the earliest editions of *The Basking Gazette*.

"These aren't indexed," Kevin announced. "What are we looking for?"

"Any reference to the Red Rover Mine."

He looked up, interested. "Why's that?"

"It's just an idea." I studied him. I liked Kevin, but I respected Jake's opinion. Jake had a lot of experience when it came to bad guys. "Kevin, did Livingston call at all during the time he was supposed to be away from the dig?"

His jaw dropped. "He was *dead*," he reminded me.

"I realize, but what I mean is, did anyone call saying they were Livingston? Or did anyone at the site claim to have heard from Livingston?"

Kevin had a weird expression. "Yeah," he said slowly. "He did call in -- or at least we thought he did."

"Who took the calls?"

Kevin shook his head. "Amy? Marquez? I'm not sure. There were written messages a couple of times."

"Whose writing?"

"I'm not sure. No one questioned the notes." His eyebrows drew together. "Shoup seemed to be in contact with him. That's what we all thought anyway."

I tried another approach. "What's the deal with this mine? Why is everyone so interested in it?"

Kevin spluttered, "You're the one who wants to look through old newspapers. Don't you have a -- a --"

"Plan?"

"No. A -- a --" He gestured over his head.

"Theory?"

"Yeah, a theory. Do you honestly think one of us killed Livingston? *Why?* Because of some mine we couldn't even know we'd find?"

"Did anyone have any problem with Livingston? Anyone argue with him?"

"No. We all admired the man. We all *liked* him."

"Who didn't?"

"Nobody! He was ..." Kevin shook his head. "He wasn't the kind of person who gets murdered."

"What do you mean?"

"He was a ... a scholar and a gentleman. I guess that sounds corny. Archeology was his passion, but he loved teaching. He loved sharing his knowledge, and he made the past come alive. He made archeology a lot more than old bones and broken pottery."

I sat down in the broken chair, which tilted drunkenly, and began to thumb through the pages of the volume I held.

Kevin said suddenly, "Did anyone ever tell you that you sorta look like that old actor?"
"Old actor?"

"Well, I mean he wasn't *that* old. Not back then. He played the priest in that Hitchcock movie."

"I remind you of an old priest ..."

Kevin chortled. "You know who I mean. He was really good looking."

"For an old priest."

"Yeah." Still chuckling he pulled a volume off the shelf and sat down on a box across from me.

"Hey," he said after an hour of silent reading, "This is about the sinking of the Titanic. 'Mr. Hubert Duke, a resident of Basking, was aboard the doomed vessel,'" he read aloud. "Pretty cool."

"Chilling." I glanced up. "When was the Titanic? 1912? You've got to go back a couple of decades."

"Basking was founded in 1848."

"Royale came west in 1849. We're probably looking for something circa the 1850s. When did Royale die?"

"Beats me." Replacing one volume on the shelf, he pulled out another. "This could take forever," he muttered.

I was afraid he was right.

Another hour passed, and Miss Buttermilk brought us coffee in foam cups and a plate of Fig Newtons.

"What's this mysterious hold you have over Miss Buttermilk?" I asked Kevin, brushing crumbs off my hands.

"Hmm? Mitty? She's a sweetheart, isn't she? She's one of us."

"One of us?"

"Gay. Well, lesbian." He grinned at my expression. "She's not out or anything. People of her generation can't be."

"They can't?"

"Not in a small town."

I was still mulling over that as Kevin lowered his gaze to the page before him. "Listen to this, Adrienne. 'Abraham Royale dead at forty-five.'"

"What's the date?"

"September 11th 1860. Have you noticed, that there are editions missing?"

"I was hoping it only seemed that way because they're not indexed."

"No, look how the dates jump around in this volume. It looks like someone tore out an edition."

I examined the volume. Sure enough it appeared someone had taken a razorblade to several pages.

"Where else might there be copies of this paper? The local college?"

Kevin shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe not everything was saved. Maybe some copies were lost or destroyed. This stuff is pretty fragile."

Gently I turned another yellowed page. History was literally turning to dust beneath my fingertips.

"These pages were here. They existed and someone removed them. Why?"

"It could have happened years ago, Adrien."

I took the volume from Kevin and scanned it. In brief, Abraham Royale had died after sustaining a head injury in a fall down his grand staircase. There had been no witnesses to the accident, and Royale had never regained consciousness. He was survived only by his estranged wife, Alicia Royale, *née* Salt.

"Salt." I looked up. "Where have I heard that name before?"

Kevin, his mouth full of Fig Newtons, shook his head.

"Estranged wife? Weren't they divorced? She ran off with the blacksmith, didn't she?"

"Maybe he wouldn't give her a divorce," Kevin replied thickly. Jake was right, he did have freckles on his nose. Like gold dust. Kissable.

"Maybe. Maybe she pushed him. It sounds like he left a considerable fortune." I chewed my lip thoughtfully. "Salt! That's it. Barnabas Salt was the name of Royale's partner in the Red Rover mine. Alicia must have been his daughter." I considered this. "That must have made for some awkward moments around the sluice boxes."

"Salt was already dead by the time Royale married his daughter."

"How do you know?"

"It said so in the obit."

I continued reading. Kevin was correct. Salt had been killed a couple of years earlier in a shootout with Mexican bandits. "This would be interesting to read about," I said. "See if you can find the story of Salt's shootout with the *banditos*."

"It might be one of the missing editions."

"It might not be."

We searched through the remaining volumes to no avail.

"Here's something," Kevin said, breaking another long silence. "A trapper was found mutilated in Senex Valley. Where the hell's Senex Valley?"

"Hmm? Senex Valley is what they used to call Spaniard's Hollow and the area surrounding it."

"When did they change the name?"

I answered absently, "I'm not really sure. It seems like it followed Salt's gun battle with the bandits."

"Spaniards aren't Mexicans."

"When you figure both Mexico and California were still under Spanish rule as late as 1821, I think it's safe to assume some cultural overlay."

Silence broken only by the scrape of turning pages.

"This is pretty gruesome," Kevin commented, still glued to *The Gazette*.

I glanced at my watch. "Jesus! It's five o'clock!"

Kevin slapped shut the cover. "No wonder I'm starving." As I stood up he asked way too casually, "Can I buy you dinner?"

"No can do." I shoved the volume back on the shelf, held my hand out for Kevin's. "Besides, shouldn't you be getting back to camp?"

He handed me the tome he held. "I've been asked to take a leave of absence until I'm cleared." The green eyes could not meet mine.

"Cleared?"

"Of Livingston's murder." His smile was morose.

"Who's idea was that?"

"Dr. Shoup's. But even Dr. Marquez agreed." His gaze rose briefly to mine. "See, you're not the only one who thinks I'm capable of murder."

"Kev --"

"No, it's okay. I mean, why not me?"

"Because you didn't do it?"

"Do you believe that?"

Before I could answer, he turned away. Turning out the light, he locked the door to the basement. As we started up the stairs he said, "I hear it was your friend who discovered Harvey's body in that cave."

"Uh, right." I had to wonder at the number of fibs my former Boy Scout was telling these days. Not that I didn't appreciate his running interference for me. I could imagine what the sheriff would have said if I'd discovered *another* body.

Over his shoulder Kevin asked, "What was he doing up in those caves? Was he looking for Harvey?"

"No." I tried to get my mind (and gaze) off the trim butt in the tight jeans moving at eye level as we continued back up the stairs. "Aren't the sheriffs questioning everybody?" I inquired.

"That's what they say, but they're just waiting for the damn ballistics match so they can arrest me."

We kept coming back to this. "Why should they think you killed Livingston?"

"I wouldn't have. I had no reason. He was a great guy."

"Somebody didn't think so."

"Then it was somebody who didn't know him."

I wished I could see his face as I asked, "Are you sure Livingston didn't argue with anyone? Were there any problems between Livingston and Shoup?"

"No." He qualified, "Not that I know of."

"Do you know if Livingston ever met Ted Harvey?"

"I think he came around a couple of times when we first set up camp. There was never any confrontation."

Upstairs Kevin returned the key to the basement to Miss Buttermitt's stand-in. As we walked outside into the spring evening he put a hand on my arm.

"Adrien, about yesterday ..."

I laughed. "Forget it."

His fingers tightened. "I don't want to forget it." An internal struggle seemed to take place while the old-fashioned street lamps came on one by one around us. "It's not easy being gay in a town like Basking."

"It's not easy in a town like LA. It's not easy."

"I just wish --"

I almost said, "me too," which would have been a mistake, not least because it wasn't true. I had all the complications in my personal life I could handle.

Instead I gave his shoulder a pat, got in the Bronco and drove away leaving Kevin standing on the boardwalk in the shadow of a swinging sign in the shape of a boot.

* * * * *

I made a small detour on the drive home. Yesterday's exploration of the cave had not turned up exactly what I'd expected; that meant the proof I needed was still out there -- and I thought I had a pretty good idea where.

An hour and a half later of prowling hilltops, crawling through bushes, and sliding down hillsides, I wasn't quite so sure.

I was rethinking my brilliant plan as I rested on a flat-top rock formation overlooking the archeologist's strangely silent camp when I spotted some peculiar dents in the worn surface. The pockets in the granite outcropping meant that the flat-surfaced rock would have

functioned like a *metate* or quern. For decades Indian women would have sat here chatting and grinding acorn for bread by using *manos* or grinding stones.

I knew I was on the right trail -- literally.

In fact

I shifted my weary arse, hunting down among the weeds and supporting boulders, and sure enough, before the sunset, I had my proof in the form of the latest Japanese technology.

Not that it gave me any pleasure.

* * * * *

It was nearly dark by the time I reached the ranch. Dusk's muted heather shadows stretched long across the mountains. Frederick Remington might have painted the distant sunset slashing the sky with Confederate blue and firebrand pink as I drove through the Pine Shadow gates. My headlamps picked out Jake striding purposefully across the yard, keys in hand. I parked and got out.

"Where the hell have you been?" From the drill sergeant bark, you'd have thought I'd overstayed my 24-hour pass. Then he added, "I was coming to look for you."

Well, that sounded kind of nice. It would have been nicer to have been kissed hello, but Jake stayed at arm's length

"I lost track of time." I hedged, still not having made up my mind what to do with the item in my jacket pocket.

"Doing what?"

"Looking through old newspapers." I debated whether to mention Kevin's presence, and decided that on this point honesty *was* the best policy. "I ran into Kevin."

"Coincidence?" asked Jake. "I think not."

"I think so."

He followed me up the porch steps and into the house. I peeled off my jacket watching Jake shrug out of his own, wincing. I queried, "How's the arm?"

"Not so stiff." He lifted his shoulder like he was winding up to pitch a hardball. "Itches like hell. I think that's a good sign though."

"Not if it's infected. So what did you do today?"

"Made a few calls," he said vaguely.

That sort of clinched the quandary of fair exchange of information. "Oh yeah? What's to eat? All I've had since breakfast is coffee and cookies."

I homed in on the kitchen where I discovered grilled steaks cooling on the stovetop and baked potatoes with all the trimmings on a couple of plates.

"Wow. A man could get used to this," I remarked.

No comment from Jake.

While we ate I filled him in on what I had learned -- most of what I had learned, that is. He listened impassively as though he sat on the opposite side of an interrogation table.

"Let me see if I understand you. You think something that happened over a hundred years ago connects the deaths of Harvey and Livingston?"

"I think it's possible."

"Uh huh." He chewed ferociously, swallowed and inquired, "What about the werewolf?"

"Laugh all you want, but this is one weird place. Do you know that over the past hundred-plus years over fifteen mutilated bodies have been found in the woods?"

"Do you know how many mutilated bodies have turned up in the Angeles Crest Forest over the past hundred years? Plenty."

"That's not a reasonable comparison, Jake. This is a small, relatively secluded area." I laid my fork and knife down. "They used to call this place Senex Valley. Senex is Latin for old. The Old Ones. The First Ones ... get it?"

Jake rubbed his forehead as though he felt a headache coming on.

"Maybe that's beside the point," I said hastily.

"Maybe?"

"But something about this Red Rover mine that isn't quite kosher."

"Like?"

"For starters, Royale and his partner Barnabas Salt abandoned the Red Rover. They thought it was worthless and they moved on. Then for some reason they came back to the mine and hit a vein."

"So?"

"That's not typical. It's practically unheard of."

"But it's possible, right?"

"It's not *impossible*, I'll give you that. But here's another bizarre thing. After Royale's death, they tried mining the Red Rover. The mine was played out."

"They who?" inquired Jake, getting down to brass tacks.

"I guess the ex-wife hired ..."

"But you don't know."

"I don't know *who*, I do know efforts to mine the Red Rover after Royale's death failed. That's why the mine was abandoned and then finally lost track of."

"This means something to you?" He absently stroked the gold stubble on his lean jaw, as though just noticing he needed a shave. I remembered the tickle of those whiskers against my bare back. It took effort to redirect my thoughts.

"Why all this interest in a mine that played out so long ago?"

Jake pushed his plate aside and tilted his chair back, linking his hands behind his head.

"Like your pal Shoup says, it's historically interesting. You think only things of monetary value are of historical interest?"

"Of course not, but according to Marquez, Shoup's interested in the mine because it would be a significant find. I just don't see how a played-out mine could be a significant find."

"Hard to say, what with funding and grants and nutty professors in general."

"You don't think it's interesting?"

"I guess it's interesting." He shrugged.

By now we had finished eating. Stars twinkled through the windows. I rose, started piling dishes in the sink, wondering about our sleeping arrangements. Had last night been a once-off or had we been setting a precedent? Nothing in Jake's behavior or attitude had changed, either for better or worse.

He sat unmoving as I made my trips to and from the table. Other than a floorboard that squeaked every time I crossed it, the kitchen seemed uncannily quiet.

The four feet of his chair hit the floor with a bang and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

He raised his eyebrows. "What's with you?"

I shook my head sheepishly.

Jake grinned and shoved away from the table. "Let's leave the dishes," he suggested.

* * * * *

Sober it was different: slower, sweeter. Jake explored my body with a thoroughness that would lead one to think he was investigating for clues. Or perhaps he was doing a comparison check, inspecting what wasn't there, inspecting what was.

He tried a couple of things, watching my face to see how I took it -- and I took it like a man, encouraging him as best I could without making him self-conscious.

"This is enough for you? Just ... this?"

"Enough ...?" I gasped, humping against his hand. He had wonderful hands, long strong fingers and a delicate touch despite the calluses. "I'm not saying I wouldn't like ... oh, *God* that's nice ..."

I closed my eyes, savoring the sustained caress, then opened them as his words sank in. "Is it not enough for you?" I wasn't sure what we were talking about. The sex itself or the fact that for him sex was all it was? Did he want to put a cock ring on me or did he fear I wanted to put a wedding ring on him?

"I didn't say that." Then, strangely, he said, "I heard you with Green that night."

It took effort to concentrate on his words rather than his touch. I didn't understand what he meant at first, and then I did. I blinked up at him, not quite knowing what to say. The night he referred to, the night I had discovered who had killed two of my closest friends -- and why -- was something I still couldn't bring myself to think about. At first I'd been too shocked and sickened. And now ... it felt safer not to look back.

"He hurt you."

"I don't remember. Maybe."

"You let it happen."

Again I didn't have an answer. It weirded me out to think of Jake listening to Bruce fuck me, but that was hardly the weirdest part of that particular evening.

And that evening was hardly the weirdest part of my relationship with Bruce.

"You let it happen, but you didn't enjoy it."

"Well, no." I asked carefully, "Did you enjoy it? Hearing us, I mean."

"No." All at once his face looked older: tight, bleak. "You were afraid. And I was afraid. I thought you were going to die."

I had thought I was going to die that night too. It was strange looking back from the safety of Jake's arms. Bruce, who said he loved me, had fucked me over in every possible sense. And Jake, who only spoke of fucking, never caring, had already proved to be an unselfish lover.

I said -- and I thought I was kidding, but somehow it didn't come out like that, "I knew you'd save me."

The pain in his face closed down my throat. He seemed about to add something, but changed his mind. Instead his mouth found mine with sudden hunger.

My turn to stroke and soothe.

A couple of things were already clear to me: he needed to be in complete control all the time -- so much for the theory about sexual role playing being inverse to real life dynamics -- and he was a much more generous lover than I had imagined.

In fact, I couldn't ever remember being with anyone who concentrated so hard on what I was feeling and experiencing.

It filled me with tenderness and the desire to lavish some of the same attention on him.

"Roll over."

"Me?" The surprise in his voice made me grin.

"No, the werewolf under the bed. Yeah, you."

He heaved himself onto his back, watched my face warily as I bent over him. Maybe he ordinarily had to command someone to do this.

I ran my fingers through the springy gold curls of his crotch. Like the curls on a baby's head.

“What are you smiling at?” he growled.

“Just taking a moment to appreciate what you’ve got here.”

He grunted -- but the sound changed abruptly -- went soft and startled -- as I took him into my mouth. His whole body tightened. I ghosted down the fat length of his cock, buried my nose in that soft nest, breathed him in. His hips shook beneath me.

He smelled wonderful. Tasted wonderful too. Strong but clean. Like freshly mown hay or new leather.

I sucked the head of his cock, a wet hot deep kiss, drawing him in. His hips rocked up and for a moment the hard planes of his stomach pillowed my face. I inhaled his warmth, worked him. Traced his slit with my tongue, pressed.

Jake’s head tossed on the pillow, his hands tangled in my hair, tugged me closer.

“Adrien ...” The abject pleasure in that single word made it easy to ignore my own increasing discomfort. This was all about Jake.

I took my time. He was thrusting down my throat, his lean body arching, hips pumping. I sucked him hard. Then nibbled soft and sweet. Then increased suction. Then slow and easy.

“Don’t stop,” he got out, his voice harsh and unsteady.

I smiled around that rigid thickness, reached beneath and gently fingered his balls.

Jake’s head fell back on the pillow and he groaned. He began to come, shivering like he was in high fever, shooting streams like silly string, enjoying the little party I’d thrown him.

Beautiful to watch.

After a time he quit blinking at the ceiling and turned his head my way. Gave a funny sort of half-smile.

* * * * *

I woke several hours later to a room illuminated by moonlight. For a moment or two I lay there listening.

The silence had that freshly broken sharpness.

I rose on an elbow.

Had I really heard that distant howling or was that eerie recollection part of my uneasy dreams? The ringing emptiness in my ears now was so much dead air.

Jake made a sound between a snore and a grunt, and rolled onto his side. A werewolf would have to be hopping up and down on the foot of the bed for him to notice.

I pulled the blankets up, rested my head against Jake’s back. His bare skin felt warm and smooth against my face. Comforting. I kissed him beneath his shoulder blade.

Sex wasn't everything. There were other things: someone to see you through sickness and in health, someone to wake up with on Christmas morning, someone to bail you out of jail. Companionship counted. Sex wasn't everything -- but it was a lot.

Jake began to snore.

Chapter Thirteen

“Marnie Starr has an alibi for the night Ted Harvey was killed,” Jake informed me over eggs and bacon the next morning.

“Oh? Oh.”

Correctly interpreting my lack of enthusiasm, Jake said, “I know you think Harvey and Livingston’s deaths are related, and I know you have your heart set on lost gold mines and ghostly assassins, but it never hurts to answer the easy questions first.”

I ignored the jibe. “So what’s her alibi?”

“Ms. Starr was playing bingo. At least ten people will testify she was at the Moose Club all night eventually walking away with a lovely Elmer Fudd Chia Pet.” Jake splashed more coffee into my cup and then his own. “Your boy Kevin does not have an alibi.”

I wondered why he had not shared this information last night? Didn’t want to ruin the mood? “Does everyone else at the camp have an alibi?”

“Shoup and Marquez were going over grid maps or something.”

“At midnight?”

“That’s their story. There’s no reason to doubt it. Pocahontas was staying with friends in Sonora. O’Reilly and what’s-her-name-Bernice were sleeping in camp -- not together, so it doesn’t count toward an alibi. The girl, Amy, took the first watch, and allegedly hit the sack afterwards.”

“So no one has an alibi except Marquez and Shoup. So that really doesn’t mean anything.”

“It’s not conclusive.”

“What about the autopsy results? Lab tests? Ballistics?”

“As of yesterday, Billingsly hadn’t got the ballistics report. The autopsy confirmed Harvey was the corpse in the cave; that he was most likely killed Thursday night or early

Friday morning; and tentatively, that he was killed by the same weapon that killed Livingston, most likely a .22 hollow-point.”

“Why is this taking so long?”

Jake raised his eyebrows. “It’s not taking ‘so long.’ This isn’t TV with a fifteen minute crime lab turnaround. Lab results take a day or two. Figure in that this is a small town and a not particularly ... urgent ... case.”

“Have they confirmed that Kevin’s rifle was used?”

Jake’s honey-colored eyes met mine. “They haven’t confirmed it, but the kid’s rifle had been fired recently and the load is right. It was his gun all right.”

“He keeps that rifle in a gun rack in his truck. Anyone could have borrowed it.”

“You’re assuming premeditation?”

“Yes, definitely. First Livingston is murdered and hidden in the barn. Why?” I answered my own question. “Because someone wanted to hide the fact that he was dead. His car was parked in town so that everyone would think he’d gone to San Francisco as planned. And if his body *were* to be discovered, it would implicate Harvey.”

“Harvey *is* implicated. His being dead cinches that.” Jake swallowed a mouthful of coffee. “Do you have any idea of the street value of an acre of marijuana?”

I applied the little gray cells. “You’d have to be able to process and market it. It would depend on the grade ... and the particular street.”

“Taking all that into consideration, do you have a rough notion of what that cash crop was worth?”

“No.”

Jake’s mouth quirked. “At last estimate a pound of cannabis was valued between \$700-900. An acre could bring in anywhere from \$50,000 to a cool million. Now, do you still think that pot was not a motive?”

That shook my certainty, I had to admit. “It’s not the only possible motive, surely?”

“No, but it’s the most likely.” He reached into the pocket of his flannel shirt and set a misshapen bit of metal next to the peppershaker. “I dug this out of your front porch post. It’s a 30.06.”

As I suspected, the reason he had been so accommodating about my library research was he intended to do the real sleuthing while my back was turned. “So someone else shot at us?”

“Or the same perp used a different gun.”

“Because they couldn’t get access to Kevin’s?”

Jake sighed.

“You tell me what you think happened,” I invited cordially, picking up my coffee cup.

“I don’t know what happened. I can guess. Harvey arranged for a buyer. Someone with connections, maybe a student at a local college. Livingston found out about it, made threats.

This unknown person eliminates Livingston. Maybe he tries to frame Harvey for it by planting Livingston in the barn here. It's clear Harvey and his confederate had some kind of falling out because Harvey was iced five days later."

It was a neat fit. Logical. Absently I scratched the yellow jacket bite on my hand. Looking down at the red welt a tiny memory flickered in the back of my mind.

Jake's next words derailed my train of thought. "From everything I've been able to find out, Livingston sounds like an up and up guy. Strict but fair; I heard that about three times. The worst anyone could say was he lacked imagination."

"Who said that?"

"Dr. Shoup."

"Did you do any background checking on Shoup, while you were at it?"

Jake studied my face as though he couldn't read my tone. "Yeah, I did some checking. Apparently there was some problem between him and the British Museum. A question of selling antiquities."

I opened my mouth but Jake said flatly, "Nothing was proved, but he was asked to resign, and he did. His problems at Berkley have to do with a salary dispute. From what I gathered, he felt he was worth a lot more than he was being paid."

"*Selling antiquities?* And you don't think there's a tie in?"

"What antiquities were sold or even stolen here?"

"Jake, the man was suspected of --"

He cut me off. "Baby, you were suspected of murder once, remember? Were you guilty?"

"No, but don't you think it's too much coincidence --"

"Don't you think the sheriffs think it's too much coincidence that now you're involved in a second homicide case?"

I didn't have an answer. At last I said, "What about Marquez?"

"There's nothing on Marquez. He had a parking ticket about ten years ago." Jake said, more kindly than I was used to from him, "Let's go home, Adrien. I'm running out of vacation and you're not going to enjoy the next few days."

I stared at him: the pale, sleep-mussed hair, the leonine eyes that could unexpectedly warm with amusement, the firm mouth that tasted uniquely Jake. What could I say? Maybe our relationship was undefined, but he had proven his friendship a dozen times over the past week. He had come to my rescue without being asked; he had spent his vacation making sure I didn't get myself killed playing detective; hell, he had taken a bullet that could have been meant for me. Gay or straight, I'd never had a better friend. Now he was asking me for something, probably asking as much for my sake as his own. I listened to the water dripping from the leaky tap to the sink in slow, regretful tears. I nodded.

* * * * *

I had the best intentions.

I intended to go straight to the Realtor's office and arrange for someone new to stay at the ranch as a caretaker. Somehow I found myself driving past the library one last time.

When Miss Buttermilk saw me coming she made a fluttery gesture -- like a villager warding off the Evil Eye.

"I was hoping ..." I began.

Miss Buttermilk whipped the key off her key ring and handed it over with conspiratorial haste. I thanked her and returned once more to the basement.

Though pressed for time, I was now convinced I knew what I was looking for. And after some feverish page turning, I found it. In 1857, a stagecoach traveling from Basking to Sonora had been robbed by three Mexican bandits. The stagecoach had been carrying an unusual load: gold from local mines bound for San Francisco. Valued at well over three million dollars, the hold-up had taken place in Senex Valley, minutes after leaving the stage stop. The two guards riding shotgun had been killed, the driver wounded.

I was absently scratching the yellow jacket bite on my hand as I read this, and as I stared down at the welt, a light bulb -- metaphorically speaking -- went off. Granted, it was an idea that probably should have lit the echoing corridors of my empty brain before now. The first clue had been right under my eyes that very first day.

Hurriedly I hunted through the shelves, pouring through every volume, scanning every page, but I could find nothing more about the stagecoach robbery.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I cornered Miss Buttermilk about the missing newspapers.

Miss B seemed to be mostly concerned with the defacement of library property, but at last I got her to focus on my question.

"You!" she answered indignantly. "You and Kevin were the last ones to examine those papers." She looked mad enough to revoke my library card on the spot.

"Anyone else? Anyone from the archeological site?"

Miss Buttermilk thought back and shook her head. "It was weeks ago. It couldn't have been *him*."

"Him who?"

"The doctor. The English doctor."

"Dr. Shoup?"

"The very man," concurred Miss Buttermilk.

* * * * *

Taking Miss Buttermitt's advice, I left the library and cut across to Royale House. An urgency close to panic nipped at my heels.

I caught Melissa on the porch, locking the front doors. CLOSED, read the sign swinging inside the glass pane.

"I can't talk now," she said, whipping past me on the stairs. The tips of her black hair floated against my face and I thought of the ghost story she had told me about Royale's first wife.

"Hold on." I caught her arm. "Are there copies of *The Basking Gazette* archived here?"

She scowled. "Why?"

"Because the library doesn't have a complete set and I need to check something out."

"Can't it wait? Kevin's been arrested and the dig's been called off. Hadn't you heard?"

"No." My fingers tightened on her arm as she started to pull away.

Impatiently she said, "They matched the bullets that killed Harvey and Livingston to Kevin's rifle."

Jake had hinted that was coming, but it was still a shock.

"I don't believe it," I said automatically.

"It's a fact. They found traces of blood and hair in Kevin's truck bed. They think he used the pickup to transport the bodies." Her black eyes held mine. "But you know all this."

"I do?"

"Sure. You and your copper pal have been working with the sheriff."

"We have?"

"Don't play dumb." She smiled. I'd never noticed what sharp incisors she had. "What were you up to, wandering around in those caves above the hollow, if you weren't looking for Harvey's body?"

She was a pretty woman, but more than prettiness there was strength and character in the face turned to mine. I didn't understand her, but I admired her in a way.

"I think you know what I was looking for," I said.

A beat later red suffused her dusky skin. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about spirit voices echoing out of the caves at night when all good little archeologists are tucked snug in their sleeping bags. I'm talking battery operated Kuksu in stereophonic sound."

She went very still, didn't move a muscle. A hell of a poker player she'd make.

I said, "Are you going to let me into the museum or not?"

She pivoted on heel, marched back up the stairs and unlocked the frosted glass paned door.

"Do you have proof?" she questioned, her back to me.

"Yes, I think so." Instinctively I patted the pocket of my denim jacket.

As we stepped into the museum she said, "I didn't kill anyone."

"But you know who did."

She did face me then. "No, I don't! If I did, do you think I'd let them arrest O'Reilly?"

"Truthfully? I don't know."

"Well, I wouldn't! The guy's a pain, but"

"Then what's up with the sabotage? Are you saying you haven't been trying to stop the dig?"

"NO ONE HAS BEEN HURT!" She yelled it so loudly I expected the portrait of the giant-sized Abraham Royale to blink.

"What about the dog?" I was beginning to feel like Sherlock Holmes in "Silver Blaze," forever blethering on about the curious incident of the dog in the night.

"What about the damned dog? Coyotes got it." Yet something about her expression wasn't what it ought.

I thought, *She believes in the legend of the Guardian.*

More calmly she said, "I don't expect you to understand."

"Try me."

She was silent. A born martyr looking forward to the first burning brand.

I said, "You took over your grandfather's shaman duties, didn't you? You've said a number of times you believe the hollow is sacred."

"Oh for --! *Life* is sacred," Melissa retorted. "I wanted to stop the desecration of holy ground, but I wouldn't kill anyone to do it."

"Did you put a snake in my mailbox?"

"Did I what?" Her mouth dropped. "Are you kidding me?"

I tended to believe her -- or her expression anyway.

"Can I check the newspaper archives?"

Melissa checked her watch. I checked mine. I'd promised Jake I'd be back within the hour, and forty-five minutes had passed already.

"I don't have time for this. The Student Union has asked me to organize legal aid for O'Reilly," she said. "I've got things to do and people to see."

"If we can prove who really killed Livingston and Harvey, legal aid won't be necessary."

Undecided, she contemplated me and then turned with a whirl of her black hair and led the way downstairs.

The cellar of Royale House was cool and dry. Melissa lit a lantern and the smell of kerosene mingled with the smell of dried apples and sawdust.

"What year are we looking for?" She inquired, dragging out a bulging cardboard box. I moved to help her.

"I'm thinking 1857. I read about a gun battle between Mexican bandits. Royale's partner, Barnabas Salt was killed."

"I know about that," Melissa said. "The same *banditos* had robbed the stage a couple of weeks before. They got away with a couple million dollars worth of gold dust and bullion."

"Everybody in the county must have been hunting them."

"Yep, but Salt and Royale found them holed up in Senex Valley."

"And in the ensuing fight, the bandits and Salt were killed."

"Ensnuing fight," she mocked. "I could listen to you for hours. Do you write like you talk?"

"You wouldn't want to concentrate here, would you?"

"In the *ensuing* fight," Melissa informed me, "all three bandits were shot to pieces, along with good old Barnabas Salt."

"And was the gold recovered?"

Her expression went totally blank.

"Yoo-hoo," I prompted. "The ill-gotten gains: whatever happened to them?"

She snapped back into life. "Never mind that box." She disappeared into a dusty recess and reappeared dragging another box over. The friction of the stone floor tore the deteriorating box apart. Newspapers spilled everywhere. "Fuck! Try these. This is the time frame we're interested in."

Evelyn Wood couldn't have speed-read any faster through those brittle, yellowed pages. The kerosene lamp threw flickering shadows that danced against the wall like Zuni spirit helper figures. I kept watching them out of the corner of my eye.

"Try to be careful, can't you? These are historically valuable."

"I am being careful." I nodded pointedly as a piece of page broke off in her hand. Just like old times. "Maybe we should get some help."

"There's no time. He knows how close we are. He's liable to split any minute."

He. We both knew now who we were after though neither of us had put it in words yet.

"Without the gold?"

"Maybe he's found the gold."

Maybe. Maybe not. What was it about gold that drove men to leave their homes and families, to risk everything -- to commit murder -- on just the *promise* of it? Gold fever, they called it back then. In the 1800s it had been an epidemic; now and then there was still an outbreak.

"What happens if we can't find anything?" Melissa asked after a silence of some time.

"I don't know. Even if we find the right article it isn't proof. We have to use that information to confront him."

"You think he's going to fall apart because we shove an old newspaper article in his face? We've got to do more than that."

I should have listened to her, but my attention was caught by the article before me.

BANDITS SLAIN IN SHOOT OUT proclaimed the banner headline. In the faded old-fashioned typescript I read how Abraham Royale and Barnabas Salt had been set upon by the three notorious Mexican bandits who had robbed the Sonora stagecoach line only days before. A gun battle had ensued (that word again), and all three miscreants had been slain, saving the honest taxpayers the expense of hanging Juan Martinez, Eduardo Marquez, and Luis Quintana. Tragically Barnabas Salt, Royale's long time partner in the Red Rover mine, had also been killed. The search for the stolen booty continued.

I lowered the paper. A moth was bumping against the lantern, a soft desperate sound as it fought to immolate itself. Melissa stared at my face and then eased the paper out of my hands.

While she read, I worked it out. The bandits had hidden their loot in an abandoned mine, but the mine's previous owners, working nearby, had spotted them, or somehow become suspicious. There was a fight and everyone ended up dead except for one man. One man who chose to keep the hard-earned gold of his neighbors and friends for himself.

"What should we do?" Melissa asked when she finished reading.

"I think it's time to call the cops."

"The cops!" She looked outraged. "You said yourself this isn't proof. The last thing we need is Barney Fife stumbling around in this."

"Melissa, there's enough here to give them a start. It implicates someone other than Kevin."

"We don't need the cops for this!"

My nerves on edge, I snapped back, "For what? What did you have in mind? A citizen's arrest? He's killed two people so far."

"Your buddy Riordan --"

"Don't drag Jake into this."

She lowered her head, her hair falling across her face in a veil. At last she murmured, "Okay, you win. I'll call the cops from upstairs." Then she stood, backed up and ran for the stairs, shooting up the rickety staircase like a scalded cat.

A moment later the door to the cellar banged shut.

It took a nanosecond for the full implication of the sound of a slamming door -- and the sound that followed: a key turning in a lock -- to register.

I rocketed up the stairs in her wake yelling Melissa's name with all the sound and fury I could muster. As I reached the top step she called through the wood, "Just be grateful it's not a fruit cellar!"

"Open the goddamn door!" I pounded my fist on the door. Solid oak; it was like punching stone. I wasn't getting out that way, not without a Roman Legion at my back. "Melissa, don't be stupid. *Melissa!*" I rattled the doorknob.

The sound of her footsteps died away.

I ran back down the stairs, which shook under the force of my feet. A quick scan of the cellar didn't offer much in the way of escape routes. There was no other door. There were a couple of small rectangular windows about ten feet up, probably street level.

Looking around for something to stand on, I spotted a trunk in the wavering lantern light. With some shoving and tugging, I got the trunk positioned beneath one of the windows. I hopped on top of it and found myself still two feet too short.

I jumped down, searched the corners, disturbing the spiders in their webs, and came up with a milk bottle crate. I placed the crate on the trunk and gingerly climbed back up. The crate wobbled crazily on the curved lid of the trunk. Crouched, I balanced surfer-like, straightened slowly and rested my hand on the windowsill.

Wiping a swath with my fist, I stared through the dirty window. I could see the street bathed in sunshine and the tires of cars whizzing past. I pried at the rusty latch.

No good. The damn thing could have been welded shut.

I was mad enough to punch through the window, but not stupid enough. I needed something that wasn't my fist to break through the glass. A sledgehammer would be good, but that was too much to hope for. What kind of cellar didn't have a handy crowbar or even a broom?

I was thinking about taking my shirt off and wrapping it around my hand when a face loomed into the window, one eye blinking through the circle of clean.

I nearly fell off my perch. When I had steadied myself and looked again, the face was gone from the window.

"Hey!" I shouted. "Help!"

Leaping down, I unbuttoned my shirt, swaddled my hand and clambered back up. The crate rocked and I teetered like Gidget Goes Berserk. Trying to stabilize my weight, I clutched the window sill and with my free hand feinted cautiously at the glass. With the second punch my fist shattered the pane. Most of the glass flew streetward, the rest of it dusting my face and shoulders. I shook my head, blinked carefully. Wiping the glass out of the window frame, I rested both hands on the sill and hauled myself up.

Though it looks easy enough in movies, it ain't so easy in real life to pull yourself up and wriggle through a small square window. It took a lot of writhing and squirming -- not to

mention swearing -- before I managed to scrape through the window and crawl out to the sidewalk.

"You are an abomination and shall be put to death, your blood upon your head," the Reverend John Howdy shrieked into my sweating face.

I blinked up at him.

"How's that?" I huffed at last.

He proceeded to tell me how.

Half listening while I took inventory, I decided that all my parts were in working order. I sat up, brushing off the glass and cobwebs.

"You -- you!" he spluttered.

I ducked back from the fiery breath of the little man bending over me.

"Breaking and entering, you buggering spawn of Satan," he cried. "I'm calling the police!"

"Breaking and exiting," I retorted, getting to my knees. "And calling the police is a good idea. Send them to Pine Shadow ranch."

I could hear him hollering for the law as I limped off down the street.

* * * * *

There was no sign of Jake at the ranch.

His car was packed with his gear; my suitcases were packed and sitting just inside the door. He was dead serious about our leaving on schedule. Mobil-I-zation had begun.

Dust covers blanketed the furniture once more, the shutters were closed and fastened, the thermostat was off, the fridge was empty.

"Jake!" I called, walking through the silent rooms.

There was no answer. Something felt wrong.

"Jake?"

Walking out on the porch, I froze mid-step at the distant crack of two gun shots.

It could have been hunters, but I knew it wasn't, and can't quite describe the sick chill that spread from my gut to my heart.

"He's not dead," I said aloud.

Nothing contradicted me. The cowbell chimes clanked in the breeze.

I turned and went back inside to call the sheriffs. I don't think I really heard what the person on the other end of the line said. I was probably instructed to stay put, but the moment I hung up, I climbed the hillside behind the house, jogging past the scorched marijuana field, shearing through the trees, and slipping and sliding down the pine needles of the mountainside overlooking the camp in Spaniard's Hollow.

Or, rather, where the camp had been. The kind of mass exodus that generally precedes the appearance of giant ants from outer space seemed to have taken place. I prowled the mauled grounds. Giant yellow squares indicated where the tents formerly sat, but the tents and the generators were gone, and the only vehicles parked by the tarn were Melissa's white pickup, a Land Rover and another car. I figured the Land Rover was probably Dr. Shoup's, since he lay face up beside it.

"The very man," Miss Buttermilk had said. I had thought at the time that Shoup must be in on the caper too, but now I wondered.

I squatted down beside his body. Felt his throat for a pulse.

Even dead, he had a supercilious expression at odds with the wound in his chest.

I guess you do eventually get hardened to violent death, or else I was too worried about Jake to feel much of anything for anyone else.

Shoup was stone cold, so the shots I'd heard had not been the ones that did him in. Rising to my feet I squinted at the sun glittering on the tarn, the dazzle stinging my eyes.

Why would Jake come back here? We were supposed to be getting the hell out of Dodge; why would he head back to the camp? It was so typical of that beef-witted lout to go off half-cocked, thinking he had all the answers when he only knew part of the story

After a despairing couple of moments it occurred to me where they must have gone. Now I had another choice to make. I could wait for the sheriffs; I could follow them down the stagecoach tracks; or I could try to beat them to the Red Rover mine by cutting across the mountainside. The wrong decision could cost Jake's life.

If he wasn't dead already.

I went bounding back up the mountainside without regard to my neck or heart. My shoes slipped over stones and dried grass. My heart pounded hard but it was mostly with the adrenaline rush. Hell, I figured if my pump hadn't given out by now, it was probably good for the duration. Just so long as it saw me through getting Jake back in one piece; that was the bargain I was offering God.

By now I had worked out most of the details, like why Livingston, who everyone agreed was as straight and true as the needle on a compass, had to die the minute he got wise to what was happening at the site.

As for my former caretaker, Harvey must have been playing how-does-your-garden-grow on the mountainside and seen Livingston shot. Ever a lad with his eye to the main chance, he must have tried to cut a deal. My guess was he had threatened blackmail, probably claiming he held some incriminating evidence like photos. That would explain why his trailer had been searched a couple of times. I suspected there never *was* any evidence, but either way, the blackmail scheme had backfired. Livingston's body had been planted in the barn to incriminate Harvey, and Harvey himself had been killed and dragged off to look like he'd rabbitied.

While I climbed, I reconnoitered. Maybe I should have taken the time to search for one of my grandmother's guns. What happened when I did catch them up? I didn't have a gun, and I didn't exactly have a plan; the force of my personality was not going to get us far.

I stepped wrong and went down on my knees. As I knelt there, panting and perspiring, I heard a sound. A minor explosion that resembled ... a sneeze.

My heart lit and soared like a Roman candle; I'd recognize those tormented sinuses anywhere. Crawling a few feet, I peered through the bushes. And sure enough, a few moments later I glimpsed the top of three heads through the trees branches shading the trail below; Jake's gilt hair shone like a knight's helmet.

He was alive.

I crept forward as quietly as possible. Melissa was walking on Jake's right; Marquez followed close -- though not too close -- behind. He carried a rifle aimed at their backs. I'd have bet money on a 30.06 load.

"Hurry it up!" His voice carried in the still air.

I didn't envy his task; even from my hiding place it was clear from their rigid body language that Jake and Melissa were waiting for the first opportunity to turn on their captor. Marquez knew it too, if his strained white face was anything to go by.

How the hell had *both* Jake and Melissa managed to fall into Marquez's clutches? But wasn't it just typical of these damned "A" personality types, always thinking they knew best, always thinking they could handle whatever cropped up?

On hands and knees, I slunk forward. I had to get ahead of them. That was our best chance. But if I stood up, Marquez would spot me and probably start shooting. He was scared and desperate, so there was no predicting.

And in the clear mountain air even the sound of a snapping branch seemed to carry a mile. I could go back and wait for the sheriffs. It was probably the smartest thing to do. It was obviously the safest -- and I was sure it was what Jake would have wanted me to do. I also knew it was not what Jake would have done were our positions reversed.

I moved the branches aside, listening tautly.

Reassuringly, Jake's voice floated up. He sounded calm, even conversational. "You don't have the gold then? You just think you know where it is."

"It's there."

"It's been over a hundred years, pal. Anything could have happened to it."

"If someone else had found it, it would have made history. Royale's wife didn't find it; she died in poverty."

"That's my point," Jake said. He was doing the cop thing: keep 'em talking; it distracts and builds a bond whether the bad guy wants it or not. "If the gold was there someone would have found it before now."

"Before my great great grandfather was murdered by Royale and Salt he sent my grandmother a letter saying the gold was hidden in the mine."

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, I recalled Dr. Shoup saying only a few days earlier. How right he had been.

"Royale could have moved the gold before he died," Melissa said scornfully. "Which means you've killed two people for nothing."

"Shut up and walk!" Marquez sounded harassed. Clearly he was making it up as he went. What had gone wrong, I wondered?

The bushes were thinning. Dropping to my belly, I made like GI Joe, creeping along over the hard ground. This is another thing that looks a lot easier in the movies than it is in real life. In real life dragging yourself over rocky ground without making any noise is a slow and painful business. And as quiet and careful as I was being, I was still afraid they could hear the shift and slide of stones, the snap of twigs. I could sure hear them.

But slowly, surely I gradually pulled ahead of the trio in the road below. A few more yards of this and it would be safe to stand again. The dragging along on elbows was painful; my hips felt bruised.

Suddenly it occurred to me why it was so painful: I still had Melissa's cassette player in my pocket.

As this realization sunk into my tired brain, I felt a spark of hope. Vigor renewed, I humped along, scraping myself raw over rocks and pinecones and tree roots.

The voices behind me faded. Scrambling to my feet, I ran like hell across the hillside, and then down through the trees.

I reached the mine a scant two minutes before they appeared down the track. I had just enough time to prop the cassette player in the 'V' of a pine branch. Hands shaking, I pressed play and slid up the volume, praying the recorder didn't fall off its perch.

Up close the chanting sounded so obviously synthetic, I couldn't imagine how it had fooled anyone, but as I moved away from the sound, it got creepier. More believable.

Inching down the hillside, I hid behind a thicket, sweating and trying to get my breath.

It didn't take long before I heard their voices.

"So if Shoup was working with you, why kill him?" Jake was saying reasonably. As they drew even with my hiding place I could see Jake's eyes rake the hillside, the road, looking for his chance. For a second his eyes seemed to find mine in the thicket I hid in, but his expression never changed.

A bruise darkened his forehead, but he was okay. He was alive and on his feet, and I planned on him staying that way. I felt around on the ground for a tree limb long and thick enough to use as a club.

"Because he finally figured out I ... had disposed of Dan -- Dr. Livingston. And that scum ball, Harvey."

"Disposed of? You mean killed?"

Melissa said, "You mean murdered? Because that's what it was. Cold-blooded murder, you bastard."

"Shut up!" Marquez shouted.

"Yeah, shut up," Jake growled. "You'll hurt his feelings."

Melissa stopped walking. "Do you hear that?" Her head jerked from side to side in disbelief. "What *is* that?"

About time too. I was beginning to think the three of them would never shut up long enough to hear the ghostly voices soughing on the afternoon wind.

"That's enough!" bit out Marquez, his pale face glistening, his glasses shining like insect eyes in the sunlight.

"I hear it too," Jake said.

"It's the goddamn wind!" Marquez shoved at Melissa with the rifle barrel. She fell to her knees in the road and put her hands to her face. Jake wheeled to face Marquez.

I thought Marquez would blast them then and there, and I stood up.

Jake didn't charge though, instead he said, "Listen! Hear 'em? Sirens."

Sure enough, the distant wail of sirens could be heard echoing through the mountains.

"Bullshit! Hurry up, get in there!" Thoroughly rattled, Marquez tried to nudge Melissa to her feet with the rifle barrel. She wasn't cooperating and I didn't blame her. If he got them inside the mine they'd never walk out alive.

Keeping a wary eye on Jake, Marquez poked at her with the rifle. Suddenly Melissa surged to her feet, swaying, wheeling to face Marquez. Marquez gasped and stepped back from her, the gun shaking wildly.

Unnervingly, Jake *also* stepped back from her.

His body blocked my view of Melissa, but I could see Marquez's face and I thought, *it's now or never*. Sucking in a deep breath, I bellowed over the taped chanting -- and the distant cry of approaching sirens, "Police! Drop your weapon!"

Marquez swung the rifle my way and both Melissa and Jake jumped him.

Things got confusing at that point, like one of those cartoon fights where all you see is a giant ball of dust and the occasional fist or foot. Jake wrestled for the rifle, which fired once into the sky and once into the forest before he wrested it away from Marquez. Marquez cursed and hung on with both hands, but Jake was bigger and used to fighting.

All the while Melissa howled like a war chief right out of cowboy cinema, clawing and kicking anybody she could reach.

I slithered the rest of the way down the hillside and circled the action, trying to see how to help without getting in the way or getting shot. Catching sight of Melissa's snarling face I got the shock of my life. Her eyes were glowing red like something out of *The Exorcist*.

The fight didn't last long. Jake closed on Marquez, punched him twice, and Marquez went down. Jake leaned over him, panting hard.

"Get up," he ordered. He spared me a look. Just for a moment the grimness of his face eased. "Hey."

I managed a smile, half my attention still drawn to Melissa's demonic gaze.

Marquez, his glasses hanging from his ears, his nose bloody, tried to push to his knees.

Suddenly he launched himself forward, diving toward the mine entrance.

"Halt!" Jake yelled. Melissa screamed.

Marquez didn't check. Jake fired into the timber frame of the mine opening. Undeterred, Marquez wriggled through the wooden slats still half-covering the mouth of the mine and disappeared inside.

"God damn it!" Jake swore.

We raced for the entrance.

From inside the mine Marquez screamed hysterically, a full-throated, sharp blood-curdling shriek straight out of Edgar Allen Poe that tailed and then abruptly cut off.

The silence that followed was more terrible than that dying scream.

Jake and I stared at each other, and then he started to climb through the boards.

"No, wait!" Melissa cried. We both grabbed for him.

"The stairs are gone!" I shouted, locking my arms around him.

"He's fallen down the mine shaft!" Melissa said. Her face was blanched of color, her eyes ... they were still glowing. Hastily I looked away.

Jake stared at us like we were speaking in tongues, and then to my utter amazement, he pulled me against him in a rough embrace that nearly knocked the remaining wind out of me.

"I owe you one, baby," he muttered against my ear. I could feel his heart banging away with exertion and excitement against my own. It was the most beautiful sound in the world, and I closed my eyes as I listened and thought, *I love you*.

Old news really. I guess I'd known since I left LA. I guess that was why I'd left LA, because there wasn't any future in it. Not really. The things I wanted from life -- and Jake -- weren't things he could give. But somehow at that moment it just didn't matter.

I barely heard Melissa babbling, "He must have forgotten that the stairs had rotted away. I know we told him. Kevin and I noticed when we were out here. Only the top two rungs are left. I know we told him. He forgot. He must have forgotten."

"Maybe he knew," I told her.

Jake's arms tightened around me like he was picturing himself tumbling down the shaft on Marquez's heels. "Poor bastard," he muttered against my ear.

I nodded, sick with the thought of what a difference a few minutes would have made. If it had taken me longer to get out of the cellar, if I had waited at the house for the sheriffs, if I had taken my time running across the hillside -- it would have been Jake and Melissa's crumpled bodies at the bottom of that mine shaft. In fact, we might never have found their bodies, might never have known what happened to them.

What a nice little legend that would have made.

"No one could survive that fall," Melissa said, though neither of us was really listening to her. "He's dead. He must be. Maybe he meant to do it all along. Maybe ..."

The sirens were close now, wailing through the trees like electronic banshees. As the first car appeared on the road, Jake released me and stepped back. He massaged the back of his neck self-consciously.

"He must be dead," Melissa repeated. "Don't you think?"

"Yeah," I said.

Astonished, I realized that the shadows were lengthening. Another day gone in Paradise. I looked up at the heavy skies. There was a hint of rain in the air. In fact, it felt cold enough for snow. I rubbed my nose hard. "What happened?" I asked Jake. "Why the hell did you come back here?" I stopped as color rose in his face.

"I had a bad feeling," he said. "You gave in too easily this morning. I know you -- well, I thought I did. I started thinking you were going to come back here and do something ... dumb."

"Dumb?"

"Like in a book. You know, gather all the suspects in the drawing room and try to trick the murderer into confessing."

"So you did something dumb instead?"

The clearing was suddenly full of cop cars and uniforms. The sound of voices and slamming car doors carried on the late afternoon.

Jake said, "I ... er ..." He cleared his throat. "I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Shoup confronted Marquez. He was waving this old newspaper in his face. Then Marquez popped Shoup. That's when *she* showed up. He glanced at Melissa, doing a double-take at her flaming red orbs, and breaking off what he was saying to exclaim, "And lady, what is with *you*?"

Melissa met our gazes blankly. Then she gave a weak laugh, and popped out the trick eyeballs.

* * * * *

"Well, it's been real. And it's been fun," Jake said.

I gave a half laugh.

We stood beside our packed cars. It was nearly dark.

Marquez's body had been retrieved from the mine a few hours earlier. There was no sign of any lost gold, assuming it had ever really been there. Melissa, Jake and I had given our statements to the sheriffs; Melissa had bid us a hasty goodbye and hurried off to see about getting Kevin freed. Jake and I promised to make ourselves available for the coroner's inquest and any further questioning as requested.

It had been a long day and we could have waited to leave till the next morning, but Jake was in a hurry to start back.

I could feel him watching me, but when I glanced his way, he was staring at the long silent ranch house. The windows were shuttered. The cowbell chimes hung motionless in the still, cold air. Across the barren yard, the windmill groaned with phantom pains.

It already looked abandoned, like we had never been there, like no one had lived there for years.

"Maybe we'll come back sometime," he said, surprisingly.

He met my gaze and shrugged. Then he tossed his keys, caught them, and started for his car. Over his shoulder he called, "Are you following me or am I following you?"

I opened my mouth -- then let it go. Mildly, I said, "Are you sure you know the way?"

He paused. Turned. "Hey," he said. "I found you, didn't I?"

 THE END 

Josh Lanyon

Josh Lanyon is the author of three Adrien English mystery novels. *THE HELL YOU SAY* was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award and is the winner of the 2006 USABookNews awards for GLBT fiction. Josh lives in Los Angeles, California, and is currently at work on the fourth book in the series, *DEATH OF A PIRATE KING*.