

A DEAD RED HEART

By RP Dahlke

2nd in the Dead Red Mystery Series

When a homeless Vet litters her beloved red Cadillac with poetry scrawled on paper snowflakes, Lalla decides to confront him. But that doesn't mean she wants the man to drop dead at her feet—with a pair of blue handled scissors sticking out of his chest.

With nothing but the man's last words for the police to go on, Lalla decides that someone needs to be on the side of this misunderstood vet, and that person will be the exasperating, pushy, tenacious, Ms. Lalla Bains. But digging into the man's past will only unravel a more potent question: What would you do if the love of your life lost their chance for a heart transplant because the donor organ went to a convicted felon?

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Credits:

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Many of the characters names in this book were borrowed from the roll call at Ceres High School... you know who you are.

There is a real Pippa Roulette and she's a redhead and a pistol, just not this pistol!

Dedications:

To my granddaughters, Simone & Hanna Shanahan
John Shanahan, my forever flyboy: 1964-2006,
and to my daughter, Dettre Schmidt Galvan, who always inspires me.

Chapter One

"Billy Wayne? Wake up! Come on now," I said in disgust. "This is getting out of hand. You've got to stop this nonsense."

I like having a man at my feet. Tough guys who grovel are my favorite, though I'm not averse to a little toe kissing when appropriate. I leave the toe kissing for those uneven date nights when my sweetie, Sheriff Caleb Stone, is not on duty and I'm not neck deep in summertime work as a crop duster. None of which had anything to do with the man presently draped across my feet. Dead drunk, I figured, looking down at the patriotic red, white, and blue ribbons binding his ponytail. I was too late for that heart-to-heart I'd come for — he was already out cold.

Caleb warned Billy that his continued attentions would be ill advised and considered harassment—his words, not mine. Caleb's belief that a fellow Marine should always be able to pull himself out of the fire didn't take into consideration that Billy's alcohol-doctored post-traumatic stress disorder was not conducive to any such persuasion.

His obsessive interest in me stopped for about a week. Then, in the Save-Mart parking lot, I had to shove my way through a crowd surrounding my car. I stood with the rest of the slack-jawed gawkers ogling the fluttering white paper snowflakes acting as a second skin to my vintage Cadillac. With one hand I swiped up a handful, and with the other I waved off the spectators. "Practical joke, folks, nothing special."

I didn't have the heart to report this latest infraction to Caleb. Billy Wayne, I knew, was shy, easily startled and would panic if Caleb should feel compelled to make good on his threat of a restraining order. Instead, I decided I would confront him myself. Make him understand that his attraction to me, though flattering, was never going to go anywhere.

So that's how I came to be in the alley behind Mr. Kim's Chinese restaurant on a late afternoon.

I held my breath against the smell of garbage and knelt down to shake Billy Wayne's shoulder. He rolled away and onto his back, murmuring softly.

I looked down at the blood on his nearly new white T-shirt. His dog tags seemed to be chained to the stain, and he was clutching a pair blue handled scissors. The scissors appeared to be sticking out of his chest.

In the gusty twilight, his paper snowflakes swirled into the air and cartwheeled merrily down the dark alley. I leaned in their direction, aiming for flight, for help, for anything that would get me away from this horror. I would've succeeded too, except for the tight grip he had on my ankle. I squatted down next to him, gently pulling his fingers off my ankle.

"Billy, please, let me get you some help."

He was trying to speak, his breath choppy gasps as he struggled for air. "Too late," he said. "The more there is the less you see."

A speck of light shifted into shadow, crept across the dirty walls and disappeared. Someone was there?

I jerked to my feet to call them. "Help!" I croaked.

The sound echoed the length of the alley and back to me like a bad recording.

Whatever I thought I'd seen was gone.

I knelt again and touched his neck for a pulse. It was there and then it wasn't.

With a strangled sob, I struggled to my feet and went for the help he no longer needed.

Chapter two:

The owner of Mr. Kim's Chinese Restaurant gently set me down in front of a good strong cup of hot green tea laced with plenty of sugar. I felt the touch of his fingertips on the back of my hand, lighter than a thought, and just as quickly withdrawn. I looked up into the fathomless black eyes set between deep wrinkles, and heard the weedy chime of Vietnamese in his American English.

"Miss Bains, you too close to ghost. Not safe here. You must stay away."

With those few words of wisdom, he silently disappeared behind the doubtful barrier of swinging glass beads to his kitchen.

Caleb entered the front door trailing one of his deputies and I immediately felt the tension creasing my forehead ease. His deputy, Kenny Everett, passed Caleb for Mr. Kim, but Caleb simply held up his hand, indicating that he should leave it. Having served as military MP in Japan, Korea and eventually China, Caleb's version of an interrogation with the elderly Vietnamese would be quietly respectful. He sat down across from me and cupped warm hands around my cold ones. "Hey. You okay?"

"Fine, fine," I said, hanging onto the small porcelain teacup.

He nodded thoughtfully, doing that humming thing he always does when he's thinking. "You said he was alive when you found him? Did he say anything to you?"

I felt ashamed that I thought Billy a nuisance. How could I think he was an embarrassment, when now the poor guy was dead, and with only me, the woman who rejected him, to hear his final words, such as they were.

"He whispered some nonsense about not being able to see, or maybe it was the more you see, the less you see. Not something I'd choose as my dying words, that's for sure. Not me. I'd be screaming the name of the bastard that did it."

Caleb gave my cold hands a gentle squeeze. "Billy Wayne could be hard to take when he was off his meds. We'll find out who did this."

Caleb was one of the few people who'd bothered to take an interest in a fellow Marine who'd fallen on hard times, especially after Billy's communication dipped into single syllable sentences.

Caleb drew me up, and I leaned into him, my forehead to his, begging for the wrestler's hug I usually got, the one that would confound my breathing, and leave me clearheaded again. Instead, he took my elbow, and passing his sergeant, said, "I'm taking her around to the alley."

I dug in my heels at the mention of the alley. "Is this really necessary? I already gave them a statement. Can't do it, Caleb, not again."

But no amount of heel dragging was going to change his mind.

"Take a deep breath, Lalla. It's not like you haven't done this before. Better now while it's fresh, right?"

Yes, I'd had the practice, but I that didn't mean I was ready for another one. A year ago, I'd found the body of a young woman whose greed had finally gotten the better of her. Her death

finally led back to her killer, but it still reminded me how much I didn't want to be part of another murder investigation.

In the alley, city homicide detectives acknowledged the right of a fellow police officer to be there. Their acceptance very pointedly did not extend to me. I couldn't work up enough energy to return Detective Gayle Rodney's sneer, so I shrugged off the sour looks and turned my back on them. In my limited experience, Rodney was better at munching toothpicks than he was at solving crimes. I ought to know since last year I solved his murder investigation for him. Fat lot of good it was going to do me now.

Rodney took the toothpick off his lip and raked a lazy glance over my body, his drawl confirming our mutual contempt. "Miz Eula Mae Bains."

Caleb's quick squeeze on my elbow reminded me to behave.

"It's Lalla, as you well know, Detective." Not that I wasn't proud of my namesake. God knows, I'd be thrilled to have enjoyed the spirited eighty-nine years of my great-aunt Eula Mae, but Lalla was bequeathed to me by my deceased brother and I wore it with pride.

Rodney shrugged and pretended to consult his notebook. "You came here to see Billy Wayne?"

"I did," I answered tightly.

"You do this often? Come to meet homeless guys in dark alleys?" Rodney made it sound dirty, like I might be bent enough to step into garbage stained alleys and engage homeless men in some illicit behavior.

"I wasn't here to rifle through his shopping cart, and as far as conversation went, it wasn't much. He was pretty far gone by the time I got here."

"Was he a problem for you?"

"Not really."

At my discomfort, the damp clay eyes lit with amusement.

"Sure he was. Snowflakes, right? All over that pretty red Caddy-lac." He squeezed one eye shut and pointed an imaginary gun at my face. "He left love notes on it, snowflake love notes, I heard. Bet that made you mad."

"You can holster the loaded finger, Detective. If he had glued toys all over my car and stood it on end in the middle of town, it still wouldn't be enough for me to kill him."

He snorted, but holstered the doubtful weapon. "He say anything to you before he croaked?"

"I don't think it would make sense to you."

Caleb pinched the skin under my elbow, but I could feel his mood lift under the scowl he kept up for benefit of the detective. His fingers gently stroked my skin in a message that said, *relax*.

I had to agree with him; now wasn't the time to hoist the verbal repartee.

"He was right there, leaning against that wall next to the garbage can. He said something I couldn't understand then fell down across my feet. I rolled him off, and that's when I saw ... I saw the scissors sticking out of his chest."

Caleb whispered something to Rodney, and the detective's eyes shuttered once, and his chin jerked up in dismissal.

Caleb took me by the elbow and walked me out of the alley. "Can you make it home by yourself?"

"Sure," I said, doing a stiff march beside him. "I'm fine, fine."

His sigh calculated the shock of the last hour, the high octane oolong and sugar ride I'd been on for the last fifteen minutes, and how long it would take me before I plowed into a stop sign. He signaled to his sergeant, who promptly stuffed me into a sheriff's patrol car.

"I'll come out tomorrow," Caleb said, "bring you back to your car, okay?"

"I'm fine, fine," I bleated, my head bobbing like a marionette.

He squatted down next to the deputy's car window. "Lalla, look at me."

Instead of doing as he asked, I stared at the matching fly specks on the windshield. I knew I was not at my best; white around the mouth, troubled eyebrows bunched up against a recent horror that wasn't going to go away anytime soon. I licked at dry lips. "Think it was some kind of altercation with another homeless guy?"

"Maybe," he said. "Not your problem anymore, okay? Okay, sweetheart?"

When I nodded, he said, "I'll call you." He slapped the roof of the car, turned, and walked back to the huddle of detectives.

He'd been right to insist I ride home with Kenny. I was out of steam, the last of my adrenaline left in a puddle on the dark pavement of the alley behind Mr. Kim's Chinese Restaurant.

* * *

When my widowed father announced that he was up for a triple bypass, and would I mind taking a few days to come home and help him settle his effects, since he probably wasn't going to live much longer, I packed a bag and flew home from New York City leaving behind a wobbly career as a runway model, and a disastrous divorce from a philandering Puerto Rican baseball player. That was four years ago, and since then my hypochondriac parent has decided he's going to live after all. I stayed, and now run what's left of my dad's crop dusting—make that Aero Ag, to be PC—business. Unfortunately, all of it is now in free fall, what with environmental issues, pest control issues, and all the housing developments blotting out the farmland that used to be the mainstay of our business.

Others may have something to say about a childless, twice divorced, forty-year-old ex-New York model hiding out in Modesto, California. But except for the new school that may or may not be built at the end of our runway, life is pretty good. Or it was, until I tried to talk some sense into Billy Wayne Dobson.

The porch and hallway lights were on, and lights flickered from under the door of the TV room where my dad and his arthritic Chihuahua, Spike, have bunked since the fire last year singed his eyebrows, most of the interior, and definitely the last of my patience.

Spike trotted to the foyer to greet me with a tail wag and a snarl, showing me a few teeth.

"What're you doing up this late? Oh, you wanted to show me your teeth need cleaning again? I'll speak to him for you."

He took my comment with his usual disdain, saluted me with a squeaky fart, and limped down the hall for the TV room.

"Don't stay up because of me," I muttered, following after him. I didn't intend to do anything other than open the TV room door wide enough for Spike to slip through and close it again. No sense in waking up my dad just to go over today's debacle. Besides, any time I can procrastinate on a much deserved lecture works for me.

In the dim overhead light of the hallway, I peered at what I thought was a note my dad left for me. Tomorrow's work? I looked closer. Tacked to the door, were three hand printed letters. Done with a fine point Sharpie, I supposed. Nice and black. It said, DOA.

I read it again. DOA. Something to do with the dog? Dog on ...? Done? Arrival? The only DOA I knew of was ... D-O-A. as in Dead On Arrival.

A chill ran through me. I reached out to turn the knob, and giving the door a violent shove, slammed the heavy oak against the wall.

The TV was on, his feet in white socks dangling over the edge of his Barca lounge, his eyes closed, head lolling to one side.

"Dad?" I stood at the threshold, waiting for some sign that he was okay.

"Dad?" I breathed the word again, then barked, "Dad!"

With no response, I charged into the room, turned on the lamp next to his chair and lifted his limp wrist to feel for a pulse. He was warm, his pulse strong, and steady. I gathered his thin frame into my arms, crying, "Oh, thank God! Daddy, wake up."

And he did, grumbling and sputtering, "What the hell's going on? Is the house on fire again?"

I squatted down next to him, wiping at my tears and laughing. "I thought... Oh Dad, I'm sorry I woke you, but I have to go call Caleb, and then we need to talk."

Chapter three:

Caleb and I watched the forensics team pack up and file past, shaking their heads, the signal for no sign of a forced entry.

"Lots of prints to sift through," one of them said. "Though not much chance the intruder left any of his own."

Closing the front door on the last of the IDENT team, Caleb drew me into his arms and hugged me close, squeezing me tight until I gasped. My favorite. I expelled a quick giggle, a reflexive gesture to the explosive emotions I'd been through today.

"This may not have anything to do with Billy Wayne's murder," Caleb said. "But, in any case, I'll put a man outside your house."

"Don't," I said, pulling back and then leaning my forehead onto his. "I'll set the alarm. Noah didn't 'cause he thought I'd be home before dark. He fell asleep with that damn TV on and wouldn't have heard the Second Coming." I felt my voice quaver with the effort. "I've been sent a message and the bastard has made his point crystal clear. Mr. Kim was right. I shouldn't have been there."

"I can move my gear into your house for the duration."

I did a rueful grin. "You know how I am in the middle of the season," I said. "This time of year I don't sleep more than four or five hours a night. Three a.m. start-up time comes pretty early. You here, and I wouldn't get any sleep at all. Besides, message sent, duly noted."

He nodded doubtfully, and I could see he was trying to decide if it would be worth the effort to push his case.

I was glad to see the stubborn set of his jaw soften, and that he wasn't going to waste any more air on it.

"You've got your cell. You call me for anything, you hear?" He kissed me and left.

Sure it would make me feel safer having Caleb here, but the note was a warning meant to bring me to my knees and clear up any potential temptation I might have to dig around where I wasn't wanted. Then again if my dad had been dead, there would be no stepping away from hunting the bastard down and shooting him in cold blood. Did the killer know me that well, or was it simply a guess?

I locked the door behind Caleb, set the alarm, turned off the downstairs lights, and dragged myself up the stairs for bed.

Routine won over exhaustion and I brushed my teeth and hair and then stripped and took a warm shower. Powdered and scrubbed and in my tidy white cotton gown, I climbed in between the crisp white linen sheets of my antique rosewood double bed, and turned out the light.

Outside my bedroom window cicadas sawed a sleepy rhythm and a breeze picked musically at the dry leaves on the chinaberry tree, and then—nothing. I couldn't sleep. I turned over again, slamming down the image of a dying man clutching scissors sticking out of his chest. Terrible as it was to think that someone would murder Billy Wayne Dobson, it seemed obvious to me that the killer was also clever enough to know how, and where, to apply the right pressure. I'd felt, rather than seen, someone at the end of that alley. But the killer didn't know that, did he?

I was seen, identified, and marked as a witness. And there was the possibility I might later actually remember something and think to speak of it, maybe tell Caleb, or the police. Now, however, any whiff of a memory would be sealed in a tomb of silence; silent as the grave, that would be me. I'd keep my head down, study map coordinates, calculate chemical formulas for pest control, kick airplane tires, and check pilot flight logs, pay Av Gas bills, anything that would keep me away from the potential of a murder investigation that might endanger what was most precious to me—my family.

I rolled over onto the other side, dragging my unpleasant thoughts with me. Why did Billy Wayne have to single me out for an unrequited love interest? Whether he was mentally ill, or a drug addict, it wasn't my job to be his savior, was it? He had a mother and VA doctors to help him, didn't he? That was it, of course. At the heart of it was my own loss at age eleven of my mentally ill mother, and I couldn't handle another death. Yes, I'd seen a counselor, but that ended at the dinner table when I asked my brother and dad what bi-polar meant. From then on, we never discussed her death, or her problems, or mine, either.

Laying on my side, I played the interview with the first two policemen at the scene over and over:

Did you know Billy Wayne Dobson?

We'd never actually had any kind of conversation.

Did he at any time accost you, or attempt to touch you?

No.

Other than the paper notes in the form of snowflakes, at any other time did he attempt to contact you by phone or at your home?

Eyebrows raised, subtle nods exchanged.

No.

Did you at any time go to his home?

No.

Do you know of anyone else who might have had a grudge against Mr. Dobson?

No.

Billy Wayne Dobson loved you, needed you, and you let him down. You're responsible for his death--

No, no, no!

I jerked awake, threw the covers off, pulled the sweaty nightgown over my head, and headed for another shower. Would this nightmare never end?

Chapter four:

I stretched out an arm and batted the digital alarm on my nightstand. Its little red digits glared accusingly at me—three a.m. Time to get up and go to work. The few hours of tortured sleep I'd endured only left me feeling as painfully bruised as if I'd been beaten with nightsticks.

Lately, lack of sleep has been due to those few and precious nights I get with Caleb, and then sleep seldom comes into the picture. Caleb. Did he call me last night? Oh God, last night wasn't just a bad dream, and regardless of my sleepless night, I knew that sometime today I'd have another round of interviews with a suspicious homicide detective who would only be too happy to have me back in the hot-seat.

Turning on the light I rolled over, got up, and reached for yesterday's T-shirt. My hand automatically retreated at the smear of dried blood. I jammed the soiled T-shirt into the laundry basket and went for another shower, even though last night I'd taken two, letting the sharp needles of hot water pound into the mauled pores of my skin. Poor Billy Wayne—poor me.

Pulling clean jeans and T-shirt out of the drawers, I added a sweater against the early morning chill and the freeze of ice that lingered in my own heart. I seized up my shoulder length blond hair and tugged it into the ponytail I usually wore, then opened the closet, and taking a leather belt off the rack, threaded it onto my jeans. In the soft light of the lamp reflected in my bedroom window, I almost didn't see the dark shadows under my eyes that probably wouldn't be disappearing anytime soon. If you didn't count the fact that I was forty going on forty-one I might pass as the New York model I'd been twenty years ago. Then I had to go and ruin the image by looking down at my banged up, chapped, veiny hands, and short nails. If twenty years ago someone had told me that this was the life I would be living, I would have laughed like a hyena.

I gave a hasty swipe at the covers on my bed then closed the door behind me so our housekeeper, Juanita, wouldn't feel the need to come into my room and do it right. Work would help me forget about Billy Wayne's mental illness and my own encounter with the kind of personal evil that ended in murder. Not my problem. Not anymore, it wasn't. I would stay as far away from this as possible.

Hugging work boots to my chest, I padded quietly down the stairs so as not to wake Dad and Spike in the TV room. In the kitchen I poured myself a cup of coffee, noted the time, and exited the back door, careful not to let the screen slam behind me. Conversation on yesterday's troubles could wait. I wanted to get to work and let the day scrub away the layer of hurt and fear that had tunneled into my sleep.

I stepped out onto the porch and gazed out at the pale pre-dawn of an August morning. Faint outlines of barn, office, and airplanes were just beginning to stick out from the shadows.

No rain today, my dad, dubbed the wizardly weather shaman of Stanislaus County, predicted. His uncanny ability to predict the weather made him very popular with farmers who'd been his clients for the last forty years, however, all that popularity also meant squeezing *his* cronies in front of my own work orders.

No rain, and if we were lucky, no wind—at least long enough for us to get a long summer day's work done. I beat the ground crew to the office and divvied up work orders, giving Mad-Dog Schwartz and Fitz the larger jobs, and to me, the last of my dad's unprofitable customers.

We'd talked about this order of his, hadn't we? Agreed to give it over to Merced Aero Ag, because they were forty miles closer, right? But, here it was, edging its way under my nose, stubbornly taking up space. We were definitely going to have another conversation—and soon.

I handed the work order for the material to Javier, my favorite "flagger." Javier isn't a flagger, not in the truest sense of the word. We no longer use a real person to signal the end of a row by waving a flag. Now we use GPS to get us there, map out a field and then confirm that the spray or dust is laid where it should be. Even so, I always send someone to sight the job and look for obstacles. These days city folk are only fond of the country as long as it doesn't intrude into their yard. So we must be as concerned with drift onto the subdivisions as we are with towers, wires and wind. Javier would report the tiniest breeze and I would start my first pass downwind from any houses.

"Merced?" Javier asked, looking at the paperwork.

"Yeah," I sighed, letting my annoyance seep through. "You'll need Benito to drive the water truck if you think he's ready."

He nodded thoughtfully. "You know there's a sheriff's car at the side of the road? Did the yard alarm go off again?"

We kept the perimeter around our shop covered with motion sensor lights, and a horrendously loud bell that sets the neighbors dogs to howling. As a first line of defense against equipment theft, it was iffy, and it did nothing against a break-in of our house, but it was better than nothing.

"False alarm," I said, not looking him in the eye. "I guess they decided to hang out and make sure. So, is Benito good to drive the water truck yet or not?"

"Sí. Señor Bains says so."

That meant that my dad had made sure Benito could back up the big water truck without running into anything, and then quizzed him on some basic map reading so the kid wouldn't get lost. With radios in all the trucks, and Javier's rapid fire Spanish, the kid should be fine.

"Okay. It's John Warren's forty acres of corn, you've done them before."

"Sí, but I think your daddy tol' me Señor Warren died last week."

My dad used to read the obituaries so he could compare the probability quotient of his own demise to his peers. Now he treated funerals and their accompanying wakes as a dating service. Lately, his social life had become a whirligig of phone calls as the county's widows lined up to invite him to yet another function. I just didn't see how he found the time to date and mess with my scheduling, too. But did this mean he was doing the job so he could get a date with the widow Warren? Not likely, since dad's dating circle was set at a twenty-mile round-trip, and the widow lived outside that line.

"Well, Javier," I said, "since my dad's name is still painted on the side of our trucks I guess we'll be doing the widow's corn today."

Javier nodded, and went to load up trucks with lunches and respirators. In another fifteen minutes they rumbled out of the yard for Merced.

I took off into a peachy dawn sky crackled with hot sun streaks, banked over the sheriff's patrol car idling next to our entrance, and aimed for Merced and the widow Warren's measly forty acres of corn.

Up in the air, I allowed myself a few moments of Zen-like meditation, my mind lost in the chatter of the VHF. Then the timber changed, pitching me back to reality. There was a truck in the Mendota canal a half-mile off the highway. I touched the rudder, and drifted over to follow the waterway until I spotted the useless twin headlamps pointed up into the weak dawn and saw the distinctive logo of Bains Aero Ag on the side of the truck.

Crap! I called the house and the office, getting the answering machines on both. My father's response to the notion of a cell phone was that since I ran the business, he didn't need to be bothered. It also meant that it would be up to me to get a tow for the water truck.

I sprayed a double swath on all four perimeters of the corn, cursed the bad timing, the additional expense it would cost to come back again to finish the job, and left for home.

It was late afternoon when I finally called to tell the widow Warren why we had to leave her field for the next day.

"You should have called me sooner," she snapped.

I was surprised at the irritable tone, then remembered that the poor woman had just lost her husband. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Warren, but it was also my responsibility to get that truck out of the canal."

"Well, don't go thinking you're going to bill me for what little you did this morning. I had to get someone else to finish the job for you."

This was a surprise. "Mrs. Warren, I can appreciate that you needed the job done, but who was able to do your field on such short notice?"

"Another company has been kind enough to pick up after your sloppy work," she sniffed. "And I really must say that I don't approve of a company that would allow a drunken truck driver to work for them."

Benito, drunk? Last year I had to fire a pilot because he got stuck in a bottle of prescription pain meds. I made sure he had a decent severance pay as well as two long stays in a rehab unit. But nothing took with Brad, and last I heard he was lost in more than illegal pain killers. Cousin or no, Javier wouldn't tolerate drinking on the job, and while I should be glad to be able to slide out of doing Mrs. Warren's work, I was rankled to the core at the undeserved insult.

"Mrs. Warren, we've done your work for over thirty years, and if there's one thing I can promise you, we've never had a drunk pilot, or ground crew, working for us."

"Well," she said, a little doubt creeping into her voice. "Mr. Margrave said so, and in consideration of my husband's recent passing, he's agreed to do the job at half the cost."

Junior Margrave? That dirty rat. Because I had to leave before finishing the job, Margrave must've heard it over the VHF and moved in to pirate the job while I was busy with retrieving a truck out of the canal. The sorry bastard would fly a diluted spray on the interior and call it done. Mrs. Warren might become suspicious when she saw her crop was still infested, but Margrave would whine that it was my fault, or the pest control advisor's fault, anybody's but his. He had been in business for less than a year and chemical salesmen hated him already.

"Mrs. Warren, just have your field man check the work, will you?"

I heard her sharp intake of breath. "What do you mean?"

"I did a double pass on all perimeters. It's the first thing I do to make sure the corn blight doesn't bleed into the next field, but please, have your manager check to make sure Junior Margrave finished the job."

I explained to her about how even good companies have to work with weather changes and engine problems, and that even without Margrave stepping in at the last minute, our work would still hold the pest problem. It's what any competent applicator would do.

The moment of silence on the line held until she said, "Well, I see what you're getting at, but the job's been done and paid. I don't think we'll be having Bains Aero Ag do our work anymore."

And to think I was wondering how we could gently get Mrs. Warren to go with another applicator. The poor woman didn't realize what a cheapster like Margrave would do to get her business then leave her looking at a ruined crop.

Now I had a vendetta, and since revenge was my middle name, I would have to see what I could do to help it along. Margrave was going to pay for this, somehow, some way.

* * *

I walked into the kitchen to see my dad daintily cutting pancakes into tiny bites and passing them down to Spike.

"And you wonder why he's getting fat?"

"After last night I think we should live dangerously."

The sarcasm stung, but I still had to tell him about the fiasco with Mrs. Warren and the water truck.

He sawed off another piece and slathered it with butter. "Javier told me. I hope you didn't call the insurance company."

"What? And miss all the fun of putting the truck back together? Are you at least going to take your heart meds, or would that interfere with the heart-clogging butter and syrup?"

He turned in his chair, draping a long arm over the back. "You trail trouble after you like nobody I know, Lalla Bains."

I could feel a lump swell in my throat. "I went there to warn Billy Wayne. I didn't know I was going to trail home a killer behind me."

He tapped a finger on the front page. "If you'da done that job yesterday like I told you, Margrave wouldn't have been able to get his ugly nose in our business, and you wouldn't have been anywhere near that poor boy's killing."

I'd meant to avoid the Sunday paper but decided to point out the obvious. "And you can see how well that worked out."

He put his hand over the page, covering the old publicity photo of me from my brief career as a model in New York City next to the one of Billy Wayne's body as it was loaded into the coroner's wagon. His voice softened. "You tried to help. Wasn't your fault. Last night, either. I should've set the alarm. Won't happen again. I got my shotgun loaded and from now on I'll be in charge of setting that damn alarm at night."

I took it for what it was, his way of saying he'd been as shaken I was.

"Me and Spike're moving upstairs," he added.

"You don't have to go that far," I said.

"It ain't safe sleeping downstairs, either."

I flinched. "Mentioning Spike, I'm still wondering how someone got past him last night."

He shrugged off my concern. "We're both getting old. You saw how hard it was to wake me up last night."

I nodded, but it didn't feel right. Or maybe I wasn't seeing something. Spike had been labeled a menace since before his last owner died. Everyone, except my dad and Juanita, gave him a wide berth. My dad, I suppose because he took him in, and Juanita, because she made the pancakes he craved.

He'd greeted me last night in the hallway, when he should've been tucked into his bed next to Dad's lounge and the door to the TV room closed. But how did a stranger get past Spike when he we had to grab his collar every time the UPS man showed up? My dad must be right, they were both getting old.

I decided to change the subject. "Juanita go to her grandkids birthday party today?"

He picked up the remains of his breakfast, carried it all to the sink, and filled the tub with hot soapy water. "That was the plan. You going to do something about Margrave, or you want me to?"

"I can take care of it, Noah Bains. I always do."

He snorted at the true course he knew I would take to make sure Junior Margrave got his comeuppance. Then, whistling tunelessly, he went to drowning dishes under too many suds.

Chapter five:

It was late afternoon when I decided a break was needed, and took my dad's old farm truck to Roxanne's Truck Cafe. I continue to come here even though I'm razzed, teased and jeered at on a variety of subjects, like, "How long does it take a girl crop duster to finish spraying for mites?" the answer being, "Mite be now, mite be later." That dumb joke still put them all into hysterics. I didn't get it, but I suppose it was a compliment that they kept to crop duster jokes. It could be worse, they could still be torturing me with dumb blonde jokes.

A faded, hand printed sign on the glass door at the entrance said, "Eat here and help support two kids in college." The "two" had been hastily crossed out and "one" scribbled above it. Trust Roxanne to rub it in. I'm godmother to her handsome son, Terrill, and beautiful daughter, Maya. Terrill is in his second year at Berkeley, tearing up the football field and sensibly keeping his head down. Maya, however, is in New York City blowing away the competition on the catwalk, and causing her mother to pull out her hair. Like it's my fault the eighteen-year-old hounded me until I'd helped get her a contract in the modeling industry?

It's not like I held her over the baptismal font and breathed my long-boned Norwegian genes into her. She came by her height, good looks and grace from two handsome parents, her charm from her dad and her ambition from her mom. She sure didn't get it from me. Roxanne's family are all a luscious *café au lait*, and I'm a tall skinny, twice-divorced, middle-aged white woman. And if you asked my dad, I was a wash-out as a model, and the same could be said for my ability to run his crop dusting business, especially after this morning's fiasco when I single-handedly lost the widow Warren to an unethical competitor.

Still fuming over what I saw as my dad's unfair attitude for the loss of the widow Warren's lousy acreage, I angrily pushed through the double-doors, snapped up a discarded morning paper, and took my usual spot at the counter by the coffee machine.

"Just get off work, Lalla?" asked Linda, tilting the coffee pot over my outstretched cup and letting the last of the pot trickle down to nothing.

"Lemme get you some fresh," she said.

Linda Earnest could measure my weariness with her own, since she was winding down from a long night shift. She was also the widow of an Aero Ag pilot. A pilot's job was hard to take in the best of times, what with the long hours, deadly chemicals and dangerous flying. One slip—and in Ted's case, flip—and it was all over.

"Yeah," I said, as she refilled my cup. "Between weather problems and losing another customer to a thieving competitor, it's been a long day. God, I'll be glad to see the end of this summer."

It was my usual lament, and in light of the fiasco with the widow Warren, the best I could do. She nodded and kindly didn't mention yesterday's front page with my picture on it, then moved on to the next customer. Reluctant to read the headlines, I unfolded *The Modesto Bee* to the back section and started with the funnies. When that chuckle was through, I turned the paper over to the front page and started at the bottom, vaguely wondering if the city council had ever solved the problem of Frances Quilmar's illegal outhouses.

I did an audible gasp at the headline. *Snowflake Man Found Dead by Woman He Harassed*. The newspaper had obviously dubbed him Snowflake Man for the simple reason that paper snowflakes had recently garnished my Caddy; anything to take our minds off the August heat.

I could feel eyes boring into my back. They'd all read the headlines, and my gasp only confirmed their suspicions, because nobody offered the punch line to "How long does it take for a girl crop duster to finish spraying a row of corn?" Why did I think I could get by without the entire town thinking I might be responsible for yet another murder? It hadn't stuck last year and I was going to make sure it didn't stick this time, either.

A big dark hand with bright red nails set a plate in front of me. Roxanne, delivering good on her promise to fatten me up on Leon's pie because I didn't eat right during the summer season. Chocolate chip with dark chocolate cookie crust. Convinced that chocolate pie before noon would mean I'd have to join Overeaters Anonymous, I moved the plate out of reach and looked up at Roxanne. At her kind, sympathetic face, I covered my own with my hands, hoping the trouble my dad said I trailed along behind me hadn't followed me into her café.

"Oh God, Roxy, how bad is it this time?"

She glared at the occupants on the stools next to me, and though there were a few muttered complaints, the line of seats were now cleared of big ears. She patted my shoulder. "Eat your pie, sweetpea."

I caved as she knew I would and chewed on her husband's famous chocolate pie. I swallowed, urging the pie to go down where it belonged, but the silky texture and warm cocoa might as well have been sand in my throat.

She lowered her voice. "I called your house, didn't want to add to the ton of messages you must be getting by now. We heard some of it on dispatch, then some from Caleb when he came in. He looked about as tired as you do. You get any sleep at all?"

"I had to work today, and that didn't go so well either," I answered. "Caleb say anything?"

"Just that he's been trying to reach you. Paper says you were questioned after finding the body, the police want to talk to anyone else who saw him that day, and right after this year's criminal and murder count, a brief rehash of your modeling career."

"Okay, that's not so bad, though second billing below the state's murder count is now the least of my problems."

"What do you mean?" she asked, her brows making twin furrows above her wide nose.

I told her about my frightening experience with an intruder who left a threatening message on my dad's door.

"When?"

"It was after I came home from finding Billy Wayne in the alley."

"I presume you're going to take that message as gospel." Gospel, according to my pragmatic friend, was whatever got one through the day as long as it didn't get you arrested or shot.

"I didn't ask for any of this. Before yesterday, I probably passed two, maybe three words with Billy Wayne. I was picking up Caleb for a lunch date at County, and Billy's down on his knees, those strange yellow rubber dish gloves on his hands while he's polishing rocks. Rocks, for cryin' out loud. I said hello or, 'nice job,' something like that."

"Says here he was off his medication."

Roxanne got her PhD in psychology only to discover that dishing out her husband's pie did about as much good for folks' mental health; and she didn't have to deal with county

paperwork. In her spare time, she advocated for the homeless, kept track of their pharmacopoeia, and helped file their disability paperwork to the state.

"Yeah, Caleb told me. I just wanted to tell Billy Wayne to quit with the snowflakes before he got served with a restraining order."

"This old photo shows him in fatigues, says here he was a veteran. I knew that. Also says he's a convicted felon. I knew that too, but uh-oh "

I snatched the paper out of her hand, read it, and then slammed my fist down on the page.

"This crackpot reporter is insinuating that I drove him to commit suicide?"

"Don't you give it any mind. It's just a damn shame you were involved with that trouble last year."

"Oh yeah, *that* trouble. God forbid anyone else forgets about it either. I've been paying bills, working hard, all without a single dead body in my path for what, a whole year, and now this?"

Last year a grieving husband had used my Caddy to clear his name. Worked out fine for him, but I was put in the hot seat for a murder I didn't commit. It was terrifying to realize I was back in the same position, only this time, with a killer who had made sure that I would not be speaking to the police about anything I thought I might have seen. Ironically, I couldn't ID this person if they stood up right now and confessed. But I did know one thing—I was pissed off and angry the police thought I should remember more than I did and angrier still when a killer dared to try to intimidate me with a threat to my family.

Roxy turned to page three and pointed to the photo of a thin elderly woman in a limp housedress, her face twisted with grief and rage.

"Good God! Who's this poor woman?"

"Margery Dobson, Billy Wayne's mother," she said. "Looks like she's the one who's calling you a murderer."

I looked again at the photo, gray hair sticking out in all directions, her mouth wide in a crazed, wild cry of grief. "I don't understand. Surely the police have talked to her by now. Where'd she get the idea I killed him?"

"It's that nutcase, Del Potts. Says here Billy Wayne was 'obsessed with you,' and he quotes your second ex-husband, who says you 'do have a tendency toward violence.'"

I growled. "That sounds like Ricky."

Ricky Halverson would be only too happy to weigh in with his opinion of Lalla Bains. He might have gotten over the violence I did to his vintage Caddy when I caught him with his secretary, but he was still smarting over the damage I did to his image, when I took said vehicle in trade for a divorce, and painted it candy-apple red.

I sighed and said, "Caleb didn't even call to warn me."

"I called," he said. "You were already gone."

I turned around to see the man of my dreams. Though we shared the same birth date, forty on him looked great. Flat, hard abs in a tightly pressed khaki uniform, long bony face, close-cropped, thinning blond hair, and just a trace of summer perspiration on his upper lip.

Since I preferred him sweaty, naked and feeding me strawberries and cream in bed, I knew my expression had disappointment written all over it.

Nothing in his face said the long hours he'd spent with the investigative team had garnered any clues as to who might have killed Billy Wayne Dobson.

I groaned. "Now?"

When his icy blue-eyed stare swept the room, I realized that everyone had been looking at me. As if the short fuse I generally kept well hidden was about to ignite? What did they expect? That I was going to jump up and yell, *I did it! Snowflakes decorating the red paint on my Caddy just got to me and I snapped!* What a buncha ninnies.

"Might as well get it over with," I said. I slid off my stool, and leaving behind Leon's chocolate pie and the stares, I lifted my chin and walked out the door.

Caleb opened the passenger side and when I was belted in, he said, "Sorry I couldn't get to you sooner," he said. "It's been, to say the least, a busy day."

"Where'd you put my Caddy?"

"Tucked in all nice and safe in my garage. We'll pick it up when we're through," he said, and one-handing the wheel hard over, peeled out of the parking lot.

"Nothing else on last night's intruder?" I bit my lip trying to ignore the warning signs of an impending migraine.

His glance left my face and went back to the road. "Sorry, no. You get any sleep?"

"I must have, since I woke up thinking last night was a nightmare. At work since four a.m., though that didn't go so well either. I guess I should thank you for the patrol car at the end of my road. What about Billy Wayne? Anything new?"

"You couldn't have done anything for him, Lalla. The blade nicked his carotid artery. By the time you got to him he was already bleeding to death. The medical examiner said with the amount of blood in his heart and lungs he couldn't have lasted much longer. There was no saving him, and nobody seems to have heard a thing, including Mr. Kim."

"Got any suspects, besides me, of course?" I looked out the window, my voice a thin tight wire between two cans. I'm nine again, begging for answers with an unreliable connection.

"Try not to stress over this. You're not a suspect."

"Detective Rodney probably thinks I planted that note on my dad's door," I said, the breath hitching in my throat. I blinked back the tears and turned to gaze blindly at the passing scenery.

"The detective would be only too happy to go with the obvious choice, the person who found him, the one who was the object of his unrequited affection, me, Lalla Bains.

Caleb reached out to cup my cheek in his hand. "Sweetheart, don't cry."

I sniffed back my tears. "I'm going to sell the Caddy."

"Why? Because some nutcase left you a warning? Don't do it, Lalla. Everyone in town knows who you are and what you drive, so it won't matter. Besides, that note may not have had anything to do with the murder."

Was it Junior Margrave? Nah. Though I had every intention of getting even, I had yet to give our pirating competitor reason to start lobbing angry volleys over my bow. Besides, dad locked the doors. He just didn't set the alarm. "If someone was mad at Billy Wayne, why kill him? What reason could they have had?"

"Don't know yet. There were defensive wounds on his hands."

"Oh, geez," I thought of Billy Wayne, trying to fight off a scissors-wielding attacker. "Do you think it was a drug deal gone wrong?"

"Billy Wayne was in jail for a botched bank robbery, not drugs."

"Bank robbery? How's a decorated Marine sniper end up robbing a bank?"

"After he was discharged from the Marines, he got involved with a bunch of peace-niks. Called themselves the New Army of Freedom, and thought robbing a bank would be a good way to make a statement to corporate America."

"Then he got into drugs after prison?"

Caleb's lips flattened out to a grim line. "I never saw him loaded. He was on meds for his PTSD, that's all."

"But isn't that why he was living on the street? I heard — "

"You heard wrong. He wasn't into drugs."

I was looking for a lead, anything that said last night's messenger had a rap sheet that would lead to his arrest, but all I'd managed to do was poke at Caleb's sacred belief that a decorated Marine would be above getting stabbed for a zip-lock bag of dope.

He must've read the unhappiness in my face, because his voice softened. "Lalla, any drugs in his system will be determined when the autopsy is complete. I have something else to tell you, so will you sit still for a minute and listen?"

I nodded, unwilling to antagonize him any further.

"We finally got Mr. Kim's daughter to agree to another interview. She was reluctant to do so, but when pressed she agreed to sit in and interpret for him.

"So what was the result?"

"Mr. Kim says he saw someone at the end of the alley."

"Great! Then he can identify them?"

"Sorry, but no. As for your DOA note; didn't you fire a pilot last year for doing drugs? He might be pissed enough at you or your dad to leave a threatening note."

"Yeah. I was missing an extra set of keys after he left. I'd like to think that the note is totally unrelated to Billy Wayne's killer, really I would."

I could hear the eerie echo of Mr. Kim telling me to stay away. If Mr. Kim saw someone at the end of the alley, then why didn't the killer leave Mr. Kim a threatening note?

"Who then?" I asked. "Some other homeless guy? A drug dealer? Can't they pick up all these guys and get one to confess?"

"It's complicated."

"What's so complicated?" I could feel my voice going up an octave. If some druggie stabbed him for his stash, then why was it complicated? "Don't you have *any* suspects?"

"Working on it," he said, his clipped reply said he was finished telling me anything else.

My vague feeling of unease went into hyper-drive. "Then why do I need to go for another interview?"

"It's just a simple interview."

We pulled into a parking space in front of the Modesto police station and Caleb leaned over and gently kissed me on the lips. Seeing I was calm once again, he unfastened my seat belt.

"This won't take but a few minutes," he said, herding me toward the entrance. "Relax, will you? I already told you, it's an interview, not an interrogation."

"I never thought I'd care what Detective Rodney thought of me, but does this mean he's taking last night's threat seriously?"

"Yes. I made sure he understands that he will take it seriously because I got Chief Aguilar to sign me onto the case."

Chapter six:

I burped. My stomach was showing its temper at losing out on Leon's chocolate pie. "Sorry," I said, "nothing to eat since last night. I just wish this interview wasn't going to be with Detective Rodney."

He dug a mint out of his pocket and held it out to me. "He's been bumped upstairs. You're getting a rookie today. She'll take your statement, then we'll go get some breakfast."

"She? They got a new girl in the department? Good. I'm always glad to see more women on the force."

"Just don't call Deputy Pippa Roulette a 'girl' and you'll be fine," he said, ushering me through the double doors and up the back stairs to the open office full of desks.

I nodded, thinking Caleb was preparing me for some kind of hefty NOW radical with a ready-made chip on her shoulder.

Inside the main office, a desk had been shoved to one side and away from the cacophony of police work. Unfortunately, I could barely hear Caleb introduce us for the buzz saw of a migraine kicking at my head.

"Pippa Roulette, this is Lalla Bains." He gave me a little push in her direction and then stepped back. "I'll leave you in Pippa's very capable hands. I'll be downstairs when you finish." He didn't kiss me, just left me standing there with my mouth slightly open and insects chirping a riot in my head.

Pippa Roulette's sultry green bedroom eyes tilted warmly into my own, which meant that she was eye-level with me at almost six feet in her police issued brogues.

She had long, curly red hair clipped at the nape of her long, white, young neck.

"Hi," I said, shaking the long, slim, young hand.

And to think, last year I was all mopey about a simple fortieth birthday. Caleb and I will be forty-one this August. I resigned myself to make the best of it, and took the proffered chair.

Her smile sparkled whitely. "I'm so glad to meet you. Sorry about the circumstances though."

God. She was what—twenty-five?

"I'm twenty-nine," she said, and filled me in on the rest of the questions rolling around in my head. "I was in my third year of college before I got off the fence and changed my major from law to law enforcement. Kinda hard to start over, but I'm glad I did it. I really can't see myself in a law office, can you?"

Maybe as a centerfold. Spread across a desk.

She grinned.

Good grief, this was spooky. The girl was a mind reader, too?

"So in spite of my advanced old age, this is my first real job."

"Uh-huh." I was still trying to work my mouth around forty-one without stuttering.

So why did Caleb set me in front of this gorgeous redhead with creamy white skin and no crows-feet? The uniform said police department, not sheriff's department. At least she didn't work every day with Caleb. Or did she?

She cocked her head to the side, giving me a look that said she wasn't buying into any melodrama with jealous girlfriends. "Can I get you some water or something?"

I made a twirling motion at my head. Let her read that.

She nodded, got up and every man in the room stopped what he was doing to watch the ordinary brown uniform sway all the way to the water cooler. I never had hips like that, and a waist that small appeared only after a starvation diet decreed by the fashion industry, but then my ass would disappear, so no joy there, either.

When she came back, they all ducked their heads and went back to what they were doing. She leaned over the desk, handed me the cup of water, and said, "You'd think they'd never seen a woman before."

"Well, you're not the average hair-on-the-upper-lip deputy, either."

She gave the comment a throaty chuckle.

I popped a headache pill and swallowed it down with the water.

"Thanks," I said. "I was beginning to get a migraine."

"Caleb said you get them. Do you want to go lie down for a half-hour in our break room? I could do some other stuff while you rest."

Caleb told her? What else did he tell her? When did he have time to talk to her? Did they go out for drinks after work? This was going to make me crazy in no time, so I quit before it got out of hand.

"No, no. This will work in another minute, thanks." Besides, her desktop was overflowing with paperwork, and if I put a glitch into her tight schedule, I suspected I would only have to come back again tomorrow.

"So do you have a form I can fill out, or do you wing it?"

"Let's go somewhere more private."

Pippa led me into an interview room, closed the door, put the folder she'd brought with her on the table, and tweaked the blinds closed.

"All right, I've read the file, and I know this has been terribly traumatic for you, and I'd like to help if you'll let me."

"How?" I could hear my voice go up into that higher register I get into when stress and a pounding headache were threatening to ruin the party. "I can't even remember his last words to me."

"That's why Caleb asked me to see you today. I'd like to try a little simple hypnosis, if you don't mind."

"If you promise me I won't go out of here doing the chicken dance you can try anything you like. Not that it will work, I can't be hypnotized."

"Maybe not, but it's also a great relaxing technique and you look like you could use something to help with the stress. So let's get started, shall we? Take a deep breath. That's good. Deep breathing gets the oxygen into the brain, relaxes you. Now, close your eyes and we'll both take a minute to quiet our minds. That's good, take another deep breath, relax your mind, your shoulders, your arms, your hands. We have all the time in the world, so go ahead and let it all go. That's right, take another deep breath and relax, Lalla, now go deeper, that's good, just relax and go deeper, deeper"

* * *

Pippa was talking to me. "Lalla? Would you like another drink of water?"

I blinked and yawned. "No, thanks. Sorry, but I did warn you. Never works."

"It's not a problem. We talked a bit about your headaches, and I gave you a suggestion that might work."

"You did?"

She walked me through the bullpen and to the open elevator doors, then punched the down button and handed me a card. "This is for later, in case you remember anything." She stood back, and then reached out and stopped the doors from closing. "Your guy's a rock you know, but he's all yours, Lalla Bains. I wish ... I wish I had something like that in my life again."

I nodded, and as the elevator descended, I noticed the jittery nerves I'd come in with were gone. By the time I stepped out into the lobby I was feeling downright cheerful, if somewhat lightheaded. The lightheaded feeling, I decided, was due to the breakfast I'd missed.

Caleb got up and led me to a chair.

I smiled at him. "That was fun, but since I can't be hypnotized, I have to ask, is she some kind of psychic?"

"I don't know about the psychic part, but she's got a pretty good grasp on profiling."

"You told her about my migraines?"

"Did it help?"

"I don't think it worked, but I do feel somewhat—hey, my headache's gone!"

"They say that people who are prone to migraines are better subjects for hypnosis. Your headache was just an added bonus."

"And to think I was looking forward to an afternoon of hot-lights and bamboo shoots under the fingernails."

He stood up. "Pippa tell you to call later, in case you remember something?"

He was standing in front of me, belt buckle about eye level, hands on hips, talking. My brain immediately went to zippers, bed, and hot sex.

"Uh-huh." I realize not everybody's mind naturally goes in that direction, but after a long diet of no dating, we'd found each other, and I didn't want to waste another minute. It's funny, I don't remember being this way at thirty.

Caleb's mouth twitched. "I asked if you wanted to get some lunch."

I tore my eyes away from belt-buckle-zipper-bed-hot-sex, and doing my best to match Pippa's husky voice said, "I'm starved."

* * *

I awoke to sun filtering through the blinds and the smell of coffee. Coffee? I rolled over and sat up, reaching for the cup in Caleb's hand. I took a sip of the hot brew then glanced at the bedside clock and squealed. "You shouldn't have let me sleep so long!" I shoved the cup at him, and still naked, leaped out of bed.

"Sweetheart, you needed the rest," he called as I charged past him for the shower.

"I should be at work!"

He followed me into the bathroom to watch as I stepped under the hot water. "I have news for you! You've been out since yesterday afternoon. Your dad's got your work covered."

"Really? That hypnotism must've worked after all." I put my head under the shower, and shut the glass shower door on him. "Mentioning Pippa, did I tell her anything useful?"

"Not yet." Then he went to make us a hearty breakfast.

Refreshed, from some healthy sex, food, sleep, and something Pippa, my personal therapist, put into my head, I sang all the way home.

"Dad?" I called, pounding the dust off my boots on a rug outside the front door. Since a fire last year nearly destroyed the house, my dad, my god-daughter and me in it. I now wipe my feet before walking over his newly refinished floors. A dark stain still shows on the floor where beams crashed down, but Dad says he likes it that way. Reminds him of how he shouldn't take friendships for granted.

Following the sound of the blender, I stepped into the kitchen and jiggled the pharmacy bag under my dad's nose.

"That our meds?" he asked, and turned off the blender.

I nodded, but I was also having a hard time keeping a straight face. My father was in a pair of dazzling green polyester slacks and there was a matching lime green suit jacket hanging on the back of the chair.

The seventies were all over the pages of Vanity Fair and Vogue, but somehow the retro look didn't quite translate to sixty-eight year-old men with thinning gray hair and jug-handle ears.

I put the bag on the table, drawing out two small bottles for him, and another one for his buddy, Spike.

"Okay. Heart meds, Lasix, arthritis pills, and Spike's crazy pills."

"He can hear you, you know."

I looked down at the small brown Chihuahua, his tail beating an uneven rhythm in time to some inner demon.

When he lifted a lip and snarled, I said, "And not a minute too soon, I see. When do you think the vet will take him off the Prozac?"

My dad uncapped the bottle and tipped out a pill. The dog's ears went up in trembling anticipation. "He's much better, don't you think?"

I studied the floor trying to find something kind to say about our resident Cujo, then got an eyeful of my dad's shoes.

He followed my stare down to his feet. "White for summer, right? They're already patent leather so I don't have to polish 'em. Lucky find, huh?"

I worked my lips around the laughter bubbling up, imagining my father in retro style leisure suit on his next night out. I glanced at the blender, looking for a reasonable topic of conversation, but since the frothy blue concoction might, or might not, have Viagra as its key ingredient, I gave up and blurted, "You need a haircut."

A year ago he was recovering from a triple bypass, his blood pressure cuff dangling off his arm while he dictated orders from his Barca lounge. All of that changed when our house was set on fire, and my dad decided if he was going to live, he was darned well going to enjoy it.

"Hair cut? Oh, yeah." He put his hand up to the flyaway hair growing over his big ears. "That reminds me, George Winston died earlier this week."

"The pianist?"

"No silly, George Winston, my barber. We talked about everything, 'ol George and me."

"But not that he was sick?" Then at the stricken look on his face, I added, "A heart attack, right?"

"Cancer. Went right through him." He was thoughtful for a minute. "I don't know why I called him old. He was more'n likely your age. I'll be going to the funeral at two." Giving the shiny green polyester a fond pat, he shyly asked, "Think this will do? I'm taking Shirley Hosmer. There'll be a nice spread afterwards, so I expect we can call it supper."

Shirley Hosmer? The name pinged at a childhood memory. "Shirley Hosmer ... my third grade teacher?"

"Well, she's not your grade school teacher anymore, she's my date."

I held up my hands in surrender. "Okay, okay, but a funeral? Wouldn't you rather take her out to dinner instead?"

"Should I?" He stopped pouring the thick concoction, maybe trying to remember the paleontology of dating, or maybe he was considering the price of dinner versus the Viagra he'd mixed into his blender. He scooped a drop up with a finger, tasted and nodded his approval.

"Nah. The wake will have all that food, shame to waste it. Caleb called again. Coroner confirmed that Billy Wayne's death was a homicide. But still not your fault," he said, waving a dripping finger at me. "I got us a lawyer anyway. Young guy. He should do fine."

He was looking at me from under his bushy eyebrows. We both knew what he was talking about. Best not to engage anyone from his past. They might turn out to have skeletons in the closet like his last attorney.

He sniffed at the blender contents, poured out a glassful and upended it.

I asked, "Caleb say anything about a suspect?"

"Nope. Not to me."

Caleb's method was to wait, drop little tidbits when and where it would benefit the investigation. He was a brilliant investigator, or a sneaky cold-hearted bastard, depending on who was talking.

"Well, he'll come up with something," he said, wiping away the thick stuff clinging to his upper lip. Since my relationship with Caleb was coming along so nicely, my dad wasn't above proudly pointing out those qualities to anyone who might be willing to listen and of course, my dad would put Caleb in the brilliant, not cold-hearted, category.

I wish I felt so confident about his ability to find the killer without my help. "Where's Juanita? Did she leave already?"

Since the last thing my mother said before she died was that no matter what we did, we were to keep the housekeeper; naturally our bingo-playing housekeeper is still with us. She cooks dinner but takes home the leftovers, changes the sheets once a week, does the laundry on Mondays, and she goes home when she darn well feels like it. There are rumors that she used to scrub floors on her hands and knees, but I think that's part mythology, part ancient history, since I seem to be the only one who swings a mop around here, and not if I can get out of it. On the good side, she's sober, and crazy about the even crazier pooch who came to live with us as part of last year's psychosis. I liked that about her.

"Shopping, I think," my dad said. "No, wait ...bingo. Or shopping. Anyway, she'll be back later."

I decided to keep my opinions about his wardrobe to myself and left for an afternoon of invoices and bills.

* * *

Finished by midafternoon, I leaned back in my chair where it was nice and safe and I wasn't likely to give anyone advice on things like dating.

Caleb and I were dating. It felt odd, since I didn't usually date, I just married them, and then when we'd both become unbearably miserable, I divorced them. This wasn't bad, dating Caleb. It was actually pretty good as relationships go.

My reveries were interrupted by the phone.

"It's me," said my dad. "Shirley can't make it. Will you go with me? I hate to attend these things alone."

My dad knew my take on funerals. Together we'd already put two family members in the ground, so why did he think I would want to attend another one?

"Gee," I said, unable to control my antipathy for funerals. "You mean to tell me Mrs. Hosmer declined your amazing offer of a funeral and a table full of free food? Why go to these things, anyway?"

"See old friends, make new ones."

"There's your answer, then. Pick up some nice lady at the funeral."

He didn't say anything so I plowed ahead. "Let me think, go to a funeral, which you know I hate doing, and for some guy I don't even know? What're the odds, Dad?"

"It's just the funeral home, you can take your own car, skip the graveside and the wake."

We were in a brief lull between summer and harvest. All my work was complete, my desk virtually empty, and except for the dead body from two days ago, my mind was ghost-free and I meant to keep it that way.

Then he had to go and say, "It would mean a lot to me if you went."

I still owed him for losing the widow Warren's job to Junior Margrave, so that's why I went, never suspecting the trouble I would manage to rustle up at a perfectly sedate funeral.

Chapter seven:

Clients of George Winston, the barber, not the pianist, packed the Modesto Mortuary, all of them apparently in need of a haircut. Some were women, who may or may not have been wives, but seeing five or six single women, I figured I could cut loose from this gig after all.

When the eulogy was finished, I nudged Dad, motioning that I was leaving. He acknowledged my need to avoid the rest of the funeral and stepped into the line for the casket. Maybe he'd find a date in line, take *her* to the wake and call it supper.

As I slipped into the hallway I

bumped into a grim faced, rail thin, woman in black. I politely excused myself.

Through tear stained and swollen red eyes she peered up at me. "Who're you?"

"Lalla Bains," I said, offering her my hand. "My father and I came for George's funeral. Are you, his mother?"

"Yes, I'm his mother." A tic appeared in the wrinkled skin around her eyes, and in a wheezing breath she hissed, "I know who you are. You killed my baby!"

"Oh gee, lady, I'm sorry, but you must be thinking of someone else. I didn't know your son." I reached out for her arm to pull her away from the line of mourners steadily emptying into the lobby. "Why don't I get you some water, it's awfully hot."

She jerked her arm out of my grasp. "I'm not some crazy old woman and I know who you are. You lured my innocent boy to his death, you Jezebel!"

I tried to quiet her. "Ma'am, I think you've mistaken me for someone else. Let me get you some water."

I barely managed to duck the swinging purse she aimed at my head.

"Lady, please! I'm only trying to help!"

What was this crazy woman thinking?

We were also gathering a crowd, too. Happy, I suppose, to see something other than another boring funeral. But no one stepped up to take control of the grieving mother, either.

I looked at the amused faces, the hands in pockets as they waited for the possibility that there might be a cat fight to lighten up the day.

"Hey!" I called to no one in particular. "Can't one of you guys take Mrs. Winston out of here?"

They all stood where they were, blinking like a clutch of furry-headed owl-chicks. I backed towards the door as the enraged purse-wielding madwoman advanced on me. "Hey, stop that lady! Quit that."

I tried again, "Come on guys, can't one of you do something with this woman before she does some damage?"

Conceding defeat, I raced down the steps trailing a conga-line of excited funeral attendees.

I turned to see several of them aiming cells phones at us, clicking away, enjoying the anticipation of the melee. Obviously, this was a much better show than inside. After all, the other guy was already dead.

She waved a bony finger in the air. "Billy Wayne would never have looked at your skinny hide if he'd been in his right mind."

Billy Wayne? Well, that explained a few things. This was Billy Wayne's mother, not George Winston's mom. She also had a definite opinion about my physical attributes, too, but since the crowd was happily capturing the whole thing on their cell phones; I decided to beat a hasty retreat before she swung again.

At I opened the door to my car, I heard the collective gasp of the crowd.

I turned and saw the crowd stumble back and out of gun range.

Billy Wayne's mom had pulled an ancient long-barrel .45 out of her purse.

I couldn't blame them—the barrel looked about as long as her arm and just as heavy, but that didn't stop her from squeezing one eye shut and taking a wide-legged shooter's stance.

With shaking hands, I jammed the key into the ignition and prayed I could still hit sixty before she pulled the trigger, but I'd forgotten to put it in drive and the big Caddy's engine just shuddered. My heart echoed the Caddy's noise as I shoved the gearshift into drive, gripped the wheel, and punched the gas.

In the rearview mirror I saw Billy Wayne's mother, balancing her gun in a double-handed caress, closing one eye as she took aim to shoot.

But just as she cocked it, my dad ran up and wrestled the gun out of her hand.

I hoped to God another member of the Bains family wasn't about to be arrested—or shot.

Chapter eight:

My dad was either in jail thinking how best to punish me for getting him involved with a gun-waving crazy woman, or he was trading high fives and beers with his pals at George Winston's wake. Either way, I couldn't do anything about it unless I got a call from Caleb telling me to come and retrieve my old man.

I walked into the house to the sound of the phone ringing and, expecting Caleb, picked up. I should have known better.

"I'm crushed," the voice said on the other end of the line. Why would you think I called you a murderer."

"Who is this?" I growled into the receiver, but my bet was on Del Potts, that crackpot newspaper reporter. He was probably going through the cell phone images sent to him from my humiliating encounter with a crazy woman at a funeral home.

I may have said something that sounded like, "Bite me."

"Honey, baby, is that any way to talk to your lovin' hunka man?"

"Bad Elvis, Del. Want me nicer? Then stop accusing me of murder."

"Not me, baby."

"Yeah, you. First you incite Billy Wayne's mother to say that I was responsible for her son's death, then she threatened to shoot me in front of a crowd of mourners at George Winston's funeral."

"George Winston, the musician?"

I sighed. "Not *that* George Winston. My dad's barber. It's all your fault."

"We should talk. Say over lunch? You can have me on rye, wheat, or white."

"Not on your life, asshole. Go crawl back under your rock!" I slammed the phone back on the wall, the bell tingling from the unexpected jolt. I felt bad for the phone, it wasn't responsible for my bad moods.

I looked around the kitchen for something to throw, but decided against it since I'd just have to clean it up. Instead I went to look in the fridge for comfort food. No leftovers, of course, but there was a jar of pure, unfiltered, natural no-sugar almond butter, another part of dad's new diet.

In all the years since I quit New York, I hadn't gained an ounce. Then I hit forty and all of a sudden things jiggle when I walk. I suppose I could join Caleb at the gym, but I was too lazy for that. Softball once a week, when I could spare the time, was all the exercise I needed.

I opened the jar and stuck my finger in, pulling out a sample. It tasted like wallpaper paste and stuck to the roof of my mouth. Whatever happened to good ol' Jiffy peanut butter? My dad's new take on diet food was making *me* nuts.

Hearing the floor creak upstairs, I went to stand at the bottom of the stairwell and yelled, "Dad? That you?"

Juanita came to the landing with a load of laundry clutched to her chest. "He's still in town, *chica*."

This could be a good sign, or a bad one. If he was in jail, not so good, but right now I needed to eat. "Is there anything to eat besides that healthy crap in the fridge?"

She sniffed. "Don' let your daddy hear you talk that way. He's on a tear lately. He wants me to make some kinda tofu thing instead of my seven-layer enchilada casserole."

At the mention of her seven-layer casserole my mouth watered.

"Any chance you're doing your casserole tonight?"

She shook her head at me. "No, sorry, hon. Your daddy tol' me he was eating out tonight, an' I figured you would be with Caleb, you know, so I didn' plan nothin'. If you thin' Señor Bains will be home soon, I can stay, make him some tacos. You wan' me to make you some, too?"

"Uh, thanks, but I'm sure Dad's out for the evening. I'm going over to Caleb's after all, so go home, have a nice evening."

I preferred to hang onto the thought that my dad was at the wake, sharing a plate with a nice woman, instead of sitting behind bars. Caleb should be off duty by now. Didn't I see steaks in his freezer? We'd grill and snuggle in front of the TV and I'd forget about gun-wielding widows.

"Okay," Juanita said, "but you got a lot of messages on the answering machine, and there's a letter for you on the kitchen table."

"Are any of those messages from my dad?"

"No, hon. Newspaper and TV people and a whole lotta nothin'. Some people are so rude. How am I supposed to get my work done with all these hang-ups? Oh, and one nice lady, Miss Cook, and she left a phone number. I wrote it down for you. I thin' you should call her back and forget about the rest."

I shuffled through the mail, tossing most of it into the trash until I got to an envelope addressed to me with no stamp, which meant it had been hand delivered to our mailbox. I should leave this for Caleb. But, it wasn't sealed so maybe just a peek. An embossed note card with the initial *M*.

The note said, *Please come to my home today anytime after five p.m. I'd like to talk to you about my nephew Billy Wayne Dobson.* It was signed, Miss Merriweather Cook.

I lifted the notepaper to my nose and smelled lilacs. The address was one I recognized as being on the edge of suburbia. A cautionary voice in my head said, *This is no longer interesting to you, Lalla Bains.*

I pushed the note card around and around. Hadn't I decided to stay out of this investigation?

I fast forwarded through twenty-six messages listening to the last one from Merri Cook inviting me to come for a chat about her nephew, and this time she sweetened the deal with coffee and cookies.

This really should be left for the police. If Billy Wayne's aunt had something to add to her nephew's death, the police should be talking to her, not me. But, then I'd have to go through that disgusting Rodney. Besides, she was asking for me, not the detective.

For a moment I actually felt sick to my stomach, then remembered I was probably just hungry. I would get cookies, and maybe some inside information that would lead to a break in this case.

I wondered if Miss Cook made her own cookies, or if they were store bought, then picked up my car keys and closed the door behind me.

In the Caddy, I dialed Caleb's private line and got his voice mail. I hung up. This was okay, really it was. Maybe she would give me a clue, something that would help this homicide

investigation and give me my life back. I was also hoping for oatmeal raisin with walnuts. They're my favorite.

* * *

Merriweather Cook's house was in a newish housing development that when first built looked so far outside the city limits as to appear marooned. Not any more, it didn't. Housing developments now coated the landscape all the way to Stockton.

Since it was late afternoon, children played basketball in the cul-de-sac, a man watering his lawn, looked up and waved as I passed.

I parked, got out and walked up the paved driveway to the small tract home listed as her address. I rang the bell and then noticed that the front door was ajar. Pushing the door open, I called, "Miss Cook? Merriweather? Hello-oo-oo? Anybody home?"

I stepped inside. "Hello-oo-oo?"

Nothing. Did I even have the right house? I backed out the door, and looked at the house number again, then at the street sign. Right house, right street. But no Miss Cook.

Inside, I peeked into the kitchen and saw a lonely teakettle whistling gently on the stove. There was also a plate of homemade chocolate chip and macaroon cookies on a paper doily.

So as not to feel completely foolish, I checked out the two bedrooms and a single bathroom off the hall, then stepped out the back door. Rose bushes lined the fence, a sprinkler arched water across a neatly trimmed lawn, and a colorful fabric-stripped patio set was parked on a postage-sized cement pad.

Nobody home, and no body lying dead on the floor either, thank God. She'd probably gone next door to borrow a cup of sugar to make more cookies. I ought to move in. I took a cookie and sat down on the couch to wait. Then, too impatient to sit still, I got up, and with a cookie in one hand, I tucked a soft and chewy macaroon into my cheek and ambled over to a side board crowded with framed photos.

The first was of two young women, one thin and one heavy-set. I recognized a younger version of the terrorizing harridan from the funeral home, Margery Dobson. Amazing to think one woman could hold such a sour expression for so many years. The other one had a round face and a placid, agreeable countenance. This, I assumed, was my new best friend, Miss Merriweather Cook. The next photo showed the same women with two boys between them, one tall lanky teenager next to a short, round boy. I swallowed the macaroon and stuffed the chocolate chip cookie into my mouth. With both hands free, I pulled the photo out from its frame and looked at the back. Sure enough someone had written on it: "Merriweather, Margery and the boys." *Boys?* Didn't her note say, *Miss?* Maybe like me, she'd taken back her maiden name after her divorce. But did women take back their maiden names if they had a child? Would I, if I had had a child, take back my maiden name?

Billy Wayne was recognizable, even with the sulky typical teenager "Why me?" look. But there was no way to tell who the younger one might be. There were no grown-up photos of the boys, and just as I was about to pick up another picture frame, in walked Caleb and a couple of uniformed deputies.

"Lalla," he said, his voice resigned, if somewhat pained.

"Caleb? What're you doing here?"

"Please," he said, the painful tone turning to aggravation. He took my arm, and just like a few days ago, turned me for the door. "Let's go outside and talk."

"She asked me to come," I protested as he pulled me out onto the porch.

Caleb said something to the uniforms, then nodded at the row of houses on either side, and his deputies went to work, ringing doorbells, asking questions.

"So why are *you* here?" I asked.

"Because dispatch said there was a red car outside with big tailfins, loud arguing, and gunfire."

"Right. And, mine is the only red Caddy in town?"

He did a slow head shake, like I shouldn't have to ask. "Fortunately, it's my jurisdiction. Come on sweetheart, better me than Detective Rodney, right?"

Caleb's cruiser, I noticed was hastily bumped up onto the sidewalk. It was sweet of him to hurry on my account, still, something was off. "This is a load of horse-crap," I said, waving prettily at the guy with the watering hose. "Gunshots, huh? Look over there. Do you think parents in this neighborhood would let their kids stay out and play if there were shots fired? So, how long ago did the call come in?"

"Ten, fifteen minutes," he said, herding me towards his cruiser.

"I've been set up," I said, the macaroons now burning a hole in my stomach. He opened the passenger door, and I slumped down into the seat.

"Okay, maybe you're right," he said, going around to the driver's side. Settled, he put an arm along the back of the seat and tugged at my ponytail. "Where you been all day?"

I crossed my arms over my chest and gave him the short version. "I called you. You could've returned any of the messages I left."

"I tried. Your cell out of juice?"

I pulled my cell phone out of my purse. Sure enough, the battery was dead. "I went to a funeral with my dad, met Billy Wayne's crazy mom, and got the business end of her forty-five aimed at me. But I guess nobody called the cops about that. I did get a call from that newspaper guy, Del Potts, and soon as somebody arrests a suspect, I'm suing his dumb-ass for libel, maybe defamation of character, something. Then I get this letter addressed to me from Billy Wayne's aunt. Said she had something to tell me about his murder."

"You got this letter with you? No? Okay, what's her name?"

"You don't believe me!"

"Of course I believe you."

"Merri — Merriweather Cook. This doesn't look good for me, does it? If it turns out the lady is dead, you think your psychic deputy could help me get off a murder rap?"

"This isn't a joke."

Caleb's sense of humor didn't stretch to where dead people were involved.

I decided to shut up and watch the patrolmen unsuccessfully canvass yet another house.

"You don't think she's dead too, do you?"

"I think we shouldn't jump to any conclusions. Listen, I know this probably isn't the best time to bring this up, but I needed to talk to you anyway."

"Yes?"

"I think we should get married."

My eyes blurred and I heard bees in my head. However a migraine wasn't the reason—it was panic. What was he saying? When we talked about our future together, which we seldom did, marriage was never mentioned. Besides, what was he doing proposing to me like this? I looked out at the cluster of five or six couples standing with arms folded, mouths moving, heads nodding, probably tossing theories on why the police were parked on their quiet street.

He was proposing to me in front of a missing woman's house while a complete stranger stared at us from behind his watering hose. Wait a minute. I knew what was wrong with this picture.

"You're hoping you can rope me in with a ring, aren't you? Like if we're married, I'll suddenly become this meek little wife who'll never cause you any grief? Surely, after all these years you know me better than that, don't you?"

He was silent for a moment, then cleared his throat. "I didn't do this right, I know. Work has been hectic and we've both been so busy this summer that I thought I'd take you out to dinner, give you a little black velvet box "

"Have you got the box?"

"What?"

"You heard me, bozo, you haven't got a little velvet box with a ring in it, do you? You just now thought of this brilliant plan. All of which means, this was completely off the top of your pointy li'l head."

I opened the door and got out. "She called me! And I wouldn't marry you, Caleb Stone, if you had Rock Star printed on your forehead. If you were the last man on earth!"

I shouldn't have shouted; it was drawing attention away from the search for Miss Cook, but I was steamed. I slammed the door and flounced back to my Caddy. By the time I got the keys out and started it, I was shaking with rage.

Caleb reached in and put a restraining hand on the wheel. "Lalla. Don't leave like this."

I felt my heart sink. Our first fight, and I was sick about it. I was close to crying, though I wasn't about to let him see it.

"I mean it, Lalla. Rodney's on his way, and he insists you be here."

So, that was it? He wasn't here to beg my forgiveness for the faux pas he'd just committed? He was only trying to restrain the suspect should she try to escape?

"Get your damn hands off my steering wheel," I said, doing my best to sear him with the heat of my fury. "Admit it, Caleb, you were told to keep an eye on the little woman, weren't you?"

He flushed red under the deep tan. "Mad at me isn't going to work, Lalla. Come on now, turn off the engine."

"I'm not mad Caleb, I'm done. Detective Rodney knows where to find me." I punched the gas pedal and the car bucked into forward, then I remembered the brake, and hit the gas, burning rubber for half a block before I thought to look into my rearview mirror.

With a sense of *déjà vu*, I once again saw someone standing in my rear view mirror—only this time it was my coulda been, shoulda been, fiancé, his feet spread, arms crossed over his chest, as if braced for the impact should I care to back up and run him over.

Chapter nine:

I took the freeway and cruised toward town while I sorted through what I knew was fact, as opposed to my hurt feelings. It didn't matter to Caleb that I'd been invited to Miss Cook's house for coffee and cookies. And who but Caleb would come up with a marriage proposal at a potential crime scene? What a doofus! Did he really think I was going to fall for that bit of subterfuge? I tried to contact him, didn't I? Was it my fault he didn't answer his phone? It would've been a nice, quiet chat with coffee and cookies if some crankster hadn't decided to mention my vintage red Caddy and gun-fire. But where, oh where, was Miss Cook? And, why did she feel the need to call and send me a letter, if she was only going to disappear before I got there? What were the chances? Was it really just a simple coincidence of letter, phone call, and the police showing up all at the same time? Nope. It was a set-up. Too bad Caleb didn't believe it.

I felt the nervous tension of my dust up with Caleb slowly seeping out until I was no longer angry, only puzzled about the whole episode. Sweeping aside my annoyed and disappointed feelings, I decided to do something that *would* give me some answers.

Exiting the freeway at Kansas Street, I parked in front of Mr. Kim's Chinese Restaurant and thought about his daughter, Grace Kim. In high school, we quickly appraised each other's faux Goth look and decided what we both knew to be true: we were simply a couple of deeply inhibited loners. And thereafter, whenever we saw each other, we crossed to the opposite side of the street.

Ignoring warning signals now blinking like an unanswered message machine in my head, I tried to call her on my cell. The battery was as dead as it was when Caleb asked about it. I plugged the cell into the cigarette lighter and this time the call went through.

* * *

Grace met me at the door wearing the standard waiter uniform of bow tie, white shirt, and black pants. She may have shed most of the Goth look from high school, but her lace-up Doc Marten's said she wasn't letting go of comfortable footwear.

She warily eyed me up and down. "He's been through a lot, Lalla, and he's leery of getting involved. I assured him you're not working for the police. You're not, are you?"

"Of course not. Do you want to sit in with him, translate for us?"

She chewed at the side of her thumbnail, looking me over while she considered. Her decision made, she shook her head. "Won't be necessary. Just go easy on him, will you? He's had a tough time of it."

Mr. Kim smiled nervously, and indicating that I should take a chair, joined me at the table. His feet, however, aimed for the safety of his kitchen.

"Mr. Kim, did your daughter explain to you that I'm not with the police?" I didn't want there to be any misunderstanding about my status. I'd done as promised and retired my fake

badge to a bottom drawer. However, I still kept my little brown leather notebook. Very official looking, I thought. Mr. Kim gave it a glum look as I flipped it open and licked my pencil.

I said, "You may wonder why I would be interested in the murder of Billy Wayne."

"Oh, no I understand very well. You had a special friendship with Billy Wayne," he said, pulling out a news-clipping from his white shirt pocket.

I was a bit surprised to hear that his thick accent had disappeared—his English wouldn't be a problem unless he was talking to the police.

"Uh, well, maybe not quite *that* special. I mean, that is me in the photo, but only because Billy Wayne was sending unwelcome gifts. He wrote poetry and left it on my car, but I-I guess I found it all a bit embarrassing."

He nodded. "Yes, I understand."

"Well, then you understand when I say I am concerned that some people might think I had something to do with his death, because of what was in the newspaper."

He nodded again. "Of course. You were unfairly accused."

"Not really. I mean, nobody who knows me really thought I killed him. I mean, I wouldn't have hurt him, but others might think I did, because of this newspaper reporter."

He looked down at the printed page, painful lines appearing around his wrinkled eyes. "The proletariat always lie. It was much the same in Vietnam."

"Uh, yes. That's it, at least, it is in this case."

"What will you do?"

"I need to clear my good name."

"Ah!" He smiled brightly. "I understand. Your honor is at stake. How can I help?"

"Do you remember anything about that day? Perhaps something you didn't tell the police?"

He looked over my shoulder, a faraway expression in his eyes. "Ah, Miss Bains, to be able to have such a future as yours. I would do anything to be able to go back, clear my good name. I was in prison for many years in Vietnam, and it is said that once a man has been in prison he will not take kindly to closed doors. I know of this, because I would rather take an open door to a smelly alley than a closed one. I did not lie to the police, Miss Bains. If they did not believe me, I have done my duty and there is no more I can do."

His gaze tracked the shadows along the wall, and then his black eyes blinked back to the present.

"I told them about the ghost at end of the alley. I hoped one of them would look but they all had the same *nothing* faces."

I could see that racist clodhopper Rodney discounting Mr. Kim's ghost as superstitious nonsense. "Sheriff Stone believes you. Unfortunately, the killer, whoever he is, has sent me a message much like the one you gave me when I was here a couple of days ago."

He blinked. "Ah, when I recommended that you to stay away? Yes, very good advice." He nodded thoughtfully, taking in the tight strain of my face and my hands gripped together on the table.

Then he changed the subject. "I gave Billy Wayne a book, Japanese Haiku. Do you think his mother would give back this book?"

"You talked to Billy Wayne?"

He leaned away, now wary of my intense interest. "Some days, yes, other times, no. He stayed in my alley and wrote poetry. Sometimes, he read to me while I chopped. Sometimes we discussed philosophy."

"Did you see him that day, before he was killed?"

"Yes and no. After he ate, I closed door to the alley so I do not disturb his work."

"You gave him food? Did he often beg food from you?"

The wrinkled skin around his eyes tightened in distaste. "I always offered him a rice bowl with vegetables, but many nights he refused—but always politely. He does—did not sleep well, so he did not eat. His dreams were always bad, from the war you see. He was very troubled."

"Did he ever mention anyone who might have had a grudge against him?"

"Billy's heart cast no shadow for friend or enemy. No, no grudges. Do you not want to know about the ghost?"

"Oh, sure. Tall? Short? Man or woman?"

Much like my father, his eyebrows bounced. "That is all the police think to ask. I could feel ghost eyes, but it was too dark to see if it was a man or a woman. Then nothing." He lifted his hand and flicked his fingers at the vanishing apparition. "Besides, you needed my help."

"You heard nothing?" I asked. "No garbage cans turning over? No arguing?"

"No, that is why I closed door. I had radio on. I like country western music."

The veil of suspicion lifted for a moment, but our sparring was getting me nowhere. How was I to pry, prod, or chip away at his defenses if I couldn't understand what it was that I was missing?

"Could your 'ghost' have been another homeless man? Someone who ran when he saw you?"

His eyes shifted away and then back. "Yes, it is as you say—a homeless person."

I knew a dodge when I saw it. "You know Sheriff Stone is my dearest friend, don't you? If you need protection, he can see that you get it."

"No, no," he answered too quickly. "There is nothing else to tell." He held up a knobby forefinger. "Perhaps later." He stood, indicating that our interview was over. "If I remember, I will have Grace call you."

We bowed to each other once more and I turned to go.

Grace walked me to the door. "Pops tell you about his ghost?" She smiled sadly. "You know how it is with old people. More than likely, it's his failing eyesight."

"I understand, but if he thinks of anything else you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Sure," she said. Her smile lasted for the few seconds it took for her to open and close the door on my back.

Mr. Kim had orchestrated our few minutes of conversation with all the finesse of a maestro or a magician. He dropped hints about Billy that could be clues, that is if I had the intelligence to use them correctly. At least he hadn't discounted me as a dumb blonde.

* * *

Someone was leaning against the door of my car. Detective Gayle Rodney lifted his head. Was it simply my bad luck that he'd found me here, or had he followed me? I slowed my walk to a lazy stroll, poking my nerves back under my skin. "Detective Rodney, fancy meeting you here."

"Anything interesting from the old gook?"

Though I bristled at the racial slur, I kept my answer light. "I came for the food. Gotta eat sometime."

He pushed off the side and said, "A little late for lunch, too early for dinner, and this place is a crime scene."

"The alley is a crime scene, Detective, the restaurant is open for business, and I happen to like the food." I thought about backing up another step, but it would give him reason to think I might have something to hide.

"That so? You left yesterday in such a rush we hardly had time to get reacquainted."

"I told you, I was here to eat. Do you have something to tell me about Miss Cook? Has something happened to her?"

His amused laughter said I'd got it wrong again. "You don't call, you don't come by, now what's a guy supposed to think? You're not dumping me already, are you?"

He was baiting me, but I wasn't going to let it show by responding in kind.

"Is there, or is there not, a body?"

His heavy-lidded stare confirmed my suspicions.

"Right. Didn't think so. A false alarm, a crank call. Which means you're barking up the wrong tree again. See you around, Detective."

He leaned against the Caddy, letting me know he wasn't finished. "I got a lotta respect for that boyfriend of yours. Too bad you don't feel the same, 'cause if you did you wouldn't be so willing to make trouble for him."

Now he was beginning to rile me. "I think that should be between Caleb and me, Detective."

He came around the back of the Caddy, trailing his fat fingers across the tail fins, caressing the pointed chrome tips, running a thumb along the glossy red paint of the trunk, and stepping around the side to close in on me.

My heart was racing for cover, but the rest of me was stuck to the side of my car unable to move.

He propped a heavy arm on the top of my car, giving off a smell like a nuclear detonation. "Women don't usually find me so unattractive, but you don't seem to like me. Why do you think that is, Eula May?"

His eyes left wet slimy trails on my skin until I folded my arms over my breasts and broke the connection. Snickering at my defensive posture, and sure that he had me completely intimidated, he said, "You know what I think? I think we're just the same, you and me. Except you keep thinking I'm the enemy. I'm not, you know. I'm on your side."

"You mean the side of justice? Where the innocent at least get a trial before proven guilty, that sort of thing?"

"I thought I was making myself clear. All I want is a little cooperation," he said, giving me another slow once-over.

It was men like Rodney who used their position to bully women that brought out the disrespect in me. I turned away to grip the door handle, thinking if he took one more step I could yank it open and hold it like a shield between us.

"Lalla?" Grace called, walking toward me, holding out a white bag. "You forgot your order."

I awkwardly backed up and with jerky little side steps, put some distance between me and the detective. Unable to stop myself, I called at him over my shoulder, "I'll let you know about that cooperation, Detective."

Then I smiled gratefully and took the bag out of her hand. It was too light to hold anything but empty boxes. Clever girl.

"Thanks, Grace," I said, meaning it from the bottom of my heart. I put the engine into drive, and for once didn't forget to take the emergency brake off, then smoothly pulled out into traffic and actually looked good doing it.

Chapter ten:

Still jittery from my encounter with Detective Rodney, I may have exited the freeway a bit hastily. Behind me, horns honked and fists waved in the air. I stuck my hand out the window and returned the salute, then pulled it back inside. Unfortunately, instead of my typical middle finger salutation, I'd given them all a nice, big, happy thumbs-up.

I flexed the traitorous fingers in front of my face. "What's the matter with you guys?"

Talk about uncooperative. I was rattled, frightened, and spooked to the core. That Neanderthal, Rodney, that troglodyte, with his hairy arms and cold fish eyes, the beefy leer and his dirty insinuations. I felt a shiver twitch up my neck at the thought of him getting close enough to touch me. How could any woman stand having him touch her? He wore a gold band on his ring finger, so some poor woman must have thought him cute, at least long enough to say, "I do."

Inside Roxanne's cafe, I did what I do best when nervous, I ordered food. "BLT on white, and don't go light on the mayo, fries, a glass of Roxy's sweet ice tea, and a nice big piece of that chocolate chip pie, please."

Linda served my food with a sweet smile to those of us too dumb or too stubborn to eat at home. "How're you holding up, Lalla?"

"Fine, fine," I said, clutching my hands tightly to keep her from seeing them shake. "Bring some mayo on the side will you?"

I like mayonnaise with my fries instead of ketchup, but if I continue to eat like this I'm going to have to start doing my shopping in the full figured section of Macy's.

I was mopping up the plate with a scrap of bread when Roxanne showed up and basically asked the same question. "I see you got your appetite back. You hungry, or just eating on nerves?"

"Better than smoking, isn't it?" Between Roxanne and Caleb I'd quit smoking, but after days like today I missed it.

"Uh-huh," she said, watching me pick the last of the pie crumbs off the china plate with my fingers.

"Other than being accused of murder," I said, "by the newspaper, the victim's mother, and the entire populace of Modesto, I'm just fine and dandy." I wiped a dollop of mayonnaise off my lips. "Let's see, what else? Oh yeah, my dad's dating my third grade teacher, my job may be in the toilet if that elementary school goes in at the end of our runway, and Caleb had a young and beautiful new police officer to interview me about Billy Wayne's death. Like I said, I'm fine."

"No, you're not. Your hands are shaking," she said, reaching over and covering my trembling fingers with her own warm, brown hand.

"Yeah," I said, flexing my fingers in front of my face and willing them to behave. "Some of me seems to be on strike today."

"What happened?"

I took a deep breath and told her everything. "I don't know why I feel compelled to go off half-cocked the way I do. First I try to warn Billy Wayne off so he won't get into trouble with

Caleb, so much for that good deed, now every time I turn around Detective Rodney is there, leering at me."

Roxanne reared back and snapped, "Say what?"

"His words may be completely by the book, but it's the delivery makes me feel like I've been slimed."

"Then tell Caleb."

Feeling around my back molars for a little more of that comfort food I'd just wolfed down, I said, "Can't. I think—I think we just broke up."

"Now what did you do?" Roxanne asked.

I understood that it was a rhetorical question.

I ducked my head and blushed. "He asked me to marry him."

"Oh, yeah, that'd do it for me. Best looking, smartest white boy in town been mooning after you for half your life, and you dump him? Your emotions get into motion again, Lalla Bains?"

"Yeah okay, but you weren't there to see how he proposed—in his cruiser in front of half the sheriff's department milling around wondering why I wasn't already behind bars."

"Is this about Billy Wayne's murder?"

"Not exactly," I said, then told her the rest of it; getting the phone message and a note that Billy Wayne's aunt wanted to talk to me, and how I thought maybe she had been kidnapped.

She looked away for a minute. "We'll get back to Miss Cook in a minute. You love Caleb, but you're scared to become Missus Caleb Stone. Think you'll disappear behind his back, become a nobody, did I get that right?"

She waggled a forefinger at my nose. "Fine by me, don't marry him. Just remember, you keep turning him away, he's going to start looking elsewhere."

"Yeah, well there's a new deputy at the police station who might like to step into my shoes, though she'd bust out of anything else I own. You should see her, drop dead gorgeous and all of twenty-nine. What sane man wouldn't want a twenty-nine year old? I'm about to be forty-one, and married so many times they ought to revoke my license."

She rolled her eyes. "Not that old tape again. You have the same birthday as Caleb, an' you don't see him pouting, do you? Think of the alternative: Had you come up on Billy Wayne a few minutes sooner and you might be dead, too. Then that pretty young deputy would have Caleb on her arm. That what you want?"

I did a mental squirm, but plowed ahead. "I've been single now for four whole years, if you don't count the six months I lasted with Ricky Halverson, and maybe it ought to stay that way. Besides, I've been through a lot to be able to take back my maiden name."

"Then keep it. Lots of women do these days. It's not a name that makes a marriage."

I looked away. Everything she said was so right and yet so scary. "You're right about one thing. It's my mouth that gets in the way, and I don't seem to be able to stop myself."

Roxanne snorted. "Don't you think he knows that by now? Like I said, if it isn't right, don't do it. Don't stop long enough to let somebody love you. Just you remember, it won't only be Caleb's heart that'll be broken, it'll be yours, too. Now, tell me 'bout Miss Cook. What'd she say about Billy Wayne?"

"Never got the chance to ask. When I got there, the front door was open, a kettle whistling on the stove, and a plate of homemade cookies on the table. So, I'm munching on macaroons and the troops arrive, led by none other than my future ex-fiancé, because he got a report of gun-shots and a vintage red Cadillac that doesn't belong in the neighborhood."

"And you think she was kidnapped?"

"I think so, but why would the kidnapper take the time to call it into the police?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe for the simple fun of it? There was that DOA note on your dad's door that you chose to ignore. So maybe the killer is using this opportunity to tell you again. And speaking on behalf of your godchildren, I sure wish you'd pay attention and leave it for the police to solve."

"Too late," I said, and blithely added, "In for a penny, so to speak. After I turned down Caleb's offer of marriage, I also told him I wouldn't stick around to wait for another of Rodney's lame interrogations, but Rodney must've followed me to Mr. Kim's 'cause he was waiting by my car when I came out."

I told her what I'd learned, that Mr. Kim had been friendly with Billy, that he frequently gave him food, even loaned him a book of poetry, and last but not least, Mr. Kim confirmed he'd fleetingly glimpsed someone at the end of the alley.

She reached across the counter and removed the empty plate. "Okay. So, what do you think this detective is up to?"

"Other than scaring me? I suppose he expects me to crack under the pressure and spill everything I know."

She looked down at my hands working the paper napkin into a twisty little knot. "I'd say he's doing a bang-up job of the scaring part."

"I shouldn't let him get to me. I just wish he'd lay off."

"You got Mr. Kim to tell you things he hasn't told the police. But, if you're not going to give that to the detective, what're you going to do with it?"

"Caleb is now part of the investigating team, and he's a lot more sympathetic to someone like Mr. Kim than Rodney. Soon as I'm over him proposing to me at a crime scene, I'll call him."

Roxanne nodded. "Don't you wait too long on that. What Mr. Kim said might be important." Then she looked over my shoulder and grimaced. "Uh-oh. Don't look now, but I think Del Potts is sitting in that booth over there."

I froze. "The reporter? Since when did he start coming here?"

"Since he wrote that front page story connecting you to Billy Wayne's murder. I've been telling him you only come in nights, and dang if you ain't here to prove it. I think you got more than that detective to worry about. Yeah, now I'm sure of it 'cause he's up and walking this way. Want to jump the counter and run out the kitchen door?"

"Maybe later. Lemme see where this goes first."

Roxanne vacated the spot next to me and stood back to watch Del make an unsuccessful stab at hitching his butt on the stool. He nonchalantly added an elbow to the counter and hoisted himself up onto the seat. Roxanne rolled her dark eyes and left for the kitchen.

Del pretended I wasn't grinning at him. "Hellooo baby, how 'bout I light your fire tonight?"

I calmly wiped my hands on my napkin and lost the grin. "How 'bout I just light those last three hairs on your head with my Bic."

He choked and coughed.

"Hair ball?"

"You're joking, right? You don't even carry a lighter anymore. You quit smoking, right?"

"Don't count on it. What do you want?"

Now sure I was teasing, he was back to his old obnoxious behavior. "Hey, baby, be nice. Bet you'll want to know me better when I win the Pulitzer."

I pretended to examine my fingernails. "You got five seconds."

He shook off the insult. "Okay, here's the deal. I'm going to help you find out who killed Billy Wayne Dobson."

"After you called me a murderer? I think not."

"No, no, you totally misunderstood that article. It was his mother who said that, not me. I know you wouldn't hurt a fly. Besides, I'm here to help you."

"If you know something, call homicide. Better yet," I said, pulling Detective Rodney's card out of my purse and giving it a little shove in his direction, "here's the lead detective's card. Tell him."

With one stubby finger, he gingerly scooted the card back to me. "No thanks. The guy has no sense of humor."

At least we agreed on one thing. "Tick-tock, Del."

He leaned closer and whispered, "The more there is the less you see'. That's what Billy Wayne said before he died, right?"

I blinked. "That's ... I never ... nobody could've ... How would you know what he said to me?"

"I haf my vays. Look, baby." At my frown he switched gears. "Okay, Lalla. I got an interest in this case and I can help, but not if Detective Rodney is involved."

Another thing we agreed on. "So far you haven't said anything to change my mind about you, either."

"I heard you were pretty smart. You still want to talk to Merriweather Cook, don't you?"

"What do you know about Merriweather Cook?"

"Come on, let's blow this joint and I'll explain everything." he said, and hopped off the stool.

I stayed where I was. "About Merri Cook?"

"Yeah, yeah. But, first we've got to meet a guy."

I started to get off the stool, then paused. "What do you mean, *we*?"

He grabbed my arm. "Come on, we can talk about it in the car."

I resisted the arm tugging. "What guy?"

"An informant of mine. Look, I don't want to talk about it here, too many ears. He's got some information to give us about Billy Wayne. So can we go now?"

I hesitated, looking around at the audience we were attracting. "I don't think it's such a hot idea, me and you leaving together."

Someone might mistakenly think I'd agreed to give him an interview. I'd rather have a root canal.

"I know, I know. You think the boyfriend might hear and get jealous, right? I got that problem, too. I'm a regular chick magnet these days. The women can't get enough of the 'ol love machine, probably because I project all this incredible self-confidence. Chicks like that. Though from what I hear, things aren't going so smooth in lover's land for you."

"We're not leaving together, Del. I'll meet you out front of the Modesto Bee in twenty minutes, and we'll talk about Miss Cook and your informant there."

"Suit yourself."

I let Del Potts have a five minute head start, then jumped into my Caddy and tore out of the parking lot. I hit the on-ramp for downtown Modesto doing sixty. I had to crowd in between a couple of commuters so I could get in, but you would've thought I'd stolen their place in line for tickets to a Smashing Pumpkins concert. Jeez, some people.

I was coming up on the exit to Standiford Road when I saw the cold blue lights of a Modesto city police cruiser behind me. I slowed down, hoping he wasn't after me, but when he snuggled up close enough to my bumper for me to get the point, I took the freeway exit and pulled into the nearest parking lot. A couple of drivers gaily tooted their horns as they passed by. Tomorrow, everyone in town would know I'd been caught speeding, again.

I blinked as the officer position his spotlight so it bounced off my rearview mirror and blinded me. I shut my eyes until his bulk shadowed the glare, but when I smelled his peppermint chewing gum I knew exactly who had stopped me. Damn! Two years into his job with Modesto's finest, Byron Bettencourt was also the little brother of one of my soft-ball team mates.

"Evening ma'am," he said, toggling his police issue flashlight around the interior of my car. "May I see your driver's license and registration?"

Why do parents name their children after dead poets? Should I ask him? Maybe not. Humor, I knew was not going to work with deputy stick-butt. Uh-oh, didn't my dad say something last week about returning a call to the insurance company? How many tickets would this one make for the year—one? No, two, and this would be—three.

"Hello, Byron, how're you doing? How're your mom and sister?"

"Ma'am, can you tell me how much you've had to drink tonight?" His attitude was beginning to chap my hide.

"Byron Bettencourt, have you ever seen me drunk, even tipsy? And why're you acting like you don't know me? I play softball with your big sister every Wednesday night. I know all your secrets, Byron, and if you want to keep them secret, do us both a favor, give me a warning or whatever it is you have to do. I'm in a hurry."

I'd already done the Comedy Club, and I paid on the other one, didn't I? He simply had to give me that get-out-of-jail card.

"I asked you a question, ma'am."

Crap. How long would Del Potts wait at the newspaper office if I didn't show in the next few minutes? Byron was definitely taking himself a little too seriously. Still, maybe I should just take my lumps and the ticket.

"I'm sorry, Byron. It's been a long, hard day, so will you just please give me a ticket, or let me go?"

"Ma'am, step out of the car, please."

"Byron Bettencourt! Is this a joke? You aren't serious, are you?"

"Serious as a heart attack, ma'am." He opened my car door and stepped back, his hand on his holstered gun. "I'm going to want you to walk a line for me. Right over there, please."

Dusk had already settled along the western hills of the San Joaquin Valley, but it was still light enough for drivers to see it was me standing at the rear of my big ol' red vintage Caddy, the heavy lights of a local police cruiser battering me in the face.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why're you doing this?"

The pink ran up his neck.

Yup. Thought so. "You bucking for promotion, Byron? Looking to impress the captain with your hard-nosed stance on speeders?"

The muscle along his jaw twitched. "Don't know what you're talking about, ma'am. Over there, please," he said, pointing me to the spot he'd chosen. "Put your hands on your head and walk a straight line, one foot in front of the other."

The thought of walking a drunk-line in a parking lot next to one of the main streets of Modesto was beyond humiliating. This simply would not do. I had to try again, get him to understand that he had to let me go.

"Byron, look at me. Do you smell alcohol on my breath? Do you? I will not walk a silly line for you or anybody else."

"If you say so, ma'am."

There, that was settled. But as I turned to leave he grabbed my palm and twisted my arm around my back, and winching my thumb up onto my scapula, frog marched me over to the side of his car where he cuffed me and said, "You're under arrest. Code Number #647F, driving while under the influence, and Code Number #148-1-a, disorderly conduct and resisting arrest."

"What? I did no such thing, you little brat! You are in so much shit right now, buster!"

He shoved me into the backseat, where I flopped over, righted myself, and sat painfully on the metal cuffs. I was humiliated beyond words, but it finally occurred to me that I was the one who might be in trouble. So, before he taped my mouth shut I asked what he was going to do about my car.

"It'll be towed," he said, and then as if having second thoughts, he went back to my car, grabbed my purse, and tossed it into the front seat of his cruiser then got in, buckled up, and using the radio to call in his location, asked for a tow.

While we waited, I leaned into the mesh that separated the back seat arrestees from the arrestors and tried again. "Byron! You know this is a crock." And in a less than artful attempt to remind him whose girlfriend he'd just arrested, added, "We were both at Caleb's barbeque last week, remember?"

He didn't answer, but I could see the red creeping up the side of his neck. Byron's emotions were as transparent as when he was ten and I caught him spying on his sister and me trying on bathing suits.

"Byron, I'm talking to you! Do you really think this is going to get you Brownie points with your chief?" I was losing it, but I couldn't seem to stop myself and pulled out my last card. "I had nothing to do with Billy Wayne's murder!"

I watched the tendons in his neck bunch up against the verbal assault. Something was up. "Did someone put you up to this, Byron? Detective Rodney, perhaps?"

He turned around and glared at me, but before he could answer, a tow truck honked as it pulled up. Byron escaped by leaping out of the cruiser to give directions to the driver.

He never did answer any of my questions, but I made sure he heard all of mine as we drove into the Modesto police station parking lot. He was a little less rough when he helped me out of the car and took me by the elbow into the receiving area. I resisted the standard spiel of most drunks on the way to the clinker, that I was going to sue his ass all the way to Jersey and back, I had some serious ass kicking planned for Bryon. Soon as I made bail.

Chapter eleven:

I sat in a hard wood chair with my hands still cuffed behind me while Byron yaked it up with the desk sergeant in the Modesto police station.

Then to add to my misery, Del Potts strolled in, eyebrows rising halfway up his bald head. "Why, if it isn't Lalla Bains! You've been arrested? Whatever for?"

"Are you responsible for this?" I hissed.

"Me?" his eyes widened as he pointed to his chest. "I just report the news, I don't ordain it."

"Then what're you doing here? I was to meet you at the newspaper office, remember?"

He giggled and looked me up and down. "You look to be a little preoccupied. Maybe some other time?"

"No, you idiot. You had something to tell me about—" I glanced over to where Byron was writing up the paper work to put me in the slammer, "Merriweather Cook."

"Hey, don't be sore. I can't be held to every promise I make to a woman."

Was everyone here nuts? I felt like Alice in Wonderland, dropped through the rabbit hole. First I'm arrested, handcuffed, and brought into the police station, then Del Potts shows up and acts like I'm an odd surprise. The good news was that Pippa Roulette also just walked through the door.

"Pippa! Thank God!" I would've waved, but my hands were securely tied behind my back.

Fortunately, she took in the problem at a glance and answered my prayers. "What's going on here?" She looked from Del to me, and back to Del again.

Del decided to trot out his own special charm. "Hey, if it ain't Officer Pippa Roulette. How about you and me go take that Roulette for a spin?"

Pippa narrowed her eyes, then leaned down and spoke softly into his ear. He blinked, nodded, and power walked his short legs for the exit. Then she turned on Byron, who suddenly looked like a small boy caught filching cookies. Making it sound as sweet as Roxanne's iced tea, she murmured his name, "Officer Bettencourt."

Byron may have the looks that stopped young girls in their tracks, but he was still a couple of inches short of Pippa. Looking up into her deep green eyes, his Adam's-apple bobbed up and down. All he could manage was a croak. "Officer Roulette."

This was going to be fun.

Pippa smiled, and gently eased the clipboard out of his hands. "What're you charging her with?" she asked in that husky voice.

Byron, hands hanging by his sides, stuttered, "Well ... well ... she was "

"Says here, drunk and disorderly? Are you drunk Lalla?"

Oh, goody, she was hypnotizing Byron.

I answered in the same monotone. "No, Officer Roulette."

"Have you been drinking at all this evening, Miss Bains?"

"No, I haven't."

"Now, Byron," Pippa said sweetly, her voice low, her smile warm. "You were going to give her a breathalyzer test here?"

Byron's neck flushed again, his Adam's apple jerked a couple of times. "Yeah, and she resisted arrest ... so I figured "

Waving my cuffed hands behind my back like flippers, I objected. "That was a misunderstanding!"

Pippa motioned for me to stay quiet. "Miss Bains says she hasn't been drinking, and she appears to be sober. Do you really want to go to the trouble of a breathalyzer and be wrong? Then what? Her lawyer will chew this department up. Is that what you want?"

"I, uh ... " Byron flushed again.

"I see that the paperwork's not finished, so perhaps it would be best to forget about the whole thing." She turned me sideways so he could see that she was removing the cuffs. "Tell you what. You apologize to Miss Bains, and let's both hope she agrees not to sue the department."

Byron blushed. "I apologize, Miss Bains."

So now it was *Miss Bains*, was it? The little twerp!

Pippa flashed him a benevolent smile. "That's all right then, isn't it Miss Bains? Deputy Bettencourt sees his mistake and has apologized. We can just forget about the whole thing. Okay Byron, did you have her car towed?"

Byron gulped and stuttered, "I'll ... I'll take her to the impound lot, that is, if she wants."

Now he wanted to be friends? In spite of the grin I was about to let loose, I kept my head down and let Pippa handle him.

"I'll take it from here, Byron," she said, and led me through the exit.

Outside the gate I took a deep breath of the warm evening air and let out a shaky laugh. "My God, Pippa, I can't thank you enough. Talk about timing. You use hypnosis on him, or what?"

She laughed. "Byron is susceptible to me, not hypnosis. I found that out the first day I came to work." She looked me over. "You look like you could use some coffee. There's a deli a few blocks away that should still be open. We can get a cup and you can tell me all about it."

As we walked in the warm evening air, I said, "And you got rid of Del in record time. I could use some of that voodoo you seem to have over every man you meet."

"It's just good observation and common sense. Del has the attention span of a two-year old so I gave him a lead on a drug bust that was happening downtown. As for Byron, it's amazing what a girl can learn by keeping her mouth shut around a police station."

"Oh, you mean ignored by all and treated like an accessory?"

"That and I happen to know that Byron desperately wants to take the next test for detective, but stupid mistakes like this one could get him demoted instead of a promotion."

"Even if the charges had been dismissed, Del would've splashed my mug shot all over tomorrow's front page. He used to be such a sweet boy."

"I've got my own choice words for Del Potts and sweet isn't one of them."

"No, no. Not Del. I meant Byron. I've known him since he was ten. So, the part about arrests being on the test for detective, is it—on the test?"

"Haven't a clue, but it worked, didn't it?"

"I don't suppose it hurts that he's stuck on you, either, does it?"

Her jaw tightened. "Not that it'll do him any good."

"I think ... I think someone put him up to this," I said as we walked through the doors of the coffee house.

"Can it wait?" She was eyeing the line of bored off-duty officers.

I got her point, nodded, and bought her a nice big mochachino as my thank-you gift.

We found an empty outside table and I told her everything; that Billy Wayne's mother had tried to shoot me with an antique pistol, and his aunt might have had clues on the murder but has disappeared, and though I'd been cleared on a murder charge, I still thought someone was working too hard to set me up, probably, Detective Rodney.

"What's Caleb say about Rodney?"

Since Pippa was now my newest best friend, I couldn't tell her I wished she wasn't on first name basis with my almost fiancé. Instead, I said, "Caleb says I'm all wrong about the detective. But, Rodney's everywhere I go, always trying to insinuate that I know more than I'm telling him."

I paused for a second, working at the pattern forming in my head. "My guess is he got Byron to stick me with the DUI."

Her restless hands on the coffee cup went still. "Don't get me wrong, I believe you, but that's a pretty serious charge against a police officer, even one like Rodney. And why would the detective go to all that trouble anyway?"

"Rodney? Because I can't be reined in otherwise. Last year, I was so happy to be let off a murder charge that I agreed to be his stoolie in the case. I discovered who the killer was, but almost lost my house, my dad, my god-daughter and my life, no thanks to Rodney. He got a promotion and I was left scraping charcoal out of my ears. As for tonight's episode, I think the detective had plans to arrive in the nick of time and drop all charges so he could put me back on that short leash. His plan might've worked, too, if you hadn't shown up. I really owe you one."

She thoughtfully stirred the whipped cream into her mochachino. "I don't doubt for one minute that everything you say about Rodney is true. I hear he's a misogynistic bastard who has pushed every woman in the department to tears. But, you can trust me on this, his day will come."

"I've wiggled out of his trap for now, but I just wish I knew how to keep it that way."

"It's harassment, pure and simple. You should file a complaint."

"I can't prove it, not without getting Byron in trouble. I know I'm being sentimental over a kid I used to babysit, but for now I'd like to keep him out of it."

"Suit yourself, but don't forget, most serial killers were once sweet little boys, too."

"You're right, of course. I'll think about it. So what about you, Pippa, what's next for you? Detective, Chief of Police, Governor?"

Her smile went vacuous, and she fluttered her lashes. "Oh, gee, I guess world peace?"

Then her lips tightened, and the light parody of a beauty contestant was gone. "Or, maybe justice for the dead. That would be nice."

She picked up a packet of sugar and rolling it thoughtfully between her fingers. "Yeah, that's what I'd like to see, more justice, for the living, *and* for the dead."

When the packet tore open from the abuse, she let the granules fall between her fingers like so much sand.

I thought the sentiment notable, and also that the delivery was as sharp as a knife. I didn't want to end our budding camaraderie on a sour note, so I changed the subject.

"But still, Modesto? I mean, the most exciting thing to do in this town is sit in the Safeway parking lot and watch shopping carts collide."

She laughed. "It's not exactly a destination resort, is it? But it was the right direction for me, and besides, I couldn't stand the rat race of the Bay Area another minute, or the crime. I guess I could ask the same question of you, why Modesto?"

"I guess I'm just on a long rubber-band. I get as far as some place like New York City and bounce right back."

My answer was just flip enough to signal the end of our conversation.

She looked at her watch. "It's been an hour since Byron brought you in. Your car should be in the holding lot by now. Come on, I'll give you a ride."

On the walk back to the police station, she said, "I saw the dispatch report on the sighting of your car and gunfire in the neighborhood. I also saw that Sheriff Stone wrote it up as a crank call. Any ideas who might have wanted to lure you to that woman's house?"

"None." I blushed, remembering how I tore out of there after Caleb's awkward proposal.

"What were you doing there?"

"Responding to a request by Billy Wayne's aunt to come for a little chat."

"His aunt? So, what did she want to talk about?"

I glanced at her, and I didn't know why, but I was beginning to feel uncomfortable with her questions. "Her door was open, the house empty, a tea kettle on the stove, but no Miss Cook."

"You seem very observant."

"You mean nosy, don't you?" I said, remembering Caleb's commentary on my enthusiasm for the investigation. "I better be, I spend my days looking at the ground from five hundred feet up trying to make sure I have the right field before I put a poison on it."

She grimaced. "Have you done that before? Put pesticides on the wrong crop?"

"Hey, I had to start someplace."

"But flying crop dusters; is it really something you want to do for the rest of your life?"

"Ag work is a young man's, or woman's, job. There are some Ag pilots well into their fifties, but when your eyes, or your nerves go, or you have a couple of bad luck accidents, you're done, or should be. Hull insurance for aircraft is sky high and no one can afford more than one accident, and I had my one allowed accident last year. Couple that with an elementary school that's going up at the end of our runway, and we may not have a business next year. Nothing lasts forever, does it?"

Pippa visibly flinched. I'd said something that had made her uncomfortable. Good God, I'm such a goof! I'd managed to put my foot in my mouth and say something insulting, but what?

I apologized, but she waved it off.

"It's nothing, really. A little digestive problem that occasionally plagues my every waking hour." She unwrapped a tube of mints, and crunching a couple, smiled again. "Caleb says you're a regular touchstone for trouble."

I wanted to ask her how much she saw of Caleb, but then remembered what she'd said to me at the elevator, *Your guy's a rock you know, but he's all yours.*

Feeling sorry now for my earlier jealousy, I said, "I know I'm keeping you from home and a nice long soak in a tub."

"I'm glad to have been able to help," she said. "Besides, the department doesn't need another dazzling display of incompetence on record. We've got enough trouble, what with the feds moving an investigator into the police station. I'll get your car, and we'll both go home," she said, walking up to a late model white Pontiac Firebird. The inside was pristine with only a

Chinese good luck symbol, its silk tassel swinging lightly from the rearview mirror to add a personal touch.

At the impound lot, Pippa made sure my car was intact and checked to see that I got the right key. I was happy to see that someone had rolled up all the windows and locked the doors.

She shook my hand and once again encouraged me to file a complaint against Detective Rodney. "In the meantime, stay out of his way, the guy's a snake."

"I'll consider it, but if you have any advice on how to get Del Potts to leave me alone, I'll take it."

She lowered her lashes, the gesture was as brief as a moth wing passing across a light, and then raised them to look me in the eyes.

"Turn off your phone," she said with a smile.

"I'll do that," I answered lightly, still wondering what it was I said earlier to make her flinch.

I looked up at the night sky, tasting the air for moisture. The wind had scoured the evening of its usual dust and debris, and now stars were punching holes in the velvety black dome over my head. A breeze out of the south meant we had a Southerly tracking its way into the valley, and it was coming fast. Sometime tomorrow, we were in for some rain. I could forget turning off my cell phone as that would be the first number the farmers would use, all of them vying for first place in the queue.

I exited the impound lot and turned right just as another car pulled up behind me, high beams flashing. At least this time there were no twirling overhead lights. Someone who wanted to pass? But, just in case it was Caleb, I pulled over and waited with the window rolled up and the door locked.

Del's bald head leaned close to the window, and he rolled his fingers to get me to lower my window.

"Glad to see you blew off that dyke. She didn't try to kiss you, did she?"

"Oh, for crying out loud! She's not a dyke, and *she* saved my butt from being thrown into the drunk-tank, no thanks to you."

"You're welcome. Took you long enough. I been out here waiting the whole time. What? You didn't think I was going to leave you there, did you? Just be glad I didn't have to use my CIA tactics and storm the place. That would've been messy. Okay, so take 12th street and meet me at the AM/PM next to the on-ramp. We're late."

I was exhausted from the roller coaster of the last four hours and doubly annoyed with Del's nonsense. "You go see this guy. Anything comes of it, call me."

"I knew Deputy Do-Right wasn't going to make that charge stick; you don't drink, right?"

"Who told you that?"

"Oh come on, Lalla. Everyone knows that you don't drink during the season. Insurance too high as it is. Right? Am I right? Come on, let's kiss and make up." At the expression on my face, he chortled happily. "Okay, okay. But you're going to want to meet this guy, you know."

"Why's that?"

"He asked especially for you."

"Your informant? This guy knows me?"

"Absolutely," he said, waiting for me to catch up.

"Oh, okay. My name's in the paper every day—got it. I'm not exactly firing on all cylinders here, Del. I'm dead on my feet, and all I want to do is go home."

His brows flattened, no longer amused. "That's all you got to say after all the trouble I went to? You can't make it? I'm disappointed in you, Lalla Bains. I heard you were made of tougher metal."

I looked out the window, then back at Del while I considered my options. Nice warm bed or the off chance I might get a real lead on Billy Wayne's killer? "Oh, alright. But this better be good."

Taking my foot off the brake, I gave the gas pedal a shove, and to the familiar and comforting sounds of honking horns, lurched into traffic. Only minutes before, I felt as if I'd been run over by a truck. Now I was energized again; an informant who might be able to give us a lead on Billy Wayne's killer. And, he hadn't asked for Rodney, had he? He asked for me, Lalla Bains, which gave me a thrill. I was going to crack this case and hand it to Rodney's chief on a platter.

In the parking lot of the AM/PM, I got out, looking around for Del's informant.

Del drove up and parked next to me. I had to admire his choice. The Cooper Mini is a speedy little demon with a short turning radius. The size fit Del, but the top of the car barely came to my chest. I went over and knocked on the roof. He got out, silently went around to the passenger side, and stood back.

I shrugged, leaned in, pulled the seat lever so I could maneuver my legs into the car, and sat down on his hand.

I gasped. It wasn't a mistake, because there was no mistaking his lascivious grin.

Lifting my hip, I said, "Remove the hand, Del, or you'll come out with a stump."

He pulled out his hand. "Aw, come on, where's your sense of humor?"

"What are you, twelve? Why do you pull this kind of silly stunt?"

He laughed. "Breaks the ice? Keeps the black moods away? Or maybe it's just a charming quirk of nature. Okay, sorry," he said, holding up two fingers like a Cub Scout, "I solemnly promise not to do another for the rest of the evening. How's zat?"

I mumbled something that might have been an oath of my own, then closed the door and pinched my nose at the smelly food wrappers littering his dashboard.

"Sorry. I usually clear it out at the end of the day," he said, scooping up the wrappers in both hands. "But I can see you're the fastidious type, so I'll do it *now*."

He hopped out of the car to dump the trash. I was still curious enough to overlook his ridiculous behavior, at least long enough to meet his informant.

He rushed back to the car and jumped inside.

I tsked. "It may be the local Stop and Rob, Del, but I think you're safe with me."

"Very funny. Are you satisfied with the interior now? Are we good to go?"

"This isn't it?"

"No, we meet him somewhere else, and it's best if we get there in one car."

"Jeez, you could've told me that sooner, you know. It might've saved me the hang-up at the police station."

He tilted his head down and looked at me over imaginary teacher's glasses. "I tried that, at Roxanne's, remember? Wouldn't have any of it, would you? See what happens when you don't listen to Uncle Del?"

"Okay, I'm listening now, and you promised to tell me about Miss Cook."

"I most certainly did not," he said, scanning the faces of the people going in and out of the AM/PM.

"What do you mean?" I sputtered, "You said—"

"I asked you if you were still interested in Merri Cook. I got a police scanner, heard all about it. Your Caddy in a mix with reported gunfire. Easy to look up the owner for the address, so *ipso facto*, you must be interested in her whereabouts. Am I right, or am I right?"

"She's Billy Wayne's aunt. She called me, left me a note to come see her. Now, I'm in more hot water because of it."

"Forget about Merri Cook. This is way better. Trust me, you're going to thank me for this," he said starting the car.

I muttered a curse and reached for the door. He put out a hand to stop me, and in a reflexive gesture I fisted him in the nose—hard.

He grabbed his face. "God damn, that hurt!"

I opened the door and got out.

"Wha'd you do that for? I dink you bwoke my dos." Blood was leaking between his fingers. "Lalla, would you pleath wait?"

I hesitated, then handed him a wad of tissue. How could one short, fat man make me so mad? Probably because so far, it had been one hell of a long day and there was no promise that it might get any better hanging out with Del Potts.

I took another deep breath and asked myself the redundant question: *What am I here for, if not to find Billy Wayne's killer? Put a lid on your exasperation, Lalla, and see where this was going.*

I squatted down and handed him a tissue. "You'll live. Now tell me why you think I should get in your car again, much less go anywhere with you."

He took the tissue and blotted the bleeding nose. "Okay, okay. Duth gib me a minute?"

It may have hurt like the dickens but it didn't look broken. I knew broken, since I'd broke mine twice; once trying to catch a fielded ball in a softball game, and then last year during a crash landing when my face became intimate with the metal components of my plane's instrument panel.

"Do you really hate me so much?"

"What do you expect, Del? You're working on my last nerve."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm every woman's worst nightmare. Okay, so if you can, for just one minute, let go of your disgust?"

"You got ten seconds."

"Awright, okay, lemme explain. Word is that one of the bums saw Billy Wayne's killer. But since dodging cops comes second nature to these guys, and being the wily bunch that they are, they've all gone to ground. But, our luck has changed tonight because one of them wants to talk."

"And?"

"I'm getting to that. Your picture has been in the papers, so it stands that he should want a look at Billy Wayne's love interest."

"Will you give it up about me and Billy Wayne? I spoke exactly two words to the guy, 'nice job,' or something to that effect. I don't know why he picked me. I just know he couldn't have possibly been in love with me, because he didn't know me."

Del nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I know that."

I took two deep breaths, hoping to bring down my blood pressure. "You do this to everyone you meet? Pester, annoy, aggravate, frustrate, and just plain piss them off until they finally snap? You did that to Billy Wayne's mom, the poor woman, didn't you?"

He shrugged. "She was bereaved already. Nothing I was going to say could change that, or her opinion that Billy Wayne was in love with you. As for my methods, I use what I got. It's not like I'm going to get what I need on my good looks."

"Answers, Del. I want answers now, or I'm not going anywhere, so tell me about this informant."

He dabbed at his nose with the tissue. "We get handwritten letters to the editors all the time. Sometimes incoherent raving nonsense, but we read 'em anyway because every once in a while something comes through that turns out to be a brilliant headline, or at the very least, a feature on the homeless situation. We got one this morning. It came to me 'cause I'm working this murder case. The note says he wants the press, not the cops, and to bring Miss Bains with me."

"What's his name?"

"They go by nicknames and this one signed the note, Skip-Jack. You know what a skip-jack is, don't you? It's a tuna that's not fit to eat so it gets tossed back."

"So besides having a morose sense of humor, did he say what he has for information?"

"Said he can tell us who killed Billy Wayne. So, coffee to go?"

He waited, knowing he had me.

Chapter twelve:

I should be home, tucked into bed with a nice cup of tea to soothe my frayed nerves, instead, I was sitting in Del Potts's Mini Morris parked next to Mr. Kim's darkened alley. In spite of the warm summer night, the cold lights from the halogen street lamps washed up against the buildings and disappeared into the black hole where I'd found Billy Wayne. At least Del had gotten coffee at the AM/PM. I blew on my paper cup and watched the street for the homeless man who had asked for a reporter and Lalla Bains.

"What time did he say he was coming?" I asked, feeling the weight of foreboding draining away my enthusiasm. This had all the feel of a set-up, maybe Rodney making another attempt to see me arrested.

"These guys don't usually wear a watch, and he said late and it's now late, so we wait."

"But he did say tonight, right?"

"Right."

Delmar, for the first time since I'd known him, was suspiciously quiet. He was slouched down in his seat, absorbed in his own melancholy thoughts.

I poked him.

He said, "In suffocation there's always a thin red line inside the upper lip. I read that in Billy Wayne's autopsy report. The killer got behind him, clamped a hand over his mouth and then reached around and stabbed him. Oh, and he or she, was left-handed and probably five-foot eight or so. That kind of strength takes commando type training. I'm thinking it was a cop."

I remembered Mr. Kim using his left hand to pour my tea. "It's also military training. Grace Kim told me that her dad had been a freedom fighter in Vietnam. Billy Wayne was a former Marine, and hung out behind Mr. Kim's."

"Mr. Kim? Too short."

"Then why would Billy Wayne pick Mr. Kim's?" Which reminded me to ask, "Did you know Billy Wayne?"

"As a matter of fact I did. We lived in the same neighborhood in Stockton until I was sixteen. That's when my parents divorced and I moved with my dad. Billy Wayne was nice to me. He treated me like a little brother."

I snickered. "In other words, he told you to keep your distance, huh?"

"I wasn't always so hard to take. I got a complex from all that teasing about being so short. Nothing you'd understand since you're a regular blond Viking."

"Thanks for the compliment, Del, but I had my problems in school, too. My mother died when I was eleven, and what with kids thinking it might be contagious, I found myself on the wrong side of a no-crossing zone. By high school, I sported the Goth look, you know, pentagram dangling from a chain and you only wear black? I stayed away from sports, the French Club, anything that might hold me up to ridicule. If it hadn't been for Caleb Stone, who had also lost a parent, I would have been completely friendless."

"Gee, I guess we've got more in common than either of us thought."

I slanted him a doubtful look.

He returned it with a hopeful grin.

"Why do you keep hitting on women who are totally uninterested?"

He shrugged. "It's just a game. You know, one out of twenty?"

"One out of twenty what—dates?"

He smirked. "Who said anything about dating?"

"Not even dinner or flowers?"

"Why go to all that expense? Dinner, flowers, a long night of shoving some skank around the dance floor, and for what? They either go to bed with you at the end of the night, or they don't."

"I knew I could depend on you to gross me out."

He chuckled. "Glad to see I didn't let you down. Now that you know all my secrets, you think we can be friends?"

I glared at his offer of a friendly handshake, suspicious that he might have one of those joke buzzers hiding in his palm.

But out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone shuffling towards us. The shabby hooded sweatshirt hid his face, but as he came closer to the car I got the distinct feeling that I should know him.

That walk—high school? Not everyone who was in my class made it in the real world.

Del put his cardboard coffee cup on the dashboard and hopped out of the car.

I got out by pulling my legs up to my chest, then angling them over the doorframe, and finally out onto the pavement. I vowed to take a taxi back to the AM/PM where I'd left the Caddy.

I followed Del to where the man had backed into the shadows, waiting.

When he asked Del for cigarettes, Del turned to me. "You got any smokes on you, Lalla?"

"I quit, remember?"

The man mumbled something, and hunched further into his dirty hooded sweatshirt.

That voice. Where had I heard it? "Do I know you?"

He pulled off the hood, and a rank body odor came with it. Under the harsh light of the street lamp, the planes of his face were bony, his eyes shadowed into deep sockets.

"I guess you do, Lalla Bains, and don't you look sweet. Smell sweet, too. Bet you've had a nice bed to sleep in and a nice shower anytime you want."

It was Brad, the pilot I'd fired last year for doing drugs. He stuck his hands into the pockets of his sweatshirt. I wouldn't feel sorry for him. I'd paid for two stays at rehab, and it wasn't my fault he couldn't make it stick.

"What do you want, Brad?"

"It's what you want, isn't it? Rich bitch like you wouldn't understand about giving a guy a second chance, would you? I'm blacklisted, lost my ticket as a journeyman ag-pilot, and now I can't get a seat anywhere, thanks to you. Way I see it, you owe me, but to prove I'm such a nice guy, I'm here to give you what you need to clear your lily-white name."

I bristled at Brad's remarks, though I shouldn't have expected him to be anything else except the self-centered drug addicted bum he'd become. His hard won career as a crop duster was finished for good, and he had no one to blame but himself.

Del stood slightly apart, aloof and observant, the quintessential newsman waiting for the drama to unfold. Gone was the silly jokester, the gnome-sized Elvis. If this guy decided to pull

out a knife and gut me, Del would probably report on the way my blood ran down to the pavement, then snap the whole scene as I dropped dead on the ground.

I looked back at Brad nervously bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"And you expect me to pay for the information, I suppose."

"Like I told you, you owe me. I need ... " he licked at his dry, cracked lips then sneered at the spark of pity in my eyes. "I need enough to get out of this crap-hole town. A lot of money, and you're going to give it to me."

About now, Brad was two hours into the jimmies, and his bag of wet nerves was already beginning to show.

He snapped dirty fingers to get my attention. "I could use a smoke. You got some on you, I know you do."

"Gimme a minute," I said, digging into the bottom of my purse.

I passed the wrinkled pack over to Brad and answered Del's smirk. "They're old, stale, and only to be opened in case of an emergency."

Brad took a deep drag, gave it a disappointed look and huffed out the smoke, his jerky motions temporarily dulled by weak drug of the cigarette. He took one more drag and glared at me. "Now, about that money "

Del and I looked at each other. Brad was like every other junkie, only as good as the next rush of dope and we knew Brad's swagger was good for only another couple of minutes, then the dope monster would reach up and grab him by the throat. We needed him to tell us what he knew, and now, before he disappeared again. I opened my purse, took out my wallet, and held up four twenties.

He took another deep drag then flicked a disdainful glance at the bills in my hand. "For what I got to tell, you're gonna have to come up with a lot more than eighty bucks."

"It's all you're getting from me, Brad." I held up the twenties and fanned them out so he could see the bills. "So tell us what you know, or get lost."

He swallowed, took another shaky tug on the cigarette, bit at his lip and nodded at the money. "I'll tell you one thing for the twenties in your hand. But after you hear what I got to say, you're gonna be happy to give me what I want."

I was beginning to lose patience. "Why don't you just tell it to the cops?"

His hateful grin was wide enough for me to see brown stumps for teeth, and his breath was as foul as his next words.

"They're working their way through the whole damn bunch of us. Cops stick together. You oughta know that, Lalla Bains, you're sleeping with one. If one of those bums can think long enough to remember where I was that night, they'll turn me in for a dime bag of coke the cops use to keep us in line, and that'll be the end of me. So, tomorrow night, bring me ten, no, make it a hundred grand, and I'll tell you the name of the cop who killed Billy Wayne. It's a cop that did it, Lalla, and when I tell who it is, you're going to beg to pay up so I'll leave town."

Then he reached out and snapped the bills from my limp hand.

Brad turned to run, but Del grabbed him by the back of his grimy sweatshirt.

"Who? Tell me, you slug!"

Though Del was a good foot shorter, he still had Brad by thirty pounds.

Brad wobbled, then executing a quick pirouette, he let the sweatshirt peel off with a twirl. With the sweatshirt off, I could see rail-thin ribs that were bruised, and scabbed.

Brad saw the shock on my face, and his laugh was high and mean. Then he took off, jogging down the street, looking over his back to grin at us. I stood transfixed to the spot, shocked at the blow. He was suggesting that Caleb was involved.

I looked at Del and sputtered, "The bastard! He's lying."

"He's pulling your chain, 'cause that's what addicts do. But, we aren't waiting until tomorrow to get a name out of him because by tomorrow the wrong cop could have him."

"Then let's go get him," I said, and we both took off running.

At the end of the block, Brad skidded, fell, then scrambled up and rounded the corner. We were gaining on him, but I could see that Del was running out of steam.

I picked up speed and yelled over my shoulder, "Wait here! I'll get him!"

Del waved me on and slowed to a walk.

I was gaining on Brad, but then he glanced back and saw me closing in on him. His eyes widened and he took off across the street and into oncoming traffic.

J Street is a major thoroughfare to most of Modesto, and even at this time night traffic was brisk.

Dancing between cars, he zigged through traffic, gleefully hammering the trunk of a car, snapping his fingers at me to show he still had the old hand-eye coordination—stoned or not.

Then he stepped into the high beams of a semi.

Forty tons of steel bearing down on him, and this time he wasn't able to dodge the bullet.

Del jogged up, grabbed my arm, and pulled me away from the streetlights. "Come on, Lalla. Let's get out of here."

"Oh my God! Did you see that? He just ... he got hit by that truck! We have to do something. He ... he might, he could still be " I was shaking and babbling, but I let Del drag me away and into the shadows of a nearby building where drivers stopped, and cell phones lit up as people called call 9-1-1.

Del nodded at the growing crowd around the body. "Do you really want to be here when the cops arrive on the scene? Not a good idea for either of us. Look, if it'll make you feel any better, I'll check with Modesto General Hospital, make sure. If he's alive, he's not going to be talking to anyone for a while. If he's dead, we've got our first real confirmation. I knew it was a cop, but we're going to have to work hard to narrow it down."

"What ... what if it was all for nothing?" I asked, the shock draining me down till I could hardly put one foot in front of the other. "What if this was simply his way to get back at me for firing him? He was here to blackmail me."

Del held me by my elbow and pushed me toward his car. "No, Lalla. He was telling the truth. He knew the killer is a cop."

I collapsed into the passenger seat, shaken and weepy. "It was all for nothing."

Del patted my hand. "Not for nothing. We got some to use, and I know just the place to put it."

He put the car in gear, but because he'd forgotten the coffee sitting on the dash, it fell into his lap. "Damn. Now I gotta mop this up before it makes a stain."

He backed out of the car and bent over to blot the coffee off his pants, then leaned in and mopped the driver's seat.

That's when I saw the blue lights of a city police car circling us in an incandescent halo. "Oh no, that's all we need."

I tried to disappear in my seat. We were next to an alley, a notorious pick up spot for streetwalkers, and the policeman was here to direct traffic away from the scene of the accident. He got out of his cruiser, unhooking the strap on his gun-holster as he cautiously approached.

The minute he came close enough to see who it was backing out of the open car door, the wet front of Del's pants, and me, stony and silent in the passenger's seat, he relaxed the grip on his holster.

I groaned. He knew us, and I knew him. I muttered, "And I didn't think this night could get any worse."

Byron Bettencourt worked his mouth around an ugly grin. "Lalla Bains has taken on some night work on the side? No, can't be the money. How 'bout this, since he's half the man that Caleb Stone is, Lalla Bains has given him up for Delmar Potts. Or maybe—no, I liked the first one."

Unable to hold it back any longer, he snickered. "And me without a video camera."

It couldn't have looked any worse if we were caught doing a naked mambo on McHenry Avenue. And Byron was going to have his fun after his personal humiliation at the hands of his former baby-sitter.

Unfortunately, Del made his second mistake of the night. "As you can see officer, this is spilled coffee on the front of my pants. You got us dead to rights, parked here in a loading zone as we are. What's the fine then?" He held out a hundred-dollar bill. "I'll bet you can take care of this for us, right?"

Byron's fun house expression went south, and his posture went rigid. The young man may have been willing to work for Detective Rodney, but a bribe from a civilian wasn't in the cards. His answer was a hard shove against the Mini.

The little car and I shuddered with the impact. He cuffed Del, and then growled at me to stay where I was while he marched his catch of the night to his cruiser.

My heart sank at the image of my dad picking up his morning paper to see my mug shot spread on the front page.

Let's see, should I remain in the Mini for Byron to come and arrest me on suspicion of prostitution so that he could finally get it right?

If I ran, it would be Byron's word against mine; that is, if he was dumb enough to insist that I'd been here at all.

And if Del was as bright as I thought he was, he'd deny ever seeing me. And what would be left for Byron? Arrest Del for what, loitering? Parking at a loading zone? Del would scream for the newspaper's lawyer and be out of the police station in five seconds flat and Byron would have jam on his face again. Any latent obligation to a dirty-faced little ten-year old died when he had me on a bogus DUI.

Byron opened the back door to the cruiser, and Del turned his head enough so that I could clearly see his face. He winked, then shouldered Byron in the gut and lunged out of his grasp.

Byron tried to grab Del by his collar and missed. Del took off, his short legs winding up until he disappeared around a corner.

I had a second or two before Byron realized that I'd disobeyed his order to remain in the car. Never one to waste precious seconds, I dug my rubber soled shoes into the pavement, pumped my arms for all I was worth, and didn't look back.

* * *

By the time I drove down the long road to our ranch, the wind was howling darkly through the trees. That incoming southerly I'd predicted was quickly moving into position. Though I had mixed feelings about postponing tomorrow's work, I was almost giddy at the idea of an hour or two more of rest. God knows I needed it.

Tomorrow I would have to tell Caleb that Brad Lane had fingered him as Billy Wayne's killer, and then I would have to explain where and when I'd been talking to Brad Lane.

My dad had left me a note, pinned to my door. *Rain tomorrow*, it said. *I've changed loaders and pilot time to six a.m. Sleep in, and if it clears up, you might get in some Benlate on Gerry Deller's grapes.*

Nothing about parting Mrs. Dobson from her pistol, or an arrest, thank God. Add that episode to my escape from any actual jail time by Deputy Bettencourt and I should call myself dumb lucky. And I would too, except for the nagging doubt Brad had to go and drop in my lap. It would be just like Brad to gleefully attack the integrity of my loved ones. Maybe he was responsible for the D-O-A note on my dad's door. Brad had been in and out of our house many times over the three years he'd worked for us, and he could have stolen a key.

That would explain why Spike hadn't set up a ruckus. Spike recognized him, and placated with a doggy treat, Brad could take his time. Of course, I'd never have the chance to confirm it. Then again, Brad Lane was never going to get the chance to threaten me or my family again. Yes, I should feel lucky, or relieved. Instead, I felt sick at heart that I'd chased Brad into the headlights of an oncoming semi.

In the kitchen, I ground the roasted coffee beans, set the auto timer on the pot for six a.m., and did a mental recap of my catastrophic day; Brad's descent into meth hell, his choices, his mistakes, culminating in the harsh judgment of an oncoming truck. As for Byron, I'd rubbed a sore spot in that boy's scalp, as raw as the frequent drubbing I'd given him as a kid. Maybe, I'd been wrong about him and the reason he'd arrested me. I was speeding, wasn't I? Of course my jabs at his position as a second year police officer didn't help, either. Somehow, some way it was going to be up to me to make it all better. After all, his sister, Linda Bettencourt, was still pitcher for my softball team, and when annoyed, she had a lethal aim.

I took a deep breath and then another, willing myself to relax. I was off the hook for work, and tomorrow I would talk to Caleb, confess everything. Tomorrow. First thing.

As I wearily climbed the stairs, the cell phone on my belt trilled.

Without bothering with the niceties, Caleb said, "Can't you drive like a normal person?"

"What?" I asked, my breath catching in my throat.

"Someone saw you getting a ticket at the Standiford intersection this evening."

I blew out the breath I was holding. Ancient history after all the other stuff from tonight. He didn't know I'd been hauled into the police station, or that I'd chased a homeless man until he ran out in front of a truck, or that Del and I'd barely missed being hauled in as a john and his hooker.

I felt my stomach heave, swallowed and went on the offense. "I'm not speaking to you."

"Don't be silly, of course you are."

"Okay, maybe this once."

Then his voice went gentle. "I love you, sweetheart. Let's not fight."

All the heat I'd been stoking up blew away like the Southerly knocking against my window. "I love you, too, Caleb. It's just been a very long day, and I'm not fit for company. Besides, it's going to rain tomorrow, so my day is going to start early with work orders."

Caleb, knowing my family was big on weather forecasting, knew better than to ask, but I could hear the tease in his voice. "What rain?"

That got a smile out of me. I promised I'd call him tomorrow and hung up.

I had so many questions I wished I'd thought to ask of Brad. Even without the pointless threat of Caleb's involvement, did he really know who the killer was? Were the cops really beating up on innocent, vulnerable homeless men and then trading dope for information? Or was that simply a ploy to tilt our sympathy in his favor?

As for Del, I found it interesting that he and Billy Wayne had been kids in the same neighborhood in Stockton. There was a connection between them, something that Del hung onto, even if Billy Wayne hadn't. I'd have to ask Leon, Roxanne's husband, if he'd heard anything last night on his police scanner about a homeless guy killed crossing the street.

Then, with purpose in mind for a rainy day, I fell into bed and dropped into a deep sleep uninterrupted by dreams of any kind.

Chapter thirteen:

I awoke to the sound of wind slamming the trees against our house.

My dad and I greeted each other in the kitchen. He was getting his second cup and I was aiming for my first. His thin gray hair stood on end, and the hollow shadows under his eyes said he was grateful that I'd opted to take this shift. "Still dry, but guess I'll go back to bed, if you think you can handle it."

"It may not rain."

"Oh, I think it will."

His hair reminded me of owl chicks and the funeral home, and I thanked him for foiling Mrs. Dobson's attempt to shoot me.

He shrugged. "I doubt it would have fired anyway. It had a cap in the chamber, but the gun hadn't been cleaned, or oiled, since the last century. I handed her off to one of the women and went to the wake."

"Well, thanks again, Dad — though I don't suppose it hurt your reputation with the ladies."

He made some noises that could have been, "Mind your own business," and climbed the stairs.

I secretly smiled, grabbed a cup of coffee, then scanned the newspaper for last night's death of a homeless man.

What was I doing? This was yesterday's paper, and any news about Brad would have to wait until it arrived in our newspaper holder sometime this afternoon.

I went out the back door to the office to watch the crew reluctantly trundle into the yard on the off chance we could squeeze in a job or two between the rain. They all would rather be tucked into a warm bed instead of sitting in the office waiting for a cloud burst. Me too.

Some of the guys flopped down on the floor and went back to sleep while others played cards. Outside the office window dawn broke like an upside down quilt of lumpy cloud cover.

Summer storms in the valley have been likened to a woman, throwing a fit then hiking up her skirt and stomping away. I watched as a dust devil spiraled along in a waltz gathering leaves and twigs in its embrace. It lost its momentum somewhere on the back forty and vanished, leaves ghosting to a stop on recently turned earth. A few black birds ruffled their feathers and settled into the maple trees. Everything that could crawl, creep, or scurry was going for shelter.

True to Noah Bains' prediction, lightning split the gray sky with silver, thunder ricocheted off the hills, echoed across the valley, and raindrops the size of bugs began to drop in earnest until sheets of it drummed loudly on the corrugated roof of my office.

"Well, boys, that's it for today." I piled the forms over to the right side of the desk and watched them fight for the exit.

* * *

My dad was in the kitchen eating Juanita's pancakes.

Weary from last night's drama, I declined breakfast and instead, dunked an herbal tea bag into a cup of hot water, and leaning against the kitchen counter, I watched my dad happily shovel in his breakfast.

"Pancakes, again? What happened to your health food kick?"

"I'm still on it. This is my day off. Today, I can eat anything I want."

"No blue goop in the blender though, huh?"

"That's because I use the anti-oxidants of blueberry, and I only take that in the evenings."

Juanita snickered.

He shot her a look. When he looked back at me, I had this big grin pasted on my face. Busted. Unperturbed, he shrugged and pushed back his chair. "I got better things to do today than to sit around here and jaw with you girls."

I followed him out of the kitchen as he put his hand on the wood banister to climb the stairs. "So tell me Dad, what's with the vitamins? Last year you were sure you were at death's door, now you're gulping health food and dating again?"

He shrugged. "What's wrong with that? I might want to get married again."

"Oh yeah? And who might you be marrying?"

Silently he climbed the stairs, one step and then another, until at the landing, he turned and looked thoughtfully down at me. "What do you care? You'll be moving out soon."

"I'm not getting married again."

"That's not what Caleb says." He smiled and turned the knob on his bedroom door.

Unable to resist teasing him, I called after him, "1970 called! They want their leisure suit back!"

I went into the kitchen to finish my tea. Juanita grinned, and then our laughter got the better of us. She wiped the tears with her apron. "Ay Dios! Your daddy ees so funny. Does he know what he looks in that green zuit?"

"I don't think he cares."

"Did you know he got one of those lamps with the bubbles in it?"

"A lava lamp? Where'd he get that from, the barn?"

"I don't know what ees called, but yesterday I find it on his bedside table."

"Uh-oh, hide the disco albums."

I left Juanita giggling into her soapy dishes.

I'd have to do a search and destroy on all the old Donna Summer records. Though *She Works Hard* for the Money could've been my theme song, the monotonous beat of Disco music right about now would drive me around the bend. Perry Como and Barbara Streisand, but please God, not Disco.

I flopped down on top of my bed and pulled on my eyeshades for a nap. I was feeling pretty good now that I'd settled the mystery of who had put that threatening bit of paper on my dad's door. Caleb was right; it was a completely unrelated coincidence on the heels of Billy Wayne's murder, and Brad Lane wouldn't be around anymore to make threats to me or my family.

I breathed in and out; that bit of laughter with Juanita relaxed me enough that I could, with good conscience, settle into a nice deep mid-morning nap.

From somewhere Donna Summer soulfully blew into my ear and sang, "She works hard for the money, so hard for it, honey..."

* * *

It's late autumn. Dad has brought in a lug of tart apples, a gift from a local farmer and unusual in that farms aren't known for their generous gifts of excess produce anymore. My mother is laughing at my knock-knock jokes as I stand on a step stool, elbow deep in flour as we turn green apples into sweet pies. ABBA is singing on the radio, the autumn sun warming our big kitchen, and I'm so happy, I'm squirming like a puppy. She rolls out the dough for two pies and I load the apples into the bottom crust, then she adds the sugar, fragrant cinnamon, and real butter. I revel in this moment, her voice so clear and calm in my ear and so unlike ... well...

I shrug off the inconsistencies and make up ever wilder stories just to hear again the happy sound of her laughter.

Then the phone rings, breaking into my Norman Rockwell moment. She looks at me and wipes the flour off her hands. I duck my head, pinching the edge of the top crust wishing we didn't have a phone so our all too brief time together wouldn't be broken. She puts her hand up and strokes my cheek. "Just remember, Lalla. The more there is, the less you know."

I nod solemnly, intent on keeping her every word branded on my memory for when she's gone again.

She says, "Now go answer the phone, dear."

* * *

I awoke to sunbeams dancing across my bedroom floor and the sound of disco. No, not disco, it was the musical tones of my cell phone. I reached out and picked up my cell while noting the rainwater dripping off the eaves. Feeling groggy, I sat up on the side of the bed and hit talk.

"Miss Bains? This is Merriweather Cook."

I sat up straighter, now completely awake. "Miss Cook? Where are you?"

"I'm terribly sorry I couldn't be there when you called. It was rude of me to leave without a note, but my son came by and convinced me to go with him. He seems to think that my life might be in danger."

If she knew something about the killer, perhaps her son had it right—hide mom, apologize later.

"Where are you?"

"I can't say, dear. He doesn't know I'm using the phone, and I only have a minute. I need to ask, no beg you, will you please do what you can to find Billy Wayne's killer?"

"But, I don't understand. Why can't you call the police?"

"I believe my nephew had a secret that he felt he could only share with you. It would explain his agitation, and the strange behavior those last few days. His obsession with you was most peculiar, considering that he never mentioned it to me. I know it sounds odd, that a young man would confide in an old woman like me, but that dear boy shared many things with me. Please Miss Bains, I'm sure that if you look hard enough you'll be able to find the evidence that will bring his killer to justice."

The connection was cut. I punched Recall and got a continuous ring but no answer. I wrote down the number and then punched in Caleb's private line. "Caleb. I just talked to Merriweather Cook!"

"Who?" I could hear his feet smack the floorboards. He must have been leaning back in his dad's old office chair, long legs stretched out on the desk as he read some report.

"Merriweather Cook, Billy Wayne's aunt, remember? She just called me."

"Lalla, Billy Wayne's mother says her sister is on a road trip to Canada and doesn't even know that her nephew's dead."

"I have two words for you—cell phone. She knows her nephew is dead, and she's not on any road trip because she told me her son is hiding her. I wrote down the number. You could trace it, find out where she is. If she has information about her nephew's killer, you're going to want to talk to her."

He was silent for a moment. "We need to talk. Either drive into town, or I'll have someone pick you up."

The bottom of my stomach dropped. "Someone pick me up? But *why*?"

His response was simple. "Pick one, sweetheart."

I'd been clutching at the slim hope that Byron, having seen his chance to haul Del and I in on a perversion charge slip through his grasp, had decided to err on the side of caution. Guess not.

I picked my own transportation and a time to be there.

Chapter fourteen:

I drove through puddles mirroring a hot blue sky with Donna Summer crooning work ethics in my ear. It was unlikely that my mother ever spent any time in our sunny kitchen, and we certainly never made pies together. Mom spent most of her days floating around in a prescription drug induced haze, and Juanita did all the cooking, but never apple pies. All of it, the dream, my mother softly speaking to me, was an eerie reminder of last year. In another bizarre Norman Rockwell dream we were all together, my mother, father, brother, and I, roasting marshmallows around a campfire. My subconscious must've planted the campfire because of the smoke oozing under my bedroom door. But still, it didn't explain how my dead mother managed to insinuate herself into my dreams in order to get me out of the burning house. I felt goose bumps climb my arms. And why did my mom say, "The more there is, the less you know?"

Until Del repeated it to me, I'd been unable to remember the exact words, and my mom's weren't quite right, were they? It was supposed to be, "The more you see, the less there is," or was it, "The more there is, the less you see"?

This required a detour. Ten minutes out of my way, tops. Though I heard murmurs of caution knocking at my head, I thought the side trip might give me the coin in trade I would need to get out of the trouble I saw bearing down on me at Caleb's office.

I put my finger on the doorbell and then hesitated. Maybe I should think about this—after all, wasn't this the woman who tried to shoot me?

While I hesitated, an eyeball appeared at the door crack. "Who are you?"

"Remember me, Mrs. Dobson? The funeral home? I swear to you, I'm not responsible for your son's death." I was staring, dumfounded, at her aluminum headgear. Obviously the funeral home fiasco was not going to be an isolated incident.

The door cracked a little wider, and she grudgingly motioned me inside. "You might as well come in. You couldn't do any worse than that numb-nuts police detective, Rodney."

I tore my eyes off the bright aluminum wrapped around her head and stepped inside. She swept the pile of newspapers, magazines, and unopened mail from a spot on her couch, and motioned for me to sit.

When she didn't offer to explain the bizarre contraption on her head, I asked. "Am I keeping you from something?"

She stared at me as if I'd just dropped in from Mars.

I pointed to her head. "Uh, did I interrupt your hair coloring?"

She straightened the crumpled cap and sat down in a ratty upholstered armchair. "I believe you."

"That I didn't have a relationship with your son? Oh, good, thank you." I always start any conversation with crazy people by agreeing with them.

"What are you doing about my son's killer?"

"Can we start with your sister? Merriweather Cook is your sister, right?"

She nodded and reached up to adjust the aluminum cap.

"Is Cook her maiden name?" I was thinking of the picture on her table. The one with Margery and two boys.

"What? Of course it is. Merri took it back after the divorce. Cook is our family name. I resent having to tell anyone this, much less the woman my boy adored—oh yes, you don't have to sneer," she said putting up a bony hand to ward off my denial. "I could tell, he was in love with you. Why else would he sneak out of the house at all hours of the night? Not that you or any other woman deserved his love. She's missing you know."

Sorting through the oddly strung words was as simple as climbing through a pile of debris. "Missing? But, Mrs. Dobson, you told the police your sister is on a road trip to Canada."

She bit her lower lip and looked down at the floor. "I know, but it's not true. For all I know, she could be off on one of her binges. Merri has a drinking problem, you know. She's been sober lately, so that's a plus."

"She told me her son was hiding her."

"She what? When? She hasn't returned any of my calls! What the devil is she doing talking to the likes of you?"

She had me there. What did Merri Cook want with me when she could have told all of this to her own sister, or the police? Here was something that would have to be settled when I saw Caleb.

"Do you have any idea who would want to hurt your son?"

"I've already told this to the police. But they just say that my boy was a drug addict like all the rest of them bums on the street. He wasn't, you know. He was a Marine, and proud of it. He came home sick. Nothing I could do made a difference. He wouldn't let me help him. The Veterans hospital said it was a precondition and put him on some no-good crappy medicine, and completely forgot about him. He couldn't sleep. Up and down the streets with that stupid shopping cart, all night long, picking up cans and what-not."

I tried again. "Did you know anyone who might've wanted Billy Wayne dead?"

She jerked up out of her seat on the couch and started pacing. "They all wanted him dead."

I waited until she calmed a bit then gently asked, "Anyone in particular?"

She tsked, reached down and picked up a brown shopping bag. Grabbing a handful of the envelopes, she shoved them at me. "They *all* wanted him dead."

I took the letters and quickly scanned a few pages. Despite the spelling errors and simple stationery, they all had one thing in common: "Billy Wayne was meant to die," and, "Your son was a killer!" and, "After what your worthless son did he deserved " and, " ... he's a sin against nature."

I looked up from the letters. "I don't understand. He served some time in prison for burglary, didn't he? One of the letters said something about him being 'a sin against nature'. Was that because he was a sniper in the military?"

She shook her head, the shiny hat threatening to capsize. "He did his duty and came home a decorated hero, and if he hadn't taken up with those hippies he called protestors, he never would have gone into that bank in the first place. He actually thanked the judge for his sentence, told the court, and I had to listen, that he deserved prison."

"So he knew he'd done something wrong and he was sorry?"

"Oh, he was repentant all right. But not for what you think. Not for the burglary and getting caught with that riff-raff he called friends. It was that damn war. I had no idea, that is until the doctor, the good one, not that quack Army doc, said he not only had that PTSD thing,

but he'd also been exposed to some kind of chemicals. My boy was going to die and he didn't seem to care. He told me not to make a fuss, can you believe that? What mother wouldn't make a fuss. He was going to give up, but I couldn't let my boy die in prison. I wouldn't. So, I did it."

"Did what?"

Through tears streaking down her face, she said, "He'd faithfully served his country and this is how they treated him? They were really sorry he didn't die over there after I got through with them, because when I found out how they were treating him, I took over. I promised that if they didn't give him a new heart, I would take it all the way to Washington. The dirty outfit. He wasn't going to die in prison, not if I could help it. I made them give Billy Wayne a new heart, and he-he hated me for it!"

I spent the next few minutes consoling a desolate mother as she mopped up her sobs with a wet hanky.

So the Iraq war, and its inherent toll of death, had left Billy Wayne heartsick in more ways than one. His anguish at what he saw as duplicity on his mother's part, getting him the surgery that would allow him to live, must have been unbearable for him. And from the stack of letters, apparently a lot of other people thought so, too.

"How long have you been getting all of these letters?"

She held up the *Secret Star*, a sleaze rag out of New York. "I don't know. They just keep coming, even after the police came and took the first ones away." She stood up, swiping at her tears. "I have to leave now. I have to go change my mailing address to a new post office box so they'll stop hounding me."

"But surely the VA looked at his heart problem?"

"They said it was a pre-existing condition, but that was just an excuse so they wouldn't have to pay for his treatment. And then they said he had mental problems, another pre-existing condition."

"But, how could this have been leaked to the press? I thought donor and recipient information was sealed to the general public."

She threw out a hand at the pile of hate mail on the couch. "Well, missy, I guess someone talked, didn't they?"

I stood, put the bag on the floor and took a step towards the door. "Well, thank you for your time, Mrs. Dobson."

"Not so fast," she said, leaping to grab my arm in her bony hand. "Since you've already talked to my sister, where the hell is she?"

"Well, uh, I was hoping you knew where she was. As for the leak, I suppose you could sue the *Star* to find out."

She gave me a sour look. "My lawyer already tried that. But not if I get my hands on him first."

Now she'd lost me. "You mean the lawyer?"

"Not the lawyer, dummy. I'm talking about Del. He's always resented my Billy Wayne, that he was tall and so smart looking in his uniform. Del Potts couldn't even pass the physical for the Marines; too short, too fat," she said, touching the bright metal cap on her head.

Then I remembered our conversation in Del's car, that Billy Wayne had befriended him when they were kids. "Del said you were neighbors?"

"Del wasn't the only talented one, you know. Billy Wayne was a writer, too. I'll show you." She picked up a magazine, ragged at the edges from use, and opened it to a marked page. "His poetry was published in the *Midwest Weekly* when he was in high school. Stockton always

had better schools than Modesto, you know. And he could've had a scholarship to college if he'd wanted. Instead he chose the military."

The magazine was old enough to have been printed when Billy Wayne was in high school.

I said, "I've read some of his poetry Mrs. Dobson."

She sniffed. "Yes, of course you have. He thought he was in love with you. Misplaced affection, if you ask me."

"Misplaced, yes, but in love with me? Sorry, no." Then I remembered his final words to me and wondered if the answer could be found in his writing. "Mrs. Dobson, could you show me his other poems?"

"Why? So you can make fun of those too?"

"I would never make fun of Billy Wayne, and I only want to see his poems so that I can understand him better." That and see if there was some clue that might help me find his killer.

Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I burned them all. This morning. I did it so nobody can hurt my boy or make fun of him ever again."

"Please, Mrs. Dobson, I'm only trying to see if his last words to me were a clue to his killer. He said, 'The more there is, the less you see.' Does that mean anything to you?"

"It probably meant he was disappointed you didn't see him as anything but a crazy homeless boy. He wasn't homeless, you know. I kept his room for him here, just as he left it before he went into the Marines. He just couldn't sleep, poor darling, all those horrible memories so he walked and walked—sometimes all night."

I thought of the inside of Merriweather Cook's neat little house and the photos—two sons, two mothers. *He's not the only writer.*

"Mrs. Dobson, are Del and Billy Wayne related?"

"I told Merri it was a good thing we had a nice family name like Cook, who in their right mind would want a name like Potts?"

"Potts? Del Potts is ... Billy Wayne's cousin?"

"You are having a hard time keeping up, aren't you?"

They were more than just neighbors, they were cousins. So that's why Del was so interested in this case.

Mrs. Dobson was becoming agitated again. "Everybody says he's totally lost his mind."

"Del? I don't think there's any reason to be afraid of Del, Mrs. Dobson."

"Oh! Do you think so?" she cried, again mangling my words. "He's really off his rocker, you know. If she's sober and she called you, then she wants help. She'll talk to me, I know she will, if she can just get away from that nut case son of hers. Get her away from Del, Miss Bains, before he does something terrible to her."

Easing out of the tight grip she had on my wrist, I handed her Caleb's card. "I'll do everything I can. If you hear from her, please call this number, Sheriff Caleb Stone. He was a fellow Marine, you can trust him."

I slid out the door and hurried to my car. Billy Wayne might have had his troubles, but his mother was *definitely* off her rocker.

Caleb closed the door, lifted his boots onto the corner of his desk and deftly twirled a pencil between his fingers. "I got a call today from the managing editor of *The Modesto Bee*."

"Oh?" I asked pretending to admire his pencil twirling. "What about?"

"Wanted to know if we had put up a Missing Person's yet on Miss Cook."

"Did you know that Del Potts is her son and Billy Wayne's cousin?"

"If you'd stayed in Modesto instead of traipsing off to New York City, you would've known that, too."

I ignored the sarcasm. "So, have you got an APB out on her yet?"

"Rule of thumb is forty-eight hours, but we're looking for her and Del Potts, though his editor is sure that Potts will surface in a few days. He does that a lot, or so his editor says."

"I think Billy Wayne confided in his Aunt Merri, told her something that Del figured would get her killed, so he's stuck her in some bolt hole where she can't be found. Whatever she knows, it can incriminate the killer, which Del insists is a cop."

"Damn that Potts! When we do find him I'll add kidnapping to obstruction of justice."

"No, don't! Don't you see? Del might be right. Billy Wayne's killer just may be a cop. It would be about as effective bringing in Brad Lane, and he's ... uh "

His fingers went still, the pencil clattering to the desk. "Brad Lane? That pilot you fired last year? He was abusing prescription meds, wasn't he? What does he have to do with this?"

"Uh, well" The juggling act I'd set up to keep all my covert antics in the air and out of sight fell to the floor with a thud. "Well, uh ... uh, I guess "

"Spit it out, will you?"

"For the last year Brad's been taking his meals at the Salvation Army and living on the street. He contacted Del saying he had information on the killing. At first it felt like a set up for blackmail, but he was clearly frightened. He said the cops are beating up on the bums and vagrants, and he was sure they were trying to protect one of their own. He wanted me to come back the next night with some get-out-of-town money and then he'd give me a name."

I didn't add that Brad had been only too happy to finger Caleb as the killer, or that we'd chased him until he was run down by a semi. I also left out the part where Byron almost got to join Del and me in unholy handcuffs.

"When did you last see him?"

"Uh, last night? But Brad insisted the killer is a cop."

"A cop? Brad has had several arrests since you fired him. We can't discount that he'd be out for revenge against the arresting officer."

"I think whatever revenge he was counting on was going to come from me. He said I was to hand over a hundred grand in exchange for the name."

Caleb crossed his arms and leaned back. "It was a shake down, Lalla. You've got to know he would be after you for firing him."

"It could be Rodney."

He shook his head. "Forget about Rodney for a minute. And you aren't going to pay off Brad. I'll get it out of him."

"Sorry, but that's not going to happen." Then I told him how Del and I chased Brad into a street where a semi hit him.

Caleb grabbed my hand. "Jeez, Lalla. For once I'm glad you didn't wait around for the cops. Did anyone see you?"

"I don't think so." I didn't mention the spilled coffee incident in the alley with Officer Byron, or how Del's skirmish with him helped us both escape. I was also hoping that Pippa had called it right about Byron; that he wasn't the brightest light bulb in the department, and wouldn't think to connect the dots between a homeless man hit by a truck and where he'd found Del and me.

"Well, then," Caleb said, "Let's take a ride over to the morgue and ID the body of a homeless man they picked up last night."

My just desserts for not telling him sooner.

* * *

On the way to the morgue, I compulsively spilled, word for word, my interview with Mrs. Dobson, and finally her frantic plea that I should be the one to find her sister. "Those hate letters were post marked after Billy Wayne was murdered. What about the ones that were picked up by homicide, could there be any leads in them?"

"Nope, but the coroner's autopsy report confirmed his heart transplant." His grin was sardonic. "It goes both ways you know? You tell me what you know, and I give you what I know, okay? The fed in our office is still sifting through the letters to his mother, but I can tell you what I did find; Mrs. Dobson had the American Civil Liberties Union and their pro-bono lawyers threaten to tie the state of California up in court if they denied him the appropriate medical care. As the suit said, he would die without it, and if that happened, his heirs would eventually collect, however long it took. It was several hundred thousand for a new heart or forty million for a wrongful death suit."

"After going through all of that to save her son, the poor guy is murdered."

"The woman's a head case. How'd you get her to talk to you?"

"I speak crazy people."

"You didn't flash that fake police badge at her, did you?"

"I most certainly did not." The badge was a bone of contention between us from the last time I used it to get information from a witness, but that information became the key to finding the real killer—so sue me. "She thinks Billy Wayne wouldn't give me the time of day if he'd been right in the head."

"Yep."

"Are you talking about his taste in women, or my bad luck with men?"

He gave me a lopsided grin. "So, what does she expect you to do about her sister?"

"Who me?"

His narrowed stare pieced the air between us. "Yeah, you. You got that racehorse just out-of-the-gate look."

"If you will remember, I'm the one who found Billy Wayne, and there are people who expect me to find his killer," I said thinking of Billy Wayne's aunt and mother. "Not that I intend to do anything that helps Detective Rodney."

"You got something in mind? Never mind. If I don't know, I can't get in trouble."

At my surprised look, he said, "You love this stuff, don't you?"

Flustered, I sputtered, "Caleb Stone, that's not fair! What am I supposed to do? He died at my feet, and my reputation stays in purgatory until the guilty party is in jail."

"Deny it all you want, but I know you. You got the bit in your mouth, and the chase is on for you, isn't it?"

I could feel a flush rising up my cheeks. He was right, of course. His words had touched something deep within me and it sounded very much like a starting gun and racehorses pounding on the track. I never felt more alive than when I was this close to touching danger.

"Look," he said, "you've gotten more in one day than we have all week. It's not a blank check, so don't go overboard and do anything rash. No flashing your fake badge at people."

"But, Caleb—" I could do without the badge, but it felt good to banter with him again.

"No buts on this. You refuse to return any of Rodney's calls, so I'll expect you to report to me, preferably at my house every day after work. You can do that, can't you?"

"Sure, but—"

He rolled into the county coroner's parking lot, reached over, and holding my head between his hands, looked into my eyes and said, "I want Billy Wayne's killer, maybe more than anybody. I also want you safe, but I know you don't take well to me giving you directions, so we *will* do this my way."

Then he leaned in and kissed me. There was a second there where I considered arguing for a nooner instead of identifying a dead body, but there was no dodging this duty. I whispered into his lips, "You win."

In that one minute, I loved Caleb Stone more than I could have thought possible and I would do everything I could to ensure that he hadn't misplaced his trust in me.

But, first I had to ID a dead guy who used to work for me.

Chapter fifteen:

After the coroner's office and a quick and reluctant ID of Brad Lane's body, I left Caleb at his office determined to find Del Potts.

I parked at newspaper offices, and leaving the windows down for whatever breath of air that might circulate through the open windows, What? Leave a classic car like mine unlocked, windows down? Why not leave the keys in the ignition, too? Because, there isn't a soul in this town who didn't know that to steal it would get their ass kicked by Ms. Lalla Bains.

Inside, I side-stepped a harried receptionist and bounded up the stairwell.

A whiff of Chanel preceded the sound of high heels clattering down the stairs.

I kept my eyes on my shoes, hoping someone was in too much of a hurry to ask if I'd checked in with reception.

I wasn't going to be so lucky. I hadn't seen Janice Bidwell since high school, but she was still daintily curvy in a floral summer dress belted to show off a tiny waist. About to place her sandaled toe down another step, she paused.

"Lalla? Lalla Bains? Yes it is. Hey you, don't you stop to say hi to old friends anymore?"

Caught, I pretended surprise. "Janice? Janice Bidwell. Don't you look wonderful."

She swept silky dark bangs off her forehead and gave me a dazzling white smile. "Oh, lord, I haven't gone by that old name in years."

"So, you work here, now?"

"Silly, of course I do, I did the story on the Patience McBride murder last year, but maybe you didn't know because I use a penname, Margarithe Delacourte. Janice Bidwell, sounds so bourgeois, don't you think? But hey, I'm still Jan to my friends, and we are still friends, aren't we?"

"That was you? Then I should have called, thanked you for the conscientious job you did, making me look like a heroine when all I did was hang on until the fire department arrived."

She waved away the compliment and tilted her head. "Well, girlfriend, those dark circles under your eyes say you're not getting your share of beauty sleep. It must've been awful finding that dead homeless man in the alley. Of course it doesn't help that Del Potts keeps your name on the front page. So, can I help you with anything?"

"Del, if I can find him."

Her pretty face squeezed into a sour expression. "Oh, honey, if you're here to wring his neck, you'll have to get in line. Better yet, take it to our managing editor."

"The neck wringing is optional. Is he here?"

The tinkling laughter sounded forced. "After that libelous story he did about you?" She held a pinch of air between her perfectly manicured nails. "He's this close to getting fired for it, too."

"Really?" I was still feeling magnanimous towards the little twerp, so neck wringing was off today's list. But, then again, the day was still young.

"I don't even know why he's still on the payroll. Whatever he's doing now to keep his job, I can tell you he's dirt under this girl's sandals. Listen, you don't want Del. You want someone who's on your side, someone who'll do a fair and honest story. Why not let me help?"

At my hesitation, she tried again. "You said it yourself, it was my story that made you look like a heroine. Del isn't going to give you any of the breaks I can."

"Let me think about it. Do you have a card?"

She shook her head, sadly amused at the perverse set of my mind, and handed me a card.

"Lalla Bains, you got kick-me on your backside, or what? He'll abuse your trust and leave you bleeding all over the carpet like the rest of us who got in his way. Oh, and tea bags under the eyes should help, but *s'il vous plait* I have the name of a really good plastic surgeon."

I felt my face redden. "Uh, well, thanks but I'm not sure I'm ready for that yet."

"*Chérie*, even in this light I can see the worry lines and crows-feet are winning, *né'ce pas*? At least let me give you my dermatologist's number. A little Botox here and there and you'll look good as new."

"Well, uh, maybe later."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself, but you shouldn't take the big four-oh without a fight, girlfriend. Hell, thirty-five is hard enough without a little help. Besides, us girls have to stick together, don't we? Look, I have to run, but just remember what I said about Del—and call me on my cell. I'm never home anyway." She turned away, leaving a trail of Chanel and swaying hips as she clipped down the stairs.

I wondered what heinous crime Del had committed for Jan to hate him so much and why she thought she could convince me she was thirty-five, since we both graduated the same year. Must be the Botox talking.

"Potts?" replied a harried young man in shorts and Hawaiian shirt. "The great man hasn't shown up yet today. You can ask the chief, if you can get a word in between phone calls." He thumbed over his shoulder to indicate the office with a closed door.

I knocked once and a deep baritone said, "Come."

I introduced myself, offering him my hand.

He winced, but accepted my hand in his big paw. "Let me guess, you're here to complain about Del Potts."

"No, no. Just talk."

Signaling that I should take a seat, he sighed deeply and collapsed into his desk chair.

"Sorry, Del can be a bit of a trial."

"He's that alright, but you don't have to fire him on my account."

"Fire Del?" His eyes widened. "Why ever would I do that? Sure, he's a bit odd, and he has to be reined in now and then, but have you seen his work?" He waved an arm at the wall to his left. Graphic, daunting, frightening, and awesome were the only words to describe Del's photography. "He's up for a Pulitzer for this one," he said pointing to a particularly gruesome image. "Spectacular, isn't it?"

"But if he's a problem for you, I'll talk to him, tighten his leash so to speak." He smiled weakly.

We both knew that wasn't going to happen. Del might be annoying, but his editor was going to hang onto his rising star for as long as possible.

"What else can I do for you, Miss Bains?"

"You can tell me where I can find him."

"Haven't a clue. Comes and goes. In and out, all hours of the day and night, days at a time. Nothing to do for it. He shows up when he's got his story wrapped up. Anything else?"

I said, no, thanks, and taking him up on his offer of a free copy of today's paper, left the newspaper man to his work.

In my car I turned to the page for Police Beat. Last night a truck struck a homeless man jaywalking on J Street. The police hadn't released the man's identity, but if Brad had been right, that the killer was a cop, all I could do was pray that Byron was too embarrassed to let anything drop about finding Del and me in the alley next to Mr. Kim's. And, God forbid he say anything in front of the one police officer who would connect the dots and realize Del and I might have been talking to Brad that night.

Chapter sixteen:

The next day's work allowed me the respite I so desperately needed to get my mind off Billy Wayne's murder.

I was up in the air, idling along at a hundred and thirty miles an hour, hopper empty, job done, no traffic to dodge, the soporific warmth of the sun on my windshield, the vent blowing at the sweat trickling down into my flight suit, and a repetitive knocking that jumped me out of my reverie. Something in the pistons? No, just one cylinder, and it was intermittent. Hadn't I checked the engine out yesterday? Maybe not. Too busy with murder suspects lately to take care of the bill paying business. I swore at myself, then eased the fuel mixture to run a little richer, and added another hundred feet between me and terra firma.

Flying lower would save on fuel, but I'd rather avoid a forced landing and another busted up airplane. I held my breath for the last five miles until the dark hump of hangar, barn, and office came into view. I banked and kicked the ailerons, grateful that the big aircraft responds to such cavalier treatment, then let go of the breath I'd been holding as the wheels touched the tarmac under me.

The ground crew had the good sense not to call me on the VHF. Some pilots want everyone's attention when the aircraft is coming in under duress. Not me. I'm irritable at the interruption, wanting it quiet so that I can listen to the engine and hopefully diagnose the problem and confirm that I will have air under me instead of plowing into a field, or worse, into trees.

Pushing the flaps to stop the forward motion, I taxied to home plate. Pedro chocked my wheels, and Javier, his face wrinkled with worry under his darkly tanned face, offered me a hand off the wing.

The men backed out of my way, waiting, I suppose for me to bounce my helmet off the tarmac in a fit of pique. I ignored the questioning stares and waved them all back to work. Then I stood, hands on hips, sweat still trickling down the back of my flight suit. I gazed down the long fifteen-hundred feet of runway, to the other side of the canal where there used to be a walnut orchard, and where a leveled field was staked with little yellow flags. We'd protested the building site for the new elementary school, taking it to our lawyer, then to the county. The county commissioner of schools suggested we reposition our airstrip east to west or west to east. Not that it mattered to them, but west to east is not optimum for takeoff and landing. It's north and south in the San Joaquin Valley, or not at all.

As for today's fiasco, if I hadn't been able to make it as far as I had, or if the problem had surfaced at takeoff, and if I'd had to ditch the plane ... I shuddered at the picture.

Mad-Dog jogged over. "You okay?"

"Fine. I'm fine, thanks." It was a little shaky in the delivery but I wasn't about to let anyone see how frightened I'd been. I was a mechanic and I did my own engine maintenance. So, how could I let myself forget? Or was it something I couldn't have foreseen? I went in the office and rummaged through the desk looking for the maintenance records on my aircraft.

When my dad sauntered in the door, the crew correctly decided they had better things to do and left. He sat down across from me. Everyone, hearing an airplane coming in underpowered, has one ear tuned for an impact. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure." I continued to search through the paperwork, looking for the log. Not wanting to hear the reprimand I knew would be coming, I got up to leave.

"Wait," he said, catching me by the sleeve. "It can wait a few minutes. I could use a cuppa joe, you too?"

I collapsed back into my chair while he poured the coffee, adding creamer to his own, and handing mine to me black, he sat down next to the desk and crossed his legs.

"You're safe, that's all that matters," he said, watching the cup as I tried to deliver it to my quivering lips.

"I know," I said. "It's just, if that charter school they're laying ground for was already in business ... and if I wasn't able to make it to the runway ... I hate to think "

"Don't. It's not going to come to that."

"What, no school? Did something happen to change their minds? Have they put birth control pills in the water or something?"

"I don't know. But it's not anything you need to be worried about right now."

"And why is that?"

"Well, for one thing, you're too young to be worried about something that far in the future."

This was different. Where was the part where he kicked my butt for not making sure my TBO report was done?

"Right. So besides sweating a forced landing, which I may or may not have survived, I could've plowed into a schoolyard full of kids. I don't even know what I want on my tombstone."

"You're forty," he said, exasperation scouring his voice. "When you're sixty-eight you can get serious about your epitaph."

At my indifferent shrug, he slammed his cup down on the desk. "Wanna trade places? I'll tell you what, you be sixty-eight and I'll be forty again. You can have the bad eyesight, the creaking joints, and I'll get another twenty-eight years to think about what I wanna be when I grow up."

"Look who's talking. One minute you got a heart condition, can't be bothered with the business you built and slaved for, and now you're a born again ladies man. And that's another thing—why now? Why not last year, or all the other years since mom died?"

He tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling. "*First keep peace within yourself,*' Thomas á Kempis."

I rolled my eyes at yet another of his irrelevant quotes. That was the way it was with my dad. When forced to inspect his own motives, he retreated behind some archaic and totally irrelevant quotation.

Seeing my eye-roll he put down his cup. "Last year the house almost went up in flames, then you and Caleb got together, and well, you started calling me Dad again instead of Noah, so I decided that I just might have something to live for, and," he said, his expression showing his bewilderment, "danged if I can figure how to fit another lifetime into what I got left."

I grinned at him, shaking my head at the peculiar stage in which we'd both found ourselves; I'd found love where I least expected it and my dad, for once in his life, actually said what he felt.

Then, perhaps uncomfortable with the unmapped territory of our relationship, he stood up. "Well, if you don't need anything else, I'll mosey on back to the house. I have some business to attend to in town. Oh, by the way, Caleb called, said he'd be at Roxanne's, and for you to be there, noon sharp."

Oh yeah, that, my other job, the one that prevented me from doing the pre-flight check on my aircraft. I found the maintenance records, then disgusted that I'd let my TBO lapse, I locked up the office and took the farm truck to Roxanne's.

* * *

With the remains of our lunch piled up and waiting for a waitress, I sipped from a glass of Roxanne's sweet ice tea and listened while Caleb told me what was new in the case.

"We've had some leads that take us for long rides in the country. Oh, and one anonymous caller reported that Delmar was abducted by aliens back in high school, but the copy they left in his place is actually a much better looking version."

"Yeah, and the tinfoil headgear on Billy Wayne's mom is just a fashion statement. Any of those doomsayers happen to actually confess or tell you where Del has stashed his mom?"

"Don't I wish."

"Nothing gets this town going like a little murder. So, what do we have? Billy Wayne's mother thinks Del is hiding his mom, and nobody seems to know where either of them can be found."

"Detective Rodney is still asking when you're going to return his calls."

I shuddered at the mention of Rodney. "As annoying as Del is, I'd rather have his mom stay lost than have her tango with that creep." I blinked. "Del must have thought the same thing. Wish I could follow his example."

Roxanne offered a refill on our ice tea. "Just made."

Caleb and I mutely held out our glasses. Roxanne examined our glum expressions. "What're you two talking about?"

We gave her twin blank stares.

She laughed. "Okay then, do you think these Capris make me look fat?"

Caleb's glance bounced off the cow-patterned Capris stretched across the great expanse of Roxanne's very ample hips, pulled in his grin, and studied his ice tea.

She looked like a walking sofa, but she wasn't going to hear it from me. I asked, "How's Maya doing?"

Roxanne sniffed. "Haven't heard from her in a week." She thought it my fault Maya was in New York instead of in our local college. I thought Maya should be here to advise her mother on the folly of wearing anything bovine patterned.

I quickly changed the subject. "Roxanne, you're a poetry buff. What do you think about, 'The more there is, the less you see'? Does it mean anything to you?"

"Is this a line from a poem? I'm more of a Gwendolyn Brooks and Maya Angelou fan myself," she said, putting the pitcher on the table and motioned for me to scoot over.

The bench seats had been recently reupholstered in a cheerful floral pattern in anticipation that a new Motel 8 would be building in the empty lot next door. I had my fingers crossed on that, hoping it didn't go through as I wasn't ready to have my favorite café become another Denny's.

"We're stumped," I said. "Or I should say I am." With a nod from Caleb, I recounted what I'd learned so far—Del and Billy Wayne are cousins because Margery Dobson and Miss Cook are sisters, and Miss Cook was convinced I should find who killed Billy Wayne, and Margery is afraid that Del is dangerous.

Roxanne nodded. "Uh-huh. Didn't Billy Wayne's mom try to shoot you yesterday?"

"And she apologized, too."

"Makes them all sound like crackpots, don't it?"

"Gee, Roxy, you with a doctorate in psychiatry and that's the best you can come up with?"

Satisfied she had our attention, she continued, "And here's another one for you; in my learned opinion, none of these people are killers."

Caleb and I looked at each other. Roxy pulled the glass out of my hand, took a sip and handed it back. "I do make the best sweet ice tea, don't I? Listen you two, Del's silly, his mom and her sister are frightened and grieving, but none of them should be on a suspect list. What would be the motive?"

Caleb grunted. "If any of them has a motive, we'll find it."

Roxanne said, "Don' go wastin' your time, cowboy. There're other families in this town who would happily tear each other to pieces, but not these people." She leaned back in her seat. "The Cook sisters may seem a little odd to you two, being all normal that you are, but I can tell you that in what counts for family those two old girls are tight."

Seeing we needed a lesson in family psychology, she held up her fingers to count off the reasons. "Merriweather was in and out of rehab for years, but when she asked, Margery took her in, didn't she? Then there were the boys, Del and Billy Wayne. Del came home to see his mom through her last rehab. So though Del appears to have cornered the market on professional nut case, the reality is that he cared enough to put his family first."

She looked at me and then Caleb. "You don't get that Del Potts hid his mother so she wouldn't get whacked?"

I sighed. "You have a point, Roxanne."

"It's no wonder Billy Wayne was off," she said. "Sniper duty—good Lord!"

I frowned. "You think he was misdiagnosed?"

She shrugged. "Not fair of me to quarterback at this late date. No doubt he had PTSD, but the psychotic episodes, well I just don't buy it. I've read about doctors who go and slap the wrong diagnosis on soldiers. I can't speak about what he dosed himself with to keep from going off the deep end, but the few times I saw him, I'd say that boy was busy drinking himself to death."

"Then the poem? Does it sound like a line from anything you've heard?"

Roxanne pulled on her ear. "Can you repeat it?"

"The more there is, the less you see."

"Not anything I can recall."

"Maybe he poached it from one of Mr. Kim's fortune cookies," I said, frustrated that no one could come up with a winner for Billy Wayne's puzzling last words.

Roxanne turned her head as if listening to the cadence of silent words. "The Internet might have something. You ought to go through his stuff again. That would help, wouldn't it?"

"It would, except Mrs. Dobson burned all of her son's poetry."

Caleb reached into his pocket and took out some bills for our lunch. "I've got to go, ladies. If you think of anything, give me a call."

When Caleb was gone, Roxanne said, "You two are on again, I see."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Can't find any reason to push him away, huh?"

"I'm finding happiness for the first time in my life with someone who isn't preprogrammed to be a cheat and/or a liar and it's weird."

"The boys here have a pool, betting on when you'll get hitched."

"Not *if*, but *when*, huh?" Move out of the snug cocoon of my parental nest and get married for the third time? I felt the chilly draft of foreboding. "I can't believe I might even be considering it."

"Relax. Enjoy it. Count your blessings, girl. Let yourself be in love with someone who isn't going to fail you."

I looked away, unable to meet her eyes.

"Sweetpea, you said it, not me. I ain't no hypnotist like that new police woman, but you gotta ask yourself, why did you pick those losers?" When she saw the lines of distress on my face, she held up a hand. "I don't need to know what it was, or who it was that caused you to hang onto your bad opinion of yourself. The question for you is, are you gonna take it out and give it a real good look? Make sure it's worth hangin' onto after all these years? `Cause if it ain't, then get rid of it."

"How do you propose I do that?"

"You know us Baptists do our forgiving up front of the whole congregation so's everybody can say 'Amen!' I can see you're thinking someday, but if you don't do it now before you and Caleb get hitched, you're going to carry it into your marriage, and that ain't good. You got to let go of that grudge you've been holding onto. If that person is already gone," she looked at me meaningfully, and I knew she was thinking of my mother's suicide, "write them a letter, read it again and again, until you believe you've said it enough, then have a little ceremony. Burn it. Burn it, and forgive."

"Like you did for your dad?"

"He showed up at my college graduation, sober too, as far as I could tell. It was the second most important thing he'd done in my life besides give me a name. I had to work up to forgiving his hard drinking and wasted life, and my only regret is that I didn't do that until after he died."

"Then what?"

"I wrote my dead daddy a letter, thanked him for being my parent. Poor job of it and all, he was still my daddy."

Roxy was thinking I was still angry with my mother, but that wasn't it. She might be dead, but she got me out of the burning house didn't she?

No, my mother wasn't the reason I chose duplicitous men. I simply took it for granted that no man was capable of being faithful. That is until Caleb and I became a possibility. Then why was I feeling skittish? Because Caleb had bungled his first attempt at a marriage proposal? It was even sillier of me to be mad at him.

"I'll think about it," I said.

She shrugged at my incomplete answer, and went back to suspects in the murder case. "If you're looking for suspects, you might want to ask yourself this question: What would you do if your brother lost his last chance at a heart transplant 'cause the donor organ went to a convicted felon instead of your loved one?"

I drew in a sharp breath and then let it out. "I think—I think if something like that happened to *my* brother, I'd probably want to commit murder. I just don't know if I could go through with it."

"Then you see where it might take someone."

"I'll have to remind Caleb."

"As for his poetry, what was it like?"

"Billy Wayne's? After the first three I stopped reading them."

"You still have any?"

"I gave all the snowflakes he left on my car to the police. Evidence, they said. Not that Detective Rodney will let me within a mile of that box now." Then I brightened. "But my new best friend, Pippa Roulette, might."

"I never heard you say that." Roxanne held up ten fingers and waggled them in front of her face. "I'm not seeing you pull out your cell phone or make that call." She picked up her pitcher of tea and stood. "And I'm definitely not hearing you talk some police woman into doing something illegal. As a matter of fact, I was never here."

I got to watch her cow-patterned Capris moo all the way through the swinging doors to the kitchen.

Pippa listened to my request, and then agreed to meet me at the evidence building in a half hour.

Chapter seventeen:

I pulled into a space at the Modesto Police Evidence Building for my meeting with Officer Pippa Roulette, who promised a peek at the box containing the last known poetry by Billy Wayne Dobson. Looking up at a clear blue sky, I saw none of the telltale clouds that predicted a weather change.

From the sycamores overhead, birds sang, hopped from branch to branch, fussed at each other, and generally went about the business of making more birds. In a nearby bush, a bird trilled, coughed, tried again, coughed, and finally gave up. Del Potts, knocked aside a couple of dusty branches and waved me over.

I strolled to the bush and gave him a hand out. "Everybody has been looking for you, Del."

"I know, I know, but I've got to stay incognito."

"How'd you know where to find me? Are you following me?"

"Of course I'm following you. You're my eyes and ears, remember?"

"What're you talking about? We never agreed to any such thing. And what've you done with your mother?"

He grinned, obviously pleased to see that once again he had put a couple of symmetrical lines between my brows. Dammit. If I expected to keep the upper hand with Del, I was going to have to hold onto my temper.

"You figured it out that Miss Cook's my mom, huh? Good for you. Now, why're you going to see the luscious Pippa?"

"So it was you who called the cops, told them there was gun-fire and my red Caddy outside her home? What was that, another one of your 'just for fun' tricks?"

He shrugged, indifferent to the temper I was working on. I should know by now that mad at Del, who thought it amusing to push my buttons, was a waste of time.

"You still haven't told me how you knew I'd be here," I said.

"Super-stealth hearing."

I blinked at a picture of Del with earphones on his head. "That's illegal, you know."

"Do I need to remind you what Brad said the other night?"

"That the killer is a cop? Yeah, yeah, I got that. But you've been holding out on me, and I don't appreciate it."

"Baby, honey, sweetie, you know that isn't true. Anything for you."

"Anything except let your mom talk to me. If you don't trust her with me, at least let her talk to Caleb."

"I think that dyke, Pippa is somehow involved in my cousin's murder."

"Will you stop with the dyke stuff? The police want to question *you* about Billy Wayne's murder."

"Don't get your panties in a twist, and don't you go trusting Pippa, she's a cop, remember?"

"It's Officer Roulette to you, and Jan Bidwell said *you* can't be trusted, either."

"She would say that. Her and that *Officer* Roulette are both a couple of man haters."

"Another derogatory comment about women and I'm walking, you little creep."

He worked at wiping the merry humor off his face. "I'm joking, okay?"

I was struggling with my temper again. "Your mom? Jump in anytime."

"We'll get to my mom in a minute. Look, you've got to ask the right questions of Pippa. See, it didn't make sense until I went over the police roster."

"Yes?" Finally some proof.

"Less than six months ago, Pippa arrives in town, and now Billy Wayne is dead. See what I mean?"

"That's it? Well that explains everything, doesn't it? You know we got ourselves a moratorium on new residents in Modesto. If anyone wants to move into town someone else has to die. You look surprised? I thought you already knew that. As for Jan or Pippa, if you quit propositioning every woman you meet, you moron, maybe they wouldn't want to rip your head off."

"I haven't had time to proposition Pippa, but I've got a hunch she's behind all my problems."

"You've got problems alright. Your aunt says you were the one who sold the story of your cousin's heart transplant to that sleaze rag."

"Of course I sold them the story. I'm a newsman, aren't I? I was hoping to flush out something I could use to find Billy Wayne's killer."

"You really think someone murdered him because of his heart transplant?"

"Yes I do, but I have to prove it."

"And that's another thing, why didn't you tell me Billy Wayne was your cousin?"

He shrugged. "I thought it best you should make up your own mind about my family. My mom's an alcoholic and my Aunt Margery is, well, even when you're standing right in front of her, she's somewhere else."

"Wouldn't have anything to do with that headgear she wears would it?"

He wiggled his stubby fingers up in front of his face in fearful pantomime. "I told her to go for the eyes. That's the only vulnerable part on their bodies."

"Aliens?"

His eyes twinkled. "Who else?"

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "You did this so no one would think she had a coherent thought in her head, she certainly couldn't be a credible witness, she's too crazy, right?"

He leaned towards me and whispered, "I couldn't convince my aunt Margery to leave, so this was the next best thing. Good idea, huh?"

"Seriously, Del, you've got to talk to Homicide before they put out an APB on you for kidnapping. And what about your job?"

"Let me worry about my job."

"All right. Let's drop that for now, and you can tell me where you've stashed your mother, and then you can let Caleb talk to her."

"Better that you don't know yet, then they can't torture it out of you." He ignored my eye rolling. "Look, I haven't got much time, so let's set up a secret password. You can call me later and tell me what you find out from Pippa. And, that's a big if, 'cause I don't think Pippa will show."

"No."

"No? But you said—"

"No secret password, and you're wrong about Pippa."

"Why not? It'll be cool."

"We are not in Dick Tracy land, and I'm not going to contribute to your suspicions about Officer Roulette."

"Baby, sweetie, I'm doing this for your own good. If I can listen in on a cell phone conversation, so can she. Brad was right, you know, Billy Wayne's killer is a cop. Someone's always listening, so we have to be careful. Reveal nothing over the phone, just a time to meet. Okay?"

"I think Brad made it all up simply to get back at me."

"I have no doubt he added the part about your boyfriend just to watch you squirm. But we both know he was right about the killer being a cop. Cops roust the bums all the time, but beating them up is not exactly departmental SOP, is it? I know these guys, and most of them are good cops trying to get by in a recession with dwindling budgets. They moonlight, others get into muscling in on a dope deal now and then, or turning a blind eye to the downtown dopers. Most news people pay for inside information, but they won't give up one of their own for some bum who's threatening to ruin their second income. One goes down, they all do. Which is what I'm counting on, as soon as I can find the leverage to make it happen. Then, I'm going to have to bring him or her to justice before they can silence me."

Good grief! He was making up copy for his next news story.

Disgusted with his antics, I said, "Call me tonight at six and we'll talk."

"Will do. Roger, Wilco and Out."

Then Del's eyes went wide, and he reached out and shoved me so hard that I spun around.

Tilting off axis I tried to keep my balance by wind-milling my arms, then braced for the inevitable impact. I felt my right arm slide out from under me and scrape the ground as my head hit the cement.

Dazed, I tried to get up, but could only manage knees and elbow.

Someone was yelling for me to run, someone else was growling and cursing, but since the concrete looked cool and inviting, I decided to lie down and wait till the arguing stopped. Just before I closed my eyes, I saw Del squirm out of the officer's grasp and run.

Chapter eighteen:

"Lalla! Lalla! Can you hear me?"

"Roger that." I knew it sounded like something goofy Del would say. Del! Where was that little weasel?

"Are you hurt? Lalla, answer me."

I was relieved to hear a woman's voice and see a pair of dark slacks kneeling beside me. Thank God, it was a policewoman.

Clutching at my savior's pant leg, I pulled myself up into a sitting position next to a bag of take-out boxes spilled onto the pavement. Grace Kim. Her white shirt and black slacks made me think she was a police officer, though Modesto police wore brown, not black.

"Grace, how nice," I said, woozy from the head crack. "You brought me take-out."

With a tight nod at my feeble attempt at humor, she pulled me to my feet. When I winced at the painful scrapes on my elbow, she shifted her grip to my bicep and held on till I stopped swaying.

"I was across the street," she said, wiping at leaves clinging to my clothes. "This guy comes running out of the parking lot. That's when I saw you laid out on the ground. What the hell was that all about?"

"Did you get a look at him?" I asked, thinking it might have been Del running away.

"Sorry, Lalla, it all happened so fast, and to be honest with you, I wasn't prepared to chase down some mugger with a gun."

"He had a gun?"

"I don't know, but I assumed he must've had a gun to get the upper hand on you," She picked a leaf out of my hair and our eyes met—hers scampered off to settle on a speck of dirt on my shoulder.

I felt gut-punched. Grace was lying, but why?

"Look Grace, I'm fine, really." I straightened my clothes and then noticed that her bowtie was askew and her shirt had a dark smudge on it. Something was off here. If Del had tussled with someone, surely it couldn't have been a lightweight like Grace Kim. To hide my growing unease, I offered to help her pick up the delivery boxes.

"Don't be silly. You shouldn't bend over just yet, and you need to see about those scrapes."

"There was just the one guy, then?"

"Oh. I don't know. I didn't see anyone else." She shook her head, her sleek hair swinging, exaggerating the negative. With the smell of Chinese food I got a mental image of Mr. Kim, squeezing off quick nods as he offered me a quick peek at the one secret message I had yet to decode.

She smoothed some of her hair behind her ears. "I'm sorry, I was just so shocked. I honestly don't remember seeing anyone else. I mean, this is nuts! Like what mugger in his right mind would attack a woman in the police evidence lot? Did he get your purse?"

"Purse?" Her lack of eye contact, her clothes in disarray, and I had the very uncomfortable feeling one gets when a favorite elderly aunt passes wind at the dinner table and everyone's too uncomfortable to say anything. There was no doubt that Grace had saved me from something or someone, but what, or whom?

"Okay, wait here, I'll look around." She stooped to look under a few cars, then trotted over to hand me the purse.

Since the heft of it felt right, I didn't bother to check if anything was missing. I was still puzzling over the last few minutes.

Grace astutely averted her eyes and bent over to stuff the boxes into the bag. "I hadn't thought to call the police, but I could do that for you now."

"Oh, no, not necessary," I said, remembering a clandestine meeting I had with a police officer who could get fired for allowing me into the evidence room. At least that was the plan—if Pippa hadn't changed her mind. "I'm good. Really. He didn't get my purse, and I'm not hurt."

"If you say so," she said, worrying the top edges of her paper delivery bag. The excitement of the last few minutes was enough to make anyone sweat, except that I recognized her unease for what it was. I should know, I had my own lies to deal with.

"Not worth the paperwork," I said.

At least her quick nod of relief was real. "Well, I do have these deliveries, but if you're still a bit woozy I could drive you home."

"No, no. Don't give it another thought. Where'd you say you left your car?"

Grace pointed across the street then gasped. "Oh, my God! I left it running and I'm double-parked. If you're sure you're okay?"

I gave her a thumbs up and a nod. "I'm good, you go on."

She nodded, and sprinted for her car.

I thought again of what I knew about Grace Kim, that she was a waitress and delivery person in the only viable establishment in a block of empty shells along a Modesto street known more for prostitutes and drug deals than food. It was also Billy Wayne's favorite hangout and where he was murdered, and last but not least, she was Mr. Kim's daughter.

Or maybe I was seeing this all wrong. Maybe what I was seeing was guilt by association. Like, if she stayed, this dangerous black cloud I seemed to carry around might just scoot over into her space.

If I were her, I'd want to distance myself from me, too.

I should write my impressions while they were still fresh in my mind, analyze the events, evaluate the clues before the rest of my brain slipped away.

I poked my hand down into my purse, feeling around for the soft leather case of my notebook. I came up empty handed. I stared into cavernous space of my purse. It was gone. I'd kept everything in that notebook; from Billy Wayne's dying words, to my list of possible suspects. All of it, from Byron Bettencourt, Detective Rodney, and Brad Lane. And now it was gone. Somebody had taken my notebook.

As much as I hated to admit it, Del was right. Someone else knew where I was coming today, and there was no doubt in my mind that Grace also knew who it was.

Chapter nineteen:

Inside the Modesto City Police Evidence Building I collapsed onto an industrial style plastic bench seat and studied the gray concrete walls. I was late for my appointment with Pippa and still shaking from my dust up with a mugger. Why would Del run off and leave me to an attacker? And Grace Kim said she found me *after* the mugger ran? Then why the tilted bowtie and dirty shirt? Not the fastidious Grace Kim I knew from high school, that's for sure. Did she steal my notebook, or was she covering for a someone else—a cop friend, or a lover? Was that why she was here? Nothing fit and I was getting a headache.

I dug a bottle of ibuprofen out of my purse and dry-swallowed a couple. As I saw it, there were three people who were linked to Billy Wayne. One: Grace worked at the restaurant next to the grimy alley where Billy Wayne had been murdered. Two: Mr. Kim was a Vietnam freedom fighter and liaison for the Americans until he came to the U.S., and Billy Wayne had been in the Far East with the Marines, hadn't he? Had the two crossed paths somewhere other than Modesto? Last: Brad said it was a cop. Why, oh why, did he have to infer Caleb was involved and then die before we could get the truth out of him?

My scraped elbows were starting to sting, so I hit the buzzer and asked for Pippa Roulette.

Shocked at my disheveled appearance, Pippa listened to my brief account about the mugger. I left out Del, Grace, the missing notebook, and anything else that might make her think twice about supporting my cause.

She hustled me into an antiseptic white room and proceeded to pull out antibiotic cream and Band-Aids. Satisfied with her job on my elbows she pointed me to a plastic chair in the hallway.

"Wait here," she said, and slipped inside another room.

I sat down to wait, beginning to feel anxious about involving Pippa in my illegal activities. But before I got the nerve to call off this chancy escapade, the door opened and she motioned me inside.

"I might have neglected to mention you to the duty officer," she said, "but he'll be taking a break, so we'll have ten minutes, okay?"

She set the box down on the smooth surface of the Formica counter top, took off the top, and we looked into the clutter of note-sized paper and the tightly penciled scribbling of an erstwhile poet.

Pippa gave the scraps of paper an exasperated sigh.

"Can you give me an idea of what you're looking for?"

"Something to tell me why he was murdered?"

"Can you narrow that down a bit? We now have seven minutes."

Her voice, I noticed had an edge to it. Couldn't blame her, since what we were doing was illegal. "I suspect it's going to be about as easy as his sign out in front of the new Chili's. It said, 'All of you smiling, is it dark in there?'"

Pippa sighed again. "I see what you mean. Well, I said I'd do this, so let's start digging." She picked up one of the snowflakes. "What about this one? Does this mean anything to you?"

I held the snowflake up and turned the delicate paper round and round as I read aloud. "Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing "

"This is what he wrote and glued to your car? she asked. "It's 'The Raven,' by Edgar Allan Poe."

If she was exasperated, I was just confused. "I don't recall anything like this. The ones he left under my windshield were always sweet."

"Then why something like this?"

"You mean miserably dark? I don't know." I picked up another one. "My tears are like the quiet drift of petals from some magic rose.' Tears? Depressed, I guess."

I shuffled through the paper snowflakes, reading one, then another.

A pattern began to appear; it was that of a lonely man whose communication skills had receded into scratches on paper, as if his pain, hope, and despair written to a woman who didn't care enough to read them, was all he had left. And I'd ignored him, had Caleb reprimand him, only to have him die at my feet without ever understanding why, or how, anyone could have hated him so much that they would want him dead.

"How long can I stay here and look at them?"

She looked at her wristwatch. "Five minutes left."

"Can I make a copy of a few?"

"Sorry, ID key is required at the copy machine, and that would blow our cover. Can you just write a couple of these down?"

She handed me a ruled note card and pen. "So what did he say to you before he died, I mean, besides, 'The more there is, the less you see?' I hate to speak ill of the dead, but it just sounds crazy."

I put my hand on top of the closed box of Billy Wayne's obscure poetry and looked at her under the harsh glare of a bare overhead light bulb. The light cast heavy shadows on her lovely face, and for a moment I thought her demeanor less than friendly, maybe even menacing.

I shook my head. Bad lighting. And besides, I'd promised myself not to allow Del's paranoia to infect my good opinion of Pippa. And I was sure I'd been wrong to think the worst of Grace, because no matter what she did, or didn't do in the parking lot, I had the distinct feeling she'd saved me from something much worse.

"I guess I was putting too much into what these snowflakes might reveal."

She nodded thoughtfully and I felt something seemed to shift and we were back on easy terms again.

She smiled, lifted the box out of my hands, put the rubber band with its identifying tag around it, and my earlier suspicions subsided.

After she saw me safely to my car, I cranked up the A/C, and with my sweaty armpits held akimbo, put the car in reverse, and pulled out onto G Street. Going east I cut over to 11th and headed back for the freeway, wondering what the ambitious Pippa might be willing to do if it meant she could make detective before Byron. World peace aside, Pippa Roulette had ambition written all over her pretty face. Yes, if I were her, I'd befriend Lalla Bains, climb over Byron's back, and make detective in record time. Besides, unlike poor Byron, I was sure she could pass the detective's exam in one take.

I took one hand off the wheel and reached over for my bag and cell phone to call Caleb, then pulled it back. No, not the cell phone. If Del could listen to my cell, then so could someone

else. Brad had said it was a cop. Cops have connections to listen in on cell phones. Now I was paranoid, and rightfully so. I had to see Caleb in person.

I was passing cars, weaving in and out of traffic, driving too fast, thinking about what I'd say to him. I'd leave out the real reason why I was at the police evidence room and just tell him I was there to talk to Pippa.

Maybe tell him about the mugger, but leave out the theft of my notebook, then ask him if he could call in a favor with the military police to see if there was any possible connection between Billy Wayne's tour of duty and Mr. Kim.

I hit my brakes in time to avoid climbing up the rear end of a Ford F-150. Too impatient to handle the stop and go traffic ahead, I got off at Carpenter, gunned the engine and sped up the overpass and down the ramp onto the freeway. Ha! The clogged mess was behind me and the road was mine again.

I punched the gas pedal and was pleased to feel the big engine sink its teeth into the pavement. I was tearing along the dotted line when I looked over to where I'd left the card and pen on the seat. All that heavy braking had tossed everything to the floor. I could reach it if I stuck my arm way over, snag it with my fingertips.

I looked up, checked the road in front, then my rear view mirror.

All clear.

I bent over, leaning as far as I could and made a swipe at the items on the floor. Damn—missed it!

Popping up again, I checked traffic, and with the road clear, I reached down and gleefully snagged the card.

And as luck would have it, the pen rolled a bit closer. One more stretch should do it.

I looked up for a quick check in the rearview, then checked out the front.

You know what they say about seeing your life flash in front of you when met by the possibility of sudden death? It was all true.

I'd drifted across the far right lane and was heading into on-coming traffic. I knew better than to jerk the wheel and send the big Caddy careening back across the lanes. Instead, I tapped the brakes, gripped the wheel between both hands and gave it a quarter turn to the right. It was enough. I scraped along the edge of the berm for a few minutes, bounced once and came to a stop. Whew!

Just as I was congratulating myself on avoiding another disaster, I saw a black and white roll up behind me, lights flashing. It was the California Highway Patrol, and there would be no getting around this ticket.

He was taking his time, checking his computer for priors, and whether there might be a warrant out for my arrest. By now he knew my name, age, height, date of birth and the fact that I'd already had all the comedy clubs my driving record could handle. Hoping it wouldn't also mean jail time, I waited while his lights churned in time to my miserable heartbeat. Who was I kidding? I was soon going to have that one special phone call.

I mutely handed over the requisite information, including my expired insurance card and waited. I wasn't surprised when he asked me to get out of the car and then politely asked for permission to look inside.

"I lost my pen and paper on the floor," I said, as he shoved back the driver's side seat to wave his flashlight around on the floor. "That's when I leaned over to retrieve it. I must've bent the wheel too far over and accidentally sailed right across all those lanes."

He backed out of the car, nodded agreeably, and asked if I'd pop the trunk.

"I have to do it with a key," I said, pulling the keys out of the ignition. "These old classics have temperamental latches."

We walked to the rear where I inserted the key to the trunk, lifted the lid and got the surprise of my life. I squeaked and then reached out a shaky hand. But before I could touch him, the officer grabbed my wrist.

"Stand back, miss." He then put two fingers on the neck, and shook his head. Weak-kneed, I turned away and promptly vomited.

"You know this man?"

"Del Potts. Works for the newspaper," I croaked, wiping my mouth with my shirt sleeve. "I talked to him less than an hour ago. Are you sure he's dead?"

The trooper had a tight hold on my arm, though I wasn't sure whether it was to keep me from falling over or to make sure I didn't run for it.

"Can you tell me how he got into your trunk, ma'am?"

"I-I don't know. No. I can't." Had someone knocked me out to kill him and then used my keys to stuff him into the trunk?

The officer turned me around, cuffed me, and I can honestly say was actually gentle when he shepherded me into the backseat of his cruiser.

* * *

"I was coming to see you," I said to Caleb.

Caleb nodded to the deputy, and the door to the holding cell closed behind him. He waited until the door-lock clicked shut, then reached out and pulled me to his chest. I rushed to sob out my story, and this time vowed not to leave anything out.

I told him everything, finding Del waiting for me at the police evidence building, the attack, and finally, Grace Kim bending over me. "I swear to you I didn't kill him. I don't want Pippa to get in trouble because of me."

"It's not a problem. Pippa didn't remove anything from Evidence, and we'll leave it at that for now, okay? Your lawyer has already been here, you'll be released into my custody, that is, if you'll do as you're told."

"Of course, I will," I said, all too happy to comply.

It was Caleb's reputation, not mine, that swayed a judge to release me on bail.

Outside, I inhaled the sweet perfume of freedom.

My dad stood quietly waiting by his truck. He set down a small suitcase with my things in it. "Our new lawyer will be contacting you tomorrow."

"Dad, I'm awfully sorry, but I had nothing to do with this."

He nodded. "If you really want the bait to stay on the hook then you've got to stick it on good."

My mouth sagged open, not really expecting that his quote would connect to this, or any other problem, they seldom did. But he also didn't give an attribute with his quote. I waited. When it didn't come I asked, "Socrates, Euripides? Walt Disney?"

"Me," he said. "Take care of her, Caleb."

Nothing I said was going to make a difference now. Once again I was a disappointment to the only men who mattered.

Caleb carried my suitcase into his house and dropped it onto the tile entrance. "The guest room?"

I looked down the hall and nodded at the open door to his bedroom. "Please, can I sleep with you?"

He set the case down on the white quilt covering his neatly made queen-sized bed. How, I wondered, did he do it? Didn't we just mess up that bed a few days ago? If it had been my bed, the sheets would still be on the floor, the mattress halfway off its frame.

His wistful sigh said we could mess it up again if I just gave the word. My answering smile was all he needed. He reached out and enfolded me into one of his deep hugs.

"Harder," I said. When he obliged, I burrowed my face into his neck, deep enough so I could feel his steady pulse against my open mouth. I licked at the pulse, and then, ever so gently, nibbled at the tendon in his neck. His breath strummed at the erotic tug of teeth on vulnerable skin. He pulled back to look me in the eyes. "Just so I'm not making a wrong move here, exactly what is it you're doing?"

"Making it up to you for putting up with me?"

I could feel his warm smile on my mouth as his hands worked underneath my T-shirt, his fingers coolly climbing the ladder of my ribs until he came to the obstruction of my bra. With his lips lazily nibbling mine, he slid his fingers around the edge and deftly unsnapped it, releasing the last possible objection. I sighed against his mouth and pulled away to lead him to bed where I could make it up to him the best way I knew how.

Chapter twenty:

After Caleb left for work the next morning, I punched in the cell number from Jan's business card.

I barely had time to say, hello, when she gushed, "Oh, my God, Lalla! It's all over the news, but of course I don't believe you had anything to do with leaving him to die in the trunk of your car."

"Right. Why would I do that anyway? If I had a gun in my hand, I couldn't have forced him into that trunk." I winced as I remembered that Jan, aka Margarithé Delacorte, was also a reporter. I could just see tomorrow's headline: *He was Impossible to Control Unless I Held a Gun to his Head!*

"I know Del wasn't easy," she said, "but why would anyone put him in a hot trunk to die?"

Uh-oh, I'd walked into this one. She was fishing for information for her next by-line, and I couldn't afford to have her misquote me. "Gee, I can't tell you anything, Jan. I was out cold through most of it."

"Well," she said, her voice trembling, "if there's anything I can do, all you have to do is ask."

What was this? I thought she'd be handing out prizes to the person who finally took him off the planet. What was it she'd said about him? *He'll abuse your trust then leave you bleeding all over the carpet like the rest of us who get in his way.* Well, damn. I'd completely missed the signals. She wasn't talking about newsroom politics. They'd been involved, and knowing Del's take on women, she'd taken the breakup harder than he did. Maybe there was something she *could* do for me.

"Jan, do you by any chance have keys to Del's place?"

There was silence on the other end, then I heard her blow noisily.

"I'm that easy to read, huh?"

"Can we talk about it at his place?" I asked.

"I don't know if I can go back there. It's just too painful."

"I'm hoping he left some clues that will help us find out who killed him."

"Oh, of course." I heard sniffing over the line. "Give me half an hour and I'll meet you there."

"Uh, Jan, I might have a little problem with that. I'm out of jail, but I can't not be caught driving."

"Oh." She giggled, then sniffled again. "I suppose you do. Give me the address and I'll pick you up. We'll go through his apartment and look for clues," she said, her voice a limp sigh. "Del would've wanted us to."

I was choking up a bit, myself.

* * *

There was not one single brook, vista, or rambling stream running through the maze of look-alike apartment complexes between Standiford and Pelandale. Still, they all had names like Shadowbrook, Mountain Vista and Sweetwater printed on wooden signs to distinguish one from the next.

We pulled into Meadow Brook. Covered parking, grassy well-kept grounds, units by the pool, and as anonymous as a Catholic girl's school uniform, which, knowing Del, would be just the way he liked it. I felt the tears well up again and tamped them down. Jan handed me a tissue, and we exited the car. Damn his hide for dying.

At number 512, she pointed to the scuffmarks on a planter box with dried geraniums. "I never did have the key, but I know where to find it. I told him it wasn't safe, that any kid could do it too, walk right in and take his stuff. But he just laughed at me.

"Del says . . .," she gulped down her tears and continued, "*said* I shouldn't stress over the apartment, not when we were moving anyway. He was starting at the Chicago Tribune in December, and I was going with him—you have to step up on this planter to reach the ledge. I'm wearing heels, but still, too petite, *n'est-ce'pas?*"

I looked at her five-foot-three inches in strappy heels, shrugged, went up on tiptoe and found the key.

"Got it," I said, dropping down again.

She gave me a quick mile. "I guess that's the compensation for being a bean-pole."

So as not to rub it in, I didn't mention that compensation for beanpoles these days ran in the six figures, and handed her the key.

Jan never had to slouch her way through high school, and with her curvaceous figure, she practically invented the term "juicy." She also had a track record for back seat romances that was the stuff of jealous whispers all through our senior year. I couldn't say how she did with men since then, but if Del Potts was any indication, I'd say her expectations had fallen on hard times. But maybe Del's sex appeal lay in his journalistic prowess.

Inside was no big surprise; dying houseplants, newspapers and books littering the coffee table, the sink full of dirty dishes, and somewhere, the distinct aroma of a clothes hamper overflowing with sweaty gym socks.

Jan dropped the key into her bag and honked into a tissue. "He wasn't much of a housekeeper."

She walked over to a houseplant, pinched off a couple of stiff brown leaves and fussed with the remaining few stems. "We were always upstairs anyway. I know I acted like I hated him, but now I understand why he did it."

"Did what?"

"Broke up with me, of course." She tilted her chin in a defiant gesture. "I know it sounds egotistical, but I took my mama's advice to heart—it's the woman who picks the man, not the other way around. Once you understand that, you can never be hurt by falling for the wrong guy."

"Oh yeah? So what the hell happened?"

Tilting her head back to keep the tears from spilling, she settled her hands on curvy hips and laughed. "I screwed up."

"Uh-huh." I couldn't begin to see the attraction and said so.

She angrily backhanded her wet cheeks and said, "You should talk, Lalla Bains. You came home from New York City and married Ricky Halverson. I mean, really, Lalla. Every girl in town took a ride on that stallion."

Satisfied to see the barb hit home, she continued, "Yeah, I did Ricky. He made it sound like you were going back to New York and didn't care who he screwed. You should thank me, or that silly little bitch secretary you finally caught him with."

"And Del was different, how?"

"We're—we *were* both news hounds. We had the same drive to get into the big time and out of Modesto. Then last week he picked a fight, and called me ugly names." She turned to me, tears again threatening to spill. "And now he's dead."

"You're saying he *knew* he was in danger?"

"What an ass, huh? I'd like to have the chance to kick his butt all the way to Chicago."

My next question was interrupted by a noise. Jan heard it too, and putting a cautionary finger to her lips, cocked her head to one side. Then her breath quickened, and with a flick of her fingernails, she motioned for me to get out of sight.

"Are you nuts?" I whispered. "It could be a break-in. One of those kids you were talking about."

Shooing me toward the kitchen, she hissed, "Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

Not so sure she was right about this, I backed up to the sink where I grasped the handle of a big, cast iron, egg-encrusted skillet. I hefted the pan to shoulder height and waited.

She nodded her approval at my choice of weapon and went to stand at the bottom of the stairs.

Then, in a voice meant to lick honey off a lemon, she called, "Who's there?"

Who was this sexpot, and what the hell did she do with Del's grieving lover?

The floor squeaked and heavy steps shuffled against the carpet. Someone stood at the top of the stairs and from Jan's expression, I'd say the burglar wasn't a stranger because she did that hair-swing thing she used to do in high school, licked her already red lips and purred, "Well, look what the cat drug in."

Heavy footfalls slowly descended, and then I saw the back of a head, thinning dark hair at the neck of a white dress shirt, sleeves rolled up to show thick, hairy forearms.

Rodney!

"Hey, yourself," he said. His voice had a frightening intimacy to it. "What're you doing here?"

Jan dangled the house-key between her fingers. "I have a right to be here, as you well know. You'd better not have been pawing through my lace panties either, you big perv."

I shivered at the wicked sound of his laughter. Why was she antagonizing him like this? Didn't she know the guy was an animal? He stood at the bottom of the stairs looming ominously over her, his fists clenched.

I had to give it to the girl, she didn't give an inch.

"I didn't have time to get into your panties, but we can make up for it right now." He grabbed a handful of her hair and jerking her head back, went for her mouth.

She twisted away from his kiss, pushing at his shoulders. "I told you last week, it's over."

Last week? The ready grip I had on the skillet slipped a bit with *that* news. She'd been doing Del Potts *and* the detective? This girl sure got around. I steadied my hold on the heavy frying pan and waited for her signal to step up and bean the creep. Keeping his back to me, she ignored the anxious appeal in my eyes, and continued her shuffling dance with Rodney.

"You're never going to be over me, I'll see to that," he said, groping her breast and slobbering her with wet kisses.

In another minute, he'd have her on the floor, tearing off her dress. I was doing my own fearful dance, edging out of my hiding place in the kitchen, skillet in hand, side-stepping just enough to keep out of his line of sight.

She was far too small to fight him off, and size did matter when you had an animal like Detective Rodney to grapple with.

Unable to control myself for one more pass around the maypole, I stepped up and double handed the cast iron pan on the back of his head. The impact vibrated all the way up my arms.

He went down, open mouthed and inert like a hairy bearskin rug.

I'd finally done it, committed battery on a police officer. Now my ass really was going to jail. "I didn't kill him, did I?"

Jan nudged him with her sandal. "He's got a hard head. But why hit him? I could've handled the big dope."

"That was handling? You were about to be raped. Besides, if he danced you around one more turn, he was going to see me, and I'm out on my own recognizance, well—sort of. I'm supposed to be at Caleb's, not here."

"Jeez," she said, looking at the unconscious cop. "Keeping up with two men can really wear a girl out. How do men do it?"

"But, Jan—Rodney?"

She nudged him with her toe again and giggled lightly. "He was useful. Besides, he had that *je ne sais quoi* thing, you know?"

Rodney was still out cold, snoring noisily. I could see some of it—girl reporter and cop. Okay, so he was useful, but still, Rodney? At the very least, he was married, and at the worst of it, he was dangerous.

She stood quietly appraising the unconscious man at her feet. I could just see the mental wheels turning as she considered her next move—hang onto the memory of her beloved Del, or go with bucket of charm, Detective Rodney, who was still alive, and *useful*.

I said, "We can't be here when he wakes up."

She thoughtfully bit at her lower lip. "You can't be here. I'm going to have to clean up."

She was right, of course. If it were up to me, I'd roll him out into the parking lot and use him for a speed bump. "What's he going to do when he comes to and wants to know who hit him over the head?"

"I'll think of something, I always do. It'll involve make up sex, something a little kinky, but that's the way he likes it." At my horrified expression, she laughed. "For the stuff I've done to get a story, I should be at MSNBC right now instead of this jerkwater town. I'm thirty-four for crying out loud."

Thirty-four? Two days ago she was thirty-five. I decided not to mention it. After all, she was the one offering to 'clean up.'

My arms were dead weight in their sockets, so anything she wanted to do was okay by me, as long as I wasn't here to witness it. "How long before he wakes up?"

"Five, ten minutes, tops. Anyway, you've got to get out of here, now." Pressing her lips into a hard line, she lifted her chin. "I won't think about the humiliating things he'll make me do, it's all for Del."

"Fine, fine," I said. The adrenaline that had been holding me up had evaporated, and my knees were in danger of collapsing.

"I'll get a cab or a bus down the road," I said, and wobbled unsteadily for the door.

"Wait," she said, taking out her cell phone. "I'll call someone to pick you up at the corner. It'll be better than taking public transportation, and there'll be no record with a taxi company to trip us up should this go wrong."

* * *

I limped down to the corner of Orangeburg and Evergreen thinking that every time Jan talked to me she got another year younger, whereas I seemed to age another ten years.

In less than ten minutes a street rod pulled up and a kid leaned over to the passenger side, opened the door and said, "Hop in."

I buckled up and looked at him. Short, dark, curly hair peeked out of a gangsta style ball-cap. "I'm Lalla. Do you know Jan from the newspaper?" I asked, looking for something normal to talk about.

"Nah, I'm her son." Seeing my jaw drop, he grinned. "Yeah, I know, how's a babe like her have a goof-ball kid like me?"

"No, it's not that. It's just, well, I didn't realize that our mom was married." I was going to say that Jan was too young to have a grown son, because in spite of her thirty-five, make that thirty-four years old, she was my age and *still* too young.

"She forgot to mention she had a kid, huh? That's okay. Her parents made her give me up at birth. I don't know anything about my real father, but I can't imagine having a kid at nineteen, and I'm nineteen, same age she was when she had me. Don't get me wrong, my parents, my adoptive parents, are cool about me connecting with my bio mom, so here I am."

"You live here now?"

"I'm giving it a try. It's an easy transfer 'cause it's city-college. I've been majoring in business, but I'm thinking of switching to something like journalism, or maybe law enforcement, either one should be an easy A."

If there was a self-conscious, anxiety-ridden teenager under that curly hair, I didn't see it. So Jan had an illegitimate son. I wondered who the father was. Someone from our class, or one of the big city college boys she flaunted at the school dances? Really surprising considering that none of the jealous gossips in high school got wind of this secret. Janice Bidwell, preggers? How did she keep it under wraps all this time?

"So Jan's kid, what's your name?"

"Arnold, but my friends call me Arny. You're cute. Wanna go out sometime?"

"Uh, I don't think that would be appropriate." Good grief. This could be my kid!

Arny laughed. "I'm just foolin' with ya."

Okay, so add smart-ass teenager to the equation.

"Jan took a lot of flak for insisting they put an X where the father's name went, but I think she's rad to not give it up. Last name is Johnson and always will be 'cause my folks have always been there for me, you know what I mean?"

"Makes sense. Are you staying at Jan's?" I asked, wondering what his parents would think if they knew Jan's taste in men.

"Nah, that could get awkward. She has her own life and I'm a grown man now." He grinned at me and winked. "It wouldn't be appropriate."

If he only knew. "Can you take a few more minutes out of your way? I'll pay you for the gas, but I need to make a side trip out to my house and it's out in the country."

"Gas, grass, or ass, nobody rides for free." He slid his eyes at me, and then unable to hold it in any longer, laughed out loud. "Just kidding. Well, sorta. It doesn't sit well with a guy when a girl offers to pay him."

"Listen, kid—"

"Awright, awright. I'll be honest with you, it wouldn't hurt my image to be seen with a chick like you, and you're some seriously bodacious babe."

There was no way around bruising his male ego. "I'm not going to go out with you, Arny."

"Okay," he said his breezy reply enough for me to think by the end of the ride he would have forgotten all about it. "Where we going?"

* * *

Arny rolled to a stop in front of my house. I unbuckled my seat belt and hopped out. "I'll be just a minute."

He nodded, turned up the volume on his radio, reclined his seat, and closed his eyes.

The house was unusually quiet. No Juanita banging pots and pans around, no washing machine churning up the laundry, no Spike to nip at my toes.

I took the stairs two at a time, grabbed a backpack, and stuffed things my father had missed when he brought the suitcase to the police station; shorts, skin cream, mascara, and my Kindle loaded with mystery and detective fiction.

Then seeing my dad's bedroom door closed, I pressed my ear to the heavy oak door.

Was that Donna Summer on his stereo? Deciding that I'd better check in, I tapped lightly. No answer. Ever since I got a warning tacked to his door, I tended to check on him and if he wanted his privacy, he'd lock his door. The draperies were drawn, the room was dark, his window AC was chugging out cold air, and he was in bed with the bedcovers pulled up to his chin.

This was odd. "Dad, you okay?"

"Not feeling well," he mumbled. "Don't come any closer, I might be contagious."

I went to open the drapes. "And disco is the cure? Why don't I get you some chicken soup?"

That's when I noticed the lit candle on his bedside table, two empty coffee cups and a pair of heels next to his bed.

A feminine giggle erupted from under the quilt.

All I could manage was, "Oh, gosh. Sorry." I put my hands up to hide my flaming cheeks and fled, uncontrollable laughter following me all the way out the door.

I threw the backpack into the back seat, hopped into the passenger side and yelled, "Drive, kid!"

He put the car into gear, punched the gas, and we fishtailed around the corner onto the main road, hitting eighty in sixty seconds. He slowed down for the freeway on-ramp. "What'd you do, steal the family silver?"

I put my head down and ignored Arny's reckless driving. "Something like that."

"You got nerves of steel, lady. With your good looks and my excellent driving we could rob banks for a living."

"Didn't Jan tell you anything about me," I said. "Like that I'm out on bail for murder?"

His happy grin faded. "Uh, no, ma'am, she didn't. But ... you didn't do it. Did you?"

Why didn't I think of this sooner, save us both this uncomfortable conversation? But I couldn't hang onto my mad, not in the face of all his young and irrepressible good humor. "No, I didn't, but I may still have to prove it."

The ride to town was blessedly silent while Arny digested the idea he was transporting a possible felon, and I digested the idea of my dad sleeping with a woman after all these years.

At Caleb's house, Arny finally took the wadded up twenty I shoved at him.

"Gas money," I said.

He stuffed the bill under his leg and wrote down his number on the back of a card. "Here's my cell. I work nights at the service station, but I could get away if you need me. Anytime, Lalla."

He winked to show we were still friends.

I took the card and got out, adding a wave as he pulled away. Smart kid, but I'd bet my lunch money he didn't know about Del Potts—or Rodney.

* * *

I carried the backpack into Caleb's house and found him lounging against the kitchen sink, sipping a cup of coffee. His ice-blue eyes raked me with a mixture of wonder, longing, and a spark of warning.

Putting down the cup, he silently lifted a finger to his lips.

I put the backpack on the table and waited.

He reached out and pulled me into his arms where he mouthed against my ear the one name I'd been hoping I'd never hear again, "Rodney."

I felt the shock skitter down my arms in much the same way as that frying pan did an hour ago. I choked out an expletive. "Here?"

"Mm-mmm," he answered, pulling me with him until he was leaning back against the kitchen sink, legs spread, drawing me against the length of him. He whispered into my ear. "He was in the house when I got here."

I had two things going on in my head at that moment: a protest at the blatant invasion of Caleb's home, and a burgeoning lust at having his body so close to mine in the middle of the day.

That fantasy died when Rodney walked out of the bathroom wiping his hands on a towel.

"Miz Bains," he said, glancing at my back pack. "I was just telling the sheriff here that it is no longer necessary for you to be on house arrest."

I blinked once and gushed, "Really? How come? I mean, does that mean you've found Del's killer?"

A smile played around his lips. "All you need to know is that you're free to go. Home, if you like."

It wasn't going to get any better than this, so I took it. "Home?"

Caleb turned away to run his cup under the faucet, but not before I saw the flash of hurt in his eyes.

"So, you'll be going back to your ranch?" Rodney said, reaching up and rubbing the back of his head.

I nervously licked my dry lips. If he turned around, I'd see a goose egg the size of Kansas right about where I'd bashed him on the skull, and if he got a whiff of the fear nailing my feet to the floor, I'd be back behind bars in a flash.

To hide my mounting anxiety, I said, "Well, that's great news, isn't it Caleb? Will you give me a ride home? Or should I call my dad?"

I had no intention of calling him. My dad was undoubtedly in post-coital bliss with Mrs. Hosmer. In a vain attempt to keep all my wildly conflicting emotions in check, I took in a deep breath and held it, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"No need to bother your dad or Caleb, Miz Bains," Rodney drawled. "I can give you a ride."

Caleb, knowing my suspicions of Rodney, looked for a signal he should jump in and come to my rescue. But Caleb didn't know the full extent of my culpability; that I'd been at Del's apartment, and the reason why the detective had a lump on the back of his head.

"Let's go, Detective," I said, grabbing my backpack and heading for the door.

As my daddy would say, *From the frying pan into the fire.*

Chapter twenty-one:

I got into Detective Rodney's unmarked police car, snapped the seatbelt on, and hoped to God he meant it when he said he was taking me home. "So Detective, did you find out who put Del Potts in the trunk of my car?"

He glanced at my fisted hands and chuckled.

"You sure know how to show your appreciation, don't you?"

"What're you talking about?" I asked, now sure Rodney knew I was the one who hit him with that frying pan at Del's. Watching the cars whizz past, I also wondered if I jumped out at this speed if I'd live to see tomorrow.

"You shoulda seen the look on your boyfriend's face back there. You did everything but hand-flips at the thought of getting out of his house."

Oh, yeah, that. I'd screwed things up good, but it was Rodney I was worried about.

"Well," I said, fumbling for a plausible reply. "I have a business to run, and if the investigating detective thinks I'm good to go, who am I to argue?"

He slapped his hands on the wheel and laughed out loud. "You're a piece of work, you know that? Sheriff Stone thinks the sun shines out of your butt, and what do you do? Typical woman, you twist his nuts in a vise and blow him off. Okay by me. Whadya say we get us a room and I'll show you what you've been missing?"

I swallowed the bile threatening to come up. Rodney was slimy, obnoxious and married, not to mention prone to rough sex with the single women he dated. But so far nothing in his conversation indicated Jan had squealed on me.

"I think we both know it's a no-go, Detective."

At the ranch I unbuckled my seatbelt, and before sprinting for the house, remembered to say, "Thanks for the ride."

He called after me, "The pleasure may still be all mine, Miz Bains."

Maybe he did know, or at least suspected, I was the one who beamed him with that skillet. Or maybe this was simply his way to throw me off balance.

Inside the house, I shook off the last few hours of drama and looked around.

Everything was back to normal. Juanita's radio was tuned to a Mexican station, my dad was whistling tunelessly as he tucked his shirt into a pair of recently ironed pants, his old scuffed Justins sagging around his ankles and his ornery buddy, Spike, close at his heels.

Of course, this was after I'd come home unexpectedly and walked in on him and my third grade teacher.

Unable to stop myself, I had to go and rub his nose in it.

"Where's your date?"

He snorted. "Never mind that. What happened to your house arrest at Caleb's?"

If circumstances had turned out differently, if I'd stayed where I was supposed to, I wouldn't have been in Del's apartment to see Detective Gayle Rodney slobbering over Jan Bidwell, or be the one to clobber him with that skillet. And if I'd stayed at Caleb's, I'd also still

be in the dark about my father's afternoon dalliance with Shirley Hosmer. Boy, howdy, the things I'd miss out on if I did as I was told.

"Lalla? I asked you a question. Aren't you supposed to be at Caleb's?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm happy to say that Detective Rodney says that I've been exonerated from all charges. Oh, I have to make a call," I said, and ran for the stairs.

I settled onto the bed, pulled out my cell phone, and called Jan.

"Jan? What did you do with Rodney after I left?"

"Oh, Lalla," she gushed. "I have great news, but not over the phone. Can you meet me, uh tomorrow, same place as today, ten a.m.?"

"Sure," I said to dead air. She'd hung up. Good news? And now she wanted to meet me at Del's place? I could only hope she got Rodney to confess and she got it on tape.

Punching memory dial, I waited as Caleb picked up in the middle of the first ring.

"Caleb? I'm so sorry. Please don't think I wanted to leave you like that. I—"

"Are you okay?"

"Me? Sure. I'm fine, fine. I'm sorry. I should've left you a note where I was going."

There was a moment when neither one of us said anything. Then we both started again.

"Sweetheart, I just wish—"

"Me too. Caleb, please, there's so much we need to talk about, but not now. Can you come out tonight?"

"You don't want to come back here?"

I heard the ache in his voice and wished I hadn't been responsible for putting it there.

"I'll be coming in from work. We can eat here and talk, okay?"

Knowing how tired I would be by the end of the day, he agreed to come to the ranch. Besides, Caleb had a weakness for Juanita's seven-layer casserole, and it was on the menu for tonight.

* * *

My dad had commandeered my office chair. He folded his wrinkled hands on the desk and proceeded to lecture me on my most recent infractions. "Look at the facts, Lalla. It was your job, your mistake."

Mad-Dog did a fly-over on a field I'd meant to do two days ago, something I should have done, would've done, if I hadn't been stuck at Caleb's for the last two days. Now there were white streaks in the field from the larva that eat the tender corn in its husk. It should never have happened, and I had no one to blame but myself. I'd been neglectful, worrying about things I couldn't change instead of paying attention to business. And now my dad knew because the farmer had called him and complained, saying we'd get his next job but he wouldn't be paying for chemicals, or the time it took to do it. It was pilot error, pure and simple, and it would come out of my paycheck.

"I'm sorry, Dad, but—"

He held up a hand to stop me from interrupting. "I would've chalked it up to your recent worries, but that's not all of it, Lalla. I checked the regs on that cylinder you said was kicking. That engine is already hours beyond its TBO. So now someone gets to do the overhaul, and maybe replace the damn thing."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'll help, I promise."

"You can bet your buttons you're going to help. You're grounded as of today."

"Noah Bains! That's just not fair. This is my living too, you know." What I didn't say, and we both knew, was that flying, even in a pokey Ag-Cat was the nearest thing to heaven. Up there I was free of the constraints of the earthbound. My troubles became small and insignificant. Flying was the cure for what ailed me and I hated to lose it.

"You're too distracted, and it ain't safe. Not for you or anybody else."

"So what am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"Paperwork's done for today, and the boys are all out on jobs. We can't start on that engine until tomorrow, but I have something that will keep your mind occupied till then."

I took the paper he held out. "This? You can't be serious!" I squinted at him. "Tell me this doesn't have anything to do with catching you in *flagrante delicto* with Mrs. Hosmer."

"Don't start with me, missy!" he snarled, his big ears flaming.

For the second time in one day, I'd embarrassed the two men most important to me. "I'm sorry, Dad. That was out of line. Please don't be mad at me."

"I'm not mad, Lalla. This is only temporary. When you or Caleb or the police department get this all sorted out, you can get back into the seat. We can't afford to lose a half-million dollar aircraft, not to mention the lawsuit it might bring, just because you're not paying attention to business. Surely you, of all people, can understand. It's your business you'll want to protect for the future, not what I'm doing with Shirley Hosmer."

I pulled out the pity card. "But, Dad, they took my driver's license, remember?"

He snorted again. "When has the lack of a license ever kept you from driving? Take the farm truck, leave the Caddy, and no one will be the wiser."

I took my chastisement, and my marching orders, and left.

* * *

"Now, who has the answer? Yes, you. Young man in the blue T-shirt."

"Yeth ma'am, I thur can! My little brother is a peth. Have you got anything to get rid of him?"

That broke them up for another few minutes until the teacher's sharp clapping brought them to heel. "All right, children, that's enough! Let Miss Bains do the talking."

I didn't want to talk, I wanted recess. I looked at the big round clock at the back of the room. I'd been given forty minutes to an hour to talk about the benefits of pesticides. What I really wanted to do was go outside and play on the jungle gym, or maybe eat lunch and take a nap.

I raised my voice another octave and started again. "Pesticides are not scary. We use them every day in our homes. Pesticides save wildlife, wetlands, water, and lives. Everyone uses pesticides. Your mother uses them to get rid of the fungus in the shower, and do you have a flea collar for your dog?"

That brought an outburst of opinion, comments and comparisons of dogs, sizes, colors, and who had the best dog in the world.

"Awright!" I was shouting? Good God, how do teachers do it? "How many of you go swimming?" The teacher smiled and nodded. She was saving her voice. "Everyone does? Good. What's in the water? Your little brother's pee? No, you can't flush the pool out every time your kid brother pees in it. So they put a chemical called chlorine in the water to fix that, don't they? What would happen if they didn't put chlorine in the water? That's right, it would get all icky and

turn green, wouldn't it? Did you know that a good thing in one place can be a pest in another? Can you give me an example? Someone? Not you, cowboy, someone else? Anyone?"

This time I picked a pink-cheeked little blonde. She stood up by her desk and said, "I think a truck would be a good example because my mommy says my daddy shouldn't have bought his truck. It cost eleventy-seven dollars, and she says if he doesn't sell it, she's going to get a D-I-V-O-R-C-E, but my daddy says she's being a pest, because ... "

The teacher, I noticed, was carefully examining her nail polish.

I ignored her attempts to keep from laughing and tried again. "Let me see if I can explain. A rose is a nice thing, but if it grew in a field of corn, the farmer wouldn't be too happy. So he calls us, and we ... yes? Did you have a question?"

"Do you have guns on your airplanes, like they do in the old movies?"

"Uh, no. Now if you can hold your questions until after my talk, where was I? Oh, yes, roses in the corn. That would be an example of something that looks right in your mother's garden, but not in the farmer's field, isn't that right?"

Enthusiastic nods all around the room. Then it dawned on me—that's what was bothering me about Billy Wayne. He was as out of place amongst the homeless men who wandered the underworld of Modesto's night streets as a rose in the corn. Perhaps I'd mistaken Billy Wayne's messages to me. Maybe they weren't meant to be love poems as much as a way to reach out to someone who might listen. But then, why me? And why not a fellow Marine like Caleb, who'd tried to befriend him? The dead are entitled to justice, Pippa said. And for whatever reason, Billy Wayne had chosen me to bring his killer to justice.

I came back to the present when a spitball hit me in the forehead.

Released fifteen minutes early, I shook hands with the teacher and told her I'd be glad to do it again anytime, just not any time in this century.

* * *

I managed to get through dinner with nothing to rattle the quiet except for an occasional request to pass the salt.

Caleb and I washed and rinsed and piled the dishes into the dishwasher as we'd done since we were kids. I'd had him for a lifetime of friendship and now he'd come to mean more to me than I ever could've imagined. So why was I still clenching my teeth against the bond as if it were a hair rope dragging me to my grave instead of the sweet bond of promise.

Outside, we settled into our wicker chairs with an after dinner beer.

My dad came out the front door and, passing us for the steps, said, "Night," and ambled across the yard to his truck.

When the taillights were half-way down the road I turned to Caleb and said, "He's dating our third-grade teacher."

It took him a minute, but then he coughed out, "Mrs.Hosmer? *That* third grade teacher?"

"The very one. When I came home to pick up some extras for my stay at your house, I kinda, sorta accidentally walked in on them."

"That'll teach you to go home unexpectedly. Sweetheart, I only hope when we're that age we're still getting it on."

It was dark and I could barely see the outline of his profile. But I could tell he was smiling. "Oh, Caleb, what am I going to do?"

He reached out to me in the dark. "You don't like her?"

"Who?" I'd been thinking of Janice and Rodney.

"Our third grade teacher. You don't like her, or you don't like the idea that your dad is dating again?"

"Well, what if he got married?"

"You'll move in with me."

"We've been over this. No moving in together."

"And no getting married either, right? Then what do you want?"

"I didn't say I didn't want to get married." Well, not lately, anyway.

"You turned me down last week."

"That was a proposal? Was not."

"Was too."

"No ring, Caleb. Admit it. You're not ready to take the leap again."

"Am too."

"Are not."

He leaned back and pulled a small box out of his pants pocket. "I've been carrying this damn thing around for months, except that I didn't have it in my pocket the other day. The velvet on the box is a little worse for the wear, but if it's the ring you think has been holding me back, well this should settle your mind."

He thumbed the lid open, and in the light from the foyer, I saw a twinkle of a diamond. "It's not as big as your last one, or even as big as you deserve, but it's paid for. Can't take it back, so you might as well put it on."

I leaned over to look inside the box.

"It's also your wedding ring," he said. "I thought since we'd both been married before, and you don't like fussy, that this would be a secure setting for the stone." He took it out and held it up between his fingers.

In the dim light my vision wavered with tears.

"Come on, give," he said. Motioning at my left hand he put it on my ring finger.

"It's perfect, Caleb. This is all I'll ever need."

I got up and stepped around his knees to sit on his lap. "Thank you, my darling," I said, kissing him once, then again.

He nuzzled my neck and in a husky whisper said, "I love you, too. Your dad shouldn't be the only one having fun. Come home with me tonight."

I bounced off his lap like I'd been shot out of a cannon.

"Now what? You're not mad 'cause I said something about your dad, are you?"

"It's not that. Let's take a walk," I said, pulling him to his feet. We walked out under the stars, arm in arm, admiring a barely visible dark side of a quarter moon.

Where to start? My growing suspicions about Rodney needed to be put to the test.

"Caleb, I think Rodney may have bugged your house, maybe mine too."

I felt him tense against me. "I know you don't like the detective, sweetheart, but he'd need a court order to do that, and by now a friendly would have alerted me."

"Then why show up at your house when he did?"

"He came to give you the good news, though he wasn't entirely surprised to find you'd gone AWOL. That old door latch sometimes doesn't catch when I leave, so he stepped inside to wait. I got home and said no more than two words when you came in and I didn't have time to ask him anything, like, did he put a bug on my phone?"

"The bedroom! He's kinky enough, and I wouldn't put it past him." I decided to hand him another idea. "Didn't you tell me that Billy Wayne finished his tour of duty in the Far East?"

"Yes."

"I keep coming back to why Billy Wayne spent so much time at Mr. Kim's. Did you know that Mr. Kim fed him? Or that he loaned Billy a book of Japanese Haiku?"

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Okay. What do you think *that* was about?"

"I'm not sure, but seems odd, doesn't it? That Mr. Kim would choose to feed Billy Wayne when there must be dozens of homeless men looking for handouts."

"Odd doesn't begin to describe it. Perhaps the connection was poetry since Haiku is a pared down form of poetry, sort of like the art of pruning plants down to miniature, like those Bonsai the Japanese are so fond of. I don't think I ever told you this, but after Billy Wayne got out of prison I tried to help him. He said something that only makes sense now that I know about his heart transplant. He said, 'Second chances seldom happen, and when they do, maybe they shouldn't.' Then he thanked me for trying, said he was sorry if he hurt my feelings, but he just couldn't have friends."

"That feels like his last words to me, 'The more there is, the less you see.' Do you think he knew he was going to be killed?"

"I think anything is possible."

I patted his cheek. "'Second chances seldom happen' could just as easily apply to us, Caleb. You're my last hope for finding any kind of real happiness, not to mention sanity."

He held our hands between us, smoothing the ring on my finger. "Too bad Billy Wayne didn't see it that way."

"I still don't understand why he didn't want the operation."

"A highly decorated warrior who puts his body on the line for his fellow Marine but can't transcend from warrior to selling cars or shoes or insurance is sad, but it happens. Not everyone comes back from the war in one piece."

He sighed and looked out into the night. "You should have heard the tantrum his heart doc had when he found out Billy Wayne was murdered. 'Useless waste of the tax payer's money,' he said. Heartless bastard. He was steamed about losing a viable heart to a convict and all but said Billy Wayne deserved to die."

"Sounds like the hate mail Mrs. Dobson showed me."

"We've been rerouting all of her mail. Not that it does any good."

"Why do you say that?"

"Wackos mostly, but with two bomb threats in those letters, our resident FBI agent is staying busy. The poor guy gets to drink our lousy coffee and check out the kooks."

"Roxanne said something that I just can't get out of my head."

"What was that?"

"She said, 'What would you do if your brother had lost *his* chance at a heart transplant 'cause the donor organ went to an inmate in some federal prison?'"

His look reflected everything he knew about me, that I wasn't one to take offense against a family member without some kind of retribution, or revenge.

He said, "I suppose we'd better take a serious look at the list of patients who were on the waiting list at that time. One more thing, you said Grace Kim found you?"

"Yes," I said. "But I can understand her reluctance not to get involved, so I told her to leave."

"Sorry, sweetheart but that's not the way Grace tells it, and since you chose not to report the incident, the police department is taking her word that she was never there."

"What do you mean, she was never there?"

So much for thinking I needed to protect Grace.

"That's a lie, Caleb. Not only was she there, she looked as if she'd been part of it. Her bowtie was cockeyed, her shirt was smudged with dirt, and trust me on this, that's not a look that describes Grace Kim. There must be a record of someone across the street ordering that Chinese food."

He rubbed a hand wearily over his forehead. "I'm not doubting your word, but why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"I guess I didn't think she'd be someone who'd go along with stuffing Del in a hot airless trunk. It's just not the sort of thing I'd think she'd do, that's all."

He hummed. I worried he was growing suspicious of the missing bits to my story. But I didn't want to get Pippa in trouble, either.

I'd been avoiding the one question I really needed to know. "Di-did he die from being in my trunk, or was he already dead when they tossed him in?"

"I don't know yet, and Lalla, you couldn't have known he was in the trunk of your car."

"But, they booked me and finger-printed me!"

"That was for reckless driving. The book is still out on Del's death."

"I'll go to prison for it, unless someone else falls into their hands."

"No. You won't. You had no reason to kill him. We'll sort this out, I promise you. You never saw who attacked you? You don't remember hearing a voice? Footsteps coming up behind you?"

"Nope. Think I should ask Pippa to make another stab at hypnotizing me?"

When he didn't answer, I said, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Grace, but if Grace was part of the attack, then why stay to make sure I was okay?"

"Maybe Grace simply balked at hurting an innocent woman."

"Pick her up and ask her?"

"That's the other thing. Grace has skipped town. She's not at her apartment and no one, including her father, will admit to knowing where she is."

Grace Kim denied being there, then she either witnessed, or participated in my attack. Had she run because of her complicity, or was she now the killer's second victim? Which brought me back to Rodney. "Detective Rodney's is still my best bet for a suspect."

"Rodney, again? You're way off base with him. I know he's annoying, but he's a good cop."

I remembered someone else telling me about what good cops did and didn't do, just before he was killed. Poor Del. "Weren't you the one who told me that Billy Wayne was a sniper somewhere in the Far East? And didn't you say Mr. Kim was adjunct for Viet/American military? And doesn't heroin come out of Southeast Asia?"

Caleb blinked. "I'll check on Mr. Kim's history with the military. Now, give me your cell. I think the only person I can trust for this is the lonely fed who's been camped out at the police station for this last week. I can trust him to sweep my house and check the phones without it getting back to Rodney. But, if you're wrong about any of this, you owe me a date night."

In spite of the dark threat in his voice, I smiled.

Chapter twenty-two:

As I walked to the office in the early morning light, I inhaled the sweet loamy fragrance of recently irrigated land and the rich scent of ripening fruit. Too bad it would all soon be replaced by housing developments and a charter school.

In the office, I printed out triple digit checks for Av Gas and supplies, then posted invoices, and because I was an optimist, balanced the cost of supplies, pilots, ground crew, hull and liability insurance against price cutting scumbags like Margrave who barely kept his license but still managed to snatch customers from us.

I came back to the present when I heard my name on the VHF. I punched the on-button. "This is base, Mad-Dog, go ahead."

"Lalla, I just laid the borders, and the first couple of passes, and there is no way a second load is going to finish this. Are you sure the work order is right?"

"Stand by and I'll check." I'd been writing up work orders since high school, but lately I've had my share of distractions, so I plucked the work order off the spindle and computed again, then looked at the map the farmer had given me. Sixty acres, the hand drawn map said. One pint per six gallons. Two loads of wet in a hopper that held two-hundred and eight-five gallons.

I hit the talk button. "Base to Mad-Dog."

"Mad-Dog to base, go ahead."

"You checked your swath width?" I was asking because even though the calculations for the fifty-four foot wing span of the Ag-Cat was a standard number, the width of the sprayer was adjustable and could have been changed between jobs.

"I checked. Sixty feet should be right on the money."

I didn't want to talk about it over the VHF because it was an open airway and this was the way our pirating competitor, Junior Margrave, managed to weasel his way into Mrs. Warren's good graces. "See me when you come in for the next load."

I went outside to check the pile of extra material we kept in the event that we went over the allotted amount. I stared at the extra bags of Comite for a few minutes then went back into the office and called Patterson's Chemical.

A half-hour later, Mad-Dog walked into the office, got a cold drink of water and slouched onto the couch across from my desk.

I said, "I wondered why Patterson's said they've got worked into the price. They'll replace the extra Comite we used."

"You want me to map it?" Mad-Dog asked, anxiously.

We're paid by the acre and the pilots depend on the full amount to pay their wages.

"Too late for that, but I'll see that you get paid for the extra." I thoughtfully tapped my lip with a pencil. "Patterson's office manager said she *forgot* to mention why they always pad this customer's chemical order. Evidently, he's some big-shot Modesto lawyer, doesn't understand farming for beans, but he likes to figure out his own formula for the spray. Problem is, he's always short and threatens to sue when the bugs aren't dead."

Mad-Dog noticed the far-away look in my eyes and grinned. "What're you thinking, Lalla?"

"I'm thinking I'm going to let Margrave steal another customer."

Mad-Dog's rather nasty smile reflected my own. "I'm fairly shivering with anticipation to hear how that turns out, but right now I'm heading for a shower."

The phone rang. It was Caleb telling me to wear something sexy tonight. "No bugs found anywhere in this house or on your cell. You can pick up your cell at my house. Tonight. Be there." He hung up, and happy to be wrong, I sailed to the house singing, "*She works hard for the money, so hard for it honey*"

* * *

At ten a.m. I was parked outside Del's condo for my meeting with Jan when she pulled up in a red Sebring convertible.

I hiked over to the condo and watched her work the key into Del's front door.

"Did you get Rodney to confess to killing Del?"

"Better," she said, opening the door.

"Okay, but what..."

"You have to see this. *S'il vous plat*. Oh, I forgot to ask, how was Army yesterday?"

"You have a very nice son," I said evenly, waiting for the history of how she managed to keep it all a secret.

A momentary look of nostalgia flickered in her eyes. "I didn't plan on having a kid so young, I was a kid myself, but I'm thrilled that his folks allowed him to come for the summer,"

The air inside the apartment, I noticed, was considerably better than yesterday. She must've left on the A/C.

"Come upstairs," she said, her eyes twinkling.

Inside the bedroom, the covers on the double bed were crunched up into a mound in the middle. She wanted to show me Del's messy bed? I'd already seen enough of his poor housekeeping.

Then, the mound began to rise. I gasped, my breath hissing in little rasping sounds as the covers slowly rose up. "What? Wha's...."

The covers came off and somebody who looked an awful lot like Del Potts yelled, "Surprise!"

The room backed up into dark corners and closed in on me until everything went black. The last thing I remember was the clear slap of hand against flesh and Jan screeching, "You idiot, now look what you've done!"

Jan pressed a cold wet cloth to my head, and Del peered at me with a look of chagrin on his elfish face.

I pushed the cloth away and struggled to a sitting position.

"Which one's Del?" I woozily peered between Jan and Del. I was seeing double, the fall, a hit on the back of my head, all in two days. I was probably concussed. "One of you is Del, which means, Del isn't dead. What kind of dirty rotten bastard pulls a stunt like this?"

"Sorry. Del's idea of cute," Jan said. "If it's any consolation, he was pretty close to dead when they put him in that ambulance. Fortunately, the EMT's found a faint pulse and got him all fixed up again. Didn't they, sweetums?"

"Yup. It's miracle I'm alive. Heatstroke, the doc said. If I hadn't been found when I was, it would've been adios Elvis. Which only goes to prove I *am* indestructible."

I tried clearing my vision by blinking a couple more times. "Then where the hell have you been for the past three days?"

Del said, "Detective Rodney had me in the hospital under an assumed name, for my own protection."

Jan, excited at the intrigue added, "They couldn't hold him, though. He got to a phone and I busted him out and—"

"—I've been at her house ever since," Del finished.

I looked from Jan to Del. "Then you can ID your attacker? Who was it?"

"Sorry," said Del, his expression inscrutable. "Can't remember a thing. Doc said it'll come back, maybe."

I screwed up my face, and holding my head between my hands, got to my feet.

I sighed and asked, "Now what? Are you planning to give this story to the papers? And what about the police? They're looking for you, too."

Del winked. "Since I took an unauthorized leave from the hospital, I thought it might be best to lay low for a bit longer. At least until we find out who killed Billy Wayne."

"Sorry," I said, "I should've listened to you the first time."

"That's okay, Lalla," Jan said, "but we thought you should know."

"Yeah," said Del. "We figured Rodney wasn't going to let you in on the secret, and I see I was right again."

So Rodney lifted my house arrest because he knew Del wasn't dead. But, had he told Caleb? No. Caleb hadn't said a thing, and he wouldn't agree to keep it a secret, not from me. Caleb wouldn't—would he? Maybe—if his job was on the line. This was the worst of it, after all my bad luck with men, I'd developed a suspicious and cynical nature—and now it was playing havoc with my trust in Caleb.

Del was watching the expressions somersaulting across my face.

"Yeah, it's a conundrum all right. But look at it this way," he said, poking Jan in the ribs, "we're free to work, heh, heh, undercover."

She slapped his hands away. "Keep it up, and I'll take you back to that hospital."

Del nuzzled her neck, "You wouldn't do that to your lovin' hunka man."

She pushed him away again. "Not if you do any more stupid stunts like scaring Lalla out of her wits."

"Oh, *baaaby*, I'm all shook up." He did a knee knock that looked as much like an Elvis impersonation as it did a chubby kid on a new pair of roller skates.

Jan did an eye-roll but with just the teensiest curve of a smile on her lips. "So, it's decided then?" she said. "We team up to look for Billy Wayne's killer?"

"Yeah, except now Grace Kim is missing," I said.

"Told you," Del growled. "They're in on it together, Pippa and Grace."

I shook my head. "Grace may have lied to the police about her involvement, but she also stayed to help me when she could have left me passed out on the ground, or worse. As for Pippa, she could've been fired for getting me into the evidence room, but she did it anyway."

"Then it was Grace and that deputy, Byron Bettencourt, getting even. Thought it cute to stuff me in a hot trunk."

I could see Byron cheerfully dumping Del into a garbage can, but not leaving me unconscious lying on the ground. At least, I didn't think he would. Of course, he wasn't that cute little ten-year-old I used to babysit anymore, either. I couldn't believe it of Pippa, even with the shadowed looks I got in the evidence room. After all the trouble I seemed to attract, she was more likely considering the probability that I was some kind of bad-luck charm.

Del tucked in his chin. "We're going to stay under the radar. No help from the newspaper and no police. That means Sheriff Caleb Stone, too. You up for this, Lalla?"

This was typical Del, diving into dangerous waters after coming back from the dead. "Look, you might be invincible, but I have no such armor, and I still have a lot to live for." I said, turning the engagement ring on my finger.

Jan grabbed my hand. "Oh, you're engaged? Caleb Stone? You lucky girl!"

"Yes, and engaged to the man you don't want me to talk to," I said. "Of course, my more immediate problem is that I'm still without a driver's license."

"We've already thought of that," Jan said. "Arny will be your chauffeur."

And glad to have some of his school chums see it. "Okay but first, Del, I want to talk to your mom."

He looked down at his shoes and then up at me. "Can't. Sorry, Lalla."

"Doesn't fly with me, Del. She told me you're hiding her. What does she know that makes you think you need to protect her?"

"Look, we're closing in on discovering Billy Wayne's killer. If we haven't found the answer in two days, you can talk with her, will that do?"

"You can see why I'm not thrilled with this, Del. If it looks bad to me, it's got to look bad to the cops. If you want me to be part of your investigative team without talking to my fiancé, you need to come clean with me."

He shrugged, his bland expression indicating he'd already given that scenario a run around the block and was sticking to his plan. "I'm not making myself or my mom available to the cops until I find out who killed my cousin."

Jan touched me on the shoulder. "What do you think we should do next?"

I threw up my hands. "Alright, I'm in. Brad, being an addict, knew who killed Billy Wayne. Rodney's my best guess for it."

Jan's eyes went wide. "You suspect Rodney?"

I glanced from Del to Jan and wondered how much Del knew about her relationship with Rodney. Del gave me a shrug that said it all. Del no longer had any reason to be jealous of the detective.

"He's lazy and manipulative. At the very least, he's herded into doing his dirty work again. But if it's true, that he's neck deep in local drug deals, then he's also Billy Wayne's killer."

Jan squeezed Del's hand. "I got you out of that hospital just in time, snookums."

"We've slipped his grasp for now, hunny-bunny."

Before they got too chummy, I said, "I got a day job, so where will you two be so I can find you?"

Too late. They'd already dissolved into a rubbery clench. I made my way down the stairs, quietly closing the door behind me. They'd find me as soon as they came up for air.

Chapter twenty-three:

Our resident Irish balladeer and pilot, Fitz, was singing over the VHF, "They put a sulfur bag on the piece of land where my favorite runway used to stand. Before that I had a job in Colorado, if it was windy we'd just wait until tomorrow. But fearless leader called me on the phone, said I don't want to hear you bitch and moan. Get busy, stop your whining and get your lazy Irish ass to flying."

Last year a defective voice mike got all of us an ear-full of Fitz's warbling. It was also the fuse that ignited Brad's drug induced explosion. After that incident, I presented Fitz with a thumb-hold for his mike. Now when he sang, told jokes or recited trivia, at least he knew when he was on the air.

As the radio clattered with ragged applause, I smiled, picked up the phone and called Mr. Kim's.

"I am sorry, Miss Bains," he said, "I do not know where my daughter is."

"Mr. Kim, I'm afraid for her safety. Will you call me if you hear from her? Tell her that I'd like to help?"

There was a silence on the other end of the phone. "If you will come about closing time, say nine p.m., I will speak to you then."

He hung up before I could thank him. Add Mr. Kim to the growing list of people suspicious of telephones. Of course, he was also a suspect in Billy Wayne's murder, and I shouldn't forget it.

I looked at my watch. Caleb was coming to the ranch for dinner. Was he going to tell me he knew about Rodney's plan to keep Del under wraps? Or had Rodney convinced Caleb to keep it a secret, too?

* * *

Another long hot day was slipping over the western hills and drawing a bright orange band across the tips. I closed the door on the office and made it back to the house in time to smell Juanita's cooking.

My dad and Caleb were moving around the table, setting out plates and napkins. They looked up as I came through the swinging doors with the casserole in my hands.

Caleb took it and put it on the table, then reached out to push back the wispy bangs on my forehead. "Sweetheart, you look beat."

There was nothing in his comment that made me think he had anything to add and it was disappointing.

"Caleb, can I talk to you for a minute?"

He nodded and followed me to the front porch.

"Do you have anything else you want to tell me?" I asked.

"Sorry? You mean besides the fact that you look exhausted? I didn't offend you with that, did I?"

I twisted the ring off my finger and held it out to him. "I think for now, you should take this back, at least until the investigation is over."

"No! Why? Come on, Lalla," he said, waving his hands over the ring as if it were on fire. "You're doing this because you think the stink will roll over onto me? If it didn't make a bit of difference last year, it sure as hell won't now."

He wasn't getting it. If he loved me, trusted me, was on my side, then why did he let me go on believing that Del was dead? I was feeling too down to start up another fight. "I'm not going to argue about it now. If you won't take back the ring, then I'll put it away until after this is over."

He jammed his hands in his pockets. "I won't take it back unless you give me a better explanation."

"Let's just leave it and go back inside. Our dinner is getting cold."

He hunched his shoulders and silently put a foot on the porch steps. At the last step, he turned back to me, his voice pitched so low I almost didn't hear his comment.

"If we're ever going to make it together, Lalla, you have to learn to trust me. I'm not taking the ring back. You keep it and think about what I just said."

I didn't say anything to keep him or bring him back. There was no way for me to white-wash the truth and it was breaking my heart. Somewhere between duty to his job, and his love for me, Caleb had decided where his loyalties lay, and they weren't with me.

"Where's Caleb?" my dad asked between bites.

"He ... he had a call."

My dad snorted. "You two had a fight again? Your mother and I had exactly two arguments in our eighteen years of marriage."

"And look how well that turned out."

The hurt in his eyes shot through me faster and quicker than a bullet through glass. He silently got up and took his dish to the kitchen where I could hear the water running in the sink, the dishes getting the worst of his temper.

Who was this spiteful woman who would say such things? I'd pushed away one, and deeply insulted the other and my world was shattering around me. I was doing everything possible to destroy my previously happy home. But I was also tugged from two sides—Caleb, who wanted me to report to him so that he could report to Detective Rodney, and Del, who wanted me to keep everything from Caleb.

There was only one thing to do; find Billy Wayne's killer, and soon, before my entire world went spinning off its axis.

I looked at the hall clock, and taking Jan's advice, dialed Arny's number.

"Lo?"

"Arny? This is Lalla Bains."

"Lalla? Hey, what's shakin' pretty lady?"

"I need a ride, please." I was down to this, getting a ride from a love-struck teenager instead of *my* love interest, or my now royally pissed off father. But then I really couldn't expect any help from either of my men, not after tonight.

* * *

I stood on the porch and waited for Army in the dark. True to his word, he arrived in under an hour. I buckled up, and once again he punched the accelerator, tearing up the gravel as we rounded the corner to the main road.

"Go slow, will you please? I really don't want to get stopped tonight."

"Okay, sorry," he said, easing off the gas. "Gravel is so much more fun than pavement, you know?"

I smiled at his youthful enthusiasm for my gravel. "It was either add gravel or bump the headliner on all the pot-holes. Serious rad, huh?"

"Yeah, awesome."

"If it makes you happy, you can rad seriously when we come back."

"Uh, no, sorry, it's only when you go from gravel to pavement."

"Whatever. Okay turn here," I said as we came up to the Kansas exit. I pointed out the right-hand turn onto 9th, and then told him to park on J Street next to Mr. Kim's. "You have a cell phone with you?"

"Do bunnies live in trees?"

"Do ... ? I'll take that as a yes. Wait here for me. If I'm not back in half an hour, call this guy," I said, handing him Caleb's number. I got out. "And, lock the doors, Army. This part of town isn't safe."

He nodded, hit the door lock, turned up the radio, and slouched into his seat.

The closed sign was in the window of Mr. Kim's, but the doorknob easily turned and I stepped inside, following the sound of country western music to the kitchen.

With quick, deft motions, Mr. Kim was slicing scallions. And I noticed once again that he was left-handed. He looked up, knife in mid-air.

"Ah, Miss Bains. You found your way. Good, good. I am preparing tomorrow's dishes. Will you have tea?"

The evening was too warm for tea, but it would be rude to refuse. "Yes, thank you."

There was no sign of Grace. "Mr. Kim, is Grace coming?"

"All in good time, Miss Bains," he said. The light from the single bulb cast a cold light that didn't quite reach the corners. I felt a shiver of something pass over me as I looked at the row of knives lying side-by-side on the chopping block.

Seeing me looking at his knives, he said. "In Vietnam, my son would sharpen our knives. Now I do it."

"I didn't know you had a son, Mr. Kim. Is he in the states?"

"He died," he said, and invited me into the dining room where he set a pot and two cups on a table. He served us both, relaxed and confident with the ritual. I was hoping that I wouldn't have to ask again for Grace, that at any minute she would walk in.

"You were expecting my daughter. I am sorry to tell you that she is gone."

"Where is she, Mr. Kim? I really have to speak with her."

"She has gone to visit relatives in Vietnam."

"What? She can't leave the country, she's a witness."

His gray eyebrows bunched with surprise. "What do you mean ... *witness*? She was not the one who saw ghost in alley."

If this was a surprise to him, then I wasn't going to tell him about Grace's lying at the evidence lot. "She's a witness for another incident."

He waved away my concern. "It is no matter. I convinced her to leave. She's safer out of the country than here where she could end up as a reminder that I should not be talking to police."

I frowned. He'd invited me over to tell me this? I was being played again. "Why are you afraid for Grace? Is it because you know what she's done?"

"My daughter has done nothing to be ashamed of, but Grace is the only child I have left. I will not allow her to become involved with this investigation."

"If you know who murdered Billy Wayne and you're afraid of the police, then why don't you talk to Sheriff Stone. He'll protect you and your daughter."

"I did not lie to the police, Miss Bains. I cannot identify the person at the end of the alley, other than the person was tall and wore a uniform. I know this because the sun was going down and a button glittered in the light. The police wear brass buttons on their uniforms, do they not? And wouldn't you think that a policeman would come to investigate? I thought the police in this country were always eager to investigate."

"So, someone thinks you might be able to identify them, even though you've told the police you couldn't." So Del and Brad were right. It was a cop that killed Billy Wayne. There were, however, still questions to ask Grace. "How long ago did she leave?"

He shrugged, his face now a stoic mask. "By now, she is in Vietnam with relatives."

"What about you, Mr. Kim? Who will keep you safe if you won't talk about what you saw?"

"I am able to take care of myself, Miss Bains. I would suggest that you stay away from potential trouble and allow your fiancé to protect you."

* * *

Halfway home, I asked to use Arny's cell phone. He handed it to me and asked, "Where's yours?"

"It's at the drycleaners," I said, too weary to offer the explanation that it had been checked for bugs and was still at Caleb's waiting for me to pick it up.

"Talk all you want. I've got evenings free, weekends too."

"Do you have your mother's, that is, Jan's number?"

"Hit number eighty-seven," and he added, "what can I say? I know a lot of people."

Jan picked up. "Speak."

"Jan, can you find out if someone has left the country?"

"You mean, Grace Kim? There's already an APB out for her, but I'll check airports to Vietnam. Call me in an hour, tops. I should have an answer for you then."

"Any luck getting the heart doctor to talk?"

"Too soon." She hung up.

Defeat on all sides. Grace was now out of the country and there was no way to connect with someone associated with the other heart recipient.

I handed him back the phone. He smiled and said, "She's not big on phone conversation, but give her a glass of Chardonnay and you can't get the woman to shut up."

"I can't imagine what it must be like for you, having a biological parent you've just now met. You like her, don't you?"

"Jan? Sure I do. Wanna get a beer before I take you home?"

"Like I really need to add your underage drinking to my growing rap sheet?"

Arny simply grinned. "Some other time."

* * *

The next day was all work, and it wasn't until the sun was completely gone that I was able to take a stroll along the perimeter of our property where I could kick dirt clods and think.

Deciding to pilfer a couple of peaches from the neighbor's orchard I picked my way over the warm, fragrant earth and under dense, leafy trees. I was surprised to see most of the fruit lying on the ground, rotting. Which meant one of two things—the price of peaches was so bad they weren't worth picking, or the owner had sold his property to developers. Sure enough, there was a sign close to the road: *For Sale*.

No one could afford to farm small acreage these days, at least not on this side of Modesto. Between housing developments and the new school at the end of our runway we were being edged out of our own neighborhood.

I gazed lovingly at the dusky outline of Ag-Cats, the water truck, the three Ford trucks we used for business, and in the blink of an eye saw it all disappear.

We'd have to move our operation. Maybe partner with Haley's on the Westside, or better yet, move the whole outfit further south to Merced. No, that wasn't going to work. Merced was taken. What was I thinking? The aero-ag business in California was already divided up as tight as it could be, and this season could be our last.

Maybe it was time for me to look up the owner of that lot across from our landing strip, see if some kind of compromise couldn't be worked out to give us some breathing room for at least a few more seasons.

Leaving the peaches in the sink for our housekeeper, and a note for my dad, I traded the Caddy's keys for the anonymity of our old farm truck and drove to the flattened acreage where the land was leveled and waiting for a construction crew to build a new charter school.

I parked, got out and walked the property looking for a sign or anything that would tell me who the owner might be. I found it face down in the dirt; a small hand-lettered sign that at one time had been stapled onto two sticks. I turned it over and read the words, *Imagine Charter School. Coming Soon*. I wrote down the phone number on the back of my hand.

Since my cell was still with Caleb, I drove home and used the office phone. I dialed the number and a woman answered.

"Margrave Aero Ag service."

I hung up. As my daddy would say, *Well, if that don't beat all*. It was all a hoax, a ruse to worry us into quitting the business.

I left the office and went to the house. A note from my dad on the hallway table said he was out with Mrs. Hosmer.

I smiled to think that he'd found someone he liked enough to see more than once, and I hit the code for the perimeter security. Still smiling, I locked the door behind me, and climbed the stairs for bed.

I'd found a way to solve two problems with one stroke. Satisfied that karma had finally tilted its wheels to my side of the road, I slept peacefully.

Chapter twenty-four:

I'd gone to sleep the night before with happy thoughts on how I could save our business and extract my revenge on Junior Margrave. So why did I wake up thinking of Roxanne's words, *What would you do if it had been your brother who'd lost his chance at a heart transplant because it went to a convicted felon?*

The very real emotion of what that kind of pain would do hit like a crush to my chest. The tragic loss of my brother had been harder on me than my mentally ill mother's suicide. So what would I do? Would I, could I, be so obsessed, I would hunt down the convicted felon, in this case Billy Wayne, in order to exact my own bent form of justice?

With mixed feelings, I dressed and went downstairs and into the kitchen. Juanita was whisking batter for pancakes and my dad was sipping a cup of coffee and mashing eggs into his toast.

"Is that tofu on your toast, or are you off your low cholesterol diet?"

"What're you, the food police? I get two eggs a week, miss nosy-butt."

I shrugged off the surly comment. Another cup of coffee, and he'd go from surly to just crabby. I'd bet Shirley Hosmer had yet to see this cheery side of Noah Bains.

Juanita's quick smile said she agreed, but doused the grin to ask if I wanted breakfast.

I begged off the meal, but asked my dad to sit tight until after I'd made a couple of calls. Then I called a friend of mine at Imagine Charter schools, and with my suspicions confirmed, called the county tax assessor's office and got the information I needed.

Then I sat down at the table and told my dad about the property south of our landing strip, who it belonged to, and how we might be able to give Junior Margrave a stiff kick in the butt with my newfound knowledge. It was nice to see his face crease up into a smile so early in the morning.

On that happy note, I left for Roxanne's.

* * *

At Roxanne's Cafe, I stopped now and then to say hi to first one person and then another. Most folks could spare me a kind word or two.

"Sorry for your troubles, Lalla, and Barb says hi and hang in there," Tommy Johnston said. His wife, Barbara Johnston, née Bettencourt, was Byron Bettencourt's sister and pitcher on my softball team.

I was beginning to think that most folks here, in spite of the news on TV and in the paper, were holding out hope that I might be an innocent party in all of this.

Roxanne sat across from me and asked, "What's going on with you?"

I was still lost in thought, mentally turning over ideas on Billy Wayne's death. "What do you mean?"

"Hello? The paper only said you're no longer a person of interest in Del Potts' death. But do you think to call and tell your friends what's going on?"

"Oh, that. I'm off the hook 'cause he's not dead."

"What the heck do you mean, not dead?"

"He's not dead." I told her about how Del had cheated death and how Detective Rodney had Caleb by the short hairs and that I'd given Caleb his ring back, at least until this was all cleared up and added my one piece of good news.

"Remember that school that I thought might go up at the end of our runway? Turns out I've been sweating bullets for nothing."

I told her about the dirtbag competitor by the name of Junior Margrave and all the antics he'd been doing to run me out of business this last year.

"I don't suppose you're going to wait on karma to show up and settle the score. Because he will get his, you know."

"I've already worked out my revenge for Junior, but you'll be happy to know it's nothing that involves violence. Turns out he owns that piece of land at the end of our property with the school sign on it, but next week it's going on the auction block for back taxes, and Noah Bains will be there to make sure we're top bidder. All of which got me to thinking about revenge and my brother, Leslie, and what you said."

"You mean when I asked you what you would do if your brother lost his chance at a heart transplant because it went to a convicted felon in prison?"

"Yeah, that. Now I'm wondering if Billy knew that he was marked for this sort of bizarre justice and was trying to tell me the name of his killer."

"Huh. So 'The more there is, the less you see' wasn't a poem, but his way of telling you he knew why he'd been stabbed?"

"I wish I could get another good look at his snowflakes."

"Aren't they with the police?"

"Pippa got me a quick peek in the police evidence room," I said. "Though she might prefer to keep her distance since Del Potts was found in the trunk of my car."

I was thinking I could call Caleb, but if he had to ask Rodney, I might as well forget it. Rodney would never let the box go if he knew I wanted to see it.

Roxanne was picking crumbs off the tabletop, wiping fingerprints off the salt and pepper shakers, rearranging the silverware, the sort of thing she did when she was seriously thinking of how to broach an uncomfortable subject

"What?" I asked.

She rubbed a hand over her chin and said, "Don't suppose you've been exactly circumspect in your criticism of Detective Rodney, have you? Could that be why he leans on you so hard? You want my advice? Stay out of his way. Let Caleb and the feds do their job."

"I can't, Roxy, don't you see? Billy Wayne's snowflakes were his last desperate effort to get someone to listen, and all I did was sic Caleb on him. The clue to who killed Billy Wayne is somewhere in that box of a hundred or more paper snowflakes, I know it. If it's a policeman, or the investigating detective, we'll have it in Billy Wayne's own handwriting."

"So you think Billy Wayne wrote some kind of message to you on those snowflakes?"

"I don't know. The few I read in the evidence room were a complete surprise. They weren't the love poems he left on my windshield wipers, they were Edgar Allan Poe and that drunk, what's his name ... ?"

"Dylan Thomas. So you think another look might my goodies help?"

"If Rodney has anything to say about it, I'll never see those damn snowflakes and Caleb ... oh well."

"Humph. We'll see about that," she said. "I'll be right back."

While she was gone, I wolfed down a stack of dollar-sized pancakes and two eggs over medium. When she came back, I was licking syrup off my fingers.

"Sorry, sweetpea. I was going to get you that box, but looks like it's already up and gone. Think Caleb had it picked it up after all, just to please you?"

"I wouldn't think so, since we're on the outs again, but it was nice of you to make the attempt, even if it didn't work out."

"Of course I would. You're my children's godmother, aren't you? And it don't look good on their college application to have jailbird after 'Godmother.'"

I borrowed Roxanne's cell and called Jan. "Speak," she said, her voice a breathless rush.

"Hey, you were supposed to call and let me know if Grace Kim has left the country."

"The SF and Oakland airport police were already checking passports for young Asian women leaving the country. If she did leave, she did it on someone else's passport. You really thinking she'd run?"

"Her dad would rather lie about it than cooperate with the police."

"Okay, I'll call you if I find out something. Gotta go."

"Wait Jan, where's Del?"

"Working undercover, of course." She hung up on me.

He said he'd be working under cover. But then I was probably feeling jealous. At least they had a love life.

Chapter twenty-five:

Taking a side trip to the AM/PM, I loaded up on peanuts and candy bars, then parked next to Mr. Kim's alley and angled my view to include his door to the alley. I lined up my goodies—least favorite to favorite, thinking that way I might be able to avoid actually eating that Snickers bar way over on the other side of the driver's seat. This was as good as any place to sit and wait to see if Grace Kim showed up, and there was, I noticed, a blue Camry in the alley.

I didn't have long to wait. Mr. Kim's wizened head poked out of the door. He looked both ways and then retreated inside.

In another minute, Grace stepped out into the alley, got in the Camry and backed out onto the street.

I pulled out and followed, keeping several cars between us, which also meant I sailed right past her when she pulled into a parking garage across from the Stanislaus County Courthouse. I circled the block and pulled into the busy lot, took a ticket, and followed the ramp up until I found her late-model blue Camry parked on the fourth floor.

I peeked through the car window then tried the door handle—it was unlocked. Inside a folded map lay on the front seat, a large suitcase lay on the back seat and a Chinese good luck symbol on a red silk tassel swung lightly on the rear view mirror.

I jogged toward the stairs hoping I might catch sight of her crossing the street, then skidded to a stop. She was leaning against the hood of a Honda.

I don't think either of us could've been more surprised.

For a moment I thought she would bolt, but instead, she planted her feet, her tone defiant. "What're you doing here?"

"You got some 'splaining to do, Lucy."

Her eyes darted around the empty garage. "Lucy?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You helped someone stuff that reporter in my trunk. You stayed to make sure I was okay but lied to the police about being there, and now you're leaving town?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her chin. "I'm not running away if that's what you think."

"Then what're you doing in this parking garage?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I'm here to meet someone who can help us."

"A lawyer?" I asked, remembering that the garage was a favorite for lawyers working across the street at the courthouse.

Her laughter was bitter. "No lawyer will be able to help us."

"Then your dad *can* ID the killer!"

"Oh, please! Pops saw a glint of light shining off something. He couldn't identify the killer if his life depended on it."

"What about you, Grace? Could you identify the killer if your life depended on it?"

Her lips tightened into a hard line. "I heard you were the one who got a warning. Perhaps you should leave town!"

My jaw dropped. The D-O-A note on my dad's door. "How did you know? Who told you?"

She shook her head, the black bob swinging.

"At least tell me why you're hiding?"

She flapped her hands at me. "I told you, I'm not hiding."

"Fine," I said, reaching out for her arm. "Then come with me, and you can tell Detective Rodney how you lied to cover your own butt."

She pulled away and glared at me. "Can't you just leave us alone?"

"No, I can't. I want to return the favor you did when you saved me from a mugger."

"Some favor. Next time I see you on the ground, passed out, I'll keep going."

Frustrated with her refusal to tell me the truth, I tried with a lie of my own. "Oh? Aren't you just a bit worried that the button you're missing on your work shirt will match the one the police are looking at as evidence?"

Her quick intake of breath confirmed my suspicions. Grace was worried.

"You're involved with a killer, Grace. Someone who murdered once isn't going to let you off the hook, just because he's a cop, or because he says he loves you."

Doubt and puzzlement flickered across her face, her brows twitched once, then her expression flickered from sullen, to surprise, and finally panic.

She turned on her heel and ran for the stairs.

I was stunned. "Grace! Wait up!" I pocketed my keys and took off after her, following the rapid, metallic clatter on the risers as she flew down the stairwell.

She was turning from the third onto the second floor when I heard strident voices echoing off the walls.

I hesitated, waiting.

Had someone stopped her? Someone she knew? I heard voices again and Grace's impatient answer. She was arguing with someone. The muffled voices rose and fell in the echo chamber of the stairwell. Then nothing until I heard the light footfall fading as she reached the first floor.

I clambered down the stairs and onto the street. There was nothing left but a squeal of burning rubber as a car rounded the corner.

She was gone, and so was my chance to find out what she knew. Who was here to help her? Who did she trust with her secrets, and what did I say to douse her confidence? Now, with only more puzzling questions, I would have to call Caleb.

* * *

The driver's side of Grace's blue Camry was open and the IDENT team was going through it.

Rodney glared at me, said something to Caleb, then stalked away.

Caleb spoke to the team and they backed out of the car. Then he motioned for me to squat down next to the open door, but not to touch anything. He went around the other side and leaned on the doorframe so he could talk to me through the open window.

"Everything look the same?"

Even now the smell of Chinese food clung to the upholstery.

"Yes. I followed her from her dad's restaurant. Spoke with her for a minute and she ran off. I ran after her, heard her arguing with someone, but by the time I got to the first floor they'd

disappeared. She was here to meet someone, said it was someone who would help her and her dad."

"The keys," he said, nodding at the set in the ignition, "were they here then?"

"I didn't notice. Let me think," I said, looking at the plain chenille bench seats, the dust free dashboard, the tidy dirt-free car mats. "I opened the door and saw that map on the seat and the suitcase on the back seat."

I lowered my voice to a whisper. "I pressed her to tell me who she was meeting. I must've said something to shake her confidence and she ... she just took off."

"Stay here a minute, I have to talk to the detective."

Caleb stood, and when he did, it set in motion a Chinese red tassel hanging from the rearview mirror. He motioned the IDENT team forward.

That swinging tassel—where had I seen another one like it?

Caleb walked over to Rodney. They spoke for a few minutes then Rodney snapped out a few words. Caleb held up his hands in a conciliatory manner and came back.

"Okay, Lalla, here's what's going to happen—are you listening?"

I was staring at the red good luck tassel hanging on Grace's mirror. "Do you think she was kidnapped?"

Caleb sighed. "We'll find her. Mr. Kim is going to be picked up. He'll be arrested for Billy Wayne's murder."

I'd suspected Mr. Kim at first too, but not now. Not after I realized his reticence with the police was simple self-defense. "Can you tell me why?"

"Mr. Nyung Kim was a South Vietnamese military specialist assigned to the United States Army. He was trained as an assassin, Lalla. He's left-handed as the forensic pathologist has reported and he's within the range for height of the killer."

"Yes, all of that may be true, but he and Billy Wayne were friends."

"If you'll let me finish; there's one more thing you don't know. The heart transplant Billy Wayne got? The donor was Mr. Kim's son."

"Oh, no! That's why"

"Yes," he said finishing my thought. "You feel like driving home?"

"Yes—no. Caleb, why would Mr. Kim befriend Billy Wayne only to murder him?"

"I'm not going to go into it with you now. We'll talk later."

He reached out to take my arm and I flinched out of his grasp.

"This is Rodney's doing, isn't it? Because he needs an arrest."

"He's the investigating officer, Lalla. I got permission to tell you this much, and now it's over, not your problem anymore."

"Can I see him, Mr. Kim?"

"No. That's the condition for telling you this much. You're to stay away from Mr. Kim and his family."

I was furious. "You fed all that information I gave you to Rodney, didn't you? And Rodney used it against Mr. Kim. Oh, Caleb. This is just wrong. Wait! What about Brad Lane's assertion that it was a cop? Doesn't that count for anything?"

"Brad is dead and Del Potts hasn't been around to confirm the story, has he?"

I blinked. Did he really not know? "Caleb, Del's not dead."

He threw up his hands in exasperation. "What do you want from me, Lalla? The little weasel slipped out of the hospital, and nobody seems to be able to bring him in. You wouldn't happen to know where he is, would you?"

My hoot of laughter caught the attention of the IDENT team going through Grace's car. I grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him close enough to hiss in his ear. "Del survived dehydration and heat stroke to walk out of that hospital because he didn't trust Rodney not to finish him off. And you let me twist in the wind wondering how I managed to be so lucky to get off a murder charge."

"What're you talking about? Rodney said, he promised me "

"He promised you—what? That I wouldn't be charged with Del's murder because there was no dead body? If I hadn't talked to a very live and well Del Potts, I'd be right where you are today, still under that bastard's thumb."

He drew back, the ice-chip eyes thinly reappraising. "You think I'm under Rodney's thumb? Is that why you gave my ring back? Wait a minute. You do know where Del's hiding, don't you?"

"You're not paying attention, Caleb. Rodney used both of us—me, to feed you the leads so he wouldn't have to bother to work for them, and you, because he knows you're a duty-bound officer of the law. But right now, if I knew where Del Potts was, I sure wouldn't tell *you*."

Chapter twenty-six:

I spent the next few days with the pile of invoices I'd left hanging because I was involved with an investigation that, except for the still missing Grace Kim, was now all wrapped up. Maybe I should've listened to that little voice in my head—the one telling me not to get involved.

Still, I had questions; like would the case against Mr. Kim stand up in court? And would Del ever find the cop connection, and most of all, where was Grace Kim? I was now convinced Caleb had his priorities where they should be, and it was best if we didn't speak for a while.

* * *

By four in the afternoon I was napping on the office sofa, my left hand hanging over the edge. The phone was ringing, and I thought about letting it go to the answering machine then got up and answered.

Del said, "We've found a way to talk to Billy Wayne's heart doctor. We're going to corner him at a fund raiser in Stockton tonight. I have a press pass for you if you want to join us."

"What good will it do?" I asked, listlessly. "Mr. Kim has already been charged with the murder."

"Oh, come on. Just because Rodney has a convenient arrest doesn't mean he's got the right suspect. "

"But what do you expect to find? I mean, we already know that the heart belonged to Mr. Kim's son."

"Yes, but we don't know the name of the person who was in line for the heart Billy Wayne got, do we? Aren't you interested in finding out if there's a better suspect than Mr. Kim?"

"The heart recipient? You think the doc will tell us?"

"If he knows, I'm the one to get it out of him."

I was thinking of Mr. Kim sitting in jail. "Then what?"

"The more there is, the less you see," he said, quoting Billy Wayne.

Those words cut to the core of it. I wanted nothing more than justice for Billy Wayne Dobson. "What time?"

"One hour. Arny will pick you up. Wear something sexy."

"Why?"

"Because the doc fancies himself a ladies' man, and I'm just not that attractive."

"Oh goody, I'm a skill."

"I'm glad you see it my way."

Finally, something to do instead of worrying how I was going to prove Mr. Kim wasn't a killer. I hung up, and energized with hope, I left behind the rest of the paperwork and sprinted for the house. I showered, then slipped into a beige linen dress with matching jacket. Smoothing down the dress in the mirror, I noticed it stretched a bit across my hips. I was gaining weight, no doubt about it. Forty was hitting me hard, and I would have to do something about it. Like quit eating.

I ran down the stairs and grabbed a beer out of the fridge. Trailing my dad behind me, I went out onto the porch to wait for my ride.

He watched me slug down most of the beer in one gulp. "Caleb's coming for dinner tonight. Did you talk to him, tell him you wouldn't be here tonight?"

"Why do I have to tell him anything? He hasn't called me in days."

"You ought to stay, clear up this misunderstanding, or whatever it is you got with him."

Instead of answering, I asked him a question. "Did you tell anyone that Caleb and I are engaged?"

"Gave you a ring, didn't he?" he said, confirming the rumor was now all over Modesto.

"I just don't think it's a very good idea right now for us to be engaged, you know?"

"No, I don't know. You can't be worried for his reputation, are you? Not after everything he went through with you last year. Or is it that he isn't dangerous enough for you?"

"Not fair."

He was thinking of last year when I nearly fell for the ruggedly handsome nephew of Patience McBride. I knew he was unsuitable, but I'd been so flattered that this younger man found me attractive, I'd more or less fallen into my old pattern of believing another no good, cheatin' lyin' man whore.

"So," Dad asked, "what's eating you, anyway?"

"It's not that Caleb doesn't love me, Dad. It's just that his loyalties are divided. It can't be helped, it's his job. Politics probably or"

"Or what?"

"Don't you find it interesting that all charges have been dropped against me? Murder, reckless driving, all dropped?"

"I just figured, well, you know Caleb."

"He's good, but not that good, Dad. I think Rodney made a deal with Caleb. String me along but keep me in the dark about Del being alive while Caleb passes my information to Rodney."

"What's wrong with that?"

"But, Dad, I gave all those nice fat leads to Caleb and they arrested Mr. Kim."

"That Chinese guy had a motive, didn't he?"

"Mr. Kim is Vietnamese, not Chinese, and they got the wrong man. So you see, I don't know if it's in my best interest to tell Caleb anything right about now."

"Don't be stupid. You just got your nose out of joint 'cause you're out of the loop with the police."

I got up and handed my dad the empty beer bottle. "Here's my ride. I'll be back before midnight. I hate to sound secretive, but it's probably best if I don't tell you where I'm going."

"What am I supposed to tell Caleb?"

"Tell him that I ran away with the circus." I tipped my head at the street rod rumbling to a stop in front of our house. Arny's undercarriage was lit like a traveling sideshow.

"You be careful, hear?"

"Of course," I said. It was sad to think that it had come down to this, that I couldn't tell Caleb what I was doing because I couldn't trust him not to share it all with Rodney, who might use it to arrest another wrong suspect.

Arny's dark curls were spiked and gelled so his head looked like a barbwire torture contraption. He also wore a clean white shirt, skinny black tie and a suit jacket from the eighties. He and my dad should meet, talk fashion.

"You're dressed up," I said, getting into his car.

"Jan said to be ready for anything," he said, gunning the motor, juking the gas and spitting gravel as we fishtailed onto the main road. The car wobbled once but missed the telephone pole that almost got in its way.

"You obviously like the speed," I said. Have you ever been in a small plane?"

"Those pokey little things?"

"I was thinking of a Pitts. Kinda like this little street racer of yours. Ever see a stunt plane do a barrel roll?"

"No way!"

"I could get you a ride, if you like." I knew a guy with a Pitts, and it would be a good way to thank Army for chauffeuring me around.

"Awesome!"

"I'll let you know in a couple of days. By the way, do you know where we're going?"

"The Farr building in Stockton. She wrote down the address," he said, handing me Jan's notes. I noticed her handwriting had a girlish round slant and she dotted her i's with hearts; the girl was an optimistic romantic after all.

I gave him the exit numbers and in thirty minutes we were cruising past an austere two story building.

Army frowned at the long line of cars backed up a block from the building. "This doesn't look good."

We crept by the entrance and saw signs hoisted in the air and protestors shoving pamphlets at frustrated attendees trying to navigate through the door.

A parking attendant was putting out a FULL sign at the lot, while cars waited next to a sign that said, *Valet parking: \$25.00.*

Army scoffed at the line of Mercedes and limos.

"I'm not going to let one of these goons have the keys to this baby."

"We're going to have to hoof it, then," I said, peering down the long line.

We argued for a few seconds about whether he would allow me to get out at the curb or I would walk a few blocks so I'd know where he'd parked. I won, and we found something five blocks away next to an empty lot.

Stockton has, over the last years, become rougher around the edges than the local Chamber of Commerce liked to admit. Five to one, the neighborhood we were now parked in was a less than desirable area. Army would have to stay locked in his vehicle.

Three young men, their oversized pants hanging low, lounged under the street lamp.

"Army, keep your cell on. If you have any trouble, call 9-1-1."

"I'll be okay. They're just homies."

They looked dangerous. "Maybe we should move."

"Nah. They're just hangin', no worries."

"What do you mean, 'no worries'? They look pretty tough to me."

"No do-rags, no colors, and no neck tats. They're just homies hangin' out 'cause it's too hot in da crib. Go on, it'll be okay."

Cribs, huh? I closed the car door hoping he knew what he was talking about and jogged across the street. Other than an appreciative wolf whistle, none of them made a move away from the street light.

* * *

Security had provided rent-a-cops, but there were two groups of protestors, and they were noisily shouting at each other, and attendees in black tie and evening attire had to fight their way through the protestors and into the building.

"No heart transplants for convicts!"

"Prisoners have rights, too! Who're you to decide who lives or dies?"

The other side yelled, "Is there no justice for victims?"

Ironically, both sides had signs that said, "Dignity for humanity!"

Now and then a protestor danced through the crowd of attendees and shoved pamphlets at them. I bent down and scooped one up. The print looked like blood splashed across white paper, complete with droplets dripping down the edge.

Heart transplants are a Sin against God and Nature!

A murderer kills twice when he gets a heart transplant. Is that justice?

All were eerily similar to the hate mail sent to Billy Wayne's mom.

Following Jan's instructions, I went around to the side door where Jan and Del were waiting.

"Boy," Del said, "some party, huh? This is going to be fun."

"Yeah," I said, looking at the shoving match going on out front, "if there isn't a riot soon. Was this expected? The protestors?"

Del winked, "It might even become part of the eleven o'clock news."

"What do you mean 'it might'?"

"Never mind," said Del, steering me towards the door. "Jan will cover the protestors and you and I will go talk to the good doctor. Here's your pass."

I took the cardboard ID on a lanyard and draped it over my neck. "Do you really think he'll speak to us with that rowdy mob out there?"

Del winked, showing me one side of his badge with a police ID, and the other with a newspaper ID. "You have much to learn my little chickadee. Watch and learn."

Once Del waved his pass at the gauntlet of security, it was relatively easy to go anywhere we wanted. We walked down a long hallway stopping to peek through a side door and into a giant ballroom filled with the buzz of several hundred guests. Except for the black tie, and maybe better food, it looked like one of our National Aero-Ag Association conventions; rubber chicken and boring speeches.

"How're we going to find him in all those people?" I asked, peering over Del's head.

"Not a problem. Follow me." He snagged a door handle, and it opened on a darkened backstage. Small things came into focus; a dim overhead bulb, steps leading to the stage, and a theatrical curtain beyond.

I heard the sound of heels, and a woman with a clipboard breathlessly hurried toward us.

Del flashed the police side of his badge at the woman. "Doctor Madison is expecting me," he intoned. "Is he back here?"

She exhaled a noisy breath, relief washing over her thin face. "Oh, thank God you're here. What about her?"

"She's with our unit," he said.

She gave me a quick once-over, shrugged, and lifting a finger like a baton, and led the way.

"He's expecting the police," I hissed.

He pursed his lips, blew me a kiss, then hurried after the clipboard lady.

"Hideous crowd out there," she said, over her shoulder. "This is Doctor Madison's first society fund raiser, and all the invitations were mailed directly to the doctors. I presume you brought in additional security. We have some of this country's most prestigious heart doctors here tonight, and for heaven's sake, do assure Dr. Madison that you'll do something about that mob out there."

She stopped at a door. "Here we are." She lightly tapped on the door. "Doctor Madison? The police are here. Doctor Madison?"

She peeked into an empty room. "Oh, dear. Now I have to go round him up again. Wait here."

We stepped through the door "Must be a changing room for actors," I said. Thankfully, there were two chairs for guests, and I gratefully dropped into one. "We're frauds. We're going to get thrown out of here."

"No, we won't."

Del immediately started going through desk drawers.

Finding nothing, he went to the screen and peeked behind it. "We'll get a heads-up if the police show."

"What're you doing? What if he comes in here and finds you going through his things?"

"You won't tell your boyfriend about the badge, will you?"

That shut me up. "Fine, fine. Then why don't you tell me what it is that your mom knows about the killer?"

"Makes great cookies, doesn't she? Sugar's a great substitute for bourbon, though my mom couldn't save Billy Wayne even if she did manage to get him to AA meetings three times a week."

He bent over and pulled out a briefcase. He put the case on his lap and opened it. "Goody, he left his i-Pad. You watch the door, I'm going to look up phone numbers."

He scrolled through pages and punched buttons while he talked. "If my mom had her way, she'd be here asking questions instead of you. Better you than her, though. Besides, I hear the doc is partial to tall blonds. Don't take it the wrong way, Lalla. You're smart. It never occurred to me to ask Billy Wayne why he hung out in that particular alley. I just wonder if Billy Wayne knew the heart belonged to Mr. Kim's son?"

"It makes sense that he would be drawn to Mr. Kim," I said. "The way he felt about having the heart transplant, it was more of a burden than a blessing.."

"Look, I'm sorry to have to cut my mom out of this," Del said, "but if you don't mind my saying so, people have a way of turning up dead when you're around. In another scenario, I think you and her would get along just fine, but I don't want my mother in the line of fire, and that's that."

He moved his shoulders around as if trying to readjust the weight of his guilt.

"The more there is, the less you see," I said, wistfully. "What did it mean?"

"Who knows? The more I see the less I know." Del's voice broke, and he fisted his eye sockets. When he looked up again, I saw something I thought I'd never see on Del Potts' face—the sharp delineation of grief and regret. "I wanted my best friend back, my big cousin who played ball with me, not some burnt out vet with a drinking problem. I couldn't help him, and now he's gone."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "All kinds of people are running around trying to protect their loved ones from this killer. Caleb's trying to protect me, you're trying to protect your mom,

and Mr. Kim is vainly trying to protect his daughter who runs off from everyone who wants to help her."

"Someone's coming," he said.

Del put the i-Pad back in the case and leaned against the table.

An impeccably dressed middle-aged man stood in the open door. Sandy gray hair combed back from his forehead, his name identified him as our target.

"Dr. Madison?" Del said, grabbing the other man's hand and pumping it. "I'm Del Potts from *The Modesto Bee*, and we're close to discovering who killed Billy Wayne Dobson, but we need your help."

The doctor dragged his gaze from me long enough to look at Del. Then he reddened, and nailed us with a glower. "This is a private event! How'd you get past security?"

I cowered under the harsh assessment of our lowly status. Del, however, wasn't the least bit intimidated. "You and a couple hundred of your closest friends, huh?"

The doctor bristled. "You impersonated a police officer to get in here. I'll see you arrested."

"I most certainly did not. I have a press pass, see?" He held up the side of his pass that said, PRESS. I mimicked the gesture, but kept my mouth shut. To open it would only compound our stupidity.

"I could care less who you are. You weren't invited—now get out!"

Del pointed at the wall vibrating with the rising tide of discontent. "You can talk to me, or the protestors, or the TV stations lining up to question you about Billy Wayne Dobson. But we're probably going to be easier to handle than trying to break through that mob."

"I have no intention of giving you an interview, I hate the press. It's the press who've been twisting my life's work into inane sound bites. It's despicable. Now get out!" He pointed to the door. I looked at Del for signs that he was going to move for the door. Watch and learn, huh?

Seeing that we weren't going to move, the doctor turned to leave.

"Wait," Del said grabbing him.

The doctor's hot glare was enough to knock Del's hands away, but he wasn't giving up.

"There's an angry crowd out there, all because of one murder case. TV cameras from all over the state, all of them hungry for a story. We're between elections, and there's not even a fire to keep them busy. You're it. Do you really want your first fund-raiser to be on the eleven o'clock news?"

"If you were with the police," the doctor said, "I might grace that with an answer. As it is, you're not worth my time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go call someone who can do something about the rabble outside."

Del followed him out, practically walking up the doctor's heels. "I can quiet that crowd for you. Make them all disappear so it doesn't interrupt your nice speechifying."

"You?" The doctor smirked. Then a shrewd look crossed the doctor's face. He tucked his lower lip thoughtfully under his perfectly capped front teeth. "How do you propose to do that?"

"You'll have to trust me on this, but for a few questions answered, I promise to make it happen."

"Who are you?"

"I'm a reporter, but I have a very personal interest in Billy Wayne Dobson's murder."

The doctor put his manicured hands on his hips and considered the short, dumpy, balding man in front of him. "You're just another scum-sucking sleeze rag reporter hoping I'll give you the name of the person who should've gotten that heart, aren't you?"

I had to say, Del and Jan were two of a kind; they both stood up to bullies, though I doubted Del would be able to appease the mob outside.

I moved in front of Del. "He's a scum-sucking sleeze rag newspaperman, but he's also the murdered victim's cousin."

"Pitiful," he said, looking Del up and down. "Barely the same species, if related at all."

At Del's shrug, the doc's lips twitched.

"Cocky little bastard, aren't you?"

Seeing a break, I said, "Yeah, he's cocky, but you should at least hear him out."

The doctor's charm went from sub-zero up a notch. "Well, gorgeous, if you handed me a court order from the devil, I couldn't tell you the name of the patient if I wanted to. It was a waste of a perfectly good heart and the young woman in line for a transplant died because we couldn't provide another organ in time."

"We want a name," I said, feeling bold. "You can do that. Someone who will talk to us."

He paused long enough to trail acquisitive eyes over my body. "Have dinner with me tomorrow night and I'll give you a name."

Del shoved between us. "Hey, forget the girl. I offered you a trade. For a phone number, I can make that mob out there melt away, or you can deal with them. So which is it?"

The doc sighed. "Why don't you let the police handle this?"

"The police might be a bit late getting here."

The shouts of the rabble were getting louder.

"I'll give you a name, but it's off the record. You'll have to convince this person your story is worth risking her job," he said. He nodded to the pen and pad I held and spelled out the name and department of the person we should contact. I started to write it down but the pen wasn't working.

Exasperated, the doc handed me a pencil from his breast pocket. "NASA spent millions working to perfect an ink pen that would defy the lack of gravity in space. The Russian's conquered that little problem without spending a dime—they used a pencil."

I ducked my head and wrote down the name.

Taking back the pencil, he said, "We never had this conversation, and I'll expect that crowd gone by the time I get to the podium, or I'll be the one making a call. Do we understand each other?"

Del and I nodded. Satisfied, the doctor did an about face and marched through the door.

"You did it!" I was so excited, for a moment I thought about hugging him, but held off, since I didn't know if I could trust him not to grope me.

"Now you just need a really good trick to get that mob outside to leave."

He winked. "Nasty lot, aren't they? Are you scared? Never fear, I'll protect you." He punched a couple of numbers on his cell phone and held it up to his ear. "Okay to go, and tell them I said thanks."

I blinked. The crafty little weasel had this whole thing planned out from the beginning.

"This whole thing was a hoax," I said, admiration creeping into my voice.

"Everything but the rent-a-cops. Worked too, didn't it?"

* * *

By the time we walked out the front door, there was nothing left but the litter of pamphlets scattered over the sidewalks and bewildered rent-a-cops milling around. Jan ran up to us. "Did you get it?"

Del hugged her. "Am I your main man, or what?"

She squeezed him tight and smiled. "We did it. I'm so pumped, I can't stand it. I need ice cream."

I smiled at her. "We passed a Denny's at the freeway off-ramp, will that do?"

She nodded and smooched Del's cheek.

"See you there in ten minutes," I said, thinking they could make it if they didn't decide to get a room instead.

I power walked the five blocks to where I'd left Arny and his car. Even from a block away I could hear the music. Arny and his new found friends were hoisting a few brewskies while teaching each other hip-hop moves.

When I tapped him on the shoulder, he halted mid-step and blushed. "Uh ... back already?"

"Yes, if you can break away from your impromptu dance team."

"Okay. Later, guys." Arny, now the chauffeur again, opened my door, then raced around to the driver's side.

When we were half way down the street, he said, "That was fun. So, home?"

"Actually we're meeting Del and Jan at Denny's. There, see it on the right?"

Arny only nodded. "I don't drink coffee at night, so I'll wait in the car, if you don't mind."

"Don't be silly. Your mom will be disappointed. Their ploy to get the doctor to talk, worked. Don't you want to hear how it all came down?"

Arny lifted his shoulders and looked away.

"I had my mouth all set for a nice, big, double-chocolate sundae, how about you? It'll be my treat for the great job you've done as my chauffeur."

"Hot-fudge sundae?"

"Anything you want."

It was like Pippa Roulette said, it was easy to read minds, and ice cream was an easy win over the dislike of his mother's boyfriend.

He hopped out of the car and headed for the door.

We were seated in a booth: Arny and me, Del and Jan on the other side.

Jan asked Del, "You still think Rodney's involved in a rolling meth lab?"

I said, "Mr. Kim's is the only business left in that block but cops are in and out of there all the time."

"Not at night, they aren't," said Del.

"Wouldn't work, too smelly," Arny said, stuffing another spoonful of fudge-drenched ice cream in his mouth.

Jan speared him with a motherly glare. "What do you know about meth labs?"

"A lot," he said around the mouthful. "I'm doing a paper on it for my course in law enforcement."

When Jan swiveled around to look at him, he said, "I told you I was thinking about it. My prof said with my grades, I could get a scholarship and transfer from here to Berkeley in a year. Maybe go into law enforcement."

Jan was all smiles. "Oh, Arny, are you sure you want to stay in Modesto that long?"

He shrugged. "The garage owner likes me, says he'll schedule my hours around school."

Del, said, "Okay, okay, now can we get back to Rodney and his rolling meth lab? I think he's part of a gang of cutthroat drug lords who force it on their soulless minions."

Arny laughed. "That sounds like the propaganda film we got in high school for marijuana. I'm right about the meth, you know, it's too smelly to cook in a downtown restaurant."

Del shook his head. "That alley's the perfect place to schlep the stuff in and out of."

"Never happen," Arny said, putting down his spoon. "My teacher says that's a tightly patrolled area at night."

"Not if a cop is keeping tabs on the place," Del said. "And for my money, Rodney's the man for the job. A kitchen to cook, a convenient and dark back-alley for a quick get-away."

Jan took a deep breath, let it out, then put up her hand. "Del, I'm sure Arny's right about this, he's very interested in this case."

Arny's ears reddened. First, his mother's boyfriend embarrasses him, then his mother comes to his defense. Arny aimed his discomfort at Del. "It's a fact, asshole, not a guess! The stuff is smelly, and it's too risky in that location."

Del tilted his head, and raised his eyebrows at Arny. I'd seen that look before. Del was in character, pushing buttons again, but what was he looking for? "So, have you tried it?"

Arny fisted his hands on the table. He leaned over and closed in on Del's extended nose. "You're so lame. Bet you didn't even know that it can cause convulsions and tremors that mimic Parkinson's, did you? Or that it can cause irreversible brain damage or strokes. Or that twelve point four million Americans over the age of twelve have tried meth, or that the drug is exploding as the most popular drug for young men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four? I'm not dumb enough to go for that shit!"

Arny wasn't sophisticated enough to see that Del was baiting him, or that Del, considering himself barely still a kid, knew a thing or two about what buttons to push on teenagers.

"Okay, okay," I said, raising my hands between them. "Arny, I'm sure you're right, but Del was just giving us some ideas to consider. In case the lead for the heart recipient is nothing, and Billy Wayne's killer is a dirty cop, right, Del?"

Del looked from me to Arny and then to Jan. He blinked, and as if remembering he should behave, said, "Okay, let's say it isn't manufactured there, since the smell would attract someone's attention, But Mr. Kim is old, he goes home at night, and Rodney and his gang transport the stuff through the alley. It still could be the reason why Billy Wayne was murdered."

Arny had been blindly staring out the window. Now he turned to regard Del's last statement and nodded. "It could happen that way, I guess."

Jan beamed.

I paid for everyone's ice cream.

Outside, the night air was warm and balmy. The stars were smudged in a way that said an inversion was settling into the valley. We would have a reprieve from any imminent weather change, at least for the next twelve hours.

Arny had lost his sulky mood. "Still want to go home? I know a party we could crash."

"No thanks. I have to work tomorrow."

He shrugged good-naturedly, and in another twenty minutes we were taking the exit for my ranch.

"You won't forget about that plane ride, will you?" he asked, slowing for the turnoff to my house.

"Stop!" I said, putting my hand on his arm.

"This is your road, isn't it?"

"Yes, but just stop a minute."

"What is it?" Arny swiveled around looking for the danger.

"Look at that and tell me what you see," I said, pointing to our mailbox.

"Is that your mailbox? Sorry—was a mailbox. Kids, probably. High school kids out joy riding. Trashing mailboxes with baseball bats. Not that *I* ever did anything like that."

The mailbox had been smashed and ripped off its metal tube post, and was hanging by a single wobbly bolt.

"Wait here," I said, and hopped out with the intention of setting the box back on its post. It seemed a bit heavy, so I looked inside. It was dark, but something was in there. I reached inside to pull it out for a look. When my hand touched something furry and squishy I automatically squealed, jerked back, stamped my foot, and cursed.

"What is it?" Arny said getting out of the car.

"I hate it when women do that; squeal just because they find something unexpected. Have you got a flashlight?"

"Sure, but what's in there?"

"Get it, please?"

He trotted back to the car, opened the passenger door, switched on a small flashlight, and put it in my hand. I got down on my knees to peer inside the mail-box.

Inside a furry brown rat, its yellow teeth and beady black eyes gave me a bucky beaver greeting. It was also bloody and dead. Around its neck was a string, and attached to the string was a folded piece of paper. Oh, goody. Nothing like another ominous message. I sighed, resigned that I'd have to at least read it, and pulled the rat out by the note.

A black felt tip pen scratched onto white paper said, "Mind your own business, or next time this'll be you!"

How original, and every bit as menacing as it was meant to be. I shuddered to think of someone stuffing me into a metal mailbox and then hitting it hard enough to splatter my brains all over the inside.

"Got a paper bag in your car? Napkin? Anything I can put this thing in?"

"You should let the police see it *en situ*," Arny said. He shuffled from one foot to the other, awkward at the tone of his own words. "You know ... prints and stuff like that."

I ignored Arny's burgeoning aspirations to get into police work. "I've got my reasons, now go find me something to put this critter in."

He rummaged around under his seat and came back with an empty Burger King bag. "Lucky you, I usually sweep for deleterious, uh trash, before I go anyplace."

"Arny, I see a long and happy career in criminal law, but for now, let's just keep this between us, shall we?"

"What're you going to do with it?"

"Bury it. Then tomorrow morning, come down here with a hammer and put the box up on its post."

"But—but, shouldn't you tell the cops? It might mean something—like maybe they got the wrong suspect?"

"Dead rats or not, they do have the wrong suspect. So, are you going to drive me the rest of the way, or do I have to walk?"

He put the car in gear and silently drove the graveled road to my house, got out, walked around to my side, and opened the door. When I got out, he said, "Okay, so anytime you need a ride, call me."

Or pucker up and whistle. It wouldn't take more than that to bring Arny whizzing to my aid. It was kind of sweet.

* * *

Except for the overhead light in the foyer, and the one in the kitchen, the house was dark and quiet. On the kitchen table was a folded note with Caleb's handwriting on it. I put off reading it until I'd loaded the coffee maker and set the timer for tomorrow.

Ignoring the madly blinking message light on our home phone, I went upstairs to perform my nightly ritual of flossing, brushing my teeth, removing makeup, taking off the linen dress, and checking it for stains. Deciding the dress could stand a trip to the dry cleaners, I folded it up and put it on a chair for tomorrow. Then I put on my favorite soft cotton nightgown and sat on the edge of my bed to read Caleb's note: *When you get a minute, call me.*

To prove that Rodney had arrested the wrong man, the killer had left me another very pointed message. Only this time, I had no intention of letting go.

I put Caleb's note aside, shut off the questions tumbling around in my head, picked up *West With the Night* by Beryl Markham, and imagined myself flying mail over the African bush to landlocked Europeans, then turned off the light and fell instantly into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter twenty-seven:

The next day clouds in the shape of mares tails galloped across the stratosphere while an opposing low skidded in the other direction. Which could mean anything, rain, wind, clearing, or not, but it was too cranky to fly.

Downstairs my dad was dressed in his new favorite lime green zootsuit, Spike's leash in his hand. "What the hell happened to our mailbox?"

The memory of last night's episode with the dead rat and scribbled warning still filled me with loathing. Rodney came to mind, but this wasn't his MO. Brad Lane was dead, Mr. Kim was in jail, and Grace Kim was AWOL. Grace. It was nothing more than a whisper, but I couldn't help but feel that she was long gone and out of my reach.

"Kids, I guess. Last month it was wheelies on Kitty Watson's front yard. Shredded her nice green lawn."

"Humph. Damn kids. Don't they have enough to do these days except trash other people's property?"

"I'll fix it this morning," I said. "We won't be flying in this bouncy weather, anyway."

"Good time to finish that engine later today, too. You gonna help?"

I nodded. "I have to go into town, but I'll be back no later than two."

"See that you do. I don't want to have to do the whole thing myself."

"Fine, fine. I have to do this, Dad."

I looked down at Spike, his upper lip raised in a cute doggy Elvis, that is if you like Cujo as Elvis. "Time for a refill on his meds?"

"Shirley thinks his bad temper is due to his hip."

"His hip? What makes her think that?"

The chief cynic in our family blushed. "She asked him."

"My third grade teacher is now a dog whisperer?"

"She's been taking a course at the senior citizen's center in animal behavior." He fingered the leash. "I thought I'd ask the doc to take X-rays of his pelvis. See what's what."

He bent down to pet the dog, rubbing his ears. Something else was bothering my dad.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He mumbled something I couldn't hear.

"What?"

"I said, Shirley and I broke up."

"Why?"

"You know I can't abide a thief."

"Mrs. Hosmer? What'd she do, rob a bank?" I was trying to picture Shirley Hosmer, my third grade teacher, in a Nixon Halloween mask waving a shaky revolver over the heads of terrified bank patrons.

"I had to quit taking her to Smorga Bob's."

"Why's that?"

"The manager stopped me on the way to the men's room and insisted I pay for all the extras she's been carting home in that tote bag she carries around. Then he told me not to bring her back."

"Wow, banned from Smorga Bob's. I've been kicked out of better places."

"It's not funny, Lalla. It may be no more than condiments from the table, but that's not all. She thinks nothing of clipping through a back alley to avoid paying the parking lot attendant."

"And why is she paying for parking? Never mind that—you don't say anything when Great Aunt Eula May packs home all the sugar from a restaurant."

He harrumphed. "I would hardly put your aunt Eula May and Shirley Hosmer in the same category. Eula May may be old and eccentric, but she's rich."

"My point exactly. Aunt Eula May is rich enough to buy every Smorga Bob's in Texas, and that's why no manager in his right mind would dare say a word to her. But Shirley isn't rich, is she?"

"Of course not. But her teacher's pension should be enough to live on without resorting to theft. I'm retired too, but you don't see me stealing the salt and pepper."

"Oh, come on Dad, is that what's really bothering you?"

He looked at his feet. "She called me a tightwad."

Okay, now we were getting someplace.

"And that hurt your feelings."

"Of course it did. I pay for my share. I even drive sometimes, don't I?"

"Do you like her?"

"I did, but if she's going to act like this, there's more fish where this one came from, that's for sure."

"You took on this dating thing without reading the rules, and now you wonder why she's behaving this way? Well, I can tell you, she's sending you a message and you need to pay attention."

He straightened his shoulders, hitching his pants back up onto his bony hips. "So what's the message, besides Noah Bains is a sucker?"

"Dad, fact is you *are* a tightwad, and she's a nice lady, living on a fixed income. You're retired too but you own a ranch, a business, and you have plenty of money in the bank, or at least that's her perception."

"I'd better have money in the bank. What if next year's a bust?"

"It wouldn't put a dent in your bank account to treat her to dinner or theater tickets, whatever it is you two do for fun."

"We aren't kids. I shouldn't have to buy her ice cream at the soda fountain in order to hold her hand."

They were doing more than holding hands, but I wasn't about to bring it up, not now.

"Do you like this woman enough to want to fix this, or not?"

"I don't know." His stubborn jaw softened and he said, "Yeah, I guess I do."

"What do you figure it might cost you every month, that is if you acted like a hero instead of a tightwad?"

He pursed his lips and I could see that he was doing the mental math on outings if he paid for both. "I guess sixty, eighty dollars. Not all that much, when you put it like that. Hero, huh?"

"Be a hero, Noah Bains. Ask her to dinner, and make sure that she understands that you're picking up the tab. And, I'm not talking about a place like Smorga Bob's, either. Go to that steak house downtown, or at least Marie Callender's. After they take your order and you've both got a

nice glass of wine, pick up her hand and tell her how much she means to you, and that as long as she's willing to be your date, you'll pick her up, pay for all the theater, dinner, whatever you have planned, and for crying out loud, the parking attendant, too."

He blinked. "That's a pretty tall check list. But, I guess I could try it. That is if you're sure it'll work."

"What've you got to lose?"

"I haven't felt this way about a woman in a long time. Do you really think she'll change her mind if I do all that?"

I patted his shoulder and said, "I'm a woman, I know how we think."

Before my sixty-eight-year-old father could stop to consider the irony of who was giving him advice about dating, I headed for the door and work in the office.

* * *

I hit the button on my office answering machine, and a slow metallic voice said, "You have five messages." Making a note to change the batteries, I dutifully wrote down all the names and numbers of the women who'd obviously heard a rumor that my dad might be back on the market again and were now vying for his time. Then I returned Caleb's call.

When he answered I jumped right in. "Hi, it's me. Is now a good time to come by?"

"Let me check."

No, "Hi sweetheart," or any other endearments that might muddy the waters of our recent breakup. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. At least he didn't put me on hold as I could hear his antique wood desk chair creak while he consulted his appointment calendar.

"Okay," he said. "I've got to testify in a court case at ten. If you can make it soon, I'll be here. Otherwise, it'll have to be lunch. I could meet you at DEWZ across from the courthouse, say noonish?"

I looked at my watch. "I'll come by your office before you leave."

"Good," he said, and hung up.

I had that sour taste in my mouth, and my head felt fuzzy. I felt like I was coming down with something, flu, cold, maybe an avoidance virus of some kind—anything that would keep me from having this confrontation with Caleb.

Where to start? *They arrested the wrong man, Caleb.* But, if not Mr. Kim, then who? I'd already ruled out Detective Rodney for the rat in the mailbox. Byron? Maybe. He was mad enough at me to do something like this, but somehow I thought he'd hold his guns on this one. Grace Kim? I sensed an eerie quiet when I thought about Grace. It worried me, but I couldn't quite grasp the why of it.

I showered and dressed for town, then remembered to find a hammer, screws, and screwdriver and drove out to the mailbox. Since I didn't want my dad pulling out a handful of mail with rat blood on it, I sprayed the insides with Lysol and swished some paper towels around till the metal came clean. Then I set to work righting our mailbox onto its post.

I was now truly late for Caleb and not even sure I'd make it home in time to help with rebuilding that engine. If my dad could cat around till all hours of the night, and be up for breakfast this morning by six, he had the energy to do the work himself. Besides, for all his grumbling, Noah Baines still liked to think he was useful.

I looked at my watch. I had just enough time to swing by Caleb's office before lunch.

His secretary, Sherleen Glenn, was taking paper clips off a stack of forms. "No, sorry, hon, you just missed him. He left you this note," she said handing it to me. "Is there any message?"

The note said, "DEWZ, Noon."

Thinking I might be able to get some mileage out of this visit after all, I said, "Well, damn. He was going to do me a favor, but I guess he forgot. How about one of the deputies—George, or Ray. Either of them in?"

"Sure. Let me call Ray."

Ray lumbered down the hall, stopping in the doorway. At six-foot-three, and pushing three hundred pounds, Ray was part bulldozer, part forklift. The department had him on a diet, but it didn't look like it was taking. "Hi, Lalla, you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, did Caleb send you or George to pick up a box at the police station?"

"Uh, not me, maybe George. I'll go ask."

Sherlene rolled her eyes, then picked up the phone and called George. She hung up, winked at me and said, "I could've told Ray to wait, but he needs the exercise."

We could hear Ray's heavy footsteps, but George outmaneuvered him and got through the door first. "Lalla? Nice to see you, again. Ray said something about a box?"

Ray, refusing to give up his status as first on the scene, shoved past George to squeeze inside. That made four of us in Sherlene's tiny office, and she didn't look happy about it. "Hey! I'm trying to work here."

I ignored her and so did Ray and George.

"Did Caleb send you to the police evidence room to pick up a box of snowflakes?" I asked George.

The left side of George's mouth tweaked up, his brown eyes lit in humor. "They melted on the way back?" George, the jokester, slapped his thighs and wiped his eyes of the laughter. "Sorry, couldn't resist. You know ... so funny ... snowflakes ... in a box ... in this weather."

I stood there with my arms crossed, praying for patience until George could get a handle on his laughter. "Could you call and see if it will be available?"

"Now?"

"Please?" If Rodney took that box, I'd never see it again.

He perched on Sherlene's desk. She wrinkled her nose, pushed aside her paperwork and handed him the phone.

"Hello? Yeah, this is Deputy Sheriff George Heath. Evidence room, please?" He gave me a reassuring wink.

George told them what he needed and waited. "Uh-huh. Then who...? Uh-huh. You don't say. No, thanks, that's it."

"So?" I asked, my heart beating a quick tattoo.

He hung up, thoughtful. "I can tell you this much, I'm sure glad I'm not in their shoes, 'cause heads are going to roll on this one."

He held up his fingers and ticked off the problems. "One: The signature is illegible. Two: The officer seems to have forgotten to put down his badge number. And three: Nobody remembers seeing who took it, and it hasn't been returned. They're looking into it."

I felt my earlier euphoria sink into the cushion of my chair. I straightened again when I thought of something else. Checked out? That *had* to be done by a cop. This was the proof we'd

been looking for—a cop who didn't want anyone looking at Billy Wayne's snowflakes. There had to be something in them that would name the killer.

I cheerfully thanked them all and left for what was left of my lunch appointment with Caleb at DEWZ.

* * *

I stepped through the door to the downtown café behind a long line of restless lawyers and clients, judges and policemen jostling for a table and a quick lunch.

I stepped up behind an athletic brunette in shorts, animatedly discussing baseball with the man next to her.

"Excuse me," I said, edging my way through the line. "I'm meeting someone. Sorry, sorry, my friend is waiting—yes, yes, I have a table."

When she heard my voice, she swiveled around and smiled. "Hey, Lalla! You missed soft-ball practice this week. Where you been, girlfriend?"

Uh-oh. Barb Johnston was Byron's older sister. "Hey, Barb. Sorry, it's been, uh, a bit busy. You know ag pilots. We've always got crops to spray, bugs to kill, that sort of thing." I edged away, just in case she asked me if I knew who was responsible for messing with her baby brother's career as a police officer.

"Wait a sec?" She tossed a few words over her shoulder to the man, and signaled for me to meet her in the ladies' room.

Inside, she locked the door behind us. I held my breath, trying to imagine how I could possibly pacify her if I had to explain how I made her baby brother look like a total nincompoop.

She turned to me and squealed. "Byron's in love! Can you believe it?"

"Really?" This was a relief, and a surprise. "So, who's the lucky girl?"

"I wouldn't have known he had a girlfriend if I hadn't caught them smooching under the lights at his apartment parking garage. I was delivering my mom's weekly leftover lasagna, and there they were, wrapped around each other, completely oblivious to anyone who might be driving by. I didn't stick around to mess up his cha-cha, if you know what I mean, but the next day he said the relationship has to stay quiet until they leave town. You know, since they work together."

"Gee, that's great. So when's the big day?" I asked, knowing that his sister, mother, cousins, and the entire Portuguese population of Turlock, would now be on his case for a wedding date.

"He won't say, the little rascal! I only hope he'll bring her home before they move."

"Move? Byron's moving?"

"She got another job offer someplace back east and they're both going to transfer."

"Nice," I said, thinking it wouldn't be bad to have Byron out of my hair.

"Yeah, fast work on little brother's part—that is if he can hold onto a babe like that. She was a good couple of inches taller than he is. Don't get me wrong, little brother is adorable, all that dark curly hair flopping over his forehead and those damn long eyelashes, but he's always been so shy with the girls, you know? I was the one who pushed him to sign up for the police academy and I guess it's given him the boost to his confidence he needed. That uniform and his good looks. Finally, my baby brother is getting some action!"

"Did you say, taller? Was she by any chance a redhead?"

"Oh, gee, I couldn't tell, those phosphorescent lights wash the color right out of everything, you know? Great cheekbones though."

Pippa and Byron smooching in a parking lot? Whoa ... Wait a minute ... Pippa was getting a transfer and taking Byron with her? Byron, who could barely look at a woman without stammering, has hooked up with the beautiful Pippa? What were the chances? At her rescue of me at the police station, I suggested she had hypnotized him. She waved off the idea but admitted that Byron was enamored with her. *Not that it will do him any good.*

Hypnosis? She'd tried to hypnotize me and it didn't work—or did it? Didn't I seem to have a little voice telling me that I was no longer interested in this case? Byron was still a kid, easily influenced, and Pippa was ... was Pippa the uniform Mr. Kim had seen?

"Lalla? You okay? You look a little pale. Oh, gee, here I am babbling on about my family and keeping you from lunch."

"It's okay, Barb, I guess I should be going, my lunch date is waiting, and I am famished. It's been great seeing you, and I hope everything works out for Byron and his girlfriend."

I only stumbled once on the stairs to the second floor, caught myself with the handrail, and taking a deep breath to settle my nerves, met Caleb with a smile on my face. The thousand watt smile I beamed at him must have worked because he gave me a grateful peck on the cheek, pulled out a chair for me, and said, "Hey, sweetheart, I'm glad to see you."

I dropped into the seat, reached across the table, and gripped his hands in mine.

"Caleb, I know I've been hard to take lately. I accused you of feeding my theories to Detective Rodney when truly, if I'd been a better person, I would've seen this is *exactly* what you should do. It's your job that's on the line, not mine, and I had no business to judge you for what you told Detective Rodney."

He smiled, giving my hands a squeeze. "Glad to hear that, sweetheart."

"Yes, yes. I know Detective Rodney is only doing his job, and based on the information we gave him it only makes sense he would assume that he had the right person for the murder of Billy Wayne, but he doesn't."

Caleb finally managed to extract his hands from mine and scrubbed at his thinning crew cut. "Hot outside. What's the weather going to do?"

"Caleb, darling, I have information to prove it."

He looked around for perhaps the quickest escape route, then gave up, knocked back the last of his ice tea and jiggled the ice in the glass at a passing waitress.

She smiled and said she'd be right back.

The temperature outside had nothing on my own pot about to boil over. "Will you just hear me out?"

He nodded, if somewhat cautiously, and I continued.

"Am I right in assuming that I was coming to your office today to see the box of Billy Wayne's snowflakes?"

"I called, asked if I could pick it up, but it was already checked out."

"Caleb, darling, it means a lot to me that you tried. But, the box is not just checked out, it's missing."

Caleb's wet glass slipped through his hand and thumped the table. "What?"

"Let me back up a minute and it will be clearer. Last night I found an unwelcome gift in our mailbox with a threatening note. That makes two threats to me and my family, if you count the cryptic DOA on my dad's door. This note came to me after Mr. Kim was arrested. I kept thinking Rodney. But Caleb, I think Del was right all along. Billy Wayne's killer is a cop."

"We're still looking to pick up Grace Kim. She could have done it, hoping you'd leave the investigating to the police."

"Not Grace. I've got a bad feeling about Grace, and I hope I'm wrong, but I think she ran from me in that garage because she finally put two and two together. She realized her lover was someone who was a dangerous killer. Grace is gay, I know because she came out at high school graduation. So who was she meeting in a downtown garage that is parking for mostly lawyers, judges, and police?"

He started to reply, but I was on a roll. "Remember when you asked me to look at Grace's car to see if I saw anything different about it? I didn't remember it until today. There was a Chinese good luck tassel hanging on her rearview mirror. I knew I'd seen another one just like it, but couldn't remember where, and then, downstairs Byron Bettencourt's sister, Barbara, told me Byron's in love with a beautiful young police officer who's a good couple of inches taller than he is."

Caleb tilted his head, obviously not getting the connection. "Who're we talking about here?"

"I ignored Del Potts incendiary accusations about Pippa Roulette because he was always saying something to make me mad. Like when he suggested that because Pippa moved into town and six months later Billy Wayne was murdered, she was a good suspect. Del's aggravating, nerve-wracking, drive-you-around-the-bend behavior prevented me from really listening, but Caleb, I think he had it right."

He groaned. "Oh, no ... you're not saying ... "

"I know, I know. Doesn't sound fair, does it? Here is a young woman, intelligent, beautiful, she's been on the job for a few short months and I'm already accusing her of murder. I'm as sorry as you are, Caleb. I liked her. Well, at least I did until I added it all up. Your arrest of Mr. Kim was based on the killer being someone with military or police training, and someone who is left handed, which perfectly describes Pippa, as well, because I saw her write with her left hand. And that Chinese good luck symbol on Grace's rear view mirror? That was in Pippa's car, too. Pippa was the person Grace trusted to help her and her father, and now Grace has disappeared."

"And Byron?"

"I think she gave him a little hypnotic suggestion, something that wouldn't be too far out of the line for a kid who thinks he's in love—and Byron's still a kid, you know."

Caleb was doing a quick head shake, indicating that I was running away with the truth, again.

"You think I'm simply jealous of a beautiful and talented younger woman? Caleb, what if I'm right? What if Pippa Roulette is not what, or who, she says she is? What better way to have access to all the critical information she's been looking for than to do it from inside a police department."

"Wow! That's a leap, even for you, sweetheart. She came with glowing references and we have her prints and picture to prove it."

I knew how easy it was to fuzz out the details with a dazzling smile and lowered eyelashes. "Caleb, a beautiful woman is naturally trusted to be what she says she is. Born beautiful means doors are opened, jobs, money, men come easily, and certainly the city fathers would knock themselves out to have someone of Pippa's credentials and personal good looks on their roster. I'd used much of the same technique to get what I'd wanted over the years, so why not Pippa?"

"What says she didn't Photo-Shop her picture into someone else's identity?"

Caleb blanched. "Oh boy, you sure know how to throw the fuel on the fire. The police chief is trotting her out to the city council as his newest and brightest. The girl has all the right moves and he's been talking fast track promotion if things go right in the next few months."

"Byron told his sister that he and his girlfriend would be transferring to another town where they will move in together," I said. "If it turns out that Pippa is the killer, I'm afraid Byron is going to get more than a broken heart."

"Oh, come on, Lalla. Pippa is every young man's wet dream. Byron's just bragging to his big sister. Besides, what would be her motive?"

"Do you remember what Roxanne said? 'What would you do if the love of your life lost their chance at a heart transplant because it went to a convicted felon in prison?' I think she had it right. The fastest track to any inside information like a heart transplant recipient, would be through the police department."

Caleb suddenly lost the stubborn face he'd been wearing. "The DA isn't even sure they have an airtight case to present to a grand jury to prosecute Mr. Kim."

"Why? What happened?"

"I think it's the potential of an inaccurate murder charge against a minority business owner during an election year. It doesn't help that we can't locate Grace Kim, or that Mr. Kim won't talk to his defense attorney. Personally, I'm rooting for Mr. Kim." He pushed back his chair. "Can we finish this outside?"

I nodded. He put some cash on the table, and we walked to where I'd parked my car.

I opened my car door and slipped into the driver's seat. Caleb squatted down to rest his arms on the door frame so that we could continue our conversation.

I said, "So, now that you're rooting for Mr. Kim, can you get me an interview with him today?"

He hesitated. "What makes you think he'll talk to you?"

"I'd like to try. But do you suppose you can keep this from Rodney if I promise to tell you everything he said?" It was tit for tat. Rodney would hear about it only if I was wrong about Pippa.

"I can, if you keep your promise to call me."

For effect, I crossed my heart. He pulled out his cell and made the call.

"You get to see Mr. Kim, see if he'll admit to Grace's involvement with Pippa. I'm going to see if I can tiptoe around the police chief and get a look at Pippa's personnel files. If you're right, that it's Officer Roulette, you should have back up with you from now on. Kenny Everett has the day off and he owes me a favor."

"No. You can't put a tail on me, or Pippa. If she gets wind of it, she'll disappear before we can find out what she's done with Grace. And if something happens to his daughter because we cornered Pippa, Mr. Kim will blame you, me and the entire police department."

"Then we'd better hurry." He looked at his watch. "By the way, here's your clean cell phone. We'll talk again in an hour—got it?"

I nodded, already starting up the car and pulling out into traffic, thinking of what I could say to convince Mr. Kim that I was on his side.

Chapter twenty-eight:

I met Mr. Kim in the bland, windowless room meant for lawyers and their clients. When he saw me at the table, he brightened a bit and shuffled over to pull out a chair. The orange jumpsuit hung on his thin, bowed frame, his voice rusty from keeping it to himself.

"Have you found my daughter, Miss Bains? My lawyer said that she did not get on a plane for Vietnam."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kim." Then I told him about running into Grace in a downtown parking lot. My version left out the fact that I'd followed her into town from his place. "It would help if you could tell me who she was there to meet."

"She did not tell me anything. Only that I should leave. But I have been under police suspicion and told not to leave town, and now ... now I am very afraid for her."

His gaze flitted about the small room and then alighted on his hands resting on the table. "I feel so powerless, and I cannot protect my daughter if I am in prison. Miss Bains, can't you make the police understand that I would never have killed Billy Wayne? Though it went against my culture, my son lived on because of Billy Wayne."

"I think the best thing I can do for you right now is to help find Grace. Do you have any idea where she may have gone, or who she would go to if she was frightened? "

"In her past life, Grace was like Billy Wayne, troubled and at odds with life. Always one foot in war and one in peace. Part of that life has carried itself into this one. It prevented her from considering marriage. It also made her very protective of me." He looked up at me, the wrinkled face painfully aware of his predicament. "No matter how much I pushed, argued, she would not leave. We had no one left in our family but each other."

"Was Grace seeing anyone special?"

He turned his head to the door as if a memory had just walked in. "She never brought friends home. She was always alone or with me. Except for recently. Chinese New Year, I gave her a good luck talisman and she asked for another, for her special friend."

"Would that be a red silk tassel with Chinese characters on it?"

"Yes. The same."

Pippa came to town and Billy Wayne died. The minutes were ticking by for me to wrap up this interview with Mr. Kim, get back to Caleb and hopefully find Grace before it was too late.

I thanked him, and with a promise to try and find his daughter, knocked for the deputy to let me leave.

* * *

Of course Caleb wasn't in his office. I tried his cell phone and got his answering machine. Leaving out names, I left a brief message that my meeting confirmed our discussion. Then I called Pippa Roulette's office, and when she answered I hung up, called Del and told him what I knew, as well as suspected, that the good luck tassels were the link that confirmed Pippa was

involved with Grace, and how I'd discovered that Pippa was also romantically involved with Byron Bettencourt.

"If we can prove that Pippa has Grace, we might be able to keep her from adding Byron Bettencourt to the growing list of Pippa's disappearing lovers."

"Hold on a minute. I'll see if she takes the paper."

I got to listen to Barry Manilow while I waited. Del was back in less than three minutes.

"You got a pen?"

"Yes."

"Then write this down and meet me there. It's off Sisk and not too far from here. Take Standiford, then right on Dale, then right on Braden, 4334 Braden Ave."

"But Del, we shouldn't—"

"You keep forgetting, he was my family. Jan will be our lookout so watch for her car."

It took me ten minutes to go from downtown Modesto to Braden. They were parked three houses from Pippa's.

Del rolled down the window, and I asked, "You got a plan?"

"Sure," he said, getting out and shoving a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses pamphlets into my hand. "Hold this up in front of you. Now let's go see what it takes to get inside."

We walked up to the door. Del knocked then nudged the doorbell. "No peephole. See anyone at the window?"

"Doesn't look like anyone's home."

He took out a soft leather wallet. "Did I ever tell you I used to ice-skate? Hey, I know what you're thinking, but I wasn't always this fat. I coulda gone to the Olympics too, but I peaked in an off year."

"What does ice skating have to do with a set of lock-picks?"

He wiggled two of the slim tools together in the lock, turned the handle and when the door opened, he winked. "It's like ice skating, baby. Practice, practice, practice."

He gave me a pair of surgical gloves to put on, snapped on a pair himself, and we slipped through the door, closing it behind us.

Inside, the house was clean and quiet. He punched a button on the phone answering machine.

All the messages were from dry-cleaners, her office, and one from Caleb. I flushed. Just a request for a call back and timed about a half-hour ago. If he was calling her at home did it mean that Pippa had sniffed a suspicious wind and already fled?

Del winked at me. "We may not have much time but let's look anyway."

I followed him into the bedroom and pushed his hands away before he could pick through her drawers. I didn't want Jan finding some other woman's panties on him.

"I'll do this," I said. "You go look in another room."

He shrugged and went to look through garbage cans.

We met in the hallway.

"No envelopes in the trash," he said. "The cans may have been just emptied, but there's nothing here with even an address on it. You find anything?"

"A few hangers in closet, but no clothes, and no sign that she were ever lived here. Think we're too late?"

I went to stand in the door between the bedroom and the living room. "It's odd, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Take a good look around. Do you see any photos of family or friends? There's none of the usual girl stuff in her medicine cabinet except a small bottle of aspirin. We got the right place?"

He looked around at the sparsely furnished home.

"Exactly what I was thinking. Wait." He lifted up a cushion on the couch and pointed to a nationally known furniture company tag. "They sell what they rent, but I'd say this was meant to be a temporary setup."

I said, "Think she's already split?"

"She was at work when you called, right? If she's leaving today, she'll finish work today, then leave so as not to raise suspicion." He looked at his watch. "Shift changes at the police station in fifteen minutes."

I felt my stomach turn over. "We've got to find Grace. Pippa knows my car and yours, too, but not Jan's, and certainly not Arny's."

"Arny will like that. He's already told his family he intends to change his major to law of some kind. Smart kid "

* * *

Jan agreed to allow Arny to drive as long as he kept his distance.

"We'll use these walkie talkies to trade off following her," he said handing me one. "No names. We'll use code. You're 'blue one' and Jan and I will be 'blue two.'"

I sighed and gave up. Finally, Del got to play Dick Tracy.

I had Arny park close to the police station parking lot and Jan and Del were going to hang back to take over when we called.

Arny asked, "Which one's her car, do you know?"

"She drives a white Firebird."

"Cool. Does it have the 486?"

"Got me there, kid," I said, pointing at Pippa's red head leading a group coming out of the police station. "There she is." I slid down in my seat in case she looked over.

Arny chuckled. "She can't see you from there." Then he leaned over me. "But if you want to make it look really good, I could kiss you."

I pushed him away. "Pay attention to her. What's she doing now? Did she get into her car?"

He sat up, all business again. "She's waving goodbye to some people. Now she's opening the door to her car. Interesting."

"What? What's she doing?" I asked, still hunched down in my seat.

"She's looking around to see who might be watching. I'm going to love police work, I just know it."

"Start the car. We have to be ready."

I felt silly doing this, but I called Del on the walkie talkie and said, "Blue one to blue two."

Del whispered, "Blue two, here."

"She's leaving now."

"Righty-O, blue one. We're behind you"

I couldn't believe I was going to say this but I did. "Give her some room, Arny, and follow that car."

He grinned, then pulled out onto the street. "Think she's got a gun? What if she's got a gun? Are you packing?"

"Only the extra fifteen pounds I put on from the worry of these last two weeks. Look, Arny, we're only following her to see if she'll lead us to Grace. The key here is to prove that she kidnapped Grace Kim and find where she's holding her. No car chases. If she spots us as a tail, we'll turn a corner and let Jan and Del take over."

I looked in the rear view mirror and saw Jan a couple of cars behind us. We followed Pippa onto the freeway north then off at Kansas and a side street. I put my hand on Arny to make him slow down. "Hang back, don't let her see you."

Pippa turned a corner.

"Pull over here."

I called Del. "Blue two, you'll need to take over, she may have spotted us."

Arny waved as Jan shot past us and took the corner on two wheels. "Blue two, slow down!"

Del answered, a little breathless. "It's alright, blue one, we don't want to lose her. Wait, she's gone. Shit! Just a minute—slow down, Jan—some houses, now a junk yard, a Mexican grocery store, now we're passing a storage unit. There! Inside the gate to those storage lockers. She's going in."

I squeezed the button on the walkie-talkie. "Which way?"

"I can't tell. We're past the storage unit, and we can't drive in the gate. It's one of those keypad things. We're going to park and wait for you."

"We're coming."

Arny pulled up behind Jan and Del, and we all got out. I said, "Arny, she doesn't know you. You can walk through the gate and past her car. Find the storage unit number and come right back. We'll wait here."

Jan started to object, but Del hugged her close. "He can do it. He's a big boy."

Arny trotted off and Jan shook her head. "I'm just afraid he'll do something stupid."

We waited five minutes until Jan sobbed, "He should've been back by now. I can't take it, Del. If anything happens to that boy, I don't know what I'll do."

"Five more minutes, Jan," I said. Then we'll go look for him."

Jan clutched at Del until the five minutes were up.

"I'll go," Del said, and trotted for the gate.

Another five minutes ticked by until Jan became hysterical. "We've got to do something! Call your boyfriend, Caleb. Call somebody!"

I patted her arm trying to reassure both of us. "They went in on foot, and with her in a car, she could've outdistanced them. Maybe the guys are still wandering around the aisles looking for each other. Let's not panic, yet."

Jan was beyond panic. She was now incapable of coherent speech and grabbed me by my shirt. "Call Caleb! Call *someone*! Now!"

"Alright, alright. I'm calling Caleb."

Message machine again. I gave him our location and why we were here, then put away the cell phone. I looked at my watch. What had seemed like hours to Jan, had in fact only been fifteen minutes.

We were closing in on Pippa, who couldn't possibly know we were following her. I was also sure that Pippa's relationship with Grace Kim held the answer in all of this, and after all I'd

been through, I wanted to be the one to ask her. We'd corner her in her locker and get the truth. "What about that walkie talkie? Did he take it with him?"

"Yes, yes. Call him. Ask what's taking so long?"

I whispered into the mike. "Blue two, this is blue one."

It took a minute to get a response, but when a sultry female voice answered, I knew we were in trouble. "Hello, Lalla Bains. Come on in and join the party. It's number 387."

I looked at Jan's tear-stained face. "I'm sorry. She must have them both." I handed her my cell. "Call the police and wait here till they come."

"No! I'm going with you!"

I peeled her fingers off my wrist. "Call 9-1-1, tell them there's a gun involved. That always gets them here fast. Just stay in the car and wait."

She tearfully clung to my arm, sobbing how she couldn't live with herself if anything happened to Arny or Del.

I agreed it was probably for the best that we go together, flipped open the phone and made the 9-1-1 call. "Well, we'll either come out of this together or not at all."

We took off for the storage unit, leaving the walk-through gate open, hoping the police would be right behind us.

I trotted toward the white Firebird.

In a darkened storage locker next to the Firebird, I saw Del and Arny sitting together on some boxes.

"Okay, I'm here, Pippa," I said. "Want to explain why you're keeping my friends here?"

She stepped out of the shadowy interior, pointing a gun at my middle.

"Over there with your boyfriends. Go on."

Jan ran to Arny and Del and, after tearfully hugging them, collapsed onto her own box.

"The police are on their way, Pippa," I said.

She gave me a saucy laugh. "Then we'll have to hurry, won't we?"

Keeping my eye on her gun, I asked, "Did you kill Billy Wayne, or did Grace?"

With her left hand, she reached down to pick up a bottle with a rag in it and lit it.

"Grace couldn't hurt a fly. It started out right, she saw that it was wrong to allow the doctors to talk her dad into giving away her brother's heart. That heart was meant for the love of my life—not some deadbeat felon. You're in her locker, you know. It's where we put Billy Wayne's sappy scribbles."

"Then where's Grace, Pippa?" I asked, trying to control my need to rush at her, grab the gun and pound her head on the ground.

"Beats me. You can spend what little time you have left trying to put out the flames, or you can look through the boxes. Maybe she's inside one."

She chuckled at her wit and threw the flaming glass bottle at my head.

I watched it sail through the air, seeing it not as a bomb about to snuff out our lives, but as a softball lobbed by a batter out into left field.

I stepped back a bit, reached up, and with one hand neatly fielded it—and quickly pitched it back at her.

Stunned at the sudden change of direction, she fumbled between catching it and holding onto her gun.

Her hesitation meant that the bottle fell at her feet, breaking open. With the fire spreading up her pant leg, she skipped backwards, beating at the flames while trying to hold the gun on the rest of us.

We all stood where we were, watching as she swatted at her legs. Seeing she was losing the battle, she turned and ran.

I ran after her, knocking her off her feet.

Del grabbed the gun as it fell from her hand and pointed it at her while Army pulled off his shirt and smothered the fire melting her police issued polyester pants to her legs.

Caleb, Rodney, and several officers charged down the fairway, pulling out their weapons and shouting for us to get back.

Caleb grabbed me to his chest, and Rodney crouched down to speak to Pippa now lying on her back.

Though tears were running into her ears and she was whimpering, she still managed to blame us. "They attacked me!"

Army stepped forward. "That's a lie, sir. She held us at gunpoint and was going to set the place on fire and leave us to die."

Rodney nodded. "I've no doubt you're right about that, son." He turned to the deputy. "Call for an ambulance."

I looked from Rodney to Caleb and back again to Rodney. "You found the proof?"

Caleb said, "You were right, Lalla. She faked her credentials to get the job here. The real Pippa Roulette is a redhead, but about fifty pounds heavier and wears glasses."

"I'll bet the real Pippa Roulette will be furious to learn her identity has been used by a killer."

"That's going to be the tough part. The real Pippa was given a going away party when she got the job here in Modesto, but the Marin city police staff always wondered why she never called to tell them about the new job."

"Oh, no," I said. "So what's our deadly spider's real name?"

"She went by Susan Woods for the Marin job, but we're also checking the system for aliases. That's where we'll probably uncover the link that led her to kill Billy Wayne and anyone else who got in her way."

If her first job was here in Modesto, then I wasn't the only one who was carrying around a fake badge. But, where was Grace? Had Pippa killed her to keep her from her own guilty conscience? Or, had Grace slipped through the net and escaped to Vietnam? The boxes—maybe Pippa was telling the truth.

More than one killer had paid for a year or more with a storage company and then escaped.

"Caleb," I said, "Pippa hinted that she'd left Grace inside the locker."

He directed two deputies inside to go through the boxes. As Pippa was being lifted onto a gurney, she lifted her head to watch the deputies.

"Is she inside the boxes, Pippa?"

She coughed a bitter laugh. "Billy Wayne's stupid paper snowflakes."

Somehow I doubted that we would find Grace alive to tell us what really happened. The longer it went with no sign of her, the more likely it seemed that she was dead. I didn't have long to wait.

An ashen faced deputy stood in the doorway. "Got something here, Sheriff."

As the ambulance carrying Pippa Roulette drove away, I knew that at least some of what she said was the truth. The snowflakes were in the boxes along with Grace's body. She'd killed Grace, leaving her for someone else to find when the rent was due.

Chapter twenty-nine:

Above the roof of my porch, stars shimmered in a black summer sky. I had a beer in my hand and more in an ice chest at my feet. Wiping at unexpected tears, I breathed in the late summer night, feeling content to see the lights from Caleb's truck signaling a turn onto our road. They grew brighter as they came closer, then he was parking in front of our house.

I held out a beer as his consolation prize.

He lightly kissed my cheek and set a large box down on the floor. "I brought you a present. Billy Wayne's snowflakes, complete with poetry. That is, if you're still interested."

"Oh, Caleb, that's so sweet of you, but I think I've learned all I want to about Billy Wayne Dobson. How 'bout you give them to his mom?"

"Good idea, I'll do that tomorrow. And Chief Aguilar is certainly glad that we wrapped this up before he promoted Pippa. And now that this bit of embarrassment is behind him, he's just as happy to go easy on Byron."

"Did she hypnotize him? Was that how Pippa convinced him to arrest me?"

"She could've, but the chief understands the kid was taken in by the heady promises of a beautiful woman. And since the chief was as caught up as everyone else by her act, he was not inclined to chastise Byron. He gave him a stern lecture, lesson learned. No one in the department will ever get a breath of Byron's involvement with Pippa as long as he keeps his nose clean."

"What about Rodney? Was there ever any evidence that he was involved with drug deals?"

"No Lalla. Not a whiff. Rodney's real problem is his attitude toward women. The chief has written a reprimand for his unsavory comments to the female staff. Another infraction and he'll be busted back to street cop."

I dismissed the subject of Rodney for something else that had been on my mind. Grace, and why the thought of her always gave me chills. "Did the coroner say that Grace had been in that storage locker for very long?"

He reached out and drew me to him in a tight hug. "Maybe, but it doesn't matter now. It seems Pippa was not the type to leave behind someone to talk. Lucky for Byron—not so lucky for Grace."

I was thinking of Grace in the downtown parking garage and how I'd been too slow to catch up with her. "I only wish—"

"Don't, sweetheart. We all have choices. Grace made her decision and she died for it."

"'The more there is, the less you see.' I wonder if Billy Wayne said it because he knew someone was looking to kill him—never suspecting it would be a woman, or a cop.

"He was a marine, he would've respected the uniform," Caleb said.

"Oh, and that's why Spike didn't make a fuss!"

"Spike respects uniforms?"

"No, no. Spike hates men, except you and my dad. Certainly any stranger who comes to our door, but he'd roll over for a tummy rub from a woman. Pippa could've walked into our

house and tacked that DOA note on my dad's door." I shuddered, wondering why, with her track record for murder, Pippa chose not to kill my dad.

"I remember when I found Billy Wayne and I had the distinct impression that someone was watching me. Pippa had come back to make sure he was dead. She was the uniform Mr. Kim saw when he came out to investigate, the ghostly image we both glimpsed. Mr. Kim and I were distracted by Billy Wayne's need for help. Ironically, I didn't see anything at all." My own bitter laugh was reminiscent of Pippa's. "The more there is, the less you see. That's me, alright."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Pippa was guilty of the same profiling she very efficiently used on others. She saw you and thought, tall, lanky blonde, ex-model, and figured all it would take to send you running scared was that DOA note on your dad's door and a dead rat in the mailbox."

His words helped assuage my guilty conscience. "It almost worked, too. I thought I was just being paranoid when I kept hearing this little voice in my head saying over and over again, *You're not really interested, Lalla.*"

"And to think I told Pippa to hypnotize you thinking she might be able get some clue that would help us find the killer."

"Then it was a good thing I ignored all of those warnings."

"You always do. That's because you're impetuous."

"And pushy."

"Nosy."

"Determined."

"And you're still going to have to marry me, Lalla Bains."

"Do you still want me? After all I've put you through?"

"I'd rather go through life with you and your quirky nature than go through another year without you."

How could two people be more in love and less alike? Caleb the patient and Lalla Bains the impetuous. I leaned forward to meet his lips in a kiss. "You're the most patient man in the world."

Arms around each other, we stepped through the front door into the foyer. A noisy squeaking echoed through the hallway.

Caleb paused to listen. "Air conditioner?"

"Think smaller," I said, pointing to a small cart trundling towards us. Hind legs resting in a sling between two wheels, Spike easily maneuvered the little cart to a squeaky halt. And with tongue lolling, he greeted us with a happy tail wag.

"His lordship's conveyance."

Dumbfounded, Caleb squatted down to inspect the contraption. "What's this all about?"

"Mrs. Hosmer's influence, I'm happy to say. Turns out his bad manners were mostly due to painful hips. Once he got the hang of those wheels, his behavior took a dramatic turn for the better."

"Where is your dad?" Caleb asked.

"On a cruise to Alaska with Mrs. Hosmer. So, I'm babysitting the ranch, the business, and Spike. Not so bad, now that he's a regular dog again instead of a slathering Cujo."

"That's a pretty big change for your dad, isn't it?"

"You mean it's a big chunk of change for my dad. I think he's finally got that he needs to enjoy the rest of his life, starting right now."

Caleb reached over and picked up my left hand, the one with the diamond sparkling on my ring finger. "I'm glad to see that you're taking your own advice."

Ignoring the dog, I pulled his face to mine where I could draw him into a deep warm welcoming kiss, and closed my eyes, concentrating on the soft sounds of the night and Caleb's breath against my lips.

He murmured against my mouth, "Someone needs to oil that dog's wheels."

"Mm-mmm," I answered, too happy to notice Mr. Happy Wheels circling us.

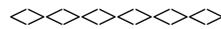
Squeaky, squeaky, squeaky.

The End

About RP Dahlke: I sort of fell into the job of running a crop-dusting business when my dad decided he'd rather go on a cruise than take another season of lazy pilots, missing flaggers, testy farmers and horrific hours. After two years at the helm, I handed him back the keys and fled to a city without any of the above. And no, I was never a crop-duster.

I write about a tall, blond and beautiful ex-model turned crop-duster who, to quote Lalla Bains, says: "I've been married so many times they oughta revoke my license."

I wanted to give readers a peek at the not so-perfect -life of a beautiful blond. Lalla Bains is no Danielle Steele character, she's not afraid of chipping her manicure. Scratch that, the girl doesn't have time for a manicure what with herding a bunch of recalcitrant pilots and juggling work orders just to keep her father's flagging business alive.



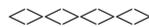
#3 A DEAD RED OLEANDER:

"Janet Evanovich meets aero-ag pilots." The Kindle Book Review

<http://www.amazon.com/Dead-Red-Oleander-Mystery-ebook/dp/B008ALR6GC/>

#4 A Dead Red Alibi:

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00N2VQW2Y>



Also, set in Baja, Mexico, my romantic sailing trilogy, starting with **A DANGEROUS HARBOR:** on Amazon/Kindle: <http://www.amazon.com/DANGEROUS-HARBOR-Pilgrims-Progress-ebook/dp/B0062D4GM2/>

When Katrina Hunter is forced to shoot her sister's stalker, she takes the required leave of absence from the SF police department as her one chance for a long over-due sailing vacation. But discovering a floater close to her first port-of-call in Baja, Mexico will change everything she knows about dealing with crooks, liars, cheaters and murder.

Adding to her troubles is handsome Italian-Mexican inspector, Raul Vignaroli, who ferrets out the one secret that could get her fired. But now that the inspector has the tool he needs to tie her to a murder investigation involving Americans in his port, what will he do with his growing attraction to this pretty young woman?

In spite of the inspector's blackmailing techniques, there's a mutual attraction between this lonely inspector and the pretty American sailor--but can Katy trust her heart, and the inspector's own dangerous secrets?

And the sequel: Hurricane Hole: Amazon/Kindle <http://www.amazon.com/Hurricane-Pilgrims-Progress-A-Romantic-ebook/dp/B00FT1E11C/>

Marooned in Baja, Mexico, a Chechen arms dealer is waiting for the right diver to retrieve the deadly cargo lying at the bottom of the Sea of Cortez. But when Leila Hunter Standiford, on hiatus from her TV contract happens to admire the handsome captain aboard a beautiful vintage Alden, she doesn't realize the boat will soon burn to the water line, or that a dead body will be found below, or that the captain has been targeted as the sacrificial diver, or that meeting the captain will forever change her life.

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