

## **A DEAD RED ALIBI**

By RP Dahlke

#4 in the DEAD RED MYSTERY SERIES

When Lalla Bains is given the unusual wedding gift of property in Wishbone, Arizona, she never expects to actually see the place, much less discover her father has been keeping company with the local police chief—at the bottom of an abandoned mine pit.

Join Lalla, Dad, Caleb and Cousin Pearlie Bains for another rollicking good mystery.

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Karen Paquette and her dog, Matilda are members of SARS and Karen has allowed me to use her name as a fictitious character in this book.

Any foobahs, typos, misspells, incorrect interpretations of facts are mine.

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Dedications:

To my forever Flyboy, Daniel John Shanahan 1964-2005

And to my beloved granddaughters,

Simone Shanahan Proctor, and Hanna Shanahan

## *Chapter One: Wishbone, Arizona*

Except for a lank rope and ancient boards loosely sheltering a deep hole in the desert terrain, my dad's brand new four-wheel-drive Jeep Wrangler sat coolly detached and totally unconcerned that its driver was nowhere around.

"It's an abandoned mine pit," Karen Paquette said, sliding off her backpack and pulling out a coiled length of nylon rope. "He probably fell in. Call to him, see if he answers."

With trepidation coloring my voice, I leaned over the hole. "Dad?"

A stone rolled down the side and someone cursed.

"I think he's down there," I whispered.

She nodded encouragement and I called again. "Can you hear me, Dad?"

His pale, dirt-smeared face came into view. He looked miserable, poor old guy.

He coughed, his voice echoed up the sides, weak and scratchy. "Yeah. I'm here."

"Are you okay? Is anything broken?"

"Back away from the damn hole will ya? You're knocking dirt in my face!"

"It's my dad all right," I said, and backed off from the edge. "Dad. Talk to me. Are you hurt?"

"I'm just fine and dandy."

I grinned. Since sarcasm and my dad were best friends, I figured he was simply embarrassed to be stuck in the bottom of a deep hole with no way out.

"If he's injured," Karen said, "I'll have to call for reinforcements."

"Trust me," I said, relief washing away my earlier tears. "If he's able to cuss at me, he's okay."

I wasn't supposed to be in Wishbone, Arizona, fearfully scouring the desert for my missing father.

I was supposed to be on my honeymoon, married at last to my sweetie, Sheriff Caleb Stone.

## *Chapter Two: One week earlier: Modesto, California*

Long time patrons of Roxanne's Truck Café, my home away from home, had a pool going as to when, not if, Caleb Stone and I would get hitched. Then, when it looked like the wedding might actually happen, another pool was started as to when, not if, I might back out of the deal. Funny thing about that pool, no one thought to consider that it might be my fiancé who would, at the last minute, be the no-show.

What began as a cheerful gathering of friends and family soon deteriorated into heartbreak for me and embarrassed silence for our friends.

At thirty-five minutes past the appointed hour of our nuptials, one of the deputies slipped outside, only to announce what we already knew; Sheriff Stone was off-duty and unavailable because he was getting married today.

With no answer on his cell or office phone, nothing on the police band radio Roxanne's husband kept in the kitchen, and no natural or man-made disasters to indicate a genuine excuse, where the hell was he?

With sweat rings circling a pattern of nerves in my two-piece linen suit, I shifted my wedding bouquet of white lilies from one hand to the other and glared at the clock on the wall.

I waited as the hour resolutely marched farther and farther away from the "I do" moment. Exactly an hour and thirty minutes later, I tossed the wilted bouquet in the trash and ran out the door.

My family tracked me as far as our ranch just north of Modesto, and watched while I tossed clothes into the trunk of my vintage red 1958 Caddy.

Aunt Mae was the only one brave enough to interrupt my fit of temper. "He showed up five minutes after you ran off."

I slammed the trunk closed. "He had an hour and thirty-five minutes to call and explain, but thanks for taking his side."

My dad huffed out an exasperated sigh. "Someone has to take his side."

Caleb Stone was always meant to be my dad's son, if not by birth, then by proxy—all he had to do was marry me. But now even that seemed to be slipping away.

Aunt Mae put her arm around me. "My girl, I only loved two men in my life. The rest came in as poor seconds. It's a rare thing you know, men like your Caleb."

"He's a rare one alright. Did they all get cold feet before the wedding?"

She snorted. "The first one did. I had to hunt him down, sober him up, and we were late for our own wedding, but after that we lasted almost twenty years."

"The aero-ag business is sold and I really can't see myself sticking around just to hear his excuses, can you?"

"Well, married or not," she said pulling an envelope out of her purse. "I think this might be just what you need."

I tried to refuse the gift she shoved into my hand, but as if to keep the envelope from escaping, she closed her wrinkled hands over mine. "This was always meant for you. Open it."

I read and reread the document, then looked up, laughed and put my arms around her small,

bony shoulders. "You're absolutely right, Aunt Mae. You couldn't have given me a better gift if you tried."

Too short to read over my shoulder, Cousin Pearlle reached up and grabbed the document out of my hands.

"Oh that old thing," she said. "It's way out in the middle of nowhere. What would you do there, anyways?"

"Think. Not think. Take long walks. Whatever I want."

Though my cousin Pearlle appeared to be a man-crazy, plump piece of blond and pink taffy, I had recently discovered that she was also smart, independent, clear headed, and when I needed her most, a crack shot with a handgun. Unfortunately, it was times like this when old habits crowded in front of her better judgment.

Most of her insecurity came from the death of her parents in a car crash, leaving her unmoored and adrift. But when she discovered a grandmother she didn't know existed, Pearlle set about to look up the selfish woman and give her a piece of her mind. What she got was a dose of reality and the stability she'd always yearned for in a family.

"Well," Pearlle sniffed, "if you say so. I suppose you want me to go with you."

I glanced over my shoulder at the Ag Cats, forklifts and trucks lined up in stark relief against the rim of western hills lining the San Joaquin Valley. It was all going to the outfit in Merced later this week, and what customers who weren't already retired, or dead, would go with them. While my dad and his lady friend had plans to fence off some of the property for a herd of milk goats, I was going to be out of a job as an aero-ag pilot. I was *not* looking forward to living on a ranch with goats. So if I wasn't going on my honeymoon and moving into Caleb's house, then I'd go to Arizona and look at my new property.

"No, no. I'm good," I said.

"Whad'ya mean, *good*? Granny says Arizona is wilder than Texas. Besides, I just got my Lady Smith back from the Sacramento Sheriff's office, and I hear Arizona has reciprocal carry for personal sidearms."

"Yeah, but you still have to take Aunt Mae home to Texas and then you promised to come back and nurse Mad-Dog to health, remember?"

Leaving her with that little nugget to chew on, I took off for the house, my dad trudging after me.

I gathered up boots and a few miscellaneous items while he jingled the change in his pockets.

"So are you really going to Arizona?" he asked.

"Yep," I said, knowing how unhappy my leaving without Caleb must make him feel.

"*Swallowing your pride won't cause indigestion,*" he said.

I rolled my eyes. When backed up against an argument he couldn't win, my father's best defense was to resort to one of the arcane adages he kept for every occasion.

"You've got Mrs. Hosmer to keep you company," I said.

"Ah, well, she's a nice lady and all, but her time is taken up these days with her new grandbaby."

I guess Dad and the goat business would have to take a back seat to Shirley's grandchild. I thought about it for a minute, then said, "Aunt Mae said the property has a gold mine on it."

"It's that place down by the Mexican border, isn't it?" he asked.

"I don't know, I've never been there, have you?"

"My pappy and I took a road trip to Arizona when I was about ten or so. As I recall, that property backed up to some real pretty mountains. There were cottonwoods next to a stream, and

a big adobe ranch house. I always wondered what happened to that property."

His sigh sounded a little like regret to me.

"How about a road trip to Arizona?" I asked.

My father's eyes momentarily brightened, but then his responsibilities crowded the moment aside. "I should stay. Merced Aero-Ag is coming this week to pick up the airplanes and equipment."

"That's what you hired Mad-Dog to do, right?"

Though Mad-Dog Schwartz was still recovering from the knife wound he sustained while attempting to corral a killer, Dad and I agreed that if anyone deserved the extra pay to ferry the airplanes and see to the equipment, it was Mad-Dog.

My dad plucked at his lower lip, looking like he was giving it some thought. "Well, the money *is* in the bank."

"And you don't want to be here when they haul away all those memories, do you?"

"What about the goats Shirley ordered?" he asked.

I had an answer for that, too. "We'll be back in a week."

"A week? Oh, well, that might work. She's going to be pretty busy for at least a week. But I don't think I could find the place after all these years."

"We have a map, a GPS, and Aunt Mae has the phone number of the property manager; he'll give us directions."

"Well, then what vehicle should we take?" he asked. "The Caddy is a gas hog and my truck, as you well know, is totaled."

I was the one driving his old Ford truck when it was T-boned, and the only reason I was alive today was because, in spite of my teasing, that old rust bucket was built like a tank.

"Yes," I said. "We still have the rental, or my gas-guzzling Caddy. Either would be okay for a road trip, but Aunt Mae says the road to the property is in pretty bad shape."

"Wait," he said, bumping his skull with an open palm. "I completely forgot. I bought a Jeep two weeks ago. They called yesterday and said it's ready to be picked up."

This was good news. After sealing the deal with the new owners of his aero-ag business, he must've decided to get one of those nice Jeep Grand Cherokees, the ones with plush leather seats, back-up camera, and Bluetooth. It was about time he got something luxurious.

"Great," I said, "We'll get to Arizona in style. How about we stop over in Las Vegas?"

"Vegas? Oh, I don't know about that. You know I'm not much of a gambler. I leave that sort of thing to your great-aunt Mae and cousin Pearlie."

My dad always said he'd spent too many years gambling on the weather to consider putting down his hard-earned money in a casino.

I laughed. "There're lots of things to do besides gamble. We'll go see the fancy cars at the Wynn, then maybe get tickets for a Cirque du Soleil."

His indifference would suggest he knew what I was talking about. The truth was my dad was new to vacations, having taken his first when he went on an Alaskan cruise last year with his lady friend, Shirley. But after a couple of phone calls, one to assure Shirley he'd be home in a week, and the other to confirm that Mad-Dog was on the job, he went to pack his suitcase.

Pearlie was annoyed that I would choose my dad over her for a road trip, even if it was to nowheresville, Arizona.

"But Lalla, if you're not going to get married, we should start looking for offices right away."

When I tilted my head in confusion, she playfully punched me in the arm. "We're going to start a P.I. business here in Modesto, remember? Well, we will soon as I get my license. You

promised we'd start looking right after you got back from your honeymoon."

"I did no such thing."

"You did too! The only thing we haven't decided was the name on the door."

I groaned. "Calling ourselves *The Blonde Job* for a P.I. firm is just asking for trouble. We'd get calls to show up for bachelor parties. Or worse."

Aunt Mae looked from her granddaughter to me and before we got into one of our childhood hair-pulling matches, she said, "I'm going upstairs to pack. When you two decide how I'm getting back home to Texas, let me know."

When she was gone, I said, "You still have a job at the ranch and you agreed to show Nancy and Jim Balthrop the ropes."

Instead of going into witness protection, the newlyweds had eagerly accepted management positions at Aunt Mae's ranch. And, in a generous moment, Pearlie had offered to familiarize Nancy and Jim with their new jobs. She could return to California and get to work on her private investigator's license—without me.

Pearlie looked up at the ceiling as if weighing the possibility that nowheresville Arizona might just be a lot more fun than Texas.

"How long do you think you'll stay out there?"

"A few days, maybe a week."

"A week? That'll work. I'll fly Gran home. Nancy and Jim can hang out with the help till I get back. You can come pick me up at the nearest airport."

Pearlie was sure she might be missing something important. Jeez, didn't she have enough excitement in the last couple of weeks?

Guess not, because the last thing she said to me before she climbed into her granny's Cessna was, "... and don't get into any trouble until I get there."

Pearlie had a really screwy idea of what was fun.

### *Chapter Three: Wishbone Arizona*

Since the property manager's office for my new home was in downtown Wishbone, we had lunch in a cute little café on Main Street. I snagged a card for the next time I wanted a quick and tasty meal in town and wrote, *Cornucopia. Best place for soup and sandwiches.*

It was a quick walk to the real estate office. The property manager handed us a county map with red markers to show us the route, pointing out the difficulties with a stubby finger.

"So you're heading east toward the Mules, uh, that's the Mule Mountains. You're lucky it's the dry season. Summers, we get Monsoon weather, and the gully washers will make that road impassable." He looked up, searching hopefully for a sign that we were rethinking the idea, but seeing my dad nod, he shrugged and continued.

"Well, anyway, I haven't been up there in, um, a few months."

I was now grateful that my dad's choice for a Jeep was a sensible off-road Wrangler instead of the luxurious Grand Cherokee.

"Look for the green stripe of vegetation coming off the eastern hills—turn up toward it on Red Mountain Rd. There's electricity to the house, but I'll call and make sure it's turned on for you by tomorrow."

While he rolled up the map, the real estate manager openly admired my assets. I had him by a couple of inches, but if my height and cheekbones weren't enough, I had realistic windblown blond hair, courtesy of my dad who preferred open windows to A/C.

My dad took possession of the map. "How long has it been empty?" he asked.

"Um, maybe six months? By now, it's probably got field mice or packrats inside, and where there are mice, rattlers follow. You'll want to keep an eye out for the snakes. Now if you'd like to consider selling, I'd be obliged if you'd allow me to list it for you."

Dad's head snapped up. "What? Sell a rare piece of property like that? Not likely!"

When he wasn't driving, Dad was reading about Arizona mining, sure that there was gold left in Uncle Ed's gold mine.

I picked up the man's card, and before my dad could ask where to buy gold mining equipment, I dragged him outside.

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With afternoon heat shimmering across the arid landscape, we followed the real estate manager's map across the last rock strewn gully and onto a potholed and seldom used private road. At the end of the road, a small dun colored adobe house was surrounded by a weed-choked, cracked adobe wall. Beyond the house, a weary barn and shed completed the impression that the property had been abandoned.

Dad pointed to the thick stand of bright green cottonwoods along a dry creek.

"Green trees mean there is still water underground," he said, happily getting out of the Jeep.

Since we'd be roughing it until the electricity was turned on, we brought jugs of water, groceries, insect spray, mousetraps, and because the property manager said snakes hate them,

mothballs. Roughing it delighted my dad and sent me into paroxysms of terror at the thought of an infestation of mice and snakes.

Using a machete, Dad cut a path through the courtyard weeds, unlocked the door, and we stepped inside. The living space was a pleasant departure from the drab exterior. The single story home had been built to appear larger than it was. The kitchen was separated from the living room by a bar of polished mesquite wood and four artistically wrought iron stools.

High ceilings bore hand-hewn beams, and though the floors had a layer of dust on them, the ochre and rust colored Mexican tiles had the look of old world craftsmanship.

To the right, a floor to ceiling rock wall housed a big, well used fireplace with kindling and logs all set for a cozy fire.

Two old leather sofas, the dark brown hides worn from use, hunkered companionably near the cold and dark fireplace.

Bookshelves had been inserted into the rock wall and held tattered copies of gold mining periodicals. I was amused by the hunk of quartz with a tiny fleck of gold in the middle.

I was delighted to see a bank of French doors across the living room, and though the small-paned windows were opalescent with age and dust, I could tell that when opened the morning sun would flood across the old tiles with happy light.

I suspected the real estate manager might've removed any carpets in favor of bare floors for renters, but I made a note to ask him about it. Somehow I doubted he'd admit to removing them, since he seemed to have lulled himself into believing the absent owners were never coming back.

Dad brought in the sleeping bags and water. "It looked bigger when I was a kid," he said, lifting a five-gallon water jug onto the kitchen counter.

I went to the stove and tried the gas. "I guess we need to get propane."

He bent over and tapped on the five-gallon tank under the counter. "Empty. We'll go into town and get it filled."

"Even without electricity?"

"Pressurized gas will do for the day or two until the electrical is turned on. All you need is a match. And, I found that in the shed," he said, indicating a shovel by the door.

I heard a coyote howl and shivered. "To fight off the wild animals?"

"No silly, for latrine duty. Water here is from the well and we'll need electricity for the pump and the toilets."

"Outside? No, no, no! Not doing that! Let's drive into Wishbone," I said, grabbing my purse. "We'll get a couple of rooms and come back when the electricity is on."

"*If the load is getting easy, you're going downhill,*" he said.

"Not from where I'm standing. There are wild animals out there. Gimme the Jeep keys, I'll drive."

He had his hands on his hips. "Now Lalla, just remember, *People don't fail, they give up.* You knew we were going to have to rough it for a day or two. Where's your pioneering spirit?"

I snapped my fingers, signaling my impatience for the keys. "Pioneers yearned for hot baths and clean sheets, too. Now gimme those keys!"

Then he said the one thing to stuff my nerves back where they belonged. "That would mean cell phone service. Then you'd have to answer your phone messages. Are you sure you're ready for that?"

He had me there. Stay here and I had the excuse there was no landline or cell service in this remote location. I already had seen enough texts and phone messages from Caleb to know he was alive, but not so many that I was ready to forgive him, either.

Seeing he'd won the argument, Dad patted my shoulder. "Don't worry. There are wires strung along the main road. It won't be a problem to get the electric company out here by tomorrow."

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Morning light sifted through the dusty window and landed on the makeshift quilt from the sleeping bag I'd unzipped to cover my bare mattress. In that almost awake moment, I had an awful feeling that something was out of sync. I knew what it was—Caleb. I'd stubbornly rejected his attempts to make me understand why he had missed our wedding, though I had enough texts and messages by now to know the details. He'd stopped into a 7-Eleven and interrupted a robbery in progress. The upshot of his vigilante justice was that he was late for his own wedding. Heck, I knew Caleb better than to imagine he would choose to get drunk on our wedding day, but slipping away to avoid the aftermath of our botched wedding seemed like the right thing to do—at least it did at the time.

But now I missed waking up next to him. My self-imposed loneliness added a bitter taste to an otherwise sweet morning.

Somewhere outside a bird sang, and as my dad would say, *Some folks won't look up until they're flat on their backs.*

I rubbed at sleep-filled eyes, sat up, stretched, and decided things could be worse. I wasn't trespassing on anyone else's hospitality. I had no one to answer to, no job to go to. Aunt Mae had deeded this house to *me*, and for the first time in my life, I owned something, a house and a piece of property. With renewed purpose, I opened the window over my bed and breathed in the promise of a new day.

By noon it would be warm, and by afternoon downright hot, but the thick adobe walls would keep the interior cool. All we needed was electricity for the ceiling fans, lights and the well pump.

I took my notepad of items we needed into the kitchen in time to see my dad walking out the door.

"Where're you going?" I asked.

"I'm going out to see if I can find Uncle Ed's old gold mine. I'll be back in time for lunch," he said, closing the door behind him.

Of course he'd be back in time for lunch. Skinny as he was, my father was never one to miss a meal.

Now, where was I? I added oil for the gate hinges, a ladder to repair or replace the loose tiles on the roof, and because I didn't know tiled roofs from horse manure, I wrote roofing contractor and gardener on the list.

The house could use a coat of paint. Something subtle for the exterior, maybe an earth color that wouldn't fight with the terrain, and for the rooms, a native plant like sage green or a warm sunflower. I added native plant books and house colors to the list.

Putting the notebook away, I gathered cleaning supplies and started on the windows.

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Five hours later my stomach rumbled. I looked at my watch. Two o'clock already? Didn't Dad say he'd be back in time for lunch?

This was Arizona, not California. He took the Jeep to look for Great-Uncle Ed's gold mine,

but that was five hours ago. Did he take his cell phone? I turned around to look for it. Sure enough, there it was on the table by the front door. He could be lying in one of those gullies, bones broken, unable to get out.

Dread at the worst possible outcome ground down the last of my patience and I power-walked the mile or so to our nearest neighbor's home, and hopefully a phone.

"Sorry to bother you," I said, to the woman who answered. "My dad and I are ...." I leaned on my knees, gasping out the last of my appeal, "here from California and—"

She took in my dusty boots, the angry scrapes left by passing mesquite, and invited me inside. "You're at the old Bains' place, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "Got here yesterday and ... was cleaning the house and completely lost track of ..."

She pushed me into a chair, filled a tall glass of water to its brim and handed it to me. "Drink it down. All of it. Visitors forget we're at five-thousand feet. You get dehydrated and wonder why you're exhausted and delusional."

When I wiped the last of the moisture from my lips, she nodded for me to continue.

"My dad left in his Jeep this morning to look at our property, but he hasn't come back and I'm worried. We don't have a landline yet. Could you call 9-1-1?"

Her gaze slipped to a sturdy Blue Heeler on a dog bed, the attention starting a syncopated tail wag.

"Does he have a cell phone with him?" she asked, still watching the dog.

I shook my head. "No. I had barely convinced him to buy one, then daily remind him to clip it onto his belt. My dad views this sort of newfangled gizmo less of a convenience and more of an intrusion on his privacy."

"How long has he been gone?" she asked, picking up her phone.

I looked at my watch. "About five hours. Can you call the sheriff or somebody to help me look for him?"

A smile tweaked at the edge of her generous mouth. "I will, but if you like, my dog and I are trained to track missing people, and the sooner we get started the quicker we'll find him."

I got to my feet, felt dizzy, and just as quickly collapsed into my chair again.

"You're still dehydrated," she said, handing me a bottle of water, and turning away, touched a few numbers on her phone.

When someone on the other end answered, she held up a *wait-for-me* finger.

"Larry? It's me, Karen Paquette. I have a neighbor with a missing relative. Yeah, looks like it might be this side of the Mule Mountains. I'll take Matilda, but I want you to know we'll be starting at the old Bains place. I'll check in with you in an hour, one way or the other."

She shut the phone. "I'll get my gear."

I drank down the last of the water, surprised by how quickly it helped. I gave thanks that I had found this no-nonsense young woman at home.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I come banging on your door and didn't even introduce myself. I'm Lalla Bains."

She took my outstretched hand while hoisting the backpack onto her shoulder. "Karen Paquette. Let's go."

With no more than a lift of her finger, the dog eagerly bounded out the door and into the back of an old Ford Bronco.

I sat in the passenger seat, twisting my hands together as if I could calm my rapidly mounting fear. "My dad is sixty-eight but he's fit for his age. Should I be worried about rattlesnakes? He ..."

he didn't wear his boots."

"Was the tank full when he left?"

"I—don't know. He's always scolding me about filling up, like all the gas stations between Modesto and Stockton will suddenly run dry while I'm on the road."

She nodded thoughtfully. "What color is the Jeep?"

"Red. Bright Red. It's a brand new Wrangler Rubicon with thirty-five inch tires, lockers, a winch on the front, and a roll cage, just in case ... I'm so worried. He could be ...."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. He's got some experience with it, right?"

"Some. We drove it from California. I just hope he wasn't trying to climb rocks and rolled the damn thing," I said, glancing at the scratches on my arms. "Do these plants always reach out and bite when people walk by?"

Karen tsked at the bloody scratches on my arms. "Mesquite can be just plain awful. Remind me later and I'll give you one of my aloe vera plants. That usually takes care of the sting. We have plenty of things here in Arizona that will sting or bite if you get too close: rattlesnakes of course, scorpions, poisonous toads, Africanized bees, bears, coyotes, cougars, skunks, javelinas and emus."

"Emus—aren't they—?"

"Yep. Big, flightless birds, and if one happens to get loose and runs out onto the highway, which happens more than you would think, well, you'll get more than a mouthful of feathers, that's for sure."

"And I was worried about rattlesnakes. I didn't know emus were native to Arizona."

She chuckled again. "No more than camels and cattle, but folks continue to bring in all sorts of critters to our state. I love emu oil. It's good for everything from cracked dry skin to arthritis."

"Okay, so I'll add emus, snakes, and poisonous toads to the list."

"On the bright side, we don't shovel snow, and we don't have earthquakes, hurricanes, or tornados. So as long as you mind where you put your hands and feet, you're good to go."

We parked at my Aunt Mae's old house, and I was pleased that our first guest wouldn't see the small adobe structure as a derelict. The windows now reflected a cheerful light and the weeds had been mowed, thanks to a gas-operated weed-whacker we'd found in the shed.

I hopped out to get one of my dad's shirts. Unwashed, of course, since we had yet to get the electricity promised by the property manager.

Matilda whined and wagged her tail, eager to begin the chase. Karen gave a command and we were soon following a zigzag pattern as the dog started her search for my dad.

Karen did a good job of directing Matilda while interjecting anecdotal stories about Arizona. I'm sure it was part of her training to keep the anxious relative from hyperventilating. Her questions were friendly and generic, the sort that accepted my privacy, but still got a bead on who I was and why I was here. Yet, I was glad when she didn't ask who went with the diamond solitaire on my left hand.

"This area is a birder's paradise," she said, pointing to the line of green cutting a path through the valley. "The San Pedro River starts our riparian corridor. It shelters hundreds of migrating birds, and every summer we see as many as twelve different species of hummingbirds."

After another twenty minutes of the dog's haphazard journey, I asked, "Why doesn't she go in a straight line?"

"She's making sure she has it right. The scent drifts on the air like smoke, and lucky us, there's a breeze coming our way."

"So this is her job—finding people?"

"To Matilda, and dogs like her, yes. It's both a job and a game. Her reward is the find and lots of praise. "

"You trained her, or did she come this way?"

"I trained her and two dogs before her. For an air scent tracker, she's in her prime, but they do wear out."

Karen broke off talking and whistled encouragement to Matilda.

An hour later, we found the Jeep.

I took it all in, the clear blue sky over our heads, the sound of a donkey braying, the musical notes of a distant cowbell, mesquite pods rattling dryly in the hot breeze, and the Red Rubicon Wrangler sitting forlorn and alone next to a deep hole.

In spite of Karen's warning to stay close, I took off running, Karen and the dog following after me.

## *Chapter Four:*

"Mr. Bains?" Karen leaned close to the open mine pit. "I'm Karen Paquette with Cochise County Search and Rescue. Are you hurt, Sir?"

"What about a rope, Karen?" I asked.

"You can forget the rope," my Dad said, his voice a tinny echo bouncing off the cavernous walls of the pit. "The rocks sawed right through the last one."

Rope? I wondered why he would choose a rope over a perfectly good winch and steel cable on the front of his Jeep.

Karen touched my shoulder. "I didn't bring the Aztec. A cable and winch will make this a lot quicker. Lemme see if the keys are in the ignition."

"We'll be with you in a minute, Dad!"

I ignored his grunted reply and followed Karen to the Jeep.

"Locked," she said, peering inside the windows. "He must have the keys with him."

"That hole is pretty deep."

"Not so much. Maybe twenty feet or so. At one time, Wishbone was the largest mining site in the west. Miners came from all over the world to look for gold and silver, leaving this part of the state looking like giant prairie dogs had been at it. I'll go down and check him for injuries. If he's okay to recover, I'll get his Jeep keys and we'll use the winch to get him out."

She squatted down and started pulling out her equipment; a harness, cleats, and a coiled nylon rope.

I put out a hand to stop her. "You heard what my dad said; rocks sawed right through the last one."

She held up the end of a thick, braided nylon rope. "This isn't what your dad used. It won't break."

"Okay, but how will you get out again?"

"I'll attach one end to the Jeep's bumper and use an ascender. See?" she said demonstrating the gear. "My foot goes in one end and I ratchet myself up and out. It won't take but a few minutes."

I went back to the hole and pulled off the remaining boards. "Lucky for us, Karen and her dog are volunteer trackers. She's going to come down for the Jeep keys, okay?"

"Sure. But hurry up, will you? It's kinda close in here with the two of us."

I sucked in a quick breath. "There's someone down there with you?"

Dad coughed. "Was. He's gone now."

"See what I mean?" Karen said. "That's the dehydration talking. It happens even quicker with old people. Just humor him for a few minutes."

I shook my head. "I don't know, Karen. My dad's a pretty tough old coot. If he says—"

"I can hear you, you know!"

I shouted back, "You'd think after six hours in a dark hole, you'd be a bit more grateful for the help!"

His response was less than grateful. "Are you really trying to piss me off?"

Karen laughed. "Keep him talking," she said, and giving my shoulder a reassuring pat, tossed her coiled nylon rope on the ground, trailed one end over to the Jeep, tucked the rope around the bumper and then deftly turned a knot. She tugged on it to be sure of its strength then put on leather work gloves, shrugged into her harness, and secured the line with a cleat.

"This is Karen again, Mr. Bains. Do you have room to move out of the way?"

"Yes, but—well, I guess."

She nodded, slipped a bottle of water into her tool belt and tested the nylon line. "I'm coming down now, Mr. Bains."

Just before her head disappeared into the hole, she poked her hand up and gave me a nice thumbs-up. I shivered. Somehow the gesture felt more ominous than reassuring.

When the rope went slack, I held my breath and listened. Their conversation was muted by the rock walls, but her calm voice was all I needed to know that she was satisfied with his condition. We'd get him out and I'd take him home. He was exhausted, and I'm sure he was hungry, since he missed out on lunch.

While I waited, I did some of the deep breathing exercises Karen said would help me adjust to the altitude, reminding myself to look around for snakes, coyotes, and any stray emus. There was nothing to mar the clear blue sky but a red-tailed hawk circling overhead, his broad tail flicking while it caught another rung on the ladder in the rising thermals.

Arizona was so different from California, yet in many ways familiar. With the Dragoons and the Huachuca Mountains on the east and west, the valley pointed north almost to Tucson. I did expect to see cactus, but there were none of the grand saguaros from the pages of Arizona calendars and tourist maps. There were plenty of ocotillo, the spindly spiked plants were everywhere, which only went to prove, Dad said, that gold filled quartz veins were right under our feet.

It was also quiet. Even though our ranch near Modesto, California was officially in the county, suburbia had been eating up all the vacant land until my dad's place was the odd bit in a sea of houses, traffic and shopping centers. All he had to do now was put up a *For Sale* sign and his property would disappear under the weight of progress.

I was jerked back to the present when I heard my name called. Unclipping the two-way radio from my belt, I answered.

"He's all right, Lalla," Karen said. "I'm coming up with the keys."

With the keys in hand, I moved the Jeep closer to the hole, and using the winch remote, I lowered Karen down into the pit again to retrieve my dad.

"Bring him up now," she said. "Slow and steady."

I put my finger on the remote control and the cable started to roll onto the winch drum. There was a quick shudder when the Jeep gripped the extra weight, but then Dad's gray head popped out of the hole. I stopped the remote and he scrambled over the ledge, rolling out onto the ground.

Karen's radio piped up again. "Lalla? How're you doing?"

"Let me get him out of the harness and I'll send the cable for you."

"I'll be waiting."

I handed my dad a bottle of water. "You okay for a minute while I get Karen out?"

"Sure. She tell you about the other thing?"

"What other thing?"

"Never mind. Get her out and we'll talk." My dad upended the water bottle, effectively shutting off any further questions.

While the winch lowered the cable down to Karen I noticed a dusty whirlwind coming our way. As it came closer, the maelstrom became two county sheriff's patrol cars. One of them peeled out of formation and stopped. A deputy got out and, thumbs in his belt, strolled over to where my dad was slouched on the ground.

Slope-shouldered with eyes so deeply set that I couldn't quite decide if there was intelligence in there, or not, said, "This is private property. What're y'all doing here?"

My dad mumbled something and the deputy scratched at his cheek in a way that made me think, *rookie*. Then he ambled over to where I waited, controller and remote in hand.

Without speaking to me, he peered down into the hole, cursed, and backed away, keeping his hands clasped behind his back.

I decided to ignore him and called to Karen on the two-way. "A sheriff's deputy is here."

"Yeah, I see him. Who is this clown anyway?"

"I have no idea. Are you ready?"

"Yes I am. Hoist away."

The deputy caught Karen under her arms and yanked her clear of the hole. When she brushed his hands away, I saw a blush rise under his soft round face.

"Why didn't the other deputy stop?" Karen asked.

The deputy stiffened under the apparent criticism. "We got a 9-1-1 call for a break-in at the art compound."

"It's okay, Karen," I said, "my dad's fine."

"Wait," Karen said. "There's another thing."

I flicked a quick glance at my dad. He shrugged, letting Karen explain.

She squinted at the hand printed name taped on his pocket. "Deputy...?"

"It's Abel. Deputy Abel," he said, slapping a hand over the nametag.

Karen's lips twitched. "You're new in the Sheriff's department?"

"Not that new. I lost my name tag is all."

"Okay. I called the sheriff's department and told dispatch I would be out here tracking this gentleman at the request of his daughter. He's okay, but we also found human remains below."

"Ancient burial ground?" I asked looking from Karen to Dad.

The deputy's face went one shade redder. "Probably another damn mule."

At my perplexed look, Karen said, "I'll explain the term later, Lalla. You need to know, Deputy, that it's not a Mexican down there, it's Wishbone's police chief."

I gasped. "You mean to tell me there's a real body down there?"

The young deputy's notebook slipped out of his hand and dropped to the ground. "Are-are you sure?"

"How'd the police chief get...?"

"I'm sorry, Lalla. I decided it best to wait until I got your dad out of the pit to tell you. As for your question, Deputy, I've met him several times before; the most recent was at a fundraiser for the K-9 troop, so yes, I'm sure."

Deputy Abel retrieved the notebook and smacked it against his trouser leg. "He's supposed to be on a fishing trip in Wyoming. How the hell did he get down there?"

He turned and glared at my dad. "I told you this was private property. What was the old guy here doing down there with him?"

I'd had enough. "Now, wait a minute, Deputy. I own this property, and my dad drove out to look around and—"

"I can speak for myself, thank you very much," Dad said. "I saw a truck parked here. It sped

off when I got closer, so I thought I'd take a look. I saw the body below and went down to see if he was still alive."

The deputy stuck his thumbs in his gun-belt and squinted suspiciously at my dad. "Uh-huh. Can you describe the truck, sir?"

My dad's jaw twitched—I knew what he was thinking because I was thinking it myself—*damn whippersnapper*. "It was white. A truck. Too far away to tell the make or model."

The deputy mouth puckered in disgust. "Old people."

Karen put her hand on my dad's arm to stop the retort on his lips.

"What the deputy means is," Karen said, "because of the sun, most cars and trucks in Arizona are white."

"How was I to know it was going to be important?" Dad said. "It took off. I went down, the rope broke on me, and there I stayed until my daughter and this lady found me."

I shook my head. "The rope didn't break, Dad, the knot came untied. Why didn't you use the winch? The remote and controller was coiled up on the back seat."

A blush rose under his dirt-smudged face. "I—I couldn't figure out how to use the damn thing."

The deputy looked at my dad's fancy new Jeep and snickered. "Like I said—old people."

I heard teeth grinding. I think it was Karen, tempted to give the deputy a piece of her mind. Instead, she turned her attention to my dad.

"You did the right thing, Mr. Bains," she said.

Deputy Abel lifted his notebook to read his notes. "Mm-mm. Since this appears to be a potential homicide, I'm going to have to, ah, secure the scene and get everyone's names."

His radio bleated and he jerked like he'd been shot, then lifted it off his belt and held it to his ear. "Oh, yeah? That so. Okay, I'll be right there."

The deputy fastened the radio back onto his belt. "Looks like we have another homicide."

"At the art compound?" I asked, looking uphill at a distant line of trees anchored to a hillside. "Who?"

"It's under investigation and that's all you need to know."

He stuffed the notebook back into his shirt pocket. "I have to get up there now, secure the area for Homicide and the M.E."

He turned to leave, then circled back to us, rubbing the back of his neck. "Dang it! What was I thinking? How am I supposed to secure a murder scene in another place when any of you might be suspects in this one?"

Visibly bristling at the insult, Karen said, "I can vouch for Miss Bains and her dad, Deputy, if that's what's worrying you."

He squinted at her. "But who's going to vouch for *you*?"

"Dumb-ass," Dad mumbled under his breath.

Karen, who had clearly been in charge of her temper a minute ago, now lost it. "Who the hell you think you're talking to? I've been working with the sheriff's department longer than you've been shaving."

I wanted to high-five Karen. *Whippersnapper, indeed.*

"Is that so? Well, until Homicide or the sheriff says otherwise, I go by the book. And since I can't take the chance that y'all won't go running off the minute my back is turned, you two get in the back seat and Karen and her dog ride up front."

Spreading his arms wide he herded us to his patrol car. "Hurry up now, I haven't got all day. Oh, and I'll take your wallets and cell phones. We'll check your identities, and then maybe you

can go home. Or not."

"Dumb-ass," my dad muttered again.

Deputy Abel got into the driver's side and started the car.

"Deputy," Karen said, "if I hadn't been out here looking for Mr. Bains, no one would've known where to look for the chief, much less find him."

The deputy nodded, starting the engine. "Got that right. Not when the man was supposed to be on his way to Wyoming. We wouldn't have started looking for at least another week."

"He was dead when I found him," Dad said.

"Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't. Either way, Homicide is going to have a lot of questions for you folks. Everyone buckle up now."

Dad and I looked at one another, thinking the same thing—weren't we glad my fiancé, Sheriff Caleb Stone, wasn't here to see us in trouble again?

Deputy Abel gunned the engine and the patrol car bounced over the rutted road and up the hill. I was curious to see what an art compound would look like. Would it be some sort of hippy commune with farm animals and babies in the same crib? As we crested the hill, the blades of a colorful windmill caught the light like a child's whirligig.

We turned onto an unpaved road, passing a collection of *Do Not Enter* and *No Trespassing* signs, and finally stopped next to a big white two-story house. The house sat a hundred feet or so across from three small cabins set in a stand of poplars. Equidistant between the cabins and the house was a huge barn, the doors open, a bright acetylene torch telegraphing the message that someone was hard at work.

Putting on the brake, Deputy Abel hopped out and trotted over to the other deputy, and they both disappeared into the house.

I said what we were all thinking. "What're the chances that the dead body here and the one my dad found are totally unrelated?"

## *Chapter Five:*

My dad, exhausted from his six hour ordeal in an abandoned mine pit, had fallen asleep, his soft snores filling the patrol car.

Karen's Blue Heeler had taken over the driver's seat and was perusing the yard for something more interesting than my dad's snores.

"Since it appears that we're to wait," I said to Karen, "can you tell me what the deputy meant by *mules* leaving dead bodies in mine pits?"

"Wishbone and Cochise County have always been a corridor for immigrants out of Mexico and Latin America, but in the last few years we've seen a real uptick in drug-dealers using them to backpack the stuff across the border, hence the term *mules*. If the border patrol spots them, they will abandon their packs and run. But every once in a while, we find one of them murdered and dumped in a mine pit."

"That's awful."

"The sheriff's department gets weekly calls for human remains in the desert, too. The county tries to repatriate the bodies, after all someone is missing them and it's the right thing to do. But it isn't always possible."

"Why not?" I asked.

"The coyotes lift cash, wallets, ID's, anything of value before they abandon the body to the elements."

I glanced over at my dad slumped against the door, his eyes closed. He had exhausted the last of his reserves.

"Karen," I said, "my dad has a heart condition. Do you think when the EMTs get here they could take a look at him, check his blood pressure or something?"

At the mention of his heart condition, he awoke. "Now don't go making a fuss, Lalla. I'm all right. I'm just a bit tired."

Karen turned her head around to look at me. "I think it's safe to say that we can't count on Deputy Dumb-Ass. I'd call someone, but Dumb-Ass took all of our cell phones. Oh well, service isn't worth a damn out here anyway."

A light winked on in one of the cabins, and from this angle I could see the man in the barn. He held a welding rod and torch, and he was working on a bronze sculpture of a horse.

"That's odd," I said. "There appear to be people here, yet no one seems to be curious as to why there are deputies outside?"

Karen looked up. "What? Where?"

"Well," I said, pointing, "there's a man working in the barn, and someone's in one of the cabins, but no one's interested as to why two county deputy cruisers are parked outside?"

She blinked at the scenery. "Yeah. That doesn't seem right. Which reminds me, my husband's going to be home from work soon and wanting his supper. Still, it might be fun to watch Deputy Dumb-Ass get his comeuppance."

I leaned forward resting my arms on the backrest. "What do you mean?"

"Ian Tom is chief homicide detective with the county. He'll sort this mess out soon enough,"

Karen said, crossing her arms over her chest.

The doggy smell and cramped space in the back seat was beginning to get to me. "I'd like to stretch my legs."

"Uh?" Karen said, rubbing at her eyes. "Oh, sure. Dumb-Ass putting you in the back like *you're* the criminals. What the hell, let's all get out. We'll take Matilda for a walk, and if the idiot shows up, I'll tell him she was about to pee on his front seat."

Dad grunted his disgust at the locked door, then seemed to remember that he was in a patrol car. He stretched and yawned, and thanked Karen for letting him out.

I shivered in the cooling air. We were higher up, closer to the mountains and quicker to become shadowed.

"I'd offer you my coat," Dad said, putting an arm around my shoulders, "but I think I left it in the Jeep."

"I'm okay," I said, watching Karen's heeler intent on a new target.

"I'm not sure what she's after," Karen said, "but let's check it out."

She gave the dog a command and Matilda lurched forward, weaving back and forth on her lead.

"Don't you want to let her go, Karen?" I asked.

"She's also fond of chasing rabbits, so probably not a good idea."

Matilda circled around and headed back to the house, then angled off toward the cabins. She leaned forward, panting in her eagerness to get to the target.

"There!" I cried. "There's something on the ground by that tree."

Karen patted Matilda, gave her a treat, and stared at the item. It was a padded jacket, turned inside out, the flannel lining dirty and ripped.

Karen stopped my dad before he could pick it up. "Wait. This could be an important piece of evidence. Detective Tom will want to see it where it is."

My father looked confused. "It looks like—"

We all turned at a man's deep voice. "Karen? Is that you?"

"Ian Tom," Karen said. "I'm *so* glad to see you. Lalla, Mr. Bains, this is chief homicide detective for Cochise County, Ian Tom. Lalla Bains owns the old Bains place now, Ian."

The man looked to be in his mid-forties. Bronzed skin and epicanthic folds at the inside corner of his eyes hinted at a distant Native American ancestor. He was also tall, maybe six-three, his big shoulders and flat abdomen under a neatly pressed dress shirt said he did more than sit behind a desk.

He shook my dad's hand, and I was pleased to see he wasn't one to assume my dad was anything other than what he said he was—a retired crop duster from California.

I thought it odd when the detective's gaze landed on my hands. They were, as always, chapped, nicked from working, with short, unpainted nails and only my engagement band with the single diamond to mention my single or not status. Then again, was he looking to see if these were the kind of hands that could kill someone? When my eyes came up to meet his, I saw humor, as well as speculation, as he worked around the how and why I might be involved with this murder case. I had to agree with Karen, this was a man who could put two and two together and know what to do about it.

Introductions over, he asked about the jacket on the ground.

"Matilda led us to it," Karen said. "I thought it might be a clue, since we started out looking for Mr. Bains. Of course, we also found the police chief."

He shook his head, frowning. "The police chief? Back up a minute. What's this have to do

with the police chief?"

"Deputy Dumb-Ass," my dad muttered.

I nudged him before he could add an expletive and said, "A sheriff's deputy."

I started from the beginning, ending with Karen's identifying the body in the pit as Wishbone's police chief.

"And the deputy got your particulars and took your statements?"

"Not exactly," Karen said. "He was interrupted by a call to come here and secure another crime scene."

The detective heaved a sigh and took out his notebook. "Let's start over again. Karen, you said you and Miss Bains tracked her father to a mine pit where you also found the body of the police chief? Where exactly is this pit?"

Karen looked downhill, "About a mile east, between the Bains's place and here?"

Detective Tom eye-balled my dad's dusty clothes. "And how did you happen on the pit, Mr. Bains?"

The Adam's apple on my dad's neck bobbed. "I was enjoying my new Jeep you see, driving through gullies and over hills, looking for my uncle's gold mine. That's when I saw someone on the property. He must've seen me and sped off before I could get there."

"What kind of vehicle?"

"A truck. White, I think. That's when I noticed the pit. The old boards covering it looked to have been messed with. I-I thought I saw something below. I took off my jacket and laid it on the Jeep fender, got out some rope, tied it to the bumper and went down the hole. Then the rope broke and ... I just don't know how *that*," he said, pointing to the jacket, "got all the way up here."

"What're you talking about?" I asked.

"The wind couldn't blow it this far, could it?" Karen said, looking uncomfortable with the suggestion.

I looked down at the item in question. "Are you saying this is—?"

"—my jacket," my dad finished for me.

The detective tilted back his head and looked up at the quiet poplars. "I think it would be fair to say that someone brought it here. Leave it, and I'll have a deputy bag it. I'll send deputies to secure the pit until the coroner can get here. Karen, could I get you to guide the team for the extraction?"

"Sure." She shrugged, apparently resolved to a late supper for her husband.

He closed his notebook and motioned for us to take a seat at a picnic table while he went to find Deputy Dumb-Ass.

When he returned, I asked if we could be allowed to leave.

"Yes, but as this is now a murder investigation of two people, we may still have more questions. You will be staying in Arizona for a while, won't you?"

I mentally groaned. Here we go again.

## *Chapter Six:*

It was five in the afternoon, and the dead police chief and the art compound owner had already been carted off to the county morgue for autopsy.

Dumb-Ass, aka Deputy Abel, returned us to the now empty mine pit and our waiting vehicles.

The deputy dumped our cell phones and wallets into our hands, jumped into his patrol car, spun his wheels and departed in a cloud of dust—which must've helped a lot after the lecture he got from Detective Tom on the care and handling of a crime scene and its witnesses.

I apologized again to Karen for getting her involved in a murder case.

"Oh, I don't know. I've never been on a rescue that turned out to be a real murder. I'll be interested to see how this turns out."

Dad snorted. "You mean in case one of us ends up behind bars, don't you?"

Jingling the change in his pockets, he went to inspect the crime scene tape staked around the empty pit.

I tried apologizing for my dad's rudeness, but she just laughed.

"He says what he thinks, which is pretty standard for this part of the country."

Dad, his profile in quiet gray shadows, gazed into the dark as if looking for answers. It was getting cold and none of us were dressed for it. I shivered, wondering what he was thinking.

"Did the detective tell you anything about the two dead people?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. Not as long as a case is still open."

"You mean as long as my dad and I are suspects."

She laughed again. "I believe Detective Tom so much as said you and your dad have been cleared."

I should've been relieved, but history had a way of circling around until one of my family members was in the thick of it.

"The detective has deep family roots here in Cochise County," she said. "Before he came here he was a New York Police detective, and I'm pretty sure that if he saw anything that looked like you should be detained, he wouldn't have released you."

Karen nodded at my dad's quiet posture. "Why don't you go talk to him, see if he's ready to leave soon. Sorry, but I'm pretty sure I can hear my husband's stomach rumbling from here."

"Of course," I said.

"You keep in touch, won't you?" She asked, opening the hatchback to the Bronco for Matilda. "Let me know how you're doing?"

I waved goodbye, then went to see if I could nudge my dad into leaving for home.

"What're you thinking?" I asked.

He grunted something unintelligible. I was used to his monosyllabic responses, but then he surprised me with a question. "What does the phrase tunnel vision mean to you?"

"Uh, well, I guess it has two meanings. You know, like when you get dizzy and your peripheral vision disappears until there's nothing left but a narrow tunnel? The other, I suppose, is a metaphor and it refers to how we tend not to see the whole picture because we're only seeing what's right in front of us. I presume you have a point?"

He winced as if he'd just experienced a painful memory. "Tunnel vision. I had that when I had my heart attack. Everything got smaller until there was only this pinpoint of light. When I was down in that hole, I did the only thing I could think of to keep from looking at the dead guy next to me; I stared at the walls. There are bits of quartz between the rock and dirt and they catch the light like a prism. Quartz carries gold you know."

"Uh-huh, I think you told me that. Tomorrow we can go into town and get some books at the museum or maybe the tourist center. Can we go now? I'm starved and you should be, too."

"In a minute. I could only look at quartz for so long before my eyes crossed, and since my cellmate had nothing to say, I looked up. Do you know what? I didn't see one single cloud. I could get used to Arizona if they have blue skies like this every day."

"Yeah, me too. Can we go now, Dad?"

"Just let me finish. I let my mind shift from one subject to another—the ranch, goats, airplanes, Shirley, you and Caleb, a dog. I was thinking I should get another dog."

I opened my mouth to object. It was late. I was cold, tired and hungry, but he was still talking.

"That's when the bird flew over. I thought it must've been a really big bird because it completely blotted out the sky."

My stomach rumbled a complaint.

"You were annoyed because I knocked dirt in your eyes."

"Exactly. You were standing too close to the edge. But how in the hell could a bird sling dirt into that hole?"

"Are you saying a bird dropped something into the pit?"

He shook his head. "I very much doubt it. And how could I tell, in the half second it took to fly across the narrow opening, what kind of bird it was?"

"Karen said you were delusional from dehydration. Or maybe it was some other kind of bird. We can get a birding book tomorrow. Now can we go? It's late and I'm getting cold."

His bushy eyebrows rose, daring me to get the punch line he just handed me.

I ignored my stomach and closed my eyes. All I could come up with was that he had been delusional from the dehydration. "I got nothin'."

He tsked at my lack of imagination. "A bird couldn't have knocked dirt into that hole. I mistook the shadow for a bird. I was mistaken. It was something else, something big enough to come between the sun and the pit and kick dirt down the hole."

"Like a coyote? He could've smelled the dead police chief. Good thing he couldn't get to you."

He shrugged. "Do you really think a coyote stole my jacket, ran with it all the way up to the art compound and dropped it where the sheriff's deputies might find it?"

"Oh. Right."

"Yeah. It also makes you wonder what kind of person wouldn't help a poor soul stranded in an abandoned mine pit."

I hesitated, swallowing hard. My mouth was suddenly too dry to comment.

He nodded at my slack-jawed expression. "I think the son-of-a-bitch was satisfied I wouldn't be getting out of there anytime soon, but just in case, he took my jacket to put at another crime scene."

"To incriminate you," I said, the implication driving away the cold.

He brushed the dust off on his pants and backed away from the edge. "Either that, or someone's got a really perverse sense of humor."

"Oh my God," I said. "If that's true, he'll know you lived. I can't believe I'm saying this, but we have to call Caleb."

He reached out and tugged on my ponytail, lightening the mood. "Let's go home, get cleaned up, drive into Wishbone, have supper, and then we'll call him."

Caleb would ask how I managed to go from secluded hideout to the middle of a murder investigation so fast. I had no idea on how to answer that question.

## *Chapter Seven:*

I was surprised at how many eateries there were in downtown Wishbone. Everything from pizza to a five star restaurant. We chose *The Table* because we could get in without reservations.

"My chicken tacos were great," I said, licking sauce from my fingers. "How was your salad?"

Dad reached across the table to steal my last French fry. "Better with fries. I'll pay the bill if you want to step outside and call Caleb."

"Do I have to?" It was a rhetorical question since we both knew this call was inevitable. My problem was that I needed Caleb's help. My dilemma was that I also missed him terribly. I wanted to tell him that I was sorry for taking off without waiting for his explanation, but I didn't know how to apologize and in the next breath ask for his help. I pushed back my chair and picked up my purse. If anyone deserved to eat humble pie, it was me.

I plodded outside, punched in Caleb's number and sighed, ready to apologize first, then ask for help.

"*Bueno?*"

I opened my mouth and then shut it. Was this a joke? "Caleb?"

There was silence on the line then the phone clicked off. What the...? Maybe I didn't have the right area code. I punched in the ten numbers and got the same answer.

"*Bueno?*"

"Who the hell is this?"

"Is me, and this my phone now, bitch. Don' call here no more or I come bust you up."

My dad sauntered through the exit, but one look at the shock and distress on my face and he stuttered, "Wh-What's wrong?"

I held out my hand. "Do you have your cell phone with you?"

"I almost never go anywhere without it these days, but not today, or I'd have used it to call for help. Isn't yours working?"

I handed him my phone. "Just call Caleb, will you? If he answers you can hand me the phone."

He did as I asked, listened, blinked and closed the phone. "Someone swore at me in Spanish and hung up. Is that what happened to you?"

"Something's wrong." I looked at my watch. "It's late, but maybe I can get someone at the Sheriff's office."

I punched in the number and got the night operator.

When I asked for Sheriff Caleb Stone, the woman said he was on vacation.

"Yes, I know that but this is an emergency. I need to reach him right now."

"If this is an emergency please call 9-1-1."

"No, it's personal."

"Oh honey, you're about a year too late on that one. The man is on his honeymoon."

"Yeah, that's what I heard too." I thanked her and hung up. "No help there. He's gone on his honeymoon—without me."

"Think he lost his cell and some Mexican picked it up?"

"And then swear at the caller when they answer? What the hell is going on?"

"He's in trouble, then?"

"Don't say that. Not yet. I'm calling his deputy, Kenny Everett. He might know something."

Kenny knew the wedding was off, but not Caleb's whereabouts. "All's he told me was that he was leaving town. He looked so down in the mouth, I didn't want to ask where he was going, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. The problem is, Kenny, someone has his cell phone and they aren't offering to take messages. He may be hurt. Can you put out a locator on the cell phone and see what turns up?"

"Sure, Lalla. Can I reach you at this number?"

I hesitated. We'd planned on returning to the ranch tonight, but with no cell service and still no landline we were stuck in town until we heard back from Kenny. "Yes, please. Call me when you hear something, and thanks."

My dad shuffled from one foot to the other. "Where do you think he went?"

"I have no idea. Mendocino was my idea, not his. He would've been happy with a beach *palapa* in Ensenada. Regardless, we have to stay in town in case Kenny calls. If we don't hear from him tonight, we'll get help tomorrow."

Dad pointed across the street. "There's a big hotel. Lights are still on. Let's try there."

The Copper Queen Hotel had been renovated to accommodate a burgeoning tourist trade. Gaslights were now wired for electricity and old black and white photos lined the walls to tell the story of fortunes found and lost in the heyday of Arizona mining. Lucky for us, the night clerk had one room left. The honeymoon suite, we were assured, had a sitting room with a pull out couch. I whipped out my credit card before Dad caught a whiff of the expensive bill and insisted we instead find a park bench. I was exhausted, and God knows my dad was fading fast.

I put him to bed in the sitting room, and sat down to call everyone and anyone I knew in Modesto.

I woke up Roxanne, worry in her voice at my late night call. "He lost his phone and someone else is using it? That can be traced, you know."

"Yes," I said. "Kenny Everett is on it, but for now, if someone in town knows, or thinks they know where he went, it sure would help alleviate my fear."

Roxanne waited a beat, letting me know my fear wouldn't be riding shotgun if I hadn't run off to Arizona.

Rushing to my own defense I stupidly blathered a silly line, "It is what it is, Roxy."

"Nonsense. I left you all those messages. Texted you, too, didn't I? How was the man to know that his five minute pit stop at a 7-11 would put him between a needle junkie and a scared Pakistani shop owner? Still, you could've taken a phone call from him—or your friends."

My head hurt, my stomach hurt worse, and I didn't think I could say another word without breaking down completely. I knew my voice trembled when I rushed to end the call with a promise to let her know if I found out he was okay. I closed the cell and rested my head between my hands. Oh God, what have I done? I'd stupidly left him with no recourse but to take his paid vacation time some place where, at the very least, his cell phone would fall into the hands of thieves.

Unable to sleep, I trolled through the mini bar looking for candy then turned on the TV.

I had half a Mars bar in my mouth when my cell phone rang. I answered and a growly voice asked, "Is this Miss Lalla Bains?"

I spat the candy into my hand. "Yes, this is she. Who's calling?"

"This is Deputy Simon from the Cochise County Sheriff's office, we got Caleb Stone here and he'd like for you to pick him up."

"Did you say Cochise County?"

"Yes, ma'am. Sierra Vista substation."

Sierra Vista was an hour away, tops. What the hell was he doing in Arizona?

"Yes, of course I'll come pick him up. Has he been in an accident? Is he injured?"

"Oh no, ma'am, though he wasn't wearing anything but his skivvies when we found him. At first, we thought he was drunk, staggering along the highway, but the EMTs looked him over and he was just suffering from exposure and dehydration, the victim of some darn coyote."

"An animal?"

His growly voice rumbled with laughter.

"Oh, no ma'am. These're smugglers. Every once in a while they hijack a car or a truck."

The deputy seemed pleased to educate someone new on the subject. "They get one of the women to lie out on the road and when an unsuspecting driver stops, the men run out and snatch the car and keys. Evidently, this one had a gun and got not only your friend's truck, but his wallet and boots. I think he's madder about his boots than anything. He said they were expensive."

This was Caleb all right. He loved those boots, and had them worn in just right and I knew the thought of losing them would annoy him to pieces.

I was dumbfounded but relieved that Caleb was here in Arizona. "Where do I pick him up, at your county jail?"

"Yes ma'am. Like I said, he's at our substation in Sierra Vista. You familiar with the town?"

"Give me an address."

"East on Highway 90 to Colonia de Salud. It's a short street, and we're on the right. He'll be in the lobby."

"I'll be there in thirty minutes," I said, wedging the cell between my shoulder and my ear while I dragged on my boots.

"And one other thing?"

"Yes?" Another man who likes to drop *one other thing* on me.

"Sheriff Stone will be wearing one of our two piece suits and plastic flip-flops, but you're not going to want to take him out in public, if you know what I mean. Oh, and I'd appreciate it if you'd return the gear."

"I'll be sure to do that, Deputy. See you soon."

I closed the phone and took a deep breath. If only I'd nailed my feet to the floor at Roxanne's Café for fifteen more minutes, Caleb and I would be married, and on our honeymoon right now. But because I couldn't handle the embarrassment, my dad spent most of today cozied up to a dead police chief, while Caleb got car-jacked, robbed of his wallet, cell phone and clothes and spent his first day in Arizona wandering half-naked in the desert. Fifteen minutes. Fifteen lousy minutes and a chain reaction rolled downhill to become a catastrophe.

Karma had once again spun around and kicked me in the head. Maybe it was just relief from the tension of today, but suddenly it all struck me as terribly funny.

My smile erupted into a fit of giggles and then laughter bubbled over. I wiped at tears running down my cheeks. I was laughing so hard I doubled over with the pain of it.

The two most important men in my life, the ones who had been as constant as night and day for as long as I could remember, and who, when the chips were down, were there for me, had been mauled in the wake of my stupidity.

I wiped at my tears and stilled the ache of laughter in my stomach. Just the same, I couldn't

stop the smile on my lips. Yes, Caleb had been dangerously close to losing more than just his wallet and clothes, but what would be the point of me rushing in to throw myself into his arms, declaring my undying love, when I could get so much more mileage out of this with just a bit of finessing on my part?

I would fish him out of his puddle of trouble and while he was still vulnerable, bring him back to the hotel, clean him up, listen patiently to his well-rehearsed explanation for leaving *me* at the altar. Then maybe, just maybe, I would succumb to his pitiful groveling.

I pocketed the keys to my dad's Jeep, and softly closing the door behind me, took the stairs to pick up my erstwhile fiancé.

## **Chapter Eight:**

I awoke with Caleb's arm slung across my chest, and morning sun strafing my face.

After seeing Caleb's pitiful condition, his sunburned face, dry and cracked lips, my defenses crumbled. But it was when he said, "I wasn't going to let a little inconvenience like no shoes, shirt or pants keep me from you," that I threw my arms around him, sobbing and wetting his jail issued shirt with my tears.

I spent the next hour ministering to his blistered and scratched skin and listening to his pitiful tale of lurching through mesquite, brush and heat.

"But it was when I met Jerry Lee Lewis pounding out *Great Balls of Fire* on a white baby grand that I knew I had to find the road or I was going to die out there."

"Poor darling," I said, adding some cream to his sunburned scalp.

I had decided not to tell Caleb about the murders, knowing if I did that, we'd never get any sleep, and we both needed our rest. Tomorrow, I would call the detective, introduce him to Caleb, and maybe change his mind about allowing us to leave.

Too tired to do anything other than hold each other, I clung to him until we drifted into dreamless sleep.

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A toilet flushed. My dad was up, and had to have passed the bed and seen Caleb with me. I looked at my watch—seven thirty, and for an aero-ag pilot it might as well be the crack of noon. I stretched and yawned, now very grateful that Caleb was safe and, better yet, that we were together again.

My dad came out of the bathroom, his gray hair wet from a quick wash up, still in yesterday's dusty clothes from his unplanned stay in the mine pit. Seeing I was awake, he tipped a questioning eyebrow at my sleeping companion.

I held up two fingers to indicate I needed a couple of minutes.

He nodded and went back to his foldout bed.

I did a quick wash up in the bathroom, slipped into my clothes, and tiptoed into the sitting room.

"Let me call room service for some coffee," I said, "and I'll tell you everything."

Then I told him how I'd gotten a late night call from the local county jail, the carjacking and his subsequent hours trying to get back to civilization.

"So you made up. Glad to see you came to your senses."

There was a knock on the door and I hopped up to answer it. The waiter glanced at the Cochise county issued orange pants and top, and blanched.

"Just put it on the table," I said, getting out my wallet.

Caleb sat up, rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Coffee? I sure could use some."

The waiter didn't wait for the gratuity; he simply ducked out the door, leaving Caleb shaking his head and me in a fit of giggles.

I poured for us. "Yep. I done sprung my lover out of the county jail so we could set ourselves up in this here honeymoon suite and order breakfast in bed."

I had forgotten to ask for three cups, so I gave mine to Caleb and drank out of a water glass from the bathroom. He needed it more than I did, though last night I'd forced two more bottles of water on him just to make sure he was hydrated and had truly left Jerry Lee Lewis behind. My new friend, Karen Paquette, would be proud to know I'd done my duty as a newly minted Arizonian.

"Anyone hungry?" I asked, looking at my two sleepy-eyed men.

Caleb rolled his tongue around his teeth. "I need to brush my teeth and I wouldn't mind another shower, but all I've got to wear is this county outfit."

"We'll sneak you out the back door before that waiter reports the escaped jailbird," I said.

A solid knock on the door said it was too late. I sighed and answered. Sure enough, there was Detective Tom, Stetson in hand, a wide grin on his face. "I was on my way to your place when I got a frantic call from the desk clerk about an escaped criminal holed up in the honeymoon suite. Good thing too. Saved me the trip."

I backed up and waved him inside.

His chuckle limped to a halt when he saw Caleb's cracked lips and sunburned face. "Ouch. If it's any consolation, we've found your pickup, your wallet and your credit cards, but if I were you I'd change the passwords anyway."

"Did they strip it or trash it?" Caleb asked.

"The truck? Nah, they were simply looking for an anonymous ride. And just our luck, the checkpoint for Highway 90 was closed last night, so they sailed right through. Here's the phone number for the impound lot," he said, handing Caleb the note card.

Caleb nodded, accepting the inconvenience. "Where would this be?"

"Phoenix. It's the hub for dispersing illegals in Arizona. They will have contacts to hide them, feed them, get fake documents, whatever they need."

"Thanks," Caleb said, "I don't suppose they left me my boots, did they?"

"Sorry, no clothes or shoes were found."

"Well, it could've been a lot worse," Caleb said.

"Yes, thank you, Detective Tom," I said, "that's good news. We can pick it up on our way to California."

Caleb flicked a hard look at the other man, wondering, I suppose, why I was on first name basis with the detective. Later, I would tell him that Tom was the man's last name, but it was nice to see a little jealousy light his eyes.

The detective didn't miss Caleb's sudden interest, or my comment about going home to California.

"Uh, about that," he said. "We still have two apparent homicides."

Caleb gave me that pained expression that asked, *'What've you done now?'*

"Not me. Not this time," I said, pointing to my dad.

Dad shrugged like it was no big deal and told Caleb about landing in a mine pit with a dead police chief, and the deputy taking us with him to a second crime scene.

"Can you tell us anything about these two murders, Detective?" Caleb asked.

"The young woman who owns the place was found strangled in her own bed. There was no forced entry, but then she might not have been too careful about locking her doors. Autopsy will tell whether or not it was part of a sexual assault. The police chief died of blunt force trauma to the head, and while we're rounding up suspects and sifting through possible evidence, I'll make

sure your interviews happen today so that you folks can get back to your honeymoon."

So he knew enough about us to know that we were supposed to be on our honeymoon, did he? Caleb and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

At his bemused expression, I said, "It's a long story."

My dad cleared his throat. "You better take a seat, Detective. I have some things to add."

When he was settled, Dad ran him through his suspicion that the killer had come back while he was still in the pit and why he thought his jacket was found at the second crime scene.

"So you see," my dad said, "I couldn't help but think ... well, it looks like ...."

"Yes, I see what you mean. I'll put a deputy at your property today."

"Do you think it will do any good?" Dad asked.

"It will give notice that we're looking out for you."

"Can I have my jacket back?"

"I think it's safe to say that you can kiss that article of clothing good-bye. It will stay in evidence for the duration of this case."

"Does my father need a lawyer?" I asked.

The Detective eyed Caleb, and then swung back to me. "Not at this time. My California contacts say that you, Miss Bains, have come into focus for a couple of murders in the last few years, but there's no reason to consider you, or your father, as suspects in either of these cases."

I opened my mouth to ask a question, but as if he had read my thoughts, he said, "They are two separate cases, Miss Bains. They will stay that way unless we find conclusive evidence to connect them."

Happenstance? I didn't believe it. This wasn't New York City where murders were committed on every other street. Or was he simply warning me off before I got started snooping where I wasn't welcome?

He pushed out of his chair. "I have to get back to the office. Someone will call today about your interviews."

With a light smile in Caleb's direction, he said, "Management would be obliged if you left through the door to the alley. Just don't lift any of the silver on your way out."

He tipped his Stetson and left.

Caleb tried to stand, grimaced and sat down again.

"Did we miss some of the gravel in your feet?" I asked.

"I don't think so, but I could really use some peroxide to clean the cuts."

"I saw a Safeway down the road," Dad said. "They'll have a pharmacy. I'll pick up peroxide, some antibacterial cream, and bandaging material."

"Thanks Dad," I said. "Bring some breakfast too, will you?"

When he was gone, I turned to Caleb, "You're a big fat liar."

"I know," he said, pulling me down next to him. "But we need to talk."

I nestled close, my head in the crook of his arm, loving his scent, the soft chest hairs tickling my nose. "Whad'ya wanna talk about?"

"If what your dad said is true, his life could be in danger."

I sighed. "Yeah. You'd think, after all this time, the Bains family would know when to keep their noses out of trouble."

His response was somewhere between humor and exasperation. "Let's back up a minute. Tell me everything. Start from the beginning and don't leave anything out."

With interruptions every few minutes for his questions, I finished about the time I heard the hotel key working to open the locked door. My dad's eyes danced as he carried the pharmacy and

breakfast bags to the table.

"You didn't interrupt anything," I said, pushing off the bed. "He made me tell him the whole story, all of it, from the beginning. It was pretty exhausting and I had to lie down."

"Sure you did," he said, opening the bags from Burger King. "Breakfast is ready."

I handed Caleb a breakfast sandwich, then wolfed down my own before dabbing peroxide and antibiotic ointment on his feet and wrapping it up with gauze and tape. While I admired my handiwork, I didn't see how he was going to fit into a pair of new boots anytime soon. "This means you're going to be wearing either slippers or sandals for a while."

"I need to make a call to my bank and change my passwords."

"We'll take you back to the house," I said. "You can borrow something of Dad's until we can get you new clothes."

He sighed. "I would've been happier if they'd have kept my truck and left my boots."

## *Chapter Nine:*

The next day Caleb and I drove into Wishbone to buy him something to wear that didn't have orange in it.

The only store with men's clothing was a local ranch supply/hardware store. Lucky for Caleb they also had a rack of jeans and a box of odds and ends for clothing. I let him paw through the box and wandered around until I found a carousel of men's shirts, pulled out several and held them up for his inspection.

"Good God, no."

"Sorry, the closeout rack is all they have," I said. "There aren't even any T-shirts left in your size. Come on Caleb. It's only until you get home." His face pinched into an uncomfortable grimace, but he grabbed a powder blue print with white pearl buttons and closed me out of the dressing room. I hung onto the hot pink number with white fringe in case he needed another option. A nice looking denim jacket and a cowboy hat were my next choices. Since we wear the same hat size, I tried it on in front of the full-length mirror, tipped the brim down, cocked a trigger finger and gave the mirror a steely-eyed squint.

That's when I noticed someone looking at me from across the room. The stranger's stare bored a path from a corner in the store to the mirror. I turned to get a better look and he was gone, the entry bell jingled merrily with his retreat.

I shivered in the draft.

All of my earlier playfulness went out of my morning, I charged into the changing room throwing myself onto Caleb's chest.

"What's wrong?" he asked, wrapping his arms around me.

"Someone was watching me," I said, pointing to the empty space between the window and door. "Over there."

He hugged me to his new pearl button, cornflower blue western shirt and rubbed my back.

"That's not all that unusual, sweetheart," he said. "You're a beautiful woman."

"And aren't you smart to remember that?" I said with more bravado than I felt. The shirt fit very nicely, and for just a minute, I thought how much fun it would be to take it off. One yank and all those buttons would pop open. Then the thought of the stranger's hot stare blew away that idea, I burrowed my face into that comforting space between Caleb's chin and chest.

He pulled me back into his arms and squeezed.

"Tighter," I said.

He did, squeezing all the fear and doubt from my heart.

"I'm fine, fine," I said, pulling out of his embrace. "We should go. Dad is sure Uncle Ed missed a big vein of gold. There's a real mine on the property, you know."

We paid for his new clothes and left the store.

Buckling up in the Jeep, Caleb asked, "So how long have you been without electricity?"

"The property manager said he'd have it taken care of but ... "

"And when was that?"

"If you count the late afternoon we got here as one, the next two days for cleaning out the

house and mowing the weeds, then yesterday spent looking for Dad, and last but not least, pulling your ass out of the county jail last night, I'd say I've been too busy to give it much thought."

His next words held just a touch of sarcasm. "And did he also offer to sell the place for you?"

"It wouldn't be much of a push for me to sell, but since we're stuck here for a few more days, we still need electricity."

"Where's the power company—in Wishbone, or Sierra Vista?"

In his powder blue western shirt and brand new Wranglers, he could pass for a local, unless you looked down at his bare toes and wrapped feet peeking out of dirty plastic flip-flops.

"After lunch I'll look up the electric company in Sierra Vista."

He wiggled his toes in the sandals. "Boots too, if I can find a good pair."

## *Chapter Ten:*

After lunch, Dad took his Arizona prospector's guide into his bedroom and closed the door. I pleaded for a nap of my own, so Caleb borrowed the Jeep and went into town.

I yawned, but decided none of us had yet checked out the barn. Maybe there was a tractor or a bicycle in it. Not that either would do much good out here, but in a pinch something for extra transportation would be nice.

I walked outside and a light breeze cooled my warm skin. Drawing in a deep breath of clean, fresh air I wondered if this was how it used to be at my dad's ranch before the suburbs moved in on us and took with it the quiet *and* the peace.

With hands on my hips, I considered the big double doors, thick chain, and rusty padlock. I yanked on the lock, but it wouldn't budge. I leaned on the barn wall and peered between the old wood boards. There must be something good inside, otherwise why the heavy chain and lock? Hadn't I seen a rack of keys by the kitchen door? I backtracked to the house and rummaged through the lot.

House keys, a pump-house key, one for the shed, and a Master Lock key was the same as the lock on the barn. I was lifting it off the hook when my dad strolled into the kitchen.

"What're you looking for?" he asked.

I held up the key. "I think this is for the barn. I thought I'd take a look inside."

"That sounds interesting, I'll bring a can of oil for the lock."

Even after a squirt of oil, the lock wouldn't budge.

"Wrong key? Or maybe we don't have one. Now what?"

"We saw it off."

"Got a saw?"

My dad huffed out a laugh. "First time I've been without my own tools in fifty years. Makes me feel kinda naked."

"Thanks for that mental image, Dad. Got any other ideas?"

"I'll bet there are tools inside we could use for repairs and such. The latrine shovel might do the trick," he said, and turned for the house to get it.

While I waited for him to come back, I looked up at the eastern hills leading to the mountains behind us. All of it covered in a velvet of short, dry grass. The cottonwoods lining the dry creek bed were also turning gold. Though I'd read that Arizona was in a long drought, it was still pretty enough for a painting, which reminded me of the recent homicides—a murdered artist, and a local police chief. The detective hadn't been willing to share much about the cases, but they had to be related. Especially since someone went to the trouble to come back to the mine pit while my dad was in it, take his jacket and leave it at the art compound.

Still, we would be gone the minute we finished with our appointment with the homicide detectives. Tomorrow, at the latest.

Dad came back with a recently cleaned latrine shovel in his hand. "The boards may splinter and fly, so stand back," he said, sticking the shovel between the boards and cracking one off from the wall.

"I wonder what treasures await us?" I asked, glad to be able to find a diversion from our upcoming interviews with Homicide.

"A generator or tools would do it for me," he said, ripping off the second board.

We pushed through the opening and stepped inside. Spaces between the roof shingles acted like floodlights for the dust motes. Against one wall was a long workbench. Old, rusty tools and some cans of paint littered the bench, but a can of motor oil and an engine hoist hinted at a tractor or some kind of motorized vehicle hiding under one of the tarps.

Dad went to inspect a wooden trough. "Now, here's a good thing to have. It's a sluice box. Nowadays, they use rubber mats to catch the gold, but back then, they'd run water through the box and the heavier gold would land between these wood slats. You have to have access to water, but I see there's a motor to run the pump. Too bad the creek's dried up."

"When Caleb gets back, we'll go find Uncle Ed's mine."

I looked forward to anything that would keep me from the puzzle of the police chief and the dead art compound owner. I wandered between some empty crates, stopping at a heavy tarp covering a machine with wheels and propped up on wood blocks.

"I think I found your tractor, Dad."

"Too long, too low, and those wheels don't look right. Here, take a hold of the edge and we'll pull off this cover."

Together we pulled back the heavy tarp and draped it over the trunk of a small open vehicle. When the dust settled, there was just enough light to see that it was definitely not a tractor.

"It's a little open cockpit two-seater," I said, admiring the sleek shape. "And I think it used to be blue."

"This isn't a sports car, Lalla, it's a race car," my dad said, pointing to a dusty smudged number 6 on the side. He went to the bench and came back with an oily rag.

"It's been here all this time? Why didn't Great-Uncle Ed take it with him when he went back to Texas?"

He finished wiping away the dirt covering the white number against the sky blue paint, and plucked at his lower lip. "Don't know."

"No wonder the key didn't work. Something like this must be valuable, right?"

"Depends," he said working at the leather latches on the hood. "Let me open the hood and see if there's even a motor in it."

He raised the hood and released another dust storm, forcing us to back up.

In a hushed tone, I said, "I bet no one's touched this thing in fifty years."

He whistled. "That's an aluminum engine, and this here's an overhead cam with dual carbs. I've never seen one quite like it. I'll have to look it up on the Internet."

"Sure you will. As soon as we have electricity and phone service."

"Oh, yeah. Maybe there's a generator somewhere in here," he said, looking around. "At the very least, we could get the well pump going for water."

I snickered. "What happened to all that pioneering spirit?"

"I'd like to have running water," he said, wiping his oily hands with the grimy rag.

Running water, my ass. He was excited about his new find and wanted to know more. And to think, until this year I couldn't talk him into a cell phone, much less a computer. His lady friend cured him of his internet phobia when she showed him how it could compare prices and have purchases delivered without ever leaving the house. If there was one thing my dad hated, it was spending too much money and having to interact with salespeople to do it.

"But do you think it's valuable?" I asked.

"Knowing your great-uncle Ed, it is. He'd already amassed a fortune in oil, land and cattle by the time they bought this property."

"We should tell Aunt Mae it's still here. She might want it back."

My dad looked up and smiled. "Did you read the deed? It said, '*The land and all of its contents entailed.*' Why don't you scoot back to the house and get a flashlight, and let's see if we can get this baby running again."

I did as he asked, now excited about our find. Even if it turned out to be worthless, we'd have another vehicle to drive.

When I returned, he was leaning against the workbench, trying to read the print of a small book in the dim light. He muttered his thanks for the flashlight and went back to reading.

"Well?" I asked.

"The manual is in Italian, but I can pretty much figure out what's what. It's a Bugatti, whatever that is. The engine's intact, but I'll have to remove the carburetors. If it's all gummed up ... and I'll have to drain the oil. It will need fresh gas and a 6-volt battery, unless we want to use the hand crank. A golf cart battery would work. Where would I get one of those? Didn't we see a sign for a golf course nearby? We could ask there."

"When Caleb gets back," I said, laughing at my dad's enthusiasm.

"Sure, sure. In the meantime, let's get to work on the engine."

A half-hour later, I heard the Jeep.

"I guess I'd better go tell him what we're up to," I said. "Maybe we can buy a pair of cutters so we can make a more dignified entrance."

"Huh? Oh yeah," he said, pulling his head out of the engine compartment. "You do that. I'll be right here."

I squeezed through the break in the wall and skipped around to the driver's side of the Jeep, excited to share our news.

"We found an old Italian race car in the barn," I said, opening his door. "Dad is inside cleaning it up."

Caleb laughed. "A what?"

"A race car. Come on," I said, pulling his arm, "see for yourself."

Caleb was, to say the least, astounded. "How the hell did a race car get here?"

I laughed. "I don't know, but isn't this fun? We need to pick up some things to get it running."

"You kids go," Dad said. "I'm going to look for the tires."

"We'll fill up a gas can at the nearest gas station," Caleb said, reading the shopping list. "Buy the motor oil, and ask where to buy a 6-volt golf cart battery, right?"

I gave the sleek race car one last pat and turned to go with Caleb. "Did you have to arm wrestle the power company?"

"Good thing I did or you'd be still waiting on them," he said, starting the Jeep. "They never heard of your property manager, and they sure didn't have an order to come out *here* any time soon."

"That rat. If I do sell, I'll find another realtor."

"I also stopped by the sheriff's office. Homicide detectives will be out here today."

"Today?" I asked, my nerves jumping into my throat. "And then we can go home, after the interview with the homicide detectives, right?"

He let the engine idle for a minute. "It's more than likely that I will be released. You and your dad will be required to stay within the county until you're cleared or a suspect is arrested."

I looked out the window at the adobe house, the roof that still needed inspection, the rooms to

paint. I had been making pretty plans for us. But of course he would have to go. He still had a job in California. Who was I kidding? I would miss him, especially now that we'd made up. My voice couldn't seem to control itself when I asked him if he was leaving today or tomorrow.

"What—and leave you and your dad here to deal with a killer? I'm still on vacation, and I can take a leave of absence if I need to. Besides, I can help with the cleanup and painting. I'm staying."

"Oh, good," I said. In thanks, I reached up and squeezed the back of his warm neck. "I'm glad. You know, we could use your contacts to match suspects to the case and—"

"I have no jurisdiction here, sweetheart. For better or worse, the locals will handle this case." He paused, the muscles in his jaw working around his own frustration.

"That homicide detective, Ian Tom, doesn't look to be inept or lazy, but there's still a chance he might try to stick Noah with it."

"That's ridiculous," I said.

"I know it and you know it, so let's hope that your dad's interview with them will clear up the last of their questions."

My earlier happy mood dissipated. "Like what?"

"Like why he chose to go down that hole instead of calling 9-1-1 and how his jacket ended up at another crime scene."

Fear made my voice rise an octave. "I remind him to take his cell phone every day, but he forgets. As for his jacket, he offered the detective a perfectly honest explanation for that."

"Yes, and it makes sense to us, but I don't think the detective is counting your dad out of the equation just yet."

"Can't you do something?"

"Lalla, believe it or not, I'm itching to butt in where I'm not wanted, but I'm going to give them forty-eight hours to come up with a realistic suspect."

"And then what will you do?" I asked, holding my breath.

"Forty-eight hours, Lalla. You and I can do that, can't we?" There was doubt in his voice, and worry too; the grim lines between his eyebrows said so. Did he know something I didn't—like my dad's chances really didn't look so good?

I felt the lump in my throat form new tears. It was now final. We wouldn't be going home anytime soon. I crossed my arms and stared blindly out of the window feeling as if we'd been dropped into an old western where the rules leaned toward lynching convenient strangers.

## *Chapter Eleven:*

The good news was that Caleb had been able to light a fire under the telephone and electric company which meant the well worked and we now had water for the sinks and toilets when the detectives arrived.

They immediately separated us, putting me in the living room and my dad with another detective outside in the shade of the patio on one of the two folding chairs we'd found in a closet.

I added patio furniture to my growing list of items we needed to make this house a home and nervously watched the door.

While we waited, I leaned close to Caleb quietly going over the questions I'd been asked.

"Relax," he said. "It'll be over soon."

"I was fine until they sprang the news on me that the art compound property used to belong to a member of our family."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"They didn't tell you? Evidently, Aunt Mae used to own all of this," I waved my hand around the room. "One hundred and forty acres, including the art compound."

"That's interesting, but what's the connection now?"

"Like they need another reason to pin a murder or two on one of us?"

"What did you tell them?" He squeezed my shoulder to show me I was overreacting again.

"I told them the truth; that I didn't know she used to own it, but it wasn't all that big of a surprise, either. My great-aunt Mae and her husband were rich by anyone's standards and they bought whatever they fancied."

"No crime in that, sweetheart."

"Then he wanted to know if this was our first trip to Arizona, and when I told him it was, he still tried to nail down Dad's every footstep since he got here. He did that little mouth pursing thing, like he didn't believe a word of it. I hate it when cops do that."

"Interrogation techniques. Don't worry about it."

"He asked if he might've taken a vacation this summer," I said, rubbing my hands together as if to wipe away the suspicious deputy. "I told him summers are much too busy for a vacation, and he pounced on that with—'Your father's retired, isn't he?' He ought to live in my boots for a summer. No one has vacations where I work."

"What else?"

"I told him my father was retired but he still answered the phone and wrote up orders and such. I left out that he does so when he isn't squiring widows around town. I hope Dad remembers to tell them about his trip to Alaska last year. I suppose that will be used against me, too. After all, it was summer, right? What did they ask you?"

"I had my interview yesterday. They have copies of all the files from Modesto—the murdered pilot this year, the body last year, the two the year before that."

"Gee, when you say it like that, I do look like I might be a killer."

"Homicide is just doing its job. You answered all their direct questions truthfully, didn't you?" My heart rate picked up. "I forgot to tell the detective that Dad sold the business. You think

I'll be in trouble for that?"

"I wish you'd stop," he said, and went to the fridge for a couple of cold sodas.

I got off the couch but couldn't stop my unremitting pacing. What was taking so long? What else could they possibly want from him? Should I start looking for a lawyer? Better yet, should we start looking for suspects? That was a ridiculous notion. I didn't know anyone here, and the dour faces of the detectives indicated there would be no help coming from that quarter. I sniffed back a tear. The regulars at Roxanne's café, the farmers, chemical salesmen, and newspaper cronies, The Lalla Bains Posse of Proficient Gossips, were all in Modesto, California.

Caleb could do background checks, but he really couldn't ask or get answers, not without overstepping his position as an out-of-state lawman.

The French doors opened and the deputy ushered my dad inside. Dad saw me, squared his shoulders and attempted his most reassuring smile.

I wasn't fooled for a minute. After Homicide finally trooped out of our home, I turned to the men and said, "We have to do something."

My dad, looking old and defeated collapsed into a chair.

Caleb simply shrugged. "My hands are tied."

That feeling of panic was gathering way too much space in my head. I needed to slow down and think. Where would I go to find the kind of help we needed? The kind that required time and trust built up over years. Who could we depend on when we didn't know, much less trust, anyone?

## *Chapter Twelve:*

I spent a restless night going over and over hopeful ideas on how to get the kind of proof that would satisfy the Cochise County Sheriff's department and allow all of us to leave Arizona.

When my cell phone rang the next morning, I was already on the patio, coffee by my side, working on ideas for my non-existent investigation. Since we had no cell service, all I could do was glance at the name on the incoming call. Seeing who it was, I rushed to the home phone and called her back.

"Pearlie," I gushed. "Just the person I need."

"Howdy, Cuz. You tired of Arizona yet?"

"Home does have a nice ring to it about now."

"Too much quiet, huh? Glad to hear you're through moping, because it's time to get cracking on that office space."

"Not that again. Office space is a bit premature, when you don't even have a P.I. license, isn't it?" I asked, flopping onto a couch.

"We have to appear prosperous, don't we? And if we want to look official, it's location, location, location."

At my lack of comment, she asked, "You got somethin' better to do?"

No, I had nothing to do except prove my dad innocent of murder. And hadn't I spent a restless night wondering who I could call? Someone the police didn't already have on their list of suspects?

"Pearlie, how soon can you get to Arizona?"

"What're you talkin' about? I'm already at the airport."

"Gassed up and ready to come out for that visit, huh?"

"Sugah, I'm at the Sierra Vista Regional Airport. Put some pedal to the metal and get out here. We can talk about our new business over food, I'm starved."

I was still thinking I should tell her that it was a no-go on the P.I. business, but yesterday, seeing my dad looking like he'd been beaten with nightsticks I folded.

"Okay," I said. "We'll be there in about a half-hour."

My dad's gray mood immediately improved at the mention of his favorite cook. He was so happy; he shaved and put on a clean shirt.

Granted, he'd done well with our long time housekeeper's Mexican fare, but when family problems convinced her to move to Bakersfield, my dad thought he'd never get another decent home-cooked meal again. Then Pearlie and Great-Aunt Mae flew in for my wedding, and though Dad bristled at the idea of housing two more women for the time it would take to see me married, the minute he tasted Pearlie's cooking, he did a complete about-face.

"What's this about Pearlie being here in Arizona?" Caleb asked.

"She flew Aunt Mae home, turned around, and flew back to Sierra Vista. She's got some whacked idea we're going to start our own P.I. business."

"You have to have a license for that," said Caleb. "And last I heard, it's a six month course. You also have to be bonded and get a concealed weapons license."

"She has a way of ignoring those pesky little issues."

"Well, flirting won't count for diddly-squat with the California State License Board," he said.

"Don't worry. I have just the thing to sidetrack her from going back to California."

"Now, Lalla, let's not ...."

My nerves finally snapped and I whirled on him. "This was supposed to be a vacation for my dad too, Caleb, and you can see how that turned out, but we can't go home. I say hang the forty-eight hours. If you won't help, I'm going to start looking for suspects before they decide to arrest my father."

Caleb shook his head. I could tell he was thinking. If I let Pearlle in on this there would be no controlling the two of us. My thoughts exactly.

"Listen," I said. "I'd take ten annoying cousins over having my dad getting grilled like yesterday."

"You're right, of course," Caleb said. "Has he been taking his heart medication?"

"He brought it. I know because I checked his bag, but the altitude here is the problem. I'm still huffing and puffing when I walk, and it must be twice as hard on him. Let's go get Pearlle, bring her up to speed, and if Dad's health doesn't improve, I'll look for a heart doctor in town."

Dad came out of the bedroom tucking the clean shirt into his pants. He swiped up the keys to the Jeep and announced that he would drive. "You two can fill me in on the way to pick up Pearlle."

I was hopeful my cousin's arrival would help us. It would certainly improve my dad's mealtime enjoyment.

"So what's the verdict, Caleb?" I asked. "You talked to Homicide yesterday. Do they have any real leads to these murders?"

Caleb shook his head. "Other than your dad's jacket at the scene, and the fact that your great-aunt Mae once owned all one hundred and forty acres around here, they don't have anything."

"I told you so," my dad said.

"Detective Tom said he'd keep us updated," Caleb said.

My dad snorted. "Then we just sit and wait until they find a suspect?"

"We'll see about that," I said.

"Where're we going to put her?" Dad asked.

"Pearlle? If she doesn't want the couch, we'll get her a hotel room at the Copper Queen," I said.

My dad hesitated. "Think we should tell her about the two murders?"

I laughed. "Are you kidding? Why do you think I'm picking her up? She's going to help us find a killer."

"That's a great idea, Lalla," Dad said. "Isn't it a great idea, Caleb? And she's a really good cook too."

Caleb shook his head again. "I don't know, Lalla, your cousin is notoriously reckless."

I secretly smiled. Pearlle's antics in the last murder case were distracting him from my own tendency to circumvent the rules. Still, I didn't want him to count her out, and we needed her.

"She helped us catch that contract killer from Vegas, didn't she?" I asked.

Caleb shrugged, "She can always use that bowling ball she keeps in the plane to bring this one down."

### *Chapter Thirteen:*

The waiting lounge at the Sierra Vista Airport was empty except for Cousin Pearlie and a uniformed pilot. Pearlie was perched on top of a metal desk, her short skirt hiked up to reveal sleek round thighs and dimpled knees. She was giggling at something the pilot said, and his grin said Pearlie was an unexpected and pleasant diversion for a long wait.

She looked up, saw us, and pushed off the desk. Pulling her skirt down, she winked at her latest conquest then turned her bright blue eyes on us.

"Cousin Lalla, Uncle Noah!" She hugged each of us in turn, then squinted her baby-blues at Caleb. "And that no-account skunk who left my cousin at the altar."

"Pearlie," I whispered, "we'll talk about it in the car."

"Fine by me," she said, lifting her chin. "Then he can carry my bags."

Caleb glanced at the four suitcases, handed the lightest to my dad, and followed us to the parking lot.

Settled in the backseat, I asked about her pilot friend.

"He flies the big shots with some international mining company. After you show me around Nana's old place, we'll leave for California, 'cause I have a date with him in San Francisco tomorrow night."

"We'll talk about that. I think after you hear what's happened you might want to postpone that date."

I showed Pearlie the house and the barn where a sleek little race car had been sequestered for fifty years. She gasped at the antique race car.

"Dad's now fixated on restoring it," I said.

Pearlie laughed. "I heard about this old thang. Granny said he loved it like a baby and it went everywhere they did. Odd, that it's still here."

"We thought so too."

"It's still Granny's though, isn't it?"

I shrugged. "She can have it back. I don't need it."

Pearlie's eyes lit. "I like it," she said. "Maybe she'll let me have it."

Maybe my great-aunt Mae hadn't meant to leave her husband's Bugatti to me. I would have to ask her, but right now, I had to bring Pearlie's attention to the events of the last few days: my dad's disappearance down an abandoned mine pit, the two murders, and lastly how I really needed her to be here to help me find suspects.

"So," I asked Pearlie, "what do you think?"

She laughed and wiped her dusty hands off onto her pants. "Didn't I tell you to wait until I got back to get into trouble again?"

"Trust me on this," I said. "This was not as much fun as you might think. Someone murdered two people; a young woman who owned the property behind us and Wishbone's police chief."

"Well then, time's-a-wastin'. What's next?"

"Let's go into the house and talk to the men."

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"The only problem might be how you introduce yourself," Caleb said.

"How's that?" Pearlie asked. "Oh, you mean me being a Bains and all. This family does tend to become suspects in murder cases, don't we?"

She moved her plate aside, opened her purse and fanned out four business cards for us to choose from.

I picked up two. One said Georgia Smith, Private Investigator and a cell number. The next one said Pearl Bains and a listing for an internet floral company. She handed me a third for my inspection. It said, Crime Scene Cleaners with the same cell phone number.

She put a pink-tipped nail on each card and explained. "All the numbers are the same, flowers are a good opener for when you want to talk to the family of the deceased, and a crime scene cleaning goes hand in hand with murder, don't it?"

"What about the fake names?" Caleb asked.

She shrugged. "I can say I accidently picked up my business partner's card. It's just a card. I've been studying up for my P.I. license and learning all sorts of great ways to get suspects to talk."

"About that," Caleb said. "You can't represent yourself as a private investigator until you're licensed."

"Oh please," Pearlie responded. "Anyone can call themselves an investigator and I ain't so dumb that I'd wave around a fake license."

She eyed me when she said it. The intent was to remind us that she knew all about the fake police badge I used to get information out of witnesses. I'd retired the badge, but Pearlie was on a roll.

"Besides," she said, "I'm a sight better looking than you are, Caleb Stone. You got cop-walk, whereas I'm just a cute lil' blond from Texas, new in town, looking for a job or a place to rent or a haircut," she said, primping her blonde locks. "We'll start at the local beauty parlor. They always have the best gossip. Besides, Lalla and I need our roots done, don't we, Cuz?"

Caleb's eyes narrowed in warning. "You and Lalla will have to stay out of the way of the sheriff's department."

Pearlie patted the outside zipper on her purse. "Sure we will. An' I got my Lady Smith, don't I? I checked and I can carry it on my hip if I want. I'm cautious, so there's no need to worry, now is there?"

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That night, Caleb and I lay snuggled together under the sleeping bag, the bedroom window open to the cool night air.

An owl hooted, then a chorus of coyotes yipped and sang, and a dog barked.

"That was awfully close," I murmured, sleepily.

"Doors are locked, sweetheart," Caleb said, snuggling up to my bottom, "and the window's too high for him to crawl in and join us."

I reached behind me to smack his naked thigh. "You're making fun of me again."

Another couple of barks brought my eyes wide open.

"Why is he barking?" I said.

"Because he can," Caleb whispered, tickling my ear.

"Well he should go home before some critter gets him," I said pulling the covers up over us. Caleb's hand drifted possessively to my hip. "I'll protect you, little lady."

That got a chuckle out of me. I was little for about the first five years of my life, after that, I didn't stop growing until I'd surpassed every boy in my class except Caleb. I took it for granted that his growth spurt would keep up with my own. His six-foot-one-inch lanky frame was exactly three inches taller than my five-foot-ten. A short stint at modeling in New York, two bad marriages, and one ugly divorce for him, and we were together at last. I sighed happily, closed my eyes and slept.

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In the morning, I took my coffee to the patio and promptly swore when I stubbed my toe on a plastic bucket full of water.

"Who left this stupid bucket out here?" I yelled to no one in particular.

My dad poked his head out of the door to see what all the commotion was about. "What's your problem? Oh, the water. That's for the dog."

"What dog?"

"Stray, I guess. Saw him when we first got here. I started leaving him water, now I put out leftovers, and it's working."

"What's working?"

"Got to hand it to him, he figured out right away that if I whistled, his dinner was here."

"What about other animals? If you leave out food at night, we'll have coyotes and other critters in our back yard."

"I know that. I usually bring it in before bed. He knows if he doesn't come when I whistle, he has to wait until the next day."

"But he could be a neighbor's dog."

"I doubt it. I called our rescue maven and neighbor, Karen. She said most folks keep their dogs fenced or in the house at night."

"Coyotes?"

"Mountain lions, rattlers and drug runners are more trouble for dogs than coyotes."

"Drug runners—oh, they would shoot them to stop the barking, wouldn't they? Are there many mountain lions around?"

"Karen says this used to be a regular animal migration corridor. The Mexican gray wolves wander in every once in a while, even the elusive jaguar has been spotted here."

"Really? I thought they were only in Central and South America."

"She has photos. Offered to show me next time I come by."

"But what if your *dog* is a wolf?"

He shrugged. "Nah. Looks more like an Australian cattle dog. Short coat with standup ears the size of Kansas. Or maybe that's because he's so skinny."

I cut my eyes at him. "What if he's got rabies?"

"I'm not going to corner him to find out," he said. "But if he doesn't try to bite me, I'm going to see about getting him to the vet."

He wiped up the water stains on the patio and dragged the pail over to the faucet to refill it.

"It's going to be hot today, so I'm leaving his bucket full, but I'll move it out of the way. You see him, don't scare him, okay? He's spooked enough as it is."

I could add wolves and jaguars to my growing list of dangerous animals. No wonder that dog was nervous.

I went inside, topped off my coffee and joined Caleb at the breakfast table. "You have a shower yet?"

"I will as soon as your cousin vacates the one and only bathroom."

"I'm out," Pearlie said, wrapping a towel around her wet hair. "And because I'm considerate of others, I'm not even going to use the hairdryer. Now how about I make y'all some biscuits and eggs?"

I privately smiled. She was lining her virtual pockets with good deeds for when she needed the men to be amenable to her own requests.

Sure enough, when Pearlie and I announced that we were taking the Jeep to go to the store, only Caleb took notice.

"Which one?" he asked. "In case I need to call you?"

Knowing he just wanted to keep tabs on us, I said, "I have my cell. You can call me if you need anything from town."

Grabbing my purse, I picked up the Jeep keys before my dad could object.

I shouldn't have worried. Dad was already on his way to the barn where he'd spend the day on his new pet project, getting the race car in running order.

I kissed Caleb and hurried after Pearlie before he could think of any more questions.

Pearlie was waiting by the passenger side. "I suppose I'll need a boost."

I reached below the passenger seat and attached a strip of nylon with a stirrup on one end and a hook on the other to the ledge of the passenger door.

Pearlie stuck her foot into the stirrup and hopped into the seat. "What's the point of having to use a stirrup if you don't have a saddle to go with it?"

Pearlie simply adored a good ol' fashioned Texas roundup, but so as not to destroy the illusion that she was roughing it, she also had someone pulling her twenty foot trailer at a discreet distance.

"Dad says the height is to avoid getting stuck when driving over rocks," I said.

She shook her head. "I think I'll stick to driving on paved roads. Let's go into Wishbone."

"What for?" I asked.

"So's we can get the lay of the land. Size up suspects. That sort of thing."

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Pearlie and I dawdled at interesting items in the downtown gallery windows. I pointed out pottery, paintings both western and modern, glass art, and bronze sculptures. One bronze in particular drew my attention. It was a horse pawing the air, nostrils flared in defiance of a lasso just out of the scene.

I drew Pearlie's attention to the window. "I've seen this artist's work before."

Pearlie murmured a comment, but was busy admiring a hand-blown glass vase.

I insisted she look at the horse. "This is exactly like one a guy was working on at the art compound."

Pearlie nodded. "That's the place where the owner was murdered, right?"

"Yes. Since Deputy Dumb-Ass ordered us to stay in the patrol car while he went off to secure the murder scene, there was nothing to do but look around. That's when I noticed a man in the barn working on a huge bronze horse just like this one."

"And it's the same artist?"

"I'm sure of it," I said. "I thought it was odd that he wasn't hanging around waiting to talk to the deputies, but maybe the police already interviewed him."

"Or maybe he had a deadline on the sculpture."

"Or maybe he's a killer."

"Puts a whole new twist on the word *deadline*, don't it? See? I knew coming into Wishbone was a good idea. Let's start at the art compound," Pearlie said. "I read the front page news about the owner's murder at the airport. There were no pictures of her in the paper, but the article said she was only in her twenties and already a recluse. Now why would a young girl like that want to live like a hermit?"

"I don't know yet, but I can't help but think there was only one killer for both of these murders."

"Where's the artist's place?"

"We would have to go back home."

"Why?"

"Because, as far as I know, the only way there is the road to Aunt Mae's place."

"I guess it's giddy-up time then."

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Since top speed beyond Great-Aunt Mae's property was barely twenty-five, I allowed my mind to wander back to when Mad-Dog took it upon himself to track down a contract hit man and got knifed for his heroics.

It looked very heroic to Pearlie, but knowing Mad-Dog as I did, I was sure it had more to do with why his ex-wife, who still had a hefty life insurance policy on him, was keeping company with a contract killer.

"How're Nancy and Marshal Balthrop doing?" I asked.

"They're just a regular pair of love puppies."

Pearlie might've sounded a tad jealous but neither of us could fault this couple's happiness. Jim had given up his hard won career in the U.S. Marshal's office to be with the woman he loved, just as Nancy had given up a career to marry a man she didn't love, only to be accused of his murder, then be vindicated when the killer was caught.

"Sorry it didn't work out with Mad-Dog," I said, "but I did warn you, you know."

Pearlie flicked me a sideways glance to see if maybe I was gloating.

"It wasn't anything we couldn't fix with enough time and effort, but I'd rather be my own boss as a P.I. than someone's housewife."

"You don't miss him?"

She swiped her tongue around her front teeth as if checking for a lost sweet. "Not yet I don't. We can always pick up where we left off, should I change my mind."

We topped the hill to the art compound and turned left onto the private road, Pearlie gawked at the multiple No Trespassing signs.

"Think it's to keep Jehovah's Witnesses out?"

"This far out? I doubt it. But I forgot to tell you," I said. "It appears that Great-Aunt Mae used to own this property."

"What? You mean my granny used to own all this?" she asked, waving at the pretty tree-lined property.

"That's what the homicide detective said."

She sat up a little straighter, a slight smile on her lips. "I wonder why she sold this place and kept that ol' dumpy place you're in?"

"What difference does it make?" I tried to shrug off the insult, but it still galled.

"Not one little bit," she said, smiling. "By the way, have you had a chance to see the gold mine yet?"

"Not yet. We got as far as the barn and the race car."

The big two story white house stood in stark relief behind a line of trimmed privets, their dark leaves glistening from a recent watering.

"Someone's taking care of the place." Pearlie said, rolling down her window. "Hey. I've seen this house before. Yeah, now I remember. Nana has a picture of it on her mantel. Of course, it was before the windmill and cabins, but it's the same house. I wonder why she sold it?"

"Don't know," I said, putting on the brake and opening my door. "Shall we knock on the door and see?"

We took the porch steps and Pearlie took out her cards, running a finger over the raised letters as if memorizing her lines by braille.

## *Chapter Fourteen:*

The door was opened by a middle-aged man, his crisply pressed and custom fitted white shirt and dress pants at odds with his rumpled face, and the dishtowel over his shoulder. Sharp gray eyes momentarily landed on me then flitted to Pearlie. Amusement tugged at his mouth and just as quickly disappeared.

"You passed a few *No Trespassing* signs on your way here," he said, running a hand through salt and pepper hair that used to be deadly black.

"Seven. I counted 'em." Pearlie said, sticking out her hand. "We're here to help you find your daughter's killer."

How on earth did she come to the conclusion that this was the dead girl's father? And what happened to the assortment of props she had ready to hand out? I held my breath, waiting for him to shut the door on our faces.

But something seemed to shift behind those sharp, gray eyes, and instead of slamming the door, he silently waved us inside.

Pearlie winked at me as if to say, 'And that's how it's done,' and sashayed into the foyer.

The shiny wood floors smelled of a recent waxing, and the sunny interior matched what I expected from the outside: an attractive two-story country house with a staircase leading to a second floor. The hall led to an easterly facing kitchen where a window drew sunlight into the room.

As if remembering his manners, the man pointed us to a sitting room and a couple of matching club chairs.

Instead of taking a seat, he remained where he was, legs spread, arms crossed. He might've been amused by his morning visitors, but he was the one calling the shots. His house, his rules, and he would be asking the questions.

"Why do you think you can find my daughter's killer?"

"Does the name Eula Mae Bains mean anything to you?"

"No," he said, examining his neatly pared fingernails. "And who are you?"

Pearlie introduced herself as a private investigator and added, "Lalla's father was the one who discovered the dead police chief."

Annoyance flashed across his eyes. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry," Pearlie said, her voice oozing sympathy. "I thought Homicide would've told you by now."

"The bastards haven't told me a damn thing," he said, clenching and unclenching angry hands. "And what would this dead police chief have to do with my daughter's murder?"

I interrupted her. "My father found his body in a mine pit about a mile west of here."

"Maybe it's just a coincidence," Pearlie said. "And maybe it doesn't have anything to do with your daughter, but for lack of any other suspects, the police seem to like her dad for both murders."

He rubbed a hand across his jaw, staring at me. "Your father—is he a criminal?"

I popped out of my chair. "Of course not! He's a retired business man and a respected member

of our community, at least he is in California, and we just got here a few days ago."

"Let me explain," Pearlie said. "Your property and Lalla's were once connected and owned by my grandmother, Eula Mae Bains."

"That doesn't mean a thing to me," he said, his voice stretched tight with impatience. "Thanks for coming by to tell me about the dead police chief, but I'll be hiring a private investigator."

"Wait," Pearlie said. "With, or without your help, we're going to find this killer."

The man took in Pearlie's curvy figure and snickered. "And why would I hire a couple of fluff-bunnies?"

I wasn't sure if I was flattered or insulted. No one's ever used the word *fluff-bunny* and Lalla Bains in the same sentence, but just in case, I added a smile. "I'll tell you why—we're smart, tenacious, and-and she has her P.I. license."

Pearlie didn't bat an eye at my bold lie, offering to root around in her purse for the non-existent license. "Rats. It's in my suitcase. But I'm staying until we come up with a better suspect than her dad."

When he didn't say anything, she added, "Give us three days."

He folded his arms over his chest. "Three days? How do you propose to find a killer in three days?"

"I didn't say we'd find a killer," she said. "But we can come up with suspects for you. People like you underestimate us—you did, and that works to our advantage. Who would suspect a couple of *fluff-bunnies* are really investigators, right? And suspects and witnesses always withhold at least one bit of information from the police, either out of fear of incriminating themselves, or because the news might be embarrassin'."

He tilted back his head, attempting to look down his nose at me. "Is that so?"

Since I'm pushing six feet tall, I was looking him straight in the eye. "Yes. You can check with Modesto's police chief, he knows us."

That is if he didn't have me shipped back to California in a straightjacket. What were we thinking, passing ourselves off as licensed investigators? Caleb would have a fit.

His face grew dark with anger. "I want my daughter's killer brought to justice. But what's to say the police here will be able to do the job? I want answers. I want suspects and I want them yesterday. And I don't care how high you have to reach into this little shit-hole, I want names. If you can do that, you're hired."

"Wait a minute," Pearlie said putting up a hand. "We'll report what we find to you, but if we come up with a viable suspect, we have to notify the homicide detective, too."

He rolled his head around on his bulky shoulders like a fighter about to go into the ring.

I put a warning hand on Pearlie.

Never mind the neatly barbered hair, the manicured nails, or the tightly pressed slacks, this was not someone Pearlie could control, and all that repressed anger could just as easily be directed at us.

Then a switch seemed to flip, and all that pent up anger subsided.

"I'm sorry," he said, lowering his eyes. "You wouldn't be professional if you didn't take the evidence to Homicide."

I let out the breath I'd been holding, but he wasn't finished.

"If we're going to work together, we should make a plan. You know, before we take anything to the police. They have a way of taking over evidence that never sees the light of day. If we can agree on that, we have a deal." He stuck out his hand. "Do we have a deal?"

Pearlie rolled her lips over her teeth in a familiar gesture. It was what she did when she was

about to argue, but instead she took his hand in hers and shook it.

His behavior was a stunning, and impressive about-face to his earlier attitude. But all Pearlle could hear was the word, *hired*.

I almost smiled. There was no doubt in my mind who was manipulating whom. I didn't know how Pearlle would take the news that she might not be the one in charge here. This was a man who was used to giving the orders and expecting them to be followed, not the other way round.

"By the way," he said, "I haven't introduced myself. I'm Mac Coker."

"Well, Mr. Coker—" Pearlle said.

"Call me Mac. So what's next?"

"Mac, then. I think we should have a look at your daughter's bedroom."

A spot above Mac's left eyebrow twitched. "The detectives have been through it already, and the room is taped off as a crime scene. I-I haven't been up there since ...."

At the naked grief on his face, my suspicious nature took a back seat.

"You don't need to accompany us, Mac. We can do this," I said.

"Good," he said thickly, "I'll be in the kitchen."

Pearlle's face was flushed with excitement, and the minute he was out of earshot, she squeaked a quick laugh. "We did it! We just got our first real job!"

"I don't know Pearlle," I said. "He as good as said he wants first crack at the killer."

"He's a grieving father, what do you expect?"

"You aren't serious are you—about reporting to him first? What about Caleb?"

"Don't be a worrywart," she said, climbing the stairs. "When we have an airtight case against a real suspect, everyone will get what they want."

"And you," I added, "the licensed P.I., forgot to ask for a retainer."

"Well then," she said, at the slip, "we'll just have to crack this case before the cops, won't we?"

## ***Chapter Fifteen:***

Crime scene tape crisscrossed the closed door to Bethany's room, barring any curiosity seekers.

Pearlie hesitated. "Darn it, my P.I. video lessons were very clear on this—'*No contaminating the crime scene.*'"

"Uh-huh," I said, turning the knob, and with a slight shove, the door swung open and I stepped over the yellow tape and into the room.

Pearlie giggled and followed me inside.

The bedroom was much like the one I'd been raised in, high ceilings and wood-sash windows in thick painted frames. The lace curtains were closed, but I noticed the windows had blackout roller shades at the top and decorative brackets held back lined drapery. The drapes and roller shades could be a defense against summer heat, or for privacy, or against migraines. I ought to know; I still got them every so often and a darkened room helps. I would ask Mac.

I pulled back the lace curtains and looked out. There was nothing to see but more mountains and the trace of a dusty track winding away from the property.

The room faced east gathering sunshine like cups of gold spilling across the oak floors and onto an empty queen sized bed. The bed had a brass headboard, but someone, probably the forensic team, had stripped it of the linens.

To the left of the bed was a closet, to the right a small, white tiled bathroom. On a wall across from the bed was a flat screen TV. Below it was a bookcase full of romance and travel books. Books could always give a girl an exotic place to go, even if only from her room. There were pictures in stand-up frames and powder from the homicide team looking for the finger, thumb, or even palm print that might lead them to a killer. I leaned in and inspected the photos. A younger version of her father had his arm around a woman. Bethany's mother? I noticed a framed picture of three laughing young women. Was one of them Mac's daughter?

Pearlie reached into her purse and pulled out two pairs of purple gloves. "Non-latex in case you're allergic. A good P.I. always carries them to a crime scene along with evidence bags and paper envelopes. Put 'em on."

"Which one do you think is Bethany?" I asked, pointing to the photo.

"Darn it," Pearlie said, and licking her pencil, wrote in her notebook. "That's the second thing a good P.I. does—ask a family member for a picture of the deceased."

"We'll ask her dad when we finish here," I said, giving her a reassuring pat. Pearlie shook off my hand. She had her first job and, licensed or not, she desperately wanted this one to go right.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she said, and pulled out a thin digital camera. "I have to take photos, in case we miss something."

"I suppose you have handcuffs in that purse too?" I asked.

"P.I.'s don't use handcuffs anymore," she said, snapping pictures of the room. "The pros use zip ties." She put the camera away. "Now, where to start?"

I stood where I was, feeling suddenly overwhelmed with possibilities. "You know something?"

"Make it snappy, we have work to do."

"It's just," I gulped down my sudden urge to cry with happiness, "this is the first time someone's actually given me permission to snoop."

She laughed. "Liberating, ain't it? I'll take the bathroom, you do the closet."

The closet had tight red come-get-me dresses next to plaid lumberjack shirts. Black thigh-high patent leather boots cozied up to a pair of lace-up hiking boots. Gauzy dresses, short skirts, padded vests, down jackets, lace blouses and jeans—everything cleaned and pressed. Tidy. Odd.

I tipped open the top of an empty wicker clothes basket. "Do you think Homicide would take her dirty laundry?"

She came out of the bathroom writing in her notebook. "There's nothing in her medicine cabinet, either."

"She could've been very healthy."

"Don't be silly. No self-respecting female goes without makeup, and there wasn't even a tube of lipstick. No boxes of tampons or pads, either. What did you find?"

"Well, for a reclusive artist she sure had eclectic tastes in clothes."

Pearlie tilted her head. "Can you be a bit more specific?"

I pointed to the closet. "Look for yourself." And while she looked I added my observations. "Who wears thigh-high, patent leather boots in Wishbone, Arizona?"

"Halloween," she said, her voice muffled by the clothes.

"Then where's the rest of the getup?" I asked.

"Party clothes, then," she said, backing out of the closet.

"And again, I ask—in Wishbone?"

"How should I know?" Pearlie said, wiping her hands on her jeans. She was annoyed to come up without an answer.

But shaking off the self-pity she flipped open her notebook. "Okay. My last lesson plan said to look around the room and try to guess what could be missing—that is, besides whatever goes with a pair of dominatrix boots."

I pivoted on my heels, looking at the room as if it were mine. Though I envied her private bathroom, I had the books, TV, a CD player, and ....

"Where's her computer?" I asked.

"Right. Every girl has one, certainly a laptop. Homicide probably took it, but I'll note it for later."

She squeaked and ran to the CD player, turned it on and ejected a disk.

Grinning widely, she stuck a gloved fore-finger in the hole. "She likes Robin Thicke? Me too. I just love *Blurred Lines*."

"That might be evidence."

"I sure hope so," she said. "But since they didn't think to take it, we'll just hang onto it for now."

She opened her purse, removed a baggie, dropped the CD in, and zipped it closed.

I snapped my fingers. "If the laptop went into evidence, Mac Coker would've signed off on a list of items removed from the house. If he can get us a copy, we'll know for sure if Homicide has it."

"Good idea. We're done here," she said, stuffing her notebook into her purse.

We found Mac Coker in the kitchen, an elderly onion in his dish-gloved hands. Seeing us, he put the onion in the sink and removed the dish gloves. "Did you find anything?"

"It's what we didn't find that has us puzzled."

"Yes?" he said, turning on the water to wash his hands.

"Did the detectives have you sign for items they removed?"

"I suppose so. Is it important?"

"We'll know when we see it," Pearlle said, taking out her notes. "They would've left you a copy."

"It's around somewhere. Do you want it now?"

At the stricken look on his face, Pearlle's position on the evidence list softened.

"Maybe later," she said. "We noticed there were no meds in her bathroom. Did she take any prescription medication?"

"Why do you ask?" he said, looking from Pearlle to me.

"I noticed the blackout shades. They help with migraines, if she had them."

"Yes. She had migraines. She would've had oxycodone and Imitrex in her medicine cabinet, but come to think of it, I can't remember the last time she mentioned having a headache."

"Some people outgrow them," I said.

"Did Bethany have a boyfriend, either here or in Chicago?" Pearlle asked.

"My daughter didn't date."

"Never?" I asked.

He leaned against the sink, crossing his arms over his chest. His defensive posture was back.

"Bethany's health is, was, delicate. She required privacy in order to work, and she had migraines. I did everything I could to make sure that she had what she needed without having to leave the property. You saw the *No Trespassing signs*. No one came here except the UPS truck and grocery deliveries."

Her life sounded very solitary and I had to wonder why she would cut herself off from the world. "About the other artists—how many are living here?"

"Only two. Jason Stark and Reina Schmidt. I've just met them, but I know because I do her books."

"There's a picture of some girls in her room," I said. "Was one of them Bethany?"

"Her cousins. They live in Chicago." He looked down at his hands, as if examining them for guilt. "I don't know why she chose to frame that picture."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd e-mail me their phone numbers."

"Don't bother," he said. "They never expressed any interest in her, living or dead."

Another oddity to ponder. Then why keep a picture of distant cousins with whom she had no contact?

"Then do you have a picture of Bethany we could borrow?" I asked.

Mac sighed. "I have one." He reached into his back pocket and pulled a photo out of his wallet, handing it to Pearlle.

Pearlle held it so I could see. The photo was ragged and pale with age. A young girl, her head tilted at a mischievous angle for the camera, smiling, her chin length hair whipping around her face as if she'd been caught dancing. She must've been about fourteen and she was graceful in a way that made you think she would grow into a lovely young woman. Yet there was something wrong with the angle of the photo. Or was it the camera? No. It was something wrong with the proportion of her face. Yes, that was it. Pearlle and I looked up to see the pain of our discovery reflected in Mac's face.

"She was born with a bifurcated skull. It's a rare birth defect," he said. "There's no surgery, no therapy, no fix. She's—she was, except for the birth defect, very normal. Her artistic abilities run in the family, though it missed me by a mile. I gave her the best private tutors and later, private

art classes. I took her to museums and art shows, but the staring and whispers became too much, and after a while she stopped going. Then she stopped painting. That's when I decided to send her out here to be with her granddad. My father was a very private person too, so it suited them both. He left her the property in his will."

A sympathetic touch would not be welcome, so I kept my hands to myself. I asked, "Have you begun the arrangements for the funeral yet?"

"I can't—not until the medical examiner releases her body. An *autopsy*," he said, spitting out the insulting word. "I'm going to see if I can get permission to bury her here in the plot with her granddad."

"We'll see what we can do about the medical examiner for you, Mac," Pearlie said.

"Thank you. I-I would appreciate the help. I still have to contact the rest of our family. I don't know how I will tell her mother."

Pearlie stiffened at his comment. I knew what she was thinking. What kind of man wouldn't immediately call the mother?

"Her mother hasn't been well," he said, lifting his pugnacious chin as if daring us to criticize him. "She lives in a full time care facility."

With his explanation, Pearlie's temperature dropped, and she took out her smart phone, snapped a copy of Bethany's photo, and returned the original to Mac. "If you don't mind, we'd like to talk to the residents before we leave."

"I don't have a problem, as long as you keep our agreement. You'll report to me what you find, right?"

He ushered us to the door, drawing it open with a flourish and whispering it closed the minute we crossed the threshold.

I followed her down the wide porch steps. Catching up with her, I pulled on her sleeve. "Wait up. We forgot to get a copy of the items Homicide took from the house."

"We will, but rule number two of my P.I. lesson is to establish trust with the client. We had our ice breaker. We'll be back later for a quid pro quo. That is, unless that laptop appears to be in the hands of one of the residents."

"The detectives couldn't have missed it."

"It may not be on that list. Her killer could've taken it."

She squinted in the changing light, looking across the hard packed dirt yard toward the cabins. Even though they were shaded by the stand of poplars, the sun had moved so that the light on the windows was reflected back into our faces. There was no way to tell if someone was at home or not.

"They missed the CD in the player didn't they? They could've forgotten to ask about the laptop."

"Or not," I grumbled.

Pearlie nodded at a bright light coming from the barn. "Someone's working. Let's go introduce ourselves."

Pearlie's stride radiated a confidence I couldn't quite match. I was feeling guilty about removing evidence from a crime scene. Caleb, if he knew, would feel obligated to turn it in. But if it turned out to be nothing—well, best not to tell him just yet.

## *Chapter Sixteen:*

Skylights had been added to let more daylight into the barn converted studio. A man in a T-shirt, overalls, and long leather welder gloves and helmet, was welding half a bronze horse to a tall ornate gate.

I nudged Pearlie. "I knew it. It's the same as the one in the gallery."

We stepped into his line of sight just when he tipped up the helmet to examine his work.

Dropping his welder's torch he cursed and yanked off his helmet. He picked up the torch and snapped off the blue flame. "Jesus! Who the hell let you two in?"

"The barn doors were open," Pearlie said, ignoring his overheated demeanor. "Wow. This is really beautiful."

"Bethany's dad sent us," I said, and nudged Pearlie. "A card?"

He ran a broad, calloused hand through wavy hair the color of sandstone. His turned down mouth reinforced my first impression; handsome was not happy with the two blonds in his way, and he was impatient to get back to work.

"You're one of the resident artists here, aren't you?" I asked, while Pearlie took out a business card.

"What does it look like to you?" he said, pulling off the gloves.

I could see the resemblance between artist and his work. Both were young, muscular, and dangerous.

Pearlie's hand with the card fluttered to her breast, a telltale sign she'd completely forgotten our mission.

I lifted the card from her nerveless fingers, glanced at it to be sure it was one of her P.I. cards and handed it to him.

"Okay. I get it. You're private investigators. What do you want to know?" he asked, glancing at his watch.

Pearlie flicked him a coy glance from under her lashes, "Your name would be a good start."

I mentally groaned.

Handsome rolled his eyes and switched his attention to me. "Jason Stark. Next question?"

"How long have you lived here?" I asked.

"Long before Bethany took over."

His answer seemed defensive. My antenna went up. "You didn't like her?"

"She's—she was okay. I don't know what's going to happen to the place now that she's gone. I don't suppose her father told you his plans for it."

"Did she raise the rent when she inherited it from her grandfather?" I asked.

"Lady, a few bucks more isn't the issue. My work sells well and since places like this are almost impossible to find, I could work with the devil himself if it meant keeping my workshop."

"And you aren't concerned that a killer might still be in the vicinity?" I asked.

His dark brows went up a notch. He pointed to a loaded shotgun leaning against the bench. "That's my usual welcome for strangers. You're just lucky I wasn't paying attention."

"Yes, we noticed the *No Trespassing* signs," I said, "But that was for Bethany's privacy,

right?"

"Those signs went up because I put 'em up. Her granddad used to feed the immigrants, then traffic changed, and now it's cartel bastards, mules and armed guards so I keep a gun handy."

"But you want to know where I was when she was killed, don't you? I was right here, welding." He shook the leonine head. "With my welding helmet and the torch on, I wouldn't have heard a damn thing."

He swiped at his nose and looked away, but not before I saw a glint of tears in his brown eyes.

"You liked her," I said, pleased that he wasn't entirely a heartless bastard.

"I said she was okay, didn't I? Now, if you don't mind, I have a commission to finish."

I would have liked to ask more questions, but Pearlie looked about ready to start licking the sweat off his patrician forehead so I pushed her out of the barn.

Outside, Pearlie fanned her overheated cheeks. "Warm in there, wasn't it?"

"It would be great if you could stay on track long enough for us to get a few questions answered."

"I was doin' fine until you butted in."

It was my turn to do an eye-roll.

"Oh come on," she huffed. "You have to admit, Jason Stark is a fine specimen of manhood. The untamed, wild sort, ain't he?"

"Get out your notebook," I said, pulling her away from the barn and the smell of the torch burning into metal.

She did, but her mind was still with handsome Jason Stark.

"Snap out of it, will you?" I said, stabbing a finger at the forgotten notebook. "Write down his name, Jason Stark, long-time resident artist, he knew her grandfather. He had mixed feelings about Bethany. The tough act didn't go with the tears I saw in his eyes. Oh, and he said that he put up the No Trespassing signs."

"Not by Bethany's dad and not for her privacy. I wonder who's lying?"

"We need more on this guy," I said, stabbing a finger on her notebook page. His finances, girlfriends, or if maybe he's gay."

"Aw, now that was just mean," Pearlie said.

"Good. Just remember, he wouldn't be the first man to go all blubbery after killing a woman. Maybe he thought he should've inherited the place instead of Bethany."

Pearlie snorted. "Slim, very slim."

I was pretty sure she was alluding to Jason's slim hips.

"Isn't there something in your P.I. manual that says not to discount any possible suspect?" I asked.

She ignored me and pointed toward the cabins. "Hey, look. There's a car next to one of the cabins. Let's go talk to them."

The car was a white truck and the paint on the hood was peeling. Karen must be right about cars in Arizona needing to be white. And while Dad couldn't identify the truck speeding away from the mine pit, knowing which suspects owned a white truck might narrow down the list.

I nodded at the notebook in Pearlie's hand. "We should find out what Jason drives."

Resentment momentarily flashed in her eyes, but she scribbled the information under Jason's name.

With her notebook back in her purse, we stepped up to the door of the cabin.

Inside, shouts pulsed against the thin walls. There was the sound of glass shattering and a woman's answering wail.

Outraged, Pearlie pounded on the door.

The door was jerked open, and a short, swarthy young man in sagging jeans leaned against the doorjamb. His dark, muscular arms were inked with the Virgin Mary, a cross and skull, and the name Reina.

"Who the hell're you?"

"Pearl Ann Bains, Private Investigator. We're working for Bethany's father. Who're you?"

I had to give it to Pearlie, she never let a man push her around—well, maybe in bed, but she could go toe-to-toe with a bully.

His dark eyes anxiously glanced behind us, perhaps worried that if we heard loud arguing, Mac Coker might've heard it too. When he saw that we were alone, his puffed up attitude was back. "Okay. So?"

Going on the offensive, I stuck a finger in his chest. "You didn't answer her question and where's the woman we heard screaming?"

"Nobody's hurt, okay?" He removed his hand from the door and looked nervously from Pearlie to me. "Come on, lady, you don't argue with your old man once in a while?"

Pearlie hated bullies almost as much as she hated a man who would strangle a woman, and about now we were both thinking this guy looked good for our killer.

"I'll be the judge of that," she said, pushing past him.

The living area was tight quarters for anything but art. There was a tattered loveseat and an armchair, but most of the cabin was used for the sole purpose of creating art. Two professional easels squatted in the middle of the room with big canvases on them. One was five by five: a square with dancing colors in a juxtaposition that was almost 3-D in its effect on the human eye. The other canvas was six-feet by nine. The artist had sketched the scene in sienna. I saw, or imagined I saw, brooding clouds over low mountains, a winding road and a lonely farm house about to get rained on. Or perhaps it would be none of those things, but if I was right, this painting would be a complete departure from the ones stacked against the wall and on the other easel.

A door opened, and a young Hispanic woman drifted out tying the knot on a chenille robe. Her delicate features looked drawn and weary and she'd been crying, but there were no bruises to indicate that she'd been beaten.

Pearlie smiled. "Hello, I'm Pearl Ann Bains and this is my cousin, Lalla Bains. I presume you're the resident artist?"

"Yes. I'm Reina Schmidt," she said, her brown eyes darting from Pearlie to me. "What can I do for you ladies?"

"We're investigating Bethany's murder," I said. I was getting used to the idea of calling ourselves investigators. And just a teensy bit sorry I'd left my fake badge back in California.

Reina put a slender hand to her mouth and collapsed onto her couch.

Her companion stood next to her, squeezing her thin shoulder and glowering as if we were now responsible for making her cry.

Pearlie and the young man exchanged a couple of heated stares, but before she opened her mouth and antagonized him, I said, "Where were you when Bethany was—"

When Reina's hands flew up to her face, her companion murmured, "Reina, you don't have to—"

She threw off his hand. "You should go to work, Julio."

He reluctantly withdrew his hand as if by doing so he was severing a vital connection. "Are you sure?"

She stretched a tight smile. "I'm all right. I'll call you later."

With a nonchalant shrug, he picked up a backpack, and shooting one last warning glare at Pearlie and me, left.

Pearlie didn't waste any time. "What were you two arguing about?"

"Money. What else?" she said, her posture stiff on the couch as if waiting for something to happen..

"Yours or his?" I asked.

"He always wants to give it to me, and I always refuse."

Pearlie took out her notebook. "His name and his relationship to you?"

"His name is Julio Castillo and he's my boyfriend," she said, tensing again. If she was expecting some kind of reaction, I sure didn't know what it was.

"Does he live with you?" I asked.

"No—heavens, no," she said, leaning back into the cushions and relaxing. "He lives in Tucson. He has a paint and body shop on 22<sup>nd</sup> Street. He's worried about me living here now—now that Beth has been murdered. He thinks it's not safe."

"He does have a point," I said. "I'm sure the sheriff wouldn't object to you leaving the property until her killer is found."

"Yes, I've been told," she said, looking at her hands. "But I'm better here than anywhere else."

I was quietly struck by the odd reply, but Pearlie immediately filled in the gap. "Are there other residents here?"

"In the last year it's just been me and Jason. He lives next door."

"By himself?"

"I think he's divorced."

"How well do you know him?"

"I wouldn't say we're friends."

"Were you friends with Bethany?"

Reina's smile flashed with bright tears. "She was my best friend. And if you're working for her dad, you must know about her facial deformity. Maybe it was because she had private tutors growing up, you know? She never had to suffer mean girls in school, so she wasn't afraid of nobody. She's—she was the bravest person I ever knew."

Reina's narrow hands rose as if to capture the other young woman's ghostly essence then dropped onto her lap.

This was not the young woman her father presented to us, in delicate health and reclusive. But then he was the parent, and an overprotective one at that.

"How did you meet?" I asked.

"At an art show in Scottsdale."

An art show? Bethany kept a lot from her father.

"It's because of Bethany that I even got a career. She introduced me to her agent and now I'm in five galleries."

I was drawn back to Reina's paintings. She and her friend Bethany attended art shows.

"Did she wear a veil?"

"Never. Her patrons didn't care. They all adored her. Everyone loved her."

I wondered if she wasn't a bit jealous.

"You pay rent here?" I asked.

"Of course. I make a living at it now, but—" Reina's tears coursed unchecked down her face. "What's going to happen now that she's gone?" She looked up, swiping at her cheeks. "You're

here to find her killer then?"

Pearlie nodded. "That's the plan."

Reina got off the couch, her motion lethargic as she drifted over to a ceramic dish on the kitchen counter. "Here's my card. If you need any help, anything at all, please let me know."

As I took the card, I noticed how cold her thin hands were and wondered if Bethany's murder was taking a toll on her health. But when my eyes met hers, I saw an undercurrent of fear that I found at odds with her earlier stance with the tough boyfriend. If she wasn't afraid of him, then what was Reina Schmidt afraid of?

## *Chapter Seventeen:*

The walk from Reina Schmidt's cabin to the Jeep didn't take long, but I couldn't shake the feeling that this young woman was keeping a secret and it was wearing a hole in her heart. And what was up with the boyfriend? In spite of his tattoos and surly demeanor, we had no way of knowing his history. I would have Caleb check.

Pearlie repeated the process of hooking the stirrup to the door frame on the Jeep and hopped into her seat. When she took out her notebook, I pointed to Reina's name.

"Julio certainly didn't want us alone with her, did he?"

"No, and even without him picking on her, she doesn't look healthy."

Pearlie had been sexually abused as a teenager and her empathy toward another vulnerable young woman could just as easily obscure the truth.

"She's tougher than she looks, Pearlie," I said. "She made him leave, didn't she?"

"He did, but did you notice her watching us for a reaction when she told us his name? Julio Castillo. Maybe he's a wanted criminal."

"We should have Caleb run his name for prior convictions," I said.

Pearlie snorted indelicately. "Sure thing, Cuz. As long as you don't mind getting a load of grief 'cause we're investigating Bethany's murder."

"Yeah, I suppose, but I keep going back to Reina's words, that she was *'better here than anywhere else.'* What do you think she meant by that?"

"How should I know?" Pearlie's voice had an edge to it, "and don't go all psychic on me now, I don't have a card for that."

"I don't know. It's just that if she's keeping secrets, whatever it is may not be something we can find on the internet."

Pearlie shrugged. "Folks are going to want to protect secrets even if it has nothing to do with a crime." She waved at the broad valley as if encompassing all of it into her plans. "We're just going to have to find ourselves a spy in the sheriff's office."

Knowing Pearlie, she would immediately be on the lookout for one that was tall, dark and handsome, too.

I took one last look at the property my great-aunt Mae used to own, seeing it in the eyes of the people who needed a sanctuary for their own reasons: Bethany because of her physical deformity, the enigmatic Reina with her unhappy secrets, and Jason Stark, who may or may not know more than he was saying.

The place did have an air of peaceful serenity about it, if you didn't count the layer of fear left behind by a cold-blooded killer.

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At home, my dad came out of the barn wiping his hands on a greasy rag. "Where the hell have you two been?"

I tried to deflect his irritation with a question of my own. "Have you got it running yet?"

"I can't get the parts I need if you leave me stranded here without the Jeep."

Pearlie slipped out of the Jeep and gave my dad her most charming smile. "I'll bet you could use some hot lunch. How 'bout I heat up the leftovers from last night's chicken cacciatore?"

At the mention of food, Dad completely forgot why he was annoyed with us and followed Pearlie into the house.

I wasn't so lucky with Caleb. He leaned on the Jeep, his arms crossed to show he had no intention of letting this slide. "I don't see any grocery bags."

"Huh?"

"Food. Groceries. You were going to the store?"

I was happy to have him here, wasn't I? And hadn't we promised to be honest with each other? Why would I consider keeping this secret from the one person who could help the most? It wasn't fun to lie to him anymore, not after all we'd been through, so I told him.

"Pearlie has been hired to investigate Bethany Coker's murder."

His sandy brows corkscrewed up in disbelief.

"Scout's honor," I said, holding up two fingers.

He reached over and took hold of the fingers. "It's three fingers for scouts, not two."

I shrugged. "I'm telling the truth."

"She doesn't have a P.I. license and who in their right mind would hire Pearlie?"

"The father of the murdered artist. The poor man is desperate for help, a lead, anything. And the sheriff's department won't tell him a thing."

I tried not to look at Caleb's face thinking how many ways this could go wrong.

"Naturally, this will go better if you help," I added.

He groaned. "This is not just Pearlie's gig, is it? It's you and your cousin, right?"

"How could we turn him down, Caleb? Besides, you said the detectives might yet try to stick these murders on my dad."

"On a scale of one to ten, that argument is a two. And that's only because I don't want to think about what could happen if they don't find a better suspect."

"I *know*. It just broke my heart to see those detectives grill him the way they did. The poor old guy is a heart patient, for cryin' out loud. Honestly, Caleb," I said, letting my hand flutter over my heart. "I think it would kill him to have to go through that again."

My dad ambled out of the house, a toothpick hanging off his lip. Seeing us, he motioned for me to hand over the keys to his Jeep. "Your lunch is waiting and I don't have all day, missy."

Accepting the keys, he hopped in, and without another word, sped off, leaving us in his dusty wake.

Caleb stared after the Jeep, shook his head and turned for the house.

I ran to catch up. "So what do you think? Will you help?"

"I think," he said, putting an arm around my waist so we could walk together, "that you're fronting your dad's heart issues for your own interests. But for Noah's sake, I'll help."

Pearlie was sitting at the table writing in her notebook. "Hey, Caleb. What's up?"

"I'm in," Caleb said and went to work on his lunch.

At her perplexed expression, I explained to her how I'd brought him into our investigation. She took it surprisingly well.

Ever pragmatic, Cousin Pearlie then turned her considerable charm on Caleb. "Witnesses *are* more likely to talk to a couple of women than they are to suits with badges."

"Leave well enough alone, Pearlie," he said, digging into the leftovers.

Pearlie tried again, "We've already made a really good start."

"How's that?" he asked, wiping his mouth on a napkin.

I cringed when she told him how we dodged under the crime scene tape and searched Bethany's bedroom.

"Homicide already searched it," I added. "We needed to look around to get an idea of what she was like. When I remarked about the blackout shades in her room, her dad said she had migraines, but there were no meds in her bathroom."

Caleb shrugged. "I couldn't say what the detectives would take for evidence. They might collect the contents of her medicine cabinet for fingerprints."

"We also learned that she had a genetic facial deformity and she had drugs for migraines."

"It could've been a burglar looking for drugs," Pearlie added. "And when he found Bethany at home, decided to rape and strangle her."

"You talked to the residents?" Caleb asked.

"No one said we couldn't," Pearlie huffed. "There're only two of them. Reina Schmidt lives in one of the two studio cabins, and she has a suspicious looking boyfriend we'd like for you to check out."

Caleb put down his fork and pulled out his notebook. "Name?"

"Julio Castillo," Pearlie said, watching him write. "She said he has a paint and body shop in Tucson, but with the line of tats and his bad attitude, we think he might be trouble."

Caleb put down his pencil. "I can get DMV records and any convictions off the appropriate data bases."

"See?" I added cheerfully, "we're a team already."

"You said there were two artists?" he asked.

"Jason Stark is the only other artist living there," I said. "He said he was working when Bethany was killed and I could see how he wouldn't have heard anything. He was wearing one of those welder helmets and didn't notice us until we stepped between him and the bronze he was working on."

Caleb wrote down the name and another notation. "Go on."

"Jason," Pearlie said, consulting her notes, "thought the killer might've been a Mexican transporting drugs through the property."

"Yes," Caleb said. "I'm told this is a corridor for smugglers."

"They'd be just the type of criminals to think nothing of killing Bethany and a police chief," Pearlie said.

Caleb crossed his arms over his chest, looking from me to Pearlie. "Then why go to the trouble of moving the chief's body out of the house and dumping it into an abandoned mine pit?"

Caleb wanted us to see something we were missing.

"Oh. The deputy said the police chief was supposed to be leaving for a fishing trip to Wyoming," I said. "They wouldn't have a reason to start looking for him for at least another week."

"Yeah," Pearlie said. "Everyone in town would've known when and where the police chief was going on his vacation. It's someone who lives here in Wishbone. It could even be another cop."

"Yep," Caleb said, unwinding his arms and dragging me to him. "And that's why you two have to tell me where you're going, when you'll be back, and for God's sake, stay in cell phone range. And Pearlie, keep that Lady Smith with you at all times, will you?"

Pearlie nodded, eyes wide, suddenly with nothing to say.

When Caleb picked up the lunch plates and utensils, I pointed to Pearlie's notebook and towed

her out the door.

"He thinks best doing the dishes," I said.

"Really? All the men I know do their best thinking with me under them."

"We didn't tell him about the CD we lifted from Bethany's room or that her laptop might be missing."

"When we see Mac Coker we'll ask if that laptop is on the evidence list. If it isn't, we can talk to Reina and Jason again."

"And if they don't know anything?"

She examined her nails. "I think I need a manicure. As a matter of fact, I think my hair could use a touch up and I'm sure you could use some highlights—or do you do lowlights? Yeah, that and a pedicure. That's what we need."

I don't color my hair, but I could tell that she wasn't thinking hair color as much as she was thinking about acquiring some gossip, and there's no better place for gossip than the local beauty parlor.

"Let's look through our brand new phone book for one," I said.

"What about transportation?" Pearlie asked.

"Dad will be back soon," I said. "He's anxious to get Uncle Ed's race car in working order."

We went inside and thumbed through the listings for beauty parlors.

There were two in Wishbone. "Which one?" I asked.

She grinned. "Let me," she said, dialing a number.

When someone answered, Pearlie did what she did best—sound like a ditsy blond. "Yes, my cousin and I are visitin' her new place here. Would you have any openings for this afternoon? What? Well, a touch up of our roots, and a pedicure for her and a mani for me—if you could squeeze us in? But not today, huh? Our names? It's Pearlie and Lalla Bains—if you think—well, sure thing, sugah. Bye now."

"No luck?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. Let me try another shop."

Pearlie went through the same spiel, and with the same results, she smacked her lips. "I need ice cream. Think there's any left?"

She took one step toward the fridge and the phone rang. Pearlie smirked and answered the phone.

"Hello? Yes, this is she. Tomorrow? Both of us? Well, now ain't that sweet of you. Yes, we'll be there." She hung up and this time made it all the way to the fridge. Opening the freezer compartment, she took out a container of Chunky Monkey.

"Well?" I asked, getting the bowls and spoons.

"Told you, didn't I? It's the same in small towns everywhere. The minute I told them our names I knew she'd call back."

As Pearlie and I were licking the last of the ice cream off our spoons, Dad strolled into the house and dropped the Jeep keys into a bowl on the side table.

"Any of that ice cream left or do I have to turn around and go back into town?"

"No one has to go into town," I said. "There's plenty of Chunky Monkey to go around."

## *Chapter Eighteen:*

Pearlie handed the breakfast dishes to the men and said, "We're going to the beauty parlor. See you in a few hours."

In the Jeep, Pearlie gathered up her loose hair and inspected it. "I guess I better get a trim, too. Suddenly my ends are splitting."

"Haven't you noticed how quickly our towels dry? It's really easy to get dehydrated here. Between the altitude and the dry air, the weather here is tough on everything."

"Rattlers, coyotes, scorpions and dehydration—I guess there ain't no such thing as paradise, is there?"

"Tell that to all the snowbirds who flock to Arizona every winter so they don't have to shovel snow."

"We're not staying long enough to find out if they have snow here, are we?"

"It's still September, we have plenty of time to solve this case and clear out before it gets cold."

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At Darlene's Cut and Curl, we were met by enthusiastic rock-n-roll and a petite redhead in bright yellow lipstick. She reached over and turned down the music. "Welcome to Cut and Curl," she said. "I'm Suzi and this here's Darlene."

Darlene, a pretty, green-eyed brunette attempted to match Suzi's welcoming smile but her grasp on the back of her salon chair couldn't hide the slight tremor in her hands.

"Let's sit you girls down and you can tell us all about it," she said.

"You mean—my color?" I asked.

"That too," she said, a little too quickly.

Pearlie squealed with laughter at some witty comment of Suzi's, and soon the two were easily chitchatting.

Draped with a towel tucked around my neck, Darlene picked up a hank of my long hair and examined it. "Not bad. Someone's given you a nice cut recently."

"Yes," I said, "for my wedding. And my great-aunt Mae gifted me some property nearby so we decided to visit Arizona."

Darlene and I locked eyes in the mirror. "And you brought your cousin instead of your husband?"

Okay, so this wasn't going exactly as planned, but I could turn it around.

"Well, of course my husband is here, but there's supposed to be a gold mine on the property, so Dad was all for a road trip. Unfortunately, the first time he went to look for it he fell into a mine pit."

Darlene picked up a brush and went to work on my hair. "Oh dear. Was he hurt?"

"No, no. He's fine. But there was another man at the bottom of the pit. I'm sure you've heard about it by now."

Darlene laid the brush down, and without a warning, gave the chair a whirl, jerked the lever on the backrest, and suddenly my carotid artery felt terribly exposed.

Why did I think I needed to come in here? Haircut, wasn't it? Did we talk about a haircut? No we did not.

"Your dad," she said, lathering on some nice smelling shampoo. "That must've been terrible for him. Was—the man alive when he found him?"

"No," I squeaked. "Dead. Sorry."

She nodded, reached up to a shelf and I got a whiff of underarm odor. Did beauticians go *au naturel* in Wishbone, or was this a sudden case of nerves? Squirting some conditioner into her hand, she silently went to work on my scalp.

How was this supposed to be a fact-finding mission if she wouldn't talk to me?

More laughter from Suzi's side of the room. Pearlie certainly wasn't having any problem in that department.

"I need to let that conditioner soak for a few minutes." Darlene patted my shoulder and disappeared.

She spoke to Suzi and the door to the shop opened and closed.

Taking her at her word, I closed my eyes and tried to relax.

Pearlie tapped my shoulder, her hair in alternate layers of foil. "What'd you say to her?" she whispered.

"Are they gone?"

"Yes, now talk."

"I told her that it was my dad who found the body." I whispered back, "I dunno, Pearlie, I think I upset her."

"Well, of course it upset her. The police chief was her husband."

"Her husband! Wow, that sucks."

"Are you kidding? We hit the jackpot. Kinda makes me wonder ...."

When the bell jingled on the door, Pearlie scurried back to her chair, grabbed a magazine, and stuck her face in it.

I, on the other hand, lay with my head soaking in conditioner, feeling like an idiot. Surely Darlene had been told how her husband was found, but talking to the daughter of the man who found him must be a shock. Still, hadn't we made the appointment hoping for some gossip on the murders? But I also wondered why she would be here at her shop so soon after her husband's murder, and what she might have in store for my hair.

Darlene put her hand on my shoulder. "How you doing, hon?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Then let's finish up."

She rinsed and towel dried my hair, and without asking how I wanted it, proceeded to style it.

"Hair spray?" she asked, holding up a can.

"Uh, no thanks. I never use the stuff."

She nodded, and started spraying and only stopped because the can finally fizzled and died. Waving away the noxious cloud, she turned me around to face the mirror.

I suppose if I had the right makeup, and wore something from the year nineteen sixty-five—maybe an Op-Art dress and go-go boots, I'd be ready for a photo shoot draped over a Corvette.

"You don't like it," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

Not wanting to be the cause of making this poor woman any unhappier, I stuttered an excuse. "It-it's just different, that's all."

She removed the drape and lowered her wet lashes. "It's on me, anyway."

I looked at Pearlie, sitting under the dryer, her magazine in front of her face. Her shoulders were shaking with laughter, so no help there.

"No, no," I said, pulling out my wallet. "You did a great job."

Darlene stayed my hand. "Please, just hear me out, will you?"

I waited, the wallet in my sweaty hands.

"The man in the mine pit, the one your dad found, was my husband." Seeing I was going to apologize, she put up a hand, "No, that's okay. There's no way you could've known."

"I'm so sorry," I said, now feeling like a jackass for coming here.

"The Sheriff said my husband was the one who answered Bethany Coker's distress call."

I nodded. "I heard that too, but I don't know much more than that."

Her pretty green eyes misted with tears. "The real problem is that the sheriff is looking for likely suspects. And as always, they look real hard at the spouse first."

"If it's any consolation, they're also looking at my dad and he never met the man before he landed in that pit."

"Then you understand how I feel. My husband was supposed to be on his way to Wyoming for his annual fishing trip, but instead, he detoured for a 9-1-1 call and died a damn hero."

"He has a police radio in his personal car?"

"It's always on. He was all about duty, honor and all that crap. It's the reason I fell in love with him, but it got him killed, too."

"So what can I do for you, Mrs ...?"

"Call me Darlene. I need someone to find my husband's killer."

Seeing my confused expression, she grabbed my hand. "Suzi said you two girls are private investigators."

"Well..." I didn't know what to say.

She tightened her grip. "Don't you see? It's divine providence that sent you here. I need someone besides the county sheriff's department to help bring my husband's killer to justice."

## *Chapter Nineteen:*

I got into the Jeep, looked in the rearview mirror and groaned.

Pearlie snickered. "Love the new look. I think you'd fit right in at the Houston Women's Club"

"Oh, stop," I said, reaching for a hairbrush and digging a comb into the hairspray. "Nobody wears big hair anymore. Well maybe in Darlene's church." Satisfied that I'd calmed the tornado on my head, I added, "You realize she thinks she's hired us to find her husband's killer."

"Yep. Suzi handed me an envelope full of cash."

"She did what? Pearlie, I was just kidding. We couldn't cash Mac Coker's check if he gave us one, and we certainly couldn't sign a contract with Darlene. We're not legal!"

"Darlene doesn't want a contract. She wants this deal kept on the Q-T. No one is to know that she's hired a P.I. Which works just fine for us. As for the money, that's for expenses. And we get hair-cuts and color for free for the rest of our lives. Ain't that sweet? I'm hungry, where're we gonna eat?"

We were working for haircuts. Yessir, we were big time P.I.'s all right.

"I saw a Mexican place on the way out of Wishbone," Pearlie said. "Let's eat there."

"Mexican? You are feeling frisky today, aren't you?" I asked, feeling decidedly grumpy. "This close to the border you're just beggin' for Tijuana two-step."

"We need to make a plan before we get home."

"You mean, get our stories straight, don't you?" I asked.

"You're right, and that may take a while. We better get take-out for the guys," she said. "Men behave better on a full stomach."

"Oh, all right." I looked at my watch. "It's eleven a.m. If we don't take too long," I said, and pulled onto Highway 92.

In my rear view mirror was a white Prius, and in front, was a white Dodge Ram with dualies and a fake bull sack attached to the chrome hitch.

"I guess Karen was right about white trucks," I said.

"Whad'ya mean?"

"Deputy Dumb-Ass was annoyed because Dad's only description of the killer's vehicle was that it was white. Evidently, white and faded are the state colors for Arizona."

"It was a truck, right?"

"And too far away to tell what make or model. White trucks aside," I said, "we need to talk about Darlene."

"Yeah? What about her?"

"We can't have two clients for the same case. We're supposed to be working for Bethany's father, remember?"

Pearlie shrugged and looked out the window at the passing scenery.

"And I'm really annoyed that you sat there with your face in a magazine while Darlene poured her heart out to a perfect stranger. I'm uncomfortable making promises we may not be able to keep."

"Forget about that for a minute. What'd she tell you about her husband? Word for word, if you

can?"

I struggled to get my temper under control. My cousin was again overlooking the little details that could get us in trouble, or killed.

"Oh come on, Lalla. She wasn't going to talk to us unless we agreed to work for her."

She had me there. I told her what Darlene said about her husband insisting on being first responder to any crime scene.

Pearlie snorted. "Gotta wonder about a man who can't live without a police radio in his personal vehicle. The hero type, huh? How romantic. Except guys like that are all about their job, and no romance at all. What else?"

"If he was on his way out of town for his annual fishing trip, then why was he wearing a sports coat and dress slacks?"

"What? When did she tell you that?" Pearlie asked.

"Dad told us. Sorry. He was in that pit with the police chief, remember? He also said the man had on too much aftershave."

"Okay, but you forgot to mention what he was wearing."

"Slipped my mind, okay?" I said.

"Is there anything else you forgot to tell me?"

"I can't think of anything," I said, through clenched teeth.

"I'll let it go for now," she said. "If you can get over working both sides of this case. So his fishing trip had nothing to do with trout. Do you think she suspected?"

"She sounded more heart-broken than angry, but surely they handed over his personal effects. His dress slacks and shirt would be her first clue there was something wrong."

"Yeah, she knew."

Pearlie held onto the notion that all men were cheaters. Of course, she'd had some experience to back up that theory, too. Come to think of it so did I, but those memories receded with every year I spent with Caleb.

"If he was on his way to see a girlfriend, he missed his chance when he took that 9-1-1 call," I said.

I wheeled into a gravel parking lot next to the Mexican café and noted several more white trucks, one looked like the truck I'd followed out of town, but it didn't have a silly fake bull sack hanging from the hitch.

"Any place with this many cars must be good," Pearlie said, hopping out of the Jeep and striding for the door of the café.

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Lunch dispensed with, we gathered up our take-out bags and left.

Getting into the Jeep, I glanced up at the sky. The clear blue dome over our heads should have been heartening, but all I could think of was my dad watching the same sky while stranded in the bottom of a mine pit. And then there was the possibility that the killer might have lined up my father as his next victim.

Pearlie pointed to the switches next to the steering column. "What're these switches for?"

"They activate the lockers. You use the lockers to gain extra traction for the tires."

"Oh yeah? Then let's give it a try," she pointed to a side road snaking uphill.

"Red Mountain Road?" I said, reading the sign. "This is our road. It looks like one big circle."

"A short cut home? Perfect."

I figured if we ran out of pavement the Jeep could handle it, and throwing up a cloud of dust behind us, sped past a solitary mailbox and narrow lane ending in a lonely rooftop.

Shifting down into four wheel drive low, we started climbing. Cresting the hill, I slowed and stopped on the bluff. Stretched out below us, afternoon light glinted off rooftops and skipped across the green of the San Pedro River to nudge up against the Huachuca Mountains.

"For being out in nowhere, there sure are a lot of houses," Pearlie said.

"Sierra Vista has a population of forty-five thousand, and that's not counting the snowbirds that start trickling in about this time of year. They have a shopping mall, too, but it's nothing like Tucson."

"What do folks here do for work?"

"There's Fort Huachuca and the border patrol. Are you looking for a job?"

"I'm going back to Modesto to look for an office to rent for our P.I. business."

"About that Pearlie, I don't think—"

She swatted away my objections. "You got your plate full right now, what with your dad being under a microscope with the local gendarmes and all. Let's find a killer, and if you still want to back out, I'll quit trying to convince you to come with me."

"Deal," I said, and put the Jeep in gear.

A big white truck, its heavy chrome grill glinting like sharp teeth, roared up the hill and headed straight at us.

I gasped and looked for a way to move out of his way.

He must've seen us, we weren't that hard to miss, but instead of slowing, he gunned his engine.

Hoping to avoid a collision, I did what came naturally—I twisted the wheel to the right. The big truck passed so close I felt the paint whisper off the side of the Jeep.

Unfortunately, the passenger side wheels slipped off the edge of the road and the Jeep was now listing precariously.

Pearlie squealed and yelled, "What the hell're you doing? Get this damn thing back onto the road, now!"

"Okay, don't yell," I said, and yanked the wheel to the left.

The wheel spun but the Jeep didn't budge.

"Use that locker thingy!"

I looked at the switch. Good idea, except I had no idea how it worked. I flipped the switch, but nothing happened. "It won't work."

I was now sorry I'd dismissed Dad's offer to teach me how to use his new gadget.

I gunned the engine again. Instead of moving back up onto the road, now two wheels hung over the edge, air borne, and spitting dust. This is what lockers were for, if only I knew how to use them.

Jamming the gas pedal to the floor only caused more wheel spinning and suddenly all I could see was a cloud of dust covering the windshield. Stifling a groan of self-pity, I hit the gas again, willing us to back up onto the road. Fat lot of good that did. I had absolutely no traction.

Then I felt the uphill side of the jeep start to come loose.

"No, no!" I yelled, and cranking the wheel over, I gunned the motor in a futile attempt to change the laws of gravity.

The Jeep's wheel spun out of my hands, and Pearlie started screaming, "Make it stop!"

I felt the uphill side of the Jeep lifted, and as if the vehicle had a mind of its own, we started to lean over.

The Jeep groaned, metal on metal as if it was gnashing its teeth.

I gasped in shock and yelled for Pearlie to keep her hands close to her body and, oh crap ...  
"Hang on! We're going to roll!"

In another second, we became air-borne.

We had on our safety belts, but that didn't do anything for the take-out bags, the contents becoming wet, soggy projectiles slapping us in the face.

We jerked upright from the first roll, rocked once. Twice. Done, I hoped.

I wiped a tortilla off my forehead, thinking we were finished, but then I heard the painful sound of the uphill tires as they came lose and momentum once again took over.

We went over again, banging into rocks, crashing through a bush as we rolled.

Pearlie was screaming and cursing. Our lungs were clogged with dust and yet, we continued to scream.

All I could think of was how I wished I had never heard of Arizona.

## *Chapter Twenty:*

The windows were caked with dust and visibility was zero, but at least it felt like all the wheels were on solid ground again.

I was bruised and my jaw hurt from tightly clenching my teeth with every roll, but I was glad to be alive.

Pearlie's eyes were closed and blood trickled down from a wound somewhere in her scalp.

"Pearlie. Wake up!" I yelled, terrified that she was dead.

She opened her eyes and whimpered, "Are we there yet?"

"If you can call it that," I said, relieved to see that she was alive and able to joke about it.

"Thank God for the roll cage Dad installed," I said. "Or we would've been crushed. Don't unbuckle just yet. It might not be safe."

"Why is it so dark in here? I can't roll down the window. Ow, ow. I can't move my arm."

"It's the dirt clogging everything and don't move your arm. Wait a minute and I'll—"

"No! I have to get out!" she shoved against the door.

"Wait, Pearlie. Something's not right. Let me—"

Pearlie threw open the door and dangled a leg out of the passenger side, fished around for something solid to stand on, and screamed again.

"What is it?" I asked.

"There's nothin' out here but air."

"Get back inside," I said, yanking her into her seat.

I pushed my door open, crawled out, and argued my way through the fangs of another Mesquite tree.

Hanging onto the corner of the Jeep, I peered over the ledge. We were still on the hill, but the passenger side was wedged up against a boulder.

"We're okay," I said. "It's just that your side is jammed up on a boulder. Crawl through to the driver's side."

The Jeep rocked and her dusty, tear-stained face peeked up at me. When I signaled that it was okay to come out, she swiped at her wet cheeks, and dragging our purses behind her, crawled out, cautiously leaned over, slipped and she landed on her fanny.

I offered her a hand up. "Are you okay?"

Giggling, she pointed at me and laughed. "You should see yourself. Your hair is standing on end, and you look like you're wearin' brown makeup."

Her laughter had a touch of hysteria to it, but at least she wasn't cussing at me for rolling the Jeep.

She touched the oozing wound on her head. "My shoulder hurts," she said, gingerly moving it around. "But nothin's broken, I guess. Boy howdy, I never realized how heavy my purse was until it came flying at me. Where are we?"

"Not where we need to be," I said, pointing down at a rooftop. "But I'll bet that farm house has a phone we can use."

"How about you?" Pearlie asked. "Anything broken? I mean besides your driving skills?"

"I'm fine, fine," I said, but I couldn't stop my hands from shaking.

"How far do you reckon we'll have to walk?"

"Maybe a mile. At least it's downhill," I said, and pulled the cell phone out of my purse.

"Before we go, let's see if we can get a signal."

I shook my head in defeat. "You?"

Agreeing that neither of us had a signal for our cell phones, we started the downhill trek to civilization.

With the adrenaline leaking out of my system, the only thing left was self-pity. "I've just ruined my dad's brand new Jeep. But then I suppose it goes with letting me drive anything of his."

"Wasn't your fault. That idiot came outta nowhere, and tried to knock us off the road."

"This isn't the first vehicle I've ruined. I suppose you and Mad-Dog have had some good laughs about all my screwups."

Not interested in my pity party, my cousin grunted and went back to carefully selecting her next footfall.

"I thought you were going to nurse Mad-Dog back to health," I said. "What happened to that idea?"

When she didn't answer, I figured she'd discovered his little black book. "Did he get late night calls from old girlfriends or what?"

She sucked in a quick breath and stopped walking. "It was nothing like that," she said, her voice quivering. "We-we just needed some time apart, that's all."

I felt like a heel. I'd found his phone book in his locker and enjoyed teasing him about it, but why was I trying to bait my poor cousin?

"I'm sorry," I said. "That was uncalled for."

She lifted her chin and picked up her speed, putting some distance between us.

I caught up with her and snagged her arm. "Wait up, Pearlie. I said I'm sorry. It's just—"

"Yeah, I know," she said, jerking away from my touch. "We're both a couple of screwups. But you know what the difference is between us?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"At least I'm not stuck in the past. You get all het up about your two failed marriages—then run off from your third wedding because you think Caleb jilted you, when it wasn't even his fault. The man followed you out here, gets carjacked and left to wander around in the desert. It's just dumb luck he made it out alive. All because he wouldn't, *couldn't* give up on you. You know what I'd do to have a man love me like that? Jeez, Lalla."

"Yeah, I know. He's a treasure and—"

"Oh put a sock in it, will ya?"

Shocked, I missed my footing and slipped. My arms wind-milled but thankfully Pearlie reached out and yanked me back onto solid ground.

"Sorry I yelled," she said. "But sometimes you're just so darn self-absorbed."

My anger popped up again. "Look who's talking? You were so set on Mad-Dog that you couldn't tell he wasn't going to sit, much less stay."

She chuckled at my dog metaphor. "Granny says you and I are more alike than we know. She says we just can't see it. In spite of ourselves, our screwups, our bad record with men, you and I have a real talent for solving crimes."

"It must be in the genes 'cause keeping books for my granny's ranch sure don't give me the same thrill as I get solving a murder case. You're the same, I know it. Besides, what're the

options for an out of work aero-ag pilot these days? Working as a receptionist in a dentist's office? Walmart customer service? The thought makes your skin crawl, don't it?"

Seeing my mouth drop open, she said, "Shut it Lalla, you're letting out good moisture and we didn't bring water."

"Oh crap. I left the water bottles in the back of the Jeep."

"Yeah, so stop talking."

"You're doing all the talking."

"And you better start thinking on what I said."

It was a long walk down that hill.

And once again, hot, sweaty, out of breath, I knocked on a stranger's door.

The door was opened by an old man in overalls, house slippers, and a shotgun in the crook of his arm.

"Injuns!" he yelled, raising the shotgun at us.

Our hands flew into the air and we stumbled off the porch.

"Wait! Sir, we're not Indians," Pearlie pleaded.

I stepped forward. "We're just covered with dirt because ..."

The old man mumbled something, and leaving us standing on the porch, disappeared inside.

Pearlie and I looked at each other.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"We were in an accident!" Pearlie shouted into the dark. "And we're not Indians," she finished with a sniff. "What is *wrong* with folks around here?"

"He left the door open," I said, putting one foot over the threshold.

She put her hand on my arm. "You saw that shotgun. We're filthy dirty strangers who look like Indians to a nearsighted, deaf old man. You really want to take the chance he won't shoot us?"

I leaned into the cool interior. "Could we use your phone, sir?"

He shuffled back to the door, a half-eaten sandwich in his hand. "Phone?"

"Yes sir," I shouted. "We need to call a tow truck."

"I ain't deaf. Wipe your feet," he said, backing up to let us inside.

We did as he said, leaving a good amount of Arizona dirt on his welcome mat.

Except for the spiffy new sixty-inch flat-screen TV and surround sound, the living room looked to have been furnished out of a 1950's Sears catalogue.

"Lemonade?" he asked, bringing in a sweating pitcher tinkling with ice.

I stopped Pearlie from accepting the pitcher. "Water, if you don't mind," I said. "He looks crazy. Let's not argue about this, okay?"

"About that phone?" I asked.

He avoided my question and invited Pearlie to help him pour the lemonade.

She stuck her tongue out at me, but brought me a lukewarm glass of water.

I got to watch her happily chug down the iced cold lemonade and smack her lips. She winked while I upended my water.

I pointed to his old desk phone. "Can I use your phone now, sir?"

"Help yourself. I suppose you'll be needin' a tow?"

"A tow?" I asked, the phone in my hand. Maybe he wasn't crazy after all. "Yes, sir. Do you have a recommendation?"

He wheezed out a laugh. "You aren't the first person to break down this far out. Grandson has a tow truck. I'll get him."

Relief washed over me. Now I could honestly tell Dad I had it in hand—well, if you didn't count the fact that I'd rolled his new Jeep.

Caleb answered the phone, anxious to know where we were. I told him the truth. "Pearlie's got a scratch on her head, and her shoulder is sore and bruised, but I'm okay. We're at a house at the bottom of the hill, and the owner says his grandson can give us a tow."

"Give me the address, and I'll come pick you up."

I put my hand over the phone and called to Pearlie, "Where's our host?"

"He went to get his grandson's tow truck."

"Well, that's really nice of him. Caleb wants to know where we are."

"I asked. You know the mailbox we saw on Red Mountain Road? That's where we landed."

Oh, the irony. We'd turned onto Red Mountain road as a short cut, and we'd ended up at the house at the end of the one lane road.

"The best way to get here," I told Caleb, "is to take the turn off Highway 92 next to Aldo's Mexican café. We'll meet you on the bluff. And Caleb, watch out for a big white Dodge Ram with a shiny chrome grill. He was gunning for us today."

The screen door slammed and our host came in trailing tall, slope-shouldered, beady-eyed Deputy Dumb-Ass.

When he saw me, he blushed and snarled, "Why'd you bring *her* here?"

"I didn't bring 'em," the old man said. "They *walked*."

"Dang it, Granddad, this one might be a suspect in a murder case."

Though I'm sure it was hard to imagine me as anything except dirt-smearred and caked with Mexican take-out, I stood a bit straighter and said, "My dad and I have been cleared of all suspicion, Deputy Abel. And why aren't you at work today?"

"As you can clearly see, lady, I *am* working." Then he turned on his heel and slammed through the open door, leaving us behind to wonder what we were supposed to do next.

The old man nodded at his grandson's sulky departure. "He's awful sensitive for a lawman, ain't he? Just can't seem to find his way around women either, and worst of all, I've yet to see him catch any criminals."

I nodded politely and tugged at the smile begging to crack into a grin.

"You best go now," he urged, "before he drives off in a huff."

Pearlie lurched to her feet, and with a groan, handed her empty water glass to the old man. "I'll be black and blue by tomorrow."

"We'll get home and put some ice on your shoulder," I said, tucking my arm through hers.

"Thanks for the water and the use of your phone, Mr. Abel."

His wrinkled brow lifted in confusion and as we left, I heard him say, "The name's not Abel."

Outside, the deputy sat in his truck, engine running, fingers impatiently drumming the wheel. I tapped on the window.

He rolled it down enough to speak. "Get in."

"I'm sorry Deputy, but it's not going to be that easy to retrieve my Jeep."

He cranked the window all the way open, his frown indicating we were taking way too much of his precious time.

I pointed to where the top of the bright red Jeep showed above the boulder on the hill. "It's half-way up that hill behind your house."

"We still have to get there. Now get in."

I helped Pearlie into the truck and got in after her.

She scooted over next to the deputy and smiled politely. "Thanks, Deputy," she said. "This is

awfully nice of you, considering it's your day off and all."  
He blushed furiously and put the truck in gear.

## *Chapter Twenty-one:*

Part-time tow truck operator, Deputy Dumb-Ass stood on the bluff, glaring below us as if willing the Jeep to climb uphill on its own.

"So how do you plan to do it?" I asked, searching for confidence in his ability to do the job.

He rubbed a hand over his face stubble. "I guess it can be done."

Hoping to give him an incentive before Caleb and my dad arrived and saw the damage, I said, "It is a bit unusual. I suppose getting it up the hill will cost extra."

His deeply set eyes brightened at the word, *extra*. "Yeah, well, a regular tow would cost you two-hundred, but this is going to take a lot more time, not to mention planning, so you can figure upwards of four hundred."

"Dollars?" Pearlie gasped. "Are you planning on carrying it on your back?"

The deputy growled and left to ready the cable.

"Don't antagonize him, Pearlie, he's our only chance."

She shrugged and grinned. "You're the one who called him Deputy Dumb-Ass. Anyway, here comes the cavalry."

Caleb, looking very uncomfortable in the passenger seat of the Bugatti leaped out before it came to a complete stop, and giving the vehicle a baleful glance, hurried over to us.

My dad was a bit slower, but he finally caught up.

"I'm fine, fine," I said, for the second time today. "The deputy here is going to retrieve the Jeep for us, Dad."

"Where exactly is my Jeep?" Dad said, looking around.

Pearlie pointed. "Down that hill."

The men went to the edge and down the hill at the Jeep perched against the boulder.

Caleb expelled a curse, and my dad's jaw dropped.

I stood twisting my hands together hoping to warm myself from the developing frost in my father's expression.

"Good thing you had that roll bar installed." I said.

"You *rolled* it?"

"I swerved to miss this huge truck and it sort of slid off the road. I tried to put on the brakes but we were already leaning too far over, and one side just lifted up and we rolled over."

"Twice," Pearlie said. "I was scared to death we were gonna die."

Dad looked me over, shaking his head. "It's a miracle you girls weren't killed."

"Don't know about your Jeep though, Dad," I said, chewing on my lip.

The deputy came back with a big hook crimped to the end of a thick cable.

"How long is your cable?" Dad asked.

"Two hundred feet. Why?"

Dad eyed the Jeep and said, "You got a rope?"

"Yeah, but a rope won't do it. This truck will pull your Jeep up in no time."

Dad just snorted. "Get me the rope."

The deputy prickled at my dad's authoritative voice. "Now, look here, old man—"

"Listen, kid, that's my Jeep down there. If you want to get paid, then you'll do as I say."

His mouth tightened, but the word *paid* did the trick and he left to retrieve the rope.

Dad tied it around his waist and said, "First of all, I doubt that two hundred feet of cable will do it. And second, I want to see if it's drivable. Give me the keys, Lalla."

"Let me do it," I said. "It's my fault it's down there."

"No, I'll go," Caleb said.

"It's nobody's fault," my dad said, knotting the rope around his waist and securing the tow hook onto the rope. "You were trying to avoid getting rammed by an oncoming truck. Now quit fussing and watch to make sure Deputy Dumb-Ass knows how to operate a winch."

Which was so much hubris since Dad didn't know how to operate one, either. When the deputy hit the button, my father backed up and eased over the edge of the bluff.

Sure enough, the end of the cable paid out within a hundred yards of the Jeep. Dad eased down to the end of his rope, unhooking from the cable and rope, he scrambled to the driver's side, opened the door and got in.

The engine sputtered, but with a lurch of shifting gears and a cloud of dust exploding from the tail pipe, the Jeep started to move.

The deputy gawked. "He isn't going to try to drive that thing uphill, is he?"

Dad maneuvered the wheels, twisting first one way and then the other, hitting the gas and creeping away from the boulder.

Pearlie and I applauded, but the deputy looked worried. "What's he doing? It's too steep to—"

The Jeep slipped on a rock, started again, and then rounded the boulder and turned downhill.

I laughed. I knew it! My father, the tight wad, figured if he could drive off the hill himself, none of us would be out of pocket for the tow.

"How come *you* didn't think of that?" Pearlie asked me.

"Because," I said, "Dad took lessons on how to use the lockers, not me."

Noticing the deputy's mouth hanging open, Pearlie gleefully poked him in the shoulder. "I guess that *old* man showed you a thing or two."

Now in a sulk, Deputy Dumb-Ass said, "Well—well, you still owe me for the tow."

Caleb pulled out two twenties. "I think this will cover your gas, deputy."

He looked like he was going to object, but accepted the money and got back into his truck.

Waving off the dust cloud he'd left us in, I laughed. "Well, as my daddy would say, *Old age and treachery will overcome youth and skill any old day.*"

Pearlie looked at the only vehicle left to us. "That's Uncle Ed's race car? Oh, boy, I wanna drive it."

"Let's wait till Noah gets back," I said.

My cell phone rang. It was my dad, he was on Red Mountain Road and would be with us again in another minute. I closed my phone, still smiling.

Pearlie, determined to drive, refused to vacate the driver's seat, so when Noah arrived, he got in the passenger side and showed her how to start it. She stepped on the gas and the Bugatti sped away.

Caleb and I were left to swipe at the cloud of dust.

"You've got dirt on your face," he said, wiping a smudge on my cheek. "Are you sure you're not injured?"

I hugged him. "Squeeze, please?"

He chuckled. "You're filthy, but okay," he said, wrapping his arms around me, and tightening until I squeaked.

"I guess you're all right if I can still get a squeak out of you."

"It was so weird. First the wheels lifted, and the Jeep slowly tilted. and I kept thinking one roll would be it, but then it did it all over again. I'll never forget the creaking metal and groaning of the tires as the Jeep lifted and rolled again. I had the benefit of the wheel. I'll have a bruise from the seatbelt, the windshield is busted, the fenders are bent, and the side mirrors are shot. As you can see, none of this has slowed Pearlie down. She's going to want to keep that Bugatti. Did you and dad find out if it's valuable?"

"Not yet," he said, "but I'll look it up when we get home. I have some other news for you."

"About the case?" I asked.

"Get in and I'll tell you."

I buckled up, then cringed when he said, "Your employer called."

Pearlie now had two clients—Bethany's dad and the police chief's widow, and she wasn't legal in any state, much less Arizona.

"What exactly do you mean by *employer*?" I asked, hoping he didn't know we now had two of them.

"Mac Coker, Bethany's dad. He called the house, but since Pearlie wasn't available, he asked for her partner, Lalla Bains."

"So what do you have for us?"

"Good God," he said, laughter in his voice. "I'd better warn Detective Tom. You girls will be after his job next."

A blush ran up my neck. "Please, Caleb. We're trying to help one bereaved father and keep my own father out of jail. Did Mac say why he called? Did he get a copy of the evidence list?"

"Yeah, and he asked us to meet him at the house."

"Did you say *us*?"

"Sweetheart. I said I was in, didn't I? I've discussed this with Detective Tom. He understands that you and Pearlie can be an asset in this case, but only if I'm point man. If any evidence is discovered it will immediately be turned over to his department. Do you agree?"

"Oh, sure," I said. I thought about the CD Pearlie removed from Bethany's room, but decided to leave it where it was, safely hidden in the living room bureau, which Pearlie was using as her underwear drawer. If it became necessary, we could always turn it over to Homicide. Would we be in trouble or lauded as heroes for coming up with the perp's fingerprints?

"I'll be interested to see what you think of Mac Coker." I blew on a tissue, removing more dust from my sinuses.

"Why? Is there something I should know?"

"I'll let you decide," I said, shaking the dirt out of my hair. "I need a shower."

Caleb put the Jeep in gear. "I'll tell you what I know. Reina Schmidt's boyfriend, Julio Castillo, has a record."

"For what?"

"Drug trafficking. He's on parole. Just promise me you'll stay away from him, Lalla."

"I may be too late on that one."

"Why?"

"He wasn't happy that we were talking to his girlfriend, and now I'm wondering if he was the one who knocked us off the bluff today."

Caleb's jaw clenched but he didn't bother reprimanding me. He didn't have access to the case files, nor would he know who might be a suspect, not unless Detective Tom decided it was in his best interests to share this case with Caleb.

"You said it was a big white truck?" he asked. "You said he scraped along the side of the Jeep? Someone will look at Julio's truck. Does Reina have reason to be afraid of him?"

I thought of the sound of glass breaking and her wail of despair, and how in spite of her delicate appearance, she so easily dismissed him.

"What's his alibi for the day Bethany was murdered?" I asked.

"He was at his body shop, and so far his alibi sticks."

"I keep thinking there's something else these two are hiding. Or, perhaps he's just sweating his proximity to a crime scene because he's on parole."

"That's for the detectives to sort out, not us. And if he was responsible for shoving you over that cliff, I'll personally see he goes back to prison."

I chewed on a hangnail. "Okay. Shower, and then we go see Mac Coker."

"I need to get your dad's Jeep to the Chrysler dealer and pick up a rental car, too. Something nice and sturdy—like a Hummer."

He was right of course. Hopefully, I could keep from wrecking that too.

## ***Chapter Twenty-two:***

Since the Jeep had a cracked windshield, missing side mirrors and dented fenders we took the backroads to avoid getting pulled over by DPS. Caleb dropped Pearlie and me at the Avis car rental in Sierra Vista while he took the Jeep to the Chrysler dealership with instructions to fix it all, including the wobble in the steering. We drove the rental, a nice white Camry, to the Chrysler dealer, and I handed over my credit card without asking about an estimate. Better this than listen to my dad howl at the damage to his wallet.

Mac Coker invited us into his kitchen for coffee and a look at the list of items removed from his daughter's house by the detectives.

When I questioned the shovel and water hose, Caleb said, "They would've *canvassed* the search warrant, which would include everything from the road to the house."

"No laptop, no cell phone," Pearlie said, scanning the list. "Is this all they took?"

"She had a laptop," Mac Coker said. "I bought her a new one last Christmas. If it's not on the list, then the thief took it along with her meds."

"Meds and electronic devices are the first things thieves look for," Caleb said.

"Then it *was* a burglar," Mac said, swallowing hard. "But why didn't he run when the police chief got here? Why did he have to kill my daughter?"

Pearlie put a hand on his arm. "We'll find this guy, Mac."

Mac swore. "And I thought she'd be safe with a tough guy like Jason on the property."

"Tough guy?" I asked. "In what way?"

"He's retired military. Navy Seals."

Caleb leaned his knee against mine warning me to keep quiet. "Homicide has interviewed and cleared him."

"Has Homicide—" I asked.

Pearlie butted in, "What I want to know is, did they—"

Caleb held up his hands. "Ladies, please, one at a time."

Pearlie waved a hand in my direction, deferring the questions to me.

"What about prints?" I asked.

"Reina and Jason readily admitted that they'd been in the house," Caleb said, "and of course the police chief's prints were in her room."

"That poor man," Pearlie said. "He busted in on her attacker and got killed for it. What about other prints, DNA samples and such?"

Caleb glanced at Mac. There was no delicate way to mention that every orifice of Bethany's body would have been swabbed. "DNA analysis in Arizona is almost as slow as California."

"How long?" Mac asked, his face darkening.

"Detective Tom said it could take months," Caleb said.

Mac exploded, slamming his open palm on the table. "This is my daughter's killer, for Chris' sake!"

"I'm sure the detective will pressure the lab," Caleb said, "but it's more than likely that this case will be solved in the usual way—interviewing the obvious suspects, finding the connections

linking suspects that lead to the killer, or killers."

Mac Coker took Caleb's answer and snapped a wooden spoon in two.

Pearlie nodded. "And that's why we can't depend on the sheriff's department to crack this case. *We're* going to find Beth's killer."

When Caleb's lips tightened in disapproval, Pearlie turned on him. "You should be pushing Detective Tom to tell you who they suspect."

Caleb's light green eyes went one shade colder. "The Cochise County sheriff's department is under no obligation to tell me anything."

Even *I* could decode that message; Detective Tom would not be sharing information that might cause Lalla and Pearlie Bains to meddle where they weren't wanted.

"What about tire tracks?" I asked. "Can all of them be accounted for?"

"Useless after the EMTs and coroner's wagon rolled into the yard," Caleb said.

Mac pursed his lips. "If you will forgive me, I have some calls to make."

Seeing Caleb start to rise out of his chair, Mac said, "No, please stay as long as you like. There's more iced tea and lemonade in the fridge."

When he left, I looked around the kitchen with its recently laundered window curtains, the copper pans hanging brightly on their hooks above a recently scrubbed cooktop. Mac Coker had been busy setting to right what he could. But seeing the lack of progress in his daughter's murder investigation was wearing his patience thin.

"He's going to call in outside help," I said.

"We've still got time to come up with a suspect," Pearlie said. "Talking about his daughter's murder has to be painful. I can't imagine what it would be like to lose a child, much less to a senseless murder, and Bethany was his only child."

"What did the M.E. say about the timing for the murders? Was the police chief killed at the same time as Bethany?" I asked.

"The M.E. estimates his death at two or three hours after Bethany died," Caleb said.

"So that's what Dad meant," I said.

"What?" Caleb asked.

"When he said that someone was down there with him, but then he was gone."

"The M.E. said the trauma to the chief's head would have precluded his ever regaining consciousness."

"That's why the killer came back," I said. "To check on his handiwork, make sure the man was dead."

"Finding a critically injured man down there must've been a shock for your dad," Pearlie said.

"Planting Noah's jacket at Bethany's house was meant to implicate him," Caleb added. "This is one killer with ice in his veins, that's for sure."

"Caleb," I said, "You mentioned that Reina's prints were in the room. What about her boyfriend, Julio Castillo. Did—?"

He reached over and kissed me on the lips. Stunned, I leaned into the kiss and completely forgot what I was saying.

"Hey! Either of you lovebirds notice there's a door out of the kitchen?" Pearlie asked.

"Most farmhouses do," I said, dreamily.

"I'm sure the detectives checked out every possible clue," Caleb said, getting out of his chair. Pearlie ignored Caleb and stepped out the back door.

"There's nothing out there but bushes and mountains," Caleb said.

I took his hand and followed her outside.

Pearlie stood, hands on hips, panning the soft brown hills as they rose up into mountains. I nudged Caleb. "What'd you kiss me for?"

"Because I don't want you talking about Julio Castillo. Not in Mac Coker's house, and not just yet. If you can wait for a few hours, I might have an answer for you. Okay?"

I shrugged, now confused. "I guess."

A buzzard soared overhead, casting a brief shadow across the mesquite and onto an unremarkable trail.

"There," Pearlie said, pointing to the track of sand. "That's how our killer came in and escaped without being noticed."

"Homicide has been through this," Caleb said, pointing to the stamp of feet. "Nothing new here."

Pearlie said, "Yeah, but look where it leads—there's a road up yonder."

"And it looks like a bad one too," I said, craning my neck to see where it went. "But it may explain a few things."

Pearlie turned to face us, her eyes bright with anticipation. "Let's go find out, shall we?"

Without waiting to see if we were following, she turned on her heel and made tracks for the rental car.

"So did the detective tell you about this road?" I asked Caleb over my shoulder.

"I keep telling you, they don't *have* to tell me anything, but I'll drive."

Pearlie took the backseat, scooting up and hanging her elbows on the front back rest to see where the trail led.

Caleb followed it until it flowed into another rock strewn and seldom used road. When he hesitated, I said, "I know, it's a rental, but the road is drivable."

Caleb grunted in agreement and turned left. We climbed, rocking through potholes and washed out gullies, and finally crested the bluff. One way led downhill toward the empty mine pit just waiting for its next victim, and the other way went uphill, ending at Highway 92.

"This is just one big circle," I said. "It passes Bethany's, winds down to our place and finally intersects the highway."

"The killer could've come in and left this way, and no one would've seen him," Pearlie said. "Probably the same person who knocked us off the road."

"And this is as far as I go today, ladies," Caleb said, doing a three-point turn and heading back toward our house.

"Why? You got plans?" I asked.

"I'm going to take you two girls home, then have a chat with Detective Tom."

"Really? What about?" Pearlie asked.

When he didn't answer, I poked him with a forefinger. "And of course you'll share anything you learn from him with us, right?"

"We'll see," he said.

Like Pearlie said, he's always going to be a cop.

### ***Chapter Twenty-three:***

Caleb dropped Pearlie and me at the house and left to talk with Detective Tom.

When we walked into the kitchen, my dad had his hands in a large mixing bowl. The smell was enough to make me wrinkle my nose. "Whew! I hope that's not our dinner."

"Dog food. Where's Caleb?"

"He went to see Detective Tom. I'm sorry, did you say dog food?"

"For my dog," he said, breaking another egg into the bowl. "Scraps and some eggs, because that's all we have. But as soon as I can get my Jeep back I'm going to town."

"First, what dog? And second, why not drive the Bugatti?"

"The Bugatti isn't street licensed, and I've been tempting him with leftovers for a week."

"I wondered who was eating all the eggs. Where is he?" I asked, looking out the patio windows.

"He comes at night. Mostly when everyone's asleep."

"Phantom, huh?"

"Oh, I've seen him, plenty of times. Don't know if he can be domesticated or not, but he's a nice looking fella."

I added dog food to our grocery list and promised we'd all go into town as soon as Caleb returned.

Pearlie was lounging on the couch, waiting for her nail polish to dry, when her cell phone rang. I watched her carefully hit the accept call button.

"Yes, Reina. They did?" Her feet dropped to the floor. "Does he have a lawyer? Okay, okay. We'll be there in a jiffy."

She closed her phone and slipped on her sandals.

"Reina's hysterical and begging for help."

"Why? What's going on?" I asked.

"Homicide has arrested Julio Castillo."

"Caleb told us he has a rap sheet."

"Let's go see if she has any more secrets to share," Pearlie said.

I had to remind her that Caleb took the rental car.

"Not a problem. We'll take that cute lil' race car," she said, heading for the door.

My dad came out of the kitchen, brandishing a large wooden spoon. "Oh, no you don't. It's not licensed. Besides, what's to keep you two girls from wrecking it, too?"

"We're only going to Bethany's place," I said pawing through the keys in the bowl.

"Now just a darn minute! This isn't just any car, it's a Bugatti."

"Italian? I love Italian," Pearlie said, "but don't worry. We won't be on any public roads. We're only going as far as the art compound."

"Why don't you take the rental when Caleb gets back," Dad said. "Then you won't have to keep borrowing one of my cars?"

"Excuse me," I interrupted. "I believe that Bugatti is now *my* property."

At my outstretched hand, Dad accepted defeat and handed over the barn key.

Before I could pocket the key, Pearlie snatched it out of his hand. "I'm drivin'."

Dad followed us to the barn, reciting a list of dos-and-don'ts for operating the car.

"Unless you want to use the crank, you got to jump start it with the battery. And go easy on the clutch," he said, as Pearlie revved the engine and motioned for me to get in.

I managed to sit down before she put the car in gear. "Slow down!" I yelled over the roar of the motor. "This road is so bad, my teeth are rattling!"

"Jeez, you're such a *girl*," she said, throwing the wheel over and fishtailing into the compound.

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Reina opened her door before we could knock. She'd been crying again, and blew wetly into a tissue. "Thanks for coming."

"Why don't you tell us what's going on," I said.

"The detectives asked me to come in again. But they only wanted to know about Julio. He's on parole, they know that. He and his pals were selling marijuana. But he's been clean since prison, and he promised me he wouldn't do anything to jeopardize either his freedom or our relationship."

"So what's the problem?" I asked.

"The detectives found bundles of pot stashed in a cavern behind Bethany's house. It's not even on the grounds, but they're trying to make a case against him, that he was using this place, and me, to transport drugs. He swore to me on his mother's life that he had nothing to do with these drugs."

"And you believe him?"

"Except for his time in prison, we've been together since high school. I wouldn't agree to marry him if I thought he couldn't stay clean."

"You're engaged?"

Reina thrust a two carat solitaire in front of us, then, as if she understood how the expensive ring looked, covered it with her other hand. "I'm really worried they're going to try to stick Bethany's murder on him."

Homicide could hold Julio for forty-eight hours before they had to charge him or let him go. They would try to sweat him for a lead, a contact, any connection he had that could give them a viable suspect in the two murders. It was what Caleb would do, and if Reina's trust in Julio was cracking, we needed to get to the bottom of this.

"The police are looking to close this case, Reina," I said. "Julio, with his record for dealing drugs, is the obvious choice."

"No," Reina sobbed. "Julio is a lot of things, but he's no killer."

"Reina," Pearlie said, touching the girl's hand. "If you're so sure that he's innocent then let us help you. Does Julio still have associates who could've done this?"

"He-he doesn't know any of them anymore. It had to be a stranger. The thieves took her cell phone and laptop, didn't they?"

Pearlie drew back in surprise. "Who told you that?"

"I-I guess Mac did. But isn't that the sort of things robbers do, right? Steal anything they can find?"

She was grasping at straws—not unlike what the detectives were doing.

"What can you tell us about Jason Stark?" I asked.

"Jason? Why? Do the cops suspect Jason?"

"Was he disappointed that her grandfather left the property to her?" I asked.

"That was before I got here, but I do know he served time for manslaughter."

Pearlie and I looked at each other. Jason had already demonstrated that he had a temper, and manslaughter could've been a deal when the D.A. didn't think he could convict on a murder charge. I wondered who it was he killed?

I started to ask Reina about it, but she suddenly got up and went to her fridge. While her back was turned, Pearlie whispered, "Jeez, manslaughter?"

"We need to find out more."

Reina came back with a tall glass of ice water. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to make it sound like Jason coulda killed Bethany. He loved her. We all did. He was just so ashamed."

"Because of her deformity?" I asked.

"Oh no, he didn't care about that. It was just that he had no idea she was being attacked. There he was on the property, and he never heard a thing."

I could see what she meant. Pearlie and I walked into the barn and watched him work, and he never knew we were there until we walked into his field of vision.

"You said he loved her. Were they a couple?" I asked.

"Bethany always said his affections were misplaced. She called it transference. She was like a therapist, you know? She was good with people, really good."

Pearlie scribbled in her notebook.

"Does Jason drive a white truck?" I asked.

"Yeah, he has a white truck. All those huge sculptures, you know? He has a trailer too. Some of his pieces are pretty heavy."

A big white truck barreling down on us—Jason would know about that shortcut to the highway. But why would Jason want to run us off the road?

We made our excuses and left.

"Sort of makes Jason look like a suspect, but I just can't quite wrap my head around it," I said.

"No, but I am interested in how Reina heard about Bethany's cell phone and laptop before we did," she said.

"Mac showed us the evidence list, maybe he just did what we would've done, ask Reina and Jason if they noticed any missing items."

"Then let's ask him."

Mac Coker opened the door with a dishtowel flung over his neatly pressed white dress shirt. "Hello, girls. Do you have something to report?"

"May we come in?" Pearlie asked.

"Please do," he said, and waved us inside. "I was cleaning cupboards and laying mousetraps. This place is overrun with vermin."

We followed him into the kitchen.

"First of all," Pearlie said, "did you know that the police have discovered a drug drop behind the property?"

He blinked. "I guess I'm not surprised. Bethany said she'd found cigarette butts, and not just one or two, but ten at a time. It made her uncomfortable. That's why I had Jason put in the security lights around the perimeter."

Under the table Pearlie nudged my leg, telegraphing the message. I knew what she was thinking; Jason told us it was his idea to put in the security lights. So who was lying?

"Did she call the sheriff's department?"

"Bethany didn't like the idea of strangers coming out here. She scooped up the butts and put them in the burn barrel. Who told you about the drug drop?"

"Reina," Pearlie said. "She says deputies found bundles of marijuana hidden in a cavern behind your property."

"That would explain the calls I heard at night. They could've been here every night and—" He stopped drying his hands on the towel. "She had a phone in her room. Why wouldn't she call the police if she suspected—"

"She did. She called 9-1-1, remember? And Wishbone's police chief responded."

"In broad daylight," he said, looking out of the kitchen window to where a hidden cavern was used as a drop-off and pick up for drug traffickers.

"We found a shortcut behind this property, Mac. It's nothing more than a rutted trail, but it's a convenient and direct route in and out to Highway 92. The detectives must've found it too, and discovered the cavern."

"My daughter would never stand for anyone bringing in dope. She must've called 9-1-1 after spotting one of them."

Mac had a point, and the results had been tragic for Bethany. It was also obvious why Julio would be their primary suspect. He had reason to be here, he had the contacts, and he knew how much the owner insisted on maintaining her privacy. But if Reina was to be believed, that Julio was innocent, there might yet be others who saw the opportunity in this remote location.

"You said the UPS guy and grocery store truck were the only regular visitors here," I said. "Did she have any other outside contacts?"

"Only the gallery owners, and they either e-mailed or Skyped when they needed to talk to her." Mac lifted his face to the ceiling. Above his head was his daughter's bedroom.

"Her window faces east. From the second story, she could've looked out the window and seen someone." Mac turned to the kitchen door, tracing the killer's path with his hand. "He noticed her watching, came in through the kitchen with every intention of silencing her. He must've caught her just after she called 9-1-1."

"The detectives are questioning a convicted felon with drug connections," I said.

His fists clenched. "Do you have a name?"

Pearlie and I looked at each other.

"Mac," I said, "before we answer that, can I ask you another question?"

"As long as you answer mine."

"Did you show the evidence list to anyone, or did you tell anyone else what was in it?"

"Yes, I found it and asked Reina and Jason if they noticed anything missing."

"And what did they say?"

He shrugged. "They couldn't help. Now tell me, who is it?"

Pearlie blinked at me. We weren't sure how he would take the news, but we had to tell him.

"Julio Castillo," I said, watching for his reaction.

His mouth puckered in distaste. "He's Reina's boyfriend, right?"

Pearlie said, "Reina said he's been clean since he got out."

Mac spat a curse. "Like that means anything."

"Mac, we can't be sure of anything yet," I said. "Not of Julio Castillo's guilt on drug trafficking, or that he had anything to do with your daughter's murder."

His anger seemed to inflate with every word. "Reina knowingly allowed a dangerous criminal into my daughter's home, that's enough for me."

"Mac. Don't make me regret telling you about Julio Castillo. Homicide may be questioning

him, but there are plenty of other known drug dealers in the area. If they have enough to charge him for your daughter's murder, you'll know soon enough."

Pearlie stood and put a hand on Mac's arm. "I'm a pretty good judge of character, and if her boyfriend is guilty, Reina is as much a victim in this as you are. She loved Bethany."

His nostrils flared with distaste, and Pearlie removed her hand. "Reina loves living here rent free."

"She doesn't pay rent?"

"I do the books for my daughter, so no, she hasn't paid a dime. Bethany said they had some kind of agreement. But push come-to-shove, she'll cover for her no-account boyfriend. I don't need to put up with the likes of her on my property anymore."

Mac got up, indicating that our conversation was over.

"Please Mac," Pearlie said, seeing trouble. "Let us do our job before you make that decision."

Mac's jaw clenched. "Then you'd better find another suspect and soon. Or Reina Schmidt gets the boot."

## ***Chapter Twenty-four:***

I lifted a leg over the low-slung Bugatti and plopped into the passenger seat. "We keep getting different stories. First Mac says he installed the No Trespassing signs, then Jason said he did, and before Bethany ever got here. Then Reina said she pays rent, and now Mac says she doesn't."

Pearlie, ignored my comments, closed the driver's door, causing it to squeak. "Your daddy should've oiled this Italian door along with the Italian engine."

"So, who's lying?" I asked.

Pearlie shrugged. "Didn't I tell you folks lie to cover up secrets? Anyway," she said, pointing at the bright light from Jason's welding torch, "cute as he is, I'd like to see how Jason reacts when I tell him we know about his manslaughter conviction."

"You read my mind," I said, getting out again and following her into the barn.

He was waiting for us, legs spread, helmet snugged up under his arm like a spare head.

He put the helmet and gloves on a high work bench and pointed us to a couple of nearby stools.

Pearlie pitched him the hard questions while I crossed my legs and pretended indifference.

"Your last comments about Bethany led us to believe that you could barely tolerate her," she said.

His dark eyes went from Pearlie to me. Suspicion at our motives etched in his downturned mouth.

Pearlie flipped open her notebook. "You said, 'I can get along with the devil himself if it means I can continue working here.'"

He shrugged. "So?"

"Reina says different." Pearlie added. "She says you were in love with her."

"Reina said that, huh? Her new meds must be interfering with reality again."

"What kind of medications are you on?" Pearlie asked.

He shrugged again. "Unlike Reina, I've been completely honest with the detectives about *my* drugs."

I started to ask what drugs he took when Pearlie nodded at his workbench. "And maybe a little pot now and again?"

Jason laughed and switched on fluorescent lights. "That's for a job."

I got off my stool to peer at his sketches.

"A pharmacy for marijuana?" I asked. "It's legal here?"

"For medicinal purposes it is, but it won't be long before it's legal everywhere. It should be; it helps manage chronic pain, especially when nothing else works."

So, Jason thought pot should be legal. I wondered if he also arranged the drop-off and pick up of bundles in the cavern.

"All right," Pearlie said. "But you also did time in prison for manslaughter."

His lips tightened but he didn't deny it, either. "I was drunk. I hit a kid on a bike. I did two years, and now I attend daily meetings at the nearest AA. Anything else?"

"Yeah. What did you really think of Bethany?"

Irritation flashed in his eyes, then Jason looked down at the calluses on his hands. "She was good with people, especially broken people."

"Like who?" she asked.

"There was this artist and his wife living in the cabin Reina has now. The old man's dementia was getting to be too much for his wife so Beth found them a facility that would keep the couple together. And because she cared, she visited every week until they died."

"And what did she do for you?"

"She was kind, and patient, and funny. And she listened," he said, quietly. "Now if you're finished asking stupid questions, I have work to do."

As we walked out of the barn, I heard the flame of his acetylene torch fire up. A quick glance over my shoulder confirmed his helmet and gloves were back in place and Jason's metal artwork would take the brunt of his temper.

"We should go home," I said.

"What for?" Pearlie released the brake and stepped on the gas. "I got a hankerin' to talk to Darlene again."

"The Bugatti is unlicensed, remember?"

"Ah, come on. Live a little!" she yelled over the engine noise. "Besides, we're only going into Wishbone."

"You don't have to take it out on me!" I yelled back. "I wasn't the one who said Jason was in love with Bethany."

Pearlie jammed her foot on the gas pedal and any further conversation about Jason Stark was left in a cloud of dust.

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Darlene was absent but Suzi was finishing up a haircut on an old man. I liked the music she had on, but she turned it down when we came in.

I elbowed Pearlie. "Isn't that—?"

"Yeah. Deputy Dumb-Ass's granddad. The one with the shotgun."

Pearlie stepped up to the chair to thank him again for his help.

The old man squinted at Pearlie and chuckled. "Eh? Say, blondie, fancy meetin' you here."

"Will Darlene be back soon?" I asked Suzi.

"Why?" Suzi asked, a smile on her lips. "You looking for another bouffant hairdo?"

She had me there. I touched my ponytail to make sure it stayed that way.

"I'd like a manicure," Pearlie said.

Suzi shrugged and whisked the drape off the old man. "Sorry, Darlene's making funeral arrangements, and I've got appointments up to seven tonight."

With her arms exposed in her salon wrap, I couldn't help but notice the tattoos on her right bicep. Men's names, like a shopping list gone wrong, were inked one on top of the other with lines drawn through all but the last name.

Noticing my stare she lifted her arm and explained. "When husband number one turned out to be a dud, I decided to have my tattoo artist draw a line through it. Might as well keep it where I could remind myself not to make that mistake again. But I seem to go through one skunk a year, con-artists, idiots, and deadbeats, and as you can see, I'm now up to number five."

I leaned in to inspect the last name. "No line through his name?"

Suzi laughed. "He has yet to disappoint me, but the year isn't over yet. Want to make an

appointment for another day?"

"Pearlie?" I asked, "Do you want to make an appointment for later?"

Pearlie waved at us as she and Deputy Dumb-Ass's granddad went out the door, leaving me to make excuses. "Um, I guess they're catching up."

"We should talk," Suzi said.

"Do you have something to add about Darlene?"

"I do, but I'd rather not talk about it here. I'll call you after work."

Annoyed that Pearlie had left me on my own, I marched outside. She was waving at the departing rear end of an ancient Ford station wagon, then turned around and grinned at me.

"Suzi's too loyal to talk about her boss, but gramps sure didn't have that problem."

"That's what you think. Suzi's going to call me after she gets off work."

"Oh good. More dirt on Darlene?" she asked.

"I sure hope so," I said. "What'd Mr. Abel have to say?"

"I learned a couple of things. One: His grandson is ashamed of the family name. The name's not Abel, it's Dick."

That explained the old man's confusion when I called him Mr. Abel and the hand-printed nametag over his grandson's uniform pocket.

"So it's not Deputy Abel," I grinned. "It's really Deputy Dick?"

"If this is the one you nick-named Deputy Dumb-Ass, I guess so."

"Yes, but this is way better. I can't wait to tell Dad and the K-9 rescue lady who helped us. He really got under her skin."

"Don't you want to hear what else he told me?"

"There's more?"

"Oh yes, and you're gonna love this. Guess which married hair dresser has a secret lover?"

I thought of Suzi and her tattooed bicep, and decided she wasn't one for keeping her lovers a secret.

"Darlene?"

Pearlie shot me a look of triumph. "And you know what I like better'n a handsome brown-eyed man?"

"No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"I like finding out he's a skunk before I fall in stupid love with him."

My cousin had fallen for our pilot, Mad-Dog Schwartz, and though he'd proven that she could trust him with her life, Mad-Dog was, and always would be, a hound-dog.

"Okay, I'll bite, tell me."

Smug satisfaction gleamed in her eyes. "Why, Jason Stark of course."

"Really!"

"Is that all you got to say? I'd lay bets Darlene thought Jason was slipping out of her grasp, went to confront the girl, and instead found her husband with Bethany."

"And strangled Bethany then hit her own husband over the head and dragged him by the heels down the stairs, lugged his body into the backseat of her car, then threw his body into that mine pit?"

Pearlie's nose twitched. "I didn't get that far. But she could've got Jason to help."

"Do you *really* think Darlene would be jealous of Bethany?"

"I get it. Darlene's a nice looking woman, so maybe Reina had it wrong about Jason's attraction to Bethany. But that don't mean Darlene wasn't jealous. And jealousy seems like a mighty fine reason for murder to me."

Murders, I'd come to find out, were usually acts of passion, but if planned, most women did their killing from a nice clean distance. Guns, poison, broken brake line hoses, killers for hire, that sort of thing. Which left me with the last question.

"Why would Jason go along with it?" I asked.

"To save his lover, Darlene, from a murder conviction, or maybe he was scared of being accused along with Darlene. He's already done time for one manslaughter conviction."

"I don't see it. He liked and respected Bethany. You heard him talk about her, and I'll bet he was another one of her broken people."

"Right now, I don't know who's lying about what. Let's go home," she said.

I got into the passenger seat and vowed to look for goggles to wear when riding in the open car.

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Pearlie and I found my dad and Caleb cheerfully saluting each other with beer bottles.

"What's the occasion?" I asked.

My dad's bushy eyebrows danced with excitement. "I hope to God you brought back the Bugatti in one piece."

"Pearlie drove but she managed not to sideswipe anything."

My cousin snorted. "Excuse me, but I'm not the one who rolled your dad's Jeep."

I ignored Pearlie's snarky remark, and asked, "So what's this about?"

My dad tipped his beer bottle at Caleb and grinned. "You tell her, Caleb."

We flopped down onto the leather sofa and waited.

"It seems that that little race car you girls are using for daily transportation could be worth a million dollars."

I shot to my feet. "What?!"

Pearlie's jaw dropped. "Y'all tellin' me that thing is valuable? But it's old. Or is it more valuable on account of being old?"

Caleb said, "I got on the internet this afternoon. From the owner's manual, it appears that this Bugatti is a 1931 Type 51. Noah confirmed that the engine is 160 horsepower with a single overhead cam straight-8. It has cast wheels instead of bolted on rims, and it all looks to be original, which would make it very valuable."

"You might as well be speaking Greek," Pearlie said. "What's it all mean?"

"There were only forty or so built," Caleb explained. "One was sold in 2010 for two million and seven hundred thousand dollars."

My knees gave out and I collapsed onto the couch. I tried to speak, but something was caught in my throat—it felt like a big wad of money.

Pearlie smacked my back a couple of times until I waved off the assault. "I think it's time we called Aunt Mae."

## ***Chapter Twenty-five:***

When Great-Aunt Mae answered, I put the phone on speaker so Caleb, Dad, and Pearlie could hear. When I brought up the subject of the Bugatti being worth a small fortune, she just laughed.

"My goodness. I'd completely forgotten about that old thing. I guess your great-uncle Ed knew his cars, didn't he?"

"Yes," I said. "But surely you didn't intend for it to be part of your gift to me. Don't you want it back?"

"What am I going to do with an old race car?"

"You could sell it," I said. "Caleb says it could fetch well over a million dollars at auction."

"Dear girl, I don't need the money or the hassle. You sell it. Or keep it. It's loads of fun to drive."

"Pearlie seems to think so too, but it's too valuable to drive around."

Pearlie opened her mouth to interrupt, but I held up a cautionary finger.

"Aunt Mae," I said, "one more thing—I heard that you used to own property behind this place."

"Why yes. I sold a few acres to a young artist. Well, he was young at the time."

"Was it an artist by the name of Coker?"

Her voice went soft with the memory. "Yes. But Galen Coker and I lost touch many years ago."

Here was a link that apparently stretched across the years. "His granddaughter was an artist too," I said. "She inherited the place from her grandfather."

"You said, *was an artist*. Is she deceased?"

"I'm afraid so. She was murdered in her home a few days ago."

I could hear Aunt Mae's quick intake of breath. "Galen's granddaughter—murdered, you say? How awful!"

"Yes, it is tragic, but we were wondering, do you know anything about Galen's son, Mac Coker?"

The line was ominously silent.

"Aunt Mae?"

Still nothing.

I thought the line had gone dead, but waited.

"I guess I should start by telling you the history between me and Galen Coker."

Pearlie shrugged. Clearly this was news to her as well.

"Galen was from a prominent Chicago family. Politics and a construction business, or as Galen liked to say, persuasion and cement boots. But Galen escaped all that when he graduated from art school and fled to Wishbone, Arizona. No one had any reason to connect him with the name Coker, and I knew his art would go up in value, so I bought six of his paintings."

Pearlie nodded. "That's my granny."

"Is that you, Pearlie?" Aunt Mae said.

"Yes, Granny. So what about the son, Mac Coker? Is he in the family business?"

"I wouldn't know anything about their family now, my dear. I left Arizona and never spoke to him again."

The way she said it made me wonder if there had been something between them. Pearlie, on the other hand was wondering about the paintings.

"What'd you do with Galen Coker's paintings?" she asked.

Aunt Mae sighed. "Pearlie, your granddad had a hissy fit and burned them all."

Pearlie nearly swooned. "He burned all those valuable paintings? Boy-howdy, that must've been some hissy fit!"

Aunt Mae laughed. "Lalla, do you remember when I told you I'd only loved two good men?"

How could I forget? It was the day she handed me the deed to this property as my wedding present.

"Yes, I remember."

"One of them," she said, "was your great-uncle Ed, and the other was Galen Coker."

Pearlie butted in. "Did you marry Galen Coker too?"

"Oh, no, dear. After Ed burned those paintings, he up and died on me. I felt so guilty I just closed up the house, locked his fancy little race car in that barn, and took his body home to Texas."

"There's a picture of Galen Coker's house on your mantel," Pearlie said.

"Galen built that house because he wanted me to leave Ed and marry him. I was young and in love with him, but I wouldn't have left my husband and I told him so."

"You always said I should marry a handsome brown-eyed man," Pearlie said. "Did Galen have brown eyes, too?"

"Yes, dear, and he sure was handsome, as well as passionate and poor. But Ed loved me too, in his own way. Trouble is, I was angry at his destruction of the paintings right up to the day he died, and I never got to tell him how much I loved him. I've had to live all these years with that regret. Now tell me, have they caught that poor girl's killer?"

"Not yet," I said, looking at Pearlie. "But your granddaughter has been hired by Galen Coker's son to look into it."

"Oh, no," Aunt Mae said. "Pearlie Mae Bains, you promised!"

Pearlie flinched at the dismay in her grandmother's voice, jerked the receiver out of my hand and clicked off the speaker to have a private chat. "Now Granny, I'm a grown woman, and you know I been working on gettin' my license. Yes, okay, it's not legal yet, but just the same— Yes'm, I will," she said, and handed the phone back to me. "She wants to talk to you."

Aunt Mae sighed. "Lalla dear, I never came back to the Arizona property because there were so many painful memories. I really thought if it was yours, that you could make new ones. Good ones. But now it looks like that place is cursed for you as it was for me. You should just sell it."

"Please don't think like that, Aunt Mae," I said. "This property and the Bugatti are more than I ever expected."

Pearlie grabbed the phone out of my hand. "That's all well and good, your gift of the property to Lalla, Granny," she said, "but that race car shouldn't be .... Yes'm, I know. Yes'm, I'm sorry."

Pearlie tucked her chin to her chest, resembling a defiant ten-year-old. I knew how that lecture went; my father was famous for them. It usually started with my impetuous behavior, and ended with how my need to do as I pleased was only going to come back and bite me.

Surprisingly, Pearlie's cloudy expression broke into a sunny smile. Her glance slid over to me, then back to listen to her granny. "Oh? Okay, that's ... I know, Granny, thanks. I love you, too. Yeah, I'll tell her."

"What was that about?" I asked.

"Granny said to keep her posted on what happens in the murder case and whatever you want to do with that race car should be fine with me."

I would've thought that was all of it, except she couldn't keep the grin off her face.

"What else did she say?"

"I got a lecture about envy and greed, but the upshot is, you have to let me drive it until it's sold."

My very wise great-aunt Mae was doing her best King Solomon, granting Pearlie what she desired most, driving the Bugatti in exchange for helping find the killer of the granddaughter of a man she once loved.

Hopefully, Pearlie wouldn't kill herself in it.

Caleb and my dad were amused.

"Well, I'm not surprised," my dad said. "She was a beauty in her day, you know. You favor her, Lalla. Of course, Pearlie's got her granny's money sense."

I watched mixed emotions slide across my cousin's face. Pearlie didn't know whether to bristle at the notion that she wasn't the beauty in the family or blush at the idea that she was good with money.

"And," she said, unable to let go of her good mood, "I've got my Granny's luck at blackjack. Too bad we're so far away from Vegas."

I patted her shoulder. "There's an Indian casino near Tucson if you get the urge."

Pearlie primped at her blond shoulder length curls. "I'm more of a Vegas kinda girl, if you know what I mean."

I certainly did. Pearlie always insisted on staying at the high-end casinos where she could rub elbows with professional gamblers who flattered her ego and flattened her pockets.

"I think it's interesting that Mac Coker has ties to a crime family in Chicago," Pearlie said.

"He may be on the shady side of the law," Caleb said, "but he's clean of any convictions and his alibi stands. Now, Julio Castillo is a much better fit for the crime. Detective Tom is confident his former *compadres* are thick with the Mexican cartel and that shipment matches his recent visits to his girlfriend."

"But, Caleb, Julio has a perfectly good reason to be there. He's engaged to Reina."

"That doesn't mean he didn't take advantage of his girlfriend's living arrangement," he said. "Julio will be arraigned on a murder charge tomorrow."

I looked at Pearlie. She nodded, indicating I should tell him. "We know about Julio's arrest, Caleb, but we think Homicide should also consider Jason Stark."

"Why?" Caleb asked.

Pearlie huffed. "Because Jason Stark is sleeping with the police chief's wife."

"Where'd you hear that?" he asked.

"The beauty parlor, of course," Pearlie said, warming to her subject.

"And what's that got to do with the murders?" he asked, taking out his notebook and jotting down the connection.

"It's possible that the chief's wife suspected him of cheating," I said. "Darlene told us that the chief kept a police radio in his personal car and the story is that he took a detour to Bethany's home because he responded to a 9-1-1 call. We think Darlene followed him to Bethany's, found him in another woman's bedroom, whacked him over the head with something heavy, and then terrified of what she'd done, got Jason to help her cover it up."

"The mine pit," Dad said, "would be a place no one would think to look."

"Because the whole town knew the chief was leaving for his annual fishing trip," I said. "They might find his car, and people would think he'd wandered off and died, but they would never find his body."

Caleb shook his head. "There's only one problem with your theory."

"What?" Pearlie and I asked.

"Jason Stark couldn't have carried a twenty-pound sack of potatoes down those stairs. He's on full disability from the Navy. He hurt his back in a night jump."

"Then how does he deliver all those heavy sculptures?"

"A hoist and a lift fitted to his truck, I checked."

So that was why we never saw him sitting. He admitted using prescription drugs, and the pot he championed probably helped with the pain.

Not one to let go of a perfectly good scenario for murder, Pearlie said, "Okay, then maybe the police chief found out about the affair with his wife, and went there to confront Jason and Jason killed him and used that fancy hoist to dump his body in the mine pit."

"It could've happened like that," Caleb said.

"Will you tell Detective Tom?" I asked.

"About Jason Stark and the police chief's wife? That's what you want, isn't it? To get this killer?"

"Well, yes, of course."

"Uh-huh. Just asking, 'cause for a minute there, I thought you were going to say you and Pearlie were going to interrogate Jason Stark on your own."

"Oh, no," Pearlie said. "He's not likely going to want to talk to us again."

Caleb shook his head and put the notebook away. "Again?"

Pearlie crossed her arms. "Yes, we talked to him."

"Anything else?" he asked, his glum expression indicating that we were one strike away from going out.

Seeing a way to lighten the mood, I said, "Well, this will amuse you, Dad. Remember that annoying deputy? The one you nicknamed Deputy Dumb-Ass? His last name isn't Abel, it's Dick," I said. "So from now on you can call him Deputy Dick."

My dad hooted. "I'd feel sorry for him if he weren't such a dumb-ass."

"Well," Pearlie said. "We may not have solved this case yet, but I'm hungry. How 'bout I make lasagna for supper?"

My dad rubbed his hands together. "Sounds great. I'll grate the cheese."

Dinner was easy. My dad was happy with another excellent meal, and Pearlie was pleased to know that she could drive the Bugatti until I sold it.

When my cell phone rang, I answered. It was Suzi calling as promised. I caught Pearlie's eye as she was clearing up from dinner. She nodded, the message being that she would expect a full report.

When I hung up, I decided that Caleb should hear this as well and went into the kitchen. "I have something new to add about the dead police chief."

Pearlie, Dad, and Caleb left their kitchen duties and gathered around the table. When we were all seated, I said, "That was Suzi on the phone. She works at the beauty parlor that the police chief's widow owns."

"I remember," Caleb said. "You came back with the Dolly Parton hairdo."

"Well," I said, automatically reaching up to make sure it was now nothing more than a bad memory. "Suzi decided we should also know that the chief had a vicious temper and whenever

he was in a mood he took it out on Darlene."

Caleb nodded. "I don't suppose she reported it."

"Suzi said Darlene didn't think she could count on the police to do anything but turn a blind eye. He was the police chief, after all."

Caleb said, "The sheriff's department probably wouldn't say anything either, not unless it's connected somehow to the man's murder."

Although his answer frustrated me, I understood. He had to go on proof, and so far, we didn't have any.

No one batted an eye when Caleb swiped a bottle of very good J. Lohr Chardonnay and pulled me out through the patio doors.

"I have a surprise for you," he said.

"I hope it's a good one. I've had enough unpleasant ones for one day."

He took my hand and led the way up a winding staircase to a wide veranda on the flat roof of the house. He opened the gate on a low metal guardrail.

"Hey," I said. "Where did this come from?"

"I discovered it today."

Caleb had set up a side table with a hurricane lamp, and a futon with pillows and blankets.

"I thought we'd sleep out here tonight," he said. "Do you like it?"

The sun was setting and lavender shadows were gathering over the valley. It was also cool enough to enjoy watching the stars come out and get some much needed privacy.

"Yes, I like it," I said, hugging him.

We stretched out on top of the futon, sipped our wine, and watched the night come alive with the sounds of distant birds.

"The air is so nice this evening. But then it's September. I wonder if the winters are cold."

"Detective Tom said it can snow but it usually doesn't last. Still," he pointed to the Huachuca Mountains to the west, "the snow line seems to stay at seven-thousand feet during the winter."

"Did the detective have anything else to say?"

"About the chief's wearing dress slacks instead of waders and a vest? Or that Jason Stark is seeing the chief's wife? Sorry, but none of it will make a case for murder."

I swirled the wine around in the glass. "Strangers saw Bethany as a young woman with a birth defect, yet the people who knew her don't even mention it. Instead, they talk about how helpful, kind and thoughtful she was."

I was trying to cut loose the itchy notion that he wasn't telling me something. I should be used to it by now. He was a cop.

I reached over and lightly bit his shoulder. "Give it up, will you?"

Caleb growled and threw his long body over mine, his icy blue eyes glittering ominously.

"Do that again, and I'll have to spank you."

I shivered. This was the Caleb Stone that could turn suspects into babbling informants, but it only made my heart speed up and the heat of desire flush my body. Finding the first snap button on his new western shirt, I popped it and then another until there was enough room to wiggle my fingers in and lay my hand on his warm bare skin close to the steady beat of his heart.

"I forgot to shave."

"You're fine." I grabbed his head and pulled him to me in a passionate kiss. And for the first time since he'd arrived we didn't have to suppress our enthusiasm.

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When I could catch my breath again, I pulled the sleeping bags over us against the night air and added some wine to our glasses.

"About the police chief ... "

"Don't you ever get tired of talking about murder?"

"This is too close to my family for me to stop talking about it."

"All right," he grumbled. "Jason Stark might've been having an affair with the chief's wife, but the police chief was fooling around too."

"Before or after Darlene took up with Jason?"

"Who knows? Law enforcement is hard on marriages, you know that, Lalla."

"You're making excuses for the man?"

"It doesn't make cheating acceptable, but I'm telling you how other officers might see it. Unless his philandering turns out to be directly related to this case, his obituary will state that the man was killed in the line of duty."

I put my wine onto the floor and snuggled up close. "Okay."

Seeing I was through talking about the case, he asked, "Do you like it here?"

"You mean besides the body or two in the neighborhood?"

His chuckle said I had him on that one. "Have you thought about keeping the place?"

"I dunno. Would you like to have this as our Arizona getaway?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"On if we're ever going to get hitched."

"I'm still wearing my ring," I said, letting the diamond sparkle in the dim light of the hurricane lamp.

He took my hand and rubbed a thumb across the ring. "Was it a mistake, coming here?"

I reached over and cupped his face between my hands. "No. Don't say that."

"Then how about Vegas?" he asked. "We could tie the knot on the way back to California."

"I guess."

I felt his body tense against mine. "Don't overdo your enthusiasm."

"It's not that. It's just that we'll be doing it without all of our friends."

"You had your chance at a packed house. You ran off, remember?"

Cold feet hadn't been Caleb's problem, it was all mine.

With the darkening Arizona night, several things became as clear as the stars overhead. Even though I hadn't bothered to leave so much as a goodbye note, Caleb Stone wasn't the kind of man to give up on us. But a man can have only so much patience, and if this was the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, it was time for me to make the commitment and stick to it.

I breathed in his familiar fragrance, a mix of man smell and his lemony aftershave.

"We will get married, my darling. In Vegas if you like, and soon, I promise."

Then I kissed him and let the rest of my doubts fade into the dark.

## *Chapter Twenty-six:*

With the sun peeking over the mountains behind us, Caleb and I reluctantly rose from our makeshift love nest and followed the scent of coffee wafting up from the kitchen.

Pearlie, yawning sleepily, lifted her cup in mock salute. "How was the honeymoon suite?"

"Great," I said. "Where's my dad?"

"He's outside looking for his new dog. What's up with that?"

"It's a stray," I said. "He's coaxing it with table scraps."

Dad's last dog was already old when he came to live with us and when he finally had to put down his little buddy, he vowed never to have another pet.

"What happened to the goat?" Caleb asked.

"After Bruce climbed up on Shirley's new Prius and left neat little hoof dents on it, the goat went to live with a local farmer."

Caleb set about foraging in the cupboard for sugar. I glanced at his nice tight butt in his fitted jeans and blushed at the memory of our nighttime antics. Last night we'd behaved like a couple of teenagers and it felt wonderful. Today I was rested, renewed and energized. Caleb, on the other hand, was ravenous.

"Shall I make breakfast?" he asked, taking eggs and bacon out of the fridge.

"We've got more problems than who's gonna cook," Pearlie said.

"Like what?" I asked.

"Reina Schmidt is in the hospital from an overdose."

"Oh, no," I said. "Jason said she was on medication."

"Who called you?" Caleb asked.

"Julio Castillo used his one phone call at three a.m. this morning," she said.

Since she made no bones about her feelings toward him, Julio must be desperate to reach out to Pearlie. Yet, he might've also noticed that Pearlie wouldn't refuse to help if Reina needed her.

"But why you?" Caleb asked.

"He wants me to go see her," she said, glancing to see if I wanted to add anything.

Caleb's brows rose a notch. "You haven't been taking night classes to become a lawyer too, have you?"

Pearlie sniffed. "It's just a hospital visit, that's all."

"Okay, then I'll hurry breakfast," Caleb said, cracking an egg into the frying pan.

While Caleb was distracted with his meal preparations, I invited Pearlie to follow me into the living room.

"I hate the thought that she's so miserable she would try to kill herself," I said.

"I hate it when people throw me a curve ball," Pearlie grumbled.

I saw her point. Why would Julio Castillo ask Pearlie for her help when he so clearly disliked her?

"It'll be okay," I said. "With a little luck, she'll be hooked up to some happy juice and we'll get her to tell us what's really bothering her."

Pearlie bit on a nail, clearly distracted.

"What?" I asked.

"I'd feel better if we had a friend in Homicide."

"We've got Caleb."

"Uh-huh."

She had me there. Caleb was still a sheriff, bound by the same rules as all officers, which meant that he wouldn't be any help to us, not without Detective Tom's approval.

"When do you want to leave?" I asked.

"After breakfast, I'm starved."

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Pearlie laid a bouquet of store-bought flowers on the bedside table and took Reina's hand in hers. "How're you doing?"

Reina's wan face brightened. "Oh, much better, now that you're here. My art gallery owner called—probably wondering if I was going to finish her commissions. But with Julio in jail ... Did he call you, Pearlie?"

"Yes he did," she said, the steel back in her spine. "But if you want my help, you have to be truthful with us."

Reina kneaded the hospital sheet, her nerves stretched tighter with every rise and fall of her breath. "He didn't kill Bethany, if that's what you mean."

"Then why did Homicide arrest him?"

She wiped at a tear threatening to spill. "It's what we were arguing about when you came to my cabin that first day. I-I hoped it wouldn't have to come to this, but now ... now it's all messed up."

Reina looked out of the window, as if she wished she were anyplace but here. "Julio went to work right out of high school and we moved in together. I painted and he worked. I was so happy with the arrangement it never occurred to me that his job was dealing drugs. When he was arrested, I was furious and hurt, then I just felt stupid that I'd been so blind. If only I had asked more questions, maybe I would've ... But it was all so easy, you know? Then he was sentenced and I panicked. I hadn't worked since high school. What could I do to support myself?"

"But Julio had already made arrangements for me to live at Bethany's. He even paid the rent three years in advance, and all I could think of was how grateful I was that I didn't have to wait tables or work at Walmart."

Reina plucked a tissue out of the box and wiped at her tears. "I loved having my own studio. Bethany introduced me to her agent and within a year, my work was in multiple galleries. I was making money, good money, for the first time in my life. It was so exciting. I could pay my own way and I convinced myself that when Julio got out of prison we could start over. There would be no drug dealing with his pals. If he couldn't get a real job, I could make enough to support both of us."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Nothing. He got out and ignored my offer. Then suddenly he has his own business. A body shop, equipment, and ready-made customers included. I knew something wasn't right, but he assured me it was all legit. Fat, dumb, and happy, that's me. I should've known better."

Pearlie spoke up. "Then you lied to us and to the investigating detectives? And he was at the property the day Bethany was murdered? Tell me about it."

She looked up, tears in her eyes. "I'd parked my car on the other side of the cabin and I guess

he thought I wasn't home, so he drove around the back. I followed him to the cavern and caught him checking the bales of pot."

"Then what happened?" Pearlie asked.

"I told him I was through with him and his lies, but it's also how I know he didn't kill Bethany. I made Julio go with me to tell her I'd be moving out because we were getting married. I couldn't betray Julio to the police, but I couldn't allow him to continue to abuse my friend's trusting nature, either."

"What did you tell her?" I asked.

Reina's head dropped to her chest. "She was already dead when we found her. I pushed Julio out of the room and told him to leave, then I called 9-1-1 and pretended I was Bethany. I told them there was an intruder in my home and where I lived. I hung up before they could ask for my name so it wasn't a complete lie. Not that it did any good. Julio's mechanic finally confessed that Julio was with me the day Bethany was murdered."

So the frantic caller wasn't Bethany, it was Reina calling from Bethany's house.

"You didn't see or hear anyone leaving?" I said.

Reina's eyes filled with tears. "All I saw was my friend lying there with her eyes staring at nothing. I couldn't save her but I thought I could save Julio. I owed him that much."

"You know that you can be arrested as an accessory to murder," I said.

Reina rubbed her thin hands together. "All I wanted to do was make things right with Bethany, but I couldn't bear to see Julio charged with killing her. I swear to you he didn't do it."

"Does he have an attorney?" Pearlie asked.

"He won't talk to nobody, not to the police, not even to his attorney. He thinks he's being noble, or something, but he's only making it worse ... that's why last night ... I just couldn't take it anymore. Please, can't you help us?"

Pearlie shook her head. "We'll have to think about it, Reina. One more thing. You told us you paid rent. Was that a lie too?"

"What? Oh, no. I paid rent until six months ago. Bethany said she'd waive the rent if I'd drive with Jason to deliver her paintings."

"Why would she do that?" Pearlie asked.

Reina looked at her hands again. "Probably because she knew Jason wasn't so good with the gallery owners. He can be an old grump sometimes."

"You mean when he's in pain?"

"His back hurts most days, and when it doesn't, he shouldn't be driving, you know?" Reina said.

Pain meds or the marijuana, either way, if he got stopped for a traffic citation and DPS noticed his dilated eyes, he'd be arrested.

"So you drove?" Pearlie asked. "Why didn't Bethany go with him?"

Reina blushed. "She said she was busy, but I think she was trying to push us together. She thought Jason and I had chosen the wrong people to be involved with."

Pearlie and I looked at each other. Yeah. Bethany might've been right on that score.

"Where will you go when you get out of the hospital?" Pearlie asked.

"Back to my cabin, I guess, why?"

"Because," I said, "if Julio is innocent of the murders, the killer might think you know his identity and should be silenced."

Reina put her hand to her mouth to stifle a cry.

Pearlie shot me a hard look and rushed to comfort Reina.

"Surely you have someone you can stay with in Tucson?" she asked.

"No, no one. My parents died when I was young."

Another reason for Pearlie to feel sympathetic.

"You can stay with us," she said, patting the girl's hand.

I nudged Pearlie. Our new house barely had room to accommodate the four of us. Where would we put another person?

She whirled around, ready for battle.

"Nothing," I said, deciding to leave it until we were alone.

Pearlie wouldn't allow Reina to say no, and promised to return and pick her up when she was released this afternoon.

I followed my cousin out of the hospital, worrying how this was going to play out with our men folk. Although I could see her point, the artist's compound clearly was no longer a safe place for Reina, I knew my cousin had stepped over a line.

"We need to talk," Pearlie said.

"We sure do. I know you meant well, Pearlie, but isn't there something in your P.I. manual about sleep overs?"

Instead of answering, Pearlie pulled out her notebook. "Let's consider the suspects."

"What suspects?"

"Jeez, do I have to do everything? The people who knew Bethany and or the police chief."

"Why did anyone have to know either of them? It could've been like Mac Coker said. She witnessed a drug drop and one of them killed her. Besides, you heard Reina, she made that 9-1-1 call, not Bethany. Which means that the chief got the call after Bethany was dead. The man was off the clock, headed for a date with his new girlfriend. Why did he answer a distress call?"

"Darlene said he was the hero type and it got him killed."

Pearlie squinted at the horizon. "We need someone in the sheriff's department but not quite on the team, a bit overweight, maybe even bullied by his peers."

The only people we knew in the sheriff's department were Detective Tom and Deputy Dumb-Ass. "You're not thinking of Deputy Dick, are you? I doubt he'd friend us on Facebook."

"He's a man, ain't he? Now where can we find the little darling?"

A phone call to the sheriff's office got us the news that the deputy was at lunch.

"The receptionist said he's either at home or eating at that Mexican café," Pearlie said.

My stomach heaved at the memory of our take-out flying through the interior of the Jeep.

Pearlie laughed at my queasy expression.

"Aw, come on, Lalla, you looked great wearing all that Mexican food."

"I'll wait in the car."

She reached over and punched me in the arm. "You do that. But I'm not splitting my fee when I solve this case."

I rubbed the sore spot on my arm and followed her into the café.

The cafe was as busy as it was the first time Pearlie and I were there. Pearlie's nose twitched hungrily at the fragrant smells.

"You're not thinking of staying for lunch, are you?" I asked. "What if we miss Deputy Dick?"

"No hurry," she said. "We know where he lives."

"Pearlie, we just ate breakfast two hours ago," I said. "You can't possibly be hungry again. Are you?"

"Three hours by my watch and interviewing suspects always makes me hungry. Let's find a table."

Any excuse for a good meal, and though I hated to admit it, the smells were making my stomach talk again. Must've been all that exercise I had last night.

Menu in hand, Pearlie squinted at the print. "Mm-mmm. I think this says.... Here, you look. Does that say chimichanga?"

I took the menu and agreed that the item was indeed a chimichanga. "Don't you have reading glasses?"

She grabbed back the menu and folded her hands over it. "If I'd remembered to put in my contacts this morning, I wouldn't have to suffer the indignation of having to ask *you* for help."

"I didn't know you wore contacts, but now that I think about it ... they're colored so your eyes look bluer, right?"

"My eyes are blue. Cerulean blue," she said, lifting her chin as she does when she thinks she needs to defend herself. "I got distracted when I took that early morning phone call from Julio and I completely forgot to put them in. And for your information, it's a blue tint so if I drop 'em I can find 'em again."

"Uh-huh." I wasn't going to argue. This was my Texas fashionista cousin. "And if he doesn't show up, or he's already eaten? You're still going to order?"

She sighed. "Oh, for heaven's sake. We're here, ain't we? Look, his house is right down that road, we can always pay him a visit. Maybe his granddad will invite us in for lemonade and cake."

I groaned. "I keep eating like this, I'm going to be wearing your clothes."

"You'd have to have curves to wear my clothes," Pearlie said, flipping her blond hair over her shoulder. "As for us eating here instead of at home, obviously you wouldn't know about the rewards of dining socially. It's all about interacting with others over a meal, exchanging pleasantries, catching up with friends, that sort of thing. You should try it sometime."

My cousin was spitefully baiting me for my gaff about her weight and I had allowed an unnecessary habit to flare up again in front of strangers. I knew her weight was a sore subject. My fault, but she always chose the tender spot in my shallow armor in which to drive her point. It wouldn't do to respond in kind, not when we were supposed to be, as my cousin called it, detecting.

I stared at the white-knuckled grip she had on her fork and decided to wave down the nearest waitress.

Chimichangas dispatched, bill paid, a waitress confirmed that the deputy always goes home every afternoon to check on his granddad. We took Red Mountain Road, same as last time, taking a right turn at the battered and BB riddled mailbox with the name Dick spelled out in stick-on reflective tape.

Obviously, no one could miss seeing visitors coming since we trailed a mile long rooster-tail of dust behind us.

Mr. Dick stood on the porch, a shotgun cradled in his arms.

I was feeling a bit parched. Maybe this time I would accept a glass of cold lemonade.

I pulled up close to his porch and said hello.

He squinted and cupped a hand to his ear to show he couldn't hear over the engine, so I turned it off and got out of the car.

That's when I saw him lift the shotgun to his shoulder, and squinting one eye, sight down the barrel. "You shouldn't have come back here."

## ***Chapter Twenty-seven:***

My hands flew up in surrender. "Mr. Dick, please! We just want to talk to your grandson."

He lowered the gun and spit over the porch. "That's a lie and you know it. You're looking to pin them two murders on my boy."

"Mr. Dick?" Pearlie waggled her fingers for his attention. "I think there's been a misunderstanding."

"You're working for that no-account Mac Coker, aren't you?"

"But Mr. Dick, he's Bethany's father, so naturally he's ..."

His grip on the shotgun tightened. "Yep. And as my pappy always said, *show me the company you keep, and I'll tell you what kind of man you are.*"

Mr. Dick and my father should meet. They could compare shotguns and unfathomable quotes.

"What is it about Mac Coker that annoys you so much?" I asked.

"He's a thief and a liar, and since you think so highly of him, you have five seconds before I start shooting."

Pearlie and I turned toward the Camry.

"Not that way! You girls can leave the same way you came in here the other day. Do you some good. Think about whether it's worth it to work for that rattlesnake."

Pearlie and I looked at each other. Up the hill? It was already after noon and the temperature would soon climb into the nineties. It would be a long walk, not to mention dry, and our water bottles were in the car.

"Mr. Dick," I said, reaching for the door handle on the rental. "Can I at least get out some—"

When he racked the shotgun to show us he meant business, Pearlie did an about face and took off running.

I trotted after her. But when I heard a rock ping next to my foot, I picked up the pace.

Behind me, I heard his wheezy cackle. The crazy old coot.

Catching up with my cousin, I advised her to slow down. "We're going to need to conserve our energy."

She looked back over her shoulder. "I guess lemonade and dessert are out of the question."

"Deputy Dumb-Ass did say the old man had good days and bad days. I guess it's safe to say that Abel Dick won't be our mole inside the sheriff's office."

"Whad'ya mean?"

"Weren't you listening? The old man thinks we might try to pin the murders on his grandson. And as my daddy likes to say, *where there's smoke there's fire.*"

"My throat's on fire, does that count? How long," she said, swallowing dryly, "do you think it will take us to hike out of here?"

"I have my cell phone," I said, patting the holder on my belt. "We get to the ridge and we'll be in range for cell phone service."

Pearlie wiped at the sweat running down her face. "Thank God you're such a tomboy. Belt loops add inches to your waist line, you know."

On Pearlie, belt loops would be a fashion disaster, but I didn't have any such qualms. In and

out of airplanes all the time generally didn't allow for anything but the utilitarian belt and cell phone case.

"An hour at the most," I said, stepping onto the goat track. "Can you walk in those shoes?"

"If I don't die of heatstroke first," Pearlie muttered, picking up her feet to avoid getting dirt between the toes of her pink sandals.

With Pearlie's constant whining and complaining, the uphill climb felt a lot longer than I'd estimated. But it was either trek up the hill with the sun beating down on our heads or chance Granddad Dick's shotgun again.

We'd been gone for four hours when we'd only meant to visit Reina at the hospital and then go home. At this rate, it would be sundown before we got to the top. I sank down onto a rock next to Pearlie, rubbing my sweaty hands on my jeans and wondering if Caleb was worried about us. I could only hope that he was now out looking for us.

Shading my brow with a hand, I stood and squinted against the afternoon light.

On the ridge of the bluff, a mirage shimmered. It looked like a man, waving at me. I waved back. This was no mirage. It was Caleb! He had found us. I reached down and pulled Pearlie to her feet.

"Come on," I said. "It's Caleb. He's waiting for us at the top."

Pearlie followed my pointing finger. Energized by hope, she waved and shouted.

He waved and shouted back.

"Thank God! We're saved," Pearlie cried.

"We still have to get there."

"What? I can't possibly take another step. My feet are killing me and I'm all hot and itchy."

"I told you to wear your boots," I said, disgusted with the whining.

"They make me look short."

"You are short. He's not going to wait all day, Pearlie, let's go."

I heard another shout, but the wind carried his words away. Then a rope flew over my head and landed about ten feet off the goat track.

"Oh," Pearlie made little mewling sounds of longing and staggered after it.

"Be careful," I called to her. "There might be snakes on the hill."

She swung around, hands on her plump hips, furious that I would presume to keep her from her rescue. "What is it now? I'm exhausted, hot and sweaty, and I just want to get the hell outta here."

She blinked and looked down at her feet. "There it is. Come to mama," she said, reaching for the rope.

The rope, however, was a couple of feet behind her, and that's when I heard the distinct sound of a warning rattle.

Pearlie lurched upright, screamed and stumbled back into a bush.

There was a whisper of movement in the dry grass as the rattler slithered away.

I ran to her side, but my cousin was still kicking and screaming.

"Oh my God," she said, eyes wide, holding out her right hand. "I've been bit!"

I squatted down and looked at the hand. I found one tiny puncture on her forefinger, but the skin was already an angry red.

"If you were wearing your contacts you'd have seen that snake wasn't a rope."

"Stupid me." She sniffled, tears spilling onto her cheeks. "And here I thought I couldn't afford to waste any water on tears, when now I'm gonna die!"

Fussing at her about her contact lenses when she'd been bitten by a rattler was also pretty

stupid. She'd saved my life and proved her mettle more than once in my book. I owed her. Certainly, I could manage my impatience better than this.

"You just have to stay calm," I said, "I'll get Caleb and we'll drive down and pick you up."

Pearlie whimpered. "Don't leave me. I'll die before you come back."

Well, this wasn't working, so I reverted to being her older cousin. "You're not going to die, so just suck it up kiddo. We'll get you to the hospital and the antivenom you need."

She sniffled once more, but my strong dose of reality finally did the trick and she quietly nodded.

Leaving the safety of the goat track, I was drenched in sweat by the time Caleb reached down and grabbed me by the arm, pulling me up onto the road.

I leaned in to hug him then recoiled. This wasn't Caleb. It was Deputy Dick, his brow furrowed in an angry glare. "Where's your friend?"

There was nothing to do but pray he wasn't here to kill us. "She's been bit by a snake."

"I figured it was something bad. That woman has some lungs on her." He tsked and said, "You got no damn business being where there're rattlers."

"Not by choice! Your granddad ran us off with his shotgun."

He visibly flinched. "Sorry about that. If you'd just called instead of going to the house, I would've warned you this wasn't one of his good days. Where?"

"On her hand. She was going for the end of the rope you threw and touched a snake instead."

"I meant how far down the trail is she?"

"About as far as the end of that rope you threw."

"Then there's no time to waste," he said, pointing me to the passenger side. "Get in."

I noticed that his truck was white, a big Dodge Ram with a chrome grill, and sure enough, it had a bull sack hanging off the trailer hitch.

I thought about resisting, but changed my mind. If Deputy Dumb-Ass wanted to kill us, all he had to do was wait until I got to the top and then kick me off the hill, leave my cousin to die of snakebite, and no one would think it was anything but an accident. It was the desert and people died out here. Caleb had barely made it, so how could two women expect anything different?

"Can you drive the truck down there?" I asked, forcing a calm voice I didn't quite feel.

"Of course. It's uphill that's the problem. Buckle up and hang on," he said, and the truck tipped its big nose over the ledge then flopped down on all four wheels. We bucked and jumped rocks, careened through bushes, dust smothering the windshield until he turned on the wipers.

"There she is," I pointed.

I jumped out and ran to her side. Her face was pale and sweaty, but she was conscious. "We're here, Pearlie, can you walk?"

When she nodded, I attempted to pull her to her feet. She swayed and moaned, shaking her head. "I-I can't..."

Deputy Dick bent down and hoisted Pearlie up and over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. "What the hell you been eating?"

Pearlie's head snapped up, her face red and tearstained. "If I'm too heavy, you can just put me down!"

Ignoring her outburst, he readjusted his grip and started up the goat track.

I struggled to keep up, but in spite of the deputy's dour behavior, he was incredibly gentle with my cousin when he settled her inside the truck.

"You get in next to her," he ordered, hurrying around to the driver's side.

Pearlie slumped against my shoulder and closed her eyes, all the fight gone out of her.

He got into the driver's seat, started the engine and tilted the A/C vent to flow over Pearlie's dirty red face. A fierce expression crossed his features. "The hospital in Sierra Vista has snake bite serum. They'll fix her up. Hang on, it's gonna get rough."

Though the truck bucked and jostled like a rodeo bull trying to unseat its hapless riders, we made it to the bottom intact.

As we passed his house, I looked at the deceptively serene setting. "Your granddad won't torch my rental car, will he?"

"I don't know why you'd think that. My granddad's a lot of things but he's not a pyromaniac."

"He took potshots at us and forced us to run up that hill."

"I came for you, didn't I?" he said, his shoulders hunched defensively.

He was right. He rescued us and now he was driving as fast as he could to get her help.

"Thank you," I said. "How did you know where to find us?"

"The waitress at the café said you two were asking about me. I wish you hadn't gone back to our ranch. I knew it would upset him."

"Upset *him*? Pearlie and I could've died on that hill."

"I told you, today is not one of his good days."

"Oh? He seems to think we're trying to frame you for Bethany's murder. What's that about?"

"Granddad has dementia. I doubt he knew what he was talking about."

"He sounded pretty lucid to me. He knew who we were and that Mac Coker hired my cousin to help find his daughter's killer."

"Then maybe it's one of his good days," he said, going back to staring at the road. "It comes and goes, okay?"

"What's his problem with Mac Coker?"

The deputy glanced at me before pulling onto Highway 92 and punching the gas. A few miles passed before he spoke again. "Mac Coker bought the lien on our property a while back. I've been trying to help, but even with two jobs I can't make enough, not in time for the sale coming up at the end of this year."

"Mac owns your property?"

"The tax lien. We have to pay it back or he gets it for the back taxes. In the last few years, he's picked up four other properties along Red Mountain Road. It's the drought. Ranchers have been quitting their places right and left. Dicks have owned property here since before Arizona was a state, and losing that land is gonna kill my granddad."

I looked to the south where a rusty trickle of water and a hard metal fence bisected the U.S. from Mexico.

What were the chances that a man like Mac Coker with his ties to organized crime was getting ready to become a real estate developer? Or was he paving the way for a massive corridor for drug transportation?

## *Chapter Twenty-eight:*

With Pearlie pressed against my shoulder, Deputy Dick sped toward Sierra Vista and the antivenom my cousin needed for the rattlesnake bite.

I looked over my shoulder at the mountains sheltering our property, the Dicks', and Bethany Coker's art compound. What seemed safe and welcoming when we first got here, now looked dangerous and forbidding. And rattlesnakes aside, the idea that Mac Coker was acquiring land along the backside of Red Mountain Road now appeared more than just suspicious. "What other places has Mac Coker been able to acquire through tax lien sales?" I asked the deputy.

"The two ranches on either side of us. The folks there were old and ready to retire anyway, but not my granddad. He thinks he's keeping it for my inheritance. Damned old fool."

He looked over at Pearlie. Her eyes were squeezed shut, her breathing shallow. "He'll be after your place next."

A county zoning map might confirm it, but I would bet he was after property he could keep free of residents. Everything he could get his hands on that lined up from the border to the Coker place. Bethany's art compound would become something else entirely. He'd boot the artists so he could shelter illegals, mules and itinerant workers. The barns and outbuilding could be turned into sorting and storage for the drug trafficking.

And he would need someone in law enforcement. I knew from my experiences with cops in Modesto that bribing a cop wasn't out of the question. The police chief took the time to answer a distress call from Mac Coker's daughter instead of letting someone else do it. Or did he answer it because he was working for Mac on the side?

Then too, Deputy Abel Dick worked for the sheriff's department and now seemed a pretty good time to ask him a question.

"Why'd you run me off the road the other day?" I asked.

His lips tightened into a thin line. "Nobody uses that road but me, and I didn't know it was you driving. All I saw was a Jeep hogging the road."

"That road ends at Bethany's place."

Something in Deputy Dick's eyes flashed, but before he could answer, Pearlie moaned and opened her eyes.

"It hurts. How much longer?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes," the deputy said, flooring the gas pedal. "If we get DPS on our tail, at least we'll have an escort to the hospital."

He slowed only to tap his brakes and honk at the occasional slow moving motorist then sped around them, and I was very relieved to see the emergency entrance come into view.

In spite of his bulk, Deputy Dick hopped out and ran around to the passenger side. Yanking open the door he impatiently signaled for me to get out, then reached in and gently lifted Pearlie out of the cab and carried her into the ER.

With the attending physician seeing to Pearlie, I asked the deputy to wait while I gave Pearlie's health care cards to the business office.

He shuffled his feet for a few minutes then mumbled that he needed to get back to work and

loped for the exit.

I shoved Pearlie's health cards at the bookkeeper, and hurried after him.

When I called his name, he rounded on me, looking ready for a fight. "What do you *want*, Miss Bains?"

I took a step back. "I just wanted to thank you again for saving my cousin."

"Are you going to tell Detective Tom?" he asked.

"About your granddad and his shotgun? Of course not."

"You could, you know. On account of him, your cousin was bitten by a rattler. I'm supposed to be a lawman, and I can't even protect folks from my own family."

"Your granddad is under a lot of stress, I understand that."

"Won't make any difference if you do or don't. He's about to lose the only home he's ever known, and I can't do a thing about it. I doubt I'll even last through this first year in the sheriff's department."

"I'm sure it will get better with time, Abel," I said putting my hand on his arm.

He looked at my hand and tears filled his eyes. "All I ever wanted to do was be a sheriff like my dad and grandpa, but I don't stand a chance, not with the bunch I work with."

"Your father and grandfather were sheriffs, too?"

"Dick used to be a respected name in this county, and it helped when I was applying for the job, but I'm not light on my feet and I don't react quick like I should, or so my sergeant says. I might as well quit now."

Here was the opener I needed and I grabbed it.

"As far as I can see," I said, "you're a hero. You saved Pearlie, and you're doing everything you can to save your granddad's home. I think if we worked together, we could find Bethany's killer, which also might give you the boost you need in the department, and if everything falls into place, maybe there could be some kind of resolution with Mac Coker too. What do you say?"

Abel's brows scrunched up in thought. "Gee. I-I don't know. Work on a case outside of the sheriff's department—that's against the rules, you know."

I could tell him that working outside of the law was actually kind of fun, but then I wasn't standing in this young man's shoes, seeing my dreams of becoming a real lawman slip out of my grasp.

"Abel, think how grateful the department will be when you're the one who breaks this case. Besides, I suspect Mac Coker doesn't want any publicity, only Bethany's killer. So what do you say?"

He slipped his hand into his pants pocket, brought out a package of gum, and offered me a piece.

Momentarily flustered by this maneuver to side-step my question, I watched him unwrap the gum from its silver foil, fold it into quarters, and then insert it into his mouth. It was such a familiar gesture I had to look away to keep from laughing.

When my dad wanted to put a little space between a question and an answer, he did exactly the same thing. Unwrap a stick of gum. Fold it up. Chew.

If Abel's sergeant and his peers thought him slow, perhaps it was only because they didn't understand that he was simply evaluating the facts before making a decision.

"If I took what I know to Homicide," he said, "they'd just make dirty jokes and that, well, it wouldn't be right."

I'd had enough of my own troubles with unsuitable remarks from police officers to agree.

"What would they have to joke about? Was it something you did?"

"Not me. It's something I know about Bethany. I-I think it's what got her killed, but you'd have to promise not to tell Detective Tom."

He would agree, but only as long as I didn't tell the homicide detective? If he was lying, and was in Mac Coker's pocket, I might be a mine pit's next victim. On the other hand, what did I have to prove that Mac was a murderer? Nothing, unless I could enlist this young man's help.

"If you'll work with us, my cousin and me, and we find the proof we need to get an arrest, you should be the one to take it to the detective."

He chewed on his gum, rocking on his feet, heel to toe and back again. "I wish it could be like that. But I'd get tossed out of the department sooner rather than later. No, it's got to come from you, or no deal."

He was waiting for me to say the one thing that would allow him to let go of a secret that could net us a killer.

"Why don't you tell me what you know, and then we'll decide what to do about together."

I was not totally surprised to learn why he'd chosen to keep this secret from the investigating detectives, and it certainly explained Bethany's very private lifestyle, and perhaps why her cell phone and laptop were still missing.

Before he left, he said, "I'll see that you get your rental car delivered to your home later today."

## *Chapter Twenty-nine:*

My cousin was asleep, her bandaged hand propped up on some pillows, an IV in the other arm. I nudged her shoulder. "Pearlie. Wake up. I have good news."

Her eyes fluttered and opened. "I was peacefully dreaming, but now that I am awake, I can honestly say that I hate you."

"Oh, please," I said, readjusting the pillows behind her head. "It was your idea to visit Mr. Dick's house, not mine. Besides, we have some help in the sheriff's department."

"Really?" she groaned at the effort to sit upright, and motioned for me to raise the back of her bed. "So who'd you get? Sheriff Tom?"

I hit the button on her bed control. "Better?"

"Oh yeah. I need my lipstick, please."

I retrieved her purse and handed it to her.

"It's Deputy Dick," I said. "The poor kid is struggling as the new deputy in the department, and he's willing to help our investigation."

"What could that big goof possibly know that could help us?"

"That big goof saved your life. Or don't you remember?"

"No. I don't remember anything after that darn snake bit me. Is my Lady Smith still in my purse?"

"Other than digging through your wallet for insurance cards, I haven't looked and no one else has bothered it. I did notice the picture of Mad-Dog Schwartz though. I thought you were over him."

"I am, but I like to remind myself about the things that don't work, and I swear I'm running out of points to avoid. Aren't there any good ones left?"

"Caleb—but you can forget it—he's taken."

"Not my type anyway."

"And maybe that's your problem. Your type always disappoints you. As for your Lady Smith, save your ammo, I'm not wasting time hiking around the hills looking for a rattlesnake when we have a killer to catch."

"Thirsty," she said, pointing to the water cup on the table.

I held the plastic container so she could sip from the straw. She waved it away and asked, "So why is Deputy Dumb-Ass willing to help us?"

"You better start calling him by his real name, Abel Dick, and you'll never guess why he agreed to help."

"My head hurts and my hand is throbbing. Either tell me or go away so I can get some sleep."

"Do you remember Jason and Reina telling us that Bethany had a talent for helping broken people?"

She blinked and yawned. "Dumb-Ass was one of them?"

"Now that he's on our side, please refer to him as Deputy Dick or Abel Dick. He worked his way through college installing TV's and exterior routers for remote homes in the county. One installation was Bethany Coker's house."

"Go on."

"He didn't flinch or shy away at her deformity, and she saw through his awkwardness around women. So naturally when she had phone connection problems, Abel offered to help. But when he tested her phone line he came across something odd. Bethany had two lines; one went directly to an answering service, the kind that won't confirm anything but a phone number. Abel, being the curious type, waited until he was off work and then called the number again. When he asked to leave a message, the service said that if he wished to be connected to *Collette* they would need his credit card number."

Pearlie jerked upright. "Phone sex?"

"Make that live-on-the-Internet-sex and you have it."

"But why? If she didn't make enough as an artist, surely her rich daddy would pick up the slack."

"Think, Pearlie. What has everyone said about Bethany? That she was so full of life, so vital, always upbeat and smiling, and in spite of her facial deformity, she was pretty. So what would a young woman like Bethany, who had little interaction with people outside of the art compound, be missing?"

"Love," Pearlie sighed. "Or something close enough so she could at least feel like a woman, wanted and desirable."

"And the men who paid for the on-line experience wouldn't think anything of a mask—she could say it was to hide her real identity."

"We should add a mask to the list of missing items from what Homicide removed from her house. And Homicide doesn't know about her secret job? What about Reina? Do you think she knew?"

"I don't know, but I doubt her father did."

"This could be why she was murdered."

"Well, Abel may never have had a real date, but he knew all about women willing to have a 'date' on the internet."

"Abel, did he—?"

"He says he had too much respect for her."

"What else?" Pearlie asked, her excitement growing. "Does he know who killed Bethany?"

"He has an idea, but that's where it gets sticky. The day Bethany was murdered, he overheard the police chief bragging about having a date with his hot new girlfriend."

Her eyes lit as she put it together. "Oh, I knew it couldn't be a coincidence. Bethany. He was on his way to see his new girlfriend. Wait. Reina admitted to making that 9-1-1 call, but not to seeing the chief. Think she was lying about that, too?"

"Maybe. But if she admits that she and Julio were there, the D.A. will pressure her to testify against her boyfriend on a murder charge."

Pearlie held up the fingers on her good hand to count off the evidence.

"Okay, so by the time Reina made that 9-1-1 call, the chief was either dead, or on his way to it. How did the police chief find out where Bethany lived?"

"The chief could get a judge and a warrant for the message center, tell them it was part of an ongoing investigation."

"And when he found her, he must've been dumbstruck. She certainly wasn't as advertised."

"Exactly. Now what would a wife-beating misogynist like the chief do in a situation like that?"

"His ego wouldn't tolerate the idea that he'd been having phone sex with a freak," Pearlie said.

"The chief's history of beating on his wife says he'd be likely to eventually murder someone. She'd made a fool out of him, so he kills her. That accounts for one murder. Then who killed the chief?"

"Homicide," I said, "is satisfied that the chief was simply the second victim of an intruder and it's going to stay that way unless we can come up with the connection between the two."

"We have to find the laptop. It will confirm if the chief was a client of hers and give Homicide a suspect for Bethany's murder besides Julio Castillo."

"You mean, *I* have to find the laptop," I said. "You're staying put until the doctors say so."

"I suppose you're right," Pearlie said, examining herself in her compact mirror.

"So is your doctor cute?"

"Short, with a little bald spot on the back of his head, but I think he's sweet on me."

"He's not married?"

"Divorced. No kids, just moved here from Minneapolis and glad for a change of weather."

I shook my head in admiration. Who else could turn a rattlesnake bite into a date but my cousin?

"There's still the issue of who killed the chief. It had to be someone who knew he was *supposed* to be on a fishing trip," I said. "He would be familiar with the area and know all the best places to dump a body. It would have to be a man big enough to haul a grown man down the stairs and ...."

The words dried up in my mouth. There was one person who fit that description perfectly. One person who was connected with both Bethany and the chief, and who had no trouble charging uphill with my cousin over his shoulder, and who could've just as easily carted the police chief's body downstairs, out of the house, and knew a convenient place to dump a body. Mac Coker held the lien on the Dick property and the deputy had no way of paying off the back taxes. Or maybe Mac Coker had offered Able a deal he couldn't refuse.

"Deputy Dick," I said, regret and disappointment echoing my words. "Damn it. And he knew all about the mapped mine pits in Cochise County."

"First he's a hero and now he's dirty? Make up your mind, will you?"

"I-I'm not sure." Was he also Mac Coker's stooley?

"You're the one who said he wasn't as dumb as he looked."

"I did, didn't I?" If Abel killed the chief, at least Julio Castillo won't be indicted for murder.

"Okay," Pearlie said, warming to the subject. "The Chief killed Bethany, and Deputy Dumb, sorry, Abel, killed the chief, swept up any evidence that might smear Bethany's good name and dumped the chief in the nearest mine pit. It's going to be up to you to find out if Abel is responsible for killing the police chief. Think you can handle it by yourself?"

"Of course I can," I said, hoping I wasn't wrong. And to think I was actually starting to warm up to Abel Dick and his gun-toting granddad. I looked at my watch. It was five o'clock.

"Damn. I completely forgot Reina and she's probably been released by now."

"Don't worry about it. Mac Coker called earlier wanting to know how we were doing on the case, and I assured him we were still on the job, but I did have to tell him I was in the hospital on a count of me being snakebit and all. He said not to worry about Reina, he'd take care of her."

An uneasy feeling ran through me. Why would Mac Coker be willing to help Reina now, when earlier he'd been ready to kick her off the property?

"I wish you hadn't done that," I said.

"Why not? He was real nice about it, me being under the weather and all."

"Because he could be the one who's moving drugs in and out of his daughter's property."

"Mac? They arrested Julio Castillo, and you heard Mac, he and Bethany wouldn't stand for it."

"No, Pearlie. He said *Bethany* wouldn't have tolerated it. Mac Coker still has ties with the Chicago mob, and Abel says he's bought the tax liens on several properties along Red Mountain Road, including the Dick property."

"Maybe he wants it for a residential development," she said with a shrug.

"Don't defend him just because he hired us to find his daughter's killer."

I was beginning to think that Caleb had it right. Who in their right mind would hire Pearlie and me as private investigators? Maybe Mac Coker hired us to get inside information and he'd either pay us off, or finish us off. Ohmygod. I couldn't, shouldn't go there, at least not without proof.

Luckily, my dad and Caleb appeared at the door and distracted me from my escalating suspicions.

Pearlie smiled at the men and whispered, "Let's leave Mac Coker out of it for now, shall we?"

I had to agree with her. But the first chance I got I intended to let Caleb in on the whole story; the tax liens bought up by Mac Coker, the possibility that the police chief had murdered Bethany, and last but not least, that Abel Dick might've killed the chief in an attempt to save Bethany's reputation.

While my dad laid a bouquet on the bedside table and asked how she was doing, Caleb pulled me out of the room.

"We have to go," he said.

"Okay, but I've got something very important to tell you."

"Can it wait? We have a problem at home."

Looking glum, my dad joined us in the hall.

"He's right, Lalla. We sort of set a trap to keep thieves away from the Bugatti and—"

"A trap? What kind of a trap?" I asked.

Dad reached up and scratched his head. "Well, now, that's the thing. We think Uncle Ed had plans to rig the light switch to electrocute any unauthorized entry. There was this sign next to the door that said, *Danger* with lightning a bolt across the words."

"In German," Caleb added.

"Who puts up a sign in German?" I asked.

"Your great-uncle Ed," the men chorused.

"If it's nothing more than an electrical shock, why are you so worried?" I asked.

"Well now," Caleb said. "That's the problem. We got to thinking, with a valuable race car in the barn it should be more than just a shock."

"Yeah," Caleb said. "We found some fertilizer soaking in diesel fuel, and a small detonator wired in series with a battery, and since it was all just sitting there, we attached it to the light switch on the door. I put it on a three minute time delay so we could disarm it, but—"

"Three minute timer?" I asked, fear skittering down my neck at the potential disaster.

"We had every intention of disarming the thing," Caleb said, "but your dad was tired of waiting for you girls, so he called the Jeep dealership about a loaner, and they called back to tell us someone was bringing us a car about the same time you called about Pearlie and we completely forgot about disconnecting the whole thing."

"I guess we got distracted," Dad said. "By the time we dropped off the driver at the Chrysler dealership the security alarm started beeping."

Caleb held up the little gizmo with a blinking red light.

My eyes widened with horror. "The Bugatti could be toast by the time we get there!"

"Not to mention trying to explain a dead thief to the sheriff's department," Caleb said.

"Maybe not," Dad said. "We just can't remember if we attached the light switch to the bomb."

I didn't have to voice what we were all thinking: Would we find a burned out barn with the hulk of an expensive race car and a dead thief in the ashes, or was it a false alarm?

I ducked into Pearlie's room to explain, saw that her head was down and her eyes closed, so I backed out of the room and motioned to Caleb and my dad that we could leave.

Caleb drove the new loaner and kept to the speed limit until we turned off the highway, and then floored it. We bounced over potholes and ate dust for the next mile, but when we arrived at our property, the security lights were on. Someone had been here. The good news was that there was no fire or smoke coming from the barn.

Caleb swung the wheel over and parked.

"Still intact," he said, pointing to the chain and lock. "That's a good sign."

He and Dad got out and did a quick sweep of the property.

I was twitching my fingers on the dash, waiting for the guys to give me the all clear sign when Caleb opened my door.

"Your dad's new dog must've triggered the alarm. We left the porch light on so why don't you go inside, Lalla. Noah and I will keep checking."

A false alarm? And they had it rigged to blow up? I was relieved and furious. Selling the Bugatti was going to be my nest egg for retirement. Obviously, these boys needed something to occupy their time besides building a makeshift protection against thieves.

I unlocked the door to the house, stepped inside, switched on the light and laid Pearlie's purse on the entry table.

Something didn't feel right. I tried to shake off my apprehension, but I couldn't quite get over the eerie feeling that I was being watched.

*Oh get over it, Lalla. It's just that you've never come into this house alone at night.*

As I reached up to brush a strand of hair from my forehead, I noticed movement on the far side of the room.

I froze, then stealthily reached into the side pocket of Pearlie's bag and withdrew her gun. Holding it between both hands, I croaked, "Come out where I can see you!"

The shadowed figure halted, a glint of metal in his hand.

With my heart threatening to leap out of my chest, I crouched and pulled back the hammer.

"Drop it, or I'll shoot!" I yelled.

But instead of doing as I ordered, he pointed his weapon at me.

I fired and dove for cover behind the nearest couch.

I waited, expecting to hear him fire back, or shout, or run out the door.

Nothing.

Was he dead? Or was he waiting for me to come out from behind the couch? Before I could decide, the front door slammed open and Caleb shouted, "Lalla!"

"Get down," I hissed.

He threw himself on the floor next to me. "What happened?"

"A gunman. I-I think I shot him."

"Where?"

"On the other side of the living room."

"By the French doors?"

"Yeah," I said, breathless and panting.

In spite of my warning, he peeked around the side of the couch, then flicked on his flashlight

and scoured the dark interior.

"No one's there," he said, standing. "Let's turn on some lights."

I got up, my legs shaking from the adrenaline rush.

With the lights on, I scanned the room. Where'd he go?

Glancing at the French doors, I gasped and brought up my gun again. "There he is!"

Caleb hit my forearm, forcing the barrel down. "Don't shoot! It's your dad."

Dad quietly slipped through the door, a shovel in his hand. "What's all the ruckus?"

"You didn't see him?" I asked, my voice an octave higher.

"Who?" Dad asked, looking around.

"There was a man with a gun standing right where you are, Dad. If the French doors were open, then he escaped the way he came in."

My dad looked behind him. "I didn't see anyone."

My voice quaked and my hands shook. "He-he could still be out there."

Caleb gently pried my fingers off the Lady Smith. "Noah, close the French doors and come over here, will you?"

When my dad was standing next to us, Caleb turned off the table lamp and said, "Lalla. Tell me—what do you see?"

I looked across the dark room. This time, three people looked back. Caleb waved. The tallest figure waved back.

"Oh, but ...." My explanation trailed off into embarrassment. I'd come into a dark house, turned on an overhead light and seen my own reflection.

"Then," I asked, annoyed at my own idiocy, "who left the French doors unlocked? And you set the alarm, right? Oh, crap. I didn't even notice the alarm wasn't set."

"The French doors were locked and the house was alarmed," Caleb said. "Someone *was* in the house."

My dad reached over and turned on the table lamp. "Gol-durn thieves. What else did they steal?"

"What do you mean? They didn't take the Bugatti, did they?"

I looked at their hangdog expressions and knew without asking. "The lock on the barn door—?"

"Yeah, well," my dad said. "I guess if he could figure out our alarm code, he could pick a simple lock and disarm our makeshift security system. If I get my hands on that sonofabitch, I'll shoot him myself."

"That may have to wait," Caleb said. "Let's turn on all the lights and look around—just don't touch anything."

When we were finished, we gathered in the living room.

"Everything is as we left it," Caleb said. "No drawers opened, and our closets appear undisturbed."

"That quart of coffee ice cream in the freezer is gone," Dad growled.

"You polished off that carton after dinner last night," I replied. "There's nothing out of place, but still ...."

"Yeah," Caleb said, looking around. "Someone was here. But for what purpose?"

"They were quick about it," Dad said. "Maybe there were two of them."

"One to steal the Bugatti," Caleb said, his voice thoughtful. "The other came in to see if there was anything worth stealing in the house."

"I put a bullet hole in the glass for nothing," I added. "You did set the alarm before you left,

right?"

"Of course," Dad said, heading for the fridge. "Why wouldn't we?"

He seemed oddly nonchalant about our security system, but then my dad also thought a shotgun was the best deterrent for thieves.

Caleb cleared his throat. "We were so busy creating our bomb that we didn't set a new code for the house."

"What do you mean?"

"We set the code at 1-2-3-4 and left."

"Brilliant," I said. "Who's going to call the sheriff's department?"

Caleb scrubbed a hand over his crew cut. "I'll do it."

"Don't hurry or anything. They only stole an antique race car worth over million dollars."

"Yes, I know that, sweetheart," he said, reaching for his cell phone.

Furious that my retirement fund had been stolen, I forgot how this call would play out; we'd be up half the night while deputies tramped all over our property, when in all probability the thief was enough of a pro not to leave any clues. The Bugatti would be smuggled across the border and in some rich Mexican drug lord's garage by sunrise.

I looked over at my dad. In spite of his assertion that he was fine, my father was still on heart medications and needed his sleep. All my righteous indignation would be for nothing if he had to endure another go-round with the sheriff's department. At least we didn't walk in on these guys. Hang the Bugatti. I had what really mattered right here in the house.

I put a hand over Caleb's. "Wait."

His brows went up in question.

"We can always call it in tomorrow."

He gave me a reassuring squeeze. "Okay. Why don't you take a quick shower?"

I pulled my shirt away from my skin and sniffed. "Eeuw. I stink, don't I?"

"Yes, you do." Caleb tilted his head at the bathroom. "We'll talk after your shower."

Pearlie's purse lay where I had left it on the entry table, her Lady Smith now back in its zippered compartment. We'd left Pearlie sleeping, so why the nagging feeling that I'd forgotten something?

I was lathering my hair with shampoo when I remembered—Reina! She had been released this afternoon, and thanks to my cousin, Mac Coker offered to—how had he put it, he would *take care of Reina*. My heart kicked fearfully in my chest. If Mac Coker was responsible for ferrying drugs in and out of Bethany's place, would he decide that the unstable Reina was a liability? I quickly gathered my wet ponytail into a scrunchy and dressed.

Caleb was at the kitchen table sipping coffee.

"Dad go to bed?" I asked.

"He did," he said, and putting a silencing finger to his lips, he motioned me to follow him out onto the back patio.

I padded outside on bare feet, barely missing the new dog's water dish, but my other foot caught on something soft, and I leaned over to pick it up. Holding it to the light, I saw that it was khaki colored, ripped, and had slobber on it. I held it between two fingers.

"There was someone here, and it looks like Dad's new friend took a chunk out of his pant leg."

"Yes, and I found a couple of bugs, one under our bedside lamp, the other on the fridge, made to look like a refrigerator magnet," he said, and ignoring the slobber, rubbed the fabric between his fingers. "This is uniform weight."

"I hate to say it, but I think Deputy Dick may be the culprit."

"I thought you said the deputy saved Pearlie."

"He did, but he also told me that Mac Coker bought the tax lien on his granddad's property, and that Mac has also been buying up property along Red Mountain Road."

"What's that got to do with the break-in?" Caleb asked.

"Abel admitted that if he can't get the money to pay for the back taxes, his granddad will lose the property. He's been working full time as a deputy and part time as a tow truck operator, and it's still not enough."

Caleb blinked thoughtfully for a minute doing his humming thing, then said, "You think Mac is using the tax lien to blackmail Abel Dick?"

"Yes," I said, hoping he saw the connection as clearly as I did.

"You think Mac Coker is buying up property along a little used road to set up his daughter's place as a drug drop?"

"It's a direct link between Highway 92 and Bethany's property. It also fits with Mac Coker's relationship to the Chicago mob," I said.

"When did Abel tell you about the tax liens and the property buys, and why is it the first time I'm hearing about it?"

"He confessed to most of it at the hospital, and you rushed me out of there before I could tell you and after that ...."

"Okay. Start over," he said, perching on the edge of a folding chair.

I told him everything Abel said about Bethany's side job as an internet sex worker, and Abel's hints that the police chief was her killer.

"Then how deeply is he tied up with Mac Coker?"

"I'm getting to that. Abel was Bethany's friend," I said. "He liked and admired her, but I don't believe he killed her. I think the police chief murdered Bethany." I held up my hand for him to wait.

"We know he wasn't dressed for a camping trip, he was a known wife beater, and I suspect if you looked into it you will find his credit card payments for Bethany's service. I think Abel Dick or Mac Coker tried to come to her rescue. One of them killed the chief, but Abel knew where to dump a body."

"The mine pit. Yes, he's the local, not Mac Coker," Caleb said.

"Right. He knew all about the pits. He's part of it ... "

"He may be an accessory to murder," Caleb said, getting out of his chair. "I'm going to call Detective Tom. If Abel is missing a piece of his uniform, he'll be arrested."

"Please, Caleb, before you make that call, I need you to go with me to pick up Reina."

"The artist who overdosed? Isn't she still in the hospital?"

"Mac Coker picked her up when she was released today. I'm worried about her. If Mac is responsible for the drug trafficking here, he might decide that she's a liability he can't afford to keep around."

### *Chapter Thirty:*

Easing into the quiet yard of the art compound, I was relieved to see lights on in Reina's cabin.

"Thank God, she's here," I said, getting out of the car.

"Wait up, Lalla," Caleb said, holding me back. He had Pearlie's pink Lady Smith in his hand, but that didn't diminish the testosterone-fueled tension in his posture.

"No Caleb, it's dark and seeing you at her door will only frighten her."

I had just raised my hand to knock when I heard the blast of a shotgun tear through the night. The sound ricocheted against the buildings and died in the hills behind us. Somewhere close by, an engine shifted noisily then faded away.

I jerked back my hand. "What the hell was that?"

Caleb pushed in front of me and tried the door of Reina's cabin. It was unlocked. Nothing looked to have been disturbed, but no one was at home, either.

"The bedroom," I said, pointing to her bedroom door.

He pushed it open and turned on a light.

"Nothing. Let's go," he said.

"I couldn't tell where that gunshot came from, could you?" I asked.

"No," he said, "but it's a good enough reason to ask Mac Coker. Come on."

He pocketed the Lady Smith and started for the big house with me on his heels.

Using his fist, Caleb gave the door three hard raps. Without waiting for an answer, he turned the knob and the door swung open.

"I hear voices," I said, pushing past him.

In the living room all the lights were on, but no one was there. I backed out and listened.

"It sounds like moaning, and it's coming from the kitchen," I said, leading the way.

Caleb reached around for a wall switch, and suddenly we knew where the gunshot came from.

Deputy Abel Dick lay on the floor, clutching his abdomen. His eyes fluttered open, his mouth gasping to speak.

I knelt down and took his cold hands in mine. "Who shot you?"

"I tried to stop him," he wheezed through clenched teeth.

"Who? Abel, tell me who did this?"

He grabbed my wrist with a bloody hand. "Terrible mistake. He stole your little race car. Said it was to make up for-for losing his investment. No honor. He lied. I should've known better. Reina. She threatened to go to the police ...."

"Save your breath, Abel. We'll get help."

"No! There's no time. You have to-to listen. He's going to kill Reina and my granddad."

"Why?"

"I'm so ashamed. Said if I did what he told me to, he wouldn't take my granddad's place. I knew it was wrong, but Bethany was already dead, so ...."

"Abel, did the chief kill Bethany?"

"Yes, but Mac killed the chief. He force-fed Reina the last of Bethany's oxycodone, and took

her. He's going to kill them both, the lying bastard."

His grip on my wrist fell away and his eyes closed.

I gasped. "Abel!"

Caleb put his hand on my shoulder. "I'll call 9-1-1."

"Hang on, Abel, we'll get you an ambulance," I said. "Caleb?"

Caleb slammed the phone back onto the cradle. "It's dead, and I have no cell service here, either."

"What about Reina's cabin? She might have a land line we can use."

"We don't have time. Pull the car around to the back door. We'll call 9-1-1 and get the sheriff after Mac Coker on the way to the hospital."

"Can you carry him?" I asked. Caleb was as tall as Abel, but Abel outweighed him by at least fifty pounds.

"You get the car, I'll take care of Abel."

I was halfway to the car when Jason Stark drove into the yard.

I waved him to a stop and ran around to the driver's side of his truck. "Abel Dick has been shot," I gasped, trying to catch my breath.

Jason looked at me and then at the lights in the big house. "Where is he?"

"In Bethany's kitchen."

"Hop in," he said, and without waiting for me to close the passenger door, put the truck in gear and braked next to the back porch.

He got out and limped into the kitchen.

Seeing Abel on the floor, the dark blood pooling around his body, Jason quietly squatted and felt for a pulse.

"I'm sorry," he said, using his hands on knees to get to his feet. "He's gone."

I backed into Caleb's solid body, my hands shaking, tears marring my vision. Wiping my cheeks, I told Jason that we came looking for Reina, but found Abel gutshot, his dying words were that Mac Coker was responsible for killing the police chief and that he took Reina with the intent of killing her and Abel's granddad.

Jason's jaw tightened. "How long ago?"

Caleb looked at his watch. "Five-ten minutes?"

Jason blinked. "What kind of car is it? Is it fast?"

Caleb said, "It's very fast, very rare, but it's also old, has a small gas tank and the tires couldn't take him very far."

"It's also worth a million dollars," I said.

"He's gone to Abel Dick's place," Jason said. "The Dick's have a flatbed car hauler. He could put it on the truck and haul it out of here tonight."

"We can't wait for the sheriff's department to get here," I said. "If we take the back way over Red Mountain Road we can get to the Dick place in less than five minutes."

Jason held out his truck keys. "Do either of you have a weapon?"

Caleb nodded and accepted the keys with his thanks. "Call 9-1-1 and report the murder and where we've gone."

Jason assured us that his cell would work, and unable to look at Abel Dick's body one more time, I hurried after Caleb.

Buckling up, we took the rutted trail behind the house and climbed the steep hill, the beams of our lights skewering the dark and pockmarked road ahead of us.

I leaned against the restraints. "Can't you go any faster?"

"We'll catch him," Caleb said, dodging a pothole and coming dangerously close to the edge before swinging back onto the middle of the narrow road.

Just as the twin beams of the head lamps shifted upward to the night sky, the big truck slid over the crest and we headed downhill, jolting, rocking and bouncing as the truck picked up speed.

I pointed to the mailboxes on the left and shouted. "Don't miss the turn-off!"

"Got it," he said, turning the wheel hard over onto the one-lane road and then jamming the gas pedal to the floor.

The Dicks' security lights lit up the house and yard like a carnival show. There would be no place to hide, for Mac or for us.

Caleb let off the gas and coasted up to the yard.

"There's the flatbed truck," I said. "He's already got the Bugatti loaded."

"Do you see him?"

"He's not in the truck. I don't know where he is."

Caleb lowered the driver's side window, turned off his lights, and crept up to the shadowed side of the house.

"Stay put," he said, "I'm going to check out the car hauler."

"Caleb, no," I said. "He's just killed Abel Dick and he won't hesitate to shoot you, too."

"I have your cousin's revolver," he said, and removing Pearlie's pink Lady Smith from his pocket, he got out of the truck and crouched in the shadow of the house.

I pushed the passenger side open and came around to squat next to him.

His brows dipped but he didn't try to talk me out of staying. "Keep behind me, and for Christ's sake, stay low."

With me now glued to his shadow, he darted for the nearest window.

Beyond the bedroom, Reina was out cold on the floor, and Mac Coker was busily taping an unconscious Mr. Dick to a dining room armchair. Satisfied with his handiwork, Mac turned off the interior lights and stepped through the front door.

I gave the old wood-sash window a heave. "We can get in this way."

Just as I was about to climb inside, Caleb pulled me off the windowsill.

"Wait," he growled.

I threw up my hands. "What the hell, Caleb?"

"I'm not letting Mac Coker get away."

"I'd agree with you, but Abel said he's going to kill old Mr. Dick and Reina, remember?"

"He's already outside," he said, shoving me behind him again. "They're not going anywhere and he doesn't expect us."

### *Chapter Thirty-one:*

I was stuck to Caleb's back, creeping around the corner of the Dick house. Caleb's plan to overpower Mac Coker went south when the barrel of his shotgun was aimed at us.

"Come out where I can see you!" Mac shouted.

"Go back to the window," Caleb hissed. "Get them out of the house."

I clutched at his shirt. "No, Caleb! Don't—"

He swatted at me from behind his back, shoved the Lady Smith into the back of his pants, and stepped into the light with his hands in the air.

"Don't shoot," he said.

I was left in the shadows, now crazy with worry that Mac Cocker would shoot Caleb, but I did as he said, hugging the wall until I was back at the open window.

I removed my shoes and crawled inside.

Abel's granddad was duct-taped to a dining room chair, his eyes closed and his chin on his chest. I put two fingers on his throat and was relieved to feel a steady pulse. Then I went to Reina. A quick check of her pulse assured me that she was alive.

I could've sympathized with Mac for killing the police chief. What father wouldn't want to take the life of the man who murdered his daughter? But the bastard also murdered Abel Dick and was planning to kill both Reina and Abel's granddad. So what did he have planned?

I tiptoed to the front door. Seeing it slightly ajar, I rubbed my sweaty hands on my jeans and jerked it open. He turned like I knew he would, and Caleb was on him in a second, wrestling for the shotgun.

In a sly movement, Mac released one hand from the barrel and the other end of the weapon dropped, Caleb's hand going with it. Mac used the maneuver to slam the stock into Caleb's shoulder.

I heard the crack of bone and Caleb dropped to his knees.

Shock and fury blew away the last of my reservations and I threw myself at Mac's back, sending both of us rolling on the ground.

He shoved me off and made a grab for the revolver, and rolling into a squat, pointed the gun at my chest.

I raised my hands in defeat and when he waved me over next to Caleb, I meekly obeyed.

Caleb cradled his left arm.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I broke his collar bone," Mac growled. "You'll need to help him into the house."

Caleb grimaced as I pulled on his good arm to get him to his feet.

With Mac behind us, Caleb and I staggered up the steps and into the house.

"You'll never get away with killing all of us, Mac."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he said, motioning both of us over to a couple of side arm chairs. "Now sit down."

Still shaking, I stepped over Reina's legs to get to the chair.

"If Abel was helpful, then why did you have to shoot him?" I asked, as I crumbled onto the

chair.

"I meant to shoot him here. It would look like his granddad did it before turning the gun on himself. The old man has dementia and a shotgun; a dangerous combination as you well know,"

Then his face darkened into a hateful mask. "I had a perfectly choreographed play until you two showed up and spoiled it all."

"Just take the Bugatti and go," I said.

"Yes, thank you, I intend to. I already have a buyer for it. But we must have a last act."

I wanted to tell him that Jason Stark had already called 9-1-1, but that might hurry his departure and I wanted Mac caught and put in jail for the murders of Abel Dick, if not the police chief.

His dark eyes narrowed in amusement again. Was he gloating over the fact that he'd bested all of us? Probably. Pearlie and I had naïvely accepted our parts in his murderous game.

"How did it happen, Mac? Did you come to the house and find the chief in Bethany's room?"

Instead of answering, he held out his hand for our cell phones, then handed me the duct tape. "Tape him to that chair."

I wrapped Caleb's arms close to his chest and around the back of the chair. At least his broken collarbone would be immobilized.

"Now his feet," Mac said. "I kept my trips to the caverns separate from my visits to my daughter. Nights for the caverns and days for Bethany, and since I had groceries I drove around to the kitchen entrance. That's where I saw the stranger's car."

I handed Mac the tape. Seeing I wasn't going to fight him, he quickly taped my hands to the arms of the chair while he continued his story.

"Inside I heard music and voices. It was coming from upstairs. I was surprised, to say the least, that my daughter was entertaining a man in her bedroom. At first, I mistook the grunts and squeals for pleasure, but when the music stopped, it all became deadly clear to me. I took the stairs two at a time. My daughter's nude body had been thrown on the bed like a discarded toy, and the bastard who murdered her was zipping up as he backed out of the room. I didn't even have to think about it. I picked up the bat she kept by the door and cracked his skull."

"You called Abel Dick to help because he would know where to hide a body."

"Yes, but the chief wasn't dead when Abel put him into that hole," Mac said, and leaned over to tape my ankles together. "I went back, hoping he would regain consciousness. I meant to greet him with a Molotov cocktail and watch the bastard burn. Unfortunately, he had company."

"My father. *You* put my father's jacket at Bethany's property."

"It seemed the thing to do at the time, but I didn't know you all as well as I do now."

He rubbed his hands together, looking around the room. "Well, I believe my work is done here. Reina looks to be able to tolerate a much higher dosage of Oxy than I thought, and the old man will come around eventually, or not. Why don't you relax and wait for the sheriff? It won't be long now."

At the door, he turned, and with a bitter smile on his lips, said, "Goodbye, Miss Bains."

He switched off the wall light, and softly closed the door behind him. In another minute, I heard the flatbed truck crunch over gravel and leave.

Goodbye? An innocent enough word, but ominous coming from Mac Coker. Thank God he'd be arrested .... Wait. How did Mac know that the sheriff would be coming? Neither Caleb nor I told him. Jason had his cell phone to his ear when we left, didn't he? But Jason Stark was also sympathetic to pot smugglers. Abel said Mac used everyone. Did Jason call Mac to warn him instead of calling 9-1-1?

My hopes for a speedy justice for Abel's killer deflated with his final words—*He used all of us.*

Anger and fear at the possibilities fueled my determination to get free and I heaved the chair back and forth, the wood groaning with each assault. It would break, I knew it would.

"Caleb!" He'd passed out from the pain, poor dear.

"Yeah?" he looked up, his eyes unfocused.

"I think I can get it to come apart if you can kick my chair over."

He took a breath to speak and flinched from the pain. Licking at dry lips, he tried again. "He turned off the light."

The damp yellow light from the porch filtered in through living room window, making his already pale skin look as gray as death. He wasn't talking about the porch light.

"What light? I can see well enough to get to the door."

"You don't want to turn on the light switch next to the door."

"Why not?"

"Because," he said, stopping to sift a breath through clenched teeth. "I think he took a page from our homemade security system. The one he so easily deactivated when he stole your Bugatti."

Sweat lay on his forehead. His shoulder must be killing him.

"Ohmygod! The light switch is attached to blow up the house?"

"That's my guess. See the wires on the ceiling? They lead to the kitchen. It'll blow as soon as someone else comes through the front door."

"Caleb. Do it now. Kick the chair over."

He nodded, and clenching his teeth over the pain, jerked back his feet and struck out.

I crashed to the floor, wood splinters digging into my wrists, but one armrest was now detached from the chair. I used my free hand to remove the tape and untied my feet. Getting up off the floor, I went to the kitchen flicked the wall switch, plucked a knife from the drawer and sliced the duct tape off Caleb's chest, then went to work on his taped feet.

"It's set up in the kitchen, just like you said, and it looks a lot like your homemade bomb."

Holding up the roll of tape, I said, "I can immobilize your arm to your chest if you like."

"One time around, please," he said.

When I finished, I helped him stand, and he wobbled into the kitchen. "You see to Mr. Dick and Reina."

I did as he said, and tried to rouse Mr. Dick.

He muttered, reached up and rubbed the back of his head. "Someone knocked me plumb out."

"Mr. Dick, we have to leave. Can you stand up, please?" I asked.

Caleb came back. "Sorry, sweetheart, but I'd say Mac Coker has had some practice with bomb building. I'd rather get everyone out of the house and let the bomb squad handle it."

"Mr. Dick has a land line that works."

"I already checked. It's been torn out of the wall."

"Okay," I said, passing Mr. Dick over to Caleb. "You help Mr. Dick, and I'll take Reina to the window."

Caleb was helpless to do more than encourage the old man, but Mr. Dick became agitated and peeled Caleb's hand off his arm.

He leaned over to look at Reina. "Is she dead?"

"No, sir. She's been drugged. We interrupted Mac Coker before he could complete his plan to blow up you both in this house. Now we have to call the police so they can catch him."

"Told you he was a bastard. My phone—"

"—doesn't work, sir," I said.

"What's wrong with your friend?" he asked, thumbing over his shoulder at Caleb.

I wasn't certain if the old man was tracking too well, what with his dementia and a blow to the head, but I told him the most recent events, leaving out Abel's death.

"You saved my life and hers. Least I can do is carry her," he said, squatting down and just as his grandson had done, lifted the unconscious girl in a fireman's carry.

How was I ever going to be able to tell him that Mac Coker had murdered his grandson?

I put out a hand before he could get to the front door. "Not that way. We have to go through your bedroom window."

"Why the hell can't I leave through my own front door?"

When I told him, he was shaken, but willing to do as I asked and followed Caleb to the bedroom window.

Caleb crawled out, then Mr. Dick slid out and gently took the unconscious girl across the windowsill.

Caleb helped take the weight of the girl on his good shoulder but not before I heard a groan escape his lips. I worried that the effort would further damage his broken bone, but Caleb wasn't going to slow down for anything or anyone.

He led us to the passenger side of Jason's truck and opened the door.

Mr. Dick stood back, the girl still on his shoulders.

"You can put her inside now," I said. "We need to contact the sheriff's department and then get her to a hospital."

"Not in this truck," he said, nodding toward the rear.

Mac, damn him, stopped long enough to slash both the rear tires before he left.

"Come with me, children. I have other transportation," he said, and with Reina's head lolling on his back, he marched to a pole shed.

Inside was his old station wagon. After gently laying Reina on the backseat, he opened the front door, tipped down the sun visor and a set of keys fell out. He dropped them into my hands.

"Take Abel's car," he said, pointing toward a red Mustang "It's faster than my station wagon. Find that bastard and see that he goes to jail. Just don't wreck it, or Abel will have your hide," he said and winked. "I'll get this little girl to a hospital and notify the sheriff's department."

I opened my mouth to tell him the truth about Abel, but Caleb nudged me to keep quiet. I did, but only because Granddad Dick seemed incredibly lucid. I shouldn't have been surprised, Abel did say he was once Cochise County's sheriff.

"Thanks, Mr. Dick," I said.

After buckling Caleb in the passenger seat, I got in, started the engine, stepped on the gas, and the car leaped forward. This wasn't just a Mustang, it was a souped-up muscle car and Abel Dick's pride and joy. If his car could bring Mac Coker to justice, it would be worth it.

### *Chapter Thirty-two:*

At the crossroad to Highway 92, I kept my foot on the brake of Abel Dick's Mustang and argued about which way Mac Coker went.

"He said he had a buyer for it and he has dealings with Mexican drug lords. He'll take it to Mexico and Naco is the closest border crossing."

Caleb shook his head. "Mac couldn't possibly get the importation work done in the amount of time he's had the Bugatti."

"Have you seen the Naco border? It's got one lone guard house. All he has to do is bribe a guard."

Caleb, too weary from the pain to fight with me, waved me onto the highway. "The Naco station it is, then."

I turned onto the highway, exhaustion from this evening's catastrophes finally catching up.

The only thing keeping me glued to this road was my stubborn inability to let go. Never mind that he was stealing my retirement fund, I loathed the idea that Mac Coker thought he could orchestrate so many murders and get away with it.

"Look!" Caleb pointed to an empty flatbed truck parked by the side of the road.

In the light of the full moon, I detected the dusty tail of a car racing along the dirt road. He was heading south for Mexico, all right, and definitely not stopping for a border check.

I turned onto the road and stepped on the gas, determined to catch him before he got there.

"Lalla, stop! It's madness to follow now. He's obviously arranged for a transfer at the border. The only thing we'll get out of this are some cartel guns in our faces."

"If we don't catch up with him in another minute," I said, hunching over the wheel and urging the Mustang to go faster, "I'll drop back."

"And how do you plan to make him stop?"

"I'll run this baby right up his murdering, thieving, lying ass!"

I would've shoved it through hell if it meant that we'd catch him before he met up with the worst kind of criminals, the kind that would allow my race car to vanish into Mexico and Mac Coker to get away from the cold hard justice he deserved.

Caleb heaved a deep sigh and sank back into his seat.

I had the gas pedal jammed to the floorboards, and closed in on the wake of dust.

For a split second I saw taillights blink on, then off and suddenly the Bugatti rose above the swirling dust, launched like a rocket ship.

But instead of keeping its course to the moon, it somersaulted and crashed to earth with a bone jarring racket.

We pulled up to the wreck, the wheels still spinning and the engine smoking. I pushed through the lung choking dust until I could see the upside down Bugatti.

A single feather drifted down and landed on my nose. I brushed it away, and knelt down to look inside.

The driver's seat was empty.

"He's over here!" Caleb said.

As I got to my feet I noticed movement in my peripheral vision.

I swatted away the dust. Was the moonlight playing tricks on me, or was that what I thought it was? It's long neck lunging forward, spindly legs churning hell-bent for safer ground, for a place in the desert without loud engines or hard metal.

As the feathered apparition grew smaller and smaller, Karen Paquette, the Cochise County Search and Rescue team member's words came back to me: *You hit an emu and you'll get more than a mouth full of feathers, that's for sure.*

Caleb laid his good arm around my shoulders and squeezed. It wasn't the kind that made me gasp for breath and giggle, but it was the thought that counted.

"Is he ... ?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, glancing up at the stars coming alive above our heads "He was probably thrown before the car ever hit the ground. Wishbone Police Station is a ten minute drive from here."

"Shouldn't we move his body before we go?"

He waved his good hand to encompass the wide open space of the northern Sonoran Desert. "No one out here to bother it. At least not for the time it will take for the coroner to see where the body landed. What were you looking at out there?"

"Didn't you notice the feathers?"

"What feathers?"

"Mac Coker's escape was foiled by an emu."

"An emu?" He looked at me and then at the moon. "Sweetheart. It's been a long day."

"Yes, but I'm not hallucinating, Caleb."

"That's a pretty odd bird to be out here in the desert isn't it? Aren't they native to Australia?"

"Yes on both counts. Get in the Mustang and I'll tell you about it on the way to the police station."

### *Chapter Thirty-three:*

We planned our wedding and the reception in November, giving us enough time to let Caleb's shoulder heal. The sale of the wrecked Bugatti made enough to pay for repairs to our new adobe home. The extra money also was enough for us to comp our good friends, Roxanne and Leon Leonard a room at the swanky Letson Loft Inn. They could relax, visit art galleries, do the mine tour and then join us at Café Roka for the wedding and reception.

We got the news from a relative of the Dick's that Abel Dick's granddad's health took a turn for the worse and he passed away a few days before the wedding.

We would never know if Jason had anything to do with Mac's drug trafficking, but Jason did call 9-1-1 because by the time we arrived at Wishbone's Police Station, Detective Tom and Jason were gathering together a search party for us.

In a bittersweet twist of fate, Bethany had left a will with her attorney, leaving Reina in charge of a trust that would keep the property as a haven to artists for many years to come.

Reina and Jason came to the ceremony, but left before the reception since they were handling the delivery and sales for Bethany's paintings as a way to fund the trust.

Afterward, they had plans to visit Julio Castillo at the Arizona State Penitentiary. The charges of double homicide had been dropped, but Julio pleaded to the lesser charge of drug trafficking and he would be in prison for another long sentence. Though Reina wasn't giving up on him, she was going to continue with her own life and her art.

Mac Coker had indeed used his daughter's deformity and her need for privacy to his own selfish and criminal purposes. Bethany's laptop was recovered among Mac's possessions and the chief's phone number and credit cards verified his frequent visits via the internet to Bethany's alter ego. But Caleb had it right, the official report was that the man had died in the line of duty, and he was buried with all honors. At least it gave Darlene some peace of mind as well as her police widow's benefits.

Pearlie is still working hard at her on-line P.I. courses, and looking forward to relocating to Tucson, Arizona, since she doesn't think Modesto would be any fun without me.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when Caleb was offered the vacancy for police chief in Wishbone, but after we spent another star-filled night on the roof of our adobe home, it became abundantly clear to us that in spite of everything that had happened this last week, Arizona should be our new home.

Karen Paquette was invited to our wedding, but had to decline as she had a prior commitment in Washington, D.C., but she did send a wedding gift with her card. It was an invitation to join the Cochise County Search and Rescue team. I just might take her up on it.

Dad will fly home to California to negotiate the sale of the ranch to the hungry developers who thought their persistence had finally worn the old man down. But Noah Bains drives a hard bargain and the buyers will pay dearly for the privilege.

He's already put a down payment on twenty acres between here and Wishbone, and he's looking forward to the peace and quiet of high desert country.

But first, he has to do something about his new dog. Phantom, that darn dog, has taken to

carrying off shoes and he's just disappeared with one of Caleb's new boots

The End

**Note to readers:**

I would like to explain why I have chosen not to continue my stories with Lalla Bains in the crop dusting industry. As some of you may know, my son, John Shanahan, died in a work related accident while working as an aero-ag pilot in California. Though he left me with enough stories about the industry to complete two more books, after I finished *A Dead Red Oleander* I knew it was time to move on.

In 2001, my husband and I bought a summer home in S.E. Arizona while we sailed Mexico during the winter months. Then in 2005, I, and another artist, opened an art gallery on Main Street, Bisbee Arizona. I always knew that I would someday write a book featuring Bisbee, because for such a small town, it's quite the hotbed of intrigue, some of it, okay a lot of it, is humorous.

And since most of the comments about my Dead Red series are centered around the characters and not the job, I decided that the crop dusting aspect would not be missed.

Wishbone, however, is not on any Arizona map. I made it up. For those of you who are familiar with Arizona, you may think this town looks a lot like Bisbee. Yep. So why the fictitious name? Because I wanted the option to change some physical locations, setting, and people, and I have plans to write more, a lot more about this area, and would like not to have to worry about locals taking potshots at me when I do it!

Lalla Bains-Stone, Caleb Stone, Dad Noah Bains, will again be joined by Pearlie in *A Dead Red Miracle* where Lalla, as newly minted Arizonian, will attempt to train her dad's Australian Cattle dog as an air-scent tracker for the canine unit at SARS.

If you enjoyed this 4<sup>th</sup> book in the Dead Red Mystery series as much as I enjoyed writing it, I hope that you'll consider leaving a favorable review on Amazon.

There are three more in the Dead Red Mystery Series, starting with:

#1-A Dead Red Cadillac <http://getBook.at/B004QOAZO2>

#2-A Dead Red Heart <http://getBook.at/B004W9NIOU>

#3-A Dead Red Oleander <http://getBook.at/B008ALR6GC>

Or get all three as a boxed set on Kindle: <http://getBook.at/B00GY8W5D2>

And coming in 2015, A Dead Red Miracle.

**Other books on Kindle by RP Dahlke:**

***A romantic sailing mystery trilogy:***

A Dangerous Harbor <http://getBook.at/B0062D4GM2>

Hurricane Hole <http://viewBook.at/B00FT1E11C>

Coming next in the trilogy – Dead Rise

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**You can reach RP Dahlke at her website:** <http://rpdahlke.com>

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**About the Author**

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.

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