



Except from *Desert Jade: A Letty Valdez Mystery*  
from Chapter 3  
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Letty Valdez clicked the Send button on her computer screen. Then she pushed her rickety office chair back from her desk. She stretched her long legs out in front of her and sighed deeply. She was tired, but she felt really, really good. The departing email with attached file folder was the final report for her latest investigative case. Sending the report to the client was the last step in several weeks' worth of work. This case had been another skip job. Her task had been to find her client's former business partner who had disappeared one day about six months earlier, taking with him nearly a million dollars from the company's bank account. It took her a while, but Letty finally found the skip living the high life in Playa del Carmen on the Caribbean coast. The client would be pleased. Now it was time for his attorneys to take over.

The phone rang. Letty ignored it.

The phone rang again. This time she answered. It was a potential client, someone in the Foothills of the Catalina Mountains who identified herself as Mrs. Baird. She wanted to talk about a shooting that had occurred a few days earlier. Letty suggested calling the police. Mrs. Baird said the police had been there, and they hadn't done their job. She said the wrong person had been arrested. Letty frowned. Okay. She agreed to meet the potential client and set an appointment for the next day. She doubted much would come of it. The police were not as incompetent as many people seemed to believe. She hung up the phone and looked out of the window again.

Late afternoon merged into evening. It was Letty's favorite time of day on the desert...that half hour just before the sun set. The city of Tucson glowed with a gold-tinged light. Palm tree fronds rippled dark against a dusky mango and watermelon sky. As far as Letty was concerned, winter evenings like this one were the best. She could see a lot of the sky now. Her office was a nondescript, strip mall address, but her window had a million-dollar view of the Santa Catalina Mountains on the north side of the city. She swiveled her chair to look out and see the mountains turn a coppery gold as the sun journeyed downward into the Sonoran Desert's western horizon.

Once the light turned to a soft glow, Letty turned back toward her desk. The last light of the setting sun glinted on the glass of a framed certificate on the wall. It caught Letty's eye. The document proclaimed that she, Ms. Leticia Fernanda Antone Valdez, was a licensed private investigator in good standing and fully certified to work in the state of Arizona.

It had taken three years of hard work and a whole lot of help from Marv to make it, but now she could legitimately claim to be a self-employed, licensed private investigator. She started as Marv Iverson's assistant, and over time, she had become his business partner. Then when Marv retired, Letty took over the agency. As far as Letty was concerned, Marv had saved her. He gave her a job and a way to support herself and her family. The job turned into a career and a life, something she thought wasn't possible after the devastation she'd lived through in Iraq. She could still remember the words in the brief ad on Craigslist. "Private investigator seeks assistant. Will train. Veteran preferred." Letty could never repay Marv.

She sighed again, this time from satisfaction. She would go home now and make something for supper. Her baby brother Will had a job that kept him at the bike shop until seven p.m. Letty liked the idea of fixing her little brother some supper and eating with him. It seemed so normal – a family kind of thing after the lives that both of them had lived. She was trying hard to give him a stable home.

The cell phone on her desk buzzed for the second time. The first time that the phone had announced an incoming call, Letty ignored it in favor of finishing her report to the client. This time she decided to answer. She saw that the call was coming from Jade Lopez.

"Hey, Jade. What's up?" It was unusual for Jade to call Letty, and she wondered why.

"Oh, Letty. Thank God! I thought you'd never answer!"

Letty's eyebrows went up. That must have been Jade when the phone buzzed the first time.

"I'm here now."

"Letty, I don't know how to start. I came home from school. You know today's the last day of school, we had a Feliz Navidad fiesta, and I gave all my kids a send-off and wished them Merry Christmas, and I talked to several parents, too. You know how it is. I won't see them until after New Year's. Up till then, everything was normal."

Jade's voice was strained, and her words spilled out so fast that Letty had to listen carefully to catch everything.

"And then what happened?"

"I came home like usual. I rode my bike. You know I'm trying to get more exercise. Maggie told me if I get more exercise I'll feel better. Something about endorphins."

"And then what happened?"

"I came home and parked my bike in the backyard, and I went in and changed my clothes, and I got a beer and went up on the roof, and I guess I fell asleep."

An image of Jade's house in the historic Sam Hughes District of midtown Tucson came into Letty's mind. She had only been there a couple of times on those rare occasions when Jade had hosted Sunday morning coffee on her back patio. Usually the Sunday morning coffee was at

Maggie's house, and once in a while at Seri's condo. Jade's house was a small, well-kept adobe with a backyard surrounded by a six-foot adobe wall. The house had been a gift from Jade's affluent parents when Jade and Carlos married. The newlyweds could never have afforded the neighborhood otherwise. The house was enhanced with native landscaping that included some very mature palo verde and mesquite trees.

The back patio with its ramada had plenty of shade during the heat of summer days. The patio was a comfortable place to sit with her friends and drink coffee on quiet mornings. Letty knew that both Jade and Maggie came to coffee from early Mass on Sunday. She didn't know what Seri typically did on Sunday mornings, but Mass was unlikely. Probably she was reading an obscure text on Australian aboriginal art or quantum physics or something equally esoteric. Not Letty. She didn't go to Mass. After all the things she had seen, she wasn't at all sure that there was a god, and if there were, he just might be a real bastard with a sick sense of humor.

"Okay, so you're on the roof and then you woke up?"

"Yes...and I heard something down below in the backyard on the patio, and I looked and there was this man coming out of my house!" Her voice got all squeaky and breathless.

"Who was he?"

"I don't know!"

"Did he take anything?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't know. He didn't seem to be carrying anything."

"Okay. So then what happened?"

"I ducked down so he couldn't see me, but I was watching as best I could. He just came out of the back door, looked around, and then went out the side gate."

"So now he's gone?"

"No! I mean yes, but there's the other man. Let me explain. I decided to go down the ladder and go into the house to see if he'd stolen anything. And I sort of slipped and fell off the ladder."

In her mind, Letty saw the heavy mesquite branch ladder that usually rested up against the back of Jade's adobe house. Letty thought it was just for looks. Many affluent folks kept things like that around as decoration, especially the snowbirds who came only in winter to escape their northern winters. But apparently this wasn't just for decoration if Jade was using it to climb up on the roof. Letty wondered if anyone knew this about Jade, that she was spending time on her roof. They were all worried about Jade. She didn't seem as sad as she had been, but she still wasn't the same since Carlos disappeared.

Jade's breathing got really shaky now.

"I slipped, and I was going to fall but he caught me."

"Who caught you?" Letty was alarmed now.

"This Chinese dude. Well, really I don't know if he's Chinese. He just looks Chinese. Or something Asian anyway. Japanese. I don't know."

"This was the man who was in your house?" Letty gritted her teeth. Get to the point, Jade.

"No! The second man! He held me for a just a second, and then he set me down on the patio."

"What's he doing now? And who is he?"

"He told me that he's a cop. His name is Joe."

"Joe? That doesn't sound very Chinese. Is he an American, a Chinese-American I mean? And where are you now?"

"I'm on the patio. He's standing here. I don't think he's American. He speaks with an accent. He said he's a good guy."

"A good guy?" Letty snorted. Jade was a real sweetheart but amazingly naive.

"I'm sorry, Letty. I didn't know who to call."

"It's fine for you to call me, Jade, but if your house was broken into, you should call Tucson police."

"Well....not exactly broken into."

Letty sighed again. How many times had she and Maggie and Seri warned Jade that she really should lock up her house and lock the side gate leading to the backyard when she left for school?

"Besides all that," Jade said in a low voice, "what good are the cops anyway. They don't do a damn thing."

Letty understood Jade's cynicism and felt a stab of guilt. Jade had no faith or trust in law enforcement. They hadn't been able to find Carlos, so they were useless in Jade's eyes. And Letty reminded herself that she hadn't found Carlos either, despite the fact that she was normally very good at finding people.

"Okay. Go in the house. Tell this Chinese good guy to stay outside in the back, and you lock the doors and wait for me," Letty told Jade. "Don't open the door again. Okay?"

"Okay," Jade agreed. "Okay. I'm in the house now. He's out there now on the patio. He just sat down on one of the patio chairs."

Oh, great, Letty thought. Making himself comfortable.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," Letty said.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Letty."

The drive across the city went fast despite the Friday five o'clock traffic. Everyone was in a rush to go home or, more likely, to go out to dinner at one Tucson's eateries. It was still warm enough to sit out on the patio and have a drink with friends while waiting for dinner to be served. Letty caught every green light, which she considered a minor miracle. Night had fallen when she pulled up in front of Jade's house. Letty could see that Jade had turned on every light in her house and outside, too, on the front porch and along the side of the house where the unlocked gate stood open.

The residential street Jade lived on was quiet most of the time, and like many streets in Tucson, there were no street lights. The city, including the surrounding region, was an important center for astronomy, and astronomers had convinced Tucsonans that too many city lights or lights of the wrong kind caused a kind of light pollution. So many streets stayed dark. The

payoff for this was the ability for anyone to just look up and see millions of stars in the clear, dry desert night. The downside was that nighttime thieves were harder to see. Of course, there were plenty of daytime thieves, too.

Letty walked along the side walkway and came around the back of Jade's house. She saw the Chinese man immediately. He had been sitting on a patio chair, but at the sound of Letty's footsteps, he rose to his feet and faced her. He nodded politely. Letty said nothing. She knocked on the back door without turning her back to the man. She called out to Jade.

She could hear Jade moving around in the kitchen....cooking, no doubt. Their friends Seri and Maggie had teased Jade about what a little homemaker she was, always cooking and decorating for holidays and loving on those little third-graders that she taught every day. That is, they teased her until Carlos disappeared. Jade didn't have anyone to keep a home for anymore. Letty thought maybe Jade cooked now to deal with her anxiety. It's a wonder she wasn't hugely fat, but somehow Jade had stayed slender, even thin. It occurred to Letty for the first time that Jade might be cooking, but she might not be eating.

Letty looked directly at the man standing about ten feet away.

"My name is Letty Valdez, and I am a private investigator. And you are?"

"I am Zhou Liang Wei. I am a Detective Inspector from the Ministry of Public Security, People's Republic of China."

Letty noticed immediately that the man spoke English quite well. His accent was Chinese, but also faintly British.

By this time, Jade had opened the back door. More light spilled onto the patio. Letty took a closer look at the uninvited foreigner. She guessed Zhou was about five feet nine inches tall in his bare feet, maybe even five feet ten inches. He was a couple of inches taller than Jade – but not slender like Jade. He was all muscle. He looked very fit in an athletic way, like someone who worked out regularly. He wasn't so much a pumped-up muscle builder but more someone who focused on the agility and strength needed to accomplish specific tasks, like taking out an opponent in hand-to-hand combat – the kind of skills a cop would need, Letty guessed. He probably outweighed Jade by thirty pounds but every pound was muscle. Although Zhou had to look up to Letty's six feet, Letty intuited that she would have a hard time bringing this man down despite her size and her training in martial arts. She was sure that he was a martial arts practitioner, and a good one, too. The man looked relaxed, but she knew he was sizing her up as well.

Letty gestured for Zhou to enter the house before her. Once in the kitchen, Letty and Zhou pulled out identification at the same time and traded documents with each other. Letty looked closely at Zhou's red leather passport with the seal of the People's Republic of China on the front. It looked real enough. His police identification – or at least that's what she guessed it was – also looked like a typical cop's badge and ID, but all the words were in Chinese characters. Like most passports and other official documents, his photo was bad. It barely looked like the man in front of her. He seemed indistinguishable from any other Chinese man in his age group, which Letty guessed was early 30s. His clothing was average – khaki pants, a navy blue t-shirt

under a long-sleeved light blue cotton shirt rolled up at the sleeves. His clothing was chosen to not attract attention.

Jade said, "Your name is Joe?"

He nodded yes with a short, sudden downward movement of his head. "Not American name Joe, but Chinese name Z-H-O-U." He spelled the word, using the British "zed" instead of "Z". "I explain. My name sounds like your "Joe", but in pinyin, it is spelled Zed-H-O-U. Zhou is my family name, and LiangWei is my individual personal name. Reverse of western names."

"Zhou," Jade repeated. "Joe."

Letty and Zhou traded identification again, and both slipped badges back into pockets.

"Why are you here?" Letty asked sharply.

"Interpol informed the Ministry of Public Security in Beijing that possibly a Hong Kong triad criminal gang is moving into the Arizona region. I have experience working with Interpol. I was chosen to investigate."

"Interpol?" Letty sounded dubious even to herself. Interpol was short for International Criminal Police Organization. She had read about it on the web just because she was curious after seeing a film with Interpol agents. She remembered that Interpol was headquartered in France, and its purpose was to help the police of member countries to cooperate on problems such as organized crime and terrorism. Most countries in the world were members of Interpol. The organization did not make arrests, but it kept extensive databases on criminal activity and provided that information to police to help them cooperate in bringing down criminals. She'd heard of triads but knew little about them. About the Ministry of Public Security in China, Letty knew absolutely nothing. In fact, this was the first she'd ever heard of it.

"So you are a detective?"

"Yes. I am one of the Detective Inspectors. Allow me to explain. I arrived at Tucson International Airport today. I arrived one day early. I expected to follow the triad gangster who is scheduled to arrive tomorrow. At the airport I saw the triad member. Not tomorrow. He came today. His name is Bao. I followed him. He did not lead me to see others in his gang. Instead he came to this woman's house." Zhou gestured to Jade. "Bao looks for something or maybe looks for someone."

Zhou turned to Jade. "Now I want to know why this man comes to your house," He looked at Jade directly. "Do you know this man? Do you have a business or a personal relationship with him?"

Letty noticed that Zhou's eyes had narrowed. His voice was quiet yet firm, and his body was an odd combination of relaxation and tension. Letty had a sudden memory of a rattlesnake she'd seen once across a dry wash in the shade of a scrawny mesquite tree. The rattler was relaxed into a coil, quiet, watchful, and yet ready to strike at the least provocation.

"Certainly not!" Jade said hotly. "I've never seen him before. I have no idea why he was here. I have *no* relationship of any kind with that man. He's a stranger!"

Zhou frowned and looked at Letty. "This is not good. Bao is a very dangerous man."

"This is hard to believe," Jade said. "This isn't California. We've had a small Chinese settlement here since the mid-nineteenth century, but these days, most of the Chinese in Tucson are students at the university. We don't even have a Chinatown."

"What exactly are you investigating?" asked Letty.

"The triads are involved in many illegal activities such as drug smuggling, people smuggling, counterfeit money, money laundering..." He shrugged his shoulders as if the list were too long to convey. "In recent times, an important triad gang called Wo Hop To is suspected of working in northern Mexico and southern Arizona. We do not know what they are doing. Possibly they are smuggling Chinese citizens into the U.S. across the Mexican border. Or perhaps smuggling illegal drugs. Or both. We do not know. We know only that triad members have been seen here. Interpol alerted the Chinese government to send an agent to investigate. I am the agent." He smiled.

Letty considered this. An immigration investigation was definitely plausible. Every year hundreds of illegal immigrants crossed the U.S. border into Arizona. Most of the immigrants were poverty-stricken Mexicans or Central Americans looking for a job, a minimum wage job, any job. They just wanted to feed their kids. Many of them got caught, but for every one caught and sent back, two made it across the border successfully. They eventually found the jobs that other Americans wouldn't do.

"I have heard that there were a few Chinese and some other nationalities, too, trying to cross the Arizona border," Letty admitted. "I read in the paper that a couple of our local Chinese American businessmen who still spoke some Mandarin were hired by the local police to talk to the Chinese illegals – to find out where they came from and who was trying to smuggle them in and, most of all, to find out where they were going."

"Yes, we have information about illegal smuggling. Also there are rumors of Chinese women forced to become..." Zhou hesitated, "sex slaves."

Letty nodded her head in agreement. Human trafficking and sex slavery were known problems.

Jade interrupted. "That may be," said Jade, "but right now I'm hungry."

Letty sighed. Jade didn't seem to be taking this seriously.

"Please, sit down," Jade gestured toward the table. "I made a little something to eat while we were waiting for Letty." The table was covered with dishes filled with food.

"I'm meeting Will later for supper, Jade. In fact, I need to go call him." Letty rose from the table and went into the backyard, closing the door behind her. She didn't want Zhou to hear her make her phone calls.

Zhou sat and watched Jade make a burrito. He followed her example, starting with folding one end of the tortilla up so that the stuffing couldn't escape and then wrapping it around the other ingredients. He ate with enthusiasm. Jade smiled.

"What is this?" he asked.

"What is what?"

Zhou gestured to the food, and Jade gave names for each food item...some in English and some in Spanish. "Tortilla, shredded chicken, lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, salsa. And you just made a burrito."

Zhou took a big bite and nodded. "Burrito. Very good."

"How long has it been since you ate?" Jade asked.

"Hmmm...two days...maybe three. I did not eat well before. Airport food is usually bad. I don't like it. I did not sleep well," His mouth was full. "I came from Beijing, before that, Zambia. Long trip."

"Zambia? That's in Africa," Jade said. "Do you travel a lot?"

Zhou nodded and filled his mouth again. Jade followed his example. They ate in silence.

On the back patio, Letty made a quick call to Will's cell phone and left a message that she might be delayed a little while. Then she called Marv Iverson. She could see Zhou and Jade in the bright light of the kitchen. The air around her had taken on a nighttime chill.

"Hey, Marv."

"What do you want? I'm watching football." He was always like that – gruff and short with her. Fact is that he was a teddy bear who had turned out to be someone that Letty could always count on.

"Big deal, Marv. You know you're always watching football. I need some help. Remember Jade Lopez, the woman whose husband, Carlos, disappeared about a year ago? She just called me. I'm at her house now. A Chinese cop is here...or so he claims. He says he's following a triad gangster. You know triads are those Chinese mafia-like criminal gangs. This Chinese cop says he followed a triad gang member to Jade's house. The triad member went into Jade's house. We don't know why for sure. Apparently he was looking for something."

"Well, well. That's different from the usual stuff we deal with. And it's not good if it's true. Triad gangsters are worse than the mafia from what I hear. They like to chop up people with hatchets. What was the intruder looking for?"

"We don't know. In fact, the whole story might be a bunch of bull. I'll call Tucson Police. Don't you know someone high up in the police department or in Homeland Security who could tell us if they are expecting a Chinese policeman?"

"Yeah, I'll call Sam Lambert. That dick head. He's not going to like this. Mere mortals like you and me are not supposed to know about Homeland Security business. I'll call you back in a few minutes."

That's what Letty loved about Marv. He would drop whatever to help her. And this time she could tell that he was interested in what she was telling him. It's not every day that Interpol and Chinese cops come into their conversation.

Next Letty dialed Adelita Garcia at Tucson police headquarters, but got voice mail instead.

"Hello, Adelita. This is Letty Valdez. Please give me a call when you can."

Letty went back into Jade's kitchen and sat down at the table.

"Jade, are you sure nothing is gone?" Letty asked.

"I didn't find anything obvious, but I can tell he got into my stuff."

"Like what?"

"Drawers opened. The bed covers are disturbed like he looked under the mattress. Books moved around on the shelf."

Why would some Chinese triad gang member be at Jade's house and what the hell was he looking for? Could it be something as simple as the wrong address? Letty could think of no possible connection Jade might have with Chinese gangsters.

"Here, Letty," Jade said. "Please have something to eat."

Letty half-heartedly put together a burrito, made it thin, and took a bite. She still had hopes of eating with Will.

Jade turned to Zhou. "Your English is good. Very good."

"Thank you. You are too kind," Zhou said. "My father was a businessman, and my family frequently lived abroad." Zhou paused. How easily the lie came. Actually his father had been heavily involved in espionage for the Chinese central government. His father's "business" was a cover while he collected as much information possible – all of which went directly back to Beijing. He was part of a network of spies from every nation that spent time in the world's major capitals. One of his assignments was to figure out which of the American and British embassy staff were actually spies for their own countries.

Because of his father's clandestine operations, Zhou had spent many of his growing-up years in the West although his father made sure he spent regular long periods in China as well. Later, working with Interpol led to long periods in France. As a result, Zhou knew he didn't completely fit into the West, but he didn't really fit into China either. Sometimes he felt homeless.

"My father moved our family around a lot," Zhou continued. "I went to an American high school for a brief time, and I earned my bachelor's degree from University College London. Also, I watched American television to learn slang. I watched *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewife*. That's how I learned the traditional American lifestyle and language."

"Oh, Lord," Letty said. *Friends*, *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. Traditional American lifestyles? Good grief.

Jade covered her mouth with her hand to hide her grin. Her eyebrows arched upward.

Zhou laughed at their reaction. His face, which had been all serious and professional cop demeanor earlier, was suddenly all dimples and flashing white teeth. Letty noticed for the first time that he was actually quite good looking. She also noticed that Jade was blushing. Hmm...that's not good, Letty thought. But then again, her blush may mean nothing. Jade's red face was nothing new. Jade, the red-headed, freckled-faced Irish-American girl with the Mexican Spanish name, blushed at anything and everything.

"You, please. What is your name?" Zhou asked. He was looking at Jade.

"Jade. Jade Lopez."

"Jade?"

"Yes. You know, like the green stone."

Zhou repeated the word in Chinese. "Jade in my language is..."

"Yùe" interjected Jade.

"You speak Mandarin?"

"No. I wish. When I was a kid, we lived in Australia for one year. My dad had a consulting job. My parents hired a Chinese couple to cook and clean and organize everything and take care of me, too. They called me Jade... Yùe," she explained.

Zhou nodded.

Letty's phone buzzed. Marv. She left the table and went to the backyard again, closing the door behind her.

"Your boy may be legit," Marv said. "Lambert says that they were expecting a detective from the Chinese Ministry of Public Security to fly into Tucson tomorrow. He's supposed to report to their office. And Lambert was not happy to know that I knew about this cop, and that you made contact with him first. I had to listen to him rant about security leaks and interfering people – meaning interfering me and interfering you. He wants you to come in, too, to find out why you are involved. But I gotta tell ya, Letty, it gave me a hard-on to jerk Lambert's chain." He laughed.

Letty knew that Marv and Lambert went way back. There was bad blood between them that Marv had never explained. But they had both learned that helping each other out was in each man's own best interest. So they stayed in touch and shared info, always grudgingly.

"Well, if Lambert asks again, I'm not *involved*. I'm just trying to help Jade."

"You can tell him yourself. He wants you and the Chinese cop to show up in his office at eleven tomorrow morning.

"Okay. I'll go. Marv, do you have an experience with foreign agents, or detectives...or whatever? He calls himself a detective inspector, and he says this triad intruder is dangerous."

"Nope. I only have experience with local boys and the Mexican cartel scum. Anybody who lives near the border has to deal with those scumbags at some point. I've never been to China except a layover in Hong Kong once, but that was back when it was British. I know lots of Vietnamese but no Chinese. But I've heard about those triad gangsters. They have a rep for being really nasty, violent SOBs. Be careful, Letty. And let me know what happens."

"Thanks, Marv. I'll stay in touch. Go back to your football."

Back at the table, Zhou and Jade were finishing their burritos when Letty returned.

"Mr. Zhou, aren't you supposed to report in to authorities here? And Jade, maybe we should think about finding you another place to stay until we figure out what's going on here."

Zhou nodded yes, and Jade shook her head no.

"No way, Letty. I don't want to go anywhere. This is my home. Where would I go anyway? My parents are on a trek in South America, Maggie has a full house for the holidays, Seri won't be back from her trip until Sunday, and you don't have room for me. I'll be okay. And I promise, cross my heart, that I'll keep this place locked up, and I won't let anyone in. Promise."

Zhou and Letty exchanged glances.

Zhou turned to Jade and said, "The triad gangsters are very dangerous. We do not know why they came to your house. It is best to go to a safe place."

"There's no safe place," Jade said with a frown. "I'm staying here. That's it. Period."

Letty shook her head. She knew Jade was thinking of Carlos again.

"Zhou, what about you?" Letty said. "I want to go with you when you visit the authorities."

Zhou hesitated. "I must see your Homeland Security and Tucson police. I will call them tomorrow. Then I will call you. We can go together. You will see then that I am a good guy. Okay?"

"Okay, Mr. Good Guy," Letty said. "Let's make it tomorrow morning. How about eleven o'clock? I have a client I have to see tomorrow afternoon. But first we're going to take a walk around and make sure this place is secure."

Letty went room to room, Zhou at her shoulder, and together they made sure all the windows were closed and locked. Letty felt better seeing that all the windows had decorative wrought iron security bars that made a window break-in very difficult. The front door had a dead bolt on it. The back door also had a dead bolt and chain although the door itself looked old and easy to smash in.

"And you. Did you just walk in past the side gate, too?" Letty sighed when Zhou nodded yes. "And where are you going to be tonight?"

"I first came over back wall, I hid in trees, then I passed through the unlocked gate. My rental car is behind the wall. I will go to a hotel tonight."

Letty shook her head. For a place that looked really secure in a neighborhood that was supposed to be safe, Jade's house was surprisingly vulnerable.

"This place is way too easy to get into," she muttered to herself. Zhou nodded in agreement.

Finally Letty was as satisfied as she could be, and said goodbye to both. Jade started cleaning up from dinner. Zhou followed Letty into the backyard, closing the door behind him.

"Miss Leticia?"

"Call me Letty."

Zhou nodded. "Bao is a 49er. The 49ers are the foot soldiers of the triad organization. Bao is hot-headed and impulsive. I can confirm that he has killed several people. He plays with them before killing...like a cat plays with a mouse. Bao enjoys hurting people. He forces his prisoners to cry and beg for release from pain before he kills them," Zhou looked at Letty intently. "Also he likes women. He will....," Zhou seemed to struggle for a word, "He will abuse women first, then hurt them, then kill them."

Letty felt a chill go up her spine. A sensory memory exploded in her brain for about two seconds, leaving her shuddering. Then she was pulled back again to the present. "You mean he rapes them first, tortures them, then kills them in some really painful way."

"Yes," Zhou said firmly, "You understand my meaning. He is very bad guy."

"Yeah, a bad guy. Okay, then let's do what we can to keep Jade safe."

"I agree. We cooperate. Let us make Miss Jade safe."