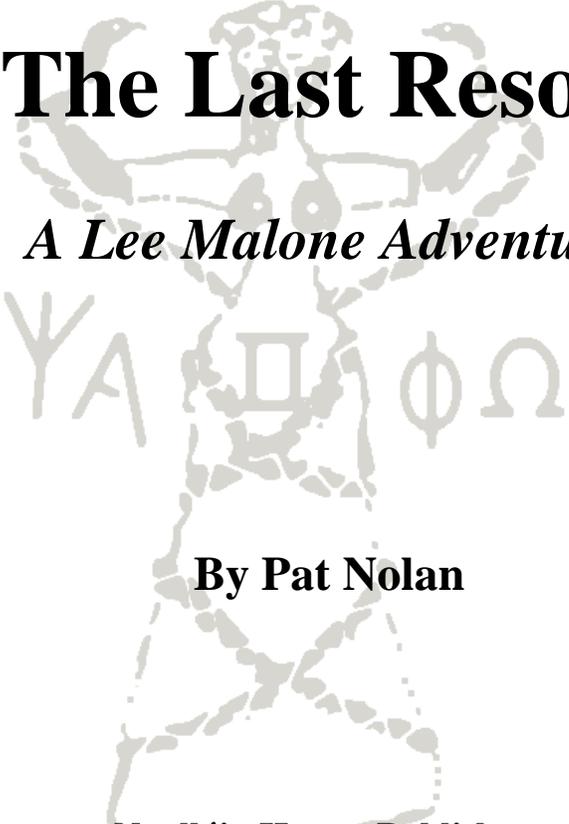


The Last Resort
A Lee Malone Adventure



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By Pat Nolan

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***“Man may have invented the wheel,
but if it weren’t for women,
it would still have corners.”***

– Rhonda La Londa

Chapter One *ON THE RUN*

I ran. Not awkwardly puffing out big breaths like I used to, striding across the black sand beach of Sabbia Negru in ‘protective custody’ under the watchful eye of SAPHO. I breathed easily, free, my feet barely touching the asphalt. It was exhilarating. My peripheral vision expanded to take in the panorama of a tranquil dew drenched morning.

I passed my first mile mark, a rank of sentinel-like poplars turned from green to gold in just the last week. There were a half dozen of them guarding an abandoned property, and tall enough that I had to tilt my head back to see their tips pressed into the swirl of thick morning fog. Their leaves littered the late greening grasses at the shoulder of the road like a scattering of large yellow coins.

The road followed a dry creek bed lined with brambles and took me past a cluster of summer homes boarded up for the season, the back half of one of them in charred ruins from a suspicious fire.

In the distance a milky white mass undulated and shifted with the air currents. The top of a fir or redwood on the ridge across the river poked through like the silhouette of a man chest deep in snow. The whole of the landscape, in fact, was enveloped in fog and mist nearly every morning at this time of year. It crept up the Corkscrew River from the coast in late evening and by early morning blanketed everything for at least ten miles inland.

Wispy pale blue geysers spiraled up to join the low dripping ceiling, signaling the presence of wood stoves and fireplaces in the damp dark woods. The acrid spicy smoke added a pleasant bite to the moist chill air. Under a street lamp giving off an eerie greenish glow, a covey of quail scattered for the underbrush and

low branches of prolific maples. I heard barks and sounds of dogs quarreling in the distance. Elsewhere, the echo-like barks of other dogs took up the call.

It was not unusual for dogs to launch themselves off of porches or out from behind fences after me. It's more annoying than dangerous. Still, it's disturbing enough to put me on my guard. Most of the dogs on my run were used to me by now, satisfied with a few perfunctory barks to acknowledge my passing through their turf. Creasy's German shepherd pup was my only real worry of late. He still thought of me as sport. I carried a length of leash in the pocket of my sweat jacket to whack him a good one across the snout and teach him a lesson if need be.

An explosion careened off the slopes of the surrounding hills, shattering as it died. I imagined the gun of some leftover vacationer flexing his citified fantasies, but likely only an engine backfiring.

After Grove Street joined Oak Lane, there was a straightaway where I liked to put on speed. And, as usual, there was old Manny's banana yellow pick-up truck crawling along, right wheels off the pavement, churning the soft shoulder. I knew he was watching me in his sideview mirror as I overtook the truck. He did it practically every morning, the old letch. Understandable in summer because then I only wore shorts and a light tank top. But at this time of year, what was there to see? A match-my-eyes blue hooded sweat jacket covered practically my entire torso! I was being naïve. I knew only too well the answer to that question. Legs and no panty line.

Manny honked and waved. An older man with graying hair and brown leathery skin, his black button eyes peered at me over the steering wheel and a wide grin of uneven teeth set in purple gums hardly masked what he was thinking.

As my run brought me closer to Timberton, I was often forced to the shoulder by a car or truck roaring past. This was the stretch I liked least. The increased traffic crowded the air with exhaust fumes and I sucked them in by the lungful. It couldn't be healthy.

The halfway point was a huge burnt-out stump, the grandmother of all redwoods. Even in its truncated and diminished state, it was monstrous, easily seventeen feet across, a network of brilliant red poison oak reaching up the side of the charred hulk like spreading fire. Beyond it, at the crest of a gentle rise, Oak ended at Highway 8, the two lane thoroughfare that ran through Timberton on its way to the coast.

I made a wide turn and headed for home. I'd been lucky so far, no dogs had tried to nip the wings at my heels. My medium length blonde hair was limp and matted with sweat, yet the tiny hairs on the nape of my neck bristled. A chill coursed through my overheated body.

Chapter Two ***ENTER EVIL***

The rumble of a blown muffler gave substance to my foreboding. I steered to the side of the road and threw a glance over my shoulder. A steel gray van with a raised rear-end and oversized chrome wheels had down-shifted to match my speed. A tinted bubble window in the shape of an Iron Cross adorned the right rear side. The van cruised by and the passenger gave me the long onceover. I watched his mouth drop open.

The front end bit the pavement as the van skidded to a stop. Gears complained, forced into reverse, rear tires smoking, propelling the gray box wildly backwards.

I maintained my pace, determined to remain calm. They weren't really trying to run me over. It was just their way of getting acquainted. I'd been recognized. Nothing new, I assured myself.

The passenger rolled his window down. "Honey, you look good enough to eat!" It was a thin, reedy voice.

I kept running, wishing them away. Fat chance of that.

The van caught up with a burst of acceleration, sailed past, and braked to a stop, lifting the rear off the pavement and spinning it at an angle across the road. The passenger door swung open. A skinny creep, forelock of black oily hair limp across a sallow forehead, ragged goatee surrounding a thin-lipped mouth, grinned maliciously. "Hey, baby, come on, get in." Chipped yellow teeth, pointed cheekbones, large protruding ears.

I smiled the smile I reserve for fools, skirting the door blocking my path, and kept on.

What he shouted after me showed what little respect he had for women. I can't say that I hadn't heard it before. What woman

hasn't? Any number of times. It used to shock me but now it only makes me angry.

The van sped past again and then stopped, blocking my path. Oil Can Willie stuck his head and shoulders out of the window. "Come on, sweet cheeks, there's plenty of room in here! You can sit on my face!"

He made a grab for me and I lashed out with the length of leash I saved for pesky dogs. It missed but my intention was clear. I heard a repulsive laugh and guessed that it came from the driver.

I put on a burst in the hope of outrunning them. The Miller place was about a hundred yards further up. The van came up behind me and forced me off the road. As they pulled alongside, my hair was standing on end. A cockroach brown Doberman lunged at me from the open window, choke chain creasing its neck as it gargled menacing barks, fangs dripping with yellow saliva.

They got a big kick out of that. The skinny one had a high-pitched hysterical laugh. I still hadn't caught a glimpse of the driver, but I heard a deep voice say something that sounded an awful lot like "tits". They peeled out, leaving the stink of burned rubber behind.

The first thing I noticed was swastikas made of red reflector tape on each side of the rear bumper. I focused on the blue and gold license plate but it was a blur. I rarely wear my contacts when I run.

My heart pounded. What assholes! The surge of adrenaline made my knees wobbly. I felt light headed, gut in turmoil. I nearly puked, but steeled myself and continued, walking briskly at first and then building into my stride.

A whistle or a cat-call from a passing car, the wet, kissing sound of some street corner zero was not out of the ordinary. But this was extreme. Men's eyes, and occasionally women's, had undressed me since I'd reached puberty. I can't say that I ever got

used to it, but as a young beauty contestant and then as a fashion model, I accepted that it came with the territory. In my presence, most men become tongue-tied, their mouths gape open, eyes bulging, dumb and mesmerized as the blood rushes to their anterior parts instead of their pea brains.

Sure, if I wasn't Lee Malone, former Teen America princess, internationally famous cover girl and runway celebrity, if my provocative good looks hadn't advertised cigarettes – *"I like them. Don't you?"* – or adorned automobile ads – *"Why don't you come along for the ride?"* – I could not have so easily pressed my advantage. But I'm drop-dead gorgeous. It's my super power.

Chapter Three

HITLER

A succession of sharp explosions collapsed into nothing. I was positive they were gunshots this time. I was taking the back road home. I had to pass through a redwood grove situated at the base of a ridge where a number of cabins were built in among the trees on the incline. There were lights in a few of the cabins in what I took to be the kitchens. A stovepipe jutting like an arm crooked at the elbow spewed billows of yellow smoke. As I passed under a tear shaped streetlight, I sensed a hand pulling aside a curtain and eyes peering out.

The road brought me out into an open alluvial plain where the gray low ceiling seemed bright by comparison. Banks of brambles lined both sides of the road, and scattered throughout the thicket, the reds and yellows of poison oak pennants. A row of birches partially divided a weed-choked field alongside a driveway at the head of which stood a tiny cabin, roofed and sided with the same green tar-paper brick. An anemic thread of smoke rose from the rusted stovepipe on the roof. I saw old man Goldstein cutting across the field to the road ahead of me, elbows pumping like a tiny old-fashioned locomotive. He hailed me as I was about to run by. It sounded like Chinese at first.

“Hoy! Lee! Lee Malone!”

I circled back. He came up to the edge of the field, hesitated, and then jumped across the narrow ditch to the road. I never saw him without his tweed sports cap. Under it was a bulbous nose and a face like a washed out prune.

“You haven’t seen Hitler, have you, Lee?” A bright yellow, green and red Aloha shirt draped his wiry frame. Wrinkled, oil-stained tan permanent press slacks, red and blue argyle socks,

and scuffed red leather slippers soaked by the heavy dew completed his outfit.

I shook my head, still not totally slowed down. I turned in a wide circle in front of him, decelerating and drawing my breaths carefully. His eyes, large brown yolks behind thick lenses, followed me, concerned. Hitler was his Airedale, a big brown and black dog, as old as Goldstein it seemed. He always chased me when I took this route, though all I had to do was put on a burst of speed to easily outrun him.

“I heard him barking earlier, he sounded upset,” he continued, “and then those shots. . . you’re going to be alright, aren’t you? Lee? Yes?”

I smiled and nodded. “Sure. I’m fine.” Inhaled deeply, and then, “I haven’t seen Hitler this morning, Mr. Goldstein.” Deep breath. Then I remembered. “Funny, Creasy’s pup wasn’t on the road this morning either. . . .”

Goldstein rubbed his skinny arms with bony mottled hands. He glanced anxiously in the direction of the large stump that marked where River Way let out onto Holly Court.

“You’re gonna catch cold in that outfit, Mr. Goldstein,” I said.

“Cold? Youcallthis cold? Letmetellyousomething, young-lady, I’ve been where it’s cold! This? Thisisn’t cold! This is California!”

I can always count on an argument from Goldstein.

“But yes, I did feel a little chill.” He passed a hand across the back of his neck. “Odd what your imagination will do. . . .” He walked towards the corner. “That numbness at the back of my head, I haven’t felt such a totally unreasonable fear since ‘39 when the Nazis came for my aunt and uncle. We, my cousins and I were hidden. . .ah, already, you’ve heard that story too many times, haven’t you?” He sighed and shook his head. “Sometimes I think

that's all that's left of my life, those memories of fear and horror.” He still spoke with a trace of an accent. “Did I ever tell you, Lee, how I got Hitler?”

I shook my head in a little white lie.

“After we escaped, and finally made our way to America! The land of the free!” He struck a pose, arm upraised as if holding a torch. “We landed in upstate New York, of all places. The Gold-glass Estate. Distant relations.” He dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

“They had an Irish woman caretaking the place. Count on the Jews to have the Irish do their dirty work for them.” He flashed me a little wrinkled smile. “She had a mutt who had just produced a litter of part Airedale puppies. One of them became mine because we were both recent arrivals to a new world. And the joy! Beyond words! In German. Or in American, of which I knew very little back then. I didn't want to call him Hot Dog, which my cousin, whose idea it was to name him that thought was very clever. One day we were playing as we usually did. I'd push him away and he'd jump back on me, trying to nip me. Playfully, of course. But suddenly he wrapped his mouth around my wrist and wouldn't let go. Even though he was just a little guy, it began to hurt and I got scared. So I yelled 'Let go of me!' and then, strangely, as if in a dream, I said 'Hitler! Let go of me, Hitler!' And he did, he let go of me because he knew that was his name, it fit him.”

In the differing versions of that story I'd heard before Goldstein never admitted that the original dog named Hitler would have died years ago and that the present Hitler was either a grandson or some descendant of the original dog. And he never admitted what I'd come to suspect, that he had named his Airedale Hitler because it was shocking for a Jew to have a dog with that name.

A retching sound came from his throat rising in pitch to a whimper of grief. “Mr Goldstein. . . .” I was at the edge of the road with him. There, where the ground sloped down, in among the thorny tentacles of blackberry and the tangle of bright red yellow poison oak, was Hitler, scarlet foam flecking his jaw, quite dead.

Goldstein dragged the dog up to the road muttering and crying something in a language I didn’t know. It sounded pitiful though, and I was touched. He rolled the dog over, its limp limbs flopping against the pavement. There was a round red blot behind Hitler’s ear and I recognized it from seeing its facsimile on TV, a bullet hole. Goldstein saw it too.

“Some bastard shot my dog!” He sounded angry and scared. “Some putz shot my dog!” He looked at me, bewildered. “Who? Did you see. . . ? Lee? Who. . . ?”

The steel gray van immediately rolled into mind. “Some creeps in a van tried to harass me a while ago. . .I mean, I can’t say for sure that they had anything to do with this, but just from my impression of them, I’d say they’d be the type.”

“Who. . .who. . . ?” he hooted.

I shrugged, helpless. “I’ve never seen them before. I only got a good look at one of them. And their dog.” The thought of them made me shudder again.

“Some putzes in a van are going around shooting dogs? I didn’t think I’d live that long.” His face lengthened with heavy sadness.

I too was feeling knots in my throat. “It was one of those kind of vans, you know, with the raised rear end and big shiny chrome wheels. . .steel gray with green trim. . .one of those tinted bubble windows at the back shaped like a cross, an Iron Cross, you know. . . .”

Goldstein gaped at me like he was hearing the words but not understanding what I was saying.

“ . . .and they had these red swastikas on the rear bumper. . .” I felt stupid as soon as I said it.

Goldstein dropped to his knees and hugged his dog’s lifeless body. “Nazis!” he spit, breaking into sobs, “Nazis killed you, Hitler!”

Chapter Four

THE GRAPEVINE

Joyce James flicked a speck of powdered sugar off the showy burgundy scarf that was meant to compliment her dark blue pantsuit. She held a half-eaten doughnut in the other hand. JJ, as she liked to be called, had once been a *cute* girl. The dimples were still there in spite of her puffy cheeks, and the upturned nose, a little rosier than it had been in her youth. She was late for an appointment with a prospective advertiser which was why she was trying, as delicately as possible, to insert the remainder of the doughnut into her mouth without dusting herself with white powder.

She motioned to the confusion of her desk with her free hand. I was supposed to understand what the charade meant. I waited for her to finish licking the tips of her fingers. She smacked her lips once she swallowed. “Your article on the art show is here somewhere. I had to cut a few paragraphs. We’re really strapped for space this week.” She started to shuffle through the papers on her desk but stopped because pages were sticking to her fingers. “Sticky,” she muttered to no one in particular. She glanced at her wristwatch and made a face. “I’ve got to get going.” She looked at me in that imploring manner I was becoming familiar with. “Be a dear and look for it yourself. I can’t be late for this appointment. It’s here, somewhere,” she repeated. I was about to protest but she had already thrown a beige alpaca shawl over her shoulders and was digging through her oversized handbag for her car keys as she disappeared out the door.

I found myself alone, in the cramped little square that housed the editorial office of Corkscrew County’s weekly newspaper, *The Grapevine*. Bundled back issues were stacked on the floor and against the walls, and in turn, file folders bulging with clip-

pings and black and white photos were placed precariously on top of the none-too-steady bundles. There were two chairs in the room, one at the desk and one by the door, both of which were piled with more shapeless folders and assorted papers. The one window that looked out onto the street below was being used as a de-facto bulletin board, plastered with sticky note reminders, editorials from other newspapers, announcements, flyers, and various New Yorker style cartoons commenting on the vagaries of fourth estate culture.

The chaos of JJ's desk reflected the random clutter of the tiny office, but to my surprise, I found my article easily. It was in a stack of papers alongside the rather large electric typewriter. The red ink bloodying the top page caught my eye. At first glance I couldn't believe it was mine. But it was. My face turned the color of the ink as I read through the butchering of what had been my review of a painting and sculpture show at a local gallery.

JJ had slashed all but a few paragraphs. What remained intact was the name and location of the business, the names of the artists, and a quote from the proprietor to the effect that the gallery featured work by local artists with a new show each month. I had found the painter's canvases to be clichéd, amateurish landscapes whose only saving grace was the odd use of color. JJ kept the comment favoring the color. I had liked the sculptures better even though they were unimaginative in their execution. She had substituted the word *graceful*.

I was chewing my cheek and about to become very perturbed when I heard the door open behind me. JJ stood there, legs slightly apart, arms dangling loosely, with a look of consternation on her face. It was such an unusual posture for her that I forgot my anger for a moment.

"I'm having car trouble. Would you be a dear and give me a lift?" she pleaded.

“That’s the newspaper business,” JJ explained once we were headed out Highway 8 toward the coast. “It has nothing to do with journalism or artistic integrity or whatever else you want to call it. The reality is that a review of an art show or a restaurant or any type of business is actually free advertisement, and an inducement to that business to buy ad space if they haven’t already, and to keep them buying if they have. If I print a bad review of any business, I stand a chance of losing them as advertisers. Now with a big city newspaper, like the Santa Quinta Daily Republican, the pressures aren’t so obvious, but believe me, their big money accounts have a say in the editorial content.”

I steered in silence. I thought her outlook was cynical. But I didn’t say so. What about journalistic ethics, the duty of the press to print the truth? But I didn’t ask. I concentrated on driving and allowed myself to marvel at the beauty of the rolling yellow green hills and the fading colors of autumn as the road wound its way to Feather, the tiny hamlet where JJ had her appointment with the proprietor of Kelly’s Seaside Resort. It hardly seemed the time to bring up my idea for a story on the dog murders.

Feather was a cluster of seedy little homes and fishing shacks on a bluff overlooking the Pacific. It had charm, in a run-down sort of way. Now and then the light glancing off the vast expanse of water gave each of the little hovels a jewel-like sparkle. Other times, the wind howled across the plateau so hard and cold that anyone foolish enough to venture out into the blast was rewarded with an instant migraine. Or, while the interior of the county sweltered in triple digit heat, Feather was wrapped in a shroud of fog. This day, however, happened to be a sparkler.

Kelly’s owner was a man by the name of Ralph Fashwalla, or so he introduced himself. Kelly’s hadn’t been owned by anyone named Kelly in quite a while JJ had explained on the way out. In

fact, in her opinion, the place was jinxed. The last three owners had gone bankrupt. Business was generally good in the summer and early fall. But revenues from the so-called tourist season were hardly ever enough to sustain the resort during the lean winter months. Part of Kelly's problem was its rundown appearance. The shredded fishnets, the broken life rings, and rusting nautical knick knacks littering the verandah were just plain tacky. JJ was making vague promises that an ad in her paper would help assuage the coming dearth of business.

Mr. Fashwalla didn't seem to be paying much attention to her pitch. He only had eyes for me. It always happened. The mouth full of teeth and lidded eyes, the lingering handshake when we were introduced had been the giveaway. I was a knock-out. That was that.

I stepped outside to lessen the distraction and give JJ a fighting chance. The porch boards creaked and I hesitated to lean against the peeling paint of the railing. I glanced down at the patch of coastal weeds that had taken over the flowerbed. In of themselves, they had a natural beauty, but their random encroachment didn't help the already deteriorating image that came with a first glance at the place.

The ocean breeze was turning into a wind and I walked out to my Volvo to get a jacket. The view from Kelly's parking lot was certainly terrific, a sweeping vista that included the rugged bluffs jutting up from the mouth of the Corkscrew River. I turned back to see JJ on the front porch shaking hands with Fashwalla. "I hope we can do business," she said as a final pitch. "And the rates are very reasonable." Too bad it was such a firetrap. He was looking over her shoulder at me. He waved as JJ trundled down the steps, scowling.

We had driven a ways before she spoke. “He wants your telephone number.” There was a trace of a tremor to her voice. She was ready to explode.

“Come again?” I had to act incredulous, though it happened to me more times than I cared to count. They always want my phone number.

“He wants your phone number! He wanted to know if you were seeing anyone. I don’t think he heard a word I said about buying an ad in the paper!” She started to sob, her padded shoulders shaking. “I really can’t afford to lose this account.” She sighed. “The paper is barely making it. I owe the printer, I owe rent on the office, I owe the phone company, I owe the production staff. . . .” She paused to gulp a breath. “I haven’t paid myself in months, I owe on my utilities. . . .” Her cheeks were wet and her eyeliner smudged.

I shouldn’t have felt guilty, but I did. All my life my beauty had got me what I wanted. But it had its negative side as well. This was a case in point. My looks had cost JJ a customer. When I was in High School, all the other girls on the cheerleading squad resented me because I made them look ugly, or so it was reported to me, and the boys wouldn’t give them a second glance. I’d been given special consideration all my life, at times to the detriment of others worthier of the attention. As a beauty contestant, I was never in fear of losing. And as a model, I was always in demand. Undeniably, there was carnage along the way. Back then, I accepted it as my due. I should have felt guilty, but I didn’t.

“Tell you what, we’ll go back and I’ll get him to place an ad.”

She shook her head. “No. . .it’s too late.” Her voice had become plaintive. She sounded at the end of her rope.

“No, I’m serious, I’ll do it.”

JJ fixed me with a puzzled stare. “Why are you even doing this? What are you even doing out here in the middle of nowhere? Are you running away from something, someone? I mean, you can practically have any job you want. I don’t get it. Why do you want to write color pieces for a newspaper with a circulation of less than five thousand?”

I had answers, but I wasn’t in a hurry to disabuse JJ of her notions just yet. I slowed behind a mottled old pick-up truck whose progress down the three blocks of Main Street could only be described as a slow trot. After we passed the old Coast Heritage Bank and Barbara’s Bakery with the *Going Out Of Business* sign in the window, I steered for the space in front of JJ’s car, an old Dodge Dart that had seen better days. When she said she had car trouble I’d assumed she meant it wouldn’t start or that it had a flat. It was listing to one side, as if an incredibly heavy object had been placed in the passenger’s seat. Then I noticed the web of smashed windshield.

Chapter Five
TIMBERTON Pop. 1,985

I wondered if anyone in Timberton, a wide spot in the road on the way to the coast, had noticed that this year in particular, 1985, matched the population displayed on the sign into town. It was an old sign and probably inaccurate, and I didn't expect that the doddering relics on the Chamber of Commerce really cared. Both sides of Main Street were lined with near empty stores and dilapidated shops on the verge of bankruptcy. Even those with quaint Western-style false fronts failed to attract business once the days got shorter and the nights longer and colder. Lumber trucks, delivery vans, pick-ups, and recreational vehicles roared right through and never looked back. Unless they had to fuel up. Then they pulled into the Last Gasp gas station at the far end of town where they were thoroughly gouged.

Next to the gas station and heading back into town was Elaine's Pottery and Knick Knacks with a big hand-lettered *Closed Till April* sign on the front door. Directly across the street was Henderson's Realty and next door was Carlyle's Hardware and Equipment Rental. A weed clogged vacant lot provided the space between the hardware store and The Blue Ox, a garish blue cinderblock bunker adorned with an oversized representation of Bunyan's pet with particular emphasis on the horned mammal's gender. The red neon knot in the only window advertised a brand of beer known the world over. Across the street and completing the first block of businesses was a cyclone fence enclosure that contained a Quonset hut surrounded by the rusting hulks of autos. The sign on the double drive gate read *Mike The Mechanic* and underneath, in smaller print, *American Cars Only – Beware of Dogs*.

I had a clear view of The Blue Ox from my table at Barbara's Bakery one block down. Barbara had placed a couple of ta-

bles in the front window and had started serving cappuccinos in hopes of staying in business. It wasn't working. Across the table JJ babbled about how they were out to get her. *They* were not anyone specific, but a parade of imagined tormentors, mostly ex-boyfriends, businessmen she had slighted, or persons she had exposed in the pursuit of her hard hitting, no-holds-barred journalism. I tried not to smirk. As long as I'd read the Grapevine, any story JJ had written was always tempered by her awareness of her advertisers' concerns. There was never any hard news in the Grapevine, only congratulatory puff pieces. Still, I was puzzled as to why she hadn't mentioned her car being vandalized anytime on the drive to and from Feather.

"JJ, someone slashed your tires and smashed your windshield! Shouldn't you be reporting that to the police?" I felt that I had to be outraged for her.

She flapped a chubby hand in dismissal. "First things first. That's the way it is in this business. I couldn't take the time to deal with it just then. I had to keep my focus. . .and my appointment at Kelly's." She sighed, segmenting the pastry on the plate in front of her into bite sized bits. "Lot of good that did. Of course, if my car hadn't been trashed and I had gone to Kelly's on my own. . . ." She stopped to savor a piece of pastry. "I wonder if Fashwalla would have bought an ad. . . ." She feigned coy innocence.

I was way ahead of her. "Are you saying I screwed up the deal for you?"

She spread her fingers in a gesture of mock resistance. "No, no, of course not." And looked back down at her plate. "But he was distracted by your being there. That was quite evident. You shouldn't underestimate your. . . ." She blushed saying it. "Beauty."

I'd heard this song and dance before. "Alright, JJ. I'll help you out anyway I can. I'll go back to Kelly's. I'm sure I can talk him into buying an ad."

Maybe it was the sight of her damaged Dodge that led JJ to reconsider. She had the rate sheet out of her oversized purse and spread on the table before I finished the sentence. She smiled as she explained the rates, her voice cloying like an old maid aunt reading nursery rhymes.

Ideally, with a new client, you wanted to start with a full page and then discount them to a half page, and finally quarter page ads for the length of the contract. She circled the New Client package. Six months for fifteen hundred dollars. If I sold Fashwalla the package, I'd get a commission. Seventy-five dollars. I made her sweeten the deal. If I brought in this account, she'd consider publishing my article on the dog murders. She hesitated at first, stuffing the remaining pastry into her mouth, and then agreed.

A fine drizzle had had fallen overnight and the roads were still damp as I drove back to Feather and Kelly's Seaside Resort the next morning. I had called Kelly's the previous evening and made an appointment. Fashwalla wasn't in a very personable mood. He agreed on a time and hung up. Apparently my good looks weren't as effective over the phone.

I thought it best to dress as a professional so as not to give Fashwalla the impression I was there for anything but business. I chose a pair of light brown slacks, a long sleeve white blouse, and a pair of sensible brown loafers. I pulled my hair into a prim bun at the back of my head held in place with a salmon colored ribbon. I added a small gold chain around my neck and a gold bracelet watch. I didn't bother with my contact lenses and wore my prescription glasses in their *Fabregianni* frames. If I was supposed to

be such a super woman, it seemed only fitting that I go as my alter ego, *Clarissa Kent*, reporter for the Corkscrew County Grapevine.

I met with very little traffic until I got to the intersection of Highway 8 and the Coast Highway. There were two cars ahead of me, a maroon convertible sports car with the top down and a pale green family sedan. The sports car was turning left, waiting for a gravel truck to rumble by. The family sedan and I were both turning right. The driver of the sports car must not have seen the van tailgating the gravel truck. The van hooked a left right into his path. There's nothing like the screech of brakes to stiffen the spine.

I gaped in disbelief. The van was steel gray and had a little bubble window at the back in the shape of an Iron Cross. A burly bearded man jumped out of the driver's seat and made for the sports car with a menacing stride. He was screaming something, his arms raised. The driver of the sports car appeared stunned from the near collision. The bearded man made as if to strike the driver of the convertible. His fist hesitated in the air above the driver's head, now aware of the stopped traffic and multiple witnesses. He gave the sportster the finger instead, got back in the van and roared off.

I got a look at the two men in the front seat as the van sped past. They were the same guys who had harassed me on my jog days earlier. Of that, I was positive.

The sports car had pulled over to the shoulder as the driver collected his wits. He'd lost his color and maybe even his breakfast. I continued right on the Coast Highway and up into Feather.

A dark billowing mass was trundling in from the ocean. The wind had picked up with it, buffeting my Volvo with regular gusts. The radio had said that this storm signaled the beginning of the rainy season. The dead weeds at the entrance to Kelly's Seaside Resort were being blown parallel to the ground and dust devils

stirred in the colorless dirt of the parking area. I stepped out of the car and held on to my hair. The odd pieces of nautical knick-knacks on the front porch were banging together and making a muffled clang. The wind had also pushed open the front door. I knocked on the frame and announced myself with “Hello?” I saw a light through an open doorway just behind the front desk. I rang the bell on the reception desk once. A single clear note emphasized the eerie quiet. The sound was perfect but something wasn’t right. I saw an arm in a shirtsleeve in the office from where I was standing. “Hello,” I announced again, “Lee Malone, with the Grapevine, I have an appointment!” I stepped around the front desk and into the office. Fashwalla wasn’t going to be dazzled by my subtle beauty. Blood dripped off the seat of his chair and his back looked like it had been opened by a boar rooting for truffles.

Chapter Six

RUNWAY PAST

“You with the Network?”

“Excuse me?”

A perfectly proportioned mannequin with a sunny expression posed the question. Barely five feet tall, he held a microphone in his hand. A Vietnamese man stood behind him, TV camera braced on a shoulder.

“ABC, CBS, CNN, NBC?”

“I don’t understand.”

Every hair on the man’s head was flawlessly in place as if it had been painted on. He wore a navy blazer over a white shirt, and around his neck, a speckled yellow power tie. A pair of Bermuda shorts and sandals completed the outfit. Typical of TV reporters. Since they were only viewed from the midriff up, they went casual below the belly button.

“Don’t tell me now. I never forget a face. Didn’t you anchor. . .no, that’s not it. . .Sundays with Charles Osgood . . . you were the news reader!”

I shook my head. “I think you’ve got me mixed up with someone else.” I got a lot of that, though not so much since I’d moved out to the relative obscurity of Corkscrew County. People remembered my face but didn’t immediately place where they’d seen it before. It’s difficult being invisible once you’ve been in the public eye. But I was working on it.

I turned to watch the forensics crew. The perimeter had been cordoned off. They shuttled in and out of Kelly’s carrying large evidence envelopes and paper shopping bags. A few deputies stood watch, their thumbs hooked over their gun belts.

“Wait, wait, you were a *guest* on Sundays with Charles Osgood!”

He was getting close. Down the highway another news van drove into view. That brought the total to three. The first reporter on the scene had been from the Santa Quinta paper, The Daily Republican. He and his photographer pulled in right after the first deputy arrived. It had taken the deputy 15 minutes from the time I dialed 911.

“He was doing a segment on over-the-hill. . .I mean, former models!”

He had me. I had appeared on that show along with a clutch of models, mostly trophy wives set up in small businesses by their CEO husbands or those marketing organic jams from up-state farms with their domestic partners. I’d been the only one still at loose ends, knocking about Europe, aimlessly staying with friends or house sitting, trying to escape the aftermath of more bad publicity, waiting for my case to be heard. That seemed so long ago.

“Lee. . .Leeann. . .that’s it!”

He had me. Leeann had been my mononym on the billboards, fashion pages, and runways.

“The glasses threw me. Marty, Marty Steele, KSQU TV News.” He held out his hand for me to shake. “So, what are you doing here? Are you covering this for CBS?”

“No, I’m not with the Network.” I turned to address him. When ignoring attention doesn’t work, surrender and charm.

“Wow, I can’t believe it, Leeann. Who are you working for?”

I was about to deny any affiliation but perversity is a small pleasure I sometimes allow myself. “The Corkscrew County Grapevine.”

At first there was a look of incomprehension on his little wooden face, and then an embarrassed flush colored the grain under the layer of makeup. He choked out, “You’re joking. . .right?”

I'd had my fun. "No, I'm not joking, but I'm not here as a reporter. I found the body and called it in."

"That's a relief. For a minute, I thought The Grapevine had beaten us to a story. I mean, no offense, but JJ's paper isn't much more than a throw-away advertiser."

"None taken." I gave him a one-sun smile. He basked in its glow. "Technically, though, since I am a reporter for The Grapevine, I did beat you to the story, as you put it."

A shadow crossed his face. "What I don't get is why a . . . a famous model like yourself is working for a nothing little rag. I mean, what kind of money can you be making?"

"I'm on commission. I sell ads as well as write for the paper." I was exaggerating a little. My first attempt had been a dismal failure, evidenced by the annoying beep of the coroner's van backing up to the front of the resort.

He looked surprised. "That can't be much."

"I get by." My finances and my sex life are two things I don't discuss with total strangers. He didn't need to know that my parents had wisely insisted, at the height of my career, that I start a retirement fund and now, in my later years, it allowed me to pay utilities, buy food, keep the Volvo running, and occasionally splurge on a really expensive pair of shoes. My career had ended in my late 20's. Designers were looking for less developed body types. Then there was my ill-advised return as a runway model on the Euro-trash circuit in my mid 30's. My step-dad had left me his summer cabin just outside of Timberton. That was how I ended up in Corkscrew County where I was trying to live a low stress, low calorie, low tech, low profile existence.

"Well, this *is* news! International fashion model discovers gruesome murder while reporting for obscure country journal!" His face lit up like a cheap paper lantern.

“Please don’t.” I gave him two suns. It didn’t seem to faze him. The story he’d report on the evening news had more dazzle, human interest plus crime and punishment. It had Network news potential. His cheeks grew rigid imagining himself on camera nationwide. “Seriously. I hope you’ll be discreet.” Three suns followed by a plaintive yet seductive look.

‘But. . .’

“Look, let me be honest with you. I don’t need the past dredged up. I mean, it’s not exactly pretty. . . .”

“Something about a fire. At a villa. . . outside of Paris? I seem to remember. . . that was pretty. . . .”

“. . .bad, yes, I know. That was an accident, as I’m sure you know.” I sighed, not solely for effect. “Unfortunately, the focus tends to be on these unpleasant things and they get blown way out of proportion.” I got an understanding nod.

“Wasn’t there that thing with the sheik. . . ?

He was obviously familiar with my dossier and my spate of bad luck, but then they were the things that made the biggest splash on the entertainment news. *Party girl fashion model outrages again!* I was hoping he wasn’t going to start listing all my public indiscretions.

“And how about that mysterious abduction?!”

“Ms. Malone?” The gruff voice belonged to a handsome slender man in his fifties. He handed me his card. “Detective Richard Santos, County Sheriff.”

I blinked a smile. *He* wasn’t going to be easy to impress.

Chapter Seven

NAKED TREES

Soon enough the rains came. One storm after another marched in from the Pacific and like stiff wind-driven brooms swept all the leaves off the trees. Leaves gathered in sodden lumps, blocking culverts. Water spread across roadways from the overflowing ditches. Unprepared downspouts spit like spavined lunatics. Roiling creeks swirled gray with stirred sediment. Soggy downpour days took the heart out of jogging for me. I didn't fight the urge to curl up on the divan with a fashion magazine or a mindless novel, the gas hearth exuding comfort like a purring cat. The horrible events of the previous week hadn't been washed away by the dramatic change in the weather, however.

Detective Santos had taken my statement at the crime scene. Gray at the temples, an inch or so shorter than me, and handsome in a rugged world weary way, his dark eyes fixed me with a studied gaze as he asked his questions. He jotted notes. He was primarily interested in the timeline. What time had I arrived at Kelley's? What time had I left home? Had I stopped anywhere along the way? What was my business with Fashwalla? When I told him I wrote for the Grapevine, he asked if Ms. James was still the publisher. Apparently he knew her from a tour of duty he'd done as a deputy at the substation in Timberton. Years ago. I caught a hint of something in that information. Nothing specific, but a woman knows.

I had also voiced my suspicions about the gray van and its occupants. They might have had something to do with Fashwalla's murder. He'd given me a skeptical squint. "Ok, I'll make a note of that." He closed his notepad and stuck it into the pocket of his windbreaker. "I have your number. And please, give me a call if

you can think of anything else. You have my card,” he said as he walked away.

The phone rang. It wasn't Detective Santos. A voice teased, “Bet you don't know who this is.” The voice was familiar. It came from a distant past. It wasn't the first.

The publicity from the murder put my name back in lights. There had been a flurry of phone calls from relatives, old friends, and long forgotten business associates. The reporters from the entertainment media were the worst. When I didn't give them what they wanted, they stopped calling. It took about a week. JJ called excitedly one evening to tell me that Star Watch had actually insinuated that I was a suspect in Fashwalla's murder. That had been followed by a panicked phone call from my mother. She must have seen the same show. Then I got a lecture about how inappropriate it was for a grown woman to seclude herself in a shack in the wilderness. The Santa Quinta Daily Republican was much kinder. They called me an aging former fashion model. That said it all.

The voice continued. “Don't tell me you don't recognized me, missy!” The edge of exasperation was a clue, and only one person called me “missy” and got away with it.

“Rikki,” I said, “so good to hear from you.” Rikki Tanguy had been one of my hairdressers when I was on the Paris, Berlin, Milan, Budapest circuit.

He snickered. “What's this I hear, missy, you're stabbing people in the back? I thought you retired from the fashion world!”

Rikki thought he was amusing, and sometimes he was. “I had to get your attention somehow. The only time you call me is when I'm in trouble.”

I heard him sigh into the mouthpiece. “Well, truth or dare, missy, I wouldn't have called at all but I'm languishing in a motel room in Santa Quinta. I'm here with a production company shooting a commercial. This ghastly rain is creating a disaster with the

talents' coifs and I saw that atrocious item on Star Watch which, believe me, honey, is not you. I mean, you get high marks in the girl beauty category and all, but very poor in the girly cat-fight-back-stabbing department so I thought why not, I'll give her a call. She probably needs a shoulder to cry on."

"Rikki, it's all right, I'm fine. And thanks for your concern? I think that's the word I want to use."

"Listen, girlfriend, I'm bored to tears playing tic-tac-toe with Wallace in this stuffy motel room. I need to get out or I'll go crazy! How do I get to your god-forsaken part of the world? I'm coming out for a visit."

I gave him the address and directions. Highway 8 from Santa Quinta to Timberton, left on Oak Lane to Vine, right on Vine, up the hill to Primrose Lane, Primrose to the end and Quince. My cabin was on the corner of Primrose and Quince.

"Primrose, Quince, how quaint, how *tres rustique* as we used to say in *Paree*. I guess it'd be appropriate for me to say I'll be out there in two shakes of a lamb's tail." Poor Rikki, he hardly ever said anything that didn't come from someone else's mouth. An old friend, but still a walking cliché.

I stared out the window after he hung up. The rain had stopped and I saw my neighbors who lived on Primrose, Rhonda and Ward, with rakes and shovels working to unplug the culvert in front of Rhonda's driveway. Rhonda was a silver haired sixty-something with a ready smile and a loud cheerful voice who always seemed remarkably uninhibited. She had known my stepdad, Frank Zola, when he used the cabin as a retreat from the world of "stock breaking" as he used to call it. Ward lived with Anna, Rhonda's neighbor on the upside of Primrose Lane. I watched as Anna came out to join them. Anna was close to Rhonda's age, her raven tresses streaked with white. She was not as gregarious as Rhonda, but certainly pleasant enough when I had a chance to talk

with her. She and Rhonda had been in business together before retiring to Corkscrew County.

I busied myself with tidying up the living room and putting the breakfast dishes away. I replaced the towels in the bathroom with fresh ones. I fluffed the pillows on my bed and straightened the seams of the bedcovers. I ran a brush through my hair twenty six times. I glossed my lips. I put a kettle on for tea, though knowing Rikki, he didn't drink only tea. From the top shelf of the cupboard, I pulled down the half full bottle of vodka that had been half full when I moved in and dusted the narrow shoulders. Soon I heard the sound of a car out front.

A black SAAB had pulled up behind my Volvo in the driveway. I stepped out onto the porch and waved at Rikki and his friend. Rikki had lost some weight and more hair. His friend was a lithe, younger Asian man. Rhonda, Anna, and Ward, still examining their handiwork, looked up and waved. I waved back.

"You didn't waste any time getting here," I said to Rikki as I hugged him and invited them into the cabin.

"The hellhounds of boredom were on my trail." He looked around the cabin and sniffed, "But dearie me, I believe I've stumbled into their lair!" He handed me an unopened bottle of vodka with a flourish. "For you! Happy reunion!" And proudly, as if displaying a prized possession, "This is my friend, Wallace Toms. He's the make-up artist, or *artiste*, if you prefer, with the production company. Wallace, this is the once fabulous Lee Malone, queen of runways from New York to Paris, Milan to Madrid. Let this be a lesson to you, dear boy, the next time you put on airs, how far the great can fall."

Wallace smiled wanly. "*Enchanté*," he said, seeming a little distracted. I usually don't have that effect on gay men. Rikki gave him the hairy eyeball. Finally, he indicated outside with a

discreet motion of his nicely coiffed head, courtesy of Rikki, no doubt. “Those people out there, on the street, do you know them?”

I was a little perplexed at first. “You mean Rhonda and. . . .” We had come to stand by the window overlooking the street where my three neighbors were casually chatting. “Ward and”

“Oh my god! I thought I recognized her!”

“Who? What are you talking about?” Rikki did his impression of an agitated owl. “Who, who?”

“Rikki,” Wallace hissed, “Rhonda. . . .”

“Oh my god, you’re right, it *is* her! The Blonda. . . .”

“La Londa!”

“What?” I still didn’t get what they were talking about. “What?”

“Remember her in *Help Me, Rhonda*? She played a nurse who helped men who were, ahem, sexually dysfunctional?”

“Remember! I was make-up on that set!”

“You’ll remember that particular gooey goody starred Wardell. . . .”

“The Wad!”

“Ward?”

“Mitchell!” They exclaimed in unison. I was starting to get the drift, but unwillingly.

“And the dark haired woman, what’s her name?”

“Anna.”

“The banana queen!” Rikki exclaimed triumphantly.

Wallace rolled his eyes. “Oh, what she did with a banana!”

“Well, she did star as a fag hag in one of my favorite movies, *United Fruit*,” Rikki said dreamily.

“Oh yes, the one with little Jimmy Handcock. . . .”

“Nothing little about Jimmy.”

“I know. . . .”

I looked from Rikki to Wallace and then to the trio in rain gear on the corner of Primrose and Quince. Was I to believe my neighbors were porn stars?

Chapter Eight

RAMBLE IN THE BRAMBLES

“Honey, we both made money with our bodies. You made yours with your face and I made mine with my. . . .” Rhonda’s words splashed up like the roadside puddle I hadn’t seen. I was running again. The air was thick with the sweet scent of post-storm decay.

I had to admire Rhonda’s candidness. After Wallace and Rikki had gone over to reacquaint themselves, more out of morbid curiosity than *auld lang syne*, I invited them all in for a drink. Anna and Ward had demurred, but Rhonda was game, and held us spellbound with her anecdotes of life as a porn actress. She was still very sassy and loved to shock as her racy stories demonstrated. I’m not one to blush, but there were a few times my cheeks burned accompanying my hearty laughter. I respected and perhaps even envied her tenacity, her toughness. Eventually Wallace and Rikki, having been drunk under the table by the old gal, passed out on the pullout couch and snored away like babies with apnea. It was then that she spoke those words. It was a truth I wasn’t going to deny.

I’d awakened, that late night a few days in the past, to the sounds of sirens but once I looked out the window I just assumed that they were clarions to celebrate the gorgeous sun smacked day. I hurriedly downed my coffee, brushed my hair back into a ponytail, excited at the prospect of running again, and slipped into my jogging togs.

The first few breaths were crisp and cold and I savored them like fine nectar. Soon my lungs ached with exertion, but it was a delicious ache. Sweat trickles bumped down my rib cage, the fine hairs at the back of my neck damp, and tiny rivulets traced a course past my ears over my cheekbones to my jaw line. I was

light on my feet and feeling as good and gorgeous as the day. Nothing was going to stop me.

Running always cleared my head, and like the fabled blonde, there was nothing behind my striking blue eyes. Eventually, in rhythm with my breathing, images, like the shadows of hand puppets, imposed themselves on the blank slate. One reminded me of JJ.

JJ, thanks to my recent notoriety, now saw me as an asset rather than a pest and had taken me under her wing. Not that I particularly cared to be hovered over. It reminded me too much of my mother, my agent, my boyfriends, my accountant, my lawyer, my mother. JJ had made me associate editor and placed my name below hers on the masthead, and above those of the regular contributors, some of whom had not penned a word for the Grapevine in years. And I continued working on the dog murders even though JJ had her reservations. The questions she asked when I let her see rough drafts only made me want to dig deeper. I had already met with Deputy Sheriff Charles Randall.

Deputy Randall was nothing if not beefcake, a steaming hunk of virile masculinity. In his late twenties, with luminescent green eyes that seemed even more vivid set against his coffee complexion, he had a bright naïve knee-weakening grin. Had he lived in Los Angeles, he'd have been a top model, a movie star, a gigolo, he was that stunning of a specimen. I was almost old enough to be his mother. He took his job very seriously. Had I been his mother, I would have been very proud. He was reluctant to share the results of the investigation with me. I did learn, however, that half a dozen dogs had been killed over a three-day period, Goldstein's Airedale and Creasy's German shepherd among them. Maggie March over at Animal Control was much more helpful.

Maggie was a large gruff woman who carried her weight well. I had watched her expertly wrestle a reluctant mongrel into a kennel before she faced me to answer my questions. She was matter of fact with her answers. There were actually more than six dogs shot to death. The Sheriff was looking into reports of dog shootings that dated back a couple of months. All in Corkscrew County. She'd heard that they were also looking into animal shootings elsewhere. There didn't seem to be a common thread. The dead dogs were an assortment of mutts, mongrels and pure-breds, large and small. Some of dogs had been the sole companions to the elderly. She didn't understand why someone would do something like that. And she wanted to know if I was that fashion model who had been in the news a while back. When I admitted to it, she cocked her head to one side with a bemused smile and a look that said "what's that gotta be like?"

I made the turn onto Elm barely slacking my pace. The brambles in the ditch glistened, draped with curled brown and yellow leaves from the bare trees above them. Long blades of resurgent grass drooping with moisture beamed a hopeful green. I was back in the flow, running with the world, as if my feet turned the planet with each step on the rain-damp ribbon of asphalt.

I sailed past Goldstein's. I'd heard that he'd taken a turn for the worse. His daughter had come to stay with him for a while. She was planning to put him in a home. No smoke came from the chimney of his tiny green cube of a cabin. The windows were dark, blank, blind, vacant. I felt an ache that had nothing to do with my running. Then I noticed the wisps of dark smoke hovering over the tree line in the distance.

I smelled it first, the acrid stench of burning plastic. When I came around the corner where River Way turns into Willow, a blind curve obscured by a thicket of bay and wild wisteria falling off into the steep sides of the creek, I saw the patrol car, the fire

engine, the ambulance, and the tow truck. The tow truck was poised to back up into the blackberries near where lazy strings of sooty smoke gathered among the treetops. As I got closer I saw Deputy Randall standing by the open door of the patrol car talking on the radio. I thought of stopping to say hello. But he looked busy. The paramedics, the firemen, the tow truck driver watched as I approached at a clip. They were smiling as if what they were seeing gave them pleasant thoughts. I smiled back at them as I passed. Their smiles brightened, brains blank with pure pleasure. It's atomic in its effect, my smile.

I glanced in the direction of the smoke. There appeared to be a charred, boxy hulk of some kind of vehicle. I kept up my pace, resolved to mind my own business and made to pass by the front of the tow truck partially blocking the road. Then it occurred to me. I'm a reporter for The Corkscrew County Grapevine. I can, in an official capacity, ask what is going on. Deputy Randall, filling out his tan and green uniform so uniformly, looked too intense as he spoke urgently into his police radio. I decided to try one of the firemen, an older man. He eyed me suspiciously.

When I explained who I was and it suddenly dawned on him that I was the one who had been in the news, he took on a tone of fatherly authority. That's the way it usually works with older guys. They figure if they can't be my lover they might as well be my daddy. Apparently there were, as he put it, crispy critters in the vehicle, bodies, so they had to wait for the coroner. I focused in the direction of the hulk of smoldering metal half hidden by the undergrowth. It was a long rectangle, like a van. I stepped a few paces forward to the edge of the bramble bank and strained for a closer look. There was a round hole in the upper rear panel. Below it, a tear of melted plastic adhered to the scorched and mottled gray paint. It was the van. My van!

“It’s the gray van!” I shouted at the fireman. He smiled, weakly, unsure of the proper response.

Chapter Nine

COLD SNAP COLD TRAIL

I looked out over the raw silver of neighboring rooftops, my first cup of java warming my hands. A pale sun streaked the frost-gripped vegetation in the vacant lot across the way. Blue gray shadows sheathed my side of the road. I turned slowly in front of the gas heater, doing what the natives call “the California rotisserie.” My mind was occupied connecting the dots.

First there were the dog shootings that I tied to the gray van. Then Fashwalla’s murder, again connected to the gray van. And finally the van itself, torched along with its occupants. To my mind these were more than just coincidences. I’d left a message on JJ’s answering machine outlining my suspicions. She’d been after me to finish a puff piece on Barbara’s Bakery to keep it from going out of business. I knew I’d never be that good of a writer. To her greater consternation, my dog shooting story was becoming “labyrinthine.” That was JJ’s adjective.

The phone rang. It was a little early for a social call so I guessed that it was her.

“I have some bad news, Lee.” She tried sounding appropriately sad. “They made an arrest in Fashwalla’s murder. His brother. Apparently a business deal gone sour.”

I didn’t want to believe it. “How can that be?” The fine web of intrigue I had woven was unraveling like an old hairnet.

“Incidentally, have you finished that bakery piece?”

“How can we be sure they’ve got the right guy?”

“Who knows with cops? Maybe they’ve heard that ninety percent of all murders are committed by relatives.”

“Something’s not right. . . .”

“And besides, if they can make the case, the guy is guilty.”

“I’m not buying it. What about the medical examiner’s report?”

“They’re not releasing much. I only heard about it because Miss Nobody from the Daily Republican called to ask me for a comment on the story for tomorrow’s edition.” She paused. “She really wanted to talk to you.”

“I can call her back. What’s her number?”

“I took care of it. Besides, do you think that Miss Big Time Reporter really cares what you have to say? She’ll only use one or two sentences of the interview, just enough to make you sound stupid, and then she’ll misspell your name.”

JJ was starting to whine. I had to get off the phone. “I’m done with the bakery piece. I’ll bring it down later this morning.” I was lying. I was going to have to throw something together in a hurry.

Frost had etched crystal patterns on the roof and down across the windshield of my Volvo. I watched it melt, slowly, defroster on full blast. Once I got going, it didn’t take me long to realize that sections of the road were slick with black ice. The orange glare of a late rising sun was just topping the rows of dark leafless silhouettes as the road turned east toward Timberton. A compact sat with its rear wheels spinning, nose in the ditch. I slowed. A face glowered from the driver’s side window. I felt the back wheels of the Volvo slip and then grab. I thought to stop but, as luck would have it, the pickup behind me slowed and flashed its hazards.

The anger on the driver’s face seemed directed at me, like it was all my fault, the freezing temperatures, the ice. My thoughts turned on that odd reflection. I had been called an ice queen, aloof, unsympathetic, freezing people out. Personally I thought of my demeanor as radiant, more often too bright for mere mortals. I be-

lieved in the power of my beauty and the access that it allowed. And I used it. The downside was that everyone thought I was unapproachable. And manipulative. That wasn't the real me, though at this point I was still a little fuzzy as to who the real me might be. Still, I could have been cashing in on any number of aging model endorsements, all legit. Instead I was writing flack for a two bit rag out in the middle of nowhere for a woman with a serious sugar habit.

A square pink box sat open at JJ's elbow, half a cruller among the blots of icing and grease. She held her hand out for the puff piece after hastily wiping it with a napkin.

"Good, good." She nodded and sipped from a styrofoam cup. "Hmm." She looked over the chaos of her desk and found the red pencil. Then she looked for a place to set her cup. There was a narrow patch near the edge of the desk and she set it down like a Piper Cub gliding into a jungle airstrip. Unfortunately, she misjudged. The edge of the cup caught the bulge of a fat envelope and the contents spilled across the page I had just handed her.

JJ moved remarkably fast, like this had happened before. The beige liquid dripped over the edge of the desk. She found an old scarf to sop up the spill, muttering apologies mixed with curses. She held up the baptized page, regarding it, head cocked to one side, with distress. "I'm so sorry," she intoned. Then all sweetness and light, "Can you type up another copy?" She fumbled in the pocket of her oversized sweater and extracted a crumpled bill. "And can you go down to Barbara's and get me another coffee? Cream, three sugars."

I had stopped paying attention to her. Among the papers I had saved from the *au lait* deluge was a press release from the Sheriff's Office. It was two paragraphs long. One named the suspect, Faheed Fashwalla, the deceased's brother, age 29, resident of

Santa Quinta. The second dealt with the fact that the case had been turned over to the DA for indictment.

“This says nothing!” I eyed the dollar bill JJ had placed on the desk in front of me.

“What do you expect? It’s a press release.” She was looking for a place to deposit the sopping scarf.

“I’d expect it to say what evidence they have against him.”

“That’s not likely.” She gave me a little self-satisfied smile. “But not to worry.” She eyed the remaining section of donut. “I’m having lunch with Detective Santos today.”

I guess my disappointment was evident. I’d been trying to get an interview with him for weeks. Why wasn’t I having lunch with him? I had discovered the body. To my mind that made it my story.

“Now, now, in the meantime, I have an important assignment for you. I need you to find The Countess.” The name ‘countess’ didn’t register right away. I’d known so many. “You know, the Countess, the crazy woman who distributes the newspapers for me.”

“She’s missing?”

“She hasn’t come by crying for an advance on her paycheck and that’s unusual. And she has to distribute this week’s Grapevine. Try The Blue Ox, someone there might know where she is.” She noticed my hesitance. “Use *the force*, or whatever it is you call it.” She seemed to be taking perverse pleasure in the fact that my conspiracy theory was falling apart. “By the way, I forgot to tell you. They determined that the van fire was an accident. Faulty valve on the propane tank for the portable stove. They still haven’t identified the victims.”

I was beginning to feel like Nancy Drew. Find the missing Countess? She had to be kidding.

“Oh, and don’t forget the coffee!”

Chapter Ten

BABE IN THE BLUE OX

The Blue Ox was a cinderblock bunker painted a neon blue that gave it the look of a very large radioactive brick. The last big wind storm had caused the rusty representation of the ox on the roof to break from its rear mooring, pitching it forward and miming a nosedive to the pavement below.

Contemplating suicide, I thought to myself as I crossed Main Street. I was accompanied by an irksome suspicion. JJ was having lunch with Detective Santos. She knew I had been after him for an interview as a follow-up on my theory that there was a connection between Fashwalla's murder and the dog shootings. And she had brushed off any suggestion that there had ever been anything between her and Santos while he was a deputy assigned to the Timberton substation. I wasn't convinced. I had called his office on numerous occasions and thought that I had finally secured an appointment. He said that he'd get back to me to confirm it. And now she was sending me off on a fool's errand? If I didn't know better I might think she was trying to steal my story. Maybe I didn't know better.

The Countess would be hard to miss. Pushing six feet tall, a heap of dirt brown hair piled high on her head and eye makeup the envy of local raccoons, she was often seen stalking Timberton attended by a Russian wolfhound and her male companion, a tall wiry shadow who resembled an exploded chimney brush. I'd run into her a few times in the Grapevine office. She claimed to have come from Russian aristocracy living in exile in Paris. When I tried to engage her in a bit of conversational French, she claimed that she had stopped speaking Russian years ago because of, as she hissed, "the Communisssts!" I figured then that the Countess was

more likely from Poughkeepsie than Paris. Her accent gave her away, a froth of nasal New Englander and Natasha of Rocky and Bullwinkle. The dog's name was Tarzan and her mate was called Puppet.

I pushed open the door to the Ox and brought the light in with me. A few of the gargoyles supporting the bar blinked. The light hovered around the shoulders of my yak skin jacket like an aura, catching the highlights in my hair and the gold of my earrings. The bar room was a low ceilinged affair or I was just feeling taller in my ostrich skin western style boots. My motto has always been "dress for any occasion and any occasion calls for a dress." Mine was a modest number, a little something I had picked up in Monte Carlo. It was red and black. I called it my roulette dress because it spun men's heads

The place stank of cigarettes, stale beer and indigestion. I had dabbed a little *Eau d'Or*, my fabulously expensive French perfume, behind each ear earlier that morning but it was hardly enough. In the smoky haze off to my right I noticed a hulking shadow circling a green felt table. Fluorescent lighting lit the grubby mirror behind the bar. The bartender didn't even look up from his newspaper at the far end. A guy with a baseball cap propped on the back of his head was making faces at himself in the mirror, one hand around an empty beer mug. He looked up at me, squinting, as if seeing me hurt his eyes.

I set my silk *Sauzeer* designer purse on the bar next to him. "Buy you a drink?"

His expression said he wasn't sure he'd heard me right. I smiled and watched it happen. Suddenly the image he had of himself, not the one he'd been grimacing at in the mirror, but the one that lived between his ears, his self-image, was rapidly being reassessed in a sudden fit of self-consciousness. Then the realization that he hadn't shaved, showered, brushed his teeth or changed his

underwear in more than a week dawned on him. He was unprepared to be the stud he thought he was. His face tightened as if in some desperate resolve but his lip quivered and gave him away. “You drive that Volvo.”

I wasn’t surprised that he babbled.

“I don’t do Volvo’s.”

“Really? That’s absolutely fascinating.”

He averted his gaze and stared at his hands. “Mike,” he grunted at the top of a belch, “Mike, the mechanic.” He threw a thumb over his shoulder indicating his shop across the street. “I don’t do foreign cars.”

Our musical repartee had stirred the bartender. The other denizens were craning their necks and looking down our way, suddenly alert.

“What’s it gonna be?” he asked as he sauntered over. He was a large balding man with yesterday’s five o’clock shadow on both of his chins and a big belly his dingy t-shirt did nothing to hide. He fixed me with the passive gaze of someone who had seen it all. He held a toothpick in the corner of his wide leering mouth.

“Beer for my friend.” I retrieved a bill from my purse. “I’ll have a bottle of your finest champagne. This twenty should cover it.”

Mike the mechanic didn’t know the whereabouts of The Countess, whom he referred to as the “gypsy witch,” nor did he much care. He also informed me a few more times that he didn’t work on foreign cars. He sucked at the suds of his full glass. A fleeting shadow crossed his brow. He’d just had an idea. It was *that* idea. The set of my lips told him he didn’t have a snowball’s chance.

I watched the bartender bending the ear of a man whose pointy chin seemed welded to his breastbone. He gave what passed for a nod and stepped over to the cue holding troglodyte at the pool

table. They exchanged words and the pool shooting brute sent a mean glare in my direction. The champagne was flat. The bottle, however, was genuine heavy glass, a handy weapon and the secret as to why smart women always order champagne by the bottle.

The pool cue preceding the hairless gorilla resembled a large pencil in his mitt. His shoulders strained the seams of a too small t-shirt whose faded slogan read "Ask Me If I Give A..." Maybe it was the size of his head that made his eyes seem so tiny. I could only imagine what made them red. I couldn't imagine where he'd find the space to put his next tattoo.

"Why you askin' after the Countess?" He got a little closer than I cared and his body odor told me that I was in the presence of a diehard water conservationist.

I grasped the champagne bottle firmly by the neck. "Would you care for a glass of champagne?"

He wasn't amused. "Don't be stickin' your nose in somebody's business."

I tried to make sense of what "somebody's business" might be. After all, I had only come looking for the Grapevine's gofer. She hadn't shown up to distribute this week's edition, the one with my review of the sculpture show at The Mongoose Gallery. His reaction seemed overly dramatic to my way of thinking. My smile had little effect. It annoyed him, like having a mirror flashed in his eyes. I figured it was time to make an exit and take my champagne bottle with me. It had a good heft as I dropped it down to my side at the ready. He caught the intent and grinned sadistically as if he had snared me in his trap. The use of force was his turf. He stepped with me as I backed to the door. He was telegraphing his moves and I calculated the arc of my swing. Then he stopped, the sneer on his face replaced by a look of puzzlement. I too stopped, having bumped against a presence behind me. I turned. He was a tall man with a full head of silver hair. He held an aluminum

baseball bat against his shoulder as if he were readying to step up to the plate.

“Hello, Lee,” Blackie spoke evenly. He was the owner of Blackie’s Antiques and Motorcycle Repair Shop downstairs from the Grapevine office. He kept his eyes fixed on the pool player. “I got curious as to why a nice girl like you would want to come into a dive like this so I thought I’d follow you over.”

I nodded at the bat over his shoulder. “A little early for baseball season, isn’t it?”

“Never too early to bat a few balls around.”

No one objected as Blackie held the door open for me. I stepped out into a steely gray overcast threatening more winter rain.

Chapter Eleven

BLACKIE'S HOLE

Blackie had his repair shop at the rear of the antique store. Delicate cut glass and enameled trays, porcelain knick-knacks and art deco jewelry, chipped Chippendale settees and Tiffany lamps filled the gloomy antique space of mirrored shelves and mahogany hat racks. A heavy beaded curtain disguised the entrance to the brightly lit confusion of motorcycle frames and engine parts. An assortment of wrenches and sockets along with glass jars filled with odd nuts, bolts, springs, and pins were neatly arranged along the back of a workbench. I examined the collection of mementos above it while Blackie fussed with Mr. Coffee. Besides the motorcycle jacket framed trophy-like with *Blackie* emblazoned below the larger patch that read *Road Devils*, the rogue's gallery of black and white photos told an intriguing story.

There was a smiling Blackie leaning on a big motorcycle with his arm around a beautiful blonde betty. Why he was known as Blackie was evident from the commanding jet-black pompadour. Among the assortment of snapshots were a few professional photos of a beautiful woman in a postwar coif smiling confidently at the camera. There were group pictures: Blackie and his pals with their motorcycles sporting tight sleeveless white t-shirts, sunglasses, cigarettes dangling from their mouths. In one, a young man in an Army uniform looked out of place. Another large group photo depicted a line of young men posing with their machines and attendant women in front of a flat roofed industrial building with a sign that read *Blackie's Hole* over the doorway. Blackie's arm was around the woman in the studio photos. There was something radiant about her smile, one that instantly beguiled. I knew that smile. Intimately. Most of the women were attired in short denim jackets or peasant blouses, pedal pushers and sandals, with their big hair

wrapped in decorative scarves. From her broad smile, one of the girls appeared quite proud of the way she filled out a knit tube top. She looked very familiar. Perplexed, I realized I was looking at a young Rhonda. Blackie had come to look over my shoulder.

“That’s Arlene.” He said pointing at the photo.

“That’s not Rhonda?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s Rhonda there, next to Chip. No, this is Arlene here in the picture with me.” He was smiling at the old memories. “This is her here, too. She was a model. Kinda like you.”

Blackie was right. She had the poise of a fashion model. And she had the right kind of cheekbones.

“Hell, we were all models back then. The women you see here were some of the hottest models in Los Angeles. Most of these guys were surfers or bikers who also did a little modeling, part time.” He looked at me and his smile widened, mischievously. “Hey, there was a demand for photos of tan muscular men.”

“And big breasted women will never go out of style, certainly not in men’s imaginations,” I had to add.

Blackie had an easy laugh that undoubtedly had enchanted more than one young woman. “Oh yeah, well, Rhonda, she graduated.” The tips of his ears turned pink. He pointed to the man in the uniform. “That’s my older brother, Al. He was killed in Korea. And this guy here, with Rhonda, is Charlie Pierce. Everyone called him Chip. He was Rhonda’s first husband. He lost a leg in a motorcycle accident.” Blackie shook his head. “He got hooked on drugs because of it. Rhonda got into her line of work to support his habit. But he overdosed. She really loved the guy.” Blackie cleared his throat of the burr of emotion that had crept in. “This place in the picture was a garage where we hung out and worked on our bikes. Tommy Perro, this guy here.” He pointed to a short muscular man, cigarette jutting jauntily from the corner of his mouth.

“He’s the one who painted the sign over the door. We never called it that. It was always ‘the place’ or ‘the box’.”

JJ had told me a little about Blackie when I had once asked about the good-looking old guy hosing down the sidewalk in front of the office. She had made some lame joke like ‘Blackie Widower’ but I also learned that his wife, Arlene, had run the antique store while Blackie puttered around in the workshop. After his wife died, he had kept the business open in her memory. It had always been called Blackie’s Antiques and Motorcycle Repair Shop. That had been Arlene’s idea. She thought that the unusual name would bring in the curious. It did, but, according to JJ, the curious just like to look, they rarely buy anything.

“How old are you in this picture?” I pointed to the one with him astride a big motorcycle. He didn’t look older than seventeen.

Blackie gave a laugh that started as a groan, as if reaching that far back stretched some memory muscles he hadn’t used in a while. “There? I’d say about twenty. Or close to it. I always looked young for my age. I was being carded well into my thirties. How old do you think I am? Now.”

I passed an appraising glance over his trim figure. He looked solid enough though his leathery weathered face was creased with the erosion of age. I imagined that it was the full head of hair, even shockingly white, that knocked the years off. “Oh, sixty something.”

He nodded, smiling appreciatively at the graciousness of my guesstimate just as Mr. Coffee came to life, ejecting a stream of dark aromatic liquid into the carafe amidst a grumble of boiling water.

“How do you like yours? Cream? Sugar?”

I told him sugar, no cream. And I had guessed right, he took his black. The rain, as if cued by the coffee maker, started in earnest. It was a heavy rain and it banged on the metal storage shed

out behind the shop and fell elsewhere with an earth-denting thud, etching itself onto the tiny dirt-smearred window that let in a skimping gray light. I brought the cup to my lips. I didn't want to miss a word of what Blackie had to tell me.

Arlene and Rhonda had been inseparable friends when Blackie met them hanging out on Venice beach. They were young, they were wild, they were supremely confident in their prospects. His description of the modeling scene in the early fifties confirmed that nothing had really changed or would change in the dog-eat-dog backstabbing world of commercial modeling. The sheer boredom of photo shoots, the humiliating treatment by the photographers, the indignities suffered, the mammoth egos of dueling star models were all very familiar to me. He could write a book, he said, name names, about who did what to whom and who wanted it done, all the dirty behind-the-scenes manipulations of the agents and fashion magazine editors. It was a sad comment on human nature, the blind, lustful, grasping sickness for fame and fortune that only led to certain emptiness. I couldn't have said it better myself.

By sheer accident, Blackie and his gang of Road Devils, on a road trip up the coast, had turned inland onto Highway 8 at Feather and stopped in Timberton. Arlene had taken one look around and claimed to have found paradise. The pines, the firs, the redwoods, the river all spoke to her spiritual inner self. Blackie couldn't argue with that. When they got back to LA, they packed a few suitcases, sold everything they couldn't carry and moved up to the Corkscrew River.

A chair scraping across the floor above broke the spell and reminded me that I was directly below the Grapevine's office and that the furniture moving was probably being done by my erstwhile editor, JJ. Blackie's story had been diverting but I still had to find the Countess.

“She and her boyfriend live a cardboard box under the bridge,” Blackie volunteered. “But don’t go down there now, you’ll get drenched. I’ll go with you once the rain lets up.”

I wasn’t in a hurry to get wet. Besides, the strong coffee was beginning to have an effect on me. Blackie read my look and pointed to the door near the entrance to his shop and a small, reasonably clean bathroom. With the door closed, the noises from the office above resonated in the confined space. I heard JJ talking. She was on the phone. I tried not to believe my ears.

“No, Miss Malone will be unable to make the appointment with Detective Santos. I will be taking her place.”

Chapter Twelve

THE CARDBOARD CASTLE

My satin high heels were sucked into the oily mire of the narrow path snaking its way through the tangle of undergrowth. Tall, brown and dead, the weeds on either side blocked any peripheral view. Up ahead, a bridge loomed in tatters of mist. Colorful scraps of food wrappers festooned the occasional shaggy shrub. Lucky Charms cereal boxes and a scattering of beer cans adorned an open space of matted grass at the edge of the trail. Dogs barked in the distance. A rusty bike missing its seat leaned against a fence post.

The trail led down toward the Corkscrew River, a roiling rushing gray mass carrying anything in its path out to the sullen winter sea. Plastic containers, barrels, and old tires bobbed by on the suds-specked waters accompanied by various pieces of lawn furniture. The sign from a local resort jammed against the branches of a large uprooted tree drifted by, its claim to be *Close To The River* still readable above the water line. Smoke from cooking fires rose in the distance, blue threads against the dark of the mist-bound bridge.

It was taking me forever to get to the homeless encampment. I thought I heard birds and then spied two rather ratty specimens. They were in fact attached to sticks held in the hand of an adolescent guttersnipe. He made bird noises but they were more like the kissing sounds made to call a four-legged pet. He had been paralleling my path in the tall weeds all along and I hadn't even noticed.

I was experiencing a kind of tunnel vision that only allowed a view of the world within the narrow frame of a full-length mirror in a dressing room. In that mirror I was wearing an orange and

gold *Felliniccio* evening gown. I should have never worn the matching high heels. They were ruined.

I came to a clearing. A blue tarp was draped over a length of rope between two trees. Sections from a large cardboard box made a kind of floor beneath the blue tent. Motorcycle parts were lined up on a gray blanket next to a smoldering campfire. Sheets of discarded newspaper clung to the dingy bushes nearby. The path continued past a cluster of campsites, widening out into a trampled muddy bog.

A dog lunged from behind a shopping cart piled high with empty cans and bottles. It looked just like Hitler, Goldstein's old Airedale. Maybe he hadn't been shot after all. Maybe he'd just been kidnapped. The mud-spattered urchin, now a young girl with a wreath of dead flowers braided into her hair, followed me with the artificial birds. They were supposed to be finches but the sounds she gave them were like cats in heat.

Under a large oak dripping with lichen, a man in Bermuda shorts, seedy sports coat and straw hat stood as if waiting for a bus. The hair showing beneath the man's hat was made of twists of orange yarn. The red ball of a clown nose covered his own. Folded in one pocket of his coat was a pornographic magazine, the pictures of nude flesh neon in the gray light. He lifted his hat in mute greeting and the curls of wool rose with it.

I was about to ask for directions when I saw it, tucked against the concrete embankment of the bridge like a wasp's nest. An assemblage of large appliance boxes and packing crates had been fitted together to make a curious dwelling atop the riprap where the Timberton bridge began its span across the river. A turret had been fashioned out of cardboard and spires made of discarded lumber were strung with shabby pennants. The rocky slope to the cardboard condo was covered with green slime. I lost my footing and tottered over the foul swirling eddies.

When I regained my balance I was sitting inside a rather spacious cardboard room with a low ceiling that read *this side up* and a tattered Persian rug covering the dirt floor. A shaggy gray dog snuffled in his sleep behind the back of a woman whose shoulders were draped in an intricately embroidered gypsy shawl. She was cooking something over a low fire. It struck me as odd that the smoke wasn't filling the cardboard enclosure. Occasionally, the flames from the cooking fire would rise and encompass her figure like an aura. A large badly dressed marionette was perched next to her. Bothered by the absence of smoke, I pushed open a flap that had been cut into the cardboard wall.

What I saw chilled me. I opened my mouth to scream but no sound came out, as if I was posing for Munch's famous painting. The two men from the gray van with their Doberman in the lead were running up the path. I had to hide but there was nowhere to go. Terrified, I clutched my knees and hid my face in my arms. Maybe they wouldn't find me. I waited. When I raised my head, they were standing in front of me, the oily skinny creep and the large bearded brute, grinning menacingly. The Doberman was inches away from my face, barking, barking like the ringing of a telephone.

I awoke and fumbled with the phone, glancing at the clock on the bedside table. It was 3:30 in the morning.

"Leeann? Leeann Malone?" The man's voice was gruff, grave. He didn't wait for me to answer. "Leeann, this is Harrison Tucker." Harrison Tucker was my mother's lawyer. And he had been my stepfather's partner in the investment firm. My stepfather had another name for him, one not used in polite company. "Leeann," he repeated, "Your mother's in the hospital with pneumonia."

I sighed. A week earlier I had told my mother that I didn't think I'd be flying back to Chicago for the holidays. Now, a few

days before Christmas, she had found a way of changing my mind. “How bad is she?” I asked.

“She’s in the intensive care. They’re doing tests.”

If I knew my mother, the hospital staff being was being tested. To the limit.

“I’ve taken the liberty of booking you a flight out of Capitol City Airport. It leaves in three hours. I knew that you’d want to be at her bedside in her time of need.” Harrison Tucker assumed too much. My mother had taken up with him after Frank died. And unlike Frank, she had him wrapped around her little finger. But I wasn’t going to take the chance that this was the one time she wasn’t crying wolf. Shaking the sleep out of my hair, I wrote down the flight information and hung up. I dragged myself into the bathroom and startled myself with the bright light above the mirror. I looked bedraggled, like a bad dream. A wind driven rainstorm pounded the landscape with an urgent howl outside the tiny window. The image of the cardboard palace was still fresh in my mind.

I hate the way these things come to me. Call it what you want, a hunch, woman’s intuition. The bodies in the burned out gray van had included a dog. The police report had not indicated whether one of the bodies was that of a woman. I had a gut feeling that one of them was.

Chapter Thirteen

MY HOME TOWN

I hate Chicago. I hate Chicago in the winter. I hate that the snow is not white but a sooty gray. I hate that the chill winds swirl through the high-rise canyons, around your legs and up your skirt, so cold and impersonal. I love the view of Lake Michigan from my mother's townhouse, sheeted over with ice and snow. I hate my mother's townhouse. It's a museum. Not a museum of Louis the XIV furniture or art deco lamps or Japanese prints. It's a museum of me.

As soon as I landed at O'Hare, I took a cab to the hospital. Even in her heavily medicated condition my mother had cocked an eye at me and said, "You're letting your hair grow." I'd been spending my time between her bedside and the townhouse since I arrived. I couldn't decide which was worse, being tortured by images of myself on every wall in every nook and cranny of the townhouse or sitting at my mother's bedside watching her struggle to breathe.

The hospital was putting on its festive face for the holidays. There were decorated trees in all the alcoves. Strings of tiny lights festooned the frames of the corporate art on the walls. The nurses wore little red and green ribbon corsages by their nametags or sported Christmas ornament earrings. Good cheer was in the air despite the sickness and pain, the daily expirations, and the low ominous hum of the life support machines. I got to know a few of the nurses, some of whom recognized me from the fashion media. "Say, weren't you in that perfume ad?" was an often asked question. "You're still gorgeous" was the chorus.

On the walls of my mother's townhouse were the constant reminders of how gorgeous I was. There were poster sized photo portraits of me by the cream of world famous photographers in the

foyer. Discreetly off to one side before entering the glass walled living room was an Oglethorpe nude of me, all white flesh and black background. I was naked but none of my private parts showed. Not that any of my parts were ever private once I became a professional beauty. Still it was pronounced the most seductive image of the century. The oil baron who had privately commissioned the portrait had made that pronouncement. In the formal dining room, taking up a good part of the wall above the chrome and glass table was the most scandalous portrait of all. It was the canvas that the controversial painter, René de Ricane, had done of me, a thicket of violent brushstrokes whose suggestiveness left little to the imagination. My face, as they say, may have launched a thousand ships, but according to the painting, my body was responsible for as many shipwrecks. It was titled *la Siréne*, The Siren.

I had spent two weeks alone with de Ricane in an old convent that he had converted into a studio near Pau at the base of the Pyrenees. When he wasn't painting, he was drinking red wine made from grapes he grew himself and smoking vile Turkish cigarettes. And he talked constantly, about art, about history, about politics, about the cinema. But most of all about his sex life, wheezing wistfully about his conquests and the one that got away, a glass of wine in one hand and a cigarette in the other on the terrace overlooking his sunset tinged vines. He had been born before the turn of the century and had known most of the significant artists of his time and judged them all to be charlatans. At first I tuned out his babble. He was as bad as cocaine high fashion photographers with their inane chatter. He was certainly more demanding, wrenching me into poses that no fashion magazine would dare show.

Maybe it was turpentine intoxication, but after a couple of days the words started leaking through. What he was saying actually made sense unlike the double-speak of agents, fashion maga-

zine editors, and sycophants. I started having thoughts of my own. I'd never had this kind of time to myself before. I had to hold poses for interminable hours. At first there was pain and discomfort, then numbness. There were times that I felt that I had left my body and was watching myself from a corner of the studio. What I saw was sad as well as beautiful in the way that birth and death are sad and beautiful. At the end of the two weeks de Ricane had grudgingly put aside the painting. "It will never be finished," he proclaimed "until you come to terms with your beauty." He gave up the commission from the wealthy patron and handed the canvas over to me instead. "This will be your Dorian Gray," he pronounced. A week later he gave up the ghost. I was left with a painting worth six figures that ostensibly had supernatural qualities and the conviction that I had to live my life differently. It's more complicated than it sounds. In forging a new life, some destruction must take place. And it did. With it came the reputation that trails me like a tantalizing scent to this day.

Harrison Tucker insisted that I accompany him to a holiday society gala. I wore an original *Jean Claude Penne* that mother had saved, preserved in plastic like an artifact in the closet of the bedroom that she insisted would always be mine. I wasn't surprised that it still fit. Once I stepped out of the limousine though, I knew it was a mistake. Bursts of camera flashes greeted me and I was swarmed by emotionally starved men in expensive suits and women who had made the wrong fashion decision, all wanting to have their picture taken with me. I was powerful yet I felt powerless. I signaled the valet and stayed only long enough for the driver to bring the limo back around.

I spent Christmas day at my mother's bedside. One of the nurses brought me a plate of dry turkey, chewy mashed potatoes, gooey gravy, and runny cranberry sauce from the cafeteria and wished me a Merry Christmas and a Happy Hanukkah. I was grate-

ful for the lack of attention. The society columnist with the Tribune that day noted my brief attendance at the gala, intimating that I was either rude, on drugs, or both. I had to face it. I was still a bad girl in my hometown.

I held mother's soft mottled hands and couldn't help noticing how much mine were beginning to resemble hers. Sometimes she was there, sometimes she wasn't. I would get that glowing look of recognition when she woke to see me or a vague troubled frown when she didn't recognize her surroundings. She had been a strong woman once, a gorgeous, vivacious woman, born in the Ukraine. I was a lucky combination of my father's cocky Irish manner and her classic good looks. The way I looked was money in the bank to her, the epitome of the American dream. I had been packaged and sold. I'd come to terms with that long ago.

Harrison Tucker made an attempt to get me out for a New Year's Eve soiree with some society stiff. I begged off. I wanted to start the New Year off with mother. I'd picked up a doorstep of a paperback at the airport and caught up on my reading while mother slept.

The night nurse peeked in. "How's everything going in here?" she asked. I indicated my dozing mother and smiled a "just fine." She tiptoed over to my chair and whispered, "All the nurses and interns are going to watch the ball drop and have champagne in the waiting room. You should join us."

I set the book aside and looked at mother. She wouldn't miss me. A small group of nurses and doctors wearing funny hats clustered around the TV in the waiting room. I was offered a plastic cup of champagne and wished a Happy New Year. The ball dropped and still Dick Clark did not look a year older. Maybe *he* was father time. There was a tiny outburst of cheering suitable for a hospital zone and a lot of kissing. A young intern in his early twenties wanted to kiss me. I let him. One of the nurses had

flipped the channel to a news station. A reporter was holding a microphone in a man's face. It was Blackie! I grabbed the remote from the startled nurse and turned up the volume. Blackie was saying, ". . .well, the river rises like this once every ten years or so, but this is the highest I've ever seen it." The caption below the report read *Corkscrew River overflows banks. . . Evacuations ordered*. It was good to see Blackie in his yellow slicker, rain dripping off his face, apparently unperturbed by it all. Then it was as if I'd stepped on a live wire. The TV showed a view of Timberton under water and the camera zoomed in on a man towing a rowboat with a rope down Main Street. Another man was hunched over, shivering, in the boat with a large brown dog. It was the unholy trio: the large bearded bully from the gray van, his greasy, rat faced partner, and their cockroach colored Doberman. Very much alive.

Chapter Fourteen
HIGH WATER HIGH ANXIETY

I suspect that some security guards liked to make me go through the metal detector twice just to watch me walk. I save that special smile for them and usually that's all they really want. Some people always find a way to have fun at work. I also avoid the VIP lounge. There are too many people there who think they know you and touch you like they think they can. I stand in line like everyone else. Often there are looks of recognition, but mostly it's just a troubled frown trying to match the face with a name. Some frantically dig into their purses or wallets looking for a scrap of paper upon which they request I scribble something. I'm gracious. I scribble something. Mostly though, people are respectful, as I am, of personal space. But boarding my flight back to the coast, it was the anger with my mother still burnishing my cheeks that warned I was in no mood.

I'd walked off the elevator onto my mother's floor at the hospital late New Year's day. I hadn't slept much, maybe four or five hours. I'd been trying to reach JJ at the Grapevine. I had to alert her to the video of the flood and the men from the gray van. All I got was her answering machine. I tried Blackie's shop. The phone rang and rang. He didn't have an answering machine. I got tired of flipping through the news channels back at the townhouse looking for but not finding the footage of the men with the row-boat. I finally went to bed exhausted yet haunted by that image.

I was a little puzzled when the shift nurse at the nurse's station greeted me with a dark lowered brow. Then the floor supervisor brushed past me as I approached my mother's room, her face flushed with distress. Something was wrong. When I turned into the room I understood why. There was mother, propped up in her

bed, perky as a new perm. It was a miracle. It was a miracle that I didn't strangle her right then and there.

I was caught up with the replay in my head. It must have shown in my glare when the flight attendant stopped me from getting to my seat.

"Oh no," he said, arching his eyebrows. He indicated the empty seat near the front of the plane. "We can't let *you* ride cattle class." He took my carry-on bag and stowed it in the compartment above. He winked. "We'll just call it an 'in-flight' upgrade. Let me know if you need anything."

I didn't argue. And I'm not going to claim that it hadn't happened before. I gazed out the small port, a steady sleet obscuring all but the blur of colored flashing lights on the tarmac. I was preoccupied by my run-in with mother less than twelve hours earlier. She had said "Happy New Year!" and I replied "Mother, my, what a quick recovery you've made" and she said, "That's because you spent the holidays with me, it had such a curative effect" and I said, trying to restrain a scream, "You vastly overestimate my powers, mother, dear" and she said "now, now, no need to make a fuss. We spent some quality time together and that's all that should matter. I knew you didn't want to come out for the holidays with all the dinner parties and hoopla of benefit galas. So I thought, what better way for a daughter to spend time with her mother and reacquaint herself with everything she's left behind for an extended campout on the West Coast? It's been the most relaxing holiday I've had in my life, and yours too, admit it" and I said "Mother, an Oscar worthy performance, but that's not how I see it" as I stormed out of the room. I remembered that she called out "Think of it as a dress rehearsal!" The complimentary glass of champagne helped but I've always slept well on airplanes and first class seating is very comfortable.

I was still a little bleary eyed as I steered my Volvo out of the airport parking lot and onto the freeway, dawn breaking in my rearview mirror. I had two hours of driving toward the dark brooding horizon before I got to Timberton. The rolling hills were a pale yellow green dotted with darker blurs of oak. Soon enough I was traveling through more familiar territory. I took a back road to avoid Santa Quinta. The road threaded through a canyon densely wooded with redwood and fir. I was home. The darker clouds had started to pelt the already wet asphalt with large drops. At one point a stream of beige water gushed down from the clearing of a wide raw vineyard scar. It crossed my mind that I knew who had bought that property but couldn't be bothered to recall, intent on getting to Timberton and the Grapevine office.

There was a roadblock on the highway into town and I slowed behind the car in front of me. A deputy in rain gear leaned in and spoke to the driver and then waved the car through. I rolled forward, my window down. It was young Deputy Randall. A raindrop dripped off the bill of his cap, his green eyes even more luminescent in the rainy grayness. He was a luscious specimen but I couldn't decide if my feelings for him were maternal, sexual or if I just wanted to serve him up in an exotic sauce. When he smiled in recognition, I decided. He was yummy.

"Oh, hi, Ms. Malone. We're only letting residents through to the flood area. The river's gone down but there's still a lot of debris and slides across the roads and the power's out in a lot of places. Drive carefully." And he waved me on. Just like that.

I crossed the bridge, a very lively silt brown river still surging underneath, carrying snags and back porches down to its ocean outfall. Once in town I saw the loaders, the rubber booted workers, and the piles of soggy debris spilling over the sides of the huge metal dumpsters. There were clots of people gathered under umbrellas along a stretch of muddy Main Street that looked like it be-

longed in a cow town. Some were there officially, hard hats in evidence, and some casually, locals, their grim looks testifying. The lower end of town on the river side had suffered the most from the flooding. The light was on upstairs in the Grapevine office.

JJ was seated behind her desk, a fork and a small plate at her elbow with what looked like chocolate cake crumbs. She beamed, “Lee, I have the most wonderful news! I just landed a new advertiser! But not just any advertiser! A full page advertiser! For a six month contract! I’m so excited! Do you know what this means?! I can actually pay some bills!”

I felt like popping each of her excited little exclamations like bubbles. “That’s great, JJ, but did you ever get my phone mess. . .?”

“Don’t you even want to know who it is?”

“Who is what?” I was still in a travel fog.

“Montague Winery! For six months! And they might even extend to a whole year!”

The name of the winery reminded me who was responsible for the man-made erosion on the way into town.

JJ brushed some crumbs from the front of her too tight ski sweater and leaned forward confidentially. “I think I may be able to get some financial backing from them,” she whispered. “If I play my cards right.”

I couldn’t imagine what cards those might be and I could have said so, but my attention was drawn to the front page of the Daily Republican on her desk. The banner headline read *Evacuations Ordered* with a panoramic shot of the flooded river. What caught my eye was the story in the lower left hand corner. “He’s getting a new lawyer?” I said half to myself.

JJ was collecting the remaining crumbs on her plate with a finger. “Who?”

“Fashwalla’s brother. He’s getting a new lawyer.”

“Oh, yeah, he fired the public defender, and recanted his confession. Claims he didn’t do it. Some kind of misunderstanding with the detective who arrested him.” My involuntary gasp turned her head. “What?”

“The lawyer. . .”

“Some high powered international attorney is all I know. How this guy could rate. . . “

“Preston Carmichael.”

“Right. You know of him?”

Preston Carmichael had been my lawyer in Paris. A sudden feeling of dread took my breath away. “He’s bad news” was all I could manage.

Chapter Fifteen

SEDUCTION

My insides were straining like the rigging on the Flying Dutchman in heavy seas. I checked the calendar even though I knew I didn't have to. Right on time. I took a long hot shower. It helped but not completely. I felt thick even though my mirror image didn't show any difference. It would get worse before it got better. I found that brushing my hair worked as a sedative. I brushed the right side one hundred and one times. I brushed the left side one hundred and one times. And from the chignon forward, the same. I poked at my face. I examined the lines, the wrinkles, the craters, the tiny brittle hairs. I daubed and plucked. Nothing in the one bedroom that served as my closet appealed to me. I chose a black tunic with gold trim around the neck and at the wrists from the hanger and found a pair of matching Capris. They fit my mood.

I stood at the window closest to the heater. It faced the end of the block visible in the gray light through a screen of leafless branches. Rhonda's white head bobbed into view. The way one arm was outstretched I knew her little poodle dog, Pussy, was pulling her along, its silky white coat curled and tight as Rhonda's hairdo. Slowly behind them Ward and Anna followed, Ward with the aid of a walker. He had taken a turn for the worse.

Returning from a run one day during a break in the foul weather, Rhonda had nodded approvingly, "Smart, you're keeping healthy." Then she confided, indicating the house next to hers with the up tilt of her chin, "He used to be a body builder, now look at him. It's his immune system, it's eating him alive." She cocked a confidential eyebrow. "They say all the gays are dying from it." She had shuddered saying it. I shuddered remembering.

Spumes of mist lifted off the tops of conifers in the distance and gathered above as a gray opaque froth.

I had work to do. On an end table under a small reading lamp nearly two weeks' worth of mail was waiting for me to sort through. I set my cup of tea on the coffee table and removed the rubber band from the bundle. I flicked through the advertisers and come-ons. Two long legal size envelopes stood out with an officious urgency. I set them aside. There were half a dozen square envelopes with familiar return addresses, the Christmas cards I should have been home to receive. I made another pile with them. I debated what to do with the three postcards. The way I was feeling, it was a big deal. I pulled a small metal wastebasket decorated with irises out from under the end table and tossed the advertisers from Save-on, then a reminder from the Volvo dealership that I was due for an oil change. Vogue wanted me to renew. I should have been getting a lifetime subscription considering all the magazines I had sold for them. Into the wastebasket. Real Estate agents smiled in unflattering mug-shots on oversize postcards claiming to have sold the most houses in Corkscrew County and were ready to make me an offer. Why bother. The small wastebasket filled in a hurry.

I turned my attention to the long envelopes in front of me. One return address was from the law office of Hogan, Carpenter and Eldridge. The other was from the Corkscrew County DA's office. I had an idea what they were about. I pulled open the small drawer on the end table and found the letter opener. It was gold plated and shaped like a scimitar. The tiny red gems set in the curved onyx handle were real, a gift from an admirer.

Even though my address had been neatly typed, the letter on law office stationary was handwritten. I was familiar with the tight, precise hand. It was Preston Carmichael's. I allowed myself to think, yes, that's what the devil's handwriting looks like.

“Dear Lee,” it began, *“I look forward to seeing you again after so many years, even if it is under such impersonal circumstances. As you no doubt know, I am representing Mr. Faheed Fashwalla and since you were involved in the discovery of his brother’s body, it is necessary that I take your deposition. Please contact me within the next week at the number on the letterhead and make an appointment that is convenient for you. I await your reply.”* There was a postscript. *“I am appealing to you personally for your cooperation because of our past friendship. A summons is so pedestrian. And I can’t ask you to dinner with a summons.”* Smooth as ever. The carrot and the stick. But that’s what it would take, a summons to even get me near him. I glanced at the wastebasket at my feet. That was certainly the proper place for it.

A business card fell out of the envelope from the DA’s office. It identified Chandler Wong, Corkscrew County Assistant District Attorney and gave his phone number. The form letter told me that I had to appear at the County Courthouse, Room 506 and gave the date and time. It was signed with a thick unreadable scrawl. I set it next to the letter from Preston. I would have to deal with them eventually.

I wandered into the kitchen and heated some more water. I glanced at the clock above the refrigerator. JJ was due to come by in a couple of hours. I had asked her over to discuss my story on the dog murders. She had been reluctant at first, citing lunch with a new account. I mentioned that a friend had sent me a tin of Swedish butter cookies and I had yet to open them. She caved, saying that it might not be till late afternoon.

Late afternoon and the spongy mist slowly lifted to reveal what was left of a blue sky among the long gray shadows of distant conifers. I didn’t recognize the car when it pulled up in front of the cabin. JJ stepped out, a little unsteady I thought, and waved at the front door before starting up the steps. It must have been an im-

portant meeting judging by the too tight black dress with spaghetti straps and ample show of cleavage. She hefted her familiar blue carryall purse onto one shoulder and grasped an open bottle of white wine with the other hand. She seemed a little out of breath when she stepped into the front room. Her eyes were wide, excited. “I need to use your bathroom!” I pointed down the hall.

I had a platter of cookies set out on the coffee table when she returned, the sound of rushing water following her. JJ flopped down on the couch and expertly examined the plate. “Hmm, these look good.” She smiled at me with one already in her fingers. “I thought my bladder was going to burst!”

“That must have been some lunch.” I sat next to her and poured the wine.

Her eyes gleamed again, “Yes, yes it was. I was meeting with Tommy from Montague Winery and his friend, Roger, who owns a string of video stores. Armchair Theaters. That’s what they’re called. I’ve got them on a six month contract with a half page! And Tommy’s going to direct a few more business friends of his my way!”

I had to be happy for her. Her joy was infectious. “That’s great. And you have a new car, too.”

She nodded, flicking a crumb from a corner of her mouth. “Well, it’s not *new* new, it’s last year’s model. And it’s Japanese. I’ve landed half a dozen accounts in the last couple of months. The publicity from the murder has really helped.” She giggled, maybe because she realized how callous she sounded. Crumbs had landed on her ample bosom and she brushed them off, tucking her chin in to look down on the mounds of flesh. “Well, if you’ve got them, use them,” she laughed. “And oh, I wanted to show you!” She retrieved a magazine from her purse and handed to me. “It’s an old copy of Vogue I found.”

I saw that. I even vaguely remembered posing for the cover.

JJ opened the magazine to the photo spread. I was wearing designs from *Lorenzo Leonardo Benaldo's Florenzi* collection. That year sheer and diaphanous was in. She leaned forward so that we were both looking at the pictures of distant palm trees, white sand and me. "Where was that? It's gorgeous." She gawked at me dreamily.

"Aruba, I think."

"Oh, you're so lucky. It must have been wonderful!"

I get a little prickly when someone insinuates how wonderful my life has been, especially if they can't keep the envy from showing. "I think I had food poisoning or the flu and had been puking my guts all over the pristine white sand. The shoot started before dawn because the photographer wanted to get the first light. I'm dressed in what is essentially tissue paper. And it was so cold I thought my nipples were going to explode!" I didn't add that despite it all I still looked devastating.

JJ gave a little laugh. She got the drift. There was an awkward silence while she took a long sip of wine. Then she sighed, "I guess we should look over your article." From her purse she pulled a sheaf of papers, creased and crumpled like they had been sat on by a variety of large bottoms. The clean typescript was covered with a red scrawl.

"Ok." She donned her reading glasses. "First of all, this is very well written. It's almost too literary to be journalism. The way you describe things is wonderful, but it's too much. It gets in the way of what you're trying to say. It's a distraction. And that brings up the question, what are you trying to say? Is it about a few dogs being killed by some psychos or something else? You've done some good legwork, but it's still vague. There's no point to it. It's a fear piece. If I published what you have now, I would just be

feeding into the general paranoia of the public to no purpose. What you need to do is frame this in a larger context, like cruelty to animals. Get statistics. And not just cruelty to dogs, but cats, horses, goats, even cows. Work in something about experiments on animals by cosmetic manufacturers. Make it a larger issue. Then I can use it as a feature article.”

I was beginning to wonder if she'd even read my article, if she even realized the implication of what I was getting at. “The men in the gray van,” I began, “the Countess. . . .”

She waved a cookie at me. “I don't know where you're going with that. You have no proof that they're even connected to what you call the dog murders, if that's even what they are. All of this gray van stuff is pure conjecture. I couldn't print any of it.”

“What about the autopsy report? Was I right? Is one of them a woman?”

She shook her head and helped herself to another big glass of white wine. “Lee, Lee, you're seeing a conspiracy where there is none.” She knocked back half the contents in one gulp. “Besides, the medical examiner is in Hawaii on vacation and they can't release the report without his ok.”

I was getting steamed. I didn't like being taken lightly. I was certain that my suspicions were correct. And all she could do was sit there like a big cream puff in a black dress that bulged in all the wrong places. She was, I also realized, very drunk. The dreamy crooked smile on the painted oval of her face told me that.

She sighed. “Lee, do you even know how gorgeous you really are?”

I gave my standard answer to that question. “You think it's easy being beautiful? I'm lusted after by every man alive and hated and resented by most women.”

“Not by me,” she said as she leaned toward me, shifting her right leg over her left knee. Her dreamy look had become earnest

in a puppy dog sort of way. She brought her face close to mine. Her lipstick needed refreshing and her mascara clung in little globs at the base of her eyelashes. Her nose was pink as a rabbit's and fine veins decorated the tip like stray red threads.

“JJ,” I whispered, squaring myself to her. I had seen that afflicted look more times than I cared to remember, but mostly on men.

Her breathing deepened, wine sour yet cookie sweet, lips inches away from mine. She moved a hand close to my thigh.

I placed my hand against her shoulder. “JJ,” I spoke as gently as possible, “I have a really bad headache.”

Chapter Sixteen
DON'T GET ME WONG

The engraved plaque on the desk read *This Wong makes it right*. Assistant District Attorney Chandler Wong's hair was parted precisely from left to right, a dark curve of bang shadowing a broad brow and spectacled intelligent eyes. His smile was genuine, shaking my hand, holding a wild marbled tie against his beige shirt with his left as he rose. "A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Malone. Please have a seat."

I set my purse down, leaning the handle of my umbrella against the front of the desk in his tiny cubicle and shedding my raincoat over the straight-backed office chair. He seemed nice enough.

ADA Wong looked up at me expectantly. "Still raining out there?" Behind him, taped to the side of a file cabinet, was a Charlie Chan movie poster someone had scrawled across *Charlie Chan(dler), congrats on winning your first conviction!* It was signed *Number One Son*. There were also numerous little gold Buddhas of various sizes weighing down stacks of paper and lining the edge of a small bookshelf.

"The rain let up just as I drove into Santa Quinta." I must have looked perplexed.

"I'm actually Catholic," he assured me and shrugged. "But because I'm Chinese, people just assume I'm Buddhist so the office staff drop them off and say things like 'I saw this in a shop at the mall and just had to get it for you'." He tapped his pen on the dossier in front of him. "If you ask me, I think they're really getting them for themselves and my office is the only safe place to keep them. And they can come and visit them whenever they want."

I was intrigued. "You must be very popular."

He cleared his throat nervously. "I like people." He opened the case file in front of him.

A framed photo on the wall to the left above his desk pictured an older Chinese couple and a young man in a cap and gown, obviously ADA Wong at graduation. They all wore big smiles. Beneath the photo a neatly printed placard read *The Two Wongs That Made Me Right*. Unfortunately, the sentiment was marred by someone who had crossed out some of the words and substituted *Didn't Make You White*.

Wong had followed my gaze. "But a few people don't like me." He shrugged. "I could take it down. File a complaint. It wouldn't do any good. So I don't say anything. People come in, see it, and realize there's a jerk in their midst. Everyone knows who it is." The smile hinted at resignation belonging to an ancient face. "We have business to conduct."

I had to show him my driver's license. He wrote the number in a box on the form, holding it a moment to compare the photo with my present physiognomy. "And this is your correct age?" I wasn't talking. He handed it back with a smile. "You're the only one I've ever met whose DMV photo actually looks like them."

"I have a way with cameras."

Wong showed a row of even teeth. "Of course, you would."

I glanced at my watch. I had parked in a one-hour parking enforcement zone in order to be close to the County Courthouse.

"We'll make this as painless as possible, Ms. Malone. I will be asking you about the events of November 15th, 1985 and to verify the statements you made to Detective Santos regarding your discovery of Mr. Fashwalla's body. I will be recording this interview and the transcription will require your signature."

ADA Wong continued his well-rehearsed speech. I watched his lips move. He was actually kind of cute. He turned a page over

to me and pointed to the two places I had to sign and date. He pulled a portable tape recorder from the bottom drawer of the file cabinet. “We’ll be conducting the interview in the conference room.” He indicated the way with an outstretched arm. “You might as well bring your coat and umbrella. You are free to leave afterwards.”

In the hallway, a tall gray haired man in a dark blue suit stopped to talk. From the first leer, I knew he was swine. A large Adam’s apple sat atop the knot of a screaming red tie. It occurred to me that perhaps today was ‘wild tie day’ at the office. In an exaggerated whisper he confided “Wong, you must be doing something right.” He forced a tight smile at me, greening at the gills. I suddenly knew who had defaced the placard in Wong’s cubicle. He raked me from my knees to my collarbone with a suggestive gaze. I returned his look, my eyes boring into his, the intensity melting something insignificant in his briefs.

Wong closed the door to the conference room and set the tape recorder on the table. “That was very unprofessional, and I apologize.”

I sat across the table from him and shrugged. “Welcome to my world.”

Wong spoke into the microphone and then rewound the tape. His voice repeated the test, calm, authoritative, in a timbre I hadn’t noticed in conversation. He placed the mike between us. “Well, let’s begin.”

Wong went over the facts with me. They included the kind of car I drove. A ‘69 Volvo. What was I doing at Kelly’s Resort? I was selling advertising for the Corkscrew County Grapevine. I had an appointment with Mr. Fashwalla. When had I last spoken to him? The previous evening, I couldn’t remember the exact time, sometime after six.

“It’s all there in my statement to the detective.” I was beginning to realize that this process might take longer than the time I had on the meter.

“I have to verify the details.”

“Do any of the details say anything about two men in a gray van?”

Wong scanned the page and turned to the next. “Hmm, there’s a note here from Detective Santos. Uh. . .you made the statement that you believe two men and a dog in a gray van are responsible or at least involved in Fashwalla’s murder. ‘Cannot be substantiated.’ Does that sound right?”

“Two weeks after the murder, a gray van was torched in my neighborhood. It was the van that I saw on the highway before I got to Kelly’s Seaside Resort.”

“You’re sure of this?”

“Two bodies burned beyond recognition and the remains of a dog were found in the van.”

“And they are the bodies of the two men you suspect of Fashwalla’s murder?”

“That’s what I thought at first, and this may sound odd, but I had a dream that the bodies incinerated in the van were not the two men, but two homeless people, the Countess and her boyfriend, Puppet, who lived in Timberton and have gone missing.”

“You dreamed that two homeless people had disappeared.”

“No, I didn’t dream that, I dreamed that they had been incinerated. In the van.”

“Was it their van?”

“No, they were homeless. They lived under the bridge.”

“But they burned up in a van that didn’t belong to them.”

“Don’t you see? Whoever committed the murder found out that the cops were looking for two guys in a gray van so they con-

veniently provided what they thought would be a dead end. Two bodies in a torched van.”

“With a dog. They killed their own dog?”

“No, that was Tarzan.”

Wong sat back in his chair, folded his hands and fixed me with a classic inscrutable stare.

“Their Russian wolfhound, Tarzan.”

“I have to say that all this sounds intriguing, but I don’t have any of it in my file. Faheed Fashwalla confessed to the homicide. The fact that he recanted the confession doesn’t change the fact that we will prosecute him for murder. The medical examiner should have determined the gender of the bodies by now. Would it surprise you if they were both males?”

“That’s just it! They can’t be!”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I saw them on TV?”

Wong sighed and glanced at his watch. Maybe he was parked in a parking enforcement zone, too. “On TV?”

“I was in Chicago. New Year’s Eve. I saw footage of the flood in Timberton. They were floating down Main Street in a rowboat!”

Wong glanced around the room warily. He turned off the recorder and, leaning toward me, growled, “Did someone put you up to this?”

“No, that’s what I’m trying to tell you! I think there’s been a cover-up. Aren’t you suspicious that Fashwalla’s brother confessed to the murder and then recanted and now has retained Preston Carmichael, a very expensive criminal lawyer, as his attorney? How can he afford him? You can bet that it’s not pro bono. That’s not Carmichael’s style. The real murderers are still on the loose and somebody, a very wealthy somebody, doesn’t want you to find them. They don’t even want you to know about them.”

“Ms. Malone, I wish I had the time to continue on this speculative track but I have the facts of the case against Mr. Fashwalla to consider, this interview being a very small part of the overall investigation.” He restarted the tape.

I got out of there with minutes to spare. I gazed over the tops of the parked cars from my vantage on the Courthouse steps. The parking enforcement scooter was cruising the opposite side of the street from where I was parked. A couple of large drops slapped my cheek and I reached for my umbrella. Then I saw the camera and microphone. The TV news crew from the local station was aiming to catch up with me at the bottom of the steps. My car was a hundred yards away. I stepped briskly. I have long legs.

“Lee, remember me? Marty Steele, KSQU News.” The news reporter, the short man with short hair and short stride I had met at Kelly’s puffed with a mike at my elbow. “Lee, uh, Ms. Malone can you tell us. . . .”

I wasn’t having any of it. I sprung my umbrella open in the reporter’s face. I had stepped to the curb. A limo rolled up. The door swung open. I got in. It was a reflex action. I had performed that curbside dance on so many occasions that it seemed perfectly natural. That was my mistake.

Preston Carmichael greeted me with mock self-assured surprise. “Lee, so nice of you to drop in.” A scrub of red hair topped a face that through plastic surgery and expertly applied makeup appeared ageless the way a wax dummy appears ageless. A navy blazer and charcoal slacks fit his wiry frame like a glove although the trim manicured hand he extended toward me vaguely resembled latex. “Does it remind you of the old days when you were tabloid fodder?” His fastidious superiority was irritating as was the garish ascot setting off a well-sculpted jaw line. It dawned on me. It was ‘crazy tie day’ in the world and no one had told me

about it! “You ignored my invitation, Lee. I could have just as easily had you subpoenaed. I was hoping that our past association would have at least granted me that small favor.”

The TV news crew. It was beginning to make sense. Who would have tipped them off that I was being interviewed by the District Attorney? I was sitting next to him in the limo. It was the last place I wanted to be. The limo sped toward the exit of the County complex. The white linen handkerchief held to his off-the-shelf nose reminded me of something I had learned about Preston Carmichael when he represented me in Paris, and that was his legendary phobias and multiple, likely psychosomatic, allergies.

“Oh shit! Preston.” I looked for the door handle that should have been there.

“Lee, my dear, there’s no need to take that attitude. I can have you declared a hostile witness. Make it easy on yourself. Have dinner with me.”

“No, that’s not what I mean, Preston. I think I stepped in dog poop getting into the limo.”

Preston’s eyes bulged as he gasped, choking into the handkerchief. “Driver, stop the car!” he commanded as he visibly shrank into the crevice between the seat and the door panel.

It started to pour as I walked back to my Volvo. Good thing I had my umbrella. And I hadn’t stepped in dog poop after all. I didn’t mind the rain. I did mind the parking ticket wrapped in plastic stuck under the windshield wiper on the driver’s side.

Chapter Seventeen

HEARTBREAKER

I'm a heartbreaker. Old men suck in their guts, young men straighten their spines when I stroll across the Save-on parking lot. Disappointment marks their faces once I pass by. Their lives will never be the same.

I grabbed a shopping cart and dropped my purse into the basket, pushing through the automatic doors. I'm the queen of hearts, my smile as clean and sharp as a guillotine. But irony of ironies, row upon row of red heart-shaped boxes and balloons blocked my path to the produce department. I can never look at the symbols for Valentine's Day without remembering what Mohamed said about them.

Mohamed el-Ipir, head of the Prince's security detail, and I were having a quiet repast one rainy February evening at a tiny restaurant in the Montmartre district of Paris, directly across from a bohemian hangout known as *Le Lapin Agile*, The Frisky Rabbit. I too had felt like a frisky rabbit, as my dangerously illicit affair with Mohamed was purely physical, acrobatic even. Not that Mohamed wasn't appealingly handsome. He could have passed for Omar Sharif's better-looking cousin.

Foggy eyed and giddy from a hot romp and expensive champagne, I had noticed a man in a large overcoat hurry to a nearby table where a demur young woman waited with a glass of white wine. The man reached into his coat and produced a small heart-shaped box as if he had pulled it out of his own chest.

I thought the scene precious and had called it to Mohamed's attention. He turned back with that slow enigmatic smile that usually meant he thought he knew something I didn't. Finally he said, "European culture never ceases to amaze me. Even though I was educated at Cambridge, certain things that are opaque to

most Europeans appear transparent to me.” Mohamed was always full of interesting if not esoteric observations.

“The heart symbol is about sex,” he continued, “not about sentiment. Take the shape, two arcs joined to form a valley, the other two segments joined in a point below.” This much I knew, but he’d drawn it in the air with his finger anyway. “Quite an ancient shape, actually, examples of which abound in the early clay pottery of prehistoric Mesopotamia.” He had read in Archeology at Cambridge. “Now transcribe a line from the point where the two arcs join down to the point below.” He’d paused, as he was naturally dramatic. “Place a dot at both points of termination and what do you have?” I wasn’t quite following. “It’s believed that this so-called heart shape originated in the impressions made by women sitting along muddy river banks after bathing.” He had lost me. It must have shown. “Then imagine a naked woman seated on a glass table as seen from below.”

I walked straight through the produce department lost in remembrance. At the time, I’d laughed at the outrageousness of the image while thinking to myself, you’ve actually seen something like this, and when, where?

The meat department appeared almost hostile in the harsh white of fluorescent lighting, the sausages glowing a pasty pink, skinned chicken breasts stark naked, and the throbbing red trays of beef. My ears burned as if from embarrassment. Waves of intense heat swept through me like I had an atomic flare at my core. Little beads of moisture formed on my upper lip. I felt the urge to strip off my clothes. Sweat gathered at my hairline and around my eyes as I swung my cart into the brightly lit freezer aisle. I open the door to the cold case and stared at the stacks of frozen pizzas, the cooling air rushing out to envelope the torch of my body. I was having what a friend had called a ‘power surge.’ I had experienced it only once before and at the time I thought I was going crazy.

Women start getting them around my age. I'm told I'm going to have to get used to them.

"Well if it isn't the queen of everything. And she does her own shopping." I turned. Rikki and his friend, Wallace, beamed like gargoyles in a cold vaporous light.

"What are you guys doing in Timberton? I thought you had gone back down south after your commercial. . . "

Rikki didn't wait for me to finish. "Missy, it's a long story, but the short version is remember when I was saying all those nasty thing about living out here in BFE among the country louts and bad food and no entertainment and just a hell of a long way away from everything?"

Wallace, his hair spiked with frosted tips, smiled over Rikki's shoulder. "It turns out that's exactly what we were looking for!"

"We don't have to live in LA to do our work." Rikki waved his hand dismissively as if the lower half of the State could just go away. "There's plenty of location work that all the home fries with husbands and wives and little kiddies don't want to take." He looked mystified that I continued to hold the freezer door open so I closed it. The surge had subsided leaving only a vague tingling on the surface of my skin. "We're renting a cabin at The Franklin Family Resort for now."

"Oh, The Mint," I interjected. "That's what the locals call it. It used to be the most popular place on the river in the forties and fifties and they made money hand over fist so it became known as the Franklin Mint. Or just *The Mint*. It's the last operating resort along the Corkscrew."

"Aren't we something, Miss Local Color. And you do your own make-up, too." Rikki's eyebrows decamped to the top of his forehead. His make-up was perfect.

“And the locals are so friendly,” Wallace added. “We’re looking for a place to buy. We’ve even met people who know friends of ours back in LA. We ran into them shopping here a couple of days ago.”

“Oh, yeah, Save-on,” I agreed, “It’s kind of like the de-facto community center. I see my neighbors here more often than I do in my own neighborhood.”

“That is so quaint, don’t you think, Wallace?” Rikki jabbed a well-manicured finger in my direction. “You must come over for a drink. We can take up where we left off last time. I read in the paper that Preston Carmichael has raised his ugly head nearby.”

I was no longer looking at Rikki. At the far end of the freezer aisle closest to the registers a very familiar mass of frizzy dark hair bobbed past followed by a sauntering loose-limbed figure. It occurred to me that their wolfhound, Tarzan, must be tied to the bike rack outside. The Countess and Puppet, they were alive!

Rikki mistook my reaction. “Of course you should be alarmed. The man is evil incarnate.”

I grabbed my purse from the empty shopping cart. “I’m sorry, I’ve got to run.” I hurried to the end of the aisle and scanned the people waiting in line. I hadn’t been imagining them, I was certain. With the Countess and Puppet alive, my conspiracy scenario was in shambles. But where had they been all this time? I made my way through the throng at the express check-out and past the sighs of the automatic doors. Outside, the sun had just dropped behind the forested ridge to the west of the parking lot, a ribbon of high ice clouds fluttering across the darkening blue

The Countess lit a smoke as I strode up to them, Puppet untying Tarzan from the bike rack.

“Where have you guys been? I thought. . .” I stopped. “I mean, JJ had me looking for you. . .” I must have sounded stupid. “That was a couple of months ago. . .”

The Countess looked at Puppet and then back at me. “Ve go Mexico in vinter. Here is too cold. The rains, the floods.” Her crooked teeth reminded me that the Countess had never taken advantage of the Royal orthodontist. “JJ know this.”

JJ knew? Walking away, the Countess called out an “adios” as I stood there putting two and two together. She had got me again. JJ had known all along. I was not pleased and the large man blocking my return to the supermarket did not make me any happier.

“You Lee Malone?” he demanded.

I backed up a step, reaching into my purse. I felt around for the pepper spray that I knew was in there somewhere. But I couldn’t tell it from my eyelash brush. I didn’t even know if it worked. I’d never used it before.

He was a professional. “Take it easy, lady.” He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket. “No need to get jumpy.” He wasn’t smiling. “I ain’t gonna hurts ya.” He handed me a long white envelope. “This is a summons to appear at the law offices of Hogan, Carpenter and Eldridge on behalf of Preston Carmichael in the criminal action against Faheed Fashwalla. You’ve been served.”

I about had a heart attack.

Chapter Eighteen
CHAMPAGNE & RASPBERRY JAM

“Go ahead, ask her why she never made movies,” Rikki demanded.

I was seated in the only chair, a faded green wicker arm-chair, in their tiny cabin at The Franklin Family Resort. Antique sconces lit the knotty pine walls with a faint amber glow. A shaft of white light from the partially closed bathroom door crossed the corner of the bed where Wallace was perched.

“But she was in a movie. I remember seeing it,” Wallace insisted. “It was some spy thriller. . . .”

“*I Spy Everywhere*,” Rikki insisted. He was wearing a black and lavender Hawaiian shirt over a flamingo hued t-shirt, dark slacks, and very large shoes. Such big feet and a mouth to match, I thought to say, but he had the floor. “Probably one of the worst action thrillers ever made.” He raised an eyebrow in my direction daring me to object.

I had accepted Rikki and Wallace’s invitation to join them for champagne in their temporary cabin home at The Mint. I’m a sucker for champagne, even in a plastic cup. Besides, I was still a little shaky with JJ’s betrayal. To make matters worse, I had been served with a summons. Champagne and Rikki’s antics were just the diversion I needed.

I’d followed Rikki’s Saab to the resort about a mile east of Timberton and then down the narrow paved roadway lined with pillar-straight redwoods where tiny dilapidated cabins leaked light like torn paper lanterns. Their cabin, a dirty white affair with peeling green trim, was adjacent to the large two-story house that served as the owner’s residence and resort office. A long narrow building like a shoebox with windows across from their cabin was brightly lit by fluorescents from within. A sign above the gaping

bright doorway read *Laundromat Video Games*. Another smaller sign near where a gaggle of teenagers had gathered read *No Loitering*. Alongside the building a few large dumpsters piled with flood debris served as reminders that when the Corkscrew breached its banks, The Mint got wet.

“Oh, I agree. Acting is not something I do well.”

“I’ll say,” Rikki snorted, “by the end of the shoot they were calling you Natalie Wooden.”

I laughed. Rikki always got me to laugh.

Wallace joined in. “That’s awful, Rikki! It can’t be true.” He glanced at me, expecting a defense. I simply sipped at the bubbles in the flimsy plastic cup.

“They don’t call the truth awful for nothing,” Rikki continued. “Now, think of it, was there ever any scene in that, pardon the expression, movie that she spoke her lines on camera? No, not a one. Were there ever any scenes in which she did anything but pose and look pretty? No. Not a single frame. This is not to say that she was not filmed moving, but all those scenes ended up on the cutting room floor!”

Wallace fixed me with astonishment, assuming I’d counter Rikki’s dish.

“When you’re right, you’re right, Rikki.” I winked at Wallace. “Posing for a still camera and for a movie camera are two entirely different things. With a still shot, all the angles are figured, the lighting, the makeup, all of that is meticulously prepared beforehand. As a fashion model you are essentially an object to the photographer, an inanimate object, a mannequin, a still life.”

“You were a still life alright, honey, a pear and two grapefruit.” Wallace shrieked at Rikki’s outrageousness. He had me laughing again. It was just like old times on the Euro-trash fashion circuit. He tipped more bubbly into my glass. “You were saying?”

“On the other hand when you’re in front of a movie camera, acting, moving, no matter how much preparation goes into doing your hair and makeup, you are in motion and angles change. The light that one moment caressed you betrays you in the next. I remember that they constantly had to stop the action if I made the slightest move of my head or spoke my dialogue. Not that I had many lines of dialogue, mind you.”

“Exactly,” Rikki chimed in, “if you saw that movie again, and I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy, you would see that all her lines are spoken off camera. All of her scenes are essentially still shots, gazing dreamily at the leading man, perching on a promontory looking out over the Aegean as the hero sails off in his luxury yacht. . . .”

“Apparently when I moved I was fracturing the way light reached the camera lens so that the image looked something like Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending A Staircase*.”

Wallace looked at me blankly. Rikki groaned. “That is so typical of a model. Blame the camera!”

We all laughed heartily at that. A loud hollow explosion punctuated our laughter, rattling the panes.

Rikki parted the threadbare green curtain at the front window and stared out into the darkness. “Those damn kids!” He poured the last dribble of bubbly into his cup with a world-weary expression. “They like to bang on the side of the dumpster like it’s a gong. They’ve done it a couple of times before. They think it’s cute. I had to go out and yell at them. They are so needy.” He raised his plastic cup in a toast. “Here’s to finding a house of our own! And soon!”

The champagne must have gone to Wallace’s head. He held me with a glazed rapt expression. Finally he sighed, “You’ve lived such a fascinating life.”

“Ha!” Rikki jeered. “And you haven’t even heard about the kidnapping!”

I thought Wallace was going to tumble off the bed. “Kidnapping?”

Rikki never knew when to shut up. That was the problem. I gave him one of my daggers to the heart looks. His big foot had lodged squarely in his big mouth. I waited to hear what else he would say. All I heard was a wail.

It came from outside, low and mournful. Rikki was at the door. “That tears it. I’ll give those pimply faced little snots something to howl about!”

I followed him down the steps from the cabin, Wallace behind me. “Wait, Rikki!” It came again, this time an anguished shriek, but it wasn’t coming from the teens. They were clustered around the door of the Video Arcade Laundromat looking up at the large white house where a red neon sign spelled out *Office*. It was coming from in there. A familiar old black pick-up was parked at the bottom of the steps that led up to the verandah and the front door.

Rikki looked at me quizzically. “Do you think we should ask them to turn down their TV?”

I started up the steps. “I don’t think that’s a TV, Rikki.” The mournful bawl was a cry of distress.

Once inside the office I encountered an eerie silence. If this wasn’t a *déjà vu* I didn’t know what was. “Hello?” I called out. I glanced at Rikki frowning and Wallace wide-eyed with panic. Here I was, Nancy Drew with the Hardly Boys. A scuffling called my attention to the ceiling. Upstairs! The moaning started up again though at a lower pitch. It was a sorrowful sound.

I led the way up the carpeted stairs to the second floor. At the top, the semi-dark hall led to a bright open doorway. I turned

to see if my backup was still following, and then, like toy ducks on a string, I led them into the bedroom.

Stretched out across the bed was a large bearded man, completely naked. It looked as if someone had smeared an entire jar of raspberry jam all over his chest. On the floor next to the bed was a pale blonde woman, also completely naked. She appeared to be spooning a double-barrel shotgun. Some of the raspberry jam had splashed on her face, arms, and thighs. Her half open mouth was the source of the disembodied moaning. Standing by the bedside table, phone to his ear, Blackie spoke in a low solemn voice.

Chapter Nineteen
THE GOOD ONES ARE ALWAYS TAKEN

Morning shone like a jewel, wild plums in full bloom. Large baubles of dew clung to the new grass drooping over the edge of the pewter pavement. The slant of early morning sun picked out gems strung on labyrinthine webs in the tangle of old blackberry cane. Tall furry limbed trees glistened crystal green.

I don't want to sound jaded, but I couldn't be bothered. The core of my focus was to put one foot in front of the other as fast as I could. I ran at a speed that made my eyes water. I knew what I was running from, the hot breath of memory on my neck.

The naked man spread eagle across the bed at the Franklin Family Resort was not only dead, I realized, but he was also the bearded driver of the gray van. The inconsolable woman was the Resort owner, Alice Franklin, sole survivor of the Franklin clan. Despite the blood splattered on her face and torso, she was unharmed. Both barrels of the shotgun had been fired. Cause and effect were obvious. On the other hand, Blackie being there just did not add up.

Once he hung up the phone and informed me that he had just called the Sheriff and that they were on their way, he asked me and my friends to step out of the room while he attended to the hysterical woman. I didn't think it unusual. He seemed like a man experienced in this kind of tragedy, calm, in command. Why he was there in the first place just didn't make sense.

I heard the explanation Blackie gave the first deputy to arrive. He had a pick-up load of trash and garbage from cleaning up after the flood, and rather than drive ten miles to the county dump, it was easier for him to unload it in the dumpsters at the Resort. Alice didn't mind, he claimed, the cost of the dumpsters being covered by the insurance company. All it proved was Blackie

knew an opportunity that would save him time and money when he saw one. He'd heard the shotgun blast just as he was getting ready to drive away. Without a thought for his own safety, he had run up the stairs and into the bedroom to discover Alice standing over the man with the shotgun in her hands. That sounded like something Blackie might do. Still, I was pestered by the incongruity of two naked people, one dead, one hysterical, and Blackie, not surprisingly I suppose, dressed all in black. Maybe it was the black gloves.

A white sedan was parked in front of the steps leading to my cabin when I returned from my run. It stood out like an absence against the green haze of azaleas, ferns and Japanese maples that landscaped the hillside against which my rustic hideaway was perched. I walked up to the driver's side and waited while Detective Santos rolled the window down.

"Beautiful morning for a run," he informed me.

I didn't know if I was more annoyed with him for being there or for stating the obvious. I allowed myself a nod of agreement. Besides, in touch with my animal self after a run, I often find myself mute, as if I had a million years of evolution to catch up on.

I stepped back as he opened the door and got out of the sedan. A beige windbreaker fit snugly over a green polo shirt and a pair of sharply creased dark blue trousers. He pursed his lips in apology. "I'm sorry to inconvenience you, Ms. Malone, but I want to go over the statement you made to the deputy at the Franklin Resort." He retrieved a notebook from his inside pocket.

I motioned with my hand toward the front door in invitation.

His faint smile was a question.

I made the supreme effort, sucking in a gulp of air and moistening my lips. My throat was dry even though I was dripping

with sweat. "Please." I started up the steps. "Come inside. We can talk."

The full-length mirror on the wall opposite the front door offered an unflattering glimpse of my flush complexion and soggy ringlets. My ponytail hung abjectly, confused and knotty from trailing in my wake. I had to take a shower. I led him into the kitchen and invited him to sit at the fifties vintage green formica and chrome table. "I have to be in Santa Quinta in an hour and a half to be deposed by Preston Carmichael. Why don't you have a cup of coffee while I jump in the shower?" I set a white coffee mug in front of him. My man, Mr. Coffee, had kept the pot I'd made earlier at precisely the right temperature. "Help yourself. I won't be more than five."

"Ms. Malone. . ." he began, but I'd already undone my hair heading down the hall to the bathroom. "Milk's in the fridge." I said over my shoulder.

Fifteen minutes later I joined him for coffee in my white extra fluffy terry cloth robe, wet hair turbaned in a towel. I was refreshed, my skin tingled, my eyes were clear, and my mind focused, ready to talk.

Detective Santos glared at me with hard narrowed eyes and a set chin. He was not pleased that I had kept him waiting. I smiled my patented Lee Malone smile, the one that had conquered the world. It never failed me.

He indicated the sun brightened yellow kitchen. "You have a very cozy place here." He had a human side after all. He dropped the official mask and looked at me quizzically, perhaps seeing me for who I am for the first time. It was a dangerous thing to do.

He hinted at a smile, self-assured, and leaned forward confidentially. "Before we review your statement, I hope you don't mind if I offer a few observations." Well spoken, too. "Corkscrew

County has had two homicides in the space of six months that have been committed using the same kind of weapon.” His eyes shone with a curious, subtle humor. “And, you were involved in the discovery of the body both times.” Attractive, engaging, someone I’d enjoy getting to know. “I’d say that was quite a coincidence, wouldn’t you?” His left hand grasped the coffee mug and he brought it to his lips. A plain gold band encircled the ring finger.

I didn’t have an answer. I had a question. Why is it that the good ones are always taken?

Chapter Twenty *CASTLE MONTAGUE*

I took the scenic route. I was going to be late anyway. The back road out of Timberton was a climb up Calico Ridge, a narrow paved switchback that crisscrossed Calico Creek's watershed down to the Corkscrew River. Calico Ridge's mix of deciduous species, a patchwork of hues among the dark veins of conifers and live oak, was the source of its name. The payoff, on the last stretch of road before it crested the ridge, was a magnificent unobstructed view of the Corkscrew, its wending vice flowing toward the mouth at Feather in a white haze of sea air and angling rays of a midmorning sun.

My session with Detective Santos took longer than I had anticipated. He was a stickler for detail. And very married, I might add. When men are in the habit of prostrating themselves before you, it's refreshing to find a man confident enough to be himself without the pretense of gender superiority. I had watched men suffer in my presence since kindergarten. In Junior High, I collected male egos like a sprinter collects medals at a track meet. By the time I was in High School, I was a professional and that was no longer allowed. So I turned my attention to wealthy and powerful men who, for the most part, hadn't really left kindergarten. The power I had to tie a man's tongue in knots was something I wielded indiscriminately in my late teens and early twenties. At Columbia, I was paired with Congressmen's sons and seen with Senator's daughters. Their consequence was never as all encompassing or as thrilling as that of my charisma. Most were smart enough to understand that and defer to me. Those who didn't suffered the agony of knowing their own inadequacy. But by then I had become unapproachable. I had to leave the country.

In Europe, I encountered real power, ancient power. First there was Ronnie Thrubury, Lord Ronald Thrubury, notorious playboy and scion of a family that traced its ancestry to Eleanor of Aquitaine. He had estates in England as well as in the foothills of the Pyrenees where his family had once ruled their own independent kingdom. I met him at a party in London thrown by The Stones, tragically a week before Brian Jones was found floating face down in his swimming pool. Ronnie was a sweetheart, harmless to all except himself. When we were married, the tabloid press went ballistic. At the time, Lord Ronnie was sixty-four to my twenty-three. And I was allowed access to an aristocratic society that had existed since before the troubadours. Everywhere I went I was surrounded by a clique of handsome perfumed young men who were generally more interested in each other than in me. Ronnie played the fool in that company though I soon came to realize that he was much wiser and accomplished than anyone imagined.

Even though he could have me any time he wanted and gladly would I fly to him, self-doubt harried him. His death acknowledged, in the most telling of gestures, his helplessness before the all-devouring goddess. He had believed that having a brazen young beauty by his side would somehow ward off the final reckoning. He knew better but had succumbed to hope. The tabloids reported that he'd drenched himself in hundred year old cognac and set fire to himself like a big flambé. I prefer to think that he just got too close to the flame. He had been drinking. The cognac laced crepes he loved to make had been his downfall.

Then there was Prince Za'ud el-Haz'r, a man so outrageously rich that his fortune and certainly much of his power dwarfed that of some nations. I met first with his emissaries, obsequious men who were obviously clerics in their own culture. Their concerns were legalistic, their questions couched in the kind of

language that would normally show up in a pre-nuptial agreement. I had to ask them to leave. But then the advances of one of the wealthiest men in the world are hard to fend off. From that moment on, my money was no good, anywhere. The lease on my posh apartment in Montmartre had been extended indefinitely requiring not a *sou* from me. My travel arrangements were paid for in advance or I had the use of a private jet if I wished. A limousine was always at my disposal. My meals in the most exclusive and expensive of restaurants on the continent were compliments of the house, my most indiscreet extravagances covered by an invisible purse. I finally had to come to terms. They were deceptively simple.

The Prince was even older than Ronnie. He had a harem, a stable of women he used strictly for sexual purposes. On the other hand, he had, over the years, supported, by gift and friendship, some of the most beautiful, intelligent and sophisticated women in the world. Their only obligation, if it could be called that, was to appear on the Prince's arm in public whenever he asked. Nothing more was expected. I was flattered that such a tribute would be paid to me. Curious as always, I had accepted.

In the rear mirror, I caught a last glimpse of the sun-dappled dazzle of the Corkscrew shimmering in the distance as the road crested at the final bend of the Calico switchback and then wound down into the tiny community of Ox Tooth. The post office, a narrow wooden structure planted on a berm above the main drag, was fronted by an extra large version of the Stars and Stripes that partially blocked the view of a megalithic granite nub that someone, years ago, had thought resembled an ox's tooth. Adjacent to the pile of rocks, an old ramshackle livery stable, now an Italian restaurant, testified to the incursion of gentrification. A shiny black Mercedes and an old pickup truck were parked out front. The brick box across the street dispensed beer, cigarettes, and bait. At the far edge of Tooth, as it was called by the natives,

the original gas station, now an antique store, displayed a crudely painted sign advertising *Arty Fakes* for sale. The ancient gasoline pump, its manikin shape topped with a frosted glass globe that still bore the faded imprint of a red horse with wings, was just another nostalgia signpost.

The white minivan tailing me since Timberton had dropped back during the climb. Now it loomed in the rearview mirror. I let the weight of the Volvo take me downhill, my foot barely tapping the brake pedal to control the speed of my descent. The road had a more gradual decline on the south side of the ridge. In the gaps between the trees, I caught glimpses of the rectangular street grids that patterned the valley floor. Hillsides were marked with regular rows of vineyards to the left and right of me. Below the fringe of trees at the base of the ridge, rolling hills of vines stretched out to the very limits of the Santa Quinta. Half way down the hillside, a fairy tale castle surrounded by vineyards stood out like the proverbial sore thumb in the grand tradition of American pretentiousness. It was Montague Winery's architectural monstrosity looking like something that had escaped from the magic kingdom.

I made out two men in the cab of the minivan nipping at my tailpipe. I knew of a narrow pullout around the next bend. I angled sharply to the right and stood on the brakes. The van swerved to avoid my rear bumper and then careened past and around the next bend, its brake lights flashing frantically.

I took a deep breath and noticed that I had a death grip on the steering wheel. I had been shadowed by paparazzi before, usually trailing my limos on Vespa scooters. It came with the territory. I got used to it. Except for that one time, that one time on the road between Prague and Budapest. I had asked the driver to take the scenic route. A black Mercedes had cut off my limo, and a

green panel truck had boxed it in. There had been guns and black hoods. I took a few more deep breaths and let myself calm down.

I eased my Volvo cautiously back onto the roadway, drifting slowly, warily downhill. Near the bottom, at a hairpin curve right after the alabaster columns that were Montague Winery's elaborately tasteless front gate, the white minivan lay on its side like a discarded Chinese food take-out carton. Seated dissolutely by the roadside and holding his head with both hands I recognized the reporter from the local TV station. His partner, the Vietnamese cameraman, had the back doors wide open, pulling out equipment. Maybe he was going to film the accident. At eleven, your news team in action. Or, out of action.

I slowed and carefully steered into the oncoming lane. Once again, my foot jammed on the brake. A greasy twig of a man, oily forelock curled across a pasty forehead, was directing traffic, a cockroach colored Doberman choke-chained by his side. He signaled me to stop. There was no mistaking him, the bearded man's partner, and the other occupant of the ghostly gray van.

A large gravel truck shouldered by in the opposite direction, and once it passed, I was waved through. I hoped he hadn't recognized me. In the side-view mirror I caught beady weasel eyes tracking me, the twist of a sneer creasing taut sallow cheeks.

Chapter Twenty One

I SEE THE LIGHT

The killing at The Mint had made the front page of the Daily Republican but below the fold. It didn't say much more than what I had already gleaned from my conversation with Detective Santos. Alice Franklin was being held at the County Jail under a suicide watch. Hollis Ryan was Blackie's given name. That I didn't know. The murdered man was Bruno Fitzwaller, aka Bear, and had a criminal history that included extortion and assault. I could have guessed that. He had also been arrested on charges of animal cruelty in the past. That made sense. My name was not mentioned. That was a relief.

The cops were being tight lipped as this latest murder had put a wrinkle in their case against Fashwalla's brother. The gray van had been incinerated. The driver had been killed. And I had just spotted his partner and dog, live and evil. My story was beginning to sound plausible again.

I set the newspaper down on the long mahogany table in the conference room of the law offices of Hogan, Carpenter and Eldridge. At the far end, the stenographer, an Asian woman with severe bangs above perfectly round pink framed glasses, sat impassively, hands on either side of her machine. I had made them wait. Now they were going to make me wait. I glanced at my watch. I figured that I probably had another half an hour to go. The stenographer didn't seem to mind, but then she was being paid by the minute. I didn't doubt that Preston Carmichael was enjoying making me wait. How the powerful liked to play god.

In the fashion business it's all about presentation and representation. You have a publicist and you have a lawyer. One gets you into trouble, and the other gets you out.

I was at a transitional stage in my life when I became aware of Preston, a gregarious middle-aged man with a certain amount of charisma, and the poise and cocksureness of someone who was used to getting his way. Being who I was, I wasn't all that impressed.

In those days I had a publicist, Helen Weil, who provided me with an entourage of sycophants who in turn, to emulate me, had their own hangers-on and groupies. And then there were what I called the minor aristocrats, the younger more impoverished European nobility whose mode of survival was to mooch at all the soirees and events thrown by the very very rich, and who cultivated a decadent faux vampirism. They liked to be seen, and in those days I was very visible. And being young, I suppose I was thought of as frivolous and an attraction to others of that nature. Which is to say, my corner of anywhere was always the noisiest, and I was invariably surrounded by mordant wit, silk handkerchiefs, plunging necklines, expensive perfume, hip nonchalance and arched eyebrows. You had to do more than just be there to get my attention no matter how rich and powerful you were.

Preston left messages for me with Helen but I never returned them. I already had a lawyer, Helen's brother, Curt, whom everyone called "Mack, The Knife" for no other reason than to do so. Helen's assessment of Preston was that he was very well connected but she didn't like some of the people he was connected with. Then she said, "This is Europe, we originated making pacts with the devil."

All the extravagant parties and expensive restaurants were hard on the waistline. And at twenty-six I was well aware of the footsteps of younger, slimmer models on the runway behind me. I needed to drop some weight. There were two choices, bulimia or heroin, and I hated the bitter taste of vomit.

It might have been a year or so after I began noticing Preston Carmichael on the periphery of my society. I was driving back from Ronnie's country estate with some friends. We had just reached the outskirts of Paris when we encountered a police roadblock. There had been a bombing in Neuilly and they were stopping all cars going in and out of the city. In the trunk of the Mercedes they said they found a quarter kilo of heroin. The driver, my friend Michel, was arrested. So was I. They said they found a bundle in my luggage. It was a lie. I never carried. That's what friends are for.

I called my lawyer. He wasn't answering. Later I learned why. He'd overdosed on the very same drug I had been arrested for. I knew Curt to be an occasional user, but never intravenously. A syringe had been found on the floor next to his body. Then Preston showed up. I was released on my own recognizance. Michel was also let go on Preston's say-so. I couldn't go anywhere afterwards without the blinding strobe of camera flashes. Preston was very helpful. He hired guards to keep the preying paparazzi at bay. When I appeared before the magistrate, it was he who did the talking. All I had to do was sit there and be as beautiful and as innocent as I had always considered myself to be.

The press coverage of the incident had seemed particularly brutal. I thought that perhaps it was because world politics was experiencing one of its unpredictable lulls that I had become the focus of their feeding frenzy. I just wanted it to stop. Preston introduced me to the Prince. The media attacks stopped.

The door to the conference room opened and a hunk with panda eyes walked in. He flashed his expensive dentistry at me. I took him to be an ex-college jock, probably football. A tailored dark gray cashmere sports coat hung elegantly from his broad shoulders.

“Brendon Ross, I am an associate of Mr. Carmichael’s.” He shook my hand, the gold *Navigator* watch dangling loosely around his wrist, and he allowed a superior smile to offset his handsome chiseled features. He had everything the perfect man should have except for the eyes. They were cold predatory pools. As he sat at the table next to me I caught a whiff of his cologne. It smelled like new money.

“Preston had to fly to Paris so I’ll be taking your deposition.” He seemed pleased by my reaction as if he had stunned me with his rugged good looks and now I was speechless.

Wrong, beefcake breath. Preston’s name, spoken by his lackey, was the password that unlocked a secret door in my head. It was as if I had opened my closet and all my shoes had come tumbling out. I’d had vague suspicions but had dismissed them as petty paranoia. After all I should have been grateful. That bastard! Preston had the dope planted in the trunk of my Mercedes, and in my luggage. Curt’s overdose. Preston stepping in and getting the charges dismissed as if nothing had ever happened. My introduction to the Prince. The timing was too perfect to be mere coincidence.

Chapter Twenty Two

NAKED BLADE

JJ was crying her eyes out. A copy of the Daily Republican was spread open on her desk. I'm normally a sympathetic person, but this was JJ, with whom I was becoming increasingly annoyed. Maybe Barbara's Bakery had finally closed. Or her love life, nebulous as it was, had taken another turn for the worse. She pointed to the black and white photo of a slightly balding man. "He had a crush on me in high school."

I looked a little closer. It didn't appear to be an obituary. "He passed away?"

She shook her head. "No, no, no. . . ." They were almost sobs. "He was this geeky guy who was fixated on me in my senior year. I was head cheerleader." And as if it was all coming back to her, "And Homecoming Queen. I think he even stalked me."

I fanned myself with the manila folder in my hand. "So. He's dead?" It was going to be another July full moon scorcher.

"No!" Now it was an angry sob. "Read!" She thrust the paper at me.

I glanced at the caption under the picture. The name meant nothing to me. Something about a science prize, nominated for the Nobel. The lighting was bad and the office was stuffy and I had to hold the paper at arm's length.

"Oh, I know what you need!" It was a kind of chirp. JJ reached into a desk drawer and came up with a handful of eye-glasses. She held out a blue pair. "Here, try these, they match your eyes."

"I don't need glasses." I adjust the distance of the text to where I could just about read it without squinting. Fortunately JJ told me what I was reading. "He was this science geek in high school. Kinda goofy looking. So I just ignored him. He asked me

to the prom and I laughed in his face.” She sighed. “The article says he’ll make billions just from the royalties on his patent for doing something with NDA.”

“DNA?”

“Whatever. Billions. He was in love with me. I could have married a billionaire. If I had only known.”

“You can’t be serious.”

She wrinkled her forehead and stared at me with her red-rimmed eyes. “You have no idea what it feels like to lose an opportunity like this. You were an international party girl. You went through men like a chain smoker goes through a pack of cigarettes. You can have any man in the world!”

I’d heard this rant before. I could have answered her, told her that the power of beauty is a double-edged sword as she herself should have realized. Beauty entitles you to nothing but itself. And along with beauty come expectations. Cruelty is one of them. JJ had been acting in a manner consistent with the status her teenage beauty had bestowed upon her.

“JJ, let’s get something straight. If you had married this guy, he’d be trading you in for a trophy wife by now. That’s what rich men do. They upgrade to a woman whose youth and beauty is equal to the power of their money.”

Like a bullfighter waving a red cape, I had distracted her from her self-pity and she focused her frustration on me. “What’s that in the file folder, the latest episode on the dog murders by Lee Malone, Girl Detective?”

I looked down my nose at her. “JJ, it’s been nearly nine months since I started writing that piece. Its moment has passed, wouldn’t you say?” I could have added “thanks to you.” Her averted eyes and the set of her chin told me she was secretly gloating. “As for that other matter, you know as well as I do that the Kelly’s Resort murder and The Franklin Family Resort killing are

linked somehow, but I'm going to let the Sheriff's Office puzzle that out. If you ask me, they're taking their sweet time about it. I guess the wheels of justice turn slowly. Fashwalla's out on bail, and the way the defense and the prosecution are lobbing motions back and forth, they might as well be playing ping pong."

I handed her the folder, "This is the publicity article for the Montague Winery Charity Fashion Show you asked me to write. And you wanted me to help you with something else?"

JJ sat up erect in her swivel chair. "Oh yes! The Fashion Show!"

"I told you, JJ, the puff piece is the extent of my involvement. I don't do fashion shows any more. I hardly do fashions." That was a lie.

"No, that's not it. Tommy asked me to model a few outfits for the show and I was wondering if you would give me some pointers. I modeled a little when I was in college."

I had seen those pictures. She had appeared in a men's magazine co-ed dorm feature of mostly well-developed young women in skimpy underwear. "Ever model on a runway?" I was hoping I wouldn't have to start from scratch.

"No," she shook her head mournfully and held up a shopping bag, "but I have my shoes." She pulled out a pair of black Italian stilettos whose high heels were well over the legal limit.

"Wow." I was impressed. "Where did you get those?"

She fit her feet into them, tying the ankle straps with some effort. "In New York City, about five years ago, on a total whim. I saw them in the display window of some chi-chi shoe store on Fifth Avenue and I just had to have them. This is the first time I've had a chance to wear them."

I certainly understood the impulse. I had a closet of footwear that testified to that urge. I watched JJ stand and almost tip over. She steadied herself with her hand on the edge of the desk.

“Well, this might take some practice.” And took a few wobbly steps. Gaining her balance, she strode to the other side of the room before her right ankle crumpled and she caught herself on the bookshelf. She turned and smiled bravely.

I leaned against the desk and wondered how long this was going to take. The office was already hot enough to incubate eggs and I was intent on finding some place cool real soon. A drive to the coast was beginning to sound like the solution. “You need to relax. Shoulders back, chin up. Now put your right foot in front of your left foot.” She moved her left foot and then corrected herself. “And left in front of right. And repeat, right, left. That’s good. Now step with determination. You walk the earth like the great and awesome beauty that you are.”

JJ giggled. “This is fun.” She was standing in front of me.

“Pivot on left heel slowly, keeping your head turned toward me, looking over your shoulder as you do.” I steadied her with the flat of my hand. “Now show me your sassy I’m-leaving-now strut.”

She looked at me, questioning. “What kind of strut?”

“The catwalk sway, the runway sashay. You’re showing off your butt, a woman’s most seductive asset after her breasts. Why do you think women wear high heels? Not because we like to torture our feet! Because it elevates and accentuates! So do the fanny flaunt!”

She regarded me again, puzzled.

“Think of it this way,” I said. “You have a cat, right?”

“Yes, my blonde Persian, Waltzing Matilda, I call her her Matty because. . .”

I cut her off before she launched into another one of her cat stories. “Visualize how your cat struts away from you, tail up, poised like a question mark, putting one paw in front of the other. Walk like that.”

A light went on behind her eyes. “Oh,” she cocked her head to the right, “I know exactly what you mean.” She advanced across the room, confident.

“Hand on hip, break the other wrist, turn,” I instructed.

“I think I’m beginning to get the hang of this.” She smiled broadly. “Shouldn’t I have a book on my head or something?”

I laughed. “No one uses a book anymore.”

“Really? What do they use?”

“They use a pencil.”

“A pencil?” She stepped behind her desk to retrieve a pencil from the drawer. One of the floorboards creaked.

I glanced at the phone and thought back to a rainy day months ago. I had been in Blackie’s repair shop below and heard everything that was said in the Grapevine office. “Remind me to call the DA,” I said in a louder than normal voice.

The pencil rolled off the top of JJ’s head and under the chair. “Why?” She was distracted, considering whether to stoop and pick it up.

“Something just occurred to me that might be an important detail in the Kelly’s Resort murder.” I spoke as if I were trying to be heard over a loud background noise.

Now I had her attention. “What, what is it? Tell me!” She was puzzled by my raised voice.

“I don’t have time to get into it right now. I’m going to head for the coast before I melt,” I announced clearly.

She shrugged. “You might consider bringing a jacket or something to cover up. It’s bound to be at least ten degrees cooler out there and the way you’re dressed would probably get you arrested in any number of countries.”

The light in the stairwell still hadn’t been replaced and I felt for the handrail. In the dark descending to the street below, JJ’s comment about covering up brought back the memory of an

equally sweltering summer day in Paris many years before when for some reason I had decided not to spend the summer on the Riviera with friends. The odor rising from the famous sewers of the City Of Light was that of a litter box long overdue for a cleaning. I was in bed, a satin sheet covering only part of my naked body. Mohamed had just stepped out of the bathroom babbling about the superiority of his culture again. I'd about had it. The heat was making me cranky. "Listen, Mo," I said. He hated it when I called him Mo. "That's just a lot of goat crap. In your culture you make women wear bags to hide their bodies," I said, and he stood over the bed looking down at me fitting a cufflink in to the starched sleeve of his tuxedo shirt, and said, "Burqa," and I said "Burqa, bag, what's the difference, you oppress women by making them cover every inch of their bodies when they're in public. That's pretty medieval, don't you think?" and he gave me one of those condescending looks like I was some half naked bimbo laid out on satin sheets who didn't know anything and said, "I'm surprised, Lee, that you, of all people, underestimate the power of the unadorned female form. Uncovered, the female body is like a brandished sword, a naked symbol of the raw power over life and death. Imagine a society where these razor sharp instruments were always on display, the anxiety and tyranny they would foster. The streets would run with blood. We have learned to respect our women as we respect our scimitars. We keep them sheathed." And I had said, "Goat crap, Mo, pure, unadulterated goat crap."

I stepped out into the swelter of Main Street. I peered into the window of Blackie's shop. No light was visible from the workshop in back. I caught a glimpse of myself in a large antique mirror, a lacy see-through bolero jacket over an orange tube top that emphasized my ample bust. A pair of tan hiking short shorts I had picked up in Santorini years ago and handmade leather sandals from the Amalfi coast completed my ensemble. I fit my *Fa-*

bregianni sunglasses over my eyes and fluffed my sun streaked blonde hair. I had to admit I looked sharp, lethal, like a naked blade.

Chapter Twenty Three

CHICKEN FISH

I parked in the lot alongside the Chicken Fish Bar & Grill in Feather. The ocean wind whipped my hair into a tangle. I looked down at where the mouth of the Corkscrew pressed against the wide flank of the Pacific. Seagulls, wings outstretched, hovered as if suspended by invisible wires. JJ was right. It was easily a good ten degrees cooler at the coast.

The Chicken Fish, perched on the bluff overlooking an expanse of driftwood strewn beach, had been a way-station for booze smugglers during Prohibition. I had a view all the way back to where Highway 8 joined the Coast Highway, now just a gray shimmer in the distance. Wind-shaped oaks and cypress dotted the far yellow hills. Up from the intersection, the shabby white of Kelly's Seaside Resort and its semi-circle of cabins looked like a wagon train that had lost a battle with the natives. A relic of the past when rumrunners occupied the clapboard boxes awaiting their shipments, it was holding its ground even if it was just powder fine dirt and stunted snarls of vegetation. Cleared acreage hemmed the dingy swath of sand and weathered wood on three sides. Heavy machinery stood idle, waiting for the go-ahead to bulldoze the last remaining obstacle. Somebody big wanted to build something on that spot and some tiny tumbledown shacks were in the way.

The wooden door to the Chicken Fish made a loud slap when it snapped back on its spring hinge. It caused the bartender's head to jerk up from his newspaper. The air was heavy with the smell of cooking oil. There were only two entrees on the Chicken Fish menu, fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, and fish and chips, hence its name. Their soup of the day was always clam chowder and the safest bet.

The bar fronted the dining room, a long narrow affair furnished with a row of knotty pine booths along one short wall and a scattering of round tables and captain's chairs. A young couple and their toddler had a table near the wide window and were pointing to the beach below with exaggerated expressions and noises for the child's benefit. Hopefully, he wouldn't get the idea his parents were idiots.

The bartender was smiling like he knew me. He didn't. "What'll it be?" He was talking to my breasts.

"Something with bubbles, non-alcoholic, a twist of lime and some ice," I answered, not that it changed his focus. I pointed at the knotty pine alcove to the left of the front door. "Ladies?" I had to do something about my hair.

When I came back, my bangs somewhat tamed, the drink was waiting squarely in the center of the red edged cocktail napkin. The lime looked more like a lemon and I hadn't ordered a cherry.

"Want some grenadine with that?" Now he was just being cute. It didn't suit him. He was an old surf rat, cheeks creased like sofa leather and a spiky salt bleached haystack topping a pointy head.

"Do I look like Shirley Temple to you?"

He swallowed like he'd been caught saying something he shouldn't. I could have complained to management but I doubted that they'd care. I had two questions for him. "Where's the public phone?" and, reaching into my purse, "what do I owe you?"

To the first, he pointed at the front door, "out front and to the right" and then offered, "but you can use the bar phone if it's local." The large hand lettered sign next to the cash register clearly stated *No Personal Phone Calls*. To the second he indicated the first booth in the dining room where Blackie, his back to me, had turned and waved. "Drink's on the gentleman in the booth."

I waved back. Blackie motioned me over, grinning like a canary eating cat.

“Escaping the heat?” he asked as I slid into the booth.

I raised an eyebrow. “How did you guess?” The bottle of beer and drained glass in front of him said he’d been there a while.

“You’re not exactly dressed for a ride on the back of a chopper.” He chuckled and tugged the zipper of his leather motorcycle jacket.

I had made an assumption and I was wrong. I’d stopped at The Last Gasp gas station to put a couple of bucks in the tank and make a phone call before heading for the coast. I stirred the ice in my drink with the red straw. “Is that an invitation?”

“You wouldn’t last a mile in those clothes.” I detected a hint of sarcasm, like he didn’t approve of my outfit.

“You think I’m some kind of cream puff who can’t put up with a little wind in her hair?” I had not seen him pass by while I gassed up nor did any motorcycles overtake me on the way out.

“No, you’re a tough cookie,” he said with a hearty laugh, “but you know what happens to cookies, don’t you? Eventually they crumble.” He poured the last of his beer in the glass.

His attitude seemed hostile. I’d had to rethink my relationship with Blackie. After what happened at The Mint, I had an uneasy feeling about him. Also, I had the impression that he’d been avoiding me. Not that we didn’t bump into each other in my comings and goings from the Grapevine office, but our exchanges were always brief and curt like we were embarrassed to have found ourselves in that disquieting situation. Underlying it all was my suspicion that there was more than happenstance to Blackie’s being in Alice Franklin’s bedroom that night.

“Taking a break from being an investigative reporter?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Not much to investigate these days,” I said wanly. I couldn’t remember if I’d voiced my suspicions about the gray van to him, but from his repair shop I was certain he would have overheard me arguing with JJ over its relevance in the Fashwalla murder. In that case he also knew that I was being less than candid. “JJ has me doing the usual color pieces that she’s apparently too busy to tackle. I’m currently writing something on the Corkscrew County Palette Club art show at the new coffee house and bakery up in Healy. Oh, and I just finished a piece on Montague Winery for the. . . .”

“Montague Winery, really?” Suddenly he was interested though I would never have pegged Blackie as a wine drinker, more of the beer and shot type.

“Yes, they’re holding a charity fashion show. . . .”

“And you’re gonna be in it. Figures. You’d be a big draw.” He took a sip of beer. “And they’d be into something like that.” The way he said it sounded more than just an offhanded comment.

“Well, no, actually, I’m done with strutting down runways. The article is the extent of my involvement.” The puff piece I had written was based largely on information JJ had supplied me. After all, how much did I need besides date, time, place, participants, and hyperbolic praise for the Grapevine’s biggest advertiser and do-gooder? “But, I’m curious, what do you know about them?”

Blackie stared at the last of the beer in his glass. “There are certain things better left alone. If you get my drift.”

That was probably the worst thing to say. Now my interest was piqued. I laughed. “Come on, Blackie, I’m sensing a story here. What do you know about Montague Winery?”

He shook his head and growled, “Just because you write for that imaginary newspaper doesn’t make you an investigative reporter. You’re kidding yourself if you think that your looks, your feminine wiles, will get you whatever you please or allow you to

do whatever you want. That idea you have of yourself is an illusion.”

This was not the congenial Blackie I knew. What I expected to be playful banter was turning sinister.

“You had the bad luck to stumble on two murder scenes,” he continued. “Don’t make it any more than it is. You’re just an innocent bystander, but sometimes innocent bystanders get hurt.”

“Blackie, why are you telling me this? It sounds like a threat.”

“Hey,” he spread his hands out in front of him, “I’m just pointing out the realities of the situation. Play with fire and you get burned.”

I didn’t want him to think he was intimidating me though my heart rate shot up and the tang of adrenaline filled my mouth. “Well, let me ease your mind. I have nothing to go on except speculation, and JJ won’t print that. The Sheriff’s Office isn’t volunteering any information. It’s old news. I’ve had to let it go.”

Blackie nodded but the malevolent hardness of his eyes didn’t change.

“But, for the sake of argument, let’s say I did get a lead on who’s behind Fashwalla’s murder and . . .”

He didn’t let me finish. “You’d find a dead end.”

There was no mistaking the intent of his words. But then why was I smiling?

“Lee, good, you’re still here.” Chandler Wong strode over to the booth, gray suit coat over one shoulder, shiny green tie loosened at the neck, radiating a big goofy grin. “I got caught up with something last minute at the office or I would have been here sooner.” He turned and extended his hand to Blackie. “Hi, I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Chandler Wong, Assistant District Attorney.”

Chapter Twenty Four
FIVE MILLION DOLLAR BABY

“I have always been bait.”

Chandler moved his head slightly from side to side in disbelief. “That’s crazy.”

“Why are you so surprised? It’s just another name for seductress.” Albért Picón, the French poet and lecher had pointed that out to me over a glass of Pernod in a smoky café on the Left Bank years ago when I was still actively playing that role.

“You had no idea that I would get your phone message telling me to meet you out here because you said you had some new information on the Fashwalla murder. Good thing I was out this way when my secretary paged me. You saw how angry Blackie was when he left. Don’t let the white hair fool you. I don’t think you realize what kind of danger you’re putting yourself in.”

I shrugged and toyed with the ice in my glass. “I’ve been bait since I could walk. Practically every woman is. When you’re made out to be the pinnacles of feminine perfection, in the eyes of men at least, it becomes obvious that you’re a lure. It’s even a quality you can have. *Allure*. Rich men want you gracing their arms like expensive jewelry. Men are impotent in the face of real beauty. And if they’re not, they’ve still got mother issues to resolve. As for Blackie, I can handle him.”

Chandler smiled wide enough to give himself dimples. “You think you’re tough, don’t you?”

I shrugged. “I think I’m a realist. At least about what I’ve been, what I’ve done.”

“Well, you might be a little out of your league here.” He was serious again, little ridges of worry crinkling his smooth Asian forehead.

“Blackie’s been eavesdropping on the conversations in the Grapevine office. You can sit in his workshop and hear everything that’s said upstairs. I made up that story about new evidence to get him to follow me out to the coast.” I bit the straw and wet my whistle with a little of the diluted soda. “I had to prove to myself that I was right about him. I still don’t know how he managed to beat me out here. Unless he was on his bike before I got to my car. . . .” My reasoning was beginning to sound farfetched, even to me. “But he’s involved in all of this, I’m sure of it. I just haven’t figured out how.”

Chandler worked up another smile but this time it had a smug edge. “Not even close.”

There was something about Chandler Wong that I liked, but I also got the feeling that I baffled him. He was certainly intelligent, but guy enough to always want to be right. I gave him my extraordinary smile and “You’re probably right, but help me out, just to satisfy my curiosity.” A three quarter profile and a little lean forward. “Where am I wrong on this?”

He started to speak but then exhaled a slight chuckle. He shook his head and stared down at the edge of the cracked formica table. “I can’t.” And then up to meet my gaze.

His mistake. I let my eyes do their special pleading.

He folded like a bad poker hand. “Alright, Hollis Ryan, or Blackie as you call him, is involved but probably not in the way you think.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “He was a potential witness in the Fashwalla murder. He happened to be here, at the Chicken Fish, on that day. But then this is one of his hangouts. As he said in his statement to Detective Santos, he was inside and not outside. He only saw the food on his plate and the beer in his glass.”

“That sounds like something he’d say.”

Chandler cleared his throat, annoyed perhaps. “Blackie was known to Detective Santos when Santos was a deputy assigned to the Timberton substation. There had been an incident with Mr. Ryan and in the course of a background check, it turned out that your antique shop owner had once been arrested for murder. He copped a plea and had it reduced to manslaughter. He did time. This was down south, long before he moved up to Corkscrew County.”

My surprise must have shown.

“It turns out that Mr. Ryan was muscle for a small time pimp by the name of Tommy Perro.”

Tommy Perro. I mouthed the name to myself. That was the name of one of the men in the photo at Blackie’s workshop. One of the old motorcycle gang.

“Perro branched out into dirty movies. Ryan doubled as one of his actors as well. He killed another male actor on the set of a shoot.”

This was a little more than I’d bargained for, but I was fascinated. “Don’t stop now.”

That chuckle again, with a slightly embarrassed shy boy sideways glance at me. Quite charming. “When Fashwalla’s brother came forward and confessed we thought we wouldn’t need the testimony of witnesses so that part of the investigation was shut down. His recanting of the confession and the similarity with the killing at Franklin’s Resort put a different spin on things. Again Ryan’s presence at the resort raised a flag but his alibi checked out so now he’s just what you might call a person of interest.”

“I think Blackie has something to do with the murders.” I tried not to sound too self-righteous. “Why aren’t you investigating him?”

A frown greeted my insistence. “Well, for one, I’m not in charge of the investigation. It’s the District Attorney’s call. He’s

the one who sets the schedule.” By the way he said it, he obviously wasn’t happy with the progress of the case.

“Anyway, we’re after bigger fish.” Chandler sat back in the booth and considered me with a serious stare. “This cannot be repeated to anyone. Do you understand?” He lowered his voice to a near whisper.

I nodded dumbly and leaned forward. “Of course.”

“After Fashwalla’s brother recanted his confession and retained the high priced attorney. . . .”

“Preston Carmichael.”

“Right, we started taking a closer look at all the players. A common thread emerged. Both Fashwalla and Franklin owned old rundown resorts. The other thing in common was that they had both refused to sell their properties to Ramparts Corp, a real estate developer with international connections. It turns out that there’s been a steady rise in title transfers of ranch land and old resorts in the county, the majority being grabbed up by Ramparts. We’re pretty sure there was coercion in more than a few of the sales. A lot of the property is being converted to vineyards.”

“Let me guess. Montague Winery.”

“Very good. Ramparts, it turns out, is an umbrella corporation fronting a lot of questionable enterprises and headed by a certain Thomas Montague.”

“Tommy Montague?”

“Senior. His son is the executive in charge of the Winery. But what’s more interesting is the fact that Montague is not the old man’s real name.” Chandler paused. He must have realized I was mesmerized.

“Perro. He used to go by the name of Tommy Perro.”

The bus boy rattled past with a cart full of dirty dishes. A group of couples had entered the dining room and were assessing

the best place to be seated. The waitress waved them over to the tables overlooking the crashing surf with a handful of menus.

“Which brings us back to Blackie.” I thought my point had been made.

“This is much bigger. Sex trafficking, child pornography, wire fraud, extortion, money laundering. We’re working with the Department of Justice, State and Federal.”

I wasn’t all that convinced. “I still think there’s more to Blackie than meets the eye.”

Another chuckle, this time a rolling rumble of pleasure. “My contact at Justice is an old college friend. He asked about you last time I spoke to him. He saw an item on TV that said you lived in Corkscrew County and he wondered if I had ever met you.”

“And you have!” I wasn’t surprised. “What a coincidence!”

“He reminded me that you had once been kidnapped and held for ransom. I remember reading something about that when I was in law school!”

“That was quite some time ago.” I didn’t like thinking about it, let alone talk about it.

He frowned as if the math was not adding up. “Not that long ago.”

“Maybe it just seems that way.” Now I was uncomfortable.

“You were held for ransom by some radical feminist group, right? And what was the ransom? Two million dollars?”

“More like five million.”

The waitress appeared suddenly, pad in hand, casting curious glances at each of us. She was an older woman with weary road worn features and dyed blonde hair gathered in a bouquet of split ends on the top of her head. She extracted a long orange pencil from the haystack. She had on a blouse that had once been whiter and a wrinkled faded black skirt. A nametag partially cov-

ered the discoloration of an old stain over the left breast. It read *Guess*. She looked at Chandler and then at me. “Well, now that we’ve decided on a price, are we ready to order?”

Chapter Twenty Five ***IN THE SWIM***

I had four men staring at me and two of them were pointing, but not with their fingers.

The day started innocently enough. The heat wave of the past several days had subsided to a mere swelter. I'd received a call from Rikki inviting me to a swim party at the home of an acquaintance. The temperatures had been pretty unbearable and with the exception of my lone foray out to the coast, I'd contented myself with iced drinks, an electric fan, and the occasional cold shower. The thought of spending time in water that didn't come from a pipe was tempting. There was a problem though, and that's what had dissuaded me from going to the beach before. I didn't have appropriate swimwear. I had plenty of stylish bikini and mini thong bottoms but no tops. I'd spent most of my time on beaches in Mediterranean countries where tops were optional so they never got packed or were simply abandoned in boutiques. Hard to believe that in all the years I'd lived near the Corkscrew River I'd never dipped in a toe.

Rikki's friend was someone he'd known in Hollywood, Nathan Thiele, the legendary stage and screen production designer, now retired. So Rikki had informed me over the phone. I wouldn't have had a clue. Nat's partner was a young Haitian man named Lalo with the cutest accent and the smallest most revealing swimsuit, which, with the speed removed, left only the *oh* to the imagination. Rikki and Wallace were both conservatively attired in clashing neon Hawaiian shirts and rather unimaginative baggy swim trunks. Nat himself looked like he might be preparing to go on safari. Nat's cabin, as he called it, was a dreamy redwood Arts & Crafts gem with a wide sweeping deck sitting at the top of an

apron of manicured lawn that ran down to the sandy shore and the water's edge.

I had shown up a little late, having resolved my dilemma by grabbing an old scarf from my scarf drawer and fashioning it into a halter top. I thought Nat's eyes were going to pop out of his head. He'd pointed a trembling finger at me. "That's not a *Hélène Mouchoir*, is it?" I admitted to that possibility, after all I did own some of her creations. And he'd replied, "Well, in that case, I wouldn't think of allowing you to go swimming in a priceless designer scarf!" Rikki spoke up and suggested that I just go topless. His words were "After all, we're gay guys, we're not gonna get all weird at the sight of your tay-tays." I considered it and thought why not, it's perfectly natural in the civilized world. There was an embarrassed silence while they all stared at my breasts. Finally I had to say, "Lalo, Wallace, it's not polite to point."

Nate and I compromised. He had a large rubber raft that featured inflated back and arm rests. There was even a place for my cocktail. After spreading lotion all over myself, I climbed on, launched the raft away from shore, and settled back. I donned my *Fabregianni* sunglasses and trailed a finger in the cool green waters. What there was of a current steered me down away from the dock into the shade of bays and willows on the opposite shore. The little alcove of shade was a perfect place to observe the world even if it was just four guys posing, posturing and frolicking in the shallows. I was like Cleopatra on her barge, the queen of the Nile with sun-dappled ankles.

The tranquility of water, I've always appreciated the tranquility of water, especially in the Mediterranean where the sparkling azure sky reflecting off the undulating expanse was magical. Just the thought of it transported me there. And the beach at Sabia Negru, the black sands where Xuxann bent over me, nipples as dark and plump as rum soaked raisins.

Only at first did it ever seem like captivity. Protective custody, the council of nine had called it. I had been confined to a small cell for possibly a week, disoriented at first, while my captors decided whether I was to be trusted. Eventually I was allowed to roam the grounds but only if accompanied by one of the nine. Most of the time it was a woman named Xuxann. She was my guide as well as my guard. A tall, lithe North African with a mass of dark ophidian locks, Xuxann was what the poets meant when they referred to Abyssinian maids.

Once I'd concluded that I was not in eminent danger, I took stock of my situation. By the angle of the sun crossing the sky, I figured that the rugged landscape faced south. My first guess was that I was on an old Roman estate tucked among pines, cypress, and aromatic cedars on a rocky hillside overlooking a cerulean sheet of sea. The main house, a large villa roofed with red tile, was perched on the edge of a table of land above the seashore. A winding stone stairway cut into the face of the cliff led to the beach below. My cell was among a collection of wood and stone structures on the hillside behind the villa indicating that at one time it might have functioned as a monastery and that my tiny austere room may have once been a monk's. There were places on the compound where I wasn't allowed, and on certain occasions I was held incognito in the confines of my room. Otherwise, I was free to roam and explore.

Behind the compound, thick nests of conifers populated the creased gray stone face of an ancient mountain. On the west side, an old Roman arch led out to a treacherous rock and thorn-bush infested ravine. A frothy white stream tumbled over smooth rounded boulders on the east side of the property and dropped over the edge of a precipice onto the beach below. Xuxann called it *Al-leca Diva*, the milk of the goddess.

The two of us often spent the early part of the day running along trails and paths of the wild flower carpeted cliffs, pausing to absorb the enchantment of a particular sea-shaped formation or gaze over a sheer decline at the rocks milling in the surf. It was then that I developed my passion for running and the love of freedom and power it gave me. We ran or jogged everywhere we went, especially on the wide stretch of black sand from the waterfall on one end to the jetty at the other. We were like wild mares galloping through the shimmering surf. When the sun rose to its peak at midday, weary from our exertions, we splashed in the refreshing turquoise waves.

I remembered sitting on that beach and watching as Xuxann rose out of the sea, a blast of setting sun framing her like a golden shell, a dripping wet wide-hipped silhouette creating a presence as well as an absence that pulled me in and yet repulsed me. I sensed her strength, a power representing all of life.

“All of life,” spoke the shaman, stretching out her arms to indicate the world of the hillside garden outside of her ancient stone abode. Xuxann had repeated the words in French as I was not yet accustomed to the old woman’s coarse dialect.

It had been a little over a month after my arrival that Xuxann took me to the top of the property and through a small stone arch that was obviously much older than the Roman period one. We had followed the path along the milky stream up to a terraced garden at the top of which a primitive stone house commanded a wide view of the sea and the shadow of a far off shore under a mantle of cloud. Out in front a tall woman with a halo of wiry silver hair framing a perfectly symmetrical face greeted us. Her eyebrows were still as dark as her eyes and her nose drew a narrow angle down to her welcoming smile. She wore a colorful tiered skirt and a little embroidered sleeveless vest joined by a

macramé clasp of gold thread in the middle. That was my introduction to Trayann, the old woman of the mountain.

How I arrived in this dream of peace and beauty was nothing short of a nightmare. I'd just finished an exhausting round of fashion shows and soirees and was on my way to Budapest to meet with the Prince for an opening of East European modernist art at a gallery he sponsored. I had asked the driver of my limousine to take the old road between Prague and Budapest. We had just passed through a small farming village and into a forested region. It was getting on toward evening and I had just begun to nod off. I opened my eyes when I felt the limo come to a stop. A black Mercedes blocked the two-lane road and a green panel truck had pulled in behind the limousine. I was trying to make sense of what was going on when the rear door was yanked open and I was pulled from the back seat. A pungent rag was forced over my nose and mouth. As I faded into unconsciousness, I made out two burly square-headed men in black hoods. It didn't seem odd that I would think *Bulgarians*. I awoke next when I felt a pin prick on my thigh. A man with a narrow face and a dark moustache glanced up from the syringe in his hand. The walls were red, the bed was red, the chair was red, the floor was red, the light was red, and then everything went black. I was jolted awake by a violent crash and found myself strapped to a gurney in the back of what appeared to be an ambulance. I heard a commotion, shouting, outside the vehicle, and then gunshots. I told myself, this is it, this is the end. My ears rang with more excited yelling in a language I couldn't quite make out, this time closer, at the doors to the rear of the vehicle. It seemed curious that they were women's voices. My heart beat harder, faster, and I lost consciousness again.

A pale white light edged with red insinuated itself through my closed lids. I opened my eyes to see the face of an older woman bent over me with a look of concern and relief. She straightened

up and I saw that she wasn't alone. There were eight other women of varying ages surrounding my bed in a large white room. I had known females of great physical beauty in the fashion business, but it was mostly skin deep. A beauty of wisdom and compassion emanated from the assembled women, generating an aura of calm benevolence. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

Chapter Twenty Six

SAPHO

The waves washing across the black gravel of Sabbia Negru made a sound in their receding like that of distant applause. I might have been feeling nostalgic for the attention I received as a celebrated beauty. There was no doubt that I was conflicted. To say I had family and friends who were concerned for my well-being would be an understatement. I had been kidnapped after all. On the other hand, my captors were kind, generous women who had rescued me from sex slavery. Though when I reflected back on it, didn't my life as a fashion model constitute a kind of slavery?

I'd been keeping track of the passage of days by the phases of the moon and my own cycle. In that time I had changed. My once pampered alabaster skin had darkened to a bronze hue under the unrelenting Mediterranean sun. And I was growing hair in places that had not seen a follicle in decades. For as long as I could remember I had been peeled, plucked, waxed and shaved of any growth that would hint at a more aggressive sexuality. As now, my hair fell to below my shoulders, streaked with salt bleached strands. And I had come to look forward to my daily jogs along the beach and my visits to Treyann's stone cottage. Xuxann was often too busy with her other duties to continually watch me and she had to trust that I wouldn't do anything foolish, like try to escape. Much of the time I was left on my own. I got a chance to know myself in those hours of solitude.

And I was learning things I had never imagined. For one, the group that was holding me was known as SAPHO, *Société Anonyme Protectrice des Hétaïres et Odaliskues*, which, loosely translated, stands for Anonymous Society for the Protection of Prostitutes and Concubines. As their name indicated, they were an

organization of anonymous female humanitarians engaged in the rescue of sex slaves and women forced into prostitution. They were a modern reimagining of nunneries in the Middle Ages coming to the rescue of wayward girls. Their sign was the ancient Greek letter *psi* which consisted of three lines converging on a single point at the base to form a bisected V, and the first letter in the Aeolic name for the great woman poet, Sappho. Some of the women had the mark discreetly tattooed on a shoulder blade or an ankle. Their totem was the octopus from which they derived their organizational structure, the nine: eight tentacles and one body. The head of a group of nine, usually the eldest, acted as the body, and directly beneath her were two women who in turn each directed a group of three. But despite their hierarchal structure, the women seemed to act by consensus. There were SAPHO octopi cells in every country around the world who worked to rescue young woman from sex slavery, usually operating as clinics and halfway houses. It was even hinted that Mother Teresa belonged to SAPHO. Only cells like the one that held me were clandestine operators. Known as the *Erinnyes*, they engaged in sabotage to disrupt the operations of the vast networks of the international sex trade. Each clandestine cell specialized in a particular type of operation. Those holding me specialized in being invisible and providing safe houses while others, like those who had rescued me, were more militant and lethal.

I was informed that it had been white slavers from the Sophia Syndicate, purveyors of female flesh since the days of the Ottoman Empire, who had kidnapped me at the behest of some sandcastle despot. SAPHO intercepted my transport at a private air strip in Moldavia and spirited me to their hideaway in the Mediterranean. Unable to deliver the goods, the Bulgarians claimed to be holding me for ransom and were demanding five million dollars. They were certain the Prince would pay the price.

SAPHO had their motives for keeping me under wraps. Through private channels, they released a picture of me holding a copy of *Le Monde* with the news of my kidnapping to prove to the Prince that my custody was under their aegis. They proposed a less costly solution, but one that was more politically delicate. And they had to move cautiously. They suspected that some of the Prince's advisors were complicit in the original plan to kidnap me. When Mohamed el-Ipir's name was mentioned, I wouldn't believe it. And when Preston Carmichael's name had come up, I dismissed him as merely that lawyer who had gotten me out of a drug jam.

Urann, the elder of this particular SAPHO cell, had been candid in explaining why I was being held. They were negotiating with the Prince to intervene in gaining the release of women from harems controlled by less enlightened oil royalty. The Prince's professed affection for me would be the incentive to free the women from the basement sex dungeons. When I was released I would be at liberty to tell anyone who asked what I knew about the organization.

"Do you think they will believe you?" she had asked, allowing a glimpse of her cold determination. "You are a woman whose sole function is to serve as a display of a man's idea of beauty, a measure held up to the women of the world. Your words on politics or the rights of others will be dismissed as that of a vacuous female icon."

As it was, once I was allowed to tell my side of the story and counter the spin that appeared in the tabloids, hinting at wild lesbian adventures or just the antics of a fading star looking to attract attention, I opted to say as little as possible. I did speak out against sex slavery and the plight of women around the world. Not surprisingly, little of what I said was reported. I was much more of a photo op, and innuendo is always so much more interesting than

fact. For me it was like buying a beautiful gown and not being able to remove the price tag. Every time I cut off one tag another appeared as a reminder of what it cost to be me.

My greatest lessons, however, were learned in the presence of Trayann. Together we explored the pine woodlands and meadows situated at the base of the monolithic crag I named *Mother Mountain*. She was intimately familiar with the surroundings and where to look for wild herbs, berries, and mushrooms. She tried to teach me the ancient names of birds and their calls. It was hopeless. The only name I remembered was Pica, the persistent woodpecker with its nest in the pine near Trayann's hut. Between my quasi-Parisian French and her provincial argot, we managed to establish a rapport that included much gesturing, head nodding, and sympathetic understanding.

There were places that were obviously sacred to Trayann. She would stop and raise her arms to the transparent blue to incant a prayer or sing a song of praise to the great goddess. Then she would show me the herm hidden in the foliage or a stone column representing a wood nymph. Other times I just sat with her in her garden or beat the midsummer heat in the cool of her stone hut with a cup of herb tea. Conversation was nearly impossible unless Xuxann was in attendance. I would ask her to tell me the names of plants she had gathered or objects that adorned her tidy stone hut. And patiently, she did.

Once I noticed what I thought to be a vaccination scar on her left shoulder but when I looked closer I saw that the scar was the result of a hot brand. The image was that of an octopus with eight radiating tentacles. She had run her fingers over it, speaking words heavy with sadness.

Xuxann had been with me that day and as we descended the path back to my cell, I asked her if she understood what Trayann had said about the brand on her shoulder. I assumed that it

must have had something to do with SAPHO as the octopus was their totem. Xuxann had given me a long searching look as if she were trying to discern my trustworthiness and then told me the story of Trayann.

What Trayann had said was something like “this is where I began.” As a young girl, she had been kidnapped by white slavers and ended up in the clutches of the Sophia Syndicate, the very same group that had tried to kidnap me. The SS, as they were known in the trade, had long branded their property with the octopus symbol. Even their luxury yachts on the Black Sea, essentially floating bordellos, flew the octopus pennant. After years in a brothel specializing in young girls, Trayann escaped and made her way to a convent in the eastern forests of Czechoslovakia where she was given refuge by nuns of the Order of St Hildegard. The nuns ran a sort of underground railway for refugees from the sex trade. They put Trayann in touch with other escapees similarly branded by the SS. She was introduced to a secret society whose mission it was to put the Bulgarians out of business. With the help of the Hildegardian nuns, Trayann and her associates set about establishing a variety of fronts and charities whose purpose was the rescue of at-risk young women. In an ironic twist, they appropriated the Sophia Syndicate brand as the symbol of their own organization.

Trayann also became a member of one of the clandestine cells working to disrupt the transport of women. They called themselves the *Erinnyes* or the *Furies*. That had been years ago, between the wars. During the war, the women of SAPHO had devoted themselves to working in hospitals and relief organization, sheltering young women who had been displaced by the fighting. Organizations like theirs, often headed by nuns, had existed in one form or another for centuries. The brutal lessons of the war had convinced SAPHO that they needed to be more militant and meet

their foes head to head on the field of battle. Their lack of physical strength and fire power was more than made up for by their womanly wiles. They had to become invisible. This was accomplished by being what men thought they were, compliant and subservient. They learned to shape shift as the ancient shamans had. Their power was the hypnotic blurring of the edges of reality, confounding the already befuddled minds of men.

Trayann, because of her age, was no longer a participant in the day to day activities of SAPHO. Nor was she one of the nine. To the women of the organization, she was a model, a symbol of the ongoing struggle for the rights of women to be recognized as human and not chattel to be bought and sold like livestock.

Something else began occurring with regularity in the early months of my safekeeping and that was the arrival, every five to seven days, of motor launches crowded with woman, young and old, of all shapes and sizes. They were excursions from the woman's resort on the grey shadow of land on the far horizon that I sometimes glimpsed from the vantage of Trayann's garden.

The women at the villa, as a cover for their presence at Sabbia Negru, hosted overnight retreats that included vegetarian meals, herbal tonics, and accommodations in cabanas set up along the base of the cliff. Late into the night I listened to the joyful shrieks of female voices accompanied by the hypnotic rhythms of drums and flutes. I was not allowed to participate because I would surely be recognized. Only on those occasions had I felt a twinge of isolation. By the time the festivities began I was usually looking forward to a restful sleep after an exhausting and fulfilling day traipsing around in the woods with Trayann. Those who knew me would have been shocked at my indifference. I had a reputation as one of the most intrepid of party girls.

Like clockwork, I watched the boats arrive. First a sparkling wave at the prow would glimmer like a faint blinking white

light. Then as the shapes of the large motorboats became more apparent, the rough rumble of their engines would reach my ears. At times three or four boatloads of women would disembark at the jetty and then proceed up to the villa, a procession of colorful beachwear flapping in the shore breeze like festive drapes set against the blackness of the sand. As I sat on the stone bench high above them in Trayann's garden, the sound of their voices, a musical incomprehensible babble, would reach me, too often drowned out by the rumble of the motor launches returning.

I didn't think I'd fallen asleep. I was hearing those motors only much louder, as if they were directly overhead. I opened my eyes and looked across the river. Rikki was waving his arms and shouting something to me. I might have been at the edge, where reverie turns to dream. And I'd barely touched my drink. Using my sandals as paddles, I made my way back to the dock where Wallace and Lalo stood shading their eyes and looking in the direction of the sound. Rikki directed my attention. "Look! A fire!"

It took me a while to focus at where he was pointing, but eventually I made out a column of black smoke roiling out from the hillside of firs and redwoods in the distance. Then I saw the source of the noise, a large white helicopter with a huge red bucket suspended beneath it, dipping into the river further down around the bend.

The look on Rikki's face mirrored what I was thinking. Wallace spoke for both of us. "Lee, isn't that smoke coming from over near where you live?"

Chapter Twenty Seven

BURNT OUT

The roof had caved in exposing charred rafters. Trails of smoke snaked up through the already choking air. The rear end of a fire truck, beeping a warning, nudged past me, backing toward the ruins of the fire demolished cabin. My cabin, half of which was now nothing more than brittle charcoal sticks. The fire chief took me by the elbow and led me back to his pick-up truck. I'd made the acquaintance of the fire chief when I first moved to Timberton. He was a moderately good looking guy in his late forties. I went to dinner with him once. Like most firefighters, if it's not on fire, they're not interested. And I don't catch fire for just anybody.

Like giant bumble bees with axes, the firefighters in their yellow protective gear tore away at the scorched, discolored walls of the back bedroom that had served as my clothes closet. The chief spoke close to my ear to make himself heard above the din of the engine pumps and the chainsaws. I didn't want to hear what he had to say. He explained anyway. The closely packed garments in the back bedroom had somehow slowed the spread of the fire to that part of the house. This was supposed to be some sort of consolation? The clothes were so smoke damaged that they wouldn't even make good rags. The *Valantini's*, the *Borochios*, the *Kokolas*, my beautiful *Yamita* silks, a classic fashion wardrobe that held the history of my career. Gone.

What I felt was more like disappointment than anger. I was still trying to puzzle the pieces together. How did my home, my refuge, become a smoking mass of rubble? What he was telling me didn't help. Besides it was competing with what I was trying to sort out in my own mind. It started when I had seen the smoke from Nathan Thiele's beachfront. I had a sinking feeling that the black column was somehow a signal to me. I had to rush home to

confirm for myself that what I was imagining was just paranoia, that it was just me, crazy me. But not crazy enough to go the way I was dressed, teensy bottoms and an improvised halter top. I'd come with a wraparound skirt but that didn't seem to be quite appropriate to go meet my insane intuition. I needed something to throw over myself.

Thiele didn't have anything in the way of women's clothing, nothing that would fit me, anyway. There was just one item, a collector's piece that had once been worn by Audrey Hepburn in some horrid movie that had never been released, and when it occurred to him, it was as if he were having an epiphany. Personally, I was a little appalled. It was a sixties-style woman's trench coat, deep red in color with large black polka dots. The movie it had appeared in might have been shelved solely on the basis of that coat. Rikki couldn't help but quip, "I knew there was a Madam Butterfly but now I see that there's a Madam Ladybug as well." I couldn't stay to laugh. My house was on fire.

The access to Primrose was blocked by fire trucks. I'd ditched my wheels and made my way up the street through the runnels of ashy water, my gold flip-flops slipping and sinking in the mire of soggy grime. I saw billows of black smoke pouring out of a broken window. Firefighters were working the hillside where the tall weeds and the oaks were burning. I began to understand then that the cabin I had called home was gone. There was nothing anyone could do. I felt numb. My cabin wasn't just a home, it was a connection to a part of my life that had always seemed safe. It had belonged to my stepfather, Frank Zola, and he had come by it in a high stakes poker game. This was long before he'd met my mother. He'd been a brash upstart Wall Street lawyer. She claimed to have civilized him, and maybe she had. But the cabin, for me, represented that side of him that had never been tamed. After I had been rescued by the Prince's elite security force and then turned

over to the authorities who were intent on charging me with fabricating my disappearance, I wasn't feeling all that great with the world. I'd had to stay in Paris until the legal wrangling was over. Frank had been in touch with me much of that time. The transatlantic phone calls alone must have cost him a fortune. He wasn't living with mother anymore. And I didn't realize how sick he was. He passed away shortly after I was vindicated.

I could have cashed in on all the attendant publicity. There was not one tabloid that didn't carry a story about me somewhere in their pages, barely any of it true, mostly rehashing past indiscretions. I was in demand at social occasions and public spectacles like gallery openings and premieres. On the other hand, I wasn't hearing much from the agencies. But I was fairly ambivalent about it all. My time in captivity on what turned out to be the southwestern tip of Corsica on the Straits of St Bartholomew had given me a new perspective. I had come to think of myself differently. I tried to keep a low profile in spite of being hounded by paparazzi. I had been evicted from my posh apartment. I stayed with friends, putting all that I owned, which was mostly clothes, in storage. Then I had to fly to Chicago for the funeral.

It wasn't quite a circus, though it was trying hard to be. Wisely, mother had convinced someone high-up on the police commission of the possibility of an unruly crowd and that he should have a riot squad on hand. Fortunately it didn't come to that. Still flashbulbs sparked like thousands of tiny random white holes in the gray mass of on-lookers that rainy Sunday afternoon. Men with telephoto lenses had climbed into trees just to get close-ups of the grieving bad girl. I would have traded every bit of my notoriety for just five more minutes with Frank Zola, to enjoy his kindness and humor, and his common sense. Later that day his lawyer advised me that Frank had left me the cabin in Corkscrew County in his will. The mystified expression on his face said he

had no idea where that was, certainly no place in the civilized world. But, considering my mental state, I took it as a sign, Frank's last bit of advice. Lay low for a while, regenerate yourself, rediscover yourself.

From the moment I parked the rental in front of the cabin on Quince, I knew I had come home. Financially, Frank had me covered, setting up a trust fund and investing my earnings while I was a minor. Even as an adult and accustomed to extravagances, he managed to convince me to contribute a percentage to the "strong box" as he called it. I sent for the things I had in storage in Paris and moved in. I wanted to be free to explore the world in anonymity, as an unknown. I wanted to reconnect with the person I had started to become on the beaches of Sabbia Negru, but this time on my own terms. I wanted to get to know that person.

Someone had once suggested that I write the story of my life as a top model. It would make a good book, they said. I never thought so. But I did start a journal and wrote down my thoughts on a daily basis. That's easier said than done. But I kept at it. And I came to realize that I had a knack for observation, for detail. That's how I ended up writing for the Grapevine. It was in answer to a plea for local news and events. I wrote a scathing review of a gallery show up the coast in Healy, the upscale art colony, and sent it in under a pseudonym. I heard back from JJ not because she accepted my article but because she said I had talent that could be used in a positive way. And I was probably the only one who had answered her plea. When we met for the so-called job interview, she recognized me immediately from one of the old cigarette billboards. She had been elated at first and then uncomfortable. And finally, very business-like in a tremulous sort of way. She couldn't pay me much, she explained, but I should consider my assignments as part of an apprenticeship into the world of journalism. In reality

she just wanted someone else to write the puff pieces, a soul deadening task in any language.

The fire chief directed my attention to the tall gray haired woman in uniform approaching us from the edge of the fire. “May Ann Young. The County fire cop,” he nodded toward her almost respectfully. “She’ll want to talk to you.” When she reached us, a fiftyish, weather scarred, no nonsense square ruddy face, he made the introductions. “May, this here’s the property owner, Lee Marlowe.”

“Malone,” I corrected, and extended my hand in greeting.

She looked at it. “You are the legal owner of this property, is that correct?” She didn’t blink and I had the feeling my every scintilla was under scrutiny.

“Yes, I inherited it from. . . .”

“What time did you leave the house today?” She held a small yellow notepad in her hand.

I didn’t know what time I had left the house this morning and I said so.

“So you left this morning. Early, late?”

It had been closer to noon.

“Are you having financial difficulties, Ms. Malone?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. What had my finances to do with my house burning down?

“Arty, show the lady what we found,” she said to the firefighter with the shovel who had accompanied her. “Recognize that, Ms. Malone?”

The firefighter extended the shovel in my direction. I looked at a vaguely familiar shape of burnt plastic and discolored metal sitting in the shovel but couldn’t say exactly what it was.

“That’s an electric iron. Or what’s left of one.”

I jumped involuntarily as if I had touched the hot iron itself. I had an electric iron. And I had taken it out when I thought to use

it on the scarf I chose for my halter top. But when I realized that it was not a material that would take heat, I'd thought better of it. I didn't think I'd plugged the iron in. But I had been in a hurry so I wasn't certain. "You mean that my iron started the fire? It was an accident?"

May Ann looked at me without a change of expression though I could tell she was weighing her words. "Normally, I would say yes. You wouldn't believe how many people lose their homes to fire through carelessness. But in this case there was just too much accelerant splashed around to make it anything but deliberate."

I was stunned. "Ok, you just said two things I need to understand better. You said accelerant. What's that?"

"In this case, I'd say gasoline. That's what you would use so that what you wanted to burn burned hot and fast."

"And deliberate, I know what that means. Arson. Are you saying someone purposely set fire to my house?"

"And tried to make it look like an accident."

"Why would anyone want to do that?" As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew the answer.

May Ann spoke, wearily, as if she were tired of saying it. "Why, to collect on the insurance money, of course."

I felt stupid, but I played it smart and stopped talking. Something Frank Zola had taught me.

"Ms. Malone, I have a lot of questions to ask you. I would like to establish your whereabouts from around noon today to approximately half an hour ago, three o'clock. Sheriff's deputies will be questioning your neighbors to see if they saw or heard anything suspicious. But I think we might accomplish more if you accompanied me to my office for an interview."

I hesitated. I was under suspicion of setting my own house on fire. "Do you actually think that I burned my own home?" I

tried to sound irate but it came out with too little conviction. I was starting to doubt myself.

“The facts haven’t been established. But I’ve been a fire cop for a long time, and a fire like this,” she indicated the pile of smoking debris with the jerk of her head, “it’s usually the property owner who has the most to gain.”

“Am I under arrest?”

A ripple of a smile or smirk flexed her stern jaw. “Not unless you wanna be.”

Chapter Twenty Eight ***THE LADYBUG RUSE***

Anything I said could and would be used against me. I had a right to remain silent. Yet in many situations such as mine, people have a tendency to babble, volunteer more than anyone needs to know, and in the process, unwittingly incriminate themselves in crimes that they never committed or intended to commit. People can be so obliging in the face of authority.

As a young up-and-coming model with a mind of my own and outspokenly opinionated, I had learned the hard way that anything I said would be twisted and bent to mean exactly the opposite of its intent. After being burned at the stake in numerous tabloids, I chose my words carefully and dispensed my opinions even more penuriously than I did my favors. I had taken as my motto the words of the other Hepburn. I didn't care what they said about me just as long as it wasn't true. I kept my mouth shut.

First there was the long silent ride to the Hall of Justice where May Ann Young had her office, a tiny cramped closet in the basement. Her manner was apologetic as she had me sit in the only other chair. Battered black file cabinets took up most of the wall and floor space. Cardboard boxes overflowing with case files occupied any area that didn't block entry and exit. A few posters exhorting fire safety served as decoration on the otherwise drab green walls. She had removed a sheaf of forms from her desk drawer, a dinged and dented metal affair that looked like it had come in last at a destruction derby. She referred to the small yellow pad I had seen her with at the fire scene and copied her notes into the spaces provided.

I felt cold. In the heat of this late July day my flimsy attire would have been appropriate, but my chill had more to do with an uncomfortable self-consciousness at having only bikini bottoms

and a makeshift halter top underneath the ridiculous polka dot trench coat. My gold sandals had turned to mush and so for all intents and purposes I was barefoot. The scent of my charred cabin hung about me like a noxious perfume. I was trying to put together a scenario that would explain who would be capable of such an act. Blackie came to mind immediately. Even after what Chandler had told me, I had difficulty believing that he would set fire to my home. Yet his words “play with fire and you get burned” resonated with ominous significance.

May Ann returned my driver’s license after copying from it onto the form in front of her. She extracted a cassette recorder from a drawer and set it on the desk, plugging it in the outlet behind her chair. When she faced me again, her mouth set in determined seriousness, she reminded me of my rights. “Why don’t we talk about why anyone would want to torch your cabin?” she said as she depressed the record button on the machine.

I could have declined to speak until I had a lawyer present. But there were more viable suspects than me. And, I was never good at taking my own advice. I told her about the Fashwalla murder and the one at the Franklin Resort. About the dog killings and the men in the gray van. And about Blackie. I also mentioned Assistant DA Chandler Wong. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything about the ongoing investigation into Tommy Montague and Ramparts Corp.

Her eyes narrowed with a steely glint. She punched numbers into the keypad of her phone after she stopped the recorder. She shuffled the forms on the desk in front of her while she waited for someone to pick up.

“Mr. Wong, May Ann Young, County Fire Investigator.” She paused. “I’m fine, thank you. The reason I’m calling is that I have a women in my office on a suspicion of arson.” She paused again. “Her name is Lee Malone. She says she knows you.” A

longer pause. “Her own home.” May Ann blinked in surprise and for a moment lost some of her professional composure. She listened to the voice at the other end of the line, nodded in assent a few times, interjecting an “I see” now and then. All the while her eyes took me in as if the words she heard were prompting a reappraisal. When she put the phone down, her cheeks appeared flush. She folded her hands on the desk and looked down at them for a moment, gathering her words. She fixed me with her relentless gray eyes and spoke. “Ms. Malone, your story checks out with the DA’s office. You’re free to leave. And I apologize for any inconvenience.” She sounded sincere.

I didn’t have to be told twice. I picked up my purse and opened the door. I hesitated.

“Turn right and up the stairs. I’ll call up to have them buzz you out to the lobby.” Her tone had lost its hard professional edge.

When I reached the locked security door that led to the lobby, there were two younger women waiting to be allowed out as well. If I had not been barefoot and wearing my fashion faux pas, we would have been in similar states of undress. One of the women was a short skinny blonde with way too much make-up that did not look all that freshly applied. Her denim shorts were cut so that much of the curve of her buttocks was exposed. An off-white sweater top allowed a view of her bare midriff encircled by a gold chain. The open-toed high heeled plastic shoes she wore could have doubled as step ladders. Her friend was taller, closer to my height. There was something familiar about her, as if I had seen her somewhere before. She wore a green blouse with short puffy sleeves over a bright orange tube top that accentuated her perky breasts quite accurately. A leather mini-skirt and black thigh high boots completed the outfit. From the way they both joked with the deputy at the door, it was obvious they were familiar with the routine.

Once out in the lobby, they stopped to chat with another deputy at the reception kiosk. I made a bee line for the double glass doors that led outside. I stopped in my tracks. A throng of reporters and TV cameras were waiting at the bottom of the steps. The last thing I wanted to do was face them, especially in my lady-bug coat. One of the reporters spotted me and alerted the others. A deputy kept them from bursting into the lobby. I turned to look for another way out. That's when I caught sight of Rhonda.

I was surprised to see her there. She had just recently returned from an extended stay in Switzerland. There was a hospital in Zurich that promised a cure for what was afflicting Ward. I had not seen her in months. But thinking back on the years I had lived in that neighborhood, she and Anna were often gone for long periods of time. They were retired, she told me more than once, and they loved to travel. They even had a little place in Malaga. On the other hand, she liked to say, there was no place like Corkscrew County to get away from it all.

At my puzzlement, she explained that she had come to bail me out. She knew I hadn't set fire to my cabin. She had already told that to the deputy who questioned her. She'd been taking her midday nap when she was awakened by the sound of a motorcycle roaring away. Soon after that she had smelled smoke and had seen flames coming from my cabin. She had been the one who had called it in. Now she was here to take me home, what was left of it. It was just the neighborly thing to do.

The mention of the motorcycle made me think of Blackie again. The reporters were clamoring at the glass doors and I moved further out of sight.

"Help me, Rhonda," I pleaded, "I can't go out there and face them."

The hookers had wandered over, drawn by curiosity. I saw inspiration light up Rhonda's face. She motioned to the two wom-

en. “Do you ladies know who this is?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “This is Lee Malone, world famous fashion model.”

The one who had looked familiar to me nodded and said, “Yeah, I thought you looked familiar.” It was then I understood why I thought I’d seen her before. She was me. She had imitated my hair style, the way I used to make up my eyes, along with a slight physical and facial resemblance.

Rhonda explained my predicament as she led us all into the woman’s bathroom. She was about to outline her plan when the short blonde, whose name was Sandy, pointed a finger at Rhonda and said “I know you! I’ve seen you in porn movies. You’re famous!” The prostitute who looked like me and whose name was Liza chimed in. “Right, right! I’ve seen your movies before. My boyfriend made me watch them. You’re amazing!” We all looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“Who’d a thought we’d ever be in the woman’s bathroom at the Hall of Justice with a famous old time porn queen and a world famous fashion model?” Liza exclaimed like a delighted child. Sandy was bubbling over with giggles.

“Now, calm down, girls,” Rhonda said, “After all, we’ve all sold our bodies in one way or another. Nothing to get excited about. Here’s my plan.”

Liza and I were to exchange garb. She was thrilled by the makeshift halter top after I explained I had got it in one of trendiest boutiques in Monte Carlo. She wrinkled her nose and passed on donning the bikini bottoms. And she wasn’t so sure about the trench coat but that was a big part of the ruse. I had no problem fitting into the tube top, the boots and the leather miniskirt. I don’t know why I was surprised that she wasn’t wearing underpants.

Rhonda’s plan was that Liza, dressed as me, would create a diversion to draw the reporters away from the front doors, and then Sandy and I, as hookers, would slip away unnoticed. She sweet-

ened the deal with a few bills from the bankroll she pulled from her purse.

The plan worked like a charm. The reporters swarmed Liza who put on fashion model airs quite naturally. I caught a glimpse of her wide smile as she basked in the momentary crush of notoriety. By the time the reporters realized that it wasn't me, I was being whisked away in Rhonda's Coupe Deville.

Chapter Twenty Nine

ODD WOMAN OUT

I had no clothes. I had no home. And I didn't have a clue why anyone would want to torch my cabin. I stood on the littered asphalt and stared at the smoking debris. Rhonda dragged me back to her house and handed me a large glass of scotch. "You need to relax" was her admonition. I took a tentative sip, the alcohol burning as it went down. My nerves released their grip and by the time the molten drop made it to my gut, I wanted another taste.

We talked. Rather, I babbled and she listened. I had to get over the hurdle of my disbelief. When I voiced my suspicion that Blackie might have done it, she considered me warily and then shook her head.

"I go way back with Blackie and unless he's changed since then, I don't think he would do something like that. If Blackie has a bone to pick with you, you'll know it because he'll be right there in your face," she said touching up the glasses with a drab more scotch.

"That's right, you guys were in business together." Rhonda's fingers tighten around her glass, lips pulled into a mirthless smile. "More like co-workers, considering that we were both employees."

"So you knew Arlene." I was curious about the woman who had been Blackie's mate and whose photo I had seen on the wall of his shop.

Rhonda drained her glass and then stared at the empty bottom. "Arlene was my best friend. We both come from foster homes in the Midwest. Me Indiana, her Missouri which she liked to pronounce *misery*. We were runaways. And we met out here, on the West Coast. A way to make a quick buck back then was posing for nude photos. We were just kids, but that's what the pervs want

to see. We were hoping to be discovered in Hollywood like a lot of young gals. This was after the war. We hooked up with a gang of motorcycle guys who also had the idea of making it into pictures, as stunt men. One of them was Blackie, another one of them was Tommy Perro.” She paused as if making an effort before she spoke the other name. “And Chip Pierce.”

I’d seen the picture on the repair shop wall, a young Rhonda with someone Blackie had identified as Chip. I vaguely recalled something about an accident, too. “Blackie told me a little about those days. You were all models, is that right?”

“That’s one way of putting it.” Rhonda chuckled. “And if that’s the way Blackie wants to remember it, that’s fine with me.” She shrugged. “The way I remember it is that Tommy had a friend who worked as a cameraman for a low budget studio. They came up with the idea of making dirty movies, what you’d call soft core these days. The plan was to use me and Arlene, and Chip and Blackie as actors. The first one they made went nowhere. It was mostly ham-handed situations, innuendo, cleavage and crotch shots, and a lot of tongue twining, grunting and panting.” She exhaled a staid chuckle and splashed more scotch against the sides of her glass. “Tommy found a backer, a two-bit gangster and wannabe movie producer, to put up the money. But the guy wanted something a little more realistic. At first everyone was cool to the idea. We all knew that once you were in stags, your chances of going legit were dead. But the money was easily more than either of us made in months of waitressing. And the guys, well, they were always broke. The way Tommy talked it up, we wouldn’t be doing anything we weren’t already been doing with each other. It’d just be on film is all. So Chip and me went at it first. Then Arlene and Blackie. Then Arlene and me. Then Blackie and me. And Arlene. And Chip.

“Once we got over our initial bashfulness, we went through the motions like actors playing their parts. All except for Blackie.” Rhonda smiled grimly. “He was a hunk, then as now. But he just happens to be an apple with a short stem.”

I laughed involuntarily at her expression.

“Tommy used to rag him mercilessly about that. But Blackie took it from Tommy because they were friends. And among Blackie’s faults is his blind loyalty. If he’s your friend you can count on him to give you the shirt off his back.”

“And if he’s not your friend?”

She shrugged. “What do you want me to say? He’s got a temper.”

“So I heard.”

“Really?” Rhonda sat back in her chair, guarded. “What have you heard?”

I realized that I might know more than I should let on. What Chandler had told me was confidential. “Oh, just something JJ said in passing.” I’m not a very good liar. “You were saying, about Tommy and Blackie?”

Rhonda nodded and looked at her glass as if the thread of the story would be found in the half inch of amber liquid. “Yeah, Tommy was a ball buster. But Blackie took it good naturedly. Of course we all knew not to tease Blackie, especially about something like that. The actor Tommy used as a body double with Arlene didn’t know that. I don’t think he even got to finish the taunt. Blackie came unglued and beat the man to a bloody pulp.”

I inhaled sharply. Even though I’d heard the story, it still shocked me. “He hurt him pretty bad?”

“He killed him.”

The way Rhonda spoke it so matter-of-factly it shocked me nearly as much as Blackie’s brutality. “Oh.”

“Blackie served his stretch, and when he got out he looked up his old friends. Arlene was first on his list. You can’t blame him.” Rhonda sighed, a troubled frown drawing a V between her penciled eyebrows. “But Blackie had spent his time in the pen thinking about a lot of things besides Arlene. One of them was his old buddy, Tommy. He came to realize that Tommy was a manipulator, a behind the scenes backstabber and that he only cared about *numero uno*.” She said it with a sly sarcastic smile. “Blackie’s plan was to get back together with Arlene and get as far away from Tommy as he could. He didn’t expect to find her living with Tommy and two babies, twin boys.” She didn’t take notice of my gasp. “Arlene didn’t hesitate. She packed her bags, loaded the kids into her car and took off with Blackie.”

I was dumbfounded. These were details that Blackie had conveniently left out when he told me the story of how he and Arlene ended up in Timberton. “What about you? I mean, did you know they were going to leave it all behind?”

Rhonda shook her head, maybe more at the memory of what she was dredging up than my prying. She swirled the scotch in the bottom of her glass before knocking it back in one practiced motion. “No, I was out of the picture about then.” She gave me a baleful stare. “The problem with working for Tommy is that he wasn’t just making dirty movies. He was dealing drugs, too. Hard drugs. Most of his actors were using. Chip got hooked after his accident. Morphine and then heroin. And it gets to be a habit. You realize you’re not going to survive the day without a fix.” She shook her head sadly. “It’s kind of ironic, you know? Blackie getting out of the slam and me going in.”

“You went to prison?” I didn’t hide my disbelief.

Rhonda nodded. “About a month before Blackie got out, I was sent up on a drug charge. I owed Tommy for drugs, and after Chip overdosed I really hit rock bottom, so I was moving weight

for him.” She pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows as if to say *what do you expect*. “And I got popped.”

“I don’t get it. Tommy and Arlene and two kids. Blackie just spirited them away? Tommy didn’t do anything about it. I mean, they were his kids, right?”

Rhonda cocked her head to one side and considered me with a narrowed look, like I was being a little too nosy. “Yeah, no telling what was going through his head. Besides dollar signs, I mean. I didn’t know what Arlene and Blackie had done. I didn’t find out till much later when I was let out on parole.”

“That Blackie and Arlene and the kids were living up in Corkscrew County?”

“Right. I heard that Blackie was working as a mechanic, and living at the Mint, in fact. Arlene wasn’t idle either, making the rounds of garage and estate sales, buying things to resell. She always had good sense in that way.”

“What became of the kids, the twins?” I hold my liquor better than I can contain my curiosity. “Isn’t one of them named Tommy?” And get enough liquor in me and I’m liable to blurt out anything.

She gave me a pained smile. “Did Blackie tell you that? Yes, Tommy. And Timmy.”

I tried not to be coy. “I know that Tommy Perro is now Tommy Montague and the money behind Montague Winery. And that he has a son, also named Tommy, running the business. I didn’t know about Timmy.”

Rhonda offered a bemused smirk before answering. “Tommy was making too much money so he got the idea of buying up property and planting vines as one way to launder the dirty cash. The boy, Tommy, he’s smart, crafty like his old man. Timmy, his twin? Let’s just say he’s. . . .” She paused, searching for the word. “Odd.”

Odd how that word struck me. Odd. I searched my memory of anyone I thought of as odd, and I'd known many who fit that description. But none of them came immediately to mind. The image the word triggered was of a greasy dark haired man with a scraggly goatee. A man I had seen not more than a few times and then only briefly and in passing. Someone who filled me with apprehension. The booze was prompting my odd fuzzy logic. Odd that I felt a sudden chill. "So what happened to them?"

Rhonda stretched her arms across the table, empty glass in her hand, weariness weighing the corners her eyes. "It took a while but Tommy tracked Blackie and Arlene down. I was out of prison by then. He had the money, lawyers and the connections to have Arlene declared unfit. She could have fought it, but she knew that if she did Blackie would get involved. And he would kill Tommy."

"Were you still working for Tommy then?"

Rhonda shrugged, the strain of this stroll down memory lane taking its toll. "I got straight. Took my cue from Arlene and cut loose of Tommy. I worked restaurant jobs, went back to school, looked for something better paying. I'd find one, and then some guy would recognize me from a stag film, and once word got around the office, they usually found a reason to let me go. I was too much of a distraction." She snorted a laugh into her empty glass. "I kept at it, though, spent a good fifteen years walking the line, keeping my head down. I even resorted to wigs, dying my hair and wearing glasses to change my appearance, and eventually it worked. The problem was that I was making peanuts while all my old friends who were still in the business were sitting in the lap of luxury."

Rhonda considered the bottle before she continued. "I knew that I didn't want to work for another crook like Tommy. So

I got together with an actress I'd worked with before. You know her. Anna."

I nodded dumbly, partly in shock. I was desperately trying to keep all the new revelations from tangling into an incomprehensible snarl. The fact that my head was swimming from the effects of alcohol didn't help.

"And we started our own production company. We had a pretty good idea what guys wanted to see, but we also knew what women were interested in. The money was good and it was better than walking the street. After that I never worked more than a couple of months a year. I can't complain. I've lived well." She said it with great satisfaction. "I've got a house in the Frisco, a place in Spain, and when I want to get away from it all, I've got my little shack in the woods, which up until yesterday was nice and quiet." She held up the bottle at an angle and stared at the corner remaining before dumping it into her glass. "When Arlene took sick I semi-retired and moved up here, to be near her."

"Semi-retired? You mean you're still. . . ?" I didn't exactly know how to say it.

"In front of the camera?" Rhonda took a sip with an amused expression. "Not for a couple of years now. You'd be surprised how many men want to see an old gal get it on." She hefted her large breasts with both hands. "I still got it." That was obvious, and I wondered if I would still have *it* when I was her age. I sighed. "Well, it's a man's world, after all."

Rhonda rolled her eyes. "Listen, honey," she said, pointing a well-manicured finger at me, "man may have invented the wheel, but if it weren't for women, it would still have corners."

Chapter Thirty

GLASS SLIPPERS

It's not like I didn't have *any* clothes. A model always has clothes. Mine were in the trunk of my Volvo. There was a basket of laundry I never found time to do. And two shopping bags full of clothes I never got around to donating to the local thrift store. Underneath all that was a large garment box my mother had mailed to me in a fit of spite. It contained the cast-offs of a life spent in the promotion of my classic good looks.

I had spread most of the clothing across the bed and on the wicker furniture of the cabin I was now renting at the Mint, just a few doors down from where Rikki and Wallace were staying. The laundry basket contained the usual delicate items gone stale, the tops that stained too easily, and the jeans and skirts that were too confining for the summer months. I was amused and not a little surprised by the items I pulled from the thrift bags. Things that were long past fashionable seemed like treasures now that they were all the clothing I had. Some of the items went back twenty years to the mid-sixties when the styles, by today's standards, seemed laugh-able. There were miniskirts and plunging necklines as well as the colorful confusion of paisley gowns. Each piece had its own history that I could have called up wistfully, but I had to decide on something to wear and in a hurry. JJ was getting impatient.

I had promised to be her moral support when she strolled down the runway at the Montague Winery Charity Fashion Show, something that apparently took precedence over the burden of my recent calamity, and she was going to hold me to it.

"That's nice," JJ commented on the beaded bolero jacket I held up. Unfortunately there was nothing else that went with it.

The belted miniskirt tunic was a little too twiggy, and I had thrown away my white go-go boots long ago.

“What’s in the box?” She lifted the flap and poked around disinterestedly.

“I can’t remember.” A few years back I had gone to the post office and the box had been waiting for me. The enclosed letter contained the usual irrational accusations of diminished affection my mother liked to imagine and use as a guilt lever. It had worked before, but no longer. The emotional blackmail in that letter still made me angry. “Some old things.”

“Is this a cheerleader outfit?” JJ held up the blue and gold sweater, beaming. “I had one just like this, except it was maroon and white!”

“I don’t think I could possibly wear that,” I dead-panned.

“And a tutu?” She had turned her attention to the other items.

“I must have been twelve when I wore that. I’ve grown a bit since then.” I held up a silky iridescent shift. “I wore this when I was crowned Miss Teen America.”

JJ gaped. “Oh my god, that’s right, you were a Miss Teen America!”

For a brief moment I had the sense that the long narrow garment box was a cardboard coffin in which a life that had once been mine was now entombed.

“You wore this?” JJ held up an embroidered peasant blouse with an expression of disdain.

Seeing the blouse again startled me. I reached blindly into the box certain of what else I would find. Yes, it was there too, the red, black, and white tiered full length skirt. It and the blouse were some of the only clothes I had worn when I was being held in the villa compound on Sabbia Negru. I remembered Xuxann explaining the significance of the colors to me. They were the colors of

the goddess: white for innocence, red for fertility, and black for death. Those items of clothing were tangible proof of the most bizarre chapter in my charmed yet otherwise disheveled life.

I felt a stab of pain at the tip of my finger. Cautiously this time, I extracted the skirt from the box and spread it on the bed. Pinned to the waistband was the small bronze medallion that Treyann had given me not long before we parted ways. It depicted a woman around whose lower torso twin snakes were twined, and whose heads she held parallel to her own. She was the great earth goddess, mistress of the underground, and prototype of the caduceus.

“I think I’ve found what I’m going to wear.”

“What?” JJ wrinkled her nose. “That? That’s so. . . ethnic hippie gypsy earth mother peasant. . .” And when I turned to seriously reflect on the blouse with its intricate embroidered history, “Kind of passé, don’t you think?”

I ran my thumb over the embossed medallion smiling to myself, and pictured Treyann swirling in dance, a dance in which the arms were extended over the head and the hands brought together in rhythmic thunderclaps accompanied by flute and tambour.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen stitching quite like this on a peasant blouse before,” JJ observed when she realized I wasn’t going to be swayed by her disapproval. The embroidery was as unusual as it was ancient. Ears of barley were depicted in the distinctive motif as well as small purple flowers similar to forget-me-nots. She pointed to the multicolored spirals embroidered at intervals along the neck line. “These look like little galaxies.”

I had to smile. “Mushrooms.”

Her eyes widened. “You mean like. . .mushroom mushrooms? Shrooms?” She gave a tentative knowing grin.

I nodded. “Yes, when I . . .” I was going to say “was held captive” but decided on “lived at Sabbia Negru, I partook of them regularly.”

Again, I puzzled her. This was something else about me she had failed to anticipate. “Sabbia Negru?”

“It’s a long story.” And it was a long story, one that I thought I had extricated myself from but was once again insisting in capturing my attention. My confinement on the grounds of the villa had been made less of an ordeal because of the daily companionship of Treyann. She was the wise old priestess at whose knee I learned about an ancient selfless world, a world in which inner beauty complimented outer beauty and made one radiant. They were lessons in the power of the female that did not reside solely in the triad of attraction, the face, the breasts, the pudendum. I was made aware of this awesome unity with Treyann’s guidance through the sacramental mushroom. My eyes were opened and what I experienced was a power both benevolent and cruel.

JJ glanced at her watch. “Well, we don’t have time for a long story. If that’s what you’re going to wear, get dressed. I don’t want to be late for the preshow rehearsal.”

I happily complied, the feel of natural fabric on my bare skin like a recovered memory. I brushed my hair out and let it fall to my shoulders like I wore it when I was a free spirit running on the black sand beaches far from the daily pressures of high fashion and celebrity.

JJ was looking at me like she wasn’t quite satisfied. “Shoes, you need shoes.”

All my shoes had gone up in smoke. “I’m thinking bare-foot.” That was how I originally worn this outfit.

JJ shook her head, “Mmm, no, not quite.” She flashed me a sly grin as she held the door open. “I’m thinking glass slippers.”

Chapter Thirty One *SCAPEGOAT*

Tommy Montague was a real charmer. JJ had every right to gush. He was a good looking guy, attired in dark slacks, a gold polo shirt, and a tan dinner jacket with the Montague Winery crest on the breast pocket. His manner was professional, his handshake firm. But there was something about him that bothered me.

For one I had no effect on him. Even with a thousand watt smile that would normally turn most men's brains to mush, his eyes registered nothing, nada. What also bothered me was that if you took an eyebrow pencil and drew a raggedy goatee around his mouth and then combed half a can of motor oil through his hair, you would have the man in the gray van, the one with the vicious dog.

Tommy personally took us on a tour of the petite castle. Except for the private apartments, which, of course, were off-limits. We were shown the wine cellar, the tasting room where a sumptuous buffet was staged, and the spectacular ballroom with the runway the models would soon be catwalking down. The mezzanine led to an open terrace overlooking sloping stretches of vineyards interspersed with little oak oases. There were champagne fountains in the tasting room as well as on the mezzanine. I availed myself of a flute as soon as the server came by with a tray. I have a weakness for bubbles.

Our guide had a two-way radio that called him away. He made his apologies and left hurriedly. I accompanied JJ to the dressing room and got caught up in the crush and hysteria.

There were two kinds of women elbowing each other for mirror space to make last minute adjustments. The professional sticks, 'twiggys', who are nothing more than skeletal clothes racks, and the amateurs, or as they are known in the trade, 'heifers,' who

are mostly high school girls, innocent and perfect, or middle aged women who think they still have something. Amateurs have a tendency to carry more meat on their bones which made them dangerous to the intent of high fashion. As every designer has told every model he has ever draped, flesh destroys fabric. There were some models who took it to the extreme. I had been one who had trod that fine line. JJ, on the other hand, as an amateur, had bulges that stretched the limits of design. But then some men find that attractive.

Rikki and Wallace had volunteered their services to do hair and make-up for the show. I was greeted by Rikki who eyed my outfit and immediately dubbed me the 'barefoot Contessa' and cracked that I was not doing the fashion world any favors by parading around like a hippie princess in front of all these impressionable young women. He was aghast that I was shoeless. I reminded him that my shoes were charred rubble. All I had in the way of footwear were a pair of hiking boots and rubber flip flops. That shut him up though it didn't change his look of sour disapproval.

I had to laugh. Here I was, a world famous model at a charity fashion show, and I would not be sauntering down the runway. Certainly not in my archaic pagan outfit. I was aware that I had been recognized and that my presence was causing a minor commotion among the participants. As usual I remained unapproachable.

I quit the hubbub of the dressing room and wandered among the arriving patrons with my flute of champagne. I had determined earlier that the terrace off the mezzanine would be the ideal place to await the start of the show. I was feeling especially bright and forgiving. As chintzy as the phony miniature castle appeared from the outside, the interior was expensively and, to a certain pedestrian extent, lavishly accoutered. I was particularly taken

by the large medieval tapestry at one end of the mezzanine in what Tommy had indicated as the private suites. I was drawn to it by the intricate weave of story it told. It was a classic, a lithe blonde female with her hand on the snout of the pure white unicorn. I felt as if I were being drawn into the woven landscape and wondered if I may not have had a horn too many.

A door opened at my left to draw me out of my reverie. A large man in a large dark suit approached and glared at me with large disapproval. I got the message and made my way back through the wide gold filigreed doors that took me out to the terrace and the cool of early evening. My bare feet seemed to sense the deep warm character of the marble paving. My eyes were drawn to the misty distance where an orange aura backlit the ridge of conifers. The air was heavy with earthy fragrance and the scent transported me to my time in captivity, or as I had come to consider it, my retreat and rebirth. I had experienced a similar overwhelming sensation, but at the time I had voluntarily imbibed in one of Treyann's herb, amphibian and mushroom cocktails. I ran my lightly throbbing finger over the image of the brooch that had pricked it and let the realization sink in. A tincture of that potion applied to the brooch pin would have been enough to produce the heightened awareness I was now feeling. A tiny pea shaped mouth in my head was telling me to panic but I held firm. One of the many things I had learned from Treyann was how to fearlessly walk the gossamer tightrope into a state of pure delight. I also learned that there was a dark side to this particular power.

Again it was an instance where my curiosity had got the better of me. It was one full moon night when a large group of women had been ferried over from the resort at the northern tip of Sardinia. I had been prohibited from joining the evenings of music and dancing on the chance that I would be recognized and my presence at the old Roman villa on the St Bartholomew straits

would get out. After months of custody I was trusted enough that I no longer needed to be escorted by Xuxann. Besides, I had been biding my time in the company of Treyann. I had spent that particular day hiking on the hillside behind the villa and had come back exhausted and famished. Treyann had fed me homemade stone ground bread, goat cheese and olives. I had fallen asleep on the little cot that she kept out in the open space between the garden and her hut. I was awakened by a chilly breeze off the Mediterranean. It was late evening and I heard the strains of fife and drum coming up from the courtyard of the villa. I called for Treyann but got no answer. She never went anywhere after dark. She did not trust her eyesight to walk the winding trails at night.

I wandered back to my little cell above the villa, but the sounds of gaiety and the throaty ululations called to me. Stealthily, I slipped into the courtyard and was not disappointed. A mass of women, bare breasted or in tiny shrugs covering not much more than their shoulders, exulted in their freedom, arms waving in the silver air of a full moon like fields of grain in a breeze, their feet stamping to the rhythm, hips undulating to the hypnotic music of a primitive orchestra of breath and skin.

The musicians were mostly African women, one of whom was Xuxann. Their instruments included a variety of drums, from the tall African type to smaller single head Celtic tambours. The flutes were of all sizes as well, shrill piccolos and the larger bass breaths of the Australian outback. They had cut a groove and the dancers followed it like water down a chute. On the stage, in tiered skirts of ancient fashion, the women of SAPHO performed a whirling foot stomping version of a primitive flamenco. Among the mass of swaying bodies I was anonymous. Then everything I had ever assumed turned upside down and inside out.

The music stopped with the exception of the low moan of a large bamboo flute. A female figure was paraded around the stage

on a palanquin carried by four women dressed in sheer glistening gowns. At first I assumed that it was a statute like the one of the Virgin Mary I had seen carried in processions in Mediterranean villages on certain holy days. On her head, a large elaborate gold headdress perched like an exotic bird. Very much alive, the woman was helped to her feet by her attendants. She was astride shoes with soles that were easily two feet high, adding to her already towering presence. Even though she was draped in layers of multi-colored scarves, her face painted to exaggerate her eyes and highlighted with fearsome red streaks, I recognized Treyann

The music started up again, slowly at first then building to a frenzy. Treyann twirled and whirled to the frantic beat of the drums and the piercing shrieks of the fifes as gracefully as if she had been barefoot. All eyes were fixed on her and a great hush descended over the assembled women as we all seemed to breathe in unison with the spinning apparition. As the tempo changed from frenzied to that approximating a steady heartbeat, it became obvious that Treyann was enacting a ritual, a paean to female power. A piebald Old World Nubian buck that had seen better days was brought onto the stage and placed before Treyann. She spun like a dust devil around the trembling animal. The flutes fell silent. The drums continued with rolling solemnity. A towering Treyann swayed, stomping her elevator shoes in time to the beat, hands held above her head clapping a polyrhythm. The drums stopped abruptly. In the rushing silence, every woman breathed as one. Treyann clapped her hands thrice like the crack of thunder. She directed all the gathered energy at the sacrificial animal. The old goat tottered and then crumbled, a mere bundle of skin and bone.

Chapter Thirty Two

WONDERING WOMAN

I felt something touch my arm at the elbow. It was cold and hot at the same time. Then I lost consciousness. When I came to, my hands were tied behind my back and I had that horrible feeling of déjà vu. The last time I'd been in a similar situation, I had been found face down on the floor of my cell at Sabbia Negru by Mohamed el-Ipir of the Prince's security force, the purple swelling of a bruise under one eye.

In that instance, everything had to be made to appear as if I had been mistreated. I had been recognized and word of my whereabouts revealed. The women of SAPHO had no choice but to clear out. Besides, I had served my purpose. My captors, if it was up to me, would remain anonymous, a mystery to the world at large.

I had been smeared with dirt and Xuxann had reluctantly, though forcefully, poked a fist in my face. Then I had been fitted with a gag but not so tight that I couldn't swallow or breathe. Hours later I heard the churning rotors of a helicopter and felt the tiny cell shake with the nearby vibrations as it touched down. I had been rescued, I realized then, by the very men who wished to keep me prisoner.

This time I wasn't gagged and my cheek was resting on the cool black leather of a couch in a dimly lit room. From the ornate desk at one end, it appeared to be some kind of executive office suite. As my eyes blinked and found focus, the circumstances that had landed me in this fix overtook me in a rush of detail.

I had been standing on the balcony off the mezzanine of the faux castle admiring the view and accepting that I would soon be bathed in a chemical stew altering my perception with heightened awareness. Already the edges of the landscape had become notice-

ably vibrant. The live oaks shimmered with golden intensity as day waned. In the distance I made out a metal sided warehouse encircled by a chain link fence topped with barbed wire, and, barely visible just above the roofline, the gridded arc of a satellite dish. I had seen a similar one at the Prince's chateau outside Paris.

Again my curiosity led me down the speculative path. Why would a warehouse have a satellite dish and be surrounded by such a barbed wire perimeter? Why were limousines arriving with what appeared to be a scheduled regularity and its occupants ushered, not into the charity event in the castle, but into the warehouse? Why were they all men? I imagined Tommy Perro alias Tommy Montague holding a high stakes poker game to recoup his contribution to charity.

I was in a wondering mood. I wondered why I was looking for the exit that would take me out to the rear of the castle. And when I found it and walked out to the edge of the grassy terrace, I wondered how close I could get to the warehouse without appearing conspicuous. The rows of vines luxuriant with early August foliage ran parallel to the warehouse and looked like they might provide adequate cover. I wondered if the posted signs that read *Warning, Grounds Patrolled by Security Dogs* really meant what they said.

Barefoot is not always the best way to walk through a vineyard, but engulfed by the lushness of the vines, the tart aroma of the ripening clusters, and the organic breath of the warm tilled earth, my feet didn't seem to be touching the ground.

As I suspected, the chain link fence blocked closer access. The warehouse was a formidable structure, no mere storage facility. I heard a succession of sharp barks around the back and voices yelling at the dogs to shut up. Ducking under a few vine rows I saw two men in dark suits. They were chauffeurs if most of my life spent in limos was any judge. And they were taking a smoke

break. Two large Dobermans in the nearby kennel, alert to their presence, snapped out challenges. A door opened at the back of the building and a man in what appeared to be a uniform stepped out and added his authority to the demands that they be quiet. The dogs dropped obediently to their haunches. When the men finished smoking, they crushed their cigarette ends with the soles of their polished shoes and reentered the warehouse.

Normally cautious, though some would dispute that claim, I felt a fierce recklessness surge within me. I made a dash for the door as soon as it closed behind the drivers. The dogs raised a howl as I suspected they would. I crouched down on the hinge side of the door, my back pressed against the metal siding. The door swung open and the voice of authority in black military-style boots stepped down onto the concrete pad and shouted them into submission. The dogs returned to their haunches but reluctantly. They could see me behind the door but he couldn't. As the door swung slowly shut on its pneumatic hinge, I picked up a chunk of oak twig from the ground litter and jammed it into the closing gap. It was just enough to keep the latch from catching. I gave myself time to take a couple of deep breaths and then cracked the door open a few inches. Once my eyes adjusted to the dim light inside, I made out a long corridor that ended in wide auditorium double doors. I heard muffled voices and laughter coming from the security post, a closed sliding glass window over a half wall, the door to the small office also closed, just inside the entrance. Like a white mouse in a maze I crouched low and hugged the wall making my way to where I thought there might be cheese. There was a burst of hearty laughter and then a low voice of accented English with East European intonations spoke. *Bulgarian* immediately popped into my ultra-conscious mind.

When I reached the double doors, I discovered stairways flanking them and leading up to a balcony. I heard the sound of

music, the kind with a grinding backbeat. I padded up the carpeted stairway on all fours keeping my head low. I peered into the near dark of the empty balcony. Bright light splashed over the railing from below. I gazed down onto a small amphitheater with a runway jutting out from the proscenium. A young Asian woman in high spiked heels and little else did her version of the model-strut. Shortly she was followed by a tall leggy blonde in an outfit that consisted of fringe draped from her broad shoulders. A man in a tuxedo at the back of the stage called out a name and a number, first in English, then in Arabic, and then in Japanese. My gaze widened to take in the men in the shadows seated along the edge of the runway. Their attention was not a leering lust, but the focused appraisal reserved for merchandise.

I'd seen that look myself many times before as I had swung my hips to the end of the runway, haughty and saucy, decked out in the latest fashion in New York, Paris, Milan, and Budapest. What I was witnessing was a parody of my life as a model. Only a few select men could have me, and only on my terms. The male fantasies of the world turned to surrogates, women who would serve their desires while I remained pure and unattainable.

I felt something touch my arm at the elbow. It was cold and hot at the same time and I lost consciousness. I moaned involuntarily as I came to and tried to make sense of my surroundings. My moan was greeted by a growl and I was suddenly aware of the bared dripping canines of a guard dog staring me in the face. My instinct was to play dead, close my eyes and let my head drop back against the leather couch. I tried to keep my breathing shallow but my heart was pounding like a runaway piston. Then it took a leap.

Overhead lights blazed on. I heard men's voices approaching. I cautiously opened one eye to a pitiless glare of bright artificial white. They were standing over me. I recognized one face immediately. I should have guessed. It was Blackie.

Chapter Thirty Three ***A BURST OF POWER***

The scowl on Blackie's face said he wasn't happy to see me. I almost burst out laughing. Not because I didn't grasp the tight spot I was in, but because of the absolute hilarity of what had just occurred to me. It was that delicious line once spoken by Mae West: "Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?" The gun wasn't in Blackie's pocket, it was in his back. He stumbled forward, pushed from behind. The gun was in Tommy Junior's hand. His lips were stretched across his teeth in a smile. It wasn't a happy smile.

I've been told that a woman with a sense of humor is dangerous. Men consider laughter, the only emotion they dare express, to be their inviolable domain. Once again I was where I wasn't supposed to be, doing what I wasn't supposed to be doing. And I was surrounded by men, all bristling with ambiguous hostility. Behind young Tommy, a limp withered figure glared from a wheelchair. Behind the wheelchair stood Preston Carmichael. The wizened apparition's right hand moved, bringing a pale plastic wand to its throat. It wasn't much of a leap, but I knew immediately that I was looking at old man Montague, aka Tommy Perro. A metallic sound crackled from the wand and shaped into words, "*Must be my lucky day.*"

Tommy Perro's hard eyes had no intention of smiling. The skin beneath his cavernous eyes hung like folds of mottled vinyl. "*My old pal, Blackie, come to visit me, and he brought his girlfriend, the most beautiful woman in the world.*" His laugh sounded like static.

Tommy Junior managed a sneer, "*Once the most beautiful, don't you mean? You have to admit she's got a few miles on her.*"

“A woman is not an automobile.” Preston spoke in his measured tone, his wan cheeks slack but his amber eyes calculating. “Like a fine wine, certain vintages will age to perfection. And this one will bring a price to rival anything on four wheels.”

The old cripple wheeled closer to the couch where I no longer pretended to be unconscious. My heightened awareness enlarged my vision. My eyes felt like they were the size of dinner plates. I was one beat ahead of everything going down. It seemed all so very predictable. Except for the Doberman, tensed, ready to lunge at a word, and incidentally, the only other female in the room.

“I get payback, from my old buddy Blackie for ripping my family apart, and as a bonus, something that will be the prize of some sultan’s collection. It’s my lucky day.”

“I’m afraid she’s already spoken for.” Preston’s tone was firm. “I have an exclusive contract with a certain party for the finest of Caucasian flesh, particularly of Circassian ancestry.”

The old man turned in his wheelchair in a way that looked both painful and menacing. It was a demand for explanation.

“In the late seventies, I had been asked to arrange to have a certain fashion model with a notorious reputation entertain a very wealthy and politically powerful man at his villa on the Caspian Sea. En route to this assignment she was intercepted and kidnapped by a gang of terrorists. Lee Malone, once the highly sought-after international beauty, Leeann, is still very much a prize. This is my opportunity to restore credibility with my client.” Preston pulled a small pistol from under his dinner jacket and pointed it at Junior. “I’m afraid I shall have to take possession of her. You can deal with your friend as you must.” Being a lawyer, Carmichael relied heavily on the bluff.

Tommy Perro had gone to a different law school. The old man rasped a noise through his wand and the Doberman launched

like a brown projectile at the dapper lawyer. Preston fired, hitting the dog in midflight. At the same time, Junior fired his pistol.

For a minute I thought I was on the set of the Maltese Falcon: men in dinner jackets with gats. And it happened instantly, inexorably, no close ups, no wide angles, overhead or tracking shots, just bang, bang, bang, one, two, three, by the numbers, the last round fired in reflex as Preston dropped like an expensive *Pelure Cochon* leather sack, fashionable but empty. One dead dog and one dead man. Tommy Junior spun and pointed his gun at Blackie who looked like he might be contemplating something gallant but stupid.

The old man may have been constrained by his physical condition but his barked electronic commands were dispatched with authority. He had some very valuable property and he was certain that there were those who would pay a tidy sum to acquire it.

I was hustled down to the auditorium and taken backstage by the security muscle, a scowling ape with a shaved head and glowing red eyes. I should have been frightened. Instead I felt fearless, as if I was inhabited by another entity, a truly powerful being bursting with supernatural energy.

The ringmaster reappeared to adjust the lighting and check the sound system. He asked with a grin if I was having a good time. Then he asked me if there was any particular music I preferred for my walk down the plank. He indicated the row of cassette tapes next to the stereo console. I didn't hesitate. My eyes were drawn to it and my finger pointed at it. *The Pipes of Pan*, music by tribesmen from the Atlas Mountains of North Africa. I'd been poolside at Brian Jones's mansion outside of London when I first heard it. It was exactly what I wanted. After all, *Pan* is the root of the word *panic*.

I watched from the wings as old Tommy was positioned in his wheelchair at the foot of the runway. Tommy Junior came up and glowered at me. He yanked the front of my blouse down to expose my breasts. "Let them see what they're getting for their money."

"I was just about to do that myself," I said, raking him with a fierce look that clawed his eyes and made him flinch. The ringmaster started the music, spoke my name and stated the opening bid. Shades of county fairs and the beginnings of my conquests as the queen of beauty. They could have at least started the bidding a little higher. I stepped out onto the runway accompanied by the cacophony of fifes and drums. I was in my element.

It was all very clear to me. I had become Treyann, the embodiment of the three secret aspects of womanhood: the ancient, the beautiful, and the powerful. As I swayed and whirled in dance, clapping my hands in rhythm over my head, proud of my firm uplifted breasts, nipples triumphant, I knew that all eyes were on me and soon they would be under my spell. They might have thought that their dreams were within their grasp. I was about to become their worst nightmare.

There was no doubt as to exactly who I was. I spoke to myself the words I had always known. I am Leeann, paramount in my sphere, far beyond competition in my beauty, in my power to enchant men. I am, in a word, irresistible, Aphrodite in human form, the face that launched a thousand shipwrecks. I am supreme, above the best. Over the currency of my flesh wars are fought, yet in my name peace is invoked.

A physical transformation took hold of me. My supple roundness acquired a hard muscular edge. The skin of my cheeks grew taut, my eyes narrowed to gun slits. I bared my teeth, canines extruded like those of a cat or viper. I knew then that I had their undivided attention. And I knew that they realized, perhaps not in

so many words and with the same depth of understanding, that from the beginning of time they, as men, have struggled with the threat of female dominance, against her strength, her complexity and impenetrability, her dreadful omnipresence. No man has yet been born who is not spun from a pitiful gob of refuse to a conscious being on the secret loom deep within the cave of a woman's body, the body that is a nurturing cradle but also the inevitable pitiless fatality of nature. As every woman I control all of creation. What I bring into this world I can take out. I am the beginning. I am the end.

I stopped in my tracks and thunderclapped thrice, swaying like an axe about to fall. The air crackled with a faint blue intensity. I heard a collective gasp. I concentrated all my energy directly at the old goat in the wheelchair. He burst like a paper bag full of wet sand.

Chapter Thirty Four

ESCAPE

I reeled like a sapling in the wake of a tornado. My legs went weak, knees about to buckle. How long had I been standing there? An eternity? The man in the wheelchair grasping at his chest in agony focused all attention on his drama. Bodyguards set up a perimeter and Tommy Junior's voice shouted out above the confusion for an ambulance. A rough hand grabbed me by the arm to keep me from collapsing.

I couldn't focus. I had projected my entire being at the old devil and now there was nothing left of me. I was empty. The hand, the shoulder, the arm around my waist, the feet striding quickly, purposefully out of the spotlight and backstage belonged to Blackie. My eyes fought the encroaching dark and my skin turned cold. Then I realized that we were outside and I wasn't dressed for evening. I was barely able to put one foot in front of the other.

Blackie half carried half dragged me behind a sheltering row of vines. I was limp as a rag doll. He shook me roughly. "Come on, Malone, snap out of it!" His anxious face multiplied in a blur like the spinning dial of a telephone. Finally he heaved me over a shoulder and jogged to behind the pump house where he had hidden his motorcycle. He took a black bandana from the pocket of his jacket and tied one end around my wrist. Numbly I complied with his instructions to climb onto the seat behind him. He pulled my arms around his waist and tied the end of the bandana to my other wrist. He pointed the bike downhill and coasted to a point where the engine came to life with an earsplitting roar. Helpless, my head pressed against the slab of his black leather back, arms bound around his waist. I should have been afraid but my instincts

told me to trust the old man, trust him the way I had trusted an old woman not so long ago.

I just wanted to curl up somewhere warm, soft, safe and quiet. Instead I was on the back of a noisy chopper with a gale force wind blowing through my skimpy blouse and up my long skirt. And I was on the down slide, the price I had to pay for my extraordinary power. I'd been there before, guided through my initiation by Trayann, and allowed to right my tumbled world before the blazing hearth of her stone hut with a bowl of herb tea, listening to the murmured litany that would help ease me out of the depths of my autism.

"I am chaos, I am order. I am she whose smile induces forgetfulness. I am the vessel of dreams, she who turns the year round its axis. I am the claw of night, the sigh of all time, silence incomprehensible."

I had gone looking for the old woman after the hubbub of my rescue by the Prince's commandos had died down. I'd hired a fisherman from Sardinia to ferry me back to the black sand beach. Everything was gone, every trace of the women, of SAPHO, had been eradicated. The villa was in a state of disrepair that would have taken centuries to accomplish. Trayann's stone hut, a pile of time worn rubble, and the once raging stream, dubbed *Milk of the Goddess*, an anemic trickle. I stood on the deserted black sand beach and looked up at where the villa had been, remembering the names of the women I had become friends with, the women who had changed my life. Xuxann, Urann, Roxann, Choann, Reiann, Mariann, Elann, Diann, Belann. And above all, Trayann.

"I am the vibrant virgin, the fertile female, the wizened hag. I am the primal force, the mist in the trees, rosy-fingered dawn. I am truth. I am beauty. I am the first and the last, the honored and the scorned, the holy and the whore, the virgin and the wife, the daughter and the mother."

In the weeks after I had witnessed Trayann's performance I completed my initiation into an ancient sisterhood whose ubiquity is its camouflage. Every woman has life shaping power, the power over life and death. Once this truth is acknowledged, the ancient technique, known in French as *la Folle*, or as Xuxann liked to call it, *Femme Fu*, 'crazy woman,' is relatively easy to learn. Of course, it helps if you have a heart stopping body like mine. However, it can only be used as the last resort.

The screaming apparition of an emergency vehicle, flashing red lights blazing, passed in the opposite direction on the darkened road. In the wake of its oscillating wail I could still hear Trayann's voice.

"I am knowledge and ignorance, shameless and ashamed, strong yet weak, fearful yet fearless. I am foolish. I am wise. I am the child at every birth, the bride at every wedding, the corpse at every funeral. I am the many. I am the one. I am the labyrinth."

Teeth chattering, I was fully alert by the time Blackie brought his bike to a stop in the alley behind his motorcycle repair shop. He untied the bandana and led me to the back entrance. All of Timberton was in the dark, another power outage apparently. Once inside Blackie found a kerosene lamp and lit it. He took a bottle down from a shelf and poured each of us a stiff drink in coffee mugs. When the whiskey hit my gut, it was like a little sun had exploded, sending its warm rays out to my extremities. I studied Blackie's craggy lined face in the warm glow of the oil lamp.

"OK, I think you need to tell me what's going on."

He shrugged. "You know about as much as I do."

"No, no, that doesn't cut it." The drink had put fire in my veins. "You need to tell me what you were doing there, at the Winery."

Blackie stared at the wall behind me, his lips pursed like he wanted to tell me but hadn't figured out how to say it.

“Come on, Blackie, you can tell me. What were you doing there? You certainly weren’t on their team, not the way they man-handled you.”

He bobbed his chin in agreement. “Actually, I was keeping tabs on you.” Blackie registered my surprise with a sly grin.

“I don’t get it. You were stalking me?”

He shook his head and sighed. In the dim light of the lamp he appeared older, tired. “You remind me an awful lot of her.” He pointed to the picture of Arlene on the wall. “She was a feisty one, too.” That brought a hint of a smile to the lines around his mouth. “You wouldn’t listen to me when I said you needed to keep your nose out of this business. I knew you’d eventually bump into trouble. You have no idea how ruthless these guys are. Everything you said to JJ about the murders and your suspicions was relayed to Junior.”

“Joyce James, that bitch!”

“The way I see it, torching your cabin was a warning. You were supposed to back off. But you wouldn’t take the hint. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw you flitting through the vine rows. For the life of me I couldn’t figure out what you were up to. When you disappeared into the warehouse I knew you were just plain stupid.” He paused to light a cigarette. “Then stupid followed stupid.”

If I had been a man, my actions would have been viewed as ballsy. As a woman, I was just stupid. My lack of caution made me reckless, not brainless. I shrugged it off. “Did you know what was going on at the Winery, the auctions?”

Blackie drained more of the bottle into his cup. His hand was shaking. “I had a pretty good idea that if it involved Tommy and his kids, it was probably no good. I keep a low profile where Tommy Perro’s concerned. He knows, and I know, that if I ever

got him alone I'd wring his scrawny neck. I'm not interested in going back to jail." He stared down at his cup.

"I know about your time in prison, Blackie, that's not what concerns me. What's your connection to Tommy and the boys?"

Blackie drew on his cigarette and let the smoke out slowly. "Ok, if you know about my time in the pen, then you probably know why." I nodded and he continued. "Imagine my surprise when I got out and found Arlene with a couple of kids. And living with Tommy! Well, I didn't care nothing about that. It was gonna be a fresh start, her and me. Like nothing had happened." He frowned remembering. "We'd talked about quitting the business and heading up to the Corkscrew River before. Arlene, she was all for it, but she couldn't leave the boys with Tommy." He shook his head. "He was too coked up or smacked out. Unpredictable, irresponsible. He was leaving his shit lying around where the rug rats could get at it. It was a real horror show I found when I got out of the slam."

"So you moved here with Arlene and the boys. Didn't Tommy come looking for you, to take the boys back?"

Blackie's look told me I'd touched a sore spot. "Yeah, he come looking for Arlene," he said slowly as if it were a strain to talk about it. "Took his damn time. She was set to enroll the boys in elementary school and all of a sudden he shows up and says he's taking custody cause she's an unfit mother being a porn actress and all. He had the brass to claim she was immoral yet here he was a big time drug dealer and porno pimp. Good thing I was gone or I would for sure have wacked his sorry ass!"

"Where were you?"

"Ah, I had to go back east, Boston, to help with my mother's funeral arrangements. And there were other family matters that needed sorting out so I was gone longer than I figured. When I got back, Arlene, she was in pretty bad shape and I was ready to go

after Tommy and put a bullet in his knobby little skull. But Arlene wouldn't have it. It wouldn't bring the boys back, she said. Tommy had the lawyers and the money so we couldn't fight it that way."

"And that was the last time you saw the twins?"

Blackie looked at me from behind the pain in his eyes. "I thought I'd seen the last of them. They'd been a handful anyway, and I don't have much patience with misbehaving and disrespect. The way they treated Arlene always made me mad. I was ready to give them a thrashing more than once but Arlene wouldn't have it. But with them gone, we had some kind of peace." The lines around his eyes relaxed as he recalled the tranquility. "Then, half a dozen or so years later, out of the blue, Timmy showed up. He'd got himself into a jam down south and needed a place to lie low. I didn't want anything to do with him, but Arlene, she put him up in the spare bedroom. Let me tell you, it was no picnic. He was a wild one, but the way Arlene fussed about him you woulda thought he was the Prince of Siam. I had him help me out in my shop to try to keep him out of trouble. Had a knack for the machines, I'll say that for him." Blackie glanced around the shop as if the deep shadows concealed the memories. "But one day, he just left, didn't say a word. Disappeared like he'd never been there. Arlene took it hard as you might expect. Me, I just couldn't figure what made him tick. I got an idea about a week after the boy took off. Santos, the local deputy at the time come looking for Timmy. Seemed that the cops suspected him of setting grass fires, one of which burned down a house. Well, Arlene wouldn't believe it when they told us and of course I took her side seeing as how I never had no love for the police. They took me down to the substation for interfering with an officer of the law." Blackie scoffed at the memory.

"So Timmy was the evil twin?" Blackie's story was making me sad. I wanted to comfort him, but his stiff manner wouldn't allow it.

“If you ask me, they’re both evil. I thought I’d seen the last of them. About then is when Arlene took sick. And that was mostly what was on my mind. Caring for her.” His eyes got glassy and he looked away.

“That must have been when Rhonda moved up here, right? Arlene must have been comforted to have her old friend nearby.”

Blackie frowned. “No, Arlene passed before any of them showed up again. First it was young Tommy, throwing money around and buying up property and planting vineyards. Changed his name to Montague. He come by once, just to check me out. I didn’t see much of him after that. And then Timmy come by. Had himself a chopper. Wanted to use my shop to work on his bike.” Blackie sighed. “Can’t say I was too welcoming. Considering.”

I was puzzled. “So Rhonda. . . ?”

Blackie shook his head. “Me and Rhonda never did get along once the whole dirty movie business started. I always figured she was the one who got Tommy going in that direction. And the way she treated Arlene, like she was her maid. I know she’s got a cabin in your neck of the woods, but her and Tommy Perro, I stay out of their way.”

Something was not adding up. “I have a confession to make, Blackie.”

He smiled, relieved to be pulled from his dark reverie. “Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“I suspected that you set fire to my cabin. I was told that a motorcycle was heard in the neighborhood before the fire was discovered.”

Blackie fixed me with a stare, brow stepped with concern. “Who told you they heard a motorcycle?”

I was about to answer when the power came back on. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Hey, nothing to be scared of,” Blackie said, laughing at the panic in my eyes, “it’s only a little electricity.”

I had easily recovered from the surprise of the sudden bright light. The apparition in the doorway was the cause of my saucer eyes. Timmy beamed an evil grin at Blackie’s back. And behind Timmy stood Rhonda. The square black thing in her hand was a pistol.

Chapter Thirty Five ***A FAMILY AFFAIR***

I was speechless, I couldn't think of a thing to say. Not that the situation required me to say anything. Rhonda, gun in hand, was clearly in control. My head was spinning. It felt like I was having post-hallucinatory hallucinations. The way my gut dive-bombed told me that it was all too real.

Blackie blurted, "Rhonda? Timmy? What?" before Rhonda cut him off.

"Shut up Blackie, and keep your hands where I can see them." There was a remorseless feline cruelty to her eyes.

And I finally got a good look at the surviving occupant of the gray van. As my prime suspect in the murder of Hitler, Goldberg's Airedale, and presumably Creasy's pup, he had epitomized the sense of wrongness, of evil, in this whole affair. What I saw was a greasy sadistic pipsqueak in a motorcycle jacket holding a big shotgun.

It must have been the adrenaline contributing to the dryness of my mouth and the sense that my back had arched. I locked eyes with Rhonda. The way she twisted her mouth into a haughty smirk. I recognized it. Timmy was making a similar one and I didn't think it was because they had both attended the same smirk school. The resemblance between Rhonda and Timmy, and by extension Tommy, was striking. That was only slightly troubling. It was the resemblance between Rhonda and the old man in the wheelchair, Tommy Perro that had me gasp in surprise. My puzzlement resolved in a flash of intuition. She was the brains behind Pa. And she was his sister or a very close relative.

I blinked. Rhonda sensed that I knew. For that, I would have to pay. "And you, you meddling bitch." She crossed the short distance between us and hit me in the face with the pistol. It

wasn't a blow that was intended to hurt as much as intimidate. I felt the skin on my cheekbone split and put my hand up to meet the swelling. I looked at the blood on my fingers. The sight of blood, especially my own, always makes me faint. I tottered.

Blackie moved to catch me but Timmy read it differently and clubbed him with the butt end of the shotgun. Blackie dropped to his knees and then fell full face forward to the concrete floor. I caught the edge of the work bench and held myself up until the wave of nausea passed. I focused on the photos Blackie had pinned on the wall, the old photos of Rhonda and Tommy and Blackie and Arlene. The old gang, the original porn crew, the youthful clan of sybarites grouped in sibling camaraderie.

Timmy left off kicking Blackie at Rhonda's caution. "We don't want to kill him. Just yet."

A crimson halo spread from Blackie's head across the cement floor and I felt a cramp in my gut that told me I was going to heave. I dug my nails into the wood of the workbench. I swallowed hard. "So you're the mother of the twins," I said finally, swaying to keep my balance.

Rhonda gave a sardonic cackle. "Of course, the twins are mine. There was never any doubt of that."

"But Arlene, she was supposed to be the mother," I managed as the room slowed its spin.

"You've got that right. She was *supposed to be*." Rhonda scoffed. "If you must know, miss busybody, not that it's going to do you any good, Arlene was supposed to act like they were her kids while I was doing time in the slammer. She claimed to be their mother so they wouldn't end up in a foster home. I didn't want that to happen to my babies. I know what that's like. I love my babies." And she gave Timmy a little maternal smile of affection, seductive in its controlling power. Timmy, in turn, frowned

the troubled frown of a momma's boy whose leash had just been tugged.

Rhonda felt a need to explain. "I was doing time when Blackie got out of prison. Once he hooked up with Arlene again, she left Tommy and took the kids with her. Tommy didn't care, he'd become strung out on his own product. So when I got out on parole I wanted to know where my kids were. In the meantime, Tommy had become quite wealthy and greedy and thought he could write me out of the script. I had news for him." She said it, lips pursed in ruthless resolve.

"But you told me. . ." I stopped. I wasn't sure what she'd told me, there were too many loose ends.

"That's the problem with beautiful women, they're so gullible. The more beautiful, the more gullible. And fashion models like you think they're better than the rest. Face it, honey, to men you're just a piece of meat. Less than that. A picture of a piece of meat. You're what they want. I'm what they get." There was a bitter truth to what she was saying. "Sure, I had to play it straight, but all the while I was working behind the scenes, managing the finances, letting Tommy be the front. I diversified. He kept the girlie concession. He always was a horny little bastard."

"And you've known that since you were a little kid."

It was her turn to blink. I knew I had got to her by the stormy furtive look she threw Timmy's way. Timmy was clueless as I imagined he'd always been, a puppet tied to his mother's apron string. "You don't know what you're talking about."

I was looking at a pistol and a shotgun yet I felt like I had the upper hand. "I think you just confirmed that I do know what I'm talking about. Tommy Perro is your brother." It was a leap but her clouded brow told me I'd hit the mark. Timmy stiffened as if stung, the dim light behind his eyes suddenly bright.

“You think you’re so clever. Here’s something you don’t know. One of the original investors in my little business venture, the guy who showed me how to launder money, set up a dummy corporation, branch out into international markets, do you know who that was?” She was certain I didn’t have a clue and she was right. A shiver of fear rippled up my spine. “The guy who owned the cabin you lived in, your sainted step-father, Frank Zola.”

Timmy might have just as well hit me in the gut with the butt of his shotgun. “Frank was involved in all of this?” Now I was really going to puke.

“Dad is your brother?” Timmy was looking at his mother, head cocked to one side, confusion darkening his features. “You’re my aunt? He’s my . . .uncle?”

“Now Timmy, honey, don’t listen to her.” She made a move toward him as if to comfort him. He leveled the shotgun at her. It wasn’t so much a threat as something that would keep her at arm’s length while he mulled over the ambiguity of the situation. Once he had been so sure of himself and now he felt betrayed.

“Timmy,” Rhonda repeated, pleading.

“No, mom, I gotta figure this out on my own.” It went with an angry pout. It didn’t last long.

Blackie had come to or he’d been playing possum. Either way, he managed to rise to his knees and throw his body against Timmy’s legs, knocking the boy down which in turn triggered the shotgun. The blast hit Rhonda on the left side just as she got off a round striking Blackie in the back. She was thrown backwards, taking the oil lamp with her. It shattered on the concrete floor sending flaming oil in all directions. Timmy’s legs were pinned under the weight of Blackie's body.

Stunned, my ears ringing, I stumbled over to help Blackie. I glanced at Rhonda and caught the wicked gleam in her crazed eyes just as she raised the pistol and fired. My entire body stiff-

ened, seized with pain, before I collapsed to the floor. Runnels of burning kerosene had reached a pile of greasy rags catching them on fire and filling the workshop with choking smoke. Timmy freed himself and crawled toward the doorway. A huge orange flame roared up from the cans of solvent stacked behind Rhonda. She was engulfed by fire in an instant as surely as if she had been sucked into the gates of Hell. A cacophony of voices filled my head, shrill voices, siren voices, swimming toward me as I closed my eyes. I didn't care anymore. I was too far gone.

Chapter Thirty Six

RESPECT

The bullet had gone through my left shoulder. They said it was just a flesh wound and that I was lucky. All the same, there was an ugly dimple where the bullet had gone in and a purple raisin-like scar where it had come out. On the right side of my face where Rhonda had pistol whipped me, a small tear shaped scar hung just below the cheekbone. My surgeon recommended plastic surgery. I said I'd think about it. I was chipped porcelain. I kind of liked the idea. It took about a month for the pain in my shoulder to cool down enough for me to resume my daily jogs. I was living in a rental in Feather but still running in the old Primrose Lane neighborhood while I had the cabin rebuilt. The insurance would pay for it.

After the cops had tracked Timmy down, he implicated the Montague crew in the arson and extortion of the small wineries in Corkscrew County. He was held responsible for the conflagration that ate up an entire block of greater downtown Timberton. The Antique Store & Motorcycle Repair Shop, and the Grapevine office upstairs, the abandoned gift shop next door to the real estate office, all pretty much gone. Rhonda did not survive the blaze, the shotgun blast having done most of the job. Blackie made it out alive but just barely. Rhonda's shot had pierced his right lung. That was the least of his problems. The stomping Timmy had given him put him in a wheelchair, maybe for good.

In the days following my release from the hospital, I was the center of a media storm. I'd been there before. This time was different in that it involved arson, extortion, murder, an international sex trafficking ring, and money laundering, not my usual outrageous prima donna shenanigans. I was camera candy on a daily basis for a couple of weeks. It was like the old days in Milan. I

couldn't go anywhere without being accosted by the strobe of camera flashes. Then someone else's high jinks, this time in DC, took over the headlines.

I learned that State and local authorities had been investigating Tommy Perro's operation for some time before Fashwalla's murder. The feds had been brought in once the scope of the operation was realized. The murder in Feather had been the wild card that turned things around. Up until then Ramparts Corp had kept their illegal business within the bounds of criminal decorum that could easily be overlooked by bribing local officials. One of them was the District Attorney, Chandler Wong's boss, the leering racist leech I'd met in the hallway at the Hall of Justice last winter. Some of the information I gleaned from the Daily Republican, some of it Detective Rick Santos let slip when he visited me in the hospital in the course of his investigation. After he was done asking his questions, he'd given me a wry smile and teased, "What's it with you and shotguns, Malone?" Chandler Wong provided me with most of the details over dinner one evening not long after I got out of the hospital.

With the first killing, the investigators had realized there were more players than they had originally figured. They never caught on that Rhonda was the controlling hand behind the scene. As an aging porn queen, she had never even come up on their radar. As a result of the police raid at the Winery, Tommy Perro, who survived his heart attack and would be recuperating in a federal penitentiary hospital, was arrested along with Junior and charged on a number of racketeering counts. Timmy was facing murder, manslaughter, and attempted murder raps. I had inquired after Preston Carmichael. Chandler said that when they converged on the warehouse that night they found only the old man, young Tommy, and some of their staff. There were no dead bodies, of either Preston Carmichael or a Doberman pinscher.

I wondered what had become of the women I had seen being auctioned off like livestock. Chandler explained that they found nine young women in a makeshift dorm at the warehouse. Most of them were country girls who had been lured by ads placed in freebie advertisers by phony modeling agencies. Once in the clutches of the white slavers, they were drugged and held virtual prisoners. They'd been released in the care of a halfway house for abused women in Santa Quinta. A few were foreign nationals and would eventually be repatriated. Chandler said that if it hadn't been for me, they'd probably still be prisoners. The medical emergency had provided the ideal pretext to stage the raid on Montague Winery.

I was also trying to make sense of what had happened at The Mint. The killing of Timmy's bearded partner, Bruno 'Bear' Fitzwallier, in Alice Franklin's bedroom had investigators scratching their heads. I had told Detective Santos in my original interview that the dead man was one of the men in the gray van. I didn't know then that he was a thug tied to Timmy Montague and Montague Winery. Once I identified Timmy as the other man in the van, they were able to piece together a plausible scenario. It centered on Ramparts Corp's voracious appetite for acquiring property as a means to launder their ill-gotten gains.

From the statements Timmy made in his confession, it appeared that Rhonda had been negotiating with Alice Franklin to sell the family resort. Although Alice had agreed to a deal at first, she had a change of heart, claiming she had a nephew who might be interested in keeping the business in the family. Fashwalla and his brother had made a similar mistake in accepting an offer from Ramparts Corp and reneging on the deal. In that instance, Ralph Fashwalla wanted to hold out for more money. He got a shotgun blast in the back for his greed, and his brother, in fear of his own life, cut a deal with the murderers. Faheed Fashwall confessing to

his brother's murder and later recanting was a ruse dreamed up by Preston Carmichael to throw the investigators off the scent.

In Alice Franklin's case, an enraged Rhonda had instructed Timmy to do whatever it took to get Alice out of the picture. Ramparts Corp would then grab up the last resort on the Corkscrew River for next to nothing. It was well known that Alice was in financial trouble exacerbated by a drinking problem. She needed money to keep the Mint open, and having fallen in with dubious company in the persons of Timmy and his partner, Bear, she was persuaded that the money they made from a risqué movie would pay off her mounting debts. Timmy denied any involvement in his partner's death in spite of the fact that his fingerprints were all over the murder weapon. Even more damning was evidence that it was the same shotgun used to kill Fashwalla. The investigators also found a video tape in a search of Timmy's apartment at Montague Winery. The tape confirmed that Alice and Bear engaged in perfunctory sex play. The video also showed Alice shrinking back with a mixture of surprise and fear as Bear advanced with shotgun in hand. Bear then stopped as if something had distracted him and, with an angry frown, glared off camera. The video stopped at that point indicating the camera had been turned off. Confronted with the evidence on the tape, Timmy admitted that once Bear had his way with Alice, he meant to kill her. The investigation concluded that Alice Franklin had turned the tables on them and acted in self defense. What or who had distracted the killers and why the filming had stopped was an unresolved detail that would not hinder the DA from adding conspiracy to murder to Timmy's growing list of criminal charges.

I got a slightly different version of what had gone down from Blackie when I visited him at the rehab facility in Santa Quinta. In the account Blackie had given the cops, he placed himself arriving after the gun had gone off.

He told me how he had walked in on the setup that night. Alice had been a friend of his and Arlene's since their early days in Corkscrew County, and he had gone by to say hello and thank her for letting him use the dumpster. He'd called out her name walking up the steps to her room, not wanting to take her by surprise. To his own surprise, when he came to the doorway of the bedroom, he spied a naked man and a naked Alice struggling for a shotgun. He yelled something, more to distract the man than anything else. He was about to jump into the fray when Timmy, whom he had not seen at first, shouldered past him and knocked him back out into the hallway. He had first thought to go after Timmy but instantly realized that Alice was in more danger so he went back into the bedroom where the naked pair had now fallen across the bed in their struggle for the shotgun. He planted a boot in the big man's kidney and it was enough to get him to release his hold on the weapon. Then the gun went off hitting Bear square in the chest. He didn't think that Alice had intentionally pulled the trigger. Alice, once she saw what she had done, was inconsolable. It had tipped her already fragile mental state into the abyss of psychosis. About then was when I arrived with Rikki and Wallace to find Blackie dialing for help.

I was concerned for Blackie. His business had gone up in flames, and he had been critically injured. His future was uncertain. It must have shown on my face.

"Hey, at least I still got wheels," he had joked half heartedly from his wheelchair. I figured that it would be a good idea if I looked in on him every once in a while.

There were still pieces of the puzzle of what had occurred over the last year that I needed to fit together for myself. The dog murders were resolved when it was revealed that Timmy Montague was an animal sadist. He had bragged to a cellmate that he

liked to cruise residential neighborhoods and shoot dogs that had the nerve to chase his van.

The mystery of the burnt-out van itself and the charred bodies it contained remained unsolved. My intuition notwithstanding, the autopsy determined that both victims were males and yet to be identified. Timmy and Bear undoubtedly had a hand in the grisly ruse. The investigation, according to the Sheriff's Office, was ongoing.

The Grapevine, Corkscrew County's last independent newspaper, was put out of business by the fire. JJ wasn't too broken up by it, though. She'd met an antique dealer at the fashion show, someone who had gone to high school with her, though she had to admit she didn't exactly remember him. He'd been in the class ahead of her. Or behind her. Not that it mattered. He lived in Arizona and was quite wealthy.

Meanwhile back at the resort, Rikki and Wallace had come up with the idea of buying The Mint from Alice Franklin. They planned to renovate it, with the help of Nathan Thiele, and make it into an exclusive resort for their same preference friends.

And there was my step-father's involvement with Rhonda and her money laundering schemes. Just the thought of it gnawed at my gut like a festering ulcer, and I knew I would have to get to the bottom of it, if for no other reason than my own sanity.

Marty Steele, the little mannequin TV news reporter at KSQU, offered me a job as a news anchor. I told him I'd think about it. I was being deluged with similar offers. News shows and talk shows clamored for my presence on their tiny screens. I felt like telling them I was too big to fit in such a small space, but I kept it to myself. My old agency was desperate to get me back even though they had hung me out to dry in the waning days of my career. I wasn't all that interested in any of it. I liked who I had become in the anonymity of the tiny river community. I took the

calls from my friends who expressed their concerns and envy that even out in the middle of nowhere I still had the ability to draw the world's attention. My answer to them: "some of us have it and some of us don't." I gave a tentative *yes* to Marilyn Nakamura, an old runway mate who was starting a line of yoga togs and wanted me to model them for her catalog. I'd never been a catalog model before. At one time I might have considered it beneath me. These days it was simply something I could do for an old friend and that was enough. And I patiently fielded the calls from my mother who was beside herself with what she called my reckless lifestyle. They usually came in the evening, around dinner time, like calls from pollsters or aluminum siding salesmen. My patience wore thin after about a week of tipsy dialing. Finally I told her that I was in the driver's seat of my life and if I took the curves a little fast and tight, that was my worry.

I had one more piece of business to attend to. I wanted to personally thank the woman who had pulled me from the burning building that night. I had come to on a stretcher being loaded into the back of an ambulance to see May Ann Young, the County fire investigator, peering at my face, brow furrowed in distress. Her face smudged with soot, she had put her hand on mine and smiled when she saw that I recognized her. I managed a weak stretch of lips myself.

May Ann retired from her position with the County before I had a chance to properly thank her. If she left a forwarding address, I wasn't privy to it. I did get the opportunity to view the investigative report she filed in which she admitted that she had mistakenly assumed I had deliberately set fire to my cabin for the purpose of collecting on the insurance. When she reviewed the timeline and the witness statements, Rhonda's appeared inconsistent. Determining that Rhonda's story would require further inquiry, she had driven out to the Primrose Lane address just in time to see the

old woman put something that looked like a rifle or shotgun in the trunk of her car and speed off followed by a man on a motorcycle. Her suspicions aroused, she set off to follow them but was called away by emergency radio traffic of a vehicle into a power pole. Since she was the closest County unit, she responded. The accident was responsible for knocking out the power to Timberton and the surrounding area. Once the scene was secured, she continued her search for Rhonda, ending up in Timberton just about the time the power came back on. She was on the road out of town when she heard the radio traffic reporting shots fired in the vicinity. By the time she reached the motorcycle repair shop, it was fully engulfed. She called the fire in to dispatch and went to investigate. When she approached the rear of the building she saw two motorcycles and Rhonda's Coupe Deville. And Timmy running off down the alley. Peering into the smoke choked open doorway, she spotted the bodies and took it upon herself to pull them to safety, first me and then Blackie.

Her uniform shirt sleeve had been ripped up past the elbow, a gauze bandage soaking blood from the wound on her forearm. She had been injured going back into the burning building after Blackie. What caught my attention was the small tattoo on the inside of her bicep, a V bisected by a line, the Aeolian Greek letter *psi*. I knew that symbol well. It belonged to SAPHO.

I put my right running shoe on the front bumper of my Volvo and tightened the laces and then did the same with my left. I would attend to everything I could all in good time. But first I was itching to run. I inhaled deeply, the cool of early morning autumn air filling my lungs. This was my favorite time of the year, the deciduous trees on the verge of turning to a riot of reds and yellows. With a water bottle strapped to one hip and a tiny cassette player on the other, I ran in place, adjusting the earphones on my head. I pressed play and grinned as Aretha's voice sang "*R-E-S-P-*

E-C-T, find out what it means to me.” I knew exactly what she was talking about. My feet beat the asphalt as I propelled myself down Primrose Lane. Was there ever any doubt? I rock!

