

PRETTY LITTLE GIRL

By Don Canaan

(and Shawn Graves)

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CHAPTER 1

“Well, aren’t you a pretty little thing?”

Laura froze. The sounds of the fair were drowned out by the roar in her ears. It was already warm and promised to be a hot day, but she was suddenly chilled...and a little girl again.

“Daddeee.....I’m scared!”

One of her earliest memories was sitting in one of the cars on the Ferris wheel as it rocked lazily back and forth. The wheel had stopped with their car at the very top and all of Fresno and the surrounding areas spread out from the fair grounds, the lights of thousands of homes and businesses twinkling in the night.

She clung to her father, squealing with equal amounts of horror and glee each time she peeked out over the edge of the car to look down on all of the people. It only took a few seconds before she buried her face against her father’s shirt, the fabric fisted in both small hands. His arm around her made her feel safe in a way that not even the belt around her waist and the safety bar locked over their laps could.

She couldn't have been more than three years old, much too short for the ride. How had her father convinced the operator to let her on? It wasn't too hard to figure out. Laura's father was persuasive and used to getting his way; in his business, in stores, in restaurants, in his home. One thing he always wanted was whatever would make her happy. Nothing was too good for his only daughter. He made sure she had the best clothes, the best toys, and the best education. If she had pointed her chubby hand at the monstrous ride and said, "Ride, p'ease, Daddy?" he would have done whatever it took to get her on.

She didn't know if he had taken her to the fair that first year after her birth, but certainly by the following year he had begun what would be a yearly tradition. Although he hadn't lived in Fresno for years before she was born, he had fond memories of the fair from his own childhood. He had been raised there in the days when Fresno was a rural agricultural town. Going to the fair was one of the few luxuries his parents had managed to afford. Taking her back to his home town every year became a ritual that nothing was allowed to disrupt.

From the beginning it was a father-daughter only trip. Laura's mother was neither invited, nor did she seem interested. They always went the first day the fair opened, arriving at the gate before it opened and staying until well after dark. She slept in the back seat as he drove home, but even so, she was always tired and cranky the next morning. When she was old enough for school she was allowed to stay home and rest.

No matter what was happening at work, the opening day of the fair was theirs. It continued every year, even after she entered her teens and her father was the last person she wanted to go to the fair, or anywhere else, with. But he insisted and he always got his way. The last time she went to the fair with him was nine years earlier, the year she was twenty five. She was engaged to be married in six months and she decided that it was juvenile for a married woman to continue going to the fair with her father.

Laura watched the Ferris wheel, remembering. She remembered the exhilaration of rising in the air, the way her stomach did flip-flops as they descended. Most of all, she remembered being three years old. She remembered thinking her father was the biggest, strongest, bravest man in the world. She remembered that feeling of assurance that nothing could hurt her as long as he was holding her.

She looked over at him now. It was the first day of the fair and she was there once again with her father. He didn't look big, or strong, or particularly brave. Today he just seemed...lost. His hair was white; he didn't stand as straight as she remembered from her childhood. He certainly didn't exude the confidence and authority that had always convinced everyone from powerful CEOs to Ferris wheel operators to accede to his wishes.

"Daddy, do you remember taking me on the Ferris wheel?"

He smiled at her.

"I think there's time for nine holes before that meeting."

"Dad, we aren't at the golf course. We're at the fair. Remember? The Fresno Fair? You and I used to come every year."

"I just need to pick up my clubs."

He ambled away and Laura followed a few feet behind, watching him stop to bend down and pick up an imaginary tee. The exhaustion of the last two years suddenly settled over her, along with the familiar resentment of having put her life on hold. The life that had fallen apart. As they neared the exhibit halls, she caught up to him.

"Dad, do you want something to eat?"

"We have a foursome and it's too beautiful a day to waste indoors."

"You don't even know who I am, do you," she sighed.

He patted her hand where it rested on his arm.

"Well, aren't you a pretty little thing?"

Laura released his arm as he knelt to put the imaginary tee in the dirt. Reaching into her purse, she ripped a piece of paper from her notebook and located a pen. She quickly wrote on the paper and when he stood up, she folded the paper and tucked it into the breast pocket of his shirt.

"The boys want to meet in the bar for drinks before we start," he told her.

"The clubhouse is right over there," she replied, pointing to the Home Arts Building just across the grass.

He smiled and headed in that direction. She watched him, knowing that within a few steps he had already forgotten where he was going. The tide of people broke around her as she stood, feeling her heart pound in her chest. He followed the crowd of people moving toward the building. He stepped through the large open doors and into the shade. The crowd closed around him and then her father disappeared from her sight. Still she stood there, her eyes watching the doorway.

For five minutes she waited, and then she pulled the strap of her purse onto her shoulder and began walking away from the building. She walked to a different gate from the one they had entered less than an hour earlier. Refusing a stamp on her wrist that would allow her to reenter the fairgrounds later, she slipped through the exit. She walked to the parking lot where she had parked her car. Sliding behind the wheel, she started the car and turned the air conditioning on. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the steering wheel for several moments. Finally, she backed out of the parking space, and pulled out onto Chance Avenue. She made her way slowly through the busy streets until she found the entrance to Highway 41. Merging into the southbound lanes, Laura drove away from Fresno. Away from her memories.

“Well, aren’t you a pretty little thing?”

CHAPTER 2

It was the fifth or sixth time that the man passed by before Steve Jacobs, CEO of the Fresno City Fairgrounds, took notice of him. He was not tall, several inches shorter than Steve's six feet, thin, white haired. Steve tried to remember how long ago it was that he first saw him; several hours, at least. The man didn't seem to be with anyone, nor did he seem to have a destination in mind and Steve had seen him in several different areas as he made his rounds. There was nothing unusual about that; a lot of people came to the fair just to walk aimlessly around and look at the sights. Except the man wasn't looking at them; he didn't seem to even notice the rides with screaming teenagers or the hawkers trying to lure him to play a game.

Steve watched as the man approached a young couple and said something. The boy and girl gave him a wary look and glanced at one another. He could see them shaking their heads as they moved away, and then heard their mocking laughter once they were well away from the man.

He thought back and couldn't remember having previously seen the man with food or anything to drink. September's San Joaquin Valley sun beat down mercilessly, making it unwise to go too long without fluids. Could this be a homeless man panhandling? It was possible. Security guards and the police tried to keep them out, but occasionally someone slipped inside.

Steve began to surreptitiously follow the elderly man. His face was red and his breathing labored, yet his expression was pleasant with an absent-minded smile. The man again approached someone, this time a frazzled-looking mother with three small children in tow. He couldn't hear what the man said, but he saw the woman frown at him and quickly pull her children away. He decided it was time to intervene. If the man was annoying paying customers, it was just a matter of time before someone reported him to security. Or, he thought, before some macho hot-head decided to take care of him.

He closed the distance between them and gently tapped the man on the shoulder. The man swung around slowly, a smile spreading across his face when he saw Steve.

"Well," the man said. "It's you."

Steve paused for a moment, searching his memory since the man seemed to recognize him.

"Sir," he finally said. "Do you need any help?"

"Well," the man said, reaching out and shaking Steve's hand enthusiastically. "Isn't that just?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Oh, sure, sure. We have an 8:00 AM tee time, but I think we'll make it."

"Tee time?" Steve glanced around at the milling throng of people, none of whom seemed aware of the strange conversation he was having with the man. "Sir, can you tell me your name?"

"Absolutely," the man said with a chuckle.

Steve waited but the man didn't offer his name. Instead, he seemed to forget that he was having a conversation. He turned and began walking away. Steve moved to stand in front of him.

"Sir? Your name?"

"Don't you worry, young man. I never forget to tip my caddy. Here you go." The man patted his pockets as though looking for something, and then reached into a small breast pocket and withdrew a slip of paper. Handing it to Steve he said, "I better go catch up with my group. They can't start without me."

Steve looked at the paper as he followed the man, trying to keep him in sight. Written on the paper were the words, "My name is Larry." Catching up with the man, Steve gently took his arm to get him to stop.

"I'm sorry, sir. Is your name Larry?"

"Well, hello there!" The man shook Steve's hand again. "I haven't seen you in a stone's age! What have you been up to? How's the family?"

"Larry," he tried again. "Can you tell me your last name?"

"We just need one more good man to make a foursome. How about it...are you up for it?"

Steve ran a hand over his eyes and looked at the man in frustration. He noticed that not only was his face red, he was perspiring profusely and had large sweat spots on his shirt. As he began to walk away again he wobbled a bit and Steve worried he was about to fall. Gently taking his arm, Steve steered the man to a concession stand and bought a bottle of water.

"Larry, I think you better drink this."

He put the bottle to the man's mouth and tilted it. The man drank willingly enough, but when Steve tried to put the bottle in his hand he didn't seem to know what to do with it. Sighing, Steve held the bottle to his lips again and reached for the radio hooked to his belt.

"Security, this is Jacobs. Do we have any missing person reports?"

"No sir, no missing persons so far today."

"I'm bringing in a man who seems to be lost. We need to get an announcement out."

"An adult?"

"Yeah. Elderly man, approximately five six, first name Larry."

"Will do, sir."

"Larry," he said, clipping the radio back on his belt. "I'd like you to come with me, OK? Let's see if we can find your people."

Larry offered no objections as he accepted another drink from the cold water bottle. He meekly allowed Steve to guide him through the crowds toward the fairgrounds security office. As they made their way slowly, stopping frequently for Steve to give Larry another drink, the announcement went out over the loudspeakers.

“Attention, please. We have an elderly man who has become separated from his party. He is approximately five feet, six inches tall and his first name is Larry. Anyone looking for this gentleman please contact the security office, located next to the southwest entrance gate. Thank you.”

Steve was relieved when he finally ushered Larry into the security office. He offered the elderly man a chair, but it took several attempts to get him to sit. Steve finally had to gently push on his shoulders until his knees bent and he lowered himself onto the chair.

“What’s going on, Steve?”

Steve turned as Jack Padilla entered the office. Jack was head of security for the fairgrounds.

“I found this guy wandering around the grounds. I’m not sure how long he’s been here, but I’ve seen him several times over the last few hours. He’s pretty confused and he had this note in his pocket.”

Steve handed the note to Jack. Jack read it and handed it back to Steve, who folded it and put it back in Larry’s pocket. Steve knelt and gave Larry another drink of water.

“I was worried about heat exhaustion,” he said. “I haven’t seen him with anything to drink and he’s sweating pretty good.”

"He hasn't told you his last name?"

"Nope. He just talks about golf."

"Golf, huh? This seems kind of strange," Jack told him. "I mean, if someone put that note in his pocket to identify him in case he gets lost, then why not put his last name on it as well? His first name alone won't help locate where he belongs."

Steve gave Larry another drink of water before standing up.

"Think we should get one of the cops in here and file a police report," he asked.

"No," Jack said, scratching his head. "We've got the announcement going out. Let's see if anyone comes looking for him."

"He's been here most of the day. Shouldn't someone have reported him missing already?"

"Maybe they don't know it yet. He could have been with a group that split up. You know how that goes...one person thinks he's with the other one, that one thinks he's with the first, and no one realizes he's missing until they meet up. 'Elderly man named Larry'...that should get someone's attention."

The sound of retching caused both men to spin around in time to see Larry vomit, slide from his chair, and crumple onto the floor. Steve rushed to the unconscious man as Jack called for the paramedics stationed at the fairgrounds.

The paramedics were close by and arrived within minutes. Larry had regained consciousness, but he was lethargic and mumbling incoherently. Steve stood back and watched as they examined him, started an intravenous line for fluids, attached the leads for the heart monitor, and radioed to the hospital emergency room that they would be bringing him in.

Steve gave what information he had about the man, which was little other than his name was Larry. He didn't respond to his name, but he didn't respond appropriately to anything that was said to him.

"He's severely dehydrated," the paramedic told Steve and Jack, kneeling over Larry. "We need to go take him to the ER."

"Could the dehydration be the cause of his confusion," Steve asked.

"Could be. But there's no way to know right now whether the dehydration caused the confusion or if he was already confused and that's why he didn't drink enough and became dehydrated." He looked up at the two men. "You haven't located any family?"

"Not yet," Jack responded. "When...if...someone hears our announcements and comes looking for him, we will let them know where you are taking him."

Larry was able to stand up with help and the paramedics convinced him to lie down on the gurney. He was so weak that he didn't resist and they soon had straps across his chest and thighs to prevent him from falling, or climbing, off as they wheeled him out to the waiting ambulance.

“All right,” Jack said as the ambulance drove away. “I guess we can’t wait any longer to file a police report. If his family shows up and it was just a misunderstanding, the police can just close their case.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. “But something tells me that no one is going to come looking for him.”

CHAPTER 3

With each step she took, Laura watched the concentric outlines racing outward from her foot in the wet sand. To her left the waves roared relentlessly onto the shore. Soon the water washed over her feet and then her ankles. She moved slightly up the shore as the tide came in, to avoid getting wet above her calves. The abrasive sand felt good on the bottoms of her feet, and that contrasted with the soothing cold as the waves hit her toes.

This wasn't a busy section of beach, but there were a few families dotting the beach with children building sandcastles. Two men threw Frisbees into the surf for their dogs to retrieve as a woman walked a third dog on a leash. The roar of the surf drowned out any other sounds, making her feel almost alone. She took a deep breath and savored the scents that were quintessentially ocean; brine, decaying shellfish, seaweed.

If she could afford to live anywhere in the world that she wanted to, it would be here. An expensive beach-front home would be nice, but she would be happy to have a small house in town. She had always loved the beach and she found Cayucos to be a beautifully quaint little town. Like all towns along the coast, it had its share of tourists year round. But more than the others, Cayucos had managed to retain that small-town, neighborly feel.

Her aunt, her mother's sister, and uncle had lived there for many years. Growing up, she had spent a month of every summer with them. Her father hated the beach and always pled the need to work. Her mother joined her occasionally, but was usually too sick. Maybe that was part of what she loved most...this place, the time she spent here, was hers and hers alone. Her cousins treated her like another sibling and for four weeks every year she could pretend that she was part of a family. A normal family.

Once she had her driver's license, she would wheedle permission from her father as often as possible to make the drive on her own. She had dreamed of moving there someday, after high school. But she was needed at home so often that she went to college locally. Still, as often as she could, she made her escape to the ocean.

David had loved it almost as much as she did. He had, in fact, suggested more than once that they move. But she refused to leave her parents. And then David found someone he wanted more than he wanted her. Someone who was more than happy to leave her parents and move to the coast with him. They lived in Los Osos with their brand new baby girl.

She wondered if things might have been different if she had agreed to move with David. Maybe if they had moved away they could have worked out the rest of their problems. Maybe if she had been able to break free of the needs of her parents that threatened to strangle her, their marriage would have survived. Maybe if she had given David a baby he wouldn't have left her. Instead, David got to live by the ocean at last, while she stayed in the same town, the same job. David got the baby he always wanted, while she moved back in with her parents. There was no reason to pay rent when she spent most of her time with them anyway.

She looked at her watch, thinking she needed to find a place to stay tonight. Her aunt and uncle still lived in town and her cousins were all nearby, too. But she didn't want to stay with any of them. She wanted to be alone. She wanted silence, except for the sound of the ocean.

Reluctantly she trudged across the dune to the narrow stone steps that led up to the parking lot. She would begin a search for a motel room. At the car, she opened her purse to pull out her keys and her eyes fell on the old, well-worn leather wallet. Inside were her father's expired driver's license, old pictures, and all of his credit cards. This trip would be on her father. She deserved it.

CHAPTER 4

Detective Elizabeth Roberts maneuvered through traffic, heading for St. Agnes hospital and the John Doe they had in the emergency room. It had been a long day and she was just about to leave for home and a dip in the pool of her apartment building when she got the call. An elderly, confused man found wandering around the fair. Her hope was that by the time she reached the hospital, he would already be reunited with his family and she could close the case.

She parked in a reserved space and went in through the emergency room door. She showed her badge to the receptionist and was buzzed through. The receptionist directed her to the room where she would find John Doe. Liz maneuvered through the maze-like emergency department and found room sixteen.

The curtain was open and propped up in bed with the bedside tray across his lap was the elderly man. He was, as had been described in the initial report, white-haired and in his late seventies to early eighties. It was difficult to tell while he was in bed, but he didn't appear to be very tall. He was thin, but looked as though he was muscular when he was younger. His face was weathered and pleasant. Over the standard-issue hospital gown, he was wearing some kind of fabric vest that fastened in the back. It had straps extending from it that were tied to the bed frame. There was a tray of food in front of him and it didn't look as though he had eaten any of it. In fact, he didn't seem to even be aware of its presence. All of his attention was focused on trying to cut through one of the straps that were restraining him with the plastic knife that had come on his tray.

"Excuse me," Liz said. "Mr.....uh....Larry?"

He didn't look up as he continued sawing on the strap.

"It's almost ready. I...just....need....to...."

The knife snapped in half, part of it dropping onto the floor. Liz smiled as she bent to retrieve it and then gently pried the remaining piece from his hand.

"I think this is safer over here."

"Oh my goodness," exclaimed a nurse, walking into the room. "You haven't eaten a bite." She examined Liz's badge and told her, "He seems to be too confused to feed himself. I'll have to call for a volunteer to come and feed him. We are getting slammed tonight and I just don't have time."

"Well, I can get him started until your volunteer gets here to take over. I would like to speak to the doctor."

“Oh, thank you so much! It shouldn’t take too long to get someone here. And I’ll let Dr. Singh know that you need to speak to him.”

“Has anyone called looking for him...or have you been able to identify him?”

The nurse shook her head. “No...no calls and the only identification is that piece of paper in his pocket that says his name is Larry.”

“Where are his belongings?”

“In that plastic bag under the bed.”

“OK, thanks.” As the nurse left the room, Liz picked up the fork and speared a piece of unidentifiable meat. “Here you go, Larry. Why don’t you try this?”

Larry smiled at her and when the food touched his bottom lip, he opened his mouth. Liz was relieved when he began chewing. She had heard that people with dementia eventually forgot how to eat, but once the food was in his mouth, Larry seemed to know what to do with it. She tried giving him the fork, hoping he had gotten the idea, but he tried to drop it over the rail. Liz caught it and continued feeding him. She tried talking to him and asking questions, but he seemed intent on eating.

A gray-haired woman in a pink uniform, who looked like she wasn't much younger than Larry, arrived and took over feeding him. Just behind her was Dr. Singh. He explained that Larry was severely dehydrated when he arrived, and running a temperature over a hundred. He was lethargic and only responded to painful stimuli. They administered intravenous fluids and he began to perk up....enough that they had to restrain him to keep him in the bed.

"He insisted he was looking for a foursome to play golf," Dr. Singh told her with a smile.

"8:00 AM sharp," exclaimed Larry.

"Can his confusion be caused by dehydration," Liz asked.

"It could, but I don't think it was the cause in this case. We are running some routine tests and will see if we can find an organic cause for it. Without more extensive tests I can't say for sure, but my guess is he has Alzheimer's. He definitely has some type of dementia."

Liz sighed. "So he was found at the fair?"

"That's what the paramedics told us when they brought him in. In fact, I believe they said it was the fair manager who found him. They said that they made announcements to go to Security if anyone was missing him, but by the time the paramedics left to bring him here, no one had shown up."

"The fair manager?" She sighed again and handed her business card to him. "OK, Doctor, thank you. If his family does show up, will you let me know?"

After the doctor left the room, Liz picked up the plastic bag containing the clothing Larry was wearing when he came to the hospital. She checked all of the pockets, but found nothing other than the slip of paper bearing the words, "My name is Larry." She slipped it into an evidence bag, wondering how many people had touched it throughout the day. She checked the labels on his shirt, pants, and underwear. They were all a brand sold at Walmart. Great, she thought, there are only a million of those.

"Well, Larry," she said as the volunteer gave him the last bite on the plate and began clearing the dishes. "I am going to have to leave now. I'm going to do my best to find out where you belong."

She took his right hand in hers and shook it. Larry held onto her hand and covered it with his left and smiled.

"Aren't you a pretty little thing?"

"Yeah, thanks, Larry." She chuckled. "That's just the image every female cop is going for."

"We'll get together and play golf in the morning."

"OK, Larry." She pulled out her cell phone and snapped a picture of him. "You get some rest now."

After calling to make sure that the manager would still be there since it was after eight at night, she drove to the fairgrounds, get what details she could from him, and then call it a night. She couldn't very well stop every person leaving the fair and ask if they were missing an old man.

At the front gate, the young man selling tickets said that he didn't know where the manager was, but he would call Security to ask if anyone knew. The answer came back quickly that he would meet her in front of the Administration building.

He arrived a few minutes after Liz. He was tall, with close-cropped dark blond hair. He wasn't dressed like a CEO, Liz thought appreciatively. He was wearing jeans and a blue short-sleeved button-front shirt.

"Well, Detective Roberts...we meet again," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Jacobs, so we do."

"I've missed you."

Liz laughed. "You saw me at breakfast this morning, you goof."

"Every moment away from the presence of my fair wife is an eternity," Steve intoned somberly, making her laugh again.

He leaned in to kiss her but she pushed him away.

"Not so fast there, Jacobs. This is official police business. I'm here to ask about the man you found wandering around today."

"Ah, yes...Larry." He fished keys out of a pocket and unlocked the doors to the building. "Let's go in my office to talk."

She followed him through the lobby and down a hallway to an office with large windows overlooking the gardens, admiring the way his jeans hugged his hips and thighs. They had met three years earlier on a blind date, arranged by mutual friends. A year later they moved in together. A year after that, they were married in a small ceremony at Steve's parents' home. They had invited very few people and most of those were Steve's family. The only family Liz had at the wedding was her sister and her family.

"I could make a pot of coffee..." he offered, sitting down in the chair behind his desk as he gestured for her to sit in the chair across from him.

"No thank you, I don't want to be awake all night." She pulled a notebook and pen from her bag. "I know you already told this to the officer who took the report, but if you could just go over it again for me. When did you first see Larry?"

He grinned at her mischievously before answering.

"Remember the last time we were alone in my office late at night? This desk is awfully big and sturdy. Did you bring your handcuffs, Detective?"

"Hey, I told you this is business," she answered gruffly. "And never you mind where my handcuffs are," she muttered, concentrating on her notebook.

Steve chuckled and then became serious.

"I'm not really sure when I saw him the first time. Sometime early in the afternoon, I think. I saw him at different places throughout the afternoon."

"What made you notice him? There are thousands of people coming through here."

"I don't know, exactly. He was alone and he just seemed...like he wasn't really here. I guess that doesn't make sense." He shrugged. "He was all alone and walking around with people everywhere, the rides, the games, concession stands, exhibits...all this noise and activity going on around him and it seemed like he wasn't aware of any of it."

"Around five o'clock I began to really pay attention to him. Then I saw him stop a few people and talk to them. I couldn't hear what he said, but they all looked at him like he was crazy and walked away. I thought maybe he was a homeless guy and was asking people for money."

"Is that when you approached him?"

"Yeah. I asked if he needed help and his responses didn't make any sense. He kept talking about golf. He thought I was his caddy and handed me a piece of paper from his pocket, thinking it was a tip. It said, 'My name is Larry.' He looked like he had been out in the heat too long, so I got him some water and took him to Security. I had them announce that anyone looking for Larry should report there."

"And no one has?"

"No one. We announced it periodically for a couple of hours and no one responded, no one reported him missing. I was discussing what to do with Jack, when Larry threw up and passed out. So we called the paramedics and they transported him to the hospital." He grinned at her. "Have you met Larry yet?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I went to the hospital to interview him...well, I tried to interview him, anyway. He's still looking for a golf game." She was quiet for a moment. "How likely do you think it is that this confused man somehow escaped the notice of the workers and security people and wandered into the fair all on his own?"

"People sneak in...it happens. But we work hard to make it as difficult as possible for them to do it. A healthy, smart, teenager might do it, but it will be hard. An elderly, confused man? I won't say it's impossible, but it's unlikely. Highly unlikely."

"I had someone call all the nursing homes within a ten mile radius and no one is missing a resident. He's not from a facility within walking distance, so he probably came in with someone. The question is...why hasn't that someone noticed that he's missing?"

Steve leaned forward and rested his forearms on the desk. "You know, Jack said that note in his pocket was strange...just a first name, but not enough to actually identify him."

Liz nodded. "That's what I think, too."

"So are you thinking he was deliberately brought to the fair with the intention of dumping him?"

"Maybe. The more time that passes with no one checking with security or calling the police to report him missing, the more likely that scenario is. It's something we have to look at, at any rate. You have security cameras at all the entrances, right?"

"Yes."

"I'd like the footage from today...from the time the gates opened until the time you found Larry. If I can see when and where he came in, maybe we can get a picture of the person who came with him."

"Sure, I'll have Jack get it to you first thing in the morning. Are you planning to go to the media?"

Liz nodded as she stood to leave. "I'll call it in tonight. Maybe by morning this will be solved and I won't have to spend the day staring at security tapes."

"Well, if you want some help, Jack and I could stare at them with you. We both know what he looks like, so we will recognize him. We can come to the station or you can come here...whatever works for you."

She frowned in concentration, thinking about a morning spent searching the tapes alone.

"You're on," she said. "We can do it here...nine AM? I am going to need to interview anyone working here yesterday who might have seen him with whoever was with him."

"Nine o'clock," Steve agreed. "We'll be here."

He stood and walked around the desk to where she was standing and reached out his right hand. Liz put her hand into his and he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

"Sorry, Detective. Are you going to arrest me now?"

"No," she said, pulling away from his embrace reluctantly. "I'll let you off with a warning this time." As he walked her out of the building and toward the front entrance, she asked, "Are you going to stay until closing?"

"Yeah, at least tonight."

"Well, hopefully I'll be sound asleep when you get in."

"Sweet dreams, Detective."

"Oh, I'm sure they will be, Mr. Jacobs. I'm sure they will be."

As she walked out to her car, Liz called the desk sergeant and asked him to get a press release out to the television stations in time for the late night news. She sent the picture from her phone to go along with the release. Once in her car, she had every intention of driving straight home. But instead she found herself driving back to the hospital.

Visiting hours were over, but there were still stragglers in rooms and walking through hallways. The nursing staff was busy with bedtime medications and requests from patients. She was given the number of the room that Larry, registered as "Larry Doe," had been admitted to on the fourth floor.

"He's definitely feeling better," the nurse assigned to Larry told her. She was tall and broad shouldered, her gray hair cut short. She exuded a no nonsense attitude and Liz wondered how many patients were afraid to ask her for anything. "I took him for a walk in the hall, and one of the aides did, too. But I finally gave him something to sleep and he settled down. I don't think he's asleep, though, just drowsy. You can go in and see him."

Liz thanked her and headed for his room. All of the rooms in the hospital were small and single, so there was no roommate for Larry to disturb. He was lying in bed with his head slightly elevated. The bed rails on both sides were up and he was still wearing the cloth vest that was again tied to the bed frame. His eyes were closed when she entered, but he opened them drowsily and smiled at her.

"Hi, Larry. We met earlier this evening. I'm Detective Roberts."

"Yes, he'll be fine," he responded.

"Larry, do you remember being at the fair today? Do you remember who took you there?"

"I reserved us a time...I think they'll hold it for us, but we should hurry."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Liz sighed. "OK, Larry. You get some sleep and I'll see you tomorrow. Maybe we can get you back to where you belong soon."

She patted his hand and watched for a few minutes as he drifted to sleep. Rubbing the back of her neck and feeling suddenly very tired, Liz stopped by the nurse's station to thank the nurse and leave her card in case anyone contacted the hospital about the missing man. She drove home hoping that by morning someone would have recognized Larry's picture and called the police station.

CHAPTER 5

Laura slept with the window open in the motel room so that she could hear and smell the ocean all night. She huddled under the blankets, reveling in the cool breeze. She was awake early in the morning. Dressing in sweat clothes she had picked up at a local store the day before, she made her way down to the beach once again before the sun came up.

The waves called to her like an old friend. The gray, damp fog made her feel alone and isolated, but not lonely. She liked isolation, something David had a difficult time understanding or accepting during their marriage. He thought that her desire to be alone meant she was angry with him. How could she explain that the only safe place in her life was solitude? Of course, she was safe with David. But a lifetime of ingrained behavior did not change overnight. Or even over six years of marriage.

As painful as it was for the first six months after David left, it was also incredibly freeing. They put the house up for sale and she moved into a one-bedroom apartment. For the first time in her life, she was living completely on her own. She ate what she wanted and when she wanted. If she wanted tacos for breakfast, there was no one there to object. She locked the doors and had an entire apartment to herself, rather than just a room. Or a pantry.

Laura's disappointment and anger were palpable when she had to give up her apartment and move in with her parents. Her father's behavior was becoming increasingly bizarre and her mother could not handle him. Of course Mom couldn't. And of course Laura would give up her life and take care of them.

Taking care of Mom was what she had been doing her entire life, at least for as long as she could remember. "Don't bother Mommy. She isn't feeling good." Even at three years old she knew that she had to play quietly so as not to disturb her mother...or arouse her wild-eyed wrath that people were breaking into the house.

The times that her mother was not home were the best...at least at first. She was allowed to make noise; to sing, to laugh, to talk to her stuffed animals. Her father tried to make up for the absence of her mother (as though she was any kind of real mother, even when she was home). He played games with her, rented movies to watch as they ate popcorn and candy. He often took her to work with him and let her play in his office. Sometimes he took her to a restaurant for dinner, where the waitresses commented on how well-behaved she was. Other times they picked up fast food on the way home to eat while watching television.

Then one day her father would bring her mother home, with grand proclamations of recovered health. Followed by warnings to "play quietly" because Mommy was still recuperating. Laura would go back to coloring and drawing in her bedroom, trying not to attract her mother's attention. When she heard her mother's constant muttering becoming louder, more frantic, she would gather her books and crayons and as quietly as she could slip into the pantry.

It was called a pantry, but they never kept food in it because her mother would not go in there when she was preparing dinner. She never went in the pantry. Never. For some reason she was afraid of it, believed there were bad people hiding in there. It became a storage room for the myriad castoff items no one knew where to put but didn't want to throw away. It became Laura's refuge.

The pantry was actually a small room that opened off of the kitchen, with two steps down. The door didn't lock, but it didn't matter. Once she slipped in and closed the door, she was safe. Her mother would not open that door for any reason, not even to look for her. There was an old chair, banished from the living room because of stains, which was still soft and comfortable. Other items in the pantry changed periodically as her mother would decide she didn't want them around and her father would place them in there and bring them back out weeks later when her mother had forgotten her objection to them.

Laura learned to hide snacks and sodas in the pantry, since she sometimes spent hours in there as her mother raged through the house. Then her father would come home and find her and tell her it was all right to come out, Mommy took some medicine and went to sleep. The pantry was her refuge. Until she turned thirteen. Everything changed when she turned thirteen.

She walked along the beach, feeling the pounding of the waves echoing in her body. In the dark and the fog, gray lumps that she thought were rocks from far away became fishermen getting an early start as she came closer. She walked until the sun came up and the fog began to burn away, until joggers appeared, huffing “Good morning” as they passed her. Finally she decided she was hungry and made her way back to the motel room to shower and change before breakfast.

As she entered the room, her cell phone began to ring. She glanced at the screen and ignored the call. A few minutes later her phone beeped, indicating she had a voice mail message. She punched in her code and listened.

“Ms. Bedrosian, this is Dori Taylor, the nursing supervisor at Garden Manor Care Home. We were expecting your father back last night. You should have notified us if you were going to keep him overnight. Please call as soon as you get this message and let me know when you will be bringing him back. Thank you.”

She turned the phone off and tuned the television to a morning news show as she showered. Coming out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her, she picked up her clothes from the day before. She should have bought something besides sweat clothes; she would have to wear the same clothes she had worn the day before.

The words of the news anchor on TV caught her attention and she turned to look. They were talking about a story out of Fresno. An elderly man was found wandering around The Big Fresno Fair yesterday. He was confused and unable to tell anyone who he was. Identification found on him gave his name as Larry, but no last name. He had been admitted to a local hospital for dehydration after wandering around in the heat for hours. The hospital said that he was in good condition and the police department was looking for his family. Anyone with information should call. Her father's face appeared onscreen, a picture taken in the hospital.

Laura stood staring at the television for a moment as they moved on to other stories. Then she picked up her clothes and began dressing. She needed to go to a diner for breakfast. Then she needed to go clothes shopping.

CHAPTER 6

Steve was waiting in Jack's office when Liz arrived the next morning. He had coffee, juice, fruit, bagels and an assortment of flavored cream cheese set out on a tray. The morning newspaper was sitting next to it. The story about Larry was on the front page, although it was a small article in the lower left hand corner. It was accompanied by a picture of Larry at the hospital. He had seen the story on the morning TV news, as well as on the radio as he drove to work. As far as he knew there had been no calls.

He saw Liz approaching and watched her appreciatively. Her dark brown hair was in a French braid and she had the build of a woman who worked out regularly at the gym. The sleeveless shirt she was wearing showed off well-defined arms. He couldn't see her legs under the black slacks she wore, but he knew that they were also strong...runner's legs. He shook his head, trying to dispel his thoughts about the way she looked without clothes. She was here to do a job. He couldn't help laughing as she walked through the door carrying a pink box.

"What," she said with a chuckle. "You've never seen a cop with doughnuts?"

"I always thought that was just an urban legend. Until I met you."

"Well, the best urban legends have some basis in truth." She shrugged. "I work hard to compensate for this weakness." She set the box down next to the food he had already laid out. "My husband, the health nut."

"I thought it might keep us awake while we are watching all those tapes." He indicated the two computers set up at desks. "Jack had a meeting this morning that he couldn't get out of, so we are on our own. But he got the video feed set up for us. We have four entrance gates, so he has the computers set up with split screens. We can each watch the video from two gates."

"Sounds good," Liz said.

She took a small paper plate and spread half of a bagel with a smear of cream cheese, added a banana to the plate, and poured herself a cup of coffee. With a grin in Steve's direction, she added a maple bar from the box she had brought in. Steve served himself a bagel, strawberries, and juice.

They sat at the computers and Steve showed her how to cue up the video from the security cameras. They ate and watched in companionable silence for a while, watching people pay their money and enter the fairgrounds. They watched excited children and parents looking cheerful and much fresher than they would when they straggled out at the end of the day with tired, cranky children. Groups of rowdy teenagers, laughing and pushing one another, teasing the couples who were holding hands and had eyes only for each other. Elderly people were there, as well. Some brought grandchildren because the parents were working. Some came in couples, holding hands and smiling just like the teenagers did.

Steve sat forward when he saw a group of elderly men and women approaching the gate. They looked as though they were all together, maybe a group from a nursing home. He searched each of the white-haired men but didn't see Larry. He glanced over at Liz, who was absorbed by what she was seeing on the screen, and cleared his throat.

"Your sister called this morning."

"About what," Liz asked, without taking her eyes off the screen.

"Your mother's birthday. She wants us all to go out there together."

"Why is she talking to you about that," Liz said with a sigh.

"Because she thinks you will say no. Liz..."

"No."

"We've been married for a year...isn't it time for me to meet her?"

"No."

He glanced at her again.

"You work hard at being a cynical, hard-bitten cop who expects the worst in people."

"Occupational hazard."

"This isn't your occupation, babe. This is family."

"I really, really do not want to have this discussion again. We don't all have this magical childhood on a dairy or come from big, happy families."

"No family is naturally happy, Liz. My family has had problems, but we work through them...we don't just walk away."

"Easy to say when one of the 'problems' you've 'worked through' isn't abuse," she replied angrily.

He sighed and dropped the subject. They sat for several long minutes in silence, watching the images on the computer screens.

"I'm sorry," Liz said at last. "I don't mean to get angry with you. But Stacy shouldn't have called you. She should talk to me."

"She has talked to you. But she never gets anywhere."

"Maybe she should just let it drop, then."

"Hey!" Steve sat up and used the mouse to move the images on one side of his screen back. "I think this is him...look."

Liz paused the video on her computer and scooted her chair closer to his. They both leaned closer to the computer screen and watched as an elderly man and a woman stepped up to the ticket counter. The woman slid money over and received two tickets. They moved through the gate and out of range of the camera.

"She's wearing a cap pulled down low over her face," said Liz. "We can't see her. Can that picture be enhanced?"

"Probably, but I don't have the expertise. I can get one of our security guys to try."

"Or just send it over to the department and I'll have one of our guys work on it." She looked at the image again. "She looks younger...maybe a daughter?"

"Why hasn't she reported him missing?"

Liz leaned back in her chair, considering.

"Because she doesn't want to find him. The way she's keeping her face averted from the camera...maybe she intended to leave him here. I need to get that image enhanced as much as possible and print some pictures of the two of them. I'll have the uniforms ask around to see if any of the workers saw them together. And we need to keep watching to see when she left and if we can see what...."

The ringing of her cell phone interrupted and Steve watched as she answered.

"Yeah, Sarge, whatcha got?" She listened for a moment, and then pulled her notebook and pen out. "OK...yeah...what's that name? OK, got it. Thanks, Sarge."

She hung up and looked at Steve.

"We found him...someone identified him."

CHAPTER 7

Laura slid her card key to open the motel room door and dropped her shopping bags on one of the beds, kicking the door closed behind her. She settled on the other bed with a soda and a bag of food from a fast food drive-through. She pulled out a cheeseburger and fries, picked up the remote control, and flipped through channels until she found an old movie. She ate as she watched and when she was finished, put the bag and papers in the trash.

After washing her hands she began pulling clothes out of the bags, folding or hanging up skirts, pants, blouses, and a swimsuit. She put five new pairs of shoes on the floor of the closet. Turning her phone on, she idly ran her fingers over the clothes. There was another message from Ms. Taylor. She deleted it and called her home phone to check for messages. There was a message from earlier in the morning, just before the first call to her cell phone. She turned the phone off and sat down on the bed, looking at her new clothes.

Laura liked nice clothes, which was one of the many things her father indulged her in. He took her shopping when she was little and gave her a credit card when she was older and able to shop on her own. Always he wanted her to model the clothes she bought. She remembered at five, the most important feature of any dress or skirt was the way it twirled. She could hear her own laughter as she twirled for her father, the skirt flying out in a satisfying umbrella.

She could still hear her father's laughter, as well. Every piece of new clothing was shown to him for his approval. And he always approved. She never had the problems her friends did, with parents dictating what she could and could not wear. Her father appreciated her taste and her mother...well; her mother never offered an opinion.

What would she know, anyway? Mom was satisfied to wear those horrible shapeless housedresses that buttoned down the front. It embarrassed Laura that she wore them everywhere; to the grocery store, to the post office, to church. Laura was glad when she was old enough to run errands herself. It was worth giving up free time just to make sure her mother didn't wander around town. She couldn't stop her from going to church, but she stopped going with her.

"Friends don't care how I look, young lady, and anyone who cares isn't my friend," her mother would tell her calmly. Laura would roll her eyes with disgust.

Modeling the clothes stopped being fun once she turned thirteen, but she did it anyway. He paid for them, he provided a nice house for them to live in, he gave her money any time she asked...it was the least she could do.

Laura sighed and stretched out on the bed, trying to decide what to do with her afternoon. It was warm out; she could put on her new bathing suit and go back to the beach. Or she could just lie here and take a nap. Naps had always felt like a decadent luxury until the last two years. Suddenly the only sleep she got was a nap here and there; thirty minutes or an hour at a time. Thoughts of the last two years made her feel suddenly exhausted and she let her eyelids droop and close, drifting into the pleasant nothingness of sleep.

Three hours later she awoke on her side, a bit of saliva drooling from the corner of her mouth onto the pillow. The warm afternoon had cooled as the fog moved back in. She slowly sat up and pulled on a sweater. After a trip to the bathroom, she sat down at the small table and turned her phone on. There was another missed call and voice mail message from earlier in the afternoon. Garden Manor Care Home. She sighed with irritation as she punched in the numbers. Ms. Taylor sounded stressed, on the verge of hysteria, even.

“Ms. Bedrosian, this is Dori Taylor again. Your father was on the news today...he was found wandering around the Fresno Fair. He was all alone and is in the hospital now. A detective from the Fresno Police Department is on her way here. Ms. Bedrosian...we are worried about you. Please, if you are able, call me back. Or call the Fresno Police Department and ask for Detective Roberts.”

Laura deleted the message and turned the phone off. It was too cold to wear her bathing suit now. But she wanted to be on the beach, anyway. The sun would be going down soon and she wanted to watch it disappear behind the ocean. Even if she couldn't see it go down because of the fog, she loved being on the beach this time of day. She pulled on her sweat clothes and the new running shoes. Taking only the key card, she closed the door and headed for the beach.

CHAPTER 8

Liz pulled into the parking lot of the Garden Manor Care Home. Getting out of the car, she looked the facility over. She was impressed by the graceful design of the building and well cared for grounds. A stone fountain in front was surrounded by lush green bushes of some kind...horticulture was not her forte...the circular driveway looping around it to allow for picking up and dropping off residents near the front door.

She walked around the car to stretch her legs. The hour and a half drive to Coalinga left her legs stiff and her lower back achy. She had called the Coalinga Police Department before leaving Fresno, to let them know she was assigned to investigate the confused man found at the fair and would be talking to residents in their town. The police chief had given his blessing and offered any help that she needed.

Walking up the wide, cobblestone drive, she pushed through the glass doors and stopped for a moment. The inside décor might be just as elegant as the outside with plush carpeting, intricately molded ceilings, stylish furniture dotting the foyer. But it seemed even money could not cover up the distinct underlying scent of urine and disinfectant that announced she had just entered a nursing home. It was not as strong as some places Liz had been, but it was still there. It was a smell she had been avoiding for the last five years.

Striding past the requisite white-haired men and women sitting in the foyer, where their wheelchairs had been parked, she approached the front desk. She showed her badge to the young woman sitting, noting the rich dark mahogany of the desk.

“Detective Elizabeth Roberts with the Fresno Police Department. I’m here to see the nursing supervisor...” She consulted her notebook. “Dori Taylor?”

“Oh, yes, she’s expecting you, Detective. I’ll let her know you’re here.” She punched in a number on the phone and spoke into it. “Her office is down this hallway, the third door on the left. You can go right in.”

Dori Taylor’s office was large and comfortable. More plush carpeting and a large, expensive-looking desk. The nursing supervisor looked to be about the same age as Liz, early to mid-forties, slim, and dressed in a tasteful dark skirt with matching jacket and white shirt. Her dark blond hair was highlighted, probably to hide the gray that was beginning to show up. Liz’s own hair dresser had been suggesting the same tactic.

“Please have a seat,” Dori told her with a smile, standing and indicating a chair. “Would you like some coffee?”

"No, thank you," Liz replied, settling into the chair and pulling the picture of Larry from her bag.

"Our administrator would be here to talk to you, as well, but he is on vacation and out of the country. I'm filling in and it's been rather hectic."

Setting the picture on the desk for her to see, Liz asked, "You're sure this man is one of your residents?"

"Oh yes," she said. "That is Armen, all right. Armen Bedrosian. One of our nurses saw his picture on the news and came to tell me. Before long, every TV in the facility was turned to the news."

She opened a file on her desk and turned it so that Liz could see the picture clipped to the first page. Liz looked at the man smiling at something behind the photographer, the same blank look that she recognized in Larry, despite the smile. There was no question that the two pictures were of the same man.

"The note in his pocket said his name was Larry."

Dori shook her head and frowned slightly. "Well, his full name is Armen Lawrence Bedrosian. But as far as I know, he has never gone by Larry. That's very strange."

"How is it that he was so far from your facility without anyone knowing he was missing?"

"His daughter signed him out for a visit yesterday morning. She said it was a tradition for them to go to the fair together on the first day. We expected him back last night, but we thought maybe it was late when they got back last night and she just took him home. I called her this morning and left messages on her home phone and cell phone, but we hadn't heard back from her. And then we saw Armen on the news."

"What is the daughter's name?"

"Laura Bedrosian. I'm actually rather worried about her. I called again after I spoke with you and left her another message, but she hasn't called back. Is it possible that something has...happened...to her?"

"It's something that we will certainly look into," Liz told her. "So you don't think she could have deliberately left her father?"

"Oh no! Laura is devoted to him. She comes to visit every day after work and on the weekends it's not unusual for her to spend hours here with him. She will either order lunch here or bring in something for both of them. No," Dori said emphatically, "Laura would never do anything to hurt her father."

"How long has he been here?"

"About six months, since his wife's death. She died of breast cancer and Laura moved in with them...two years ago, I believe...to take care of them. Armen was already showing symptoms of Alzheimer's. Laura took care of her mother through all the surgery, chemo, radiation, and then once there was nothing more they could do but keep her comfortable. And she took care of her father that whole time, too, as he was getting more confused. Of course, he didn't understand what was happening with his wife. By the time Laura had him admitted here, he didn't even know who she was anymore. But he was physically healthy and his wandering was becoming too much for her to handle."

"Is there any other family?"

"No one close that I know of. There are a few cousins and old friends who have come to visit, I believe. But Laura is the one who is here every day."

"Do you know of anyone who might want to harm Laura or her father?"

"No, but then I don't know much about Laura's life or Armen's life before he came here. I know that Armen owned an auto dealership...Bedrosian Ford. I believe he sold it when he retired, but it still has his name on it. And Laura works for them...as an accountant, I think. But as far as her personal life...I just don't know."

"Do visitors have to sign in here?"

"No, we try to make our facility as home-like as possible. Visitors are encouraged and we don't require that they check in with us."

Liz stared at the two pictures of Larry...Armen and thought about the devoted daughter who seemed to be missing. Or was she hiding? She pulled out the picture from the security camera at the fair, showing Armen entering the fairgrounds with a woman.

"Could this person be Laura Bedrosian?"

Dori frowned as she looked at the picture.

"Maybe...I can't see her face, but it could be her."

"You've left messages for Laura and she hasn't returned your calls?"

"Yes, both at home and on her cell phone."

"I will need those phone numbers and her home address."

Dori pointed to the phone numbers and address and Liz wrote them in her notes. "I would also like to see Armen's room and talk to some of the staff."

"Of course. I'll take you back to our Alzheimer's unit."

Liz followed Dori through a maze of hallways that she was sure she would never be able to find her way back through, until they came to double glass doors bordered by panes of more glass. On the adjoining wall there was a number pad with a corresponding pad on the other side of the glass wall. Dori punched in the numbers...eight, five, and two, a straight line down the middle...and pulled open the doors.

"We are not a locked facility, but the doors leading out of the unit have alarms that will go off when the door is opened, unless the code is punched in first."

"Eight, five, two," Liz asked, amused.

"Well, it's not the code for a doomsday bomb," Dori laughed. "We want it simple enough that the staff won't accidentally set off the alarm. But someone with dementia won't be able to figure it out.

"The door at the end of this hallway," she added, pointing, "does not have an alarm. It leads to an enclosed garden area, which is fenced and locked. For those who are still ambulatory, we have found that pacing seems to be something they like to do. It helps them calm themselves. So that door is unlocked and they have a path...down the hallway, out the door, along the sidewalk, and in the door to the activities room. Some of them will walk that route for hours on end."

As though to demonstrate, a tall, broad-shouldered, man shuffled by, seemingly unaware of their presence. Liz and Dori watched as he made his way down the hallway and pushed the door open.

"In a few minutes, Doc will come back in the other door and go back down to that door. Unless he gets distracted by a leaf or flower lying in his path, that is."

"Doc?"

Dori smiled. "Doc was a nuclear physicist. Once upon a time."

"Excuse me," said a woman with a German accent. "Have you seen my husband, Mr. Hirsch? He is supposed to pick me up and he's late."

Liz turned to the woman sitting in a chair nearby. She was short and heavy-set and was smiling up at them.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hirsch," said Dori. "I haven't seen your husband, but if I do, I will tell him you are waiting for him."

"Thank you, dear."

Dori led Liz down the hallway and said in a quiet voice, "Her husband died last year. He was here with her for a few years. They shared a room. At first, after he died, she would ask for him and we could tell her that he passed away and she would remember. But then it got to where she didn't remember it at all and it was brand new information every day. She would just cry and grieve...and then two hours later ask about him again. We finally decided to stop telling her, because she was obviously not going to remember it. Now, we just tell her that we will tell him she is waiting for him and it makes her happy." She stopped at a door and gestured for Liz to go in. "I will go round up our charge nurse and the program assistant who works with George most often."

Liz looked around the room. There was only one bed; Armen Bedrosian not only had enough money to afford a luxury facility, he was able to afford a single room. It was a regular hospital bed, but the comforter and sheets were too extravagant to be hospital-issue. His daughter must have provided them. Liz wondered if she laundered them as well. The room had a few personal touches. The recliner in the corner must have been Armen's favorite chair from home. A single picture stood on the table next to his bed; a picture of Armen and a young woman...Laura, she presumed. It was interesting that there were no pictures of his wife. Was that because he would forget that she had died and ask for her? Liz looked through the small closet and the built-in dresser drawers. Simple, comfortable clothing and not a lot of variety.

Dori returned and introduced her to Judy Keith, a middle-aged woman with curly brown hair, and Mark Lyons, a young, thin black man with close-cropped hair.

"Judy is the daytime charge nurse," Dori told her. "And Mark is one of our program assistants. A lot of the male residents respond better to a male assistant, and Mark is very good at working with the confused residents and getting them to cooperate."

"What can you tell me about Armen Bedrosian and his daughter," Liz asked them.

Judy answered first. "Armen is a sweetheart. We haven't had any problems with him since he's been here. The first few weeks we had to sedate him a few times, but that's normal. When residents first come here and are away from familiar surroundings, they sometimes become agitated. But Armen settled right in. You haven't had any trouble with him, have you, Mark?"

"None," he agreed. "I've never seen him angry or frustrated. He doesn't always understand what I'm trying to get him to do, but he never resists. He's always smiling...and looking for a foursome to play golf."

Judy and Mark both chuckled and Judy added, "He's what we call 'pleasantly confused.' He asks every other resident, staff member, and family member, anyone he comes across, if they want to play. We wanted to let him have a golf club to carry around, but decided it could too easily be used as a weapon or end up accidentally breaking a window."

"What about Laura Bedrosian?"

"She doesn't talk too much about herself," Mark replied. "But then, I'm a guy, so maybe she wouldn't talk to me, anyway."

"She does tend to keep to herself," Judy agreed. "She's always friendly, but never talks about her job or her friends or even whether she has a boyfriend."

"Has she ever mentioned anyone wanting to harm her or her father," Liz asked.

"Never," Judy answered. "I know she is divorced, but that was a few years ago and she's never even mentioned why or if it was a bad breakup."

"And you are sure it was Laura Bedrosian who took her father out of here yesterday morning?"

"Positive," Mark replied. He held out a spiral-bound notebook. "Family members always have to sign the book when they take a resident out for a visit, and a staff member has to sign it, too. There is Ms. Bedrosian's signature, and there's mine."

"All right," Liz said, shaking hands with Judy and Mark. "Thank you for your help. I would like a copy of that page."

"Detective," Judy asked hesitantly. "You don't think...do you think something has happened to Laura? Because I just can't believe she would ever go off and leave her father like that unless...well, unless something bad happened to her."

"I don't know. But we will be investigating every possibility."

Dori made a copy of the sign-out sheet and led Liz back through the facility to the front lobby.

“Who is responsible for Mr. Bedrosian’s bills here,” Liz asked her.

“His daughter is. She is his conservator.”

Liz thanked Dori for her help and gave her a business card with her contact information, in case Dori heard from Laura or remembered anything else. Back in her car, she punched in the address for Armen Bedrosian’s house to her GPS.

Laura Bedrosian was her father’s conservator. She let that information sink in for a moment as the GPS began calculating her route. That meant Laura had complete control over her father’s care, his property, and his money. This could be a motive for someone to get rid of both of them. Or could be a motive for Laura to dump her father and run off with his money.

CHAPTER 9

Laura parked her car two houses away, on the opposite side of the street. Her car was only a year old, so he wouldn't recognize it. She rolled her windows down and just waited. After about fifteen minutes, she saw a woman crossing the highway and trudging up the steep road. She was carrying a baby, who was, by Laura's calculations, just short of her first birthday. They were coming from the beach, just on the other side of Highway One.

The woman walked to the small house and mounted the steps to the wooden front porch. She sat down in a chair and leaned down to deposit the baby on a rug next to her. There were several small toys and the baby's laughter drifted up the street to where Laura sat watching.

Watching David's baby. The baby he had always wanted. The baby he had begged her to have. The baby she had found excuse after excuse to postpone having. Until it was no longer necessary to find excuses because David had found someone else, someone who would have his baby.

Laura watched the woman and the baby until she saw a car turn off of the highway and onto the street. The woman smiled and picked up the baby as the car pulled into the driveway. David emerged from the driver's side as the woman reached him, the baby in her arms laughing and holding out pudgy hands to him. He kissed the woman as he effortlessly took the baby from her. He held the baby close and began kissing her neck, causing her to squeal and wiggle.

She couldn't make out the words, but she heard David's voice, and the woman's voice, and the baby's babbling, as he reached into the car and pulled out a briefcase. The woman took it from him and they turned to go up to the house. David turned back around and pointed his key fob at his car, pushing the button to lock the doors and set the alarm. Before turning away, his gaze slid over the cream colored Mustang parked across the street and over the face of the woman sitting inside.

He started to turn away but did a double take, looking at her more closely. Laura looked back at him. After hesitating for a moment, David said something to the woman and handed the baby to her. She looked at Laura curiously before turning and going into the house. David walked slowly across the street to her car and leaned his hands on the door.

"Laura," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I was in the area and thought I would see where you live."

He sighed and looked out towards the ocean.

"Nice car," he finally said, looking back at her. "Your dad bought it for you, I guess?"

"Yes," she nodded. "How are you?"

"I'm good. How are you?"

"I'm OK." She stared at his face, the lines and angles so familiar to her. "She's beautiful, David. She's what...eleven months?"

"Thank you...and yes, eleven months."

"David," she said in a small voice. "If...if it hadn't been for my parents...do you think we would still be together?"

"Laura..." He looked down at the ground, his voice weary. "Don't..."

"It's just that I know you always thought I was too attached to them. I know you thought I cared more about them than about you."

"It wasn't just your parents, Laura. You know that."

"I know...it was the baby issue, too. But...if it weren't for my parents, maybe I would have felt ready to have a baby."

"It wasn't just that, either."

She sighed and looked away.

"Sex. It always came down to sex, didn't it?"

"I tried, Laura, you know I tried. If you had just been willing to go for some counseling..."

"So that some doctor could charge us \$200 an hour to tell me I'm frigid? To give me 'homework' that would teach me how to please my man? Some people just aren't so focused on sex! Some people think there are more important things in this world than getting fucked!"

David closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Look," he said, straightening and stepping back from the car. "We aren't married anymore. There's no reason to have this fight again. It's over."

He turned and started to walk away.

"My mother died," she said. "Six months ago."

David stopped and turned around. He put his hands on his hips and looked down at the ground.

"I'm sorry."

"Are you," she asked. "Why? I'm not."

"She was your mother. And she was ni...."

"She was crazy as a loon and you know it!"

"She couldn't help it, Laura."

"No...she couldn't help it. God! Do you know how sick I am of hearing that?! I've heard it all my life. 'Your mommy is sick, it's not her fault.' She made my childhood a living hell, but it was never her fault! And then for the last two years, she was sick and I had to take care of her while she got sicker and sicker and while she died. I had to feed her and change her diapers and clean her poop!"

He didn't answer; he just stood and looked at her with pity.

"My father has Alzheimer's," she added. "He's in a...nursing home." She looked at his face but couldn't read his expression. "So both of my parents are gone. I thought maybe now...that I'm free...maybe we could...try again."

He shook his head sadly. "I'm married, Laura."

Tears overflowed and slid down her cheeks. Somehow his pity made this all so much worse.

"You were married to me, but you left...why is this different? David...I love you. I've always loved you...please, please give me another chance."

Her tears flowed freely now and each hitching breath caused her body to shudder. He didn't answer for a long time. He watched her for several long moments before speaking.

"I'm married," he said slowly. "I'm married and I have a daughter and I love my family. I'm happy, Laura, really happy. I have no desire to leave her. I have no desire to come back to you."

It felt like a knife twisting in her chest.

"David," she sobbed. "Please...."

"You should go now, Laura," he told her firmly. "I'm sorry about your parents. I'm sorry things didn't work out for us. But you should go and you should not come back here again."

"David..."

But he turned and walked back to his house without another word, without listening to her. She watched him, weeping, until his front door closed and she could no longer see him. Crossing her arms on the steering wheel, she rested her forehead on them and cried. She cried for a long time, until she had no more tears. Still she sobbed, her shoulders shaking.

She didn't know how long she sat there, crying for the life that would never be hers. But finally she lifted her head and sat up. Pulling tissues from the console, she wiped her face and took another deep, shuddering breath. Taking one last look at David's house, she started the Mustang and put it in gear. Leaving the windows down, she drove away without looking back.

CHAPTER 10

Armen Bedrosian's house sat in a cul-de-sac in an older neighborhood. Some younger families had moved in and there was a portable basketball hoop sitting in the street in front of one of the houses. Four teenage boys were shooting hoops when Liz turned in and parked in front of the Bedrosian home. They watched her curiously as she got out and walked up to the front door. She rang the doorbell, and then knocked loudly on the door. But the house had a silent, empty feeling to it.

"Laura's not home."

Liz turned and looked at the older woman standing in the driveway of the house next door, holding a newspaper in her hands. Liz walked over to her and held out her badge.

"Do you know where Ms. Bedrosian is?"

"Why would the Fresno Police be looking for Laura Bedrosian," the woman asked suspiciously.

"I just need to ask her a few questions about her father," Liz told her.

"Armen? What's happened to Armen?"

"You haven't seen the news today?"

"News? No, I haven't had the TV on all day." The woman looked frightened. "What has happened?"

"Mr. Bedrosian was found wandering around the fair yesterday afternoon."

"Laura wasn't with him?"

"No, ma'am. That's why I need to speak with her."

"That's not right. Laura wouldn't just leave her father alone like that."

"Do you know where she is now?"

"Well, she should be at work. But I don't think she came home last night. I didn't hear her car and I didn't see her leave this morning." The woman frowned with concern. "Do you think something has happened to Laura?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. Do you know them well, Ms.....?"

"McDaniel...Henrietta McDaniel," the woman said. "I've known them for...well, all of Laura's life, I guess. My late husband and I had just moved in here a few months earlier when Armen and Lily moved in here. Laura was born six months later."

"Is it unusual for Laura to not come home at night?"

"Yes, very. But I just thought...I don't know, that maybe she decided to get a motel and stay in Fresno overnight, maybe take Armen back a second day."

"You knew she was taking her father to the fair? It was something she talked about? Planned?"

"Oh sure. Armen used to take her every year on opening day, when Laura was growing up. Of course, they hadn't gone in years. But this last two years has been tough on them, and then with Lily passing away and then she had to put Armen in the home because she had to go back to work and just couldn't take care of him...she wanted to do something fun with her dad, even if he wouldn't remember."

"Mrs. McDaniel, do you know of anyone who would want to harm Laura or her father?"

"No, of course not. Armen was a no-nonsense business man, but as far as I ever heard, he was honest and fair. And Laura was such a sweetheart. No one would want to hurt...."

Mrs. McDaniel stopped and looked at Liz, her blue eyes wide.

"What is it, ma'am?"

"It was so long ago."

"What was so long ago?"

"When Laura was thirteen...she was kidnapped."

"Kidnapped?"

"Yes, from the house. Lily was...well, Lily. She was having one of her 'episodes' and she talked about a man. But you just never knew what was real and what was in her head, so she wasn't much help. She was in the bedroom during the whole thing and when Armen got home she just kept babbling about men stealing the baby."

"She didn't see them?"

"Probably not; I'm sure she stayed in her bedroom. Lily...wasn't well."

"What was wrong with her?"

"She was schizophrenic. She had her first breakdown when Laura was about two years old, although she had been acting strangely for a long time before that. She was in and out of mental hospitals all the time that Laura was growing up, poor thing."

Liz wasn't sure if Mrs. McDaniel meant that Lily was a poor thing, or Laura.

"What happened with Laura's kidnapping," Liz asked.

"Ralph and I felt just awful. We were right next door and we never heard a thing. No one saw or heard anything. It was nighttime, around eight o'clock, and a man rang the doorbell, holding a pizza. Laura said she opened the door to tell him that she hadn't ordered one and he pushed her into the house and tied her up. Then he carried her out to a car that was waiting in front of the house, with another man driving. They put Laura in the trunk and drove away."

"Well, obviously Laura survived. Did they catch the people who did it?"

"No," Mrs. McDaniel said. "Armen was working late at the car lot and when he got home, there was no Laura and Lily was babbling about men stealing 'the baby'. Armen found a note that the kidnapper left, demanding \$50,000 and warning him not to call the police. He called them anyway and they tried to keep it quiet. Armen got a call the next morning with directions where to leave the money. The police set up surveillance, and they even saw someone pick up the money. But they lost track of him and then Laura turned up in a park on the other side of town. She was blindfolded and her wrists were taped together with duct tape. She was sitting at a picnic table, right where they left her."

"She was blindfolded? So Laura didn't see their faces?"

"She saw the man at the house, but she said she didn't get a good look at his face because he was wearing one of those baseball caps low over his face. She said that the rest of the time she was with them, they both wore masks."

"Was she...hurt," Liz asked as delicately as she could.

"No, nothing like that. She was just scared."

"So the kidnappers got away with the money and were never caught?"

"Never." Mrs. McDaniel looked at her anxiously. "You don't think, after all this time, that the kidnappers came back, do you?"

"It seems unlikely," Liz told her. "But right now I don't know how, or if, it's connected."

"Are you going to search the house? I have a key."

"You do?"

"Yes, we exchanged keys years ago for watering plants and collecting mail and so on during vacations. I'll go get it for you."

Liz turned to look at the Bedrosian house as Mrs. McDaniel hurried up the drive. She didn't have a search warrant, but at this point she didn't know if Laura Bedrosian was a suspect or a victim. So she would consider her a possible victim and do a welfare check.

"Heads up!"

Liz turned just as a basketball whizzed past her head.

"Sorry, Ma'am," a tall, lanky teenager with shorts sagging dangerously low on his hips jogged over and picked up the ball. He stopped and asked, "Are you a cop?"

"Yes, I am," she said, showing her badge. "I'm a detective with the Fresno Police Department."

"Is this about Mr. Bedrosian? I saw his picture on TV this morning. They said he was lost at the fair?"

"That's right. Do you know the Bedrosians?"

"Sure, we've lived here a couple of years. Laura pays me to take care of the yard. She doesn't have time with her job."

"Have you ever seen anyone suspicious hanging around?"

"Naw...Laura never has company or anything. It's just her, now that her parents are gone."

"Did you know her parents?"

"I met them a few times. Her mom looked all crazy...wild eyes, hair sticking out all over. Mrs. McDaniel told my mom that she used to chase Laura around the house with a knife. The old man used to get out sometimes and walk off somewhere and get lost. Laura would go looking for him and sometimes she'd ask us to help her. Once she had to call the cops...they found him like two miles away. One time he came outside while we were shooting hoops and started yelling at us that we better leave his daughter alone."

"Did Laura say anything about it?"

"When she came out and got him, she told him, 'They aren't the ones, Daddy.' I don't know what she was talking about, but her dad seemed to. My mom says Alzheimer's isn't the same thing as being crazy, but it sure looks the same to me."

Liz smiled. "Thank you for your help," she told the boy.

"Anytime," he said and ran back to his friends.

Mrs. McDaniel returned and handed a key to Liz.

"That boy over there said that you told his mother that Laura's mother used to chase her with a knife?"

"Oh my, that was awful," the woman sighed. "Lily hated taking the medications that controlled her schizophrenia, kept the voices away. So she would stop taking them. Before long she would be hallucinating that someone was breaking into the house, trying to kill her. She wouldn't even recognize her own daughter, and twice she got a knife from the kitchen and went after Laura. Once, Laura got out of the house and ran to our house. We called Armen and he rushed home. Laura told us it had happened before and Armen told us he found her hiding in the pantry. Lily was terrified of the pantry and wouldn't go in there."

"Why was she afraid of it?"

"Some delusion about killers hiding in there."

"Were the police or Child Protective Services called when she threatened her daughter with a knife?"

"No, no, no...none of us wanted Armen to have to deal with the authorities, on top of everything else."

"But she could have killed the girl!"

"It only happened twice, and Armen took care of it. He got her into a hospital and she was gone for months. When she came back she was on her medications. I know you think we should have reported it," she said defensively. "But you're a detective. We were friends with the family and we could see it would be devastating to Laura if she was taken away from her father. She adored him. Armen raised that little girl and took care of his sick wife. He did the best he could and having police and social workers breathing down his neck would have just made things worse."

Or maybe the family would have gotten help, Liz thought. But she didn't say it. Arguing the point now wouldn't change what had happened in the past.

"You're probably right," she said. "How old was Laura when this happened?"

"Five or six years old."

"Well, I'll just go take a look inside. I'll bring the key back to you when I'm done."

Liz walked back up the driveway and front walk to the door. She turned and looked around. The garage hid the front door from the view of the McDaniel's house. They wouldn't have been able to see the man at Laura's front door the night she was kidnapped. There was a house across the street that someone might have seen...if anyone happened to be looking out the window at that exact moment.

She rang the doorbell and knocked on the door again, just in case Laura was home. When there was no answer, she put the key in the lock.

CHAPTER 11

Laura drove the Mustang north on Highway One. If she hurried, she could make it to San Simeon in time for the last tour of Hearst Castle. She had always loved walking through the huge home that William Randolph Hearst had built. She wanted to go somewhere and just not think. Two hours of walking through the decadence of a bygone era would help to stop her spinning thoughts.

She didn't want to think about David and his perfect wife and perfect baby and perfect life. She didn't want to think about the last two years of her mother's life, especially the last few weeks. She didn't want to think about her father and his mental deterioration.

He had put off retiring until he was seventy. Laura always assumed he just didn't want to have to spend every day with his crazy wife. Although, Laura grudgingly admitted, her mother's schizophrenia had stabilized over the years. She hadn't been hospitalized in the last ten years, at least not in a mental hospital.

After her father sold the dealership, he and her mother had spent a year or so traveling and enjoying retirement. But his forgetfulness was becoming more of a concern than an annoyance. Then there was the day he pulled over on a busy highway on their way home from a week in Las Vegas, with a flat tire. He got out to put the spare on until they could get to a town. He couldn't remember how to change the tire. Her mother told her that she watched him for thirty minutes, pulling the hub cap off and putting it back on, rummaging in the trunk, before she finally realized that he didn't know how to do something that he had done many times in his life.

Thus began years of doctors, tests, specialists, and medications. He seemed to do well on the medications at first, but eventually nothing could stem the tide of dying neurons. Her father became increasingly childlike, needing her mother to bathe him, tell him to eat, take him to the bathroom. It gave Laura a strange sense of satisfaction to see her mother, for the first time in her life, having to take care of someone rather than being the one needing care.

Of course, her mother couldn't make a decision without consulting Laura. Then when David left her, Laura's mother began pressuring her to move in with them. She refused. She had no intention of moving in and becoming her father's caretaker. Her mother was forced to be the responsible adult and Laura was not about to let her off the hook and take over.

Six months later her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Once again there were doctors, tests, medications. But there was also surgery, chemotherapy, radiation. With her father's confusion and disorientation worsening, her mother begged again for her to move in. Laura gave in and moved back home. It was easier than trying to deal with her parents' needs from her own home.

It had been a horrible two years. She hated every moment she spent with her mother, resenting the fact that she was forced to take care of a woman who had never taken care of her. It was bad enough when she was growing up and she had to keep quiet, monitor her mother's medications, prepare her meals, remind her to take a bath and change her clothes. But the intimacy of bathing her, changing her diapers, feeding her...the little knot of anger she always felt in her mother's presence grew until it threatened to choke her.

Laura found a spot in the parking lot of the Hearst Castle Visitor Center. She went immediately to the ticket windows and was relieved to find one opening on the very last tour. She paid her money and stood in line for the bus, smiling coolly at anyone who tried to engage her in conversation. On the bus at last, she sighed and settled back in her seat. As the bus began its fifteen minute twisting drive to the house on the hill, she let her mind focus on something other than her parents and her ex-husband.

CHAPTER 12

"Hello," Liz called. "Laura Bedrosian...this is Detective Elizabeth Roberts of the Fresno Police Department. I am conducting a welfare check to make sure you are all right and I am entering your home."

Liz stood in the large entryway and listened. Silence. She made a quick check of all the rooms just to make sure there was no dead or injured Laura Bedrosian. The house was empty, just as she had expected. She made a slower circuit of the sprawling ranch-style house. Vaulted ceilings in the living and dining areas gave it an open feeling. One wall of the dining room was all glass, looking out onto a large covered patio and a swimming pool.

In the kitchen, Liz found a rinsed coffee cup and glass coffee pot and a plate, fork, and butter knife sitting in the sink. The dishwasher was full of what looked like clean dishes. The refrigerator contained milk, a wilting salad, and take-out containers.

She looked through the bedrooms. It appeared that Laura had taken over the master suite; her clothes were in the closet and dresser drawers. Liz couldn't tell if any clothes were missing, but an expensive set of luggage seemed to be present and accounted for in the back of the closet.

One of the smaller bedrooms still contained a hospital bed and an open package of adult diapers. Another package of diapers sat on a chair in the next bedroom, a set of golf clubs in the corner.

She pulled out her cell phone and shot pictures of the rooms, the dishes in the sink. Back to the kitchen, she noted a closed door that she thought could be a pantry. She opened the door and flipped on the overhead light. It was a pantry all right, although there was no food in it. It was actually a small room. Shelves lined the walls and contained various knick knacks, lamps, books, folded clothing. There were several pieces of furniture, probably cast-offs, she thought. Liz took several pictures of the pantry before turning off the light and closing the door.

Nothing looked amiss now. She stood in the entry way and imagined a thirteen year old girl being pushed down to the floor and tied, blindfolded, and gagged. She looked down the hallway. The master suite, where she assumed Laura's parents slept back then, was at the end of the long hallway and around a corner. Was it possible that Lily Bedrosian, lethargic from her mental health medications, simply slept through her daughter's abduction?

Sighing, Liz closed and locked the front door and made her way back to Mrs. McDaniel, waiting anxiously in her own driveway.

"Well," she asked. "Is Laura...in there?"

Liz shook her head and handed the key back. "No, it's empty."

"What do you think could have happened?"

"I can't say, Ma'am. I don't have enough facts. Can you tell me anything about Laura's ex-husband?"

"David? Oh, that was so sad. Laura has had so many losses in the last few years. He left her...I believe for another woman. At least he remarried as soon as the divorce was final. Poor Laura was devastated...she loved him so much. Armen was already confused and getting worse by then. Some months later, Lily was diagnosed with the cancer. That's when Laura moved back in."

"What is David's last name? And do you know where he lives now?"

"His last name is Kirksey...David Kirksey. I believe that Laura said he moved over to the coast. I don't remember where...Pismo, maybe?"

"All right, thank you for your help." Liz handed her card to Mrs. McDaniel. "If you hear from Laura, please give me a call."

Back in the car, she punched Bedrosian Ford into the GPS and pulled up the directions. She drove through town and pulled in to the dealership set on a large corner lot. She suspected the employees needed golf carts to get around. She walked into the showroom and was greeted by an overly friendly salesman in a suit and tie.

"Good afternoon, Ma'am! Are you shopping for a new car? I'm sure we've got just what you're looking for."

"Sorry, no," Liz told him, as she showed her badge. "I'd like to talk to the owner...is he here?"

"Oh, of course, Detective. Let me just track him down for you. I'll be right back."

He was back within a few minutes and ushered Liz into the owner's large office. Jack Teague was a large, balding man, wearing black, square-framed glasses. He offered her a bottle of water, which she took gratefully, and a chair.

"I called Fresno PD earlier today," he said, settling himself behind his desk. "I saw Armen's picture on the news."

"Did Laura Bedrosian come into work today," she asked.

"No...Laura took the rest of the week off."

"Did she say what she planned to do?"

"I know she was taking her dad to the fair. She didn't say what she was going to do with the rest of the week. She doesn't have a lot of vacation time left after taking family medical leave to take care of her mother. But she came back right after her mother passed and she put Armen in the home, and she hasn't taken a single day off since."

"How is she as a worker?"

"Oh, she's excellent. Rarely missed a day before her mother got sick, shows up on time, and gets her work done. When I bought the place from her father, he wanted it in the contract that we would keep Laura on at the same salary, benefits, and time worked. It was one of the best things I ever did. She knows the books, she's good with numbers...I'm glad to have her."

"Do you know how her relationship with her parents was?"

"She never talked much about her mother, other than keeping me up to date as her health deteriorated, and then finally when she needed to take a leave of absence. From what I saw of her and her father, though, they seemed very close. Like I said, he made sure she would keep her job before he sold the place. I gather he had bought her a new car every five years or so since she was sixteen, and he continued that even after he retired. He came in here just a couple of years later and bought her one. He was getting forgetful by then, but he still knew that he wanted her to have a new car. Then he bought another one last year."

"He bought a car last year," Liz asked. "Was he still able to make business deals then?"

"Well, no," Teague admitted. "Laura was his conservator by then, but she had her mother's approval and I know that's what Armen would have wanted."

"Has she ever mentioned having any problems with anyone...either here or outside of work?"

"Never. Laura is so easy-going; I don't know who would have a problem with her."

"How about her ex-husband?"

"Not that I know of," he said, shaking his head. "I know Laura was pretty broken up when he left, but she never mentioned that there were any fights or threats or anything. But then," he added, spreading his hands, "who really knows what goes on in someone else's private life?"

"True," Liz agreed. "Would you mind if I took a look at Laura's office?"

"Certainly." He got up and showed her down the hall to another large office.

"Did Laura ever express any resentment that her father didn't leave her the business?"

"Not that I ever knew of. She knew the money he got from the sale was his primary funding for retirement. I don't think she was really interested in owning the place, anyway. Laura likes the books, the figures, making things add up or finding out why they don't. The actual business itself, selling cars, customer service...that didn't really seem to appeal to her."

Liz looked around the office, opened all the drawers in the desk. It was just as neat and clean as the house had been; everything in its place, no dust on the desk, no haphazard piles of paper. Also no threatening letters from anonymous stalkers and no confession that she was dumping her father and running off with his money.

After thanking him for his help and giving him her business card with the request to call her if he heard from Laura, Liz left. She drove to the Coalinga Police Station and spoke with the Chief of Police. She requested the file on Laura Bedrosian's kidnapping and he told her it was in storage, but he would have it pulled and faxed to her in Fresno.

She asked if anyone who worked the case was still on the job and was told that the lead detective had retired and moved to Florida. Another detective who had worked the case was still there, but he was on vacation in the mountains, with no cell phone service, until Monday.

Liz thanked him and left her card. She sat in her car for a few minutes, going over her notes. It was late in the afternoon, she was tired, and she still had another hour and a half drive back to Fresno. She found the number for Laura Bedrosian's cell phone and called it. It went directly to voice mail and she left a message.

"Ms. Bedrosian, this is Detective Elizabeth Roberts with the Fresno Police Department. I need to speak with you about your father, Armen Bedrosian. Please call me as soon as you get this message."

She left her the numbers for her phone at the station and her cell phone. Rubbing her neck wearily, she started the car and drove out of the town of Coalinga, passing Bedrosian Ford on the way. Her cell phone rang and Liz used her hands-free device to answer, hoping, but not really expecting, that it would be Laura Bedrosian on the other end.

"Detective Roberts."

"Hey Liz, are you busy?"

Her sister. Liz knew what this was about and she had been avoiding this conversation for a week.

"Kind of...I'm driving. What's up, Stacy?"

"Well, you know Mom's birthday is coming up."

"Uh huh."

"I just thought...well, maybe, we could go see her together. Take a cake or something."

"I can't promise anything, Stace. I'm pretty busy with work right now."

"You're always busy, Liz."

"What can I say? I'm a cop...sometimes crime just doesn't happen at a convenient time."

"Dad was a cop and he had time for birthday parties."

"Yeah, well, Dad worked in a small town...less crime."

"Liz...it's been five years."

"Has it?"

"You know it has. She...misses you."

"Yeah," Liz said with a snort of contempt. "I'll just bet she does."

"It's true. You know, people change...they have regrets."

"Yeah."

Stacy sighed. "You're so hard, Liz. Why can't you forgive her and move on? It was a long time ago."

"You move on, if you want to, Sis. I'm fine right where I am."

"This bitterness and anger isn't good for you, you know. It's probably why you have trust and commitment issues."

Liz laughed. "Stop trying to psychoanalyze me. You're a nurse, not a therapist."

"It doesn't take a therapist to see that what happened to us as children has affected us as adults. The difference is that I decided to forgive and let go of all the bitterness. And I'm happily married with two great kids. You should try it, Liz."

"I'm happy for you, Stace. But I'm not you. I know I don't have the skill set to be a parent."

"Oh Lizzy..."

"Besides, I'm happily married...I'm committed."

"You were married, and committed, to Tom, too."

"You think I'm going to cheat on Steve, like I did with Tom," Liz asked angrily. "Once a whore, always a whore...is that right?"

"You know that's not what I think, Liz! But I do think you sabotage yourself...it's like you're afraid of being too happy."

"And we are back to the psychoanalysis."

"I just think..." Stacy paused for a moment. "I think it would help, that's all."

"Hey, I gotta go," Liz said as a beep sounded in her ear. "I've got another call and I'm working. I'll think about Mom's birthday."

"Promise?"

"I promise. 'Bye, Sis." She ended the call and picked up the next. "Roberts here."

"I hope you are having a productive day, Detective."

"Mr. Jacobs," she said with a smile. "Well, the day isn't as productive as I would have liked, but I got some useful information."

"Well, I'm calling with some more information for you. I found the woman who brought Larry...I mean Mr. Bedrosian...into the fair as she left. I've got her leaving just about an hour after they arrived. She left alone and through a different gate from the one they came in."

"Can you see her face?"

"No, her hat is pulled low, just like when they came in."

"OK, great. Can you send that over to the station for me? I'll get some pictures printed up."

"Sure, I could do that. Or...I could get the pictures printed up myself and you could come here to pick them up. Tomorrow? I'll buy you lunch."

"Oh, Steve, I just don't think I have the time...."

"Oh, come on. Where else can you get Chicken Fried Bacon, Fried Avocado, and Spaghetti and Meatball on a Stick."

"I can feel my arteries hardening already."

Steve laughed. "Hey, you work out. It's only once a year, so I think you can afford it. Besides...there's Deep Fried Oreos for dessert."

"Is there anything there that isn't deep fried?"

"Yeah...cotton candy. At least, so far they haven't fried it that I know of. And anyway, it's not just the video and the pictures. There are a couple of vendors who remember Bedrosian and the woman who was with him. I know the uniformed cops got their statements, but I thought you might want to talk to them yourself."

Liz thought about it for a moment and then said, "All right, you convinced me. I need to run down some leads in the morning...look for some records. Then I'll come over. And don't forget the Oreos."

"You got it. I'll see you at home tonight, babe."

CHAPTER 13

"Laura, honey, this is Henrietta McDaniel. I'm real worried about you. Your dad is in the hospital in Fresno and there was a detective here, looking for you. Please call me and let me know you're all right."

Laura listened to her neighbor's message and the message left by the detective, and then turned her phone off again. She was going to have to check out this morning, because the room...all the rooms...were booked for the weekend. She either needed to find another motel to stay in, or...what? Go home? That house was the last place she wanted to be right now.

She dressed and walked to the beach. She soaked in the scents and sounds, thinking about where to go next. She wasn't ready to return to the Valley. She wasn't ready to answer questions about her father.

She had watched the news the night before to see if there was anything about him. She found out that he was in the hospital, but was doing well, and was expected to be taken back to Garden Manor Care Home in Coalinga today. So he must be all right, if they were releasing him from the hospital already. There had been more messages from Dori Taylor, wanting to know if Mr. Bedrosian would be returning. Everyone must have figured it out, because the decision was made to send him back. As well they should; his bill was paid six months in advance.

Laura stooped to pick up a smooth rock from the sand. Running her fingers over the smooth cool surface, she turned it over in her hand. Turning to face the ocean, she drew her hand back and threw the rock as hard as she could into the crashing waves.

She took a deep breath and looked up and down the beach. There were couples, a family searching for sand dollars. She seemed to be the only single person.

Alone. She had been alone so much lately. Since her mother died and her father went to Garden Manor, Laura had been alone every night in the big house she grew up in. She got up and went to work every day. There were people there, of course. But she didn't interact with them very much. Then at the end of the day, she went back to the big, silent house. She usually picked dinner up on the way home and spent the evening in front of the television.

On weekends, she sunned herself beside the pool, rolling into the cool water whenever she became too hot. The boy from across the street mowed and weeded and watered...but he rarely interrupted her solitude.

It was what she had wanted...to be alone. She had spent so much time taking care of her mother and her father, taking them to doctor's appointments and dealing with the doctors for them, giving instructions to the nurses and aides who came in to take care of them while she worked.

Then there was her time with them. She could never count on any time alone. Her mother would ring that infernal bell to signal she needed Laura. She seemed to need her every fifteen minutes or so. Her father would just wander into her bedroom or she would hear him rummaging through drawers and cupboards in the kitchen and go check on him.

Then one day she was alone. She craved silence and solitude and politely refused Mrs. McDaniel's attempts to keep her company and coworkers' attempts to include her in "hanging out" after work. She read and watched television or sometimes she just sat in silence.

Laura looked around at the couples and families and groups beginning to show up on the beach. Suddenly she had had enough of being alone. She wanted to talk, to laugh, to dance...with other people. But one thing she did not want...she did not want to talk about her parents. She knew exactly where to find the companionship she craved without any uncomfortable questions.

She made her way back to the motel, packed her new clothes in her two new suitcases, loaded them into the trunk of the Mustang, and checked out of the motel. After stopping to fill up with gas, she made her way from Cayucos to eastbound Highway 46. Laura set the cruise control, put a CD in to play, and settled in for the long trip.

CHAPTER 14

Liz made her way to the fourth floor. She wanted to see Armen Bedrosian before he was taken back to Coalinga, so she stopped at the hospital on her way to the office.

"You're here early," she said, walking into the room to find Mark Lyons kneeling on the floor and putting a shoe on Armen's foot.

"I volunteered," he replied as he stood. "We thought the trip would be easier on him if he had a familiar face going along with him."

"Familiar?" Liz gave him a puzzled look. "I thought he doesn't remember anyone."

"No, he doesn't remember my name, or who I am. But when he sees me, I'm...familiar."

"So even though he doesn't recognize his daughter, is she familiar to him?"

"Oh yeah...he always has a big smile for her when she comes to visit. And he follows her around the room, around the unit. Anywhere Laura goes, Armen follows her. He might wander away, if his attention gets distracted, but when he sees her again he will follow her. She said that was the problem when she had him at home. As long as he could see her, he would stay close...too close, sometimes, especially when she was trying to take care of her mother."

"Is he like that with other people?"

Mark scratched his head. "Not so much. He will follow me, as long as I keep reminding him...calling him. But he isn't as focused on me, or anyone else, as he is on Laura. Isn't that right, Armen," he asked.

"Well, we just need one more," the man replied.

"Mr. Bedrosian, I am Detective Roberts."

She held her hand out to him and he clasped it in both of his, smiling at her.

"That should do it," he told her.

Armen dropped her hand and pushed himself up from the chair. She watched him as he moved around the room, touching, straightening the bed linens, bending down to pick up a stray piece of paper.

"He seems so happy, and so...sweet."

Mark was putting Armen's clothes from the day he was found in a bag. He paused and looked at her.

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully. "That describes Armen...happy and sweet. Some of the residents, especially the men, will sometimes wander into each other's path and start pushing or threatening each other. Family will tell us how nice they were before this disease. But Armen...he just smiles and moves out of the way."

Liz went to Armen and put her hand on his arm. He turned his smiling brown eyes on her.

"Mr. Bedrosian, I have to go to work now. You have a safe trip home."

He chuckled and patted her hand.

"You pretty little thing."

Armen moved away from her and knelt to look under the bed. Liz told Mark goodbye and left the hospital.

She spent the morning looking up records, checking credit card activity on either Armen or Laura Bedrosian's cards, delving into their lives. There was nothing on Laura's cards since the morning the fair opened, when she put gas in her car before leaving Coalinga.

There were, however, several charges to Armen's cards. They were all in the same area on the Central Coast. There was a motel in Cayucos for the last two nights. There were also several clothing stores in Cayucos and San Luis Obispo, along with restaurants in Cayucos and Morro Bay. Why was she at the coast? Was it even her, or someone using stolen cards?

Because Cayucos was a small town with no police department of its own, she called the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Department. Liz explained her investigation and that she needed to make sure Laura Bedrosian was not a victim of kidnapping or robbery. She requested that they send a deputy to the motel to speak with her, make sure that it really was Laura, and whether she was alone. She left her cell phone number and the sergeant assured her that he would call as soon as he heard from the deputy.

Next Liz searched for marriage records and information on Laura's ex-husband. She found that he was remarried and living in Los Osos, not far from Cayucos. He was working for a company in San Luis Obispo. She called and asked for David Kirksey. When he answered, she introduced herself.

"Fresno Police? What's this about?"

"I am trying to locate your ex-wife."

"Laura? Why?"

"I need to speak with her about her father. When was the last time you spoke with her?"

"Yesterday," David said, sounding confused. "What's going on with her father?"

"You talked to her yesterday? In person or on the phone?"

"Wait a minute...what is going on with Laura's father and why are you looking for her?"

Liz sighed impatiently. "Her father was found wandering around the fairgrounds on Wednesday, confused and unable to tell anyone who he was. The last person known to have been with him was his daughter. But no one has seen or talked to her since Wednesday. No one, except you, Mr. Kirksey. I need to find out if she is all right and if she knows why her father was alone at the fair. Now...did you speak with her in person or on the phone."

"In person."

"And where was this?"

"Across the street from my house," he told her. "I went home a little early yesterday and when I got there, Laura was sitting there in her car."

"Waiting for you?"

"I guess. I don't know how long she had been there."

"Do you know where she was staying?"

"No...she has family in Cayucos, but she didn't say and I didn't ask."

"What did you talk about?"

David hesitated and then said, "You know, Detective, this is kind of personal. And I don't see what it has to do with Armen being at the fair. Has Laura done something wrong?"

"To be honest, Mr. Kirksey, I don't know. She was the last person known to have been with Mr. Bedrosian. Since we haven't been able to find her, I've had to consider the possibility that something had happened to her."

"She seemed fine...not like she had been hurt or anything."

"Do you think she could have deliberately abandoned her father?"

"No...absolutely not," he said firmly. "There's no way Laura would leave her father at a busy fair if he is as confused as you say he is. She loves him too much...they've always been close and she would never do anything that would hurt him."

"Look, I know that it's difficult to talk about a personal conversation, and you don't have to answer the question. But I'm a detective and my job is to wade through all kinds of information and determine what is and isn't relevant. Until I can talk to Laura herself, I have to try to find out what happened before and after Armen Bedrosian was found wandering around that fair. So, please...what did you and Laura talk about?"

Liz waited as he considered this, and let stillness fill the phone line between them. She had always found silence to be a better incentive to talk than any of her questions. It seems to be human nature to fill a silence with sound and she had gotten more than a few confessions by staying quiet and letting the other person talk; it often led to saying more than they intended. Finally David sighed and cleared his throat.

"She told me that her mother had died and that her father was in a nursing home."

"You didn't know that?"

"No, I haven't kept track of them. When I divorced Laura, I divorced her family."

"I see," she said, making a note that David was the one who initiated the divorce. "What else did she say?"

He hesitated again. "She said she is free now and she...she wanted to get back together with me."

"What did you tell her?"

"That I'm married and I have a baby...I've moved on and she and I are over."

"How did she take that?"

"She cried...and begged."

"And?"

"And I told her that she should leave and not come back. Then I went into my house. After a minute or two, she drove away."

"So it sounds like she thought her parents were to blame for your divorce. Or you thought they were."

"Laura's family was messed up," he said. "I guess that happens when a child grows up with a mentally ill parent. Laura's mother never parented her...the child had to take care of the parent."

"What about her relationship with her father? People keep telling me how close they were."

"That's not a good thing."

"How so?"

“Armen spoiled Laura her entire life. He gave her anything she wanted. Money was no object when it came to his only child. But...he treated her like more of a wife than a daughter, and treated Lily like she was their child. They conferred together on Lily’s treatment and her care, when to hospitalize her, and so on. Then Laura was his accountant at the business and pretty soon she was taking care of his personal finances, too. There was always something that he needed to talk to her about.”

“A neighbor told me that Laura’s mother chased her with a knife a couple of times.”

“A couple of times? No...that was how many times Armen couldn’t keep it quiet. It happened a lot.”

“Why would he leave his daughter alone with an unstable and dangerous mother?”

“Armen was all about control. He wasn’t about to admit that he couldn’t control his own wife. Every time it happened, Lily was sent to a hospital...to ‘have her medications adjusted.’ And Laura had a safe place. Lily was terrified of the pantry and wouldn’t go near it. So Laura became adept at recognizing when her mother was getting close to the point that she would spiral out of control and she would go hide in the pantry.”

“Sounds like a nightmare childhood.”

“It was. But as she got older, things did get better. Maybe Laura learned how to head off a psychotic break, maybe they finally found the right combination of drugs, or maybe Lily’s illness just leveled out as she aged. Whatever the reason, by the time I met Laura, Lily didn’t have violent outbursts anymore.”

“What about the kidnapping when she was thirteen?”

“Laura never wanted to talk about it. She said her dad paid the ransom and she wasn’t hurt, so she just wanted to let it stay in the past.”

“You know,” Liz said thoughtfully, “you are the first person I’ve talked to who has had any criticism of Armen Bedrosian. Everyone has talked about how he was tough but fair, a doting father, and a wonderful husband.”

“Yeah...he was all those things. But most people never saw what he was like in private. They never saw just how controlling he was with his wife and his daughter.”

“And his son-in-law?”

“He tried. And he won a lot of our battles.”

“Like what?”

“Like moving to the coast. Laura and I both loved it over here, but Armen thought that was foolish because the cost of living is so expensive. We didn’t move. I was offered a job in New York...a great job with an exorbitant salary and benefits, lots of room to advance. But Armen depended on Laura to help in his business, to help take care of Lily. I turned the job down. I wanted a family, a baby. I think Laura did too, but her father never thought we were ‘ready,’ so we waited. And waited.”

“So there was no love lost between you.”

"I liked Armen fine before Laura and I got married. I thought he was controlling, but I respected that he wanted to protect and take care of his wife and his daughter. I was even happy to sign the prenup his lawyer drew up. I never wanted his money, I just wanted Laura. But I lost all respect for him on my wedding day."

"Why is that?"

"At the reception, just before we left on our honeymoon, Laura was off changing her clothes. Armen asked to talk to me in private and he took me to some office in the hotel. His lawyer was there and had another 'agreement' for me to sign. Armen said now that I had agreed to the prenup and I had gone through with the wedding, he was convinced that I really was 'worthy' of his daughter. He wanted to make sure that nothing would happen in the future to break Laura's heart. This agreement they wanted me to sign said that for every ten years I stayed married to Laura, I would receive \$500,000."

Liz let out a low whistle. "Fifty thousand a year...that's a pretty sweet deal. What did you tell him?"

"I ripped up the agreement and told him he could stuff it up his ass. I may have benefited from the money he gave to Laura or spent on her...but I never accepted a single dime from him. He wanted to buy us a house as a wedding present and I told him and Laura 'absolutely not.' He continued buying Laura's cars, and offered to buy me one, but I refused. I bought my own cars and we saved our money and bought our own house."

"He was the reason you left?"

“He was part of it. I could see that Laura would never be free from him. Actually, she didn’t even see that she needed to be free from him. But that wasn’t the only reason. Laura and I had other...problems.”

“What kind of problems?”

David was silent for a moment before answering. “You know, Detective, this is getting into an area that really is too personal. I need to get back to work now.”

“All right. Thank you for your help. If you hear from Laura, will you call me, please?”

“I will, but I don’t think I’ll be hearing from her again.”

After hanging up the phone, Liz checked the time. She pushed away from her desk, glad to have an excuse to get out. It would feel good to walk around the fair and soak up the sunshine; eat some unhealthy, greasy food. Picking up the file on Armen Bedrosian, she left the station and headed for the fairgrounds.

CHAPTER 15

Laura stepped out of her air conditioned car into the heat of the Mojave Desert. She filled the car with gas, visited the bathroom, and stopped in the mini-mart to buy a soda and snacks for the road. She was half-way there, which meant it would be dark, or close to it, when she arrived. That was perfect.

She loved road trips, especially long ones. She loved the feeling of freedom from the everyday minutiae of life. What did it matter if it was time to change the battery in the smoke alarm? Who cared if that annoying sound the air conditioner was making meant it was about to go out and need either expensive repairs or a more expensive replacement? None of that mattered out here, hundreds of miles from home, with the road stretching out forever ahead and behind. What's for dinner tonight? Corn dogs, chips, and a soda...eaten while driving.

She called the hotel to book a room for the next two nights. The desk clerk told her that all rooms were booked for the weekend and suggested Laura try another hotel. But she wanted that hotel. She asked for the clerk's supervisor and patiently, but insistently, made her way up the chain of command. Finally, a manager conceded that they did have one room, but it was one of the most expensive. Laura booked it immediately, reading the credit card numbers over the phone.

She would need to go shopping again. The clothes she bought in Cayucos and San Luis Obispo were casual. She needed a dress to go out in...a dress that would make her feel beautiful, sexy, and alive. Something she could dance in. Twirl in.

She thought again of all those dresses her father had bought for her over the years. All the times she tried them on for him. All the times she twirled in her new dresses. His laughter, the way he enjoyed buying for her and watching her enjoyment. It only seemed appropriate. Nothing made him happier than buying things for her.

The first time she went on an actual date with a boy, Teddy Jessup, it was to a school dance. He did not have his driver's license yet, so her father rented a limo for them. Teddy was impressed, her friends were jealous, and she had felt like a princess.

She had, however, felt less princess-like on the way home. Teddy was excited by the privacy panel between them and the driver, but his wet kisses and groping fingers had left her cold and disgusted. It would be another year before she gave in to a different boy's advances. This time it was the captain of the football team and she had been so drunk on rum and Coke that she wasn't entirely certain the next day if it had been real or a dream. Until she felt the soreness between her legs.

Laura pushed the memories aside and started her car, turned both the air conditioning and CD player on high, and pulled away from the gas station. She had another long drive ahead of her today.

CHAPTER 16

Steve manipulated the computer mouse, leaning over Liz as she sat in front of the computer. He was enjoying the excuse to be in such close physical proximity that the scent of her shampoo wafted up to him. He was tempted to kiss her neck, but resisted. She was working, after all. He leaned closer to point out the image on the computer screen and her shoulder pressed against his chest.

"See her there? She's still wearing the cap," he said.

"I see," Liz replied, sighing. "And we still can't see her face."

"Jack made up some eight by tens," Steve told her, reluctantly straightening and laying the pictures on the table.

Liz opened her file and pulled out the picture the lab had enlarged for her, taken from Laura Bedrosian's driver's license. She set the picture and the picture taken from the earlier video of Armen and the mystery woman entering the fairgrounds next to the picture of the woman leaving.

"Think it's the same woman," Steve asked.

"I do," she answered. "I just can't prove it with these pictures."

"Do you think she deliberately covered her face?"

"I don't know...maybe. If she did, then that means she intended to abandon her father. I just can't figure out why."

"Money? It sounds like he has a lot of it. Was she planning to dump him and empty his accounts before anyone found out who he was?"

"It's possible...she is his conservator, and she was her mother's conservator, too. I've got a call in to the court that appointed her to see if there has been anything questionable about how she has handled her parents' estate. But so far she hasn't tried to empty any accounts. She went to Cayucos and got a motel room and did some shopping...all on her father's credit cards. But they aren't exorbitant amounts." Liz paused and studied the pictures again, frowning. "I just don't get why now, and why dump him? She is their only heir; everything will be hers once her father passes away."

"Maybe he was taking too long?"

"Maybe..." She sighed again and stood, picking up the pictures and putting them into her folder. "You said you have some vendors who saw them?"

"Yeah, I'll take you to them." As they walked toward the concession stands, Steve explained, "The girl who was working the ticket counter when they came in, thought the picture of Armen looked vaguely familiar, but couldn't be sure she remembered him. She sold a lot of tickets that morning."

"It's understandable that they wouldn't make a big impression."

"But they got lemonade and the girl who served them remembers."

"Good."

They approached one of the portable trailers that traveled from fair to fair all over the state. There was a line of people waiting for lemonade, soda, bottled water. Steve opened the door in the back of the trailer and stuck his head inside.

"Hey, Susie, do you have a minute to talk to the detective?"

"Sure, Mr. Jacobs," the girl answered. She asked one of the other workers to take over for her, filling drink orders, and stepped outside.

The girl was several inches shorter than Liz. That, along with her short, strawberry-blond hair and round face gave her pixyish look.

"Susie, this is Detective Roberts. Detective, Susie Coughlin."

Liz shook hands with the girl, and then pulled out pictures of Armen and Laura.

"Yes, that's them."

Liz nodded to the line of people in front of the trailer. "There are a lot of people who go through here...how can you be sure of these two?"

"Well, I remember him because he was so sweet. He didn't say much that made sense, and the woman ordered and paid for the lemonade. He just smiled and talked about playing golf later. And he was so happy with the lemonade...like he'd never had one before."

"How did the woman seem, and how did she act with him?"

"Oh, she was very nice...polite, you know? She told me thank you...not too many people do that. And she was really...oh, what's the word?" The girl scrunched her face in concentration. "Solicitous! That's it...she was very solicitous. She called him 'Daddy' and asked if he was getting too hot."

"Did he answer her?"

"Not really. He just laughed and said something totally off the subject. When I handed him the lemonade, he smiled at me and called me a 'pretty little thing.' I thought that was cute."

Liz showed her a picture from the security camera. "Could this be the same woman?"

"Oh yeah...that's her. Those look like the clothes she was wearing, and she was definitely wearing that hat."

"Did you notice which way they went when they left?"

"I think they were headed toward the midway, but it was busy and I lost track of them."

"OK," Liz said, handing the girl her card. "Thank you, Susie. If you remember anything else, please give me a call."

"I will."

As Susie turned and reentered the trailer, Steve led Liz to the exhibit halls.

"So," Steve said, "Laura Bedrosian brought her father to the fair, bought him lemonade, and then within an hour, left the fairgrounds without him. It's hard to believe a daughter would deliberately dump her father like that. Could she have been forced to?"

Liz shrugged. "I didn't see anyone with her when she left, but I suppose there could have been someone."

"Maybe she got a phone call...someone threatening someone close to her, if she didn't leave right then and get them some money."

"Threaten who? Her husband divorced her and her father seems to be the only person left that she's close to. And he was with her, not being threatened by some mystery person."

Steve grinned sheepishly. "I know...it doesn't make much sense. Maybe I've been watching too many TV crime shows. I guess I just really want to believe the best about people."

"Nothing wrong with that," she assured him with a warm smile. "It's good that your optimism hasn't been dampened by close contact with your cynical wife."

Steve laughed and led her inside the Home Arts building. She followed him through the maze of quilts, homemade jams, loaves of bread, and embroidered pillow cases until he stopped to introduce her to a short, round, blue-haired woman with an infectious smile. She was manning a quilting booth where a large, beautiful quilt in a variety of brilliant blues and purples was being raffled off. The description card clipped to the bottom right corner of the quilt said that the pattern was called "State Fair." That seemed appropriate.

"Mrs. Henson remembers seeing Armen wandering around in here," Steve told her.

"Was he with this woman?" Liz showed the picture of Laura.

"Oh no, dear," the woman said. "He was all alone when I saw him. I wondered if there was someone with him, because he just seemed confused. He wasn't really paying any attention to the displays. When he came near my booth, I asked him if he needed any help and he just said he got separated from his 'foursome' and was looking for them. I offered to help him find his party, but he didn't answer. He just walked away."

"Did you see which way he went out?"

"No, I'm sorry, I didn't. I caught sight of him a couple more times in different spots, but it was getting busy here with people buying raffle tickets and I'm afraid I lost track of him. I saw the story about him on the news and I feel just terrible now, knowing the poor man has Alzheimer's and doesn't even know his name. I should have realized there was something wrong and called security."

"You had no way of knowing, Ma'am," Liz assured her. "Do you remember what time it was?"

“Not the exact time, but I do know it was around noon.”

Liz handed her a card and repeated her request to call if she remembered anything else. Liz and Steve walked out of the building into the bright sunshine.

“It’s looking more and more like she deliberately left him, isn’t it,” Steve asked.

“That’s how it looks. I would really like to talk to her, though, before coming to any conclusions. I asked the San Luis Obispo Sheriff Department to send someone to the motel in Cayucos, to check on her and ask her to talk to me.” She looked up at Steve and grinned. “But right now I’m on my lunch break and I’m going to spend the next hour eating greasy food and not thinking about Armen and Laura Bedrosian.”

He smiled back and said, “Where do you want to start?”

An hour later, Liz popped the last of the deep fried Oreo into her mouth. Steve chuckled and shook his head.

“It’s a good thing you work out, Detective. Doughnuts, greasy fair food...”

“Hey, you’re the one who said, ‘It’s only once a year.’ You know this isn’t how I normally eat.”

Her cell phone interrupted and she gave Steve an apologetic look as she answered. He watched her as she listened, making few comments, asking an occasional question.

“All right, Sheriff, thank you.”

She disconnected and sighed.

"Bad news," Steve asked.

"The deputy went to the motel where Laura Bedrosian had paid for a room for the last two nights. But she wasn't there. She checked out this morning and the clerk didn't know where she was going."

"But it was definitely her?"

"Yeah, it was her. The deputy showed the clerk a picture and he confirmed it."

"So now what?"

"So now," she said, standing up. "My 'person of interest' is in the wind, and I have to fight off the lethargy induced by all that greasy food you forced down me and go back to work."

Steve stood up as well and said with a smile, "Want me to buy you a coffee?"

"No thanks. We have some really bad stuff back at the station...it's guaranteed to keep anyone awake." She smiled at him. "Thank you for lunch."

"We're here for another nine days," he said with a chuckle. "Come back any time."

She gave him a quick kiss.

"Hey, Jacobs? I love you."

"Love you, too, babe."

CHAPTER 17

Laura stood in front of the mirrored closet doors and looked at herself critically. She turned and looked over her shoulder at her back, then back around to the front. Next she twirled and smiled as the skirt lifted gracefully. It had been a long time since she had worn a little black dress. It had been a long time since there had been a reason to wear one. This dress was low-cut to reveal enough cleavage to tease, but not enough to be slutty. It clung to her curves, showing them off to advantage. The skirt fell just short of her knees and was full enough, of course, to twirl. The black peep-toe pumps with two inch heels emphasized her new pedicure and shapely legs. Laura smiled again.

She had arrived after dark the night before, as she expected. David had always said that the best time to arrive was after dark. The Las Vegas Strip made a spectacular first impression at night. The lights of the hotels and casinos almost made headlights unnecessary.

Laura had driven the length of the Strip twice, slowly, gawking like any tourist, just as David had done. Their honeymoon was the first time she had ever been to Las Vegas and he had enjoyed her awe. Pulling up to the Bellagio had brought back more memories of David.

Their honeymoon destination had been a surprise for her and she knew that part of the reason he refused to tell her where they were going was because he didn't want her father to know ahead of time. Her father hated Las Vegas. He called it "Sin City," and although he said little to David, he had been angry when he discovered where they spent their honeymoon.

Her father worked hard for his money and while he had no problem spending it lavishly, especially on her, he thought gambling was a foolish waste. David had only been able to convince her to return once more during their marriage, because she hated keeping secrets from her father...and hated his disapproval even more.

But he wouldn't know about this trip, would he? She could tell him all about it if she wanted and it would mean nothing to him now. He wouldn't even understand what she was saying; much less remember it in the next minute.

Once Laura arrived and settled into her room, she went out and walked along the Strip. She took in the lights, the other tourists out walking, and the prostitutes who didn't bother to hide their reason for being there. She stopped in at a few casinos and played some slot machines. The drive had been tiring, so she didn't stay up late. She returned to her room and ordered room service, then watched a movie in bed before falling asleep.

She had spent the day pampering herself; sitting by the pool in her new bathing suit, drinking Mimosas, shopping for the dress and shoes, getting a manicure and pedicure, having her hair highlighted. She had even taken a nap in the afternoon so that she would be refreshed for the evening. She wanted to dance tonight and intended to stay out late.

Tomorrow she would think about going back to Fresno and dealing with this detective who had left another message on her phone. She saw on the news that her father had been taken back to the nursing home. She would deal with them, as well. That supervisor, Dori, had told the reporters that Laura took him out for a visit on Wednesday morning, which was probably why the police wanted to talk to her. It might be time to find a new nursing home for him, someplace where they knew the meaning of the word discreet. Or she could hire a caretaker to stay with him in the house while she moved into a condo she had been admiring.

Laura smoothed her hands over her skirt and pushed away thoughts of what needed to be done at home. Tonight was about forgetting her responsibilities and having fun. She picked up the Martini she had ordered from room service and watched herself in the mirror as she sipped it. She looked and felt beautiful, elegant. She looked at the sandwich she had also ordered. She wasn't hungry, but she knew that she shouldn't drink on an empty stomach. She nibbled on the sandwich, but could only eat half of it. She was too excited. There should be something to snack on in the nightclub, anyway.

It was time. Laura drained the last of the Martini and set the glass down. She took one longer look at herself in the mirror, and then picked up the black beaded clutch bag that looked so good with this dress and left the room. Walking along the plush carpeted hallway to the elevator, she took a few deep breaths, trying to calm her racing heart.

Stepping onto the elevator, she couldn't fail to notice the two men watching her appreciatively...or the angry glances of the women who were with them. Laura smiled sweetly at the women, even as she made no attempt to hide the way she looked the men over from head to toe, as though she were considering a purchase. Her confidence picked up as she walked through the hotel and made her way to the nightclub, where she could hear music pounding. She was acutely aware of heads turning as she passed.

This was familiar. This was the Laura from high school and college, before she met David. The beautiful, seductive Laura that men wanted and women resented. The Laura her father knew nothing about, always thinking of her as the little girl clinging to him on the Ferris wheel. The Laura her mother cared nothing about, lost in her delusions and the voices in her head.

The nightclub was dim, loud, and crowded as she walked through, deliberately taking her time as she made her way to the bar. She ordered a Martini and stood as she sipped it, looking over the crowd. She had been noticed, she knew. Now the question remained of who would be the first to ask her to dance.

She waited patiently as the song ended and another began. She was in no hurry. She knew how she looked and she knew she would have plenty of offers to dance before the night was over. She would have plenty of offers for more before the night was over.

The man who approached her was tall, very tall, making her feel petite. He moved to stand next to her at the bar and ordered Scotch.

"My name is Roger," he told her, bending close so he didn't have to yell over the music.

"Hello, Roger," she said coolly.

He waited a moment and then asked, "Are you going to tell me your name?"

She looked up at him and frowned as though pondering his question.

"We'll see," she replied. He smiled in amusement.

"Well then, would you like to dance while you make up your mind?"

She returned his smile. "Yes," she said, setting her drink on the bar. "I would like that very much."

CHAPTER 18

"Spaghetti. Seriously?" Liz laughed as the waitress walked away with their orders. "You bring me to a fancy Italian restaurant and order spaghetti?"

"Why not?" Steve grinned at her. "It's not like I ordered a hamburger. Spaghetti is Italian, isn't it?"

"Barely...and it's not something that requires a restaurant. Even I can boil some noodles and open a can of sauce."

"I've had your spaghetti, Detective, and it's blasphemy to compare it to this."

"OK, Father Jacobs, I'll do penance later."

Steve laughed and leaned back in his chair. He always appreciated the way Liz looked when she was working, with her business-like pants and shirt in neutral colors, the sensible shoes, and her hair tamed into a slick pony-tail or braid. Tonight, though, her looks were softened. Her hair loose and framing her face, the sleeveless dress showing off well-toned upper arms, and the low-heeled sandals showing off a very nice pair of legs.

"Any progress on Armen's case," he asked.

She shrugged and took a sip of wine.

"I contacted the clerk of the judge who appointed Laura as his conservator. For the first couple of years they required her to submit detailed accounting of his money and assets. The clerk said Laura's records were itemized to the penny and there was nothing questionable about how she managed his finances. She was doing such a good job that they relaxed their vigilance and didn't require any records last year. She said they would probably ask for it every two or three years from here on out."

The waitress brought their salads and they ate in silence for a few minutes.

"So she took good care of her father's finances and you said she hasn't had any exorbitant charges since she left."

"Well, that was before she left Cayucos. She's in Las Vegas now, staying at the Bellagio."

"Nothing cheap about that," Steve said.

"No, there isn't," Liz agreed. "And she has been charging up a storm since she got there; room service, a high-end dress shop, spa, mani/pedi...all on her father's credit card. Plus she took out \$5,000 in cash, also from her father's account."

"Ahh...that doesn't sound so innocent, does it?"

"No, it doesn't. Then there's the matter of her car."

"What about her car?"

"Last year she bought a brand new car from the dealership where she works, the one her father started, and paid for it from his account. The court doesn't know about that yet, because she hasn't been required to submit any records since she bought it."

"What will happen when they find out?"

"I don't know," she said with a shrug. "According to the new owner of the dealership and Laura's ex-husband, her father has bought every car she's ever owned...all brand new. Maybe the court will accept that."

"But not the charges in Las Vegas?"

"Maybe if she had paid all this money to herself for her work as his conservator, she might be able to justify it. But this...just using his funds for a little vacation in Vegas? I don't see how she hopes to pull this off."

"Is it possible that she's not planning to come back?"

"Sure, that's possible. I called the Las Vegas police and asked if someone would go talk to her, find out what she knows about her father. But she wasn't in her room. The officer left a message, asked the front desk to call when she comes back, and I've left her a couple of messages. If she's running, she's not doing it very fast or secretly...but then she's also not breaking her leg to find out why the police want to talk to her."

Liz chewed thoughtfully and shook her head. "Everyone I've talked to says what a devoted daughter she is, and how close she and her father were before he lost his memory. The only person I've found who has anything negative to say about Armen is the ex-son-in-law. Then there is the business of Laura's kidnapping when she was thirteen."

"She was kidnapped? What happened?"

Liz shrugged again. "Someone broke in and kidnapped her, demanded a ransom. The ransom was paid and Laura was released. She didn't see the faces of the men who took her, claimed she wasn't harmed, and the police never had any solid leads on suspects."

"So do you think it has something to do with what is happening now?"

"I just don't know. I don't see how...it was over twenty years ago, no suspects. Even if they came back and are blackmailing her...it doesn't make sense. The kidnapping is public knowledge. What could they have on her?" She sighed.

"None of this makes any sense."

"I came across something else interesting when I was doing a search of records. Armen was married once before, and has another daughter."

"Where are the ex-wife and the daughter?"

"His ex-wife died about a year after the divorce and the daughter is living back East. I tried to call her, but got her voice mail. I'm getting tired of leaving messages."

"How did the ex die?"

"She committed suicide."

"Wow...there sure has been a lot of tragedy in that family."

"Yeah, there has. And it all seems unrelated, so I don't know if any or all of it could be related to Armen Bedrosian wandering around that fair."

"So there are lots of questions and no answers," he said with a smile.

"That's about it. I don't think I'll have any answers until I talk to Laura. I may try to wheedle the brass into letting me fly to Las Vegas to try and track her down myself."

"Well, if you need company, I'll be glad to go with you. I'm sure I can find a slot machine or two to play while you do your detective thing."

"Don't you have a fair to run for another week," she asked.

"Everybody knows Vegas beats out a fair any day."

They laughed as the waitress collected their salad plates and set their entrées in front of them. Steve poured another glass of wine for each of them.

"OK," Steve told her, offering his plate. "Before you start on your Chicken Scampi, taste this spaghetti and tell me it's no different from your canned sauce."

Liz humored him and twirled some of the pasta on her fork. Her eyes widened slightly as she chewed.

"You win," she admitted. "This is the best spaghetti sauce I've ever tasted, and definitely not from a can."

"Well, it's nice to be vindicated," he said, setting his plate down and picking up his own fork.

He watched her as they ate; the way she cut her chicken and sipped her wine, the way her face lit up when she laughed, the way the candlelight picked up the golden highlights in her hair. They talked about food, music, books, movies, sports. Liz was smart and funny; Steve loved seeing her relaxed and enjoying herself.

"Stacy called again," he told her as they drove home.

Liz sighed with annoyance.

"I'm going to tell her to stop calling you...this is between the two of us."

"She wasn't going around you this time. She called the house and you weren't there. I happened to answer, that's all."

"That's all...but she didn't waste an opportunity to try to get you to bring me to my senses, did she?"

"Liz, I think she is just concerned that this may be the last...." He paused for a moment, concentrating on the road. "That your mother may not have many birthdays left," he finished quietly.

Liz looked out the window at the streetlights and houses passing by. They were silent the rest of the way home. After they watched an old movie, Liz changed into her favorite boxer shorts and T-shirt. She sat cross-legged on the bed and watched him as he got ready for bed.

"You know...Kingsburg isn't that far away," Steve told her.

"It's a lifetime away," she murmured as he stretched out across the bed.

"I'm just saying...we could go over, tell her 'Happy Birthday,' and then go get dinner. What would be the harm? She's elderly, she has Parkinson's...maybe Stacy is right that she regrets the things she did when you were growing up."

"You just don't know what it was like," she said. "Mom didn't spank us, she beat us. Once she had that belt in her hand, it was like she was possessed. She just lost all control and it would go on and on and on...it seemed like for hours. I can't tell you how many times I claimed I was sick so that I wouldn't have to dress for PE, so that no one would see the welts. And the things she said while she was hitting us...everyone thought my mother was this prim and proper cop's wife, pillar of the church. But when she was in one of her rages, she would scream the foulest words you have ever heard, and call us the worst names. When we were little, we didn't even understand most of the things she called us. But we learned."

"Didn't anyone ever suspect? Your teachers, people at church?"

"If they did, they probably thought Dad was the one responsible. He was this big, gruff cop. But who is going to accuse a cop of beating his kids?"

"What about your father," Steve asked. "Why didn't he do anything?"

"If he knew, he pretended it wasn't happening. Mom was good at coming up with logical explanations for any injuries she couldn't hide. But it was no secret that she used a belt on us," she added bitterly. "That wide leather belt...Dad never wore it. There was only one use for it. She bragged about 'sparing the rod' and about 'keeping my girls in line.' And she always kept it hanging on a hook right next to the front door. Everyone knew what it was for. Stacy and I rarely had friends over, and never boyfriends...it was too humiliating for them to see that freaking belt."

"But...why didn't you and Stacy tell your dad what was really going on?"

Liz shrugged. "I don't know...I guess we were more afraid of what might happen if we told him than we were of the beatings. Even with all she did to us...we didn't want her to go away."

"Is that what she told you would happen if you said anything?"

"No, she never even told us not to tell. We knew about kids going into foster care because their parents hurt them. We didn't want that to happen. So we kept quiet."

She unconsciously rubbed the small scar on her left cheek. Steve leaned over and softly kissed the scar. She had told him before about her mother, but she had never told him about this.

"Tell me about the scar," he whispered.

She took a deep breath and said, "I was nineteen and living at home while I was going to Fresno State. Dad was killed on the job three years earlier...a domestic violence call. After he died, Mom really lost it. The beatings got worse and more frequent. We never knew when she would go off."

"Wait a minute," Steve said. This was new information. "You were nineteen? And your mother was still hitting you?"

"Yeah."

"But...why? You could have left as soon as you turned eighteen. Why would you stay there and...?" He trailed off.

"I didn't want to leave Stacy there alone. I was the one she took it out on the most. Maybe it was my attitude, maybe I talked back more. I don't know, but something about me just infuriated her. As long as I was there, Stacy didn't get it as much. I thought if we could stick it out until Stace turned eighteen, then we could both leave. I thought we would get an apartment together and go to school, maybe even leave the state.

"Then one Saturday night, I told her I was spending the night with a friend. And I did...I just didn't tell her that we were going to go out cruising. We let these two older guys pick us up, followed them to their apartment. That's the first time I ever had rum and Coke. I didn't like it, but I wasn't about to tell them that. We both got more than a little tipsy and we probably would have stayed and had sex with them...but we had Lisa's little sister with us. Kimmy was only fifteen and she was thrilled to be out with older girls. We didn't let her drink and we finally left because we couldn't just pair up with these guys and leave this little girl sitting on the couch.

"We went back to Lisa's house and snuck in so her parents wouldn't wake up and realize we had been drinking." Liz lay down next to Steve and closed her eyes, remembering. "The next day Kimmy was on the phone, telling her best friend all about our night. Her mother overheard all of it; the strange guys, going to their apartment, the alcohol. She was furious. She confronted Lisa, who confessed. I guess she was angry with Lisa, but mostly she blamed me. She called my mother and told her everything. She said since Lisa was an adult she couldn't tell her who her friends could be, but that I was not welcome at their home anymore and she never would have entrusted me with her impressionable youngest daughter if she had known I was going to drag her into something like that.

"If Lisa's mom was angry, mine was beyond enraged. I had endured plenty of Mom's rages over the years, but nothing like that. Stacy wasn't there; she was at a friend's house or a game or something. Mom chased me all over that house. Funny thing is, I was a good five inches taller than her and probably twenty pounds heavier...but it never once occurred to me to fight back. I tried to get away from her, I even tried to leave...but I never tried to take that belt away from her. She was just flailing that thing at me, hitting me anywhere she could. I was wearing shorts and a tank top, so I had plenty of bare skin to make contact with. That was the first time she hit me with the buckle or made me bleed. She finally got me cornered between my bed and the wall and all I could do was huddle in a ball and cry while she hit me over and over. The buckle hit my cheek cut it. The whole time she was screaming at me what a whore I was, she was glad my father was dead and couldn't see what a slut he had raised, on and on like that.

“When she got tired or her rage burned out or whatever made her finally stop, she told me I was grounded. Grounded!” Liz snorted in disgust. “She said I could go to school and work but nowhere else and she would decide later how long. And then she left. She had a meeting at church, so she got her purse and her Bible and she left. I don’t know how long I stayed on the floor crying, but finally I got up and went to the bathroom. I took one look at myself in the mirror and threw up. I was covered with welts, some of them bleeding. My cheek was already swelling and the cut was bleeding. I looked like a boxer. I cleaned up...put a bandage on my cheek, took a shower. Then I packed a bag and I left. I had always had a job in high school and college, and had bought a car. So I lived in my car for a few months, until I could get enough money together for a cheap studio in the worst part of town. When I left, I took the belt with me. I found a dumpster and tossed it in.”

“Oh, babe.” Steve pulled her against him and wrapped his arms around her. “And Stacy? Did she know what happened, why you left?”

“I called her and told her Mom and I had a fight, but I don’t know what Mom told her. I didn’t let her see me until weeks later, when the bruising was gone and my cheek was healing. Funny thing is Stacy says Mom never hit her after that day. She never even yelled at her. They became close that last year before Stacy went off to college. So for her sake, I’ve had to endure Mom at all of Stacy’s special events...graduations, her wedding, birthday parties for her kids. But other than that, I never talked to Mom. When she got Parkinson’s, Stacy took care of her. She even moved her into their house when she couldn’t live alone. Once she had to go into the nursing home, there was no reason for me to have to see her anymore. And I haven’t. Stacy can visit her all she wants; she can go celebrate birthdays and holidays with her. But I’m not going.”

They were silent for several long minutes, Steve holding her close.

"So," she said finally. "Do you still want to meet my mother?"

"Yes."

"What?!" Liz pulled away and rolled off the bed. She stood and glared down at him. "After hearing all that, you still want to meet her? Why?"

Steve propped himself up on his elbow.

"Because, babe, like it or not she's a part of you. She's a part of what made you who you are. And I want to meet her."

"Fine! You go and see her, then. I'm not going."

"I think you should. I think you need to see her."

"So I'll see that Stacy is right and she's changed and she regrets the crap she put me through?"

"Maybe Stacy is right. You just said that she stopped hitting Stacy after that day. Maybe she realized she had crossed a line and she made some changes."

"Or I'm the one who set her off and with me gone, she was able to control herself."

"So you think what she did to you was your fault?"

"No...I..." She rubbed her hand over her face in frustration.

"I think you need to see her for closure," Steve told her.

"Closure?" Liz put her hands on her hips. "What does that even mean?"

"I think those events affect how you think and react and make decisions today. I think, even though you deny it, that on some level you are still that little girl and she only did those things because you were bad."

"More psychobabble," she said with a disgusted sigh. "Now you sound like Stacy. I suppose you think I 'sabotage my own happiness,' too."

"Yeah, I do."

"So...what? You think I'm going to cheat on you like I did my first husband," she asked derisively. He didn't answer and Liz flinched as though he had struck her. "Is that what you think, Steve? Have you just been waiting for two. three...years for me to cheat?" She whirled around and stalked angrily to the door. "Why the hell did you even marry me?"

"Liz..." Steve rolled off the bed and caught up with her as she opened the door. He grasped her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Listen to me. I have not been 'waiting for you to cheat.' But I would be lying if I said I hadn't thought about it. Do you remember what you said when you first told me about it?"

She sighed in defeat and hung her head.

"I said I didn't know why I did it; that Tom and I had a good marriage and a great sex life, and I didn't know why I was willing to risk losing it all."

“And we’ve got a good marriage and a great sex life, so....yeah, I wonder sometimes if it’s possible that you will do it again. Hey...I married you because I love you. And because I love you, I don’t want to see you punishing yourself over things your mother did decades ago.” He pushed the door closed and kissed her. “Just think about it, OK?”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head against his chest.

“Fine. I’ll think about it. Are you satisfied?”

“Almost,” he said kissing the top of her head. “I just have one more question.”

“What now?”

“Just where are those handcuffs, Detective?”

Her laughter was cut off by his kiss.

CHAPTER 19

Laura carefully slid from under the man's weight and extricated herself from the tangle of arms and legs. She tried to be quiet and not wake him, but the pounding in her head was making moving difficult. Finally she slipped from the bed and the man groaned softly in his sleep as he repositioned himself around his pillow.

Laura stood for a moment looking down at him. Roger? It was hard to remember, her memories of the night before were fuzzy. She remembered dancing with this man several times. Robert? She remembered dancing with several men, but this one kept coming back. Rodney? It was something with an "R." At least she thought so.

She looked around the room, similar to her own. Clothing, his and hers, was scattered around, as though they had pulled each piece off and flung it in different direction. She quickly began picking up her dress, her underwear, her shoes, and hurriedly pulling them on. She wanted to be gone before he woke up. Had she given him her room number? Her real name? She didn't think so, but she preferred to be out of the hotel and on the road as soon as possible, just in case he had some romantic notion that they would see each other again.

She smoothed the wrinkled dress as best as she could, picked up her purse, and left the room noiselessly. Back in her own room, she saw the flashing red light on the phone, indicating she had messages. Two messages, one from a Las Vegas police detective asking her to call, and another from the front desk informing her that the detective wanted to speak to her. She deleted both messages.

Stripping off her clothes, Laura stepped into the shower and stood under the hot, stinging spray for a long time. As she dried off, she noted several bruises on her body. Reminders of the enthusiastic love-making with the man now sleeping two floors below her. She dressed and began packing her bags. As she transferred her things from the small clutch purse she had used the night before to her large, everyday bag, she turned her cell phone on. Another message from that detective in Fresno. She was becoming annoying.

Laura sighed and surveyed the room, making sure she hadn't forgotten anything. It was time, she knew. Time to go back home. She would talk to that detective and then she would take her father out of that nursing home. She would take care of him herself. It was time.

She had finally realized, on the day her mother died, that she had to do something about her father. She had been so exhausted. The Hospice nurses had been telling her for two weeks that it could happen any minute. Laura hadn't slept more than an hour or two at night for those two weeks. Her mother was in so much pain, she would cry out and Laura would stumble from her bed to tend to her. Give her more medication, change her diaper, turn her, and wipe her mouth. And always, right on her heels, was her father.

He followed her everywhere she went. She would finish with her mother and turn around, only to trip over her father. When she tried to cook, she had to constantly move him aside so that he wouldn't get burned. In the laundry room, as she put more of her mother's soiled bed linens in to wash, he would follow her in and crowd her. She had to lock the bathroom door when she took a shower, or he would follow her in there, as well. Laura was beginning to feel like she was suffocating.

She had been sitting in a chair next to her mother's bed that last day. It was quiet and the house was warm. Laura dozed off, her head lolling against the back of the chair. She started awake as her father entered the room, banging a golf club against the door as he passed through.

"It's almost tee time," he said. "I need to get going."

"There's no golf today, Dad," she said wearily. "You're going to break something with that thing."

She stood to take the club from him and he smiled at her, recognition suddenly lighting his face.

"Well, aren't you a pretty little thing."

As quickly as it had occurred, the recognition was gone. It was replaced by the familiar blank smile. And just as quickly, Laura was filled with rage. She couldn't remember ever feeling that much anger in her entire life. It boiled up inside her, so thick and palpable that she could taste it like bile on her tongue.

Stupid, silly, demented, old man! He couldn't remember anything. He couldn't remember his wife, dying in that bed just five feet away. He couldn't remember his daughter or the hell her life had been. But he remembered golf. He remembered that cloying phrase that had been intended, she supposed, to make her feel special all of her life. He hadn't resisted as she pulled the club from his hands.

Laura took a deep breath and shook her head, pushing the memories of that day away. She didn't have time for this now. She needed to get back. It was time to take care of her father once and for all.

CHAPTER 20

Liz sat flipping through Armen Bedrosian's file, hoping something would jump out at her that she had missed. She had asked for permission to fly to Las Vegas, but knew the department was not going to pay for her trip, just to stake out Laura Bedrosian's hotel room. She had no evidence of a crime and the lieutenant pushing her to close the case and move on. She could turn over the charges Laura had made on her father's credit cards to the court overseeing the conservatorship. It would be up to them whether to pursue it.

Her phone rang, jerking her from her reverie.

"This is Detective Roberts."

"Detective Roberts, this is Miriam Davis."

"Miriam Davis? Oh, yes! Thank you for calling back, Ms. Davis."

"What is this about?"

"Are you the daughter of Armen and Maria Bedrosian?"

"Yes, I am. Why?"

"Well, your father was found wandering around the Fresno Fair last week. He was confused and dehydrated and was taken to the hospital."

"Is he all right?"

"Yes, he's fine now. He's been transferred back to the nursing home. But I'm trying to get in touch with your sister. Have you spoken to her in the last week?"

"My sister?"

"Laura."

"I don't have a sister."

Liz paused for a moment and then asked, "Ms. Davis, how long has it been since you saw your father?"

"It's been...a long time. His second wife cut off contact between us when I moved out."

"Oh, I see. Well, you have a sister named Laura. She's been taking care of your father and his estate."

"Well, she must not be taking care of him all that well, if he was wandering around a crowded fair all by himself. He's nearly eighty years old."

"That's the thing," Liz told her. "I haven't been able to find out how he came to be there because I haven't been able to talk to Laura. I didn't realize that you two had never met. I was hoping you had spoken with her."

"I'm sorry I can't be of any help. I need to get back to work now. Goodbye."

Liz stared at the phone for a moment before hanging up. Miriam Davis claimed that her stepmother had cut off contact between her and her father, yet she had shown no interest in knowing anything about him. She shook her head and put the phone back in its cradle. It rang almost immediately.

"Detective Roberts."

"Oh, Detective! This is Henrietta McDaniel."

"Yes, Mrs. McDaniel, what can I do for you?"

"Laura is back."

"She's at the house now?"

"No, she left a little while ago. She must have gotten in last night, but I didn't see or hear anything. I saw her backing her car out of the driveway this morning and I went over to talk to her."

"Where did she say she had been?"

"She didn't, really. She just said that she had been on a little vacation. Her phone was turned off, so she didn't get any of her messages until she got home last night."

"Did she say anything about her father?"

"She said she was very upset about what had happened and that she was going to Garden Manor to get to the bottom of it."

"So she was on her way to the nursing home when you talked to her?"

"I think so. I told her that you were trying to get in touch with her and she said she had some messages from you. She said she would talk to you after she checked on her father."

"All right. Well, thank you for calling, Mrs. McDaniel."

Laura Bedrosian was back from Las Vegas. It sounded as if she didn't know what had happened to her father, but Liz knew Laura had been at the fair with him. Liz pulled out her cell phone and began to dial Laura Bedrosian's number, when the phone on the desk rang again. Annoyed, she hit the "end" button and set her cell phone down.

"Roberts."

"Is this Detective Roberts?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"This is Jack Teague from Bedrosian Ford. I just wanted to let you know that Laura came in this morning. She just left a few minutes ago."

"She didn't stay at work?"

"No, she said that she needed to straighten out this mess with her father, and asked for a personal day."

"Did she say how she was going to straighten it out?"

"No, but she said that she is not happy with the care he has been getting at that nursing home. I told her that you were trying to reach her and she said she would call you after she takes care of her father."

Liz sighed. "OK. Thank you, Mr. Teague. Please let me know if you hear from her again."

Liz put the phone down and picked up her cell phone. She dialed Laura's number and it went directly to voice mail. She left a message and asked her to call as soon as possible. Thirty minutes later, her desk phone rang again.

"Detective Roberts."

"Detective, this is Dori Taylor at Garden Manor Care Home."

"Let me guess, Ms. Taylor...Laura Bedrosian has been there."

"Yes she has, and she's very upset. I've never seen her like this. Laura is always so pleasant and polite to the staff. But she stormed in here this morning, accusing Mark of losing her father at the fair and just leaving him there."

"She says that Mark took him to the fair?"

"Yes, it's just bizarre. Of course, Mark didn't take him. He was working here that day and was here for his entire shift. Several staff members saw Laura taking her father out. I don't understand why she is saying these things."

"What else did she say?"

"She said that she is not going to leave him here, where he is obviously being neglected...or worse. She told me that she is going to take him out and place him in another facility. She said she would be back this afternoon to pick him up and to have all of his things packed and ready to go. I just don't understand this. Armen Bedrosian has received excellent care here. For her to start throwing around accusations like that..."

"It must be very frustrating. How did she act with her father?"

"That's the strangest part...she didn't even go in to see him. She just came to my office and yelled, made these wild accusations, ordered me to make sure he was ready to leave when she gets back, and then she stormed out. She never even went back to her father's room."

"Did she say where she was going next?"

"No, but I assume she is out looking at other facilities."

"OK, thank you, Ms. Taylor. Let me know when she comes back for her father."

"I will. I just wish there was some way to stop her from taking him out...at least for today. She just doesn't seem...right."

Liz called Laura's phone again and again it went to voice mail. She hung up and sat back, thinking about the phone calls she had received. Laura's mother was schizophrenic...was that genetic? Was it possible that Laura was beginning to exhibit the symptoms of her mother's disorder?

There was nothing more she could do at the moment, except wait for Laura to call her back. For the next two hours, she tried to concentrate on catching up on paperwork. She made a few phone calls and tracked down some records on other cases she was working. Finally, she walked over to the sergeant.

"Hey, Sarge, I think I'm going to take a run over to Coalinga."

"What for?"

"I just really want to talk to Laura Bedrosian before I close this case. I've gotten calls this morning and I know she's back in town. She told the nursing home that she was going back this afternoon to take her father out. She's not returning my calls, so I thought I'd go wait for her there."

"All right, but don't spend any more time on this than you have to."

"I won't. Thanks, Sarge."

Liz went back to her desk and gathered her keys and the file on Armen. She gave a disgusted sigh as her phone rang.

"Roberts."

"Hey, Roberts," said the officer at the front desk. "There's a woman here, asking to see you. Name's Laura Bedrosian."

CHAPTER 21

"Please have a seat, Ms. Bedrosian," Liz said.

She had decided to take Laura into an interview room, which was less intimidating than the interrogation rooms. She looked the younger woman over as she settled into a chair and pulled it closer to the table. Laura was very business-like in a dark blue skirt and matching jacket over a white shirt. Low-heeled, sensible, pumps completed the look.

"I need to make this clear," Liz told her. "This is only an interview. I am just gathering information about your father and how he came to be at the fair. You are not under arrest and you are free to leave at any time. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," she answered.

"To be honest," Liz confided as she settled into a chair across the table, "I'm not even sure that a crime has been committed."

"Well, I'm sure," Laura exclaimed.

"You're sure a crime has been committed?"

"I suppose you are the expert on the law," Laura admitted. "But certainly it has to be a crime when that nursing home takes my father on a field trip, without my permission, and then loses him."

"OK, let's back up a bit. Now, last Wednesday, your father was found wandering around the fair by himself. Are you saying that the staff of Garden Manor Care Home took him there and then left without him?"

"How else would he have gotten there? He certainly didn't escape, walk seventy miles, and then pay for a ticket to the Fresno Fair. Someone had to have taken him."

"Now here's where I'm confused," Liz said. "The staff at the nursing home said that you checked your father out Wednesday morning, in order to take him to the fair."

"They're lying," Laura said firmly. "They have to now, don't they? They have screwed up and now they have to try to cover themselves."

"So you are telling me that you did not check your father out of the nursing home and take him to the fair?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

Liz pulled a photocopy out of the file and laid it on the table.

"But they say that you signed their book...is that your signature?"

Laura looked at it briefly before saying with a sniff, "No...it's a forgery."

"I see. Here are pictures from the security cameras of your father entering the fair grounds. This person with him...is that you?"

"No, it isn't. It doesn't look anything like me. It's probably one of the girls from the nursing home."

"Well, here's my problem. I have a vendor at the fair that saw you there with your father and sold lemonade to you...and said that you were wearing the clothing in those security camera pictures."

"She must have seen my picture and was confused, that's all. There are a couple of girls working at that nursing home who are about my height and build. She must see hundreds, or thousands, of people a day."

"Yes, well, you're right there," Liz murmured. "Now...where have you been since last Wednesday? How is it that you didn't know about your father's disappearance?"

"I took a long weekend vacation. The last few years have been very stressful and I needed to relax. I spent a couple of days at the coast and then I drove to Las Vegas for a couple of nights. I just needed to unwind. That's why I didn't have my phone on and didn't get all those messages about my father. I assumed, incorrectly it seems, that he was safe and well-cared for."

"It must have been frightening when you got all those messages."

"It was. I'm just so relieved that he wasn't seriously hurt. Once I get him out of that place and settled elsewhere, I will be speaking with my lawyer about a possible lawsuit. It's just unforgivable that they would be so negligent with a confused elderly person entrusted to their care."

"You know, once we had learned your father's identity, I spoke with people who knew him and knew you. Everyone mentioned how difficult it has been for you, with your mother's cancer and your father's dementia. But they all commented on how devoted you are to your father."

"Well, yes." Laura relaxed a bit. "It's very hard to see one's parent losing his faculties; to have to take care of the person who had always been the caretaker."

"The staff at the nursing home said that you visit him every day."

"Of course. I had to make sure my Daddy was getting good care. Of course, we see what happened when I relaxed my vigil and left town."

"Right, right..." Liz shuffled through some more papers in the file. "Now...uh...it looks like you used your father's credit cards for your vacation."

"Excuse me?" Laura sat up straight. "How do you know that? Were...were you tracking my father's credit cards?" She frowned at Liz. "And who authorized you to do that?"

"Well, you have to understand," Liz said apologetically. "Once I learned who your father was, and I wasn't able to locate you...and of course, I had the supervisor at the nursing home telling me that you were with your father that morning...well, I had to consider the possibility that something had happened to you. So, naturally I checked the bank accounts and credit cards for both you and your father, just in case someone had taken you against your will and had accessed your funds."

"Oh. I see. Of course." Laura relaxed again. "I used his credit cards because they had a higher limit. I am, of course, going to itemize how much of that money was my salary for being his conservator. And the rest I will pay back. It's something my father has always done...let me use his credit cards."

"I understand. It's like the new cars he always bought for you...and which you bought for yourself from his funds last year."

"Yes," Laura replied warily. "My father has always been very generous with me. I am very careful with his money. These are things he would want, things he has always done for me."

"Now," Liz abruptly changed the subject. "Your next-door neighbor mentioned that you had been kidnapped when you were thirteen. I looked into that...to see if there could be a connection, of course." She set some old newspaper clippings about the kidnapping on the table. "That must have been very traumatic."

Some emotion flickered over Laura's face at the mention of the kidnapping. It was over before Liz even registered the change, and her attitude returned to the indignant, faintly condescending one she had come in with.

"It was traumatic," she said smoothly. "But it was a long time ago and, as you can see, it had nothing to do with my father getting lost. That was pure incompetence and negligence by the nursing home."

"She also told me about your mother's mental illness. You haven't had an easy life, Laura. May I call you Laura?"

"I suppose," she answered, leaving no doubt that she did not like the familiarity. "It's true that I haven't had an easy life, but there is no point in complaining about it or dwelling on it."

"She said that your mother chased you with a knife."

Laura shifted in her seat. "Yes, that happened a couple of times. But...my father took care of it. He sent my mother to the hospital for treatment and she got better."

"So your father protected you. It sounds like he was a great father...generous, protective. Mrs. McDaniel said he paid the ransom when you were kidnapped."

"Yes," Laura said as she gathered together the papers Liz had spread out on the table, putting them into a neat pile and laying them back down in front of her. "Dad was great. A wonderful father."

"And a good husband, to keep your mother at home all those years. Some men might have just packed her off to a mental institution and left her there, especially after she showed violent tendencies towards her own child. But he kept her at home."

"No, Daddy wouldn't do that. He's a good man."

"Of course some might say that it was foolish to leave his young daughter alone with a mentally ill mother who had already attacked her twice."

"He made sure I was all right," she said defensively. "He sent her away and she got treatment. And he made sure I had a safe place to go to."

"The pantry, yes. I saw it."

"You were in my house?!"

"Well, yes...remember, I thought I might be investigating your disappearance."

"You know, none of this has anything to do with my father getting lost...."

"No, of course not. But I feel like I got to know you and your father over the last week. Everyone I talked to told me that he just doted on you. They said nothing was too good for Armen's little girl. He always bought the best of everything for you."

"Yes, he did. Now, about that nursing home and their negligence..."

"Oh, I'll be looking into that, of course. Now, the strange thing is that Ms. Taylor said that you told her it was a tradition for you to go to the fair with your father."

"Well, of course she will say that. She is going with this lie that I took my father, so she has to make the story look good."

"So it wasn't a tradition?"

"Well...yes...it was, when I was a child, as it is with many children and their parents. But I haven't gone to the fair in years."

"Because Mrs. McDaniel told me the same thing. She said she talked to you that morning and that you said you were going to take your father to the fair."

"No...uh...that's not...You know, Mrs. McDaniel is getting senile herself. We may have talked that morning about the fair. In fact, that's right...we did talk about it. I was just being sentimental and reminiscing about all the times Daddy took me to the fair. She...um...yes...She just got confused when she heard that he was found at the fair and thought I said I was taking him. But, no...that's not what I told her."

"Mrs. McDaniel is getting up there in years, I suppose," Liz said. "I guess it makes sense that she got a little confused with her facts." She covertly watched the other woman as she pretended to study her notebook. Laura's cool composure had slipped a bit and Liz wanted to see if she could make it slip a little more. "Of course, your boss also told me that you were taking your father to the fair on Wednesday."

"I don't understand why you keep asking me about the fair." Laura's fingers were playing with her purse in her lap, opening and snapping it shut. "You said yourself that you don't know if there was even a crime. Can I go now?"

"Oh, you can go any time you like, just as I told you before."

"Then I think I would like to leave now."

Laura stood up and nervously brushed the wrinkles from her skirt and jacket. She turned and walked to the door.

"I am curious about something, though," Liz said. Laura stopped with her hand on the doorknob and looked back at her. "Of course, this has nothing to do with what happened last week at the fair. But Mrs. McDaniel said that your mother chased you with a knife twice and you said it happened a couple of times. But...your ex-husband said it happened a lot while you were growing up."

Laura released the doorknob and turned slowly to face Liz, her face pale.

"My ex....David?" Her voice was soft, almost a whisper. "You talked to David?"

"Yes, I did," Liz told her, flipping the page on her notebook. "He said that your mother chased you with the knife many times, and that it was just those two times that your father wasn't able to hide it." She looked up at Laura.

"David told you that?"

"Yes, he did. Which was it? And if it happened a lot, why would your father leave you alone with a violent woman?"

"No...it wasn't like that. David...he...misunderstood." Laura took a few steps closer to the table. "What...what else did David say?"

"He said that you went to his house and told him you are free now and want to get back together."

Tears filled her eyes and threatened to spill. She shakily lowered herself into the chair.

"He...why would he tell you that? That...it had nothing to do...he shouldn't have..."

"He just seemed to want to talk," Liz told her. "He also told me that your father was very controlling."

"Dad...he just...David didn't understand how it was with Dad. He just wanted the best for us."

"Like telling you where to live and when you were ready to have children?"

Laura gave her wounded look. "I couldn't move away...Daddy needed me. And...he was right about the children. We...we weren't ready. I tried to make David understand, but..."

"Well, he also told me that your father wasn't the only problem you two had in your marriage," Liz said, looking embarrassed. She took a deep breath and tried a bluff. "He told me about...the other problem. You know," she lowered her voice. "The sex."

Two tears trickled down Laura's cheeks. "Why would he talk about that? I never...just because there were problems...we could have gotten help. I would have done anything for him."

"Anything except move to New York."

"I couldn't! Daddy needed me...to help him with his business, to help take care of my mother. I couldn't just forget everything my father had done for me and leave him alone."

"It would have been ungrateful...is that right?"

"He gave me the best of everything, he protected me from my crazy mother my whole life. He paid fifty thousand to the kidnappers...he saved my life!"

"So you owed him."

"Yes, of course...I owed him everything."

"David just didn't understand."

"No," Laura said, tears falling freely now. "David never understood."

Liz pushed a box of tissues across the table and Laura gratefully took one. She wiped her tear-streaked cheeks.

"He didn't understand that he should be grateful for the help your father offered...like buying a house for you."

"Daddy was so insulted and hurt when David refused."

"And was he insulted when David turned down the money he offered to stay married to you?"

"What?" Laura looked at Liz with surprise. "What money? What are you talking about?"

"David told me that on your wedding day, your father and his lawyer offered him a...contract. Your father would pay David five hundred thousand dollars for every ten years he stayed married to you. You didn't know about it?"

"That...that's not true. Daddy wouldn't do that."

Liz shrugged. "It's exactly what your ex-husband told me."

"You're lying."

"Am I lying about the other things David told me?" She set her cell phone on the table. "We can call David to confirm, if you like."

Laura stared at Liz in silence for several long moments, her face pale. Liz didn't move, barely dared to breathe. She didn't know where this was leading, but she knew she was seeing the first glimpse of true emotion in Laura and she didn't want to break the spell.

"That stupid, stupid, old man," Laura whispered.

CHAPTER 22

"Why couldn't he just leave us alone?" Laura stood and paced agitatedly around the room, twisting the wet tissue in her hands. "David and I would have been fine if he had just left us alone. That demented old man ruins everything."

"David didn't take the money," Liz told her.

"No, no...he wouldn't. David is too good and principled. Turning down that money and turning down the house...Dad would have never forgiven him for those insults."

"Is that why your father convinced you not to move to the coast, or to New York? To punish David for refusing his help?"

"Oh, that was just an added benefit," Laura said resentfully.

"He was never going to let me move so far away. He was never going to let me have my own life."

"Because he needed your help."

"My help," she repeated, sliding into the chair. "Yes, he needed my help. Because there are no other accountants in the entire county who could possibly take care of his books."

"And your mother," Liz added. "You said he needed your help to take care of your mother."

Laura gave a bitter laugh.

"Well, I took care of my mother." She looked at Liz, her eyes burning with anger. "He had no right. David loved me and I loved him. And Dad couldn't stand that."

"I suppose most fathers are jealous of their daughters' husbands. But you said he only wanted what was best for you."

"He didn't care about what was best for me...he only cared about what I could give him."

"Help with his business and with your mother."

"He said I owed him." Laura stared at her hands folded on the table. "He said I owed him for all the things he has given me, for taking care of me when my mother couldn't, for protecting me and saving my life." Laura's voice was almost a whisper. "For taking his wife away from him."

"I don't understand," Liz said. "How did you take his wife away?"

"She had her first psychotic break after I was born. He said having me is what drove her crazy."

"He...blamed you for your mother's mental illness?"

"He said it was my fault and so it was my responsibility to take care of her, and to take care of him."

"Take care of him," Liz asked.

"Take care of his needs...because my mother couldn't anymore."

"Oh..." Liz stared at her. "Are you saying your father molested you?"

"He said it was the least I could do, since it was my fault my mother couldn't do it anymore."

"When did it start," Liz asked quietly.

"When I was thirteen."

"When did it stop?"

"Stop?" Tears slid down Laura's face and she reached for another tissue. "When he couldn't remember how anymore."

Liz gaped at her, mouth open in shock. "Are you saying that it...continued...after you were an adult, after you were married?"

"He said just because I had a husband didn't make me any less responsible for him."

"But why would you continue to go along with it? He didn't have power over you anymore."

Laura gave her hopeless look and began shredding the tissues. "Power? He always had the power. Don't you understand? I owed him. He gave me everything."

"Didn't you ever try telling someone, an adult? Maybe a teacher? Or your mother...did you ever try to tell your mother?"

"My mother?!" Laura abruptly stood and resumed pacing. "My mother...what was she going to do? She couldn't take care of herself, let alone me. Do you really think she was going to have my father sent to jail and go to work and support me on her own?"

"Parents can surprise you," Liz said softly. "If she had known what was happening to you, she might have protected you."

"Protect me," Liz said furiously. She stopped her pacing and glared at Liz. "My mother protect me?! She didn't even protect me from the kidnappers...you think she was going to protect me from my father?"

"What do you mean?"

"When that man had me on the floor, tying my arms behind me, I was screaming for my mother. I screamed, 'Mommy! Help me, Mommy!' I had just come from her room when the doorbell rang. She was awake and her door was open...just down the hallway. I couldn't see her room from where he had me on the floor, but I could hear. I heard her close the door and lock it." Laura put her hands on the table. "Do you understand what I'm telling you? Her thirteen year old daughter was being kidnapped and was screaming for help and she locked her bedroom door. That woman was not going to save me from my own father."

"My father is the one who saved me," Laura continued. "He paid the ransom and got me back. And the night I came home was the first time he...."

"He molested you the night you were released from your kidnappers," Liz asked incredulously.

"Well, he did pay a lot of money for me." Laura slid tiredly into the chair. "He came to my room that night and said he knew that I was probably afraid to sleep alone, so he would stay with me. Then he got into bed with me. I was almost asleep when he started...touching me. When I tried to pull away, he just started talking and talking. He said \$50,000 was a lot of money, more than he had ever spent on me before, and he had spent a lot of money on me my whole life. He talked about how my mother was perfectly sane before she had me and they had a normal sex life. But after she had me, she went crazy and now they hardly ever had sex. So now that I was old enough, it was my responsibility to take care of his needs...since it was my fault that my mother couldn't. He reminded me of all the times she had tried to hurt me and how he always rescued me and sent her away for a while." She used her hands to sweep the shredded pieces of tissue into a pile. "Finally I just closed my eyes as tight as I could and tried to think about walking along the beach until he...finished. That's how it always was...I just closed my eyes and imagined I was on the beach."

"So all those years, he claimed to be protecting you, but he never sent her away permanently," Liz commented.

"Oh no...he liked it when I was scared. When I was little and he would come home and find me hiding in the pantry, he would make a big fuss of finding me and hugging me and staying in my room while I fell asleep. It must have made him feel powerful to find me in that pantry. Of course," she added, "my mother was afraid of the pantry, but my father wasn't. After that night, I sometimes tried hiding from him in there, but he always came and got me. He used to lie and say my mother threatened to kill herself, just so he could have her committed for seventy-two hours...to give us privacy, he said."

"My god," Liz said. "Looking at him now, it's hard to believe he could have been capable of...that."

"Yeah," Laura agreed. "Everyone sees him as this sweet, little old man who talks about golf all the time. I guess maybe that's all that's left of him. But when I look at him, I see him for who he is, the monster he was my entire life. 'Pretty little thing,' that's what he called me. It made me feel special when I was little. But then after...he always said it when he...."

"So offering your husband \$500,000 for every ten years of marriage...that's \$50,000 a year. The same amount that he paid to your kidnappers."

Tears began flowing down Laura's face again.

"Yes, paying for me year after year. I'm sure he enjoyed his little inside joke, that evil bastard. But I got the last laugh."

"How?"

Liz looked at her curiously. Laura bit her trembling bottom lip, and then stuck her chin out defiantly.

"He always wanted me to take care of her...so I took care of her. We both took care of her."

Liz felt a chill run down her spine.

"What do you mean you 'took care of her,' Laura?"

"It was her own fault, really."

"What was her fault?"

Laura looked up and held Liz's gaze, all trace of tears gone.

"She wouldn't die. I took care of her for two years and the last six months I did everything for her. I bathed her and cleaned up her poop and her vomit. I fed her and gave her all of her medications. The nurses had been telling me for two solid weeks that she could go at any time. But she just kept lingering and lingering. She kept me up all night and Dad followed me everywhere I went. He even tried to climb in bed with me one night...as though he could do anything.

"That last day, I was sitting by my mother's bed. I was so freaking tired...she had kept me up all night. I had just dozed off and my father came in with one of his golf clubs, banging the door. I woke up and there they were, this idiot old man and crazy old woman who had made my entire life miserable. Dad started babbling on about golf and then he looked right at me and said, 'Well, aren't you a pretty little thing.' My mother was awake, lying there looking at us. All of a sudden I wanted her to know...before she died I wanted her to know.

"I took the golf club from Dad and I pointed it at her. 'Do you know, Mommy, what your husband has been doing to his pretty little thing all these years? Do you know?' She was loopy from the pain medication, but she looked right at me and said, 'Yes, I know.' I wanted so badly to take that club and bash her face in with it. But then I had a better idea. I put it down and pulled Dad over next to her. I got one of her pillows and put it in Dad's hands, with my hands over his. Then I pushed it over her face. She grabbed my wrist with one of her hands and tried to pull it off, but she was so thin and weak by then...."

Liz and Laura stared at each other for several long, silent moments. This was not what Liz had expected at all.

"Then what happened," she finally managed to say.

"We stood there, Dad and I, holding the pillow, until she finally stopped struggling and just...went to sleep."

"You...killed your mother."

Laura shrugged. "She was dying anyway, but she was taking too long. I was tired of waiting. So Dad and I did what we have always done...we took care of her. Together."

"Did your father understand what had happened?"

"He didn't even look at her. He just picked up his golf club and wandered out of the room."

"I...I don't understand. Your father is the one who molested you."

"It was all her fault," Laura said, her voice cold. "If she had just been normal, if she had just been a real wife to my father, he wouldn't have had to do it."

"So, after your mother's...death...you found a nice facility for him."

"Only the best for my Dad. He always gave me the best and now it's my turn to give him the best."

"I noticed there are no pictures of your mother, either in the house or in your father's room."

"I have no desire to remember her. And she made Dad's life miserable...he's better off not remembering."

"And taking him to the fair last week?"

"I told you, I didn't take him."

"No, see...when I told you about the vendor who saw you there, you said she was mistaken. I never mentioned that it was a girl. She remembers you and your father very well. She remembers what you were wearing. And when I get a search warrant for your house, I suspect I'm going to find those clothes." Liz shook her head. "You just admitted to killing your mother, Laura. Why are you still lying about leaving your father at the fair?"

Laura didn't answer right away. Her fingers spread the shredded tissues out and gathered them back together.

"I shouldn't have left him there. That was an impulse. I should have stuck with my original plan."

"What was that?"

"I took him to the fair...one last time. He always took me when I was growing up. Then I was going to drive him over to the coast, somewhere along Big Sur. I was going to find a deserted stretch of beach and at dusk I was going to take him down to the beach. We were going to eat hotdogs down there and watch the surf."

She stopped and Liz waited for her to go on. Finally she asked, "Then what?"

"Then," Laura said with a sigh. "I was going to leave him on the beach, get in my car, and drive back to Coalinga."

"You were just going to leave him alone on a deserted beach at night? He could have drowned, fallen on the rocks."

"I know. I didn't care. My mother was gone and I just wanted him gone, too."

They sat in silence for a long time. Liz had wanted the truth. She had suspected Laura abandoned her father and intended to empty his bank accounts. She had not expected this. Pulling her handcuffs from her belt, Liz stood up.

"Laura Bedrosian," she said. "You are under arrest...for murder."

CHAPTER 23

Liz watched the scenery rush by as she drove along Highway 145. Grapes, cotton, almonds...all the crops supporting the San Joaquin Valley. It had been two weeks since she arrested Laura Bedrosian. The District Attorney was asking for an order to exhume Lily Bedrosian's body for an autopsy...something that hadn't been done at the time of her death because she was terminally ill and under the care of a doctor. Her death had been expected and imminent, so it had raised no red flags. Laura's lawyer was already floating Post Traumatic Stress as a defense in the press, while also working to have her confession suppressed.

In that two weeks, Armen's oldest daughter, Miriam, had surfaced. With Laura's arrest, Fresno County had secured guardianship of the confused man. Miriam arrived in town and petitioned the court for guardianship and permission to take him home with her. It had been granted and Miriam made arrangements to take her father with her to Maine. Liz was on her way to Coalinga to see them before they left.

It had also been just over two weeks since her discussion with Steve about her mother. Stacy had called once to ask her about going to see their mother on her birthday. Liz told her she would think about it, but couldn't promise anything. Stacy called once more to tell her what time she and her family would be taking cake and presents to the nursing home, but she didn't ask Liz to go again. Steve had not brought it up again, either, until that morning.

"Today's your mother's birthday, isn't it," he asked casually and let it drop.

She parked in the Garden Manor parking lot and made her way through the facility to the Alzheimer's unit. She punched in the code and pushed through the door.

"Excuse me, miss, have you seen my husband, Mr. Hirsch? I've been waiting for him to come and get me."

Mrs. Hirsch was sitting in the same spot as the last time Liz had been there, although she was wearing different clothes.

"No, Ma'am, I haven't seen him," she told the woman. "But if I do, I'll let him know you are waiting for him."

"Thank you, dear."

Liz walked down the hallway to Armen's room and paused in the doorway. A woman, Miriam Davis she presumed, was putting folded clothing into a suitcase that was open on the bed. Her back was to the doorway, so she hadn't seen Liz yet. Armen was standing with a putter, lining up a shot with an imaginary ball.

Liz watched him for a moment, trying to reconcile this smiling, friendly old man with the monster that Laura said she grew up with. Was she telling the truth, or did she make it up to explain abandoning him? Her emotion and story seemed believable, and there was no reason for her to confess to killing her mother...that would never have even been investigated. Armen caught sight of her and smiled broadly.

"Well, hello there," he said. "You're just in time! We're about to tee off."

Miriam turned to see who he was talking to. She was in her early fifties, if Liz remembered correctly, average height. Her dark hair had several streaks of gray in it.

"Ms. Davis? I'm Detective Liz Roberts." Liz stepped into the room and showed her badge to Miriam. "We talked on the phone a couple of weeks ago." She turned to Armen and shook his hand. "Hello, Armen. It's good to see you again."

"Oh yes, Detective Roberts...I remember. You were the detective working on my father's case. You arrested his daughter, or so I've been told."

Liz noted the reference to Laura as "his daughter," rather than "my sister." She supposed it was natural, since Miriam didn't even know she had a sister until two weeks ago. Liz wondered if Laura had known about her father's first family.

"I see you are about ready to go," she told the woman.

"Yes, we are driving to LA today. I have some cousins there I haven't seen in a long time. I know Dad won't remember them, but it's nice to touch base with family. Our flight leaves in the morning."

"That's quite a long trip to undertake with someone in your father's condition."

"Dad's doctors have said it will be fine. They gave me medication, in case he becomes agitated and frightened." She sighed and looked at her father. "I just want him home where I can take care of him. We've missed so many years already."

"So you are going to take care of him in your home?"

"Yes," Miriam told her. "As nice as this place is, I know Dad would never have wanted to be in a nursing home. He's going to be with me now, in my home."

"Have you spoken with your sister," Liz asked.

"No, and I don't intend to. I never knew about her before you called me that day and now I have no desire to ever get to know her."

"It seems incredible that you haven't seen or talked to your father in thirty-five years."

"That was his wife's doing. As soon as I turned eighteen, she made it clear I was no longer welcome in their home...or their lives."

"Strange that your father didn't insist on staying in touch with his oldest daughter."

"I don't like to speak ill of the dead, Detective, but the truth is that my father was mesmerized by Lily and would have done anything she told him to."

"It's sad that you lost so many years with your father, especially with your mother being gone, as well. She committed suicide, didn't she?"

"Yes," Miriam replied without emotion. "My mother had suffered from depression for years and losing her husband to his young secretary...how cliché could he get? In any case, my mother sunk deeper and deeper into depression until one day she took a bottle of sleeping pills."

"How sad for you," Liz said softly. "I'm sorry."

"I wasn't very close to my mother. There were days, weeks, when she couldn't even get out of bed. I spent most of my childhood taking care of her...and my father."

Liz felt a chill of déjà vu at Miriam's words.

"You know that Laura claims your father molested her, don't you?"

"I know that's what she is saying, but she's just trying to get sympathy so she can get off on murdering her mother and abandoning her father."

"So he never...with you?"

"Dad was a wonderful father. He made sure I had everything I could need or want, and he always gave me the best that money could buy."

Miriam closed the suitcase and set it next to the door. She went to Armen and gently pulled the golf club from his hands and put it in a golf bag, also sitting next to the door.

"Come on, Daddy," she said as she took his arm. "It's time to go."

Armen looked intently at her face and then his face lit up in another smile.

"Well, now...aren't you a pretty little thing?"

Liz saw Miriam freeze and her fingers tighten on Armen's arm. It passed quickly, but Liz saw it.

"You know," Liz said, "Laura said that's what he always called her when he...molested her."

"It's just something fathers say to their daughters. It doesn't mean anything. Let's go, Daddy."

Mark appeared and Liz helped him carry the bags out to the car as Miriam led Armen. Judy, Dori, and other staff members gathered to tell him goodbye. Armen tolerated all of the tearful hugs with good humor, chuckling and patting people on the back. Miriam got him settled into the front passenger seat and buckled his seat belt. As she went around to the driver side, Liz leaned in the open window and shook Armen's hand.

"Goodbye, Armen. Take care of yourself."

Armen patted her hand and said, "It's going to be all right, honey."

Liz stared at him. Had that been a moment of clarity or just ramblings caused by misfiring neurons? She glanced over at Miriam, who was watching her father thoughtfully.

"It was my mother's idea, you know."

Liz frowned in puzzlement. "What was her idea?"

Miriam continued to look at Armen.

"I was already doing all of the cooking and cleaning and shopping, because my mother couldn't even get out of bed most days. She didn't like taking pills, so she never stayed on any of the medications for very long."

"What was her idea," Liz asked again.

"She said it was my duty. Dad gave us so much, I should be grateful. He needed relief, she said, but she was too sick."

"What are you saying, Miriam?"

"She did it for her father. She needed my help, that's all. It would be no different than ironing his shirts or cooking his dinner. He needed relief; men have needs."

Liz swallowed hard, feeling as though she were back in the interview room with Laura.

"So...what did she want you to do, Miriam?"

"To take care of my father, of his needs." She finally looked at Liz, her eyes hard. "To service him."

"And...did you?"

"I always did what my parents told me to do; I was very obedient."

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen. Two years later he announced he was in love with Lily and he wanted a divorce. Just like that, my mother was out. He moved her to a small apartment. She begged me to go with her, but why would I? What had she ever done for me? I wanted to stay with Daddy. For a year, she kept asking and asking for me to come and live with her. Finally one day, she took the sleeping pills."

"Did your father continue to...?"

"Yes, but he didn't come to me as often...after all, he had Lily."

"And Lily didn't know about it?"

"Not at first. But one weekend, not long after I graduated from high school, Dad took us camping in Yosemite. I had my own tent and Lily hadn't been feeling well all day, so Dad came to sleep in my tent...so she wouldn't get him sick, he told her. During the night, Lily walked into my tent and we were...." Miriam paused and took a deep breath. "Lily threw a fit. She said it was disgusting, we were disgusting."

"But she didn't report it and she didn't leave him?"

"No. Lily had worked hard to seduce her rich boss...she wasn't about to give him up so easily. But she certainly didn't want his daughter around as a rival for his affections. She insisted I had to leave. She never wanted to see me again and never wanted him to see me again, either."

"And your father went along with that?"

Miriam shrugged. "I always thought my mother was weak and my father was strong. I found out that Dad wasn't so strong, after all. He gave me a new car and some money. He told me I would be fine, but I could not call him or come to the house ever again."

"What did you do," Liz asked.

"I left. I went to San Francisco and found a job. I saved some money and went to school. I met my husband and we moved to Maine and had two boys. My husband passed away six years ago. My boys are married; I have grandchildren. I built a life for myself."

"You never tried to contact your father?"

"I saw how he was with my mother. Once you are out of his life, you are out for good."

"You never knew that you had a sister?"

"Not until you called. Maybe that's why Lily was sick that day, maybe she was pregnant. Or she got pregnant soon after. In any case, I didn't know."

Liz shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Leaning in the car window was making her back ache.

"Then why did you decide to come out here? Why take him back with you? Aren't you angry about what he did?"

"Angry? No. Look at him, Detective. He needs someone to take care of him."

Liz held her gaze.

"Miriam, do I need to worry about Armen's safety?"

"Of course not," Miriam replied, sounding offended. "I would never do anything to hurt my father. We really should go now; we have a long drive."

Liz stood up and backed away from the car. She watched Miriam and Armen drive away and thought about the tangled webs of mental illness and abuse that surrounded Armen Bedrosian, his wives, and his daughters.

One of the administrative assistants at the police station had small poster pinned up in her cubicle that said: "Be nice to your children. They will choose your nursing home." Or, Liz thought, the children you abused will one day be in complete control of your care and your resources.

"God and I thought my family was messed up," she muttered to herself as she got in her car and drove away.

Maybe Stacy really had found a way to forgive and move on, as she was always preaching to Liz. She had grown up in the same house. Stacy didn't deny the abuse that had happened, nor did she dwell on it. She acknowledged it without excusing it, and then managed to maintain a relationship with their mother. Stacy was also an excellent mother to her own children; she had broken the cycle. Maybe her baby sister really did have all the answers.

Liz reached for her phone and dialed Steve's number.

"Do you have any plans this afternoon," she asked when he answered.

"No...why?"

“I thought we might take a ride to Kingsburg.”

The afternoon sun was warm as Steve parked in the parking lot, but there was a hint of the fall to come. Liz walked through the hallways of the nursing home holding Steve’s hand, a bouquet of lilies in her other hand.

“Aunt Lizzy!”

Liz’s niece and nephew ran across the room and hurled themselves at her. She hugged them and smiled at Stacy and her husband.

The woman huddled in the wheelchair was a shrunken version of the mother who had wielded that hated belt when Liz was a child. The tremors gave her the appearance of being cold. She turned her head to see who had come in and a smile creased her face.

“Lizzy!”

Liz walked over and leaned down to kiss her wrinkled cheek.

“Happy Birthday, Ma. There’s someone here I want you to meet.”

Authors' Biographies

Don Canaan

Don Canaan went from a Bronx tenement to success in television news film, immigration to Israel, return to the U.S. and then print journalism.

He edited news film and documentaries for NBC News in New York, receiving a joint editorial commendation (as Donald Swerdlow) for Producer Fred Freed's "American White Paper: Organized Crime in the United States." In 1974, Canaan immigrated to Israel as part of an American group planning to found and settle the new city of Yamit in the Sinai, north of El Arish (an area that is now part of Egypt).

Ohio State University's School of Journalism offered Canaan an offer to earn a master's degree while serving as an instructor in its TV news workshop.

Canaan was later hired as staff writer and photographer for The American Israelite in Cincinnati where he enterprised many stories. His series, "Jews in Ohio's Prisons: Does Anybody Care?" received first place recognition for best weekly journalism in Ohio from the State of Ohio Bar Association.

It is available for the Kindle at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0057Q222G>.

A compilation of his newspaper articles, "The Cracker Barrel." is available at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B005C1GMS6>

Canaan is the author of "Horror in Hocking County" (a true-crime documentation of alleged satanic murders, available from Kindle at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0035RPHN0>, as well as in an audiobook version.

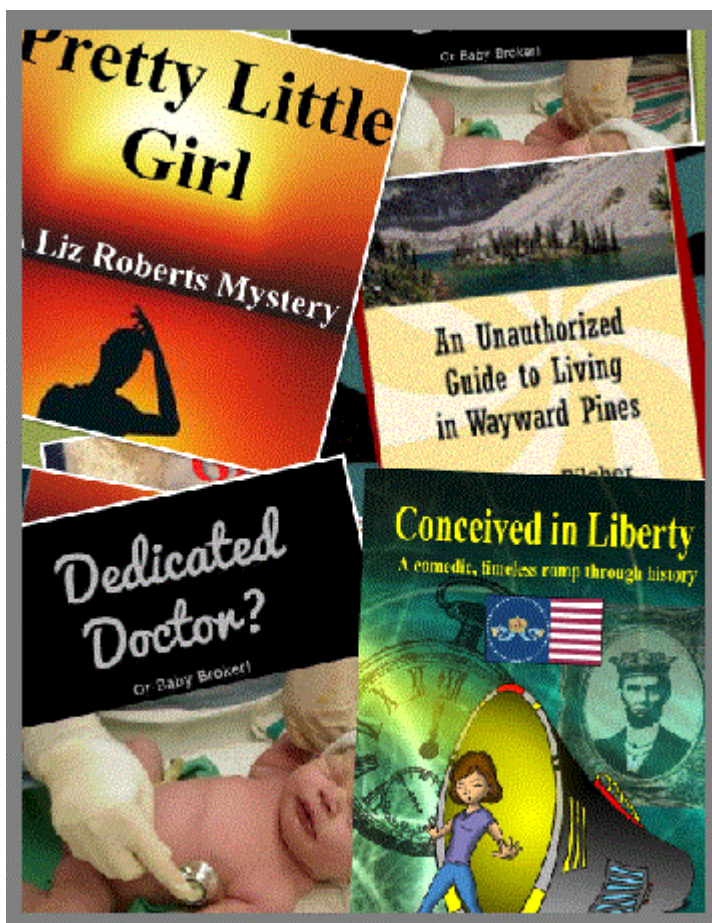
Canaan is the co-author, along with Marcia Swerdlow Koski of a children's book, "Miss Rainbow and the Magic Teapot," at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00507CXKS>.

His latest books include "Daddy's Girl" (the prequel to Pretty Little Girl) and "The Baby Thief, (which I hope you have enjoyed reading. Opening chapters from "Pretty Little Girl" may be found following these biographies,

Canaan has also written "An Unauthorized Guide to Living in Wayward Pines" and "Conceived in Liberty" (A comedic, time-traveling romp through the history of the Union of Royal American States--our monarchy as founded by Benedict Arnold who defeated the traitorous General George Washington).

The opening chapter of "Conceived in Liberty" follows the opening chapter of "Pretty Little Girl." These books and others are available from <http://tinyurl.com/CanaanAuthor>

For a music video of Pretty Little Girl, please visit <https://youtu.be/hVQh5Hm9Lsg>. Pretty Little Girl, The Baby Thief (listed as "Dedicated Doctor or Baby Broker?" and Horror in Hocking County are also available as audiobooks



Shawn Graves

Shawn Graves was born and raised in the Central San Joaquin Valley of California where she now lives in Exeter with her youngest daughter and a slightly psychotic cat.

Except for a few years living in the Napa Valley and then Oregon, she has resided in the same area for her entire life. Graves is the mother of four adult children and grandmother to two adorable grandsons.

For the past twenty-five years, this former welfare mother has worked as a nurse in a variety of settings; hospitals, nursing homes, clinics, jails. And for the past ten years, has been employed for a county social services program. Graves is an avid reader, political and news junkie, crime show addict. and active participant in her church,

As a young, single mom, she determined that nursing was a practical career to pursue and this has proven to be very satisfying. But in recent years, Graves has rediscovered her old passion for writing and indulges it at every opportunity.

