

Chapter I

Tuesday, October 9, 1962 – Hollywood, California

The mail had just arrived but it was too early to sift through the usual notices of past due bills. I tossed the mail onto the kitchen table and walked away when I noticed a small square envelope had fallen to the floor. The L. A. postmark was dated two days earlier. My name and address were scrawled across the front in heavy strokes of black ink.

It was bold. It was direct. It was personal and the lack of a return address immediately sparked my interest. I studied the distinctive handwriting for a second or two then ripped it open.

Miss Lude, must talk, noon, October 9, at the Chester House, 12346 Canyon Rd. ~ Oliver Kurtz.

Those fourteen little words made me pull out a chair and light a cigarette. Penniless or not, I had two hours to decide if this was a prospective client and if I was desperate enough to take the bait. I studied the handwriting again as if the answer to who Oliver Kurtz was and the reason for the meeting would magically appear.

For the past couple of years, my private investigation agency operated out of a two-room suite on the second floor of an office building on Santa Monica Boulevard. Business was brisk for a while. I owed it all to the hodgepodge of cultures crammed tightly together in the self-serving caldron of crime commonly known as Hollywood. With less warning than the Andreas Fault gives before she shifts, the steady stream of paying clients quit calling. The influx of cash screeched to a halt, leaving me scouring the streets for anyone who smelled like a paying customer.

Now, my one-bedroom apartment above Zells, a hole-in-the-wall bar and grill on Highland, just north of Hollywood Boulevard, had been home for less than ten days. No one except the owner, Jimmy “Pops” Zells and the bill collectors knew where I lived. I picked up the note again and wondered how this Oliver Kurtz had found me.

By eleven o’clock, the thermometer outside the kitchen window hit 78 degrees. I was tempted to get in my car and head to Santa Monica, but the prospect of feeling the gratifying weight of cash in my pocket or spending the day at the beach wrestled hard with my logic.

I seriously considered the possibility this meeting was someone’s idea of a joke—a wild goose chase with a mysterious man as the prize. Still, I couldn’t think of a soul clever enough to have come up with such an elaborate prank. Bad joke or not, I was ready to risk the scorn for the feel of a few Ben Franklins in my hand.

Novels by crime mystery author, Marta Stephens

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