

Chapter Three

A half hour later Holly looked out the kitchen window and saw Dex Stafford get out of the Kern County Sheriff's vehicle and reach in the back for his murder kit. Nice butt. Stafford was taller than she was and that was important to her. His crisp brown hair shone in the lights that illuminated the parking lot. He looked around. Harry Price, his old partner, got out of the vehicle on the passenger side. Shanko, his current partner, could get on somebody else's nerves now. Dex called Shanko a LOP—in Department parlance a lazy cop.

Stafford looked up, saw her in the window and smiled. A report of a fresh body could mean anything from natural causes to suicide to homicide. When she first met Dex Stafford a couple of months ago, his good looks had created a sensation among the unclaimed treasures of Sierra Mountain Village single ladies. She could see now he wasn't as pretty as she'd first thought. Something about the nose flawed perfect good looks, but how important is a nose, she asked herself?

She watched as a cluster of deputies surrounded Stafford, the fire guys and paramedics drifting closer. One of the deputies asked Dex a question and he started giving orders to process the scene. What looked like confusion wasn't. Everybody knew what to do. She came outside to say hello.

Sgt. Madison thundered down the stairs to meet Stafford and Price. "Criminalists are already in Arvin, so they'll be here soon," Holly heard Stafford tell Madison.

Arvin was a spread-out town on the flats about 45 minutes away from here, home to air quality rivaling that of Beijing and New Delhi. The noxious yellow haze of pollutants blown from the north was trapped at the end of the San Joaquin Valley, circled by a ring of mountains.

Holly took a big breath at the top of the Grapevine Summit and tried not to breathe every time she hit the flatlands in Bakersfield.

If it was any of the other detectives in the department, they'd take her statement and send her home like the peon she was. Holly didn't think Stafford or Harry would do that. Dex knew she was on the board of directors in the Paws operation and involved in all its politics. He also knew she was a curious cat herself and would have a hard time keeping her nose out of the investigation. Dex's partner Harry Price had just returned from an around-the-world-trip, the gossips said unchanged. Harry wore his grey hair in a regulation flat top, beefier, a little wider in the ass, still all business. His face was so tanned he looked like an English walnut. Only a winter spent on the South Sea Island Cruise in a yacht gave you a tan like that. How could he be unchanged after everything that had happened to him?

County cars now lined the road on both sides, red and blue lights spinning on the light bars, the deputies milling around. The village was home to about 1500 people on a blustery winter afternoon in February, and doubled on a glorious holiday weekend in July when the air was full of crickets and bird song. Half of the three thousand properties were second homes owned by well-off people who lived in Bakersfield or the Los Angeles sprawl, their mountain vacation homes unoccupied much of the year. Looking out for empty houses was one of the priorities of the patrol department.

Sgt. Bill Madison who commanded the nearby Sheriff's Department substation stood at the top of the stairs leading to the parking lot outside Peach's home. He and two deputies descended the stairs to meet Harry and Dex. The long, low addition housing the cattery buildings stretched away into the shadows. The Coroner's Death investigator was on his way and he would begin the process of determining mode, manner, and cause of death.

Harry ordered the deputies to check in at the top of the hour so nothing got missed. Every murder investigation piled up reams of paper, reports, field investigation notes, photos and all the etcetera of preparing a trail leading to a suspect and a court case. Holly stood at the edge of the group, while all the *hey, how the hell are ya's* were happening. She edged down the central hallway inside until she reached an alcove opposite the treatment room where she'd have a good view. *I'm going to stay here, dammit, until somebody turfs me out.*

She watched from the shadowed alcove while Dex and Harry worked their way down the hall toward her. Neither one of them spotted her as they did their initial walk-through. The two detectives stood talking inside the room, looking around, four feet away from the body, trying to put together what happened. She could hear them talking.

"No surveillance cameras by any chance?" Harry said, looking around.

Dex laughed. "To watch hanky-panky between cats?"

"Looks like a doctor's office," Harry said peering around the treatment room.

"This is where they do simple stuff like injections. I know they have a vet and vet techs who come in all the time."

"Lotta equipment. This is a nice house," Harry said. "There's money around."

They stepped closer, hunkering down by the body.

"She's putting all her money into the cats. Holly volunteers here," Dex muttered.

"Hmmpf. Why were the lights cut?"

"I don't know. Create confusion. Make a delay. Sneak up on the guy? When did the power go off? Before or after they got him down?"

Harry's low rumble of a voice. "What makes you think there was more than one? He looks like a little old guy. What would it take? Must have got him from behind. Doesn't look like there was much of a struggle, except for this."

Price pointed to a tray of instruments and vials of vaccination fluid crashed to the floor, a standing lamp knocked over. He peered at the body, moving the edge of the cotton golf shirt upward with a ballpoint pen. The front of Farrow's shirt was a stiff carpet of dried blood.

"Ooooh, ugly," Dex said. "Knife. See it anywhere?" He got to his feet and pivoted, making a quick survey of the room.

"Nope. I think I can see three blade entries. Got it in good and twisted it up hard to make sure he hit the heart."

"Damn. Victim's wearing gloves. No epithelial cells under the fingernails."

Harry Price considered the wounds, squatted down by the body. "Froth of blood on the lips so he got a lung too. Wish he'd left the weapon for us."

"Takes skill to hit the heart with a blade, training."

"Like it's somebody he knew. If he came up behind him like in a surprise, the angle would be different."

Price gave Dex a look. "Better not let Gorman hear you speculating. He'll get all pissy if he thinks you want his job."

Dex laughed. The laugh ripped through the room. Gallows humor.

They studied the body and the wounds on Don Farrow's chest without more conversation. Stafford had told Holly last week they had new lab techniques for DNA analysis. Their own DNA could be contaminating the scene even without contact with the body, no matter

how careful they were. Breathing near the victim was enough. That's how sensitive DNA testing had become. And defense attorneys knew it too.

"Maybe it's PETA nuts, wanting to free the animals. Maybe Farrow caught them and then..." Harry said.

Holly gritted her teeth. Oh, no. Not PETA. Please, no.

"Cats? These aren't chimps. I don't know about cats," Stafford said. "I think people like this place. It's popular. That's what Holly tells me."

"Nuts are nuts, remember? We can't discount that."

"But why wouldn't they kill Peach Bryson then? She's the one that runs the place."

"Who the hell knows? Let's get a preliminary statement from her before the coroner's guy gets here."

Holly slipped out the loading dock door while they were still talking and went back in the house.

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