

Mack's sleek BMW convertible cruised through unusually light traffic during the short drive along Pacific Coast Highway. He always loved the freedom of driving next to the ocean with the top down, the faint smell of saltwater scenting the air, seagulls flying overhead or picking at garbage. He smiled remembering the image of a personalized license plate holder he once spotted proclaiming *PCH a Way of Life*.

He had learned the hard way how true that was. It was impossible to zip along PCH at a good pace on a summer weekend or holiday. Inching along bumper-to-bumper was much more likely. If you had a home along Pacific Coast Highway, you simply got used to beachgoers forming almost solid lines of traffic in both directions when the weather was nice. In fact, one was lucky to be able to drive ten miles an hour.

Mack felt it simply didn't make sense that now, over a decade later, people involved in the Strangler case were turning up dead. Moreover, none of those killings were similar. Of course possibility existed that the killer decided to experiment with different ways to eliminate perceived enemies, but that didn't make much sense either. The real question was if there truly was a connection, what triggered this rash of murders. He would be more than ready to help in any way he could after listening to Captain Jack's theories.

*Was it possible his father's murder might actually be solved after all these years, or was this really just a coincidence?*

His thoughts turned to Greta. The award-winning investigative reporter was an interesting friend. *What was she up to?* He met her when she was thought to be missing in Washington state. Her sister was afraid that she was in real trouble, and mutual friends tricked him into searching for her.

It was true he had felt some anger when he realized his friends tricked him. However, after spending a fantastic night with Greta's beautiful sister, he had agreed to help. As he suspected, Greta had been working on a story undercover—one that turned out to be an extremely dangerous story. They both could have been killed in the small town of Watson Falls, Washington.

As he drove along the highway, he thought about how his adrenalin had pumped like it had back when he was a cop, and he had really enjoyed the feeling. It was pumping like that now. Living a life with lots of money and free time was something most guys would envy, but he had to admit he missed the danger and the challenge of solving crimes. He knew it was about to get interesting. Captain Jack and Greta were both involved in possible cases—the rash of new murders and whatever Greta was working on.

He angled into a space in the parking lot of the beachfront restaurant and put his top up.

Captain Jack was already there, seated at an inside table with a coveted ocean view. Tables surrounded by Adirondack chairs and shaded by thatched beach umbrellas dotted

the beach beyond. This afternoon, rows upon rows of Adirondack chairs lined a clear area of the sand. Outside, one could sit and watch the water and totally relax with tasty food and drinks as they listened to the whoosh of waves hitting the sand, then receding back. Weddings at this venue had become popular, so he assumed those chairs might soon be filled with guests of the happy couple.

He headed for his friend's table. "Hey, Cap, you beat me."

"Yeah, you guys who live just up the road figure you have all the time in the world, while us poor stiff's struggle to beat the traffic from town. Not that I'm complaining, you understand." He patted the seat adjacent to him. "Have a seat, Lad. I have quite a bit to tell you."

A server interrupted the greeting with, "Can I get you something, Sir? A drink—something to eat?"

He returned her pleasant grin. "Sure thing. I'd like a Margarita straight up and some Kahuna Nachos for the table. Looks like my friend here already has his drink." As though agreeing, Captain Jack took a sip of his Anchor Steam beer.

"Coming right up," she said and headed off.

Mack leaned forward with a serious expression. "I've gotta be honest. I'm feeling pretty melancholy considering the memories these murders stirred up, but intrigued at the same time. What have you got for me?"

A obvious tourist at the next table, judging by his Hawaiian-style shirt dotted with bikini-clad cuties on surfboards, shouted, "Holy shit! Look at that."

It was a sight Mack was used to, but it was probably exciting to someone who had never seen dolphins arcing over the water as they seemed to play with each other. Locals at other tables laughed when some people rose from their seats to get a better view of the spectacle.

"Hmm, now that we have dealt with that burst of enthusiasm, out with it. What the Hell is going on with these new murders, Cap?"

The cop took another sip of his beer, then looked at Mack, his face reflecting the seriousness of what he was about to say. It was as though all chatter around them had ceased, and the only thing Mack heard was his friend's voice.

"It began when you were on your way to that town in Washington and I called you while you were on the road. I learned more about it after that call and figured I would fill you in when I had enough to talk about. Well, I have it now. The cop who was murdered in cold blood while finishing his Sunday brunch, just like your Pop's murder, was Sergeant Danny Carson."

Mack took a deep breath. "Danny? Oh God, not Danny. He was my Pop's protégé from the time he joined as a cadet. We would have him over to the house for dinner, and my Mom loved him like he was a son. Last I heard, he was married and had two kids—a boy and a girl. I don't know his wife, but I want to call her. Please get the phone number for me. I know Danny always thought my Pop's murder was connected to the Strangler, just as many others did. As I recall, he came up with some strong leads that helped catch the bastard."

Captain Jack nodded, then said, "That's the one. I'm so sorry. I didn't know that you knew him. After you took off for Europe, apparently Danny swore he wouldn't stop until he helped to capture Martin's killer, and he kept digging even on his time off. Maybe he came up with something. Sadly, we will never know."

The server placed a plate of the Café's signature Kahuna Nachos and Mack's Margarita on the table, unaware that she had interrupted an emotional conversation. She flashed a cheery smile. "Anything else for you guys?"

"No, we're fine for now. Thanks." She turned and walked over to another diner. Mack stared out at the water as the news of Danny's murder sunk in.

"Who was next, and how?" Mack asked as he reached for his drink.

Captain Jack tapped his forefinger against his chin and seemed to give a little shudder. "The next victim was one of the jurors. Before you ask, I don't know how that monster found her."

He paused to take a sip of his beer. "After the trial she lived in fear of reprisal. Some of the jurors gave interviews and one even wrote a book with a ghostwriter. But not her. She made no secret of being terrified. She moved, got divorced and went back to her maiden name, but her worst fears were realized. A neighbor found her and called the police and 911, but it was too late. She had been beaten to death and the scene was so gruesome no crime scene photos were allowed to be published in the media. Because of the name change, at first there was no way to make a connection. The investigation revealed her married name—Sandra Johnston, Juror Number Five."

Mack lowered his voice, aware that people at nearby tables might be listening. "So, the connection was made through the name. Okay, so Danny was killed in a drive-by, this poor woman was savagely beaten to death and Sam was killed by a hit-and-run driver. Definitely no apparent connection to the Strangler in the way the killings were carried out except for Danny. How was victim number three killed and what was the connection?"

About three weeks after Sandra was killed, the sister of one of the Strangler's victims who had testified at the trial supposedly jumped from tenth floor balcony of her condo in the Marina. A typed suicide note was found in her printer saying life had gotten too tough to continue. Of course, there was no signature. The detective who connected Sandra Johnston to the case as one of the jurors, also recognized this woman's legal last name being the same as a witness in the case. Too many coincidences, right?

He paused and let that sink in. "Her legal name was Melody Rabinowitz, but she was an artist who went by the name of Mel Rabin. Her life was definitely not tough. Her gallery shows were always sold out, two magazines featured her in profile articles as an artist destined for greatness. She was beautiful, personable, and talented, not to mention she had also become wealthy. Her pieces were going for thousands. But we made the connection when we discovered her sister was the Strangler's fourth victim, Stephanie Rabinowitz. Our theory is that she was pushed.

The restaurant had begun to clear, and the dinner crowd would be arriving soon. They were only open until sunset, but since this was summer it would be light at least until eight that night.

Mack leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. "Okay, what can I do to help?"

His friend finished the last of his second beer and popped one remaining bit of the Nachos into his mouth. "Truthfully, you can stay out of it. As a civilian, I'm sorry but you can't legally do anything. Maybe you could be a sounding board for me, but I can't authorize anything dangerous. I wanted to lay this out for you so you could think about it. Frankly, I have no idea what we are really dealing with here, but there's no doubt it could be dangerous. I am hoping that you aren't targeted as Martin's son, although you had nothing to do with the case."

He reached for the check. "This one's on me. Nice for a cop to be able to say that to a millionaire. Take care, my friend. I'll be in touch." With that Captain Jack rose from his chair and prepared to leave.