

# A Will to Die

A Cliff Knowles Mystery

by

Russell Atkinson

## The Cliff Knowles Mysteries

Held for Ransom

Cached Out

Fatal Dose

Death Row

Gut Shot

Behead Me

A Will to Die

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## Chapter 1

She could hear a noise but couldn't identify it. A motor of some kind, a low hum, she thought. The air conditioner, probably. She tried to think but her brain wouldn't form complete thoughts.

She opened her eyes but couldn't see anything at first. She wasn't sure her eyes were even open. There was a whitish haze. *Was that The Light? Was she alive?* Then she realized what she was seeing. It was the condensation of her breath on the plastic bag.

She closed her eyes again. Sooo sleepy. She almost smiled at the thought. *Wait ... why is there a plastic bag?* It was her last thought.

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Tuesday

Eva Sanchez was on her way to work when the call came. She diverted to the address she had been given. It was a low-end hotel in the Core-Columbia District right across from the Aladdin Bail Bonds office. She'd been to that office as a patrol officer on multiple occasions to pick up bail jumpers Aladdin had caught up with. She had also been to the hotel a few times on calls for drugs, fighting, and domestic disturbances.

"Morning, detective. Third floor," the uniform standing on the front sidewalk said.

Sanchez nodded acknowledgment and looked around before entering. She saw from their van that the evidence team was already there, but since most of them were standing around drinking coffee in Styrofoam cups, she knew the body had not yet been removed. She entered the lobby where two uniforms were already talking to the desk clerk, apparently getting some records. Both nodded to Sanchez as she walked straight to the elevators.

On the third floor a small gaggle of patrol officers in the hallway made the location of the crime scene obvious. There was also a gurney with an empty body bag on it standing by outside the room. Two of the officers, one male, one female, were talking to a stout, middle-aged Mexican woman with heavily-tattooed arms.

"Here's the detective now," the male officer said to the woman. Then, turning to her, he said, "Detective Sanchez, this is Rosa Morales, the manager."

Sanchez nodded but did not extend her hand. "Mrs. Morales, I'll be with you shortly. Please wait out here. I need to see inside first." She entered the hotel

room before Morales could respond. The senior officer, who looked like an aging surfer, followed close behind.

Inside, the stench told her the death wasn't within the last few hours. Harold Potter, the medical examiner, stood by the bed waiting for her. Potter, tall, thin, and balding, was, since J.K. Rowling's series became such a hit, forever correcting people who called him Harry.

"Morning, Harold, what do we have?"

"Eva. White female, forty years old. Apparent suicide. It looks like another Gatekeepers. Probably took place early yesterday. I've taken temperature readings and will give you a better idea after I've done the math. No obvious signs of trauma, although there are some faint bruises on her right upper arm."

Sanchez bent over the woman on the bed. The victim's hair was black, but it had been dyed some time ago, judging by the brownish roots. A plastic bag, the filmy transparent kind you find in a produce department, was lying on the bed next to her. Sanchez pulled out a notebook and began to jot things down.

"We have a name?"

"Denise Knowles," the officer behind her said. "She's been here since Sunday night according to the manager. Her purse is on the table there, but we haven't examined it yet. We were waiting for you. There could be other ID there." He handed her a photocopy of a hotel registration card and a driver's license. The license confirmed the age and name, but had an El Cajon address. The registration card was bare bones, just name, driver's license number, and a telephone number, no employment or relatives listed. The box was checked indicating only one resident.

Sanchez leaned over the plastic bag and sniffed. From the outside she couldn't smell any odor from the bag, what with the decomposition smell overpowering everything else. She snapped on some rubber gloves. "Who removed the bag?"

"I did," Potter replied. "I let the photographer take a photo with the bag in situ first. The manager said she didn't touch it."

Instinctively Sanchez glanced over at Potter's hands, but of course he was wearing gloves. He would never contaminate fingerprint evidence. She carefully opened the bag and thrust her nose right into the opening. There was still no chemical odor.

"Liquor?" she asked without looking at either of the men.

"None found," the officer said.

"Applesauce? Phenobarbital?" The inquiry was spurred by Sanchez's knowledge that the Gatekeepers preferred suicide method was ingestion of heavy doses of barbiturates and liquor before placing the plastic bag over the head. Sometimes the drugs were mixed with applesauce to make them palatable.

"Nothing obvious on the table or anything. The evidence team hasn't been through yet."

"Anyone else seen coming or going from the room?"

“Not according to the manager. Due to renovations down the hall there was only one other room rented on this floor. An elderly Japanese couple checked in Monday. We’re still canvassing, but so far no one saw or heard anything. The manager discovered the body this morning after the Japanese couple complained of the smell coming from the room; they got moved to the second floor.”

“Cameras?”

“There are no cameras on the floor, but there’s one in the lobby, one in the elevator, one over the side alley door, and one on the landing of the stairwell on the second floor. We’ve taken the tapes for review.”

She pulled out her phone, looked in her contacts list, and made a call. She’d have to let Rob Martin of the sheriff’s office know. One of the two previous Gatekeepers suicides had been on the grounds of Greenwood Memorial Park, which was county territory. The police and sheriff’s office had coordinated on the second one. Her contact then had been promoted to Undersheriff and he’d introduced her to his replacement, Rob Martin. She assumed Martin would be assigned to this one. The sheriff had no jurisdiction over this case, since it happened in the city, but it was now part of a related string of three deaths and Rob would have to know. After a brief conversation on the phone, she learned he was tied up in court. She’d fill him in later. There wasn’t much to see in these Gatekeepers suicides anyway. She pulled off her gloves as she exited the room.

## Chapter 2

The chocolate éclair looked so tempting through the window that Cliff's mouth began to water. He should have walked on the other side of the street. He knew that bakery was there, right en route from the gym back to the office, so why should he torment himself by walking right by it? He was not a believer in the idea that you had to confront your temptations head on; it was better to avoid them. He had managed with difficulty to get his weight down to two hundred pounds after Tommy was born, a late-in-life blessing from the gods or Mother Nature, and he was determined to keep it there. He walked on, making a mental note to cross to the other side next time, even if it took a bit longer.

"You got a call from a detective in San Diego," Maeva said as he entered the office. A pert redhead who'd dropped out of Stanford Law School, she had earned her private investigator license two years earlier under Cliff's tutelage. She was hoping Cliff would take her in as a partner eventually. Since Tommy had been born, Cliff had cut back on his hours and she was doing more work than he was now, or putting in more hours, anyway. Still, it was his business and he was the rainmaker, the former FBI agent, and she wasn't expecting anything on that front soon.

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, just said you should call. The number's on your desk."

He continued into his office, leaving the door open. He had done a bit of consulting work for law enforcement in his early days after retiring from the FBI, but not lately with all the more profitable corporate and law firm work. So he was curious why the detective had called, especially since San Diego was over four hundred miles away.

"And there's an e-mail you'll want to see," Maeva called after him as he sat behind his desk. He could tell from the hesitation in her voice that it wasn't good news.

He pressed the Shift key on his keyboard to kill the screen saver and his home screen came to life. There was an email from his CPA. It said there was a discrepancy in his business records that he needed to discuss. He'd already requested an extension on his income taxes and he knew the return had to be filed within the next few days.

He looked up the CPA's number and dialed. A woman's voice answered, "Mason Huang's office."

"Hi, Iris. This is Cliff. Is your husband there?"

"Cliff, how are you? I saw Ellen and Tommy at the park last weekend. He's getting so big. You'll have to bring him over for a play date with Julie."

"I'm fine, Iris. Tommy is getting to be a handful now that he's walking. That play date sounds like a good idea." He wasn't in the mood for small talk and was trying to figure a polite way to urge her to just put him through when he heard her call to Mason to pick up line 1.

"Here he is, Cliff," Iris said before the line went silent. Seconds later Mason came on.

"Cliff, how are you?" Huang said.

"Fine, Mason. What's up?"

"Your 1099s don't match up with your own records. The bookkeeping program you use shows more income than the 1099s do."

"Can't you just report the lesser amount?"

"Come on. You know better than that. We need to reconcile them. You don't want to underreport, especially now that you know of the discrepancy. You could get accused of tax dodging or even fraud and be audited for years. And of course you don't want to pay the larger amount either, if you don't owe it."

"Yeah, yeah. I get it. So what do you want me to do?"

"Can you come by here so we can go over it line by line?"

"I'm kind of busy."

"I could file for another extension, but you're going to owe something this year and that means when you pay, you'll have to pay hefty interest."

"Okay, I can come by about five. Will you be there that late?"

"I'll be here. See you then."

"Okay." Cliff hung up.

"Don't forget the detective," Maeva called to him.

Focused on the tax situation, he had forgotten the detective. He picked up the slip of paper and dialed the number. A woman answered, "Homicide, please hold." Before he could say anything, some obnoxious pop music came on the line. Come on, a Britney Spears resurgence? Oops, she really did do it again. He considered hanging up and calling later, but the word "homicide" had caught his interest. He put the phone on speaker and hung up the receiver. Then he started looking at the rest of his email. None of it was important.

"Homicide, how may I help you?" the voice suddenly said again. He picked up the receiver. "May I speak with Detective Vasquez, please? I'm returning his call."

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Cliff Knowles."

"One moment."

"Detective Vasquez," a feminine voice said after a pause. "Is this Mr. Knowles?"

Cliff was momentarily taken aback. He had assumed the detective was male, and Maeva hadn't corrected him earlier when he'd used the masculine pronoun. He glanced at the note again; the caller was listed as "E. Vasquez." He'd have to give Maeva some flak for that. She had a healthy feminist streak. She had probably intentionally not corrected him to teach him a lesson for assuming the detective was male. He looked at her through the window that separated his office from her desk in the tiny reception area. She was smirking; she'd obviously heard his flub through the open doorway. He stuck out his tongue at her. She stuck hers out in response.

"Yes," he replied.

"Mr. Knowles, I'm afraid I have some bad news. I'm sorry to inform you that your sister Denise has died."

"Denise? Are you sure?"

"I'm afraid so. You are her brother, aren't you?"

He exhaled heavily and croaked out an affirmative. This was a surprise to him in some ways, but not in others. His sister was much younger than he was, but she'd had a life of excesses – partying, alcohol, drugs, a failed marriage, homelessness at one point. An early death wasn't surprising in and of itself. He hadn't been in touch with her in years. He hadn't even known she was back in California. That much was a surprise.

"How did it happen?" Since Vasquez was in the homicide bureau, he assumed she'd been murdered, or maybe killed by a drunk driver. Was she the drunk driver? He was already imagining that she'd killed someone else.

"The official cause of death hasn't been determined, but it appears to be a suicide. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Suicide? You're with homicide. You must think there's more to it than that."

"No, not at all. All apparent suicides are handled by the homicide unit initially. I have some questions for you, though. I'd like to do it now, if I may."

"When did she die?" Cliff said, ignoring her request.

"Her body was discovered this morning. It appears she died yesterday, the early hours of Monday. When did you last speak to her?"

"It's been years. Fifteen? Maybe less. I don't know. How did you get my name?"

"You're the next of kin so far as we can tell."

"She has a daughter, Crystal."

"A daughter? Can you give me a name and contact information?"

"Well, no ... I ..." Cliff immediately realized how stupid he must have sounded. Crystal, now in her late teens, Cliff guessed, was a near-vegetable living in some state institution, or at least he assumed that was where she was. She'd been born with severe physical and mental disabilities. Of course she would be useless to an officer as next-of-kin.

"I mean, she can't help you. She's mentally disabled. She was institutionalized as an infant. She'd be in her teens now. I don't know where she is. I don't know if Denise is even in touch with her. The girl's name is Crystal Bachman."

"I see," Vasquez said. "Our records show that Denise was treated at the hospital several years ago. On the admission forms she put your name as next of kin. She didn't list Crystal or a husband. Is there anyone else we should be contacting? Crystal's father, perhaps?"

"That's a guy named Corbin, last name Bachman, same as Crystal. They were married but they divorced a few months later. He died of a drug overdose."



Cliff remembered Corbin all right, an all-around scumbag. He and Denise both had a love of getting high but nothing much else in common. Their marriage had lasted about four months, just long enough for him to get arrested and leave her pregnant with what turned out to be a severely retarded child, a daughter he'd claimed to be anticipating with joy until she actually arrived and her impairment was obvious. Then he'd denied the child was his.

"Our parents are deceased. There's no one else that I know of. What was she hospitalized for?"

"Drugs. But there hasn't been any record of that in recent years, for what that may be worth. We need you to come down and take possession of the body and her property."

"The body? I don't want her body. What am I going to do with it? Look, I don't want to be cold here, but I haven't seen her in years. We weren't close."

"You can refuse. She'll be buried at taxpayer expense. Until the tox screen results are in her body will have to stay with the Medical Examiner. That'll be at least a few days. So you have time to decide. I have a few more questions. Was she religious?"

Cliff wondered what that had to do with anything but decided just to let the detective finish her questions. "Sort of. She was into the flavor of the month when I last saw her."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"She was into all kinds of spiritual things, if you call that religious. She could quote the bible, but she got into eastern religions in a big way – Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrian, I think, or Bahai. Anything sounding esoteric or trendy. The I Ching. Tarot. Palmistry."

"Did she ever mention Heaven's Gate to you?"

"Heaven's Gate? That rings a bell, but not from her. Wasn't that some sort of cult? Something in the news."

"Yes, sir. That's the group that believed there was a spaceship following the Hale-Bopp comet. They committed mass suicide back in '97 in order to 'ascend to a higher plane.'"

Vasquez failed to hide her distaste as she spoke that final phrase, like she was picking up a dog turd. "Oh, right," Cliff replied, "I remember now. That was down your way. But no, I don't think she ever did. Is that how she died?"

"That's what it looks like. We're still investigating. How about Gatekeepers?"

"Gatekeepers? I've never heard of it. What is that?"

"We think it's a descendent of Heaven's Gate, a related cult with similar beliefs at any rate. We've investigated some similar suicides here recently of Gatekeepers members. Does she have any friends you know of? Maybe someone from her childhood who stayed in touch with her?"

"Maybe, but I wouldn't know. What about her co-workers? I mean, if she's employed. I don't even know if she is ... was."

"She was working at a food processing plant according to a pay stub in her purse. We'll be checking there. I need to ask you a few questions about yourself ... for the report. Full name, date of birth, contact information, I hope you understand."

"Sure. You have my number already; out of curiosity, how did you get it?"

"The hospital form I told you about, where you're listed as next of kin? She didn't list a telephone number; she just said contact FBI, San Francisco. We did. They said you were retired and said you practiced law. It wasn't hard to find you on the web."

He wasn't sure whether she was referring to his professional website or to the many stories out there about some previous public exposure. He'd been involved in some well-publicized cases a few years ago. Sanchez didn't mention that so he assumed she didn't know. "Okay. So what else do you want to know?"

The detective questioned Cliff for several minutes longer and thanked him for his help. He promised to let her know what he wanted done with the body and would see about coming down there in the next few days.

When the call was over, he explained to Maeva what had happened. She expressed the usual condolences but it was as obvious to her as it was to him that he hadn't been close to his sister. He quickly changed the subject to the tax problem. Maeva was responsible for the bookkeeping and squirmed uneasily when she heard him explain. Had she screwed up?

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Cliff sat next to Mason Huang looking at the two screens. One showed a spreadsheet listing Cliff's clients during the preceding year, all companies or law firms. Totals were shown next to the names. The other screen was the bookkeeping program from Cliff's computer showing what his records had for income.

"I think I have it tracked down," Huang said. "It was off by eight thousand one hundred sixty-five dollars and forty cents. I was able to track that to one entry from Pringle and Lowe. Your records show you received that amount six months ago. Their 1099 matches your total except for that one entry."

Pringle and Lowe was a large general practice law firm with offices all over California. Cliff had done a lot of work for them the previous year on civil litigation. He figured he must have billed them somewhere around seventy thousand over the course of the year. They were often late to pay, but he didn't remember any dispute over that particular amount. He knew they still owed him money but he wasn't sure how much. Maeva hadn't come to him with any problem about that amount, he was sure.

"Okay, I'll have to check that out. I don't remember that particular payment. Give me the date of the check and of the deposit. Do you have the check number?"

"It's here in your records," Huang replied, pointing to a line on one of the screens.

Cliff pulled out his phone and emailed himself the dates, amount, and check number. When he got back to the office he would have Maeva pull the records, then look at bank statements. It looks like she'd been a little sloppy, he figured. Maybe the money had come from another source and been attributed to Pringle and Lowe erroneously. "Got it. There's not much I can do from here right now. At least you located the discrepancy."

"Yes. Sorry to make you come over."

"No problem. I'm on my way home anyway. My wife's cooking something special tonight, she said, so I can't be late."

"Right. The IRS is nothing on the fear scale compared to a wife whose 'special meal' is spurned."

"Iris suggested we get the kids together. I'll mention it to Ellen."

"You do that. Get back to me tomorrow on the Pringle thing. We really have to get this filing done."

"First thing in the morning."

"Okay, talk to you then."

When Cliff got home, Tommy was bouncing in a doorway jumper seat, something he loved.

"Hi, Honey," he said. "Has Tommy been good?"

"No. He's been perfect. The cutest baby in the entire world."

"Good to know. Especially since it comes from an unbiased source."

Ellen laughed. "Oh, I never claimed to be unbiased."

"Thank you so much for picking him up today. I got a lot of work done at the office."

"I'm caught up at work, so it was no problem ducking out right at five. Theresa said he was good." Theresa was Ellen's sister, a widowed single mother. Her daughter Ashley was also the FBI Director's goddaughter, a fact that had come in handy for both Cliff and Ellen before.

Cliff went into the bedroom to change out of his work clothes.

"How was your day?" Ellen asked when he emerged. He noticed for the first time that she'd put on a skirt and blouse combination that Cliff particularly liked instead of her usual jeans and sweatshirt.

"Well I did have one bolt out of the blue. I found out my sister died."

Ellen's demeanor changed immediately. "Oh, Cliff, I'm so sorry. How did it happen? How old was she anyway?" She embraced Cliff in a consoling way, patting him on the back, her hair against his cheek.

Cliff felt guilty as though he was receiving a prize he hadn't deserved. He wasn't sad since he had had no contact with Denise in years. He felt like he should be grief-stricken, but it just wouldn't come. Ellen's tenderness felt unmerited.

"I'm okay. You know we weren't in contact. I got a call from the police in San Diego. It was a suicide, like those Heaven's Gate people who wanted to

join their spirits with the alien spacecraft behind that comet a few years ago. There's some new group that's an offshoot called Gatekeepers, the police said."

"Oh my gosh," Ellen replied, crossing herself. She was Catholic and suicide was a sin in her book. "You told me she was into spiritual things, but I never thought it was that ... far out. Sorry, that was tacky. I should ..."

"No, it's okay. Like I said, I'm fine. She and I ... oil and vinegar, you know."

Ellen tried to suppress a smile. "That's salad dressing. I think you mean oil and water."

"Uh, right." Cliff smiled too, then felt even guiltier for finding it funny when he should be grieving. After he composed himself he continued, "I have to go down to San Diego. I have to claim the body or something. Otherwise they'll put her in a potter's field. There's no one else."

"Oh, Cliff, you have to give her a proper burial. Just because you're agnostic don't deny her a Christian burial." She hesitated a moment. "Are those Heaven's Gate people Christian? Anyway, a spiritual burial. They must have priests or something. She has a soul."

"I'm not denying her anything. I don't see why I'm somehow responsible for her, for what happens to her body."

"She's family. You do that for family. I just wish I could have met her. You didn't even invite her to the wedding."

"I didn't even have an address or phone number. The last I knew she was living in Florida. Anyway, it was a good thing she wasn't there. With your folks? Now that would have been oil and water. Make that gasoline and matches."

The mention of fire made Ellen remember she had dinner simmering on the stove. She stepped back over to the stove and checked the timer. "This is going to be ready in ten minutes. Why don't you finish changing and we can talk about this over dinner."

By the time Cliff changed and got Tommy out of the jumper seat and into his high chair, dinner was ready. Ellen dished them each up a bowl of blazing hot hamburger chili, a favorite of Cliff's, and set out a small dish of mixed fruit for each of them. A cold beer for Cliff and a plate with steamed tortillas completed the meal. While Ellen was doing this, Cliff spooned food into Tommy's plate and then handed him the spoon. Ellen had fried up some of the hamburger and beans for him without the hot peppers and other chili ingredients. In another one of the sections of the baby plate Cliff put some sliced banana and raisins.

"So when are you going down?" Ellen asked.

"The body will stay with the coroner until the tox screen is completed, which will take a few days, but I should get there before that to find a funeral home and do whatever else needs doing. Will Friday be okay with you? I don't know what's open on the weekend, but I may need to stay over a day."

"You'll miss going to San Francisco Opera with the Kings," Ellen protested.

"I know. You know how disappointed I am about that," he lied. He hated opera and wasn't all that keen on the Kings. Most of all he hated San Francisco. Parking was non-existent, the crowds were horrendous, tourists, homeless people, and protesters in equal measure, and he'd seen all the sights a thousand times since he'd worked in San Francisco for years during his FBI days. "You should go. It should only be a day or two. I'll be back and we'll still have plenty of time to do stuff together."

"I guess you're right." She gave him another hug, still thinking he needed the consolation.

They finished up the dinner and Cliff did the dishes, his chore when she cooked. Ellen played with Tommy in the family room. As Cliff was finishing up she called to him, "Tommy really needs someone to play with."

"I know. Your parents were great for that when they visited."

"No, I mean another child close to his age." She walked into the kitchen, Tommy once again in his doorway jumper seat.

"Funny, Iris was just talking about that today."

"Iris Huang? Her daughter's a little older. I was thinking of someone a little younger." She stood behind him and placed her arms around his waist, pressing tight against him.

"Really, who?" Cliff said as he dried his hands.

Ellen said nothing, but her hands slipped under his waistband and began a slow descent.

"Oh, you mean ...." His pulse quickened. The skirt, the nice meal all made sense now. She'd even foregone the beer.

"He needs a brother or sister. I'll be forty soon. We can't wait much longer. Besides, if we start now, it should be about a two year gap between them. That's about perfect, don't you think?"

## Chapter 3

Wednesday

Rob Martin, a new addition to the Sheriff's homicide squad, entered the San Diego Police Department's homicide squad bay, a place he was becoming familiar with quite regularly now. Martin was thirty-one but could pass for twenty-one. He had apple cheeks, a blond crew cut, and wore an eye-stabbing plaid sport coat with more colors in it than a jumbo Crayola box. He'd spent a year as a detective on robberies and burglaries, but this would be his first homicide, if that's what it turned out to be. His last case, the previous Gatekeepers case, had been ruled a suicide. He was enthusiastic about the opportunity to work murder cases, but was itching to get a real one instead of another suicide like this one.

Vasquez, on the other hand, was a veteran with over two dozen homicides under her belt. She was a contrast to Martin in other ways, too, with a dark complexion, black hair, and a dour attitude. A hint of Aztec lineage could be seen in her facial features. She'd seen too many killings, mostly gang-related or drug-induced, to be happy about another one. She wore no makeup and kept her straight black hair chopped into a helmet. Despite a fairly conscientious workout regimen, she was beginning to show some middle-aged spread around her midsection. At least now as a detective she no longer had to wear her uniform. Her jacket and slacks combination hid the burgeoning girth better. The police department had a policy on homicide cases that detectives should always work with a partner, but it was short-handed since Vasquez's previous partner had just retired. So the decision had been made on this one to have Vasquez and Martin work as a team even though Martin was a deputy sheriff, not a police officer. It was expected to turn out to be a suicide anyway.

"Not the seersucker again." Vasquez snorted when she saw him.

"I should take fashion advice from someone whose entire wardrobe consists of gray polyester?"

She ignored the retort. "How'd it go in court yesterday?"

"I never even testified. It took them all day to work out a plea deal. At least I'm off the hook for trial testimony."

"Sorry I couldn't hang around for you. Did your lieutenant brief you on this case?"

"Yeah, the short version. Another Gatekeepers it looks like. Has the next of kin been notified?"

"I talked to her brother yesterday."

"That the guy with the goatee?" Martin had seen Cliff's website with its head-shot photo.

"Yes, ex-FBI. He says he'll let us know about the body. It'll stay in the morgue for now. He'll let us know about her daughter, too, if he can find anything out."

"Is he coming down?"

"I think so. He said he'd have to make plans."

"What's this about a daughter?"

"Apparently she had a mentally disabled daughter in an institution. We'll have to find out where she is. I don't know if it's going to affect her at all. Her care is probably provided by Medi-Cal. The girl is non-verbal according to the brother. Can you let Social Services know about it and verify whether there's anything we need to do?"

"Yeah, sure. So what's next?"

"We'll read the reports from the uniforms who did the canvass and see if any of the neighbors reported anything. We'll have to go back out and interview anyone who was missed, but we won't get the canvass report until late today. Then we review the tapes to see who else might have been there. If she was assisted, then we have a homicide. The autopsy may shed some light on that, but I wouldn't count on it being a homicide. The other two were ruled suicides. We should go out to the workplace."

"What about The Weenie? Do we interview?"

"We'll have to, for what it's worth. He'll deny any involvement and will have an alibi. Let's make that our first stop."

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The detectives pulled up in front of the Gatekeepers building, a former Pentecostal Church. The cross had been removed from the peak of the roof, but the stained glass windows remained untouched.

They entered the front doors, which stood wide open. The lobby displayed artwork in various styles depicting religious figures – Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Krishna, Moses, even Mao Zedong. Prominent among them was a framed photo of a gray-haired man Sanchez now knew was Marshall Applewhite, the founder of Heaven's Gate. The ornate inner doors were closed. They stepped through into the nave. Just inside a large donation box greeted them. The church appeared to be empty, but as they continued to walk toward the pulpit area, a young woman emerged from a side door and walked toward them.

"Greetings, friends," she said unceremoniously.

"Hello. I'm Detective Sanchez with the San Diego Police. We're here to see Mr. Shapiro."

"Do you have an appointment? Tohini is in meditation."

"No, but it is an urgent and serious matter. Can you please interrupt him?"

"I see." The woman hesitated a moment.

Martin appraised the woman as young men do all young women. She could be attractive, but she didn't make it obvious. She was a dirty blond with a pale complexion. Her hair was pulled back in a pony tail. She wore a high-

necked, long-sleeved dress that came to her ankles, but it was well-tailored to show off her figure. He could see the hint of a tattoo peeking out at one wrist. She wore a small nose stud on one side and a bit of subtle makeup, eyeliner at least. The overall effect was that of an unsettling cross between an Amish woman, a hippie, and a millennial into body art.

“Wait here,” the woman said and disappeared through the side door.

“He’s always ‘in meditation.’ He’ll come out,” Sanchez said to Martin. “He has the other two times. And don’t call him The Weenie. That’s inside the department only.”

“Of course not. You think I’m stupid?”

“I’ve heard how you pronounce Tohini. Say it straight if you have to say it at all.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Moments later a short balding man strode through the door smiling broadly. He wore a standard clerical collar under a brightly colored dashiki covering his ample girth. His face was dominated by a nose that could have been a transplant from an elephant seal. The girl followed ten feet behind him and took a position standing with her hands clasped together demurely below her waist, as though trying to shield her private parts.

“Detective Sanchez, Detective Martin, so nice to see you again. Have you come for enlightenment?”

“Indeed, Tohini, that’s precisely why we’re here. We’re hoping you can enlighten us about one of your members.”

“I do not have ‘members,’ as you know, but I have many friends. We are all equal here. But I imagine you are here because of Lakshmi’s ascent.”

So he knew already. The two officers cast a glance at each other. Martin spoke first. “Sir, we’re here about Denise Knowles. We believe she may have been one of your ... friends.”

“Here she is known as Lakshmi, a name of her choosing, a Hindu goddess. It is a custom of ours. Please step into my office.”

They proceeded through the side door, down a hallway, and were led into what had once been the pastor’s office. The furnishings were bare-bones. Sanchez, having been through the process previously, took a seat in one of the hard wooden chairs. Martin followed suit as the man took his place behind the government surplus desk. The blond woman stood off to the side, her back to the wall.

“Since you are aware of her death,” Sanchez began, “can you tell us how you became aware of it? Her name wasn’t in the press release or mentioned in any article or news story I saw.”

“Gatekeepers are very close. When one of us is lucky enough to ascend, it is a moment of great joy and the word spreads quickly. We all celebrate. Isn’t that right, Uli?” The girl nodded.

“And just how, specifically, did the word spread to you in this case, sir?” Martin said. Sanchez cocked an eyebrow at him. He had probably become tired



of playing second banana as the junior detective, she supposed. Understandable, perhaps, but they would have to discuss it. Interrupting another detective usually did not work well unless it was part of a good cop, bad cop scenario. Still, he was Sheriff's Office, not P.D., and she'd have to be tactful.

"Oh, everyone knew she was planning it. There had been over a month of cleansing and preparation. When she was ready, she texted a friend that it was happening that day."

"We didn't find a phone at the scene," Sanchez said. "Who was the friend?"

"Lance, I believe. It was Lance, wasn't it, Uli?"

"That's what I heard," the woman replied.

Martin broke in. "Why don't we do the necessary police stuff first. You know, legal names and such. You're Moishe Shapiro, is that right? You haven't legally changed your name?"

"That's the name on my driver's license. Please call me Tohini. It's Japanese. It means, well, it's hard to translate, sort of 'being in a state of justice or rightness,' a kind of enlightenment. You can put that down as an alias if you must." He chuckled as he said it. "You have all those other details from my license. Nothing's changed since the last time."

"And Uli, is that your name?" he said, turning to the young woman, who still remained standing.

"It's Hawaiian," she said. "Actually it's Uli'uli, but everyone calls me Uli. That's not my legal name, though." She stepped around the desk, opened a lower drawer, and pulled a wallet from the purse inside. She extracted her driver's license and handed it to Martin. Sanchez, leaning to the side, thought she caught a glimpse of a package of condoms in the drawer. Martin jotted down the information on the license, which showed her name as Rachel Schwartz.

"We'll need Lance's full name and contact information, too," Sanchez said.

"Lance is his legal name, I believe," Shapiro said. "I don't know his last name off-hand. I don't use a phone of any kind, so I don't have his contact information. Uli can get that for you when we're done."

"Tell us about her plans for ascent as you call it. What did she say?"

"She was attending one of our assemblies about two months ago when we discussed the Heaven's Gate ascent. She was very interested and asked a lot of questions. I was there. This was in front of twenty or so Gatekeepers. You can ask around. She said she was sure she had been spoken to by God and had a duty to shed her earthly form and ascend to heaven as she called it. She used those terms. She had a strong Judeo-Christian influence in her, but she accepted the eastern influences, too. They're all the same thing, really. We were placed here on earth by beings we don't understand, who ..."

"I think we'll pass on the theology lesson for now, Tohini," Sanchez interrupted. "You know why we're here."

“Of course. So she wanted to know exactly how it was done, how they left their earthly form and received a new body after ascent. This lore is part of our culture, but she was quite new and hadn’t heard it in detail. Several members answered her questions.”

“About phenobarbital, the plastic bags? Is that what you mean?”

“Yes, that was discussed. But it’s much more than that. There must be a spiritual cleansing, a mental preparation. A personal ceremony of acceptance of departure from this realm.”

“A ceremony? With other people?”

“No, more of a ritual I guess you’d call it. We don’t attend the final ceremony of others, unfortunately, because of your laws. We are aware that you would call it assisted suicide or even homicide. If we were present assisting in any way, that is. It has to be a personal choice and personal act. You know this, detective. I’ve explained it before.”

Martin jumped in again. “Do you know what drugs she used? Where she got them?”

“I do not.”

Martin looked over to Uli. She scowled and shook her head no.

“What about her phone?” Martin continued. “You said she texted Lance. We didn’t find it. Do you know where it is?”

“When someone is planning to ascend, their last act is to give away all their earthly goods to fellow Gatekeepers since they will be of no value in the next world. Two nights ago she came here, texted Lance, and then placed her phone and her other goods into the donation box. At least I assume the phone was among the things. There was no one to witness it. The building and donation box are always open. That was the last we heard from her. I assume that she went back to the hotel – I heard of that location afterward – and performed the ritual. I’m sure you can get her phone records to pinpoint the time.”

“What goods were in the box? And where are they now? Who has the phone?” Martin leaned forward.

“There was an assembly yesterday morning. The box would have been opened and the material goods shared. Unfortunately, I wasn’t there. I was in Texas and only got back last night. So I don’t really know. There’s usually twenty or thirty people in attendance. I doubt she had much of value to donate.”

Martin looked over to Uli again. “How about you? Were you there when the box was opened?”

“No, it was my mother’s birthday. I spent the day with her. You can check. It’s the same address as on the license. I live with my parents.”

“So who was there? Do you have a record? A list of regular attendees?”

Shapiro took a stern tone for the first time. “We don’t know and we aren’t going to give you a list of people for you to harass. Do you take roll when you go to church or mass? I’ve cooperated and told you how these things happen. I think that’s all the help I can be. Now if you’ll please continue your

investigation elsewhere, I'd like to return to my meditation. If you have any further questions you can contact my lawyer. You know who she is."

Neither detective rose. "What about Lakshmi's daughter, Crystal? Did she ever mention her?" Sanchez said.

This shut Shapiro up for a long twenty seconds. "A daughter, you say? I was under the impression she had no family. She lived alone she once told me." He looked over to Uli who just shrugged and shook her head no. "Interesting name. Lakshmi was very gifted with crystals, you know. She could read them. Now look, I don't want to have to be tritely legalistic, but I have asked you to leave. Do I have to say I am withdrawing my consent for you to be on the premises? Need I record this and post it online?" He looked over to Uli, who now had a smart phone in her hand, although it was pressed to her side and not yet in a position to record any video.

Sanchez stood, and Martin slowly followed. "All right, we're leaving," she said, "but you said Uli would get us Lance's contact information."

Uli looked over to Shapiro who nodded. She pressed a few times on her phone and brought up the contact screen for Lance, whose last name was DeSoto. Martin copied it all down. The detectives left.

"'Gifted with crystals'. What does that even mean?" Martin scoffed once they were outside.

"It's all bullshit – crystals, clerical collar, the Mao picture – all of it. He's just a middle-aged con man who's found a way to get it on with young babes like Uli there. It was the same way the last two times, although with a different girl. He had a convenient verifiable alibi. I'm sure he knew exactly when it would happen. I don't know if he supplied the drugs but I know he's responsible. He's the one talking them into suicide."

"What's in it for him? The prior suicides, I mean. Was there something going on with them and Shapiro sexually? Spurned lovers?"

"They were both men," Sanchez replied. "The previous ones."

"Yeah, so?"

"I don't think he's gay, but we never found any personal close connection like that. I think they were true believers in his line of crap. Neither had much money. One of them left the keys to his car in that donation box before he did it. At least that's what we were told. It was a Beemer, pretty new, too, but it had a back due loan on it. The Weenie drove it around for a couple of months and then let it get repossessed. He probably couldn't keep up the payments."

"So what's next?"

"We talk to people where she worked. We should talk to people at her home address, too, while we're there. Then we'll do this Lance guy after we've had a chance to check him out."

"You have the work address?"

"Yeah, El Cajon."

"Let's go."

...

The detectives first stopped at the El Cajon address listed on Denise's driver's license. It was a converted garage on Lemon Avenue, detached from and behind the small house in front. A battered pickup truck with one different-colored door sat in the driveway, blocking it, so they parked on the street. The front yard showed signs of once having been a lawn, but the drought and neglect had since turned it into a brown dirt pile. They knocked on the door of the house first, assuming the resident would own the garage, but got no answer. They walked down the driveway to the garage. The main door that originally had been for the car to enter had been rebuilt into a wall. The "front door" was now what had originally been the side door. They knocked. No answer there, either.

Sanchez turned and saw a curtain move in the back window of the house in front. She motioned to Martin and they walked to the back door of the house and knocked again. When they still didn't get an answer Martin began pounding on the door and yelling to open up. He called "Police" several times to no avail. Sanchez then began calling out in Spanish and the curtain moved again. A sliver of a woman's face appeared and checked out the detectives. Sanchez said something else and within a few seconds the back door opened. The woman inside was Mexican and apparently spoke little or no English. Sanchez continued talking to her in rapid-fire Spanish and gesturing to the garage. The woman disappeared inside for a moment and then came back to the door with a slip of paper in her hand which she handed to Sanchez. The detective thanked the woman and the door closed.

"They're renters, too," she said to Martin. "She gave me the landlord's name and number. She says that the woman lived there alone and that's all she knows. She doesn't speak English and the Knowles woman didn't speak Spanish so they never talked." Sanchez pulled out her cell phone, called the number, and asked for the landlord by name. After a short conversation in English she announced that he lived ten minutes away and was coming right over.

They spent the ten minutes knocking on neighbors' doors. After several failures to find anyone home, they got the neighbor on one side to answer the door. The older woman there didn't know the decedent, but had seen her and knew she drove an older model car, which she sometimes parked in front of the neighbor's house.

"What happened to her car?" Martin asked Sanchez when the interview with the woman was over. "Was it left at the hotel?"

"She had a Ford Focus registered to her. The uniforms looked for it but it wasn't in the hotel lot or parked on the street nearby."

"I'll put out a BOLO. Whoever has it might have been involved in the death, then driven away."

"The Weenie probably has it. Like the other time. Before you do that, let me call his lawyer."

Sanchez retreated to the car and flipped open a binder looking for the number. After a short search she dialed. She was connected to a secretary and after a short wait, to the attorney.

"Naomi Morgenthal. How may I help you."

"This is Detective Sanchez. I'm calling about your client, Moishe Shapiro. He asked me to call you with any questions I might have."

"Tohini warned me about you. What is it?"

"Ms. Knowles had a car. There may be other personal property of value that belongs to the estate. Does he have it?"

"I understand Lakshmi donated all her property to the Gatekeepers. She can give it away to whoever she wants. It's not part of the estate."

"Does he have the car? Or someone else in the church?"

"I don't know who has the car, assuming there was one. I can inquire."

"Tell him we're putting out a BOLO on the car. That's a Be On the Look Out to you. Anyone driving it can be arrested for possession of stolen property. We'll give you an hour. If I don't hear back from you by then it'll be broadcast all over the state."

"I'll pass it on. Anything else?"

"Tell him not to dispose of any of that property she donated. It's part of a homicide investigation. It's evidence."

"Suicide investigation, you mean. Tohini doesn't have the property personally. He told you that. There's no inventory. He has no way of knowing what was donated or which friends might have it now. He was out of town. If you have a particular item besides the car you're interested in, you'll have to describe it and I can inquire."

"It's a homicide until the Medical Examiner says otherwise. You have an hour." She disconnected.

"It's probably in a chop shop in Tijuana already," Martin sniffed. "Or sold on Craig's List." At that moment the landlord drove up and parked at the curb. As the man emerged, Martin pulled his neon jacket aside slightly so he could see the badge clipped on his belt.

The man approached the detectives hurriedly, perspiration on his forehead. He was a short, thin man with a short, thin mustache looking like a pair of matched earwigs emerging from his nostrils. He was clearly Latino but spoke English without an accent. "Detective Sanchez?" he asked.

"Mr. Lopez?" Sanchez said smiling. "Thank you for meeting us."

"Is she dead? The lady?" he said, fear in his voice.

"We're investigating the death of Denise Knowles. Was she your tenant?" Sanchez replied. Martin already had his notebook out and was writing as they spoke.

"Yes, yes. She rented the back unit. She was killed, then?"

"It may be suicide. We're waiting for the medical report. When was the last time you saw her or spoke to her?"

"The first of the month, so a little over a week ago. I came by in the evening for the rent. She said she didn't have it all. She just gave me half and said she'd get the rest to me in a week. She never did. I called her two days ago to tell her I'd evict her if she didn't pay me in full by the first, but I only left a message. She never answers my calls. Is the body still in there?"

"No, it didn't happen here. She died in San Diego."

A look of relief washed over his features. "Ah. That's good. I mean, not on my property. Nobody wants to rent a place where someone died. You want to look inside?"

"Yes, please."

He pulled a ring of keys from his pocket and led them back down the driveway. They entered the garage (which Lopez called a cottage) and walked through quickly. Martin pulled out his phone and took a video of the place. It was only one room, but one end had been converted to a small kitchen. A miniscule bathroom was screened off in the corner. It had obviously been cleaned up as everything was tidy and the bed was made. It was also nearly barren of any sign of someone living there, at least at first. No magazines or knickknacks on the table. No TV. No photos or clippings on the refrigerator. No art on the walls except for one poster of Buddha overlooking the small dinette set. Hanging over that set, dangling from the light fixture, was a dreamcatcher. The kitchen counter held no cookie jar or butter dish or even a toaster. The trash bin under the sink was empty.

Further examination did produce evidence of habitation. The cupboards held a few dishes. On one shelf was a sugar bowl and salt and pepper shakers. Sanchez wondered why they weren't on the table or at least a counter. A wardrobe held a few clothes, mostly cheap, practical garments, but there were some nice dresses and tops on hangers. Two banker's boxes held some papers in manila folders. Martin began to flip through them. One held old check registers, but no checkbook. Another had Denise's passport. Several thick ones contained papers pertaining to her daughter Crystal – correspondence with federal, state and local agencies, articles clipped from newspapers and magazine. The second box was full of books, mostly how-to books on subjects like palmistry, crystal reading, astrology, Zen Buddhism, high colonics. There were two cookbooks and some children's books as well. The overall look of the place was that whoever lived here was in the process of moving out or was preparing to take a trip.

"She's on month-to-month," Lopez volunteered.

"Did she say anything about moving out or going somewhere?" Sanchez asked.

"No. She just handed me the check."

Martin, still squatting over the boxes of papers, said, "We should take these. Plain view. There's too much stuff to read through here."

Sanchez asked Lopez, "Does anyone else live here? That's a queen bed." She knew that a warrant would be necessary if there was another person with a reasonable expectation of privacy in the contents of the cottage, like a roommate

or boyfriend. If not, then it wouldn't matter because no one would have standing to object to the search.

"No, just her. I told her an extra twenty bucks a month for double occupancy. She checked the box on the rental form for one person."

"Okay, take the papers," She told Martin. He put the tops on the boxes. She turned back to Lopez. "Her brother is supposed to be coming down soon. He'll want to take her property, I suppose. Was this furniture hers?"

"No, it comes furnished. The bed and tables and microwave are mine. Stove and refrigerator, too. Those must be hers." He pointed to the poster and dreamcatcher. "I don't know if she had anything else. I never stepped inside after she moved in. She'd just hand me the check at the door or mail it."

"Okay, that's it for now. Leave it locked. I'll let the brother know so he can make arrangements to get clothes and stuff if he wants to."

"Can I start to show it? I'm going to have to get another renter."

"Why don't you hold off for another week, in case we need to come back. She's paid through that much. If you don't hear from us after that, you can work it out with her brother. I'll give him your phone number."

Martin snapped several photos of the apartment, then the two detectives returned to their car and headed to the workplace address they had for Denise.

The nearby plant bore a large sign out front reading "Pepe's Salsa." They entered, identified themselves and asked to talk to the manager. A grizzled woman of about fifty appeared wearing a jumpsuit that looked like it came from a hardware store apparel section. When she found out what they wanted, she said she knew Denise by name, but knew little else. She suggested they talk to her shift foreman, Alejandro. She led them back to the production area.

Alejandro turned out to be a movie-star handsome young man and the nephew of one of the company's original owners. He had an MBA from San Diego State and was learning the business from the ground up. He was surprised to learn that Denise was dead, but not overly so. There was a lot of turnover in her job – sorter – and workers often enough just stopped coming in without giving notice. Denise was a reliable worker, though, and he was sorry to hear of her passing, or so he told the detectives. He explained that her job was to sort the vegetables as they came down the assembly belt, tossing out rotten or underripe ones, and placing chili peppers of the right size and color into a separate bin for bottling. He explained that the sorters rotated from peppers to tomatoes to onions every hour because the fumes and oils from the peppers and onions could be hard to take for long periods. Even so, some workers couldn't handle it and just quit. He didn't really know her well but said she normally worked right next to Marisol on the line and he knew they talked a lot during the day. He told them he couldn't stop the line, but he volunteered to take Marisol's place in line for a few minutes while they talked to her. He walked over to a matronly Mexican woman, said something to her, and took her place.

Marisol walked over to the detectives. "My boss said you want to talk to me about Denise," she said in a strong Mexican accent. "What she do?"

The detectives weren't surprised that Alejandro hadn't told her of Denise's death. No one likes to be the bearer of bad news. "She passed away, I'm afraid," Sanchez said. "Was she your friend?"

"Jes, here at work. I don't visit her at home or like that. What happen to her?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. Was she depressed?"

"Depress?"

"Sad?" Martin offered. "Talking about suicide or death?"

"Suicide? ¡Dios mío!" She crossed herself, then after a moment, "No. She was happy."

Sanchez didn't like Martin's referring to suicide, since that had not been determined yet. She launched into Spanish to take control which also had the effect of making things go much faster.

She learned that Marisol and Denise often talked while working, Denise sometimes came in late but rarely missed a day. She used to try to borrow money from Marisol, but gave up after she kept telling her no. Denise had a new boyfriend, a fact she first mentioned a few months ago, but she was secretive about him. Marisol didn't know his name or any more about him. Lately Denise had been in a particularly good mood, probably because of the new boyfriend. She'd talked religion a lot, too, especially at first, but Marisol avoided the subject because all that eastern spiritual stuff conflicted with her Catholicism. Mostly they talked about TV shows and movies. Denise went to the movies with a friend named Beth about two weeks ago. She remembers Denise kept saying that Beth really liked Star Wars and would go to those Comic-Con conventions every year.

When the interview was over, Sanchez summarized it for Martin. He was irritated at having been cut out of the questioning, but he knew that the fault was largely his for not being a better Spanish student. He'd followed some of the conversation and had already made a note of the name Beth. They would have to find her and interview her. They still didn't have a list of Denise's friends or other local contacts.

"It sounds like she was elated she was about to meet her maker," he said after Sanchez explained what Marisol had said.

"Could be. These aren't traditional suicides. They're not motivated by depression; at least we don't think so. So you were looking through the papers from her apartment. Do you remember any mention of Beth or Elizabeth?"

"No. I'll go through the boxes in more detail this afternoon if I can. Maybe there's something there. We need to find her phone and her car."

"Yeah, dollars to doughnuts The Weenie has 'em."

"Speaking of doughnuts, I'm hungry. Let's stop and grab lunch on the way back to the office."

"Islands on Balboa okay?" It was her favorite place.

"Are you a real Mexican?" Martin chuckled. "You always go there for the burgers."



“You want Mexican? You can order the chicken soft taco there. Put some Pepe’s Extra Hot on it and we’ll see who the real Mexican is.” She grinned at him as she started the car.

## Chapter 4

Thursday

Cliff was irritated when he entered the office and Maeva wasn't there. She usually came in early and started the coffee. He didn't normally have any at home in the morning, or on the way in. He liked to pour himself a cup as soon as he walked in. He started a pot going. The bookkeeping error contributed to his irritation, too, he knew, although he told himself it might not be Maeva's fault. Pringle and Lowe might have screwed up. He walked into his office and turned on his computer. Now he'd have to wait for that to boot up; Maeva usually started that, too. Another irritation.

He walked back out to the coffee pot and paced, mug in hand, while it brewed. As soon as he got this tax thing straightened out he'd have to figure out how to clear his calendar so he could go down to San Diego and what he'd do when he got there.

Maeva walked in as he was pouring his first cup. "You're in early," she said, surprise in her voice.

"Well, one of us should be," he replied, sounding snippier than he meant to be.

"Well, excu-u-u-s-e me," she replied, stretching it out like Steve Martin. "Traffic was murder. I told you I had to take my boyfriend to the airport this morning. You know what 101 is like."

"Right. I forgot about that." He tried to sound conciliatory since he realized he had told her no problem when she had let him know.

"Sure," she said, rolling her eyes.

Cliff poured Maeva a cup and put it on her desk. "I can sympathize. Hey, I have something I need you to get right on. Sorry for the rush. The CPA found a discrepancy in our records and we need to get it explained today. The filing deadline is coming up tomorrow. We show a receipt from Pringle and Lowe that they don't include in their 1099 to us. We're claiming income their 1099 says they didn't give us. I'll send you the check number and date. Can you pull up the bank statement and the check image?"

"Okay, as soon as I get booted up. I'll pull up the correspondence file from Pringle, too. That should have a cover letter or copy of our invoice."

Cliff nodded and went to his desk and sat. His computer was fully booted up now so he opened his browser and clicked on his email. He found the email he'd sent the previous day from Huang's office and forwarded it to Maeva.

He began reading through his email. There was already one from the San Diego detective asking him to call. He skipped that for the time being and dealt with all his other business emails.

Then he looked at his calendar, decided that he could move some things around, and leave the next morning, Friday. He'd stay one night to take care of funeral arrangements and whatever else needed doing. That would give him one business day so he could go to banks, police, or government offices or whatever else. If he had to, he could stay over an extra day and fly back on Saturday night without much affecting his own business schedule. Otherwise he'd have to wait until the following weekend.

He called Sanchez and got her voice mail. He left a message that he would be coming down the next day and could answer any questions then. When he got off the phone, Maeva was standing next to his desk with two folders and a sheet of paper, a printout of some kind.

"Here's the printout of the check. Pringle and Lowe, \$8,165.40 deposited six months ago. There's a letter in the file." She pointed to a Post-It protruding from a sheet in one of the folders. "I didn't screw up, Cliff. We got the check. I deposited it and entered it in the ledger like normal. I don't know why they sent a 1099 that didn't match."

"Okay, leave it with me. I'll call them."

She left as Cliff flipped open the Pringle correspondence file to the Post-It note. There was a letter on Pringle and Lowe letterhead but it didn't help much. It was signed by a lawyer named Rubin Cox, who was identified in the letterhead as a Senior Associate in the Sacramento Office. Cliff didn't remember the name or working a case with their Sacramento office, but many times the matter might be from out of town and he was only doing some local investigation. He dealt almost exclusively with partners, but they usually had associates do most of the grunt work, so that wasn't surprising either. There was a subject line with a case name: "in re: McKendrie PR2013-87334." The body of the letter read as follows:

Enclosed is a check in the amount of \$8,165.40 in accordance with our letter of January 14, 2014. This is in final settlement. If you have any questions contact me at the above number.

Cliff didn't remember the McKendrie case or the previous letter, but this struck him as strange. That date was over two years earlier. Not only that but the case number was from 2013, a year before. He wouldn't have waited two years to resolve a billing dispute and he didn't remember one in this amount. He normally rounded hourly bills off to the nearest dollar, although expenses could be an odd amount. There was a pencil notation in the margin in Maeva's handwriting that said "check encl. dep." with the date of deposit. Cliff's initials were in the bottom right-hand corner in ink, a practice he had for all correspondence to signify he'd read it, a practice that carried over from his FBI days as a supervisor.

He flipped backward in the file to find the previous letter. When he got to the very back he realized the volume he had didn't go back that far. He got up and walked out to the front office and pulled open the file cabinet drawer that held the Pringle files. He pulled out the one that held the 2014 correspondence

and began leafing through it. January would be near the bottom. He looked at the very bottom correspondence first, which consisted of several pages of emails. Cliff never trusted “the cloud” to preserve important emails or other documents. He always made paper copies for his files. That was dated January 4. The next document in the file was an invoice from Cliff to Pringle for \$11,580 dated January 22. There was a case number and name on it, but they weren’t the same as McKendrie or even close. He flipped through some more of the file but there was no mention of either McKendrie or Rubin Cox.

He carried the file over to Maeva. “I need this 2014 letter,” he said, pointing to the sentence in the current letter she had tagged. “January 14<sup>th</sup>. It’s not in the file.”

Maeva took both volumes of the file and began looking with an exasperated expression. Within thirty seconds she could tell the letter just wasn’t there where it should have been. She did the filing. This had to be her mistake.

“I, I don’t know what happened. I always file their correspondence in this folder. Gee, I’m sorry. I’ll try to find it. Is this urgent?”

“Yes, I told you that already,” he replied impatiently. “Mason Huang is waiting for this. He has to file. Hold on. Give me that.” He pulled the file back and looked at the letterhead again. Then he pulled out his cell phone and dialed the number next to Rubin Cox’s name. A receptionist answered.

“I’d like to speak with Rubin Cox,” he said, eschewing the usual “please.” He was transferred to a secretary where he repeated his request.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Cox is out of town. He won’t be in until Monday. Is there something I can help you with?”

“This is Cliff Knowles. I’m a private investigator. I’m inquiring about the McKendrie case. I did some work on it. There’s a problem with the billing. Is there someone else I can speak to? A partner, maybe? He sent me a letter six months ago about it.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Knowles, I can’t speak about that matter. Only attorneys can do that. I can ask around and see if I can find someone who will talk to you, but everyone’s busy and I doubt anyone else would know anything about Mr. Cox’s matters. Why don’t you leave me your name and number and the date and case number on that letter and I’ll have him call you on Monday.”

“Fine,” he replied with barely concealed exasperation, “have him call me.” He gave her the information she’d requested and hung up.

He handed the files back to Maeva and retreated to his office. He called Mason Huang and got right to business.

“Mason, I haven’t been able to figure out exactly what happened with that check. Maeva pulled it up and found recent correspondence on it but it basically just said here’s a check. It references an earlier letter, but we can’t find that one. We got that check and deposited it, that much I know. I don’t remember what it was for. I’ve got a call in to the attorney who sent it but he’s out of town.”

“Could they have sent it to you by mistake? Maybe it was for someone else.”

“Maybe. I don’t know and I probably won’t know until Monday at the earliest.”

“Okay, we’re going to have to include it in your income. If you find out it shouldn’t be there, we can always do an amended return. Stop by my office any time after one and sign the return.”

“Okay. Sorry, that’s the best I can do. See you then.” He stepped out into Maeva’s area again and told her to make him plane and hotel reservations in San Diego for early tomorrow, with a return on Saturday evening.

“Ramada Inn?” That was the chain he usually used when on client business.

“No, this one’s on my dime. Make it the Hampton Inn. And if you find that letter from 2014, let me know right away.”

• • •

Cliff went by the accountant’s office to sign the return. Since he was close, he went by his house. All his personal files, family photo albums, and the like were at home. He dug around a bit and found what he was looking for: a folder with paperwork pertaining to Denise. Inside was her last will and testament, at least as of fifteen years earlier. He had forgotten about it until this morning.

He opened it up and reread it. It was as he had remembered. He was named as her executor. Everything was to go to Crystal, not that she had expected to have much to bequeath. It was his responsibility to file the will, collect her assets, pay her debts if possible, and distribute the rest according to the provisions of the will. That was something he’d agreed to do back then when they were on good terms and she’d looked briefly like she was getting it together. He muttered something silently to himself and closed the folder. He took it with him when he headed back to the office. He had a lot of preparation to do before tomorrow. He’d have to look up the legal process for an estate case. It had been a long time since that class in law school.

## Chapter 5

Friday

“The brother’s due in by now,” Sanchez said as she lowered the manila folder in her hand. She and Martin had spent the late afternoon Thursday going through the boxes of paperwork from Denise’s apartment. The one she held was quite thick and contained information about Crystal. It showed that a Crystal Bachman, now aged eighteen, was a resident at a state facility for the severely disabled just outside San Diego. They had decided to visit there with Cliff when he arrived since he would need to go there too, and it might be helpful to have the next of kin there in case of any privacy issues. A form in the file showed that Denise had named Cliff as the second emergency contact for Crystal, Denise herself being first.

“I checked his flight. It’s been on the ground for fifteen minutes. He’ll call when he gets his rental car,” Martin replied.

“If we’d picked him up, we could have talked to him in the car as we drove out there.”

“He has stuff he has to do here. We can’t chauffeur him around all day. Anyway, he told me he was going to rent a car so who am I to tell him not to?”

The desk phone rang at that moment and Sanchez picked it up. “Hello?”

“Hello. This is Cliff Knowles. You wanted to meet me this morning.”

“Yes, we’ve been waiting for you to call. Can you meet us right away?”

“Yes. What’s the address?”

“We’ve located Crystal’s facility. It’s nearby. Can you meet us there? You’re listed as her emergency contact and next of kin after Denise, in case you didn’t know.”

Cliff sighed at the news. “I didn’t know. Okay, well, I guess that’s something I’m going to have to take care of anyway. Give me that address and I’ll head directly there.”

She gave him the address, ended the call, and told Martin to get ready to head out.

• • •

At the facility, euphemistically named Tranquil House, the detectives were waiting in the lobby when Cliff arrived. Introductions were made all around. They walked Cliff over to the reception desk and the woman there said that Mrs. Browne would be right out.

A bony woman with acne scars and graying hair emerged from a nearby office and approached. “Mr. Knowles? I’m Roberta Browne. I just spoke with the detectives. They tell me you’re Crystal’s uncle. Please come into my office.” She

shook hands and gestured toward the open office door. Once inside, she closed it. There were chairs for the detectives and Cliff. They all sat.

"Mr. Knowles, I'm afraid I'll need to see some identification," she began. Cliff showed her his driver's license. "Thank you. I see you're listed as her next of kin, but I also see you haven't visited here in the eight years she's been here. Do you even know your niece?"

Cliff didn't like her tone, but could understand where she was coming from. "No, I don't. My sister put her in an institution when she was an infant. I haven't seen her since she was a baby. Denise may have listed me as next of kin, but she never told me about it. Look, I want to do the right thing. Can I see her?"

"In a minute. First I need you to understand - you have no rights here. Denise gave up her parental rights years ago. Crystal is a ward of the state. I'm her legal guardian, not Denise, not you. Or, more accurately, my department, the Office of the Public Guardian, is. The court established a conservatorship. She needs to be in a facility like this. She needs 24-hour a day care that you can't provide."

"Hold it. Hold it. I'm not trying to take her out of here. I didn't even know I was named on the forms. I wouldn't have any way to take care of her. I'm sure this is the best place for her." Cliff was sincere in this as the facility seemed at first glance to be a much nicer place than he had imagined.

The detectives watched the exchange with interest, but said nothing.

"That's fine, Mr. Knowles," Browne said more softly. "I didn't mean to suggest anything about you. The detectives told me you were a lawyer here to handle Denise's estate and we've had some bad experiences when relatives come in with a lawyer."

"So can I see her now?"

"Why don't we ask our questions first," Sanchez said. "Mrs. Browne, can you please tell us about Crystal's mother? Did she visit? Did you know her?"

"Before I say anything about her, can you provide me some proof she's dead? Do you have a death certificate? We need that for our records."

"No. The official cause of death hasn't been determined yet so there's no death certificate. You'll get a copy in due course."

"Alright," Browne went on. "Denise was, shall we say, sporadic in her attention to Crystal. As I understand it, Denise moved here eight years ago. She had some sort of job in Tijuana at a clinic. You know, one of those miracle cancer cure con jobs that use unapproved native medicines at outrageous prices or whatever. She got Crystal moved from the facility in northern California where she had been for years. The guardian there was also my department, but the caseworker and doctors there agreed to it because Crystal responded very well to her mother and this facility is a nicer one, too.

"At first, Denise came in regularly to visit and Crystal did well. As well as can be expected. You'll see how bad off she is shortly. After a year or so, that job fell through. Probably because Denise was having drug and alcohol issues.

We could see it on those few occasions when she came in. Then she stopped coming in at all for over two years.

“Denise finally got herself into AA and cleaned herself up some, but it was hit and miss for a couple of years. The last two to three years she’s been sober so far as the staff could tell. She’s been coming in regularly at least once a week. She’s very loving ... was very loving, with Crystal and it’s obvious that Crystal loved her mother. The visits were very therapeutic for her and I’m sorry they’re going to stop. She has no other visitors. Denise told me that she has a job in a factory around here somewhere. That’s about all I really know about her.”

“Did she ever come here with anyone else? A girlfriend? A boyfriend?”

“Not that I recall. I wasn’t usually here. I have cases all over the county. She had visiting privileges and could see Crystal any time she wanted unless there was a medical order in effect.”

“How about money? Did Denise support Crystal at all?”

“No. Her support is entirely by the state. Denise would bring her small gifts sometimes. Candy. Crystal is lactose-intolerant, among other things, and can’t have milk chocolate or many other things. Once Denise brought one of those soap bubble toys, but Crystal couldn’t blow any bubbles. She seemed to take pleasure in watching her mother blow bubbles around her, though. That sort of thing. Coloring books, crayons. Crystal loves to color. I got the impression Denise had no money. Her car was unreliable. I know at least once she took the bus all the way out here. That brings up a good point, though. Does Crystal inherit anything? I’m her legal guardian; it’s my duty to ask.”

Everyone looked at Cliff. “I don’t know,” he said after a pause. “Denise wrote a will fifteen years ago or so. I’m planning to file it, but there could be another one somewhere I don’t know about. I expect there will be.”

“Who’s named as executor?” Browne asked sharply.

“I am, but I haven’t been in touch since then and Denise didn’t like me or trust me since we had our falling out. I assume she got her will updated somewhere in there and named someone else.”

“And yet she named you as emergency contact and next of kin for Crystal,” Browne pointed out. “Maybe she trusted you more than you think. What does the will say? Does Crystal get anything?”

Cliff knew the will would be a public document as soon as he filed it. There was no point in keeping it secret. “Yes. Well, it names her as sole heir, but of course Crystal is incompetent.”

“I’m her conservator. Don’t you think I ought to be the executor if Crystal is the sole heir? If you administer it you get a percentage of the estate.” The combative tone was back.

“Give me a break. I don’t want her money. I’ll waive any fees. From what you say she doesn’t have any, anyway. Her creditors will probably get it all regardless of who the executor is. Wouldn’t you rather I deal with them?”



"Okay, you two," Sanchez broke in. "Can we get back to our questions? I'm sure the two of you can figure that out later. About the car, when was the last time you saw it?"

"Denise was here last week, I heard. I wasn't here. I don't know if she drove in, but she usually did. There might be a security tape of the parking lot."

"Did Denise ever talk to others here? The doctors or nurses, other patients' relatives?"

"Certainly. The medical staff knew her. Most of what I told you about her I got from them. I doubt any of the other patients would interact with her well, although some are quite intelligent. Not everyone here is disabled in the same way. I can't say if she talked to any relatives. The nursing staff would know better than I. I'm the conservator for ten patients here and eight at another facility in the county and many in private homes. I can't be with all of them all the time. I'm required to deal more with financial and legal matters and make medical decisions based on doctors' reports. In fact, I really must get to the other facility. Do you have any more questions?"

Sanchez answered. "Nothing that can't wait. We'll call you if we need anything." They all rose.

"The nurse will take you to see Crystal."

They filed out and Browne took them to a nursing station then said her goodbyes. Soon a male nurse appeared pushing a wheelchair. In it was a poor, shriveled creature the likes of which Cliff had never seen. Crystal must have been no more than seventy pounds and twisted like a French pastry. She made Stephen Hawking look like Hulk Hogan. Her mouth hung half open and drool ran down one side of her chin. She didn't make eye contact with any of them as she was rolled up to them. Rather, she seemed to be staring at Martin's crotch. It was obvious he was beginning to feel embarrassed.

"Oh, it's your belt buckle. She likes shiny things," the nurse said. "You must be the detectives."

Martin buttoned his sport coat self-consciously. "Yes, I'm Detective Martin and this is Detective Sanchez."

Cliff extended his hand to the nurse. "Cliff Knowles." The nurse shook it.

"You hear that, Crystal?" the nurse said. "This is your Uncle Cliff. He's family. He's your mom's brother." He held Crystal's pipe-cleaner arm out straight to point to Cliff.

Crystal finally made eye contact with Cliff and started making a high keening sound like a wail of despair.

"She's happy," the nurse explained. "That's the sound she makes when she likes something."

"Hello, Crystal," Cliff said uncomfortably. He bent over to put his face closer to her level since it was obvious she had trouble moving her head to look up at him. Her right arm was limp and useless, but she had movement in her left hand, Cliff saw. It was making a sort of flapping motion against her stomach.

"She wants to shake your hand," the nurse said. "She learned to do that just last year."

Cliff tried to look cheerful as he reached over and took her left hand in both of his and shook gently. She made the keening sound again. "Can I hug her?" he asked the nurse.

"Gently, yes." Cliff gave her an awkward squeeze.

"Why don't we take a walk. She loves the yard. Follow me." The nurse put a wide brimmed hat on Crystal's head.

"Did you know Denise, her mother?" Martin asked.

"Of course."

"What can you tell us about her? Was she different recently?"

"Yes, I guess you'd say that. She always tried to put on a good face around Crystal, but she would always complain to the staff about her life, her job, stuff like that. But lately she's been upbeat."

"Not depressed? Suicidal?"

"Lord, no. Why? Is that what happened?"

"The cause of death has not been determined yet," Sanchez said quickly and shot Martin a withering look, jerking her head toward Crystal. She didn't know how much the girl understood.

Cliff took a closer look at Crystal as he walked behind her. The wheelchair was the standard hospital variety, the kind someone has to push if the patient can't turn the wheels manually, which clearly Crystal couldn't. Her hair was a tangled mess despite being cut short although the hat covered it now. She wore a tee shirt with the tag sticking up in the back, but over that was a hospital gown. Cliff assumed Crystal needed help with her bodily elimination functions and the gown was a necessity. The chair continued down a ramp into a well-groomed back yard. The grass was obviously well-watered despite the drought and there were flowers in small side plots.

As the detectives kept asking him questions about Denise, the nurse kept the entourage going until they reached the end of the paved walkway at the back of the property. There was a bird feeder hanging from a tree limb there. Birds of two or three species were actively darting in and out between the wires of the cage protecting it from the squirrels. Crystal started making the keening sound again. Cliff moved around to watch her face and could see her eyes light up.

"She loves to watch the birds," the nurse explained.

"Do you take her out here every day?"

"When we can. The problem is we can wheel her out here, but someone has to stay with her. She can't maneuver the wheelchair by herself. She's hypersensitive to sunlight so she has to be kept in the shade. There's only a little patch out here and it keeps moving as the sun moves. We don't have enough staff to stay out here with her. She'd stay for hours if she could. When her mom would visit, sometimes they would, but that was only on weekends. If it rained, they'd stay inside and watch cartoons. Crystal loves cartoons, too."

"Her left hand moves okay," Cliff pointed out. "Couldn't she operate one of those electric wheelchairs?"

"That's a good observation," the nurse replied. "The nursing staff thought so, but the doctors actually experimented with that once and she couldn't sit straight in a conventional power chair. She couldn't reach the controls with her left hand, either. See how her left hand is almost locked against her stomach. Her spinal deformity is too great. She'd need a custom-built chair and controls, which would be very expensive. She'd need some kind of sunshade built into it, probably with electric adjustment, too. The doctors say it's not a medical necessity and can't justify the expense, especially since we can't even be sure she could learn to use it. We have plenty of other needy patients and a limited budget."

"How much would it cost?" Cliff asked.

"Ballpark guess? Eight or ten grand for the chair, probably. Then you'd need a private therapist or trainer to get her to use it and to decide on any modifications that might be necessary. Another five for that. Maybe more."

"I'm sorry to interrupt but we have to talk to some other staff members," Sanchez said. "We need to see if anyone else has information about Denise. Why don't you stay here with your niece while we do more interviews. We can meet you in the lobby in half an hour, say."

Cliff looked at his watch. "No, I have to get going myself. I need to get to the courthouse and file these papers. What about her apartment? Can I get access there? I need to see what property she has and go through her financial records."

"The landlord has been told you're coming. Here's the address and his phone number." She handed him a sheet of paper. "He told us he'd meet you there and let you in. We took custody of her papers. There were two boxes. We haven't finished going through them. They're evidence for now, but if you come by the station when you're done with those errands, you can look through them and we'll make copies of anything you need. You can take any property of hers that's still at the apartment."

"Okay, thank you."

The whole party turned around and headed back to the building. Crystal started making a new sound, a sort of clipped barking noise. Cliff could see the unhappiness in her eyes. Obviously she was disappointed to be going back so soon.

Cliff stopped and bent down near Crystal's face. "Crystal, I have to go now, but I'll try to come back later today and take you out to the birds again if I can. Would you like that?"

The barking noise stopped. Crystal made eye contact with Cliff but stayed silent.

"She has physical therapy from three to four," the nurse said, "but you can come any time besides that. Evenings, too."

They continued on to the building. The detectives shook hands with Cliff and told him they'd talk to him later when he came by the station, and then went to talk to other nurses. Cliff thanked the nurse pushing the wheelchair and gave Crystal's hand a squeeze before heading for his car. The whole experience left him shaken.

• • •

At Denise's garage apartment, the landlord met him and they both entered. Cliff opened all the kitchen cupboards and drawers but the sparse crockery and pans were old and of no significant value. The clothing included a few nice things so he collected those and piled them in the middle of the room. After several minutes, it was obvious that there wasn't anything more worth dealing with. He told the landlord that he could have anything else there and so far as he was concerned he could start showing the apartment if the police said it was okay.

"She only paid me half the rent for this month," the landlord said. "You gonna pay me the rest?"

"It's only the twelfth. If she paid you half then you're even. Besides, you have a security deposit don't you?"

"Yes," the man admitted.

Cliff bent down to scoop up the clothes and noticed something. Against one wall was a set of bricks and boards in a makeshift set of shelves. Under the lowest board there was something dark and thin. Cliff moved over there and pulled it out. It was a coiled coaxial cable. One end was plugged into a jack near the baseboard. The jack and cable weren't visible from a standing position due to the boards. He stood and examined the top shelf more carefully. There was nothing on it but dust. Cliff thought he could see a faint oval pattern in the dust. He snapped a photo of it with his phone.

"Did you have cable service here?" he demanded.

"No. She must have had that brought in."

"The TV must have been right here. Do you remember if there was one here?"

"She never let me in. She just handed me the check at the door or mailed it to me. But I remember last time I could hear the TV as I came to the door. She turned it off before she opened the door."

"Last time? When was that?"

"The first of the month. Twelve days ago."

"Is that the only time?"

"I think so. I don't know. It's not something I'd remember."

"So what happened to the TV? Did you take it?"

"No. I don't know what happened."

Cliff didn't know whether to believe him or not. He looked around again, bending close to the floor looking for any other jacks. He wondered whether

there had been a modem there, too, but saw no sign of one. She might have had a computer and other electronics.

"You want that thing?" the landlord said, pointing at the dreamcatcher.

"No. I'm leaving." He scooped up the clothing again and carried the small pile out to the car, leaving the landlord to close up.

He put the clothes in the trunk and headed for the courthouse. His car's GPS took him there without difficulty. Inside he filed Denise's fifteen-year-old will. Since he didn't think Denise had any real property he didn't file his petition to administer the estate. The law required him to file the will where the decedent died and had property. If someone else filed another will, he'd be notified. He was hoping to avoid probate, which is usually possible with small estates.

From there he drove straight to the police station. He was led in to see Sanchez and Martin.

"Did you get the will filed?" Martin asked.

"I did."

"Can we have a copy? It's relevant to the investigation. To see who might have a motive."

"Sure. I have to believe that she's made another one since then. If she did, this one isn't valid. I was out to the apartment. Like you said, I don't think there's anything to inherit." He handed his copy of the will to Martin. "Besides, you said it's suicide, right?"

Sanchez answered while Martin was making a copy of the will. "It certainly looks that way. We're still waiting for the medical examiner on that, but we have no reason to think it's anything else."

"Did anyone else at the Tranquil House have any good information?"

Sanchez gave him a funny look. "Mr. Knowles, I know you're a retired FBI agent, but you know we can't really share our investigation with you."

"Of course. I didn't mean ... well, I do think there's a crime going on here."

"A crime?" Martin said, interested, as he returned with the will and handed Cliff his copy.

"Yeah. What about her phone and her car and her TV? Somebody's ripped those off."

"This Gatekeepers group she was in says she donated all her goods to them before she 'ascended'. We've already been in contact there and requested the car and phone back."

"What about the TV? It's a big one. It must be worth a few hundred bucks at least."

The two detectives looked at each other. "We didn't see any TV," Sanchez replied.

"That's because someone took it. The landlord, maybe, I don't know, but there was one there." He explained about finding the coaxial cable and the oval in the dust.

"That's right," Sanchez said to Martin. "Remember her friend at the factory? All they talked about was television."

Martin went to his computer and started pulling up photos. Cliff and Sanchez stood behind him. Soon he found what he was looking for – a photo of the apartment showing the bare shelving. He zoomed in. The dust oval was faint but definitely noticeable.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered. "We missed that."

"From the size of that mark, it must have been at least a 52-inch model," Cliff said.

Sanchez pulled out her phone and scrolled until she found the number she was looking for. She dialed.

"This is Detective Sanchez. Give me Ms. Morgenthal." The tone of her voice made clear she meant business. She pushed the speakerphone button.

"This is Naomi Morgenthal."

"There's a big-screen TV missing, too."

"Good morning to you, too, detective," Morgenthal replied, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "You're saying she donated a television, too?"

"Cut the crap. There's no way she hauled a big TV like that by herself up to the church. Somebody cleaned out her apartment, either just before or just after she died."

"That doesn't mean it was my client or anyone else in the church. Lakshmi may have asked a friend to help her. It may have been repossessed. Maybe it was in the trunk of the car. It could be ..."

"If someone entered her apartment after she died and stole that TV, that's a felony. And if they helped her commit suicide so they could get her TV and car, we're talking murder."

"Come on, detective. You really think a fellow believer would steal from her? Commit murder for a TV and a used car? They don't even watch TV. Tohini says it pollutes the mind."

"We just came from a facility where Denise's daughter is institutionalized. She's a special needs child, a very pitiful case. A will has already been filed by the decedent's family and it leaves everything to the daughter. I want that property returned pronto."

There was a long silence on the other end, then "I see. Well, I contacted my client after I spoke to you before and he's looking into it. I'll let him know about the television. That's all I can do right now. Someone will be getting back to you. Does the family have a lawyer?"

Sanchez looked at Cliff. He nodded and tapped his chest.

"Yes. His name is Cliff Knowles. He's Denise's brother. He's in my office right now. He flew down from San Francisco." Anything in the Bay Area was San Francisco to people in San Diego, even though Cliff lived and worked forty miles south and flew in and out of the larger city of San Jose.

"Do you have his number?"

Cliff recited his number through the speakerphone.

"Thank you, Mr. Knowles. My condolences to you and your family. Among the Gatekeepers this is a time for rejoicing, but I realize it must be a sad time for you. How long will you be in town?"

"I'll be here tonight and tomorrow. I'm planning to fly back tomorrow evening if I can."

"If my client can assist you in any way, I'm sure he will want to. I will let him know of the situation. I understand that he was unaware of the existence of Lakshmi's special needs child, or any child. He told me she had no family."

"Just get me her property back, counselor. Please. I'm a retired FBI agent. I can make things unpleasant if you don't."

"There's no need to threaten, Mr. Knowles," Morgenthal said. "We all just want what's best. Your sister was generous to the church, but the church can be generous to those in need, too. Will you be able to meet with me tomorrow morning?"

"I don't see why not."

"I'll try to arrange something with my client. I'll be in touch. Goodbye." She hung up.

"That was a good catch about the TV," Martin said to Cliff, and raised his hand up for a high five. Cliff disliked the juvenile gesture, especially now since it was hardly a time for celebration, but he was long past making an issue of it. He gave a perfunctory slap to the detective's hand to be done with it.

"Will you two be able to meet if she calls?" Cliff asked.

Sanchez turned to Martin. "It's your turn. I caught the crime scene by myself." Then she turned to Cliff. "Mr. Knowles, we don't normally work on weekends unless there's an active homicide. Detective Martin can accompany you to the lawyer's office if she calls. One officer should be enough. We'll want to dust the car and TV for prints if they turn those over. Once we've done that, you can keep them. We'll want to keep the phone for now, but you can make a copy of the contacts."

"Okay. So what are you doing next? I mean, I'm not trying to horn in, I just mean how does this work? What do you do when it looks like a suicide?"

"We have the name of a fellow cult member that she supposedly texted about her plans. We hope to interview him this afternoon. We normally would try to catch him by surprise, and we'll try that, but he's probably already been warned by the assistant to the cult leader that we'll be coming. She's the one who gave us his contact information."

Martin broke in, "And I found the telephone number for that woman Beth that the co-worker mentioned. There was actually an address book in her papers. No last name. Just Beth on the B page. It's a local number."

From her expression, it was obvious Sanchez hadn't heard this bit of news. "Good work. So we have some interviews to do, and we'll check her text messages and email if we come up with a phone or computer, but really it's going to come down to what the Chief Medical Examiner says, Mr. Knowles."

"Please call me Cliff."

“Okay, Cliff. I’m Eva. But I expect it’s going to be ruled a suicide and I doubt we’ll find proof as to who helped. Even if we did, the D.A. is unlikely to prosecute unless the circumstances are pretty egregious. But we can at least help you get her property back. And there’s another thing. We’d like you to identify the body. It’s really just a formality since we already had her prints on file, but it is still standard procedure. We’d like to do that now, if you’re up to it.”

Cliff exhaled heavily. He’d seen dead bodies before, so that wasn’t so much the issue, but the only relatives he’d seen that way were his own parents and that had been wrenching even though it was natural causes in both cases. He hadn’t seen his sister in almost fifteen years. He didn’t know what to expect. “I suppose so, if it has to be done.”

“We’ll drive you over. When we get back you and Detective Martin, Rob, can go through the papers together. You can get copies of her bank records or whatever you need.”

• • •

The morgue wasn’t at all what Cliff had expected. Rather than a dark windowless room in the basement, it was on the first floor with large, high-set windows that gave the room a sunny, cheerful feel. Still, he felt a chill run up his spine as the gurney was rolled out from the adjacent cold storage room. A sheet covered the shape atop the gurney.

The attendant said nothing. Dealing with relatives was the detective’s job. “She’s already had the autopsy so the body is rather cut up. We’re only going to show you the face,” Sanchez said. “Are you ready?”

“Go ahead.”

She nodded to the attendant, a chubby Chinese male with one drooping eyelid. He pulled back the sheet, exposing the head.

Cliff didn’t recognize her. She was too heavy and the hair was pitch black, unlike the mousy brown color he knew. He moved around the corpse to the other side and bent closer. The detectives looked at each other. Martin thought for a moment that they had misidentified the body and started to say something, but Sanchez put her hand on his arm as he started to talk and motioned for him not to say anything. She knew that it wasn’t that unusual for people to be unable to recognize the bodies of even close friends or family members several days after death, especially if they haven’t seen them in years.

“Yes, that’s her,” Cliff finally said. “The hair’s a totally different color. She had light brown hair. In high school she bleached it blond. She was a cheerleader. When she dropped out of college and started with drugs she shaved her head once. I’ve never seen it this color, but that’s her. See that scar behind her ear? She had a mastoid operation as a teenager.”

Sanchez signaled the attendant to cover the body again, which he did. “What do you want done with the body when we’re through?” the attendant asked Cliff.



"I'll have to contact a funeral home while I'm here. I'll look through her papers to see if she's left any other instructions, but in the will she requests to be cremated. Can I just leave you the name of whichever one I choose?"

"Yes," he replied. "At the front desk there's a stack of flyers with the names and telephone numbers of all the funeral homes in the area. You can pick one up on the way out." He looked to Sanchez again. She nodded and he wheeled the gurney out.

"As I told you on the phone," Sanchez said, "the body stays here until the results of the tox screen are back."

"I understand. What about the hotel room where she died. Was there anything there?"

"We took everything out of there. There's still crime scene tape on it for now. We'll release it as soon as the Chief Medical Examiner rules. You can go through that stuff at the station along with the papers from the apartment. There wasn't much there except her purse."

Cliff picked up a sheet with the list of funeral homes as they exited the morgue. The trio drove back to the police station.

There Cliff sat down with Martin to go through the papers and purse. Cliff didn't try to read things in detail. He took copies of the debit card and bank statements, the checkbook, and similar financial records, as well as the address book and the folders pertaining to Crystal. There was a passport in the name of Denise Knowles. The purse, covered with fingerprint dust, had \$13.75 in cash in it, but no credit or debit cards. He knew he could go through it all later.

When they were done Sanchez was nowhere to be found. Cliff said goodbye to Martin and left. By the time he got to his car his stomach was growling. He drove to the nearby McDonald's he'd spotted on his way to the station. He ordered a Quarter Pounder meal with the super-sized fries. He knew he shouldn't, but he was hungry and didn't have time to go shopping around. It all tasted too good.

After lunch he went to the closest funeral home and explained the situation. The attendant there was obsequiously sympathetic and told him he could take care of everything. He just needed a check up front. Cliff decided it was probably hopeless doing comparison shopping in a strange city under time pressure, so he agreed and wrote the check on his personal account.

Next he went to the bank that issued Denise's card. Armed with the newspaper article about Denise's suicide and a copy of the will, he was able to get the bank to freeze the account. They said they'd need a death certificate to unfreeze it and would give him signature authority when the court appointed him executor. The current balance was zero, but her paycheck was direct deposited so more funds might come in. They told him there had been some charges on the debit card after the date of death. Unfortunately, they told him, debit cards did not have the consumer protection of credit cards so that money would not be reimbursed. The total was almost eight hundred dollars and had cleaned out the account.

By this point Cliff was steaming. Someone was ripping off his sister's estate, in effect stealing from Crystal. As he was contemplating what he'd like to do to the Gatekeepers people, his phone rang.

"Hello."

"Mr. Knowles, this is Naomi Morgenthal. I have good news for you."

"What is it?" Cliff hissed, skeptical.

"The Gatekeepers were most upset to learn that Lakshmi had a special needs child. Inquiries were made and the word sent out among them to return the gifts she made to the church. Members have returned the car, phone, and television. If you could meet me at my office tomorrow at 9:30 A.M. I can provide them to you. In addition, the congregation took up a collection. I have an additional four hundred dollars for you to be applied to the benefit of the child."

Speechless for a moment, Cliff did not immediately respond. He tried to sound sincere when he did. "I'm glad to hear that. That is welcome news. Much as I appreciate that, I feel that I must bring one more matter to your attention."

"And that is ...?"

"I just came from the bank. Someone used Denise's debit card after she died and cleaned out her bank account."

"I see. And how much was the loss?"

"Just under eight hundred dollars. I will have to do the math to get the exact amount. It didn't happen in one transaction."

"I will let Tohini know. Please come by the office tomorrow." She gave him the address.

"I will. Thank you. Who's Tohini?"

"My client. He's the founder of the Gatekeepers."

"All right. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

## Chapter 6

"Anything in the alley?" Sanchez asked.

"No. Just the hotel guy pushing the garbage bin out of the alley and back. You?" Martin replied. They had divided up the video recordings from the security cameras at the hotel and had been reviewing them for over an hour. He'd gotten the recordings from the side entrance camera.

"The lobby has had a few people, but almost everyone goes down the hall to the first floor rooms, not to the elevators. The vic comes and goes. There's someone with her. Let me know what you think."

Martin slid his chair over to her desk to view her screen. Since the recording was digital, Sanchez was able to click on the timeline to move the playback to the exact moment she wanted. The lobby appeared on the screen. A woman was shown at the front desk, apparently checking in. A man stood next to her.

"This is late Sunday night," Sanchez said. "You think that guy could be Lance?"

They had pulled the driver's license photo of Lance DeSoto and run him in the system. It showed a tall, skinny white male with shoulder-length hair and a beard that might have qualified him as a model for a Jesus Christ painting. He had a record of petty theft and was on probation for shoplifting. The lobby camera was slightly out of focus and the angle was from high and behind the figure. It was hard to tell if it was Lance.

"Do you have another angle?"

Sanchez fast forwarded a few frames. Like all security cameras, it didn't take continuous footage since that would be too voluminous; it took a shot every three seconds. She was able to find one frame with a profile view.

"I think that's DeSoto," Martin said.

"I do too. He shows up again later." She slid the mouse to another spot she had marked. "Here." The picture showed the man leaving the lobby alone minutes later.

"Could be him. And she had no luggage at check-in. Just a purse. Doesn't look like she planned to stay long."

"The purse and backpack are both big enough to hold drugs. It doesn't take much room."

"I suppose. At least we know she was alive and well Sunday night. Does she show up later?"

"I haven't gone all the way through yet, but no, I haven't seen her after that."

"Potter said she died Monday, right?"

"It wasn't official, but that's what he said at the scene. Probably early Monday morning, just a few hours after checking in."

"I'm almost done with the alley video. When I finish this I'll start on the second floor landing cameras." He put his video on fast forward and watched as the timer in the corner raced, but the alley remained empty through Wednesday morning when a uniformed officer appeared and made a slow search of the area. That was when the officers responded to the discovery of the body, Martin realized. The video stopped shortly afterward. He switched to the camera at the second floor stairway landing file and clicked play. Sanchez continued reviewing lobby video.

"Hey, here he is again," Sanchez said after a few minutes. "This is Tuesday before we got there."

There was the man they thought was Lance DeSoto arriving in the lobby and going directly to the elevator. Ten minutes later he reappeared from the direction of the elevator and exited to the street.

"Now that's interesting" Martin said. "He doesn't have the backpack anymore."

"And he looks upset. Look how fast he makes it from the elevator to the door."

The two detectives finished reviewing the videos. The only people who traveled to the third floor in the elevator during the period Denise was there besides the maid and manager were Denise, Lance, and a Japanese tourist couple. The man, it turned out, was a World War II veteran, drafted into the Japanese army in 1945 just in time to be sent to Okinawa weeks before the U.S. invaded there, or so he had told the officers. Now in his nineties, he wanted to see the World War II era ships harbored in Southern California. That couple had been interviewed by the responding officers the day the body had been discovered. They said they had been given a room on the third floor Monday when they arrived because they had asked for it, hoping for a view, but the desk clerk had warned them that renovations were going on and there was a strong chemical smell from the flooring material that was being laid down in some of the rooms. They had regretted the decision. They knew nothing about the occupant of the other room on the floor, Denise Knowles, and had heard and seen nothing. They had smelled something bad Tuesday morning, but thought it was the chemical smell from the work, not a dead body, and asked to change rooms. They had been relocated to the second floor.

The camera on the second floor landing had a wide-angle lens and you could see the stairs coming down from the third floor and descending to the first floor, as well as the open doorway leading to the second floor hall. It showed plenty of traffic by the second floor tenants going down to the first floor lobby, and occasionally coming up, but no one went up to or came down the stairs from the third floor the entire time.

"That's it then," Martin said when they'd finished. "The maid, the manager, the Japanese couple, and Lance. No one else was on the floor the entire time. If anyone helped her do it, it had to be Lance. It's time we had a little talk with our friend."

"I think you're right. I'll call him now." Using her desk phone, she dialed the number Uli had given her and put it on speaker. It rang several times and went to voicemail. She left a message. "This is Detective Eva Sanchez of the San Diego Police. I'm calling about the death of Denise Knowles – Lakshmi. We need to speak to you right away. Call me back at this number. You're still on probation. If we don't hear from you within thirty minutes we'll report you for violation of probation."

Within two minutes Lance DeSoto called back.

"Where are you?" Sanchez asked.

"I'm at work."

"Which is where?"

"The Farmer's Outlet on Friars Road. I can't talk now. I'll be fired. Please, can it wait? I'll be off in an hour."

"We'll be waiting. See you in an hour behind the place."

• • •

An hour later Martin texted Lance to let him know they were parked on Rainier behind the produce market. He appeared at the car within thirty seconds. The detectives had him get in the back seat and began driving back to the station in downtown.

"Hey, my car's here," Lance objected when he realized what they were doing.

"We'll drive you back," Martin said. He continued the questioning as Sanchez drove. "We know you were the last person to see Denise Knowles alive. Tell us how it happened."

"Her name is Lakshmi. She ascended. She's on another plane now."

"Tell us exactly what happened when you got to the hotel Sunday night."

"She checked into the hotel and we went up to her room. She said she was going to do a dry run. I told her I couldn't be there, but she could text or call me if she got scared or there was any problem. Then I left. I guess everything went okay and she decided to go through with the ascent."

"The suicide, you mean."

"Tomayto, tomahto."

"Don't be a wise ass. A woman's dead leaving her disabled daughter an orphan."

Lance's eyes grew as big as a tomato, or a tomahto. "A daughter? Whoa. I didn't know that. She always said she had no family. I been to her place. There was no daughter. That's a trip."

"The daughter's in an institution. Did she call you or text you after you left the room?"

"Yeah. She texted that she was about to do the dry run. She had some stuff with her."

"What 'stuff'?"

"Pills. Probably goofballs. I seen an envelope in her purse with pills but I don't know for sure what kind. We're not supposed to ask."

"How'd she get the pills? Did you give them to her?"

"No."

"Shapiro? Uh, Tohini?"

"No, he was out of town."

"Uli?"

"I don't know. Maybe Lakshmi had a prescription. Or got them on the street."

"So why were you in that hotel? Why not her apartment?"

"To be higher. It's easier to ascend if you're closer to the sky. The earth has a strong spiritual pull. The closer you are to the ground, the harder it is to ascend. That's why we asked for the top floor."

Incredulous, Sanchez snorted as they sat at a stoplight, but Martin kept the questioning going. "Seriously? There are much higher hotels in San Diego. For that matter, why not do it on a mountaintop?"

Lance seemed to think about that. "She couldn't afford the really tall ones, the hotel, I mean. That one's cheap."

"What did she care? She could just charge it on her credit card since she wouldn't have to pay it anyway."

"She didn't have credit. She told me. She only had a debit card, so I guess that's all she had in her account."

"So why not the mountains?"

"You'd still be near the ground. That's what he said."

"He who? Said what?"

"Tohini. He said it was the cheapest place to get that elevated in San Diego. The earth is like a neutralizing force. You need to be up in a building or a tree."

"When did he say that?"

"At one of the assemblies, maybe two months ago. We talk about ascent often. He was there that time. Anyway it was just a dry run and she was going to do it at home, but she changed her mind. So it didn't really matter how high this time."

"You keep saying dry run. What does that mean? She was going to practice suicide?"

"Yeah, kinda. Some of us are afraid of death. I mean, it's natural. Everyone is, right? So one way to handle that is to do a dry run with a smaller dose, just enough to knock you out. You can see how painless it is and how fast it works so that when you're really ready you can do it with a full dose and the plastic bag."

"You're saying she didn't intend to die Sunday?"

"Well, I was kinda surprised when I found out. She was going to text me when she woke up to tell me how it went. I guess it went well and she decided to go ahead and do it while she was already elevated."

"How long was it after you left the hotel that she texted you?"

"Maybe three hours. It was after midnight. You guys can check her phone records, can't you?"

"What about the plastic bag? Who brought that?"

"I don't know about the bag. I didn't know she had one. I guess she had it in her purse. You don't use a bag for a dry run. You could accidentally suffocate. The Heaven's Gate enlightened used them as a backup, but it turned out they weren't needed. The release from the bodily form came from the drugs."

"Did you come back after leaving the hotel?" Martin already knew the answer from the video, but he wanted to see if Lance would lie.

"Not until Tuesday. When she didn't text me afterward I thought I'd better check on her. She should have woken up by three or four in the morning. She didn't reply to my texts, either. So I went there early. But she didn't answer the door so I left."

"Did you report her situation to the desk clerk or the police? To anyone?"

"Nah. I guessed that maybe she decided to ascend, or something went wrong, and I didn't want to be around if she was found dead. I thought you guys ... well, the police,... I mean, I know you're doing your job, but I didn't want to be a suspect."

"So you think maybe something 'went wrong'?"

"I dunno, man. Like I said, I thought it was just a dry run. Maybe the ethereal pull was just too strong."

"Ethereal pull?"

"Yeah, like her spirit was just pulled right from her earthly form, you know. She was very enlightened. If you're enlightened enough, spiritual enough, that can happen."

Sanchez could barely drive when she heard this. She shook her head as though to free it from a settling swarm of hornets. "What utter crap," she muttered. DeSoto looked at her, but did not reply.

"What about her car," Martin asked. "Did you two arrive in her car?"

"No. We drove like together but I had my own car, behind her. We both parked on the street then we went into the hotel together."

"So what happened to it? It wasn't there when the police came."

Lance cocked his head and a puzzled expression realigned his features.

"It wasn't there? I dunno. Maybe it got towed. Or stolen."

"Could she have driven it to the Gatekeepers after you left and donated it?"

"I guess. Someone would have had to drive her back. One of the others left his car to the group when he ascended. That doesn't really make sense, though. We could have met there and I could have driven her to the hotel if she was planning it ahead of time."

"Would there have been someone there to drive her back?"

"Hmm, maybe."

"How about her phone? You didn't take her phone or her car?"

"No, man, I mean, officer. No way. I didn't. Can't you check where it is from cell towers or something? Or where it was?"

"So you didn't take anything from her at all? Her debit card? Maybe she made a gift to you to take to the congregation."

"No. I told you. Nothin'. Why would I? It was supposed to be a dry run. She'd need her stuff."

They arrived at the station and Lance was taken inside. Questioning continued for over an hour, but he stuck to his story. He was there only as moral support. He did not help her get or use drugs. He didn't take the car or anything else. He went over the teachings of the church, held her hand, and left before she took anything. He didn't know she was going to die. They couldn't shake him and they couldn't find any holes in his story.

Martin drove him back to his car. While he was out, the medical examiner's preliminary report arrived for Sanchez. She was just finishing reading it when Martin returned. She handed it to him.

He took a quick look and said, "So it's a suicide, then. Do we keep going on this?"

"We still have to determine if there was anyone else who assisted. The lieutenant's going to want us to wrap it up quick, though. Even if we find somebody, the D.A.'s not going to prosecute, not on a suicide. Porter and Alvarez just caught a gang slaying in Southeast. It looks like I'm going to be needed to help with some of the Spanish interviews and emails. But go ahead and read through the report. Let me know what you think."

Martin resumed reading. Sanchez had already pulled the medical reports from the previous two Gatekeepers suicides. Something bothered her about this one, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was. She read those reports as Martin finished the one on Denise Knowles. He finished first.

"I don't know all this medical jargon yet," he said. "Asphyxia is just suffocation, I guess. Could be from the barbiturate overdose suppressing respiration or the bag or both. It sounds right to me. She took the goofballs, put the bag over her head, and went bye-bye."

"Yeah, but look here. The other two were different. Look at the pheno levels in her blood. They're less than a quarter of what the first two had. It looks like she was taking a smaller dose like DeSoto said. Maybe it was just a dry run."

"You think it might have been accidental, then?"

"It's possible."

"Once the medical examiner says it's suicide, isn't that final?"

"Well, it has to be the Chief Medical Examiner, but usually that's just a rubber stamp of whatever the first-line medical examiner says. This is only a preliminary report. Cause of death is asphyxiation. That's not going to change, but it's the manner of death that's important. The Lieutenant is going to pull us off this if the manner of death is ruled a suicide or accidental. We have real homicides to work."



“But somebody else had to be involved. This doesn’t make sense. How’d the car get taken while she was in the room? How did she text Lance from the room and then have the phone end up with the cult members? You saw the security tapes. She texted after Lance left the room and no one came in or out after he left, but somehow her phone left before we got there. Someone else had to be waiting in that room, or come down the hall and entered her room. The elevator or stairwell videos would have caught anyone else. Maybe it was that Japanese couple, or someone hiding in those rooms under renovation.”

“Or more likely Lance took her phone with him, along with her wallet and car keys, when he left. He could have texted himself from her phone from just outside the hotel to make it look like he wasn’t there. It would show up as coming from the same cell tower as it would inside the room. We can’t tell whether she texted from the room or he texted from her phone from nearby. Even if you were right that somehow someone else was in the room, we have eyewitness testimony from DeSoto, Shapiro and Schwartz that she intended to either do a dry run of a suicide or an actual suicide. She took the drugs voluntarily. That makes it either an accident or assisted suicide at worst, and the D.A. won’t prosecute either of those.”

“That’s only if Lance and The Weenie are telling the truth about the suicide plans but lying about the phone being with her. Why would Lance lie about that? He could have just said she gave him the phone and car keys to take to the church. That’s not a crime. I don’t like it. There are too many loose ends. Somebody else is involved. We still need to talk to her friend Beth, the one she went to Comic-Con with. And the new boyfriend, if there really is one.”

“Yeah, the Lieutenant shouldn’t have any trouble letting us finish that up, but I’m telling you if the Chief Medical Examiner says it’s suicide, he’ll pull us off this case.”

• • •

Cliff was frustrated that he couldn’t complete what he needed to do. No death certificate had been issued yet. He reported the death to social security, which took much longer than it should have. He could have done that from home. He couldn’t get back the car and other property until tomorrow.

Still at loose ends, he decided to go back to see Crystal. It was almost four and by the time he got there her physical therapy would be over. He drove out to the facility and asked at the desk for her. One of the attendants, a motherly sort of Asian woman wearing a pink smock, told him he could go into her room but not to move her. She told him how to find the room. He thanked her and proceeded down the hall until he came to Crystal’s room.

The room was a double. The half nearest the door was Crystal’s. She lay in her hospital bed propped up. A television set tuned to a cartoon show was mounted high on the wall across from her bed. The sound was muted, or at least Cliff thought so at first, but when he got closer to Crystal he realized there was a

speaker on a small table near the head of her bed. There was a curtain dividing the room, but it was pulled all the way back so that Cliff could see the other patient, a woman with a distorted grimace of a face. She was in her thirties or forties and fairly thin; it was obvious she had lost all muscle tone. Flesh hung in loose flaps from her one good arm when she moved it. Despite her impairments, whatever they were, she had a put-together look. She wore light makeup and a neatly buttoned floral blouse over navy blue sweat pants. She sat in a fancy-looking electric wheelchair working a tablet computer with one hand. She looked up when she saw Cliff enter and made what Cliff guessed was supposed to be a smile. She uttered a syllable that might have been "I" or "Hi."

Cliff responded with a non-committal "Hi. I'm Crystal's uncle." He then turned his attention to Crystal, not wanting to become engaged in small talk, or small gibberish as the case may be, with this woman. Up to this point Crystal had been too focused on the cartoons to notice Cliff, but when he spoke, she looked at him and began making that keening sound again. Her hand started flapping.

Cliff moved to her bedside and gently took her hand and shook it as he had the first time.

"Remember me? I'm your Uncle Cliff."

He was instantly rewarded with another keen and a crinkle of the eyes that could not be mistaken for anything but a smile of recognition. Almost immediately, though, Crystal's eyes returned to the TV screen.

"Ah oo enis buhhah?" the woman said.

He was embarrassed at being unable to understand and sat dumbstruck, wondering how to respond without hurting the woman's feelings.

"Enis ooh sisah?" the woman tried again.

Suddenly it clicked. Are you Denise's brother. Denise your sister?

"Yes, Denise's brother. I'm sorry. I didn't understand there at first."

"Oh ay." She waved him over with her good hand and Cliff moved around to the space between the beds, standing above the curtain track. To his amazement the woman began typing a message with her good hand almost as fast as Cliff could type with two.

*its ok i cant talk right stroke ur denises brother im kathy*

"Yes. Denise passed away. I'm here to take care of the estate."

*i heard she died how did it happen*

"Suicide. Some cult thing like Heaven's Gate."

Now that Cliff realized the woman was a stroke victim, it was easier to decipher her facial expressions. One side was much more demonstrative. He could tell she was troubled by this news.

*i cant believe shed commit suicide she was so happy lately*

"You knew her?"

*she came alot to see crystal was getting her a new wheelchair like mine*

"Denise was going to get Crystal a new wheelchair? An electric one?"

*yes she asked me where i got mine wanted all the details*

"When was this?"

*last time here two weeks ago*

Now Cliff's interest was really piqued. "I heard that would be expensive. Did she say where she was getting the money?"

*no*

"How long have you been Crystal's roommate?"

*almost 2 years*

For the first time Cliff noticed a dreamcatcher hanging over Kathy's bed. It looked much like the one that had been in Denise's apartment. "Did Denise give you that?" he said, pointing to it.

*yes she was very generous*

"The conservator told me they won't give Crystal a custom wheelchair because it's not a medical necessity. Did you buy your own?"

*yes from the malpractice settlement its off the shelf crystal needs one custom made*

"Did you give Denise the name of where you got yours? Do you know if she contacted them?"

*i dont know u can call them*

Cliff wrote down the name and phone number Kathy typed on her screen.

*her show is ending u can take her out she likes to watch birds i can go with u*

Cliff looked over at Crystal. She was still fixated on the cartoons running under the final credits. "Yeah, that's a good idea. They told me not to move her, though." With that he left to find an attendant. In short order the same male nurse as before had Crystal in her chair. When he learned that Kathy was going to go with them, he granted Cliff permission to take her out without other accompaniment. He obviously had confidence that Kathy knew the drill and would be sure Crystal didn't get too much sun. Crystal became excited when she realized what was happening. Kathy said something to the nurse that Cliff couldn't understand, and he reached into a cabinet and gave her a paper bag which she stashed in a compartment on the side of her chair.

Kathy led the way. Her wheelchair was quite zippy, but she slowed down when she saw how slowly Cliff was pushing. She started talking to Cliff as they moved along since he couldn't see her screen from his position. He had trouble understanding her and she had to repeat, but after a few times he caught on to the cadence and limitations of her speech well enough to comprehend her meaning.

"She likes you," Kathy declared in her distorted patois. "You can see it in her eyes."

"Oh, I doubt that. She doesn't even know me. She probably just likes being taken to the birds."

"That, too. Still, you make her happy."

Crystal made the sound Cliff now knew signified happiness. He wasn't sure if she did that because they were getting close to the bird feeder or in

affirmation of Kathy's statement. He couldn't believe Crystal could understand Kathy, but the timing suggested the possibility.

When they got near the feeder, Kathy watched as Cliff positioned Crystal's chair so that she was out of the direct sunlight. She nodded and said that was perfect. Kathy positioned her chair right next to Crystal's and pulled out the bag. She withdrew a large coloring book and opened it. The pictures inside were all birds. The left page showed a pair of birds that had already been colored in. They were all gray; the crayon had strayed from the lines a bit, but was mostly kept inside the lines. The right page showed another pair of birds, uncolored. Kathy positioned the book on Crystal's lap towards the knees, then placed a shallow bowl of crayons on her lap tucked against her abdomen. Crystal made a sound Cliff did not recognize.

"That's her 'thank you'," Kathy explained.

Cliff was learning more about his niece every minute. He watched but Crystal did not make any movement to pick up a crayon. She was watching the bird feeder. There had been some birds feeding as they approached but they all flew away as the party drew close.

*Just wait be still theyll come back* Kathy typed.

By the time Cliff finished reading her statement, birds began returning. He stood, unmoving. Within seconds a tiny bird with a gold belly and black-and-white wings landed on the feeder and entered through the openings in the wire cage. Immediately Crystal picked up a yellow crayon with her left hand and leaned over to reach the book. She began to color the stomach area of the first bird. She drew outside the lines here and there and didn't completely fill the stomach area, but she did a better job than Cliff would have guessed possible. The bird was gone but Crystal next picked up a black crayon and began to color in the black stripes on the wings.

"She can remember what the bird looked like," Cliff said needlessly.

*goldfinch shes smarter than u think*

"Do you think she could learn to operate a wheelchair like yours?"

*yes I told Denise that 2 with training she could come out here on her own*

Cliff looked around again, trying to absorb the entire scene, trying to get a better feel for the place. "Tell me, Kathy, is this really a good facility? I mean, could Crystal be better off somewhere else, you think? You seem to know her well."

*theyre wonderful here money is tight but good people*

"I can see she has a wonderful roommate."

Startled at the compliment, Kathy blushed deeply and averted her eyes momentarily. When she made eye contact again, they were tear-filled.

*i have no family shes my baby now*

Just then Cliff's phone rang.

"Hello."

"Cliff, it's Rob Martin. We just got some information we can share."

"Okay. What do you need from me?"

"Can you come by the office again?"

"All right. I'll be right over. By the way, I arranged the meeting with the lawyer to get Denise's property back. She claims they even took up a collection and have a few hundred dollars for her daughter. You said you wanted to dust for prints?"

"Right. When and where?"

"Tomorrow at nine-thirty; the lawyer's office." He hung up and walked around the wheelchair to face Crystal. "I'm sorry, Crystal, but I have to go. We'll have to go back now."

She put her crayon in the bowl and Kathy packed the coloring materials up. They all headed back to the building.

• • •

Thirty minutes later Cliff was in the police station again. The two detectives ushered him into an interview room.

"Cliff," Sanchez began, "We have the preliminary medical examiner's report. Drugs killed her. They suppressed her respiratory system causing asphyxiation. You should prepare yourself for a suicide ruling."

"But that Browne lady, you heard her, said she was in AA and showed no signs of drug use."

"Users relapse. The tox report said she had Phenobarbital in her blood. No sign of a struggle or external trauma other than a minor bruise on one arm. They're going to rule it a suicide once they get the investigative report from us unless something comes up. We still have some interviews to do, but we wanted you to know we're likely going to have to close this case very soon."

"Don't you think that's premature? I just came from Tranquil House. Crystal's roommate says Denise was going to buy her a wheelchair. It sounds like she had some money somewhere, and it seems to have disappeared. There's at least some thievery going on; we know that. I know you can't bring her back, but I could use your help in recovering her assets for Crystal's sake at least. If someone helped her commit suicide, isn't that a crime?"

"Of course, but the D.A. won't prosecute that either. We've been down that road before. You were in the FBI. I'm sure you know that resources are too short to waste on cases that are going nowhere."

Martin added, "Don't worry, I'll still go with you to the lawyer's office tomorrow. It sounds like you're going to get her property back. I worked property crimes until recently. Even if they were stolen instead of donated, I can't see that being prosecuted either under the circumstances once they're returned. Maybe she did donate everything to the church. There's no way to prove otherwise."

"Who are you going to interview?"

"Friends of hers," Sanchez replied. "We can't share names." She didn't want to have to say that they still didn't know the name of Denise's boyfriend or

even whether she really had one. She hoped Beth could clarify that. She was surprised that they hadn't been contacted by now by either of them. "Another thing: Denise's name wasn't publicly released until now, but it will be at the end of the day. There will certainly be some news coverage. The whole Gatekeepers – Heaven's Gate cult angle has already been played up on this one in the media. We won't release your name, but I suspect some reporters will get it somehow."

Cliff exhaled heavily with a sag of his shoulders but said nothing in response. That was just one more hassle he would have to deal with. Then, "Can I see the medical report?"

Taken aback, Sanchez replied, "No. It's only preliminary. The final one hasn't been issued. When it is you should be able to get a copy as next of kin and executor of her estate. Why do you want it?"

"I want to see what the level of drugs was in her blood. She's been sober for years according to Browne and the staff up there. She'd never gone that long before. It sounded to me like she'd really gotten herself clean and had things to look forward to. It doesn't make sense to me that she'd commit suicide."

"Relatives find it hard to accept. I'm sure it didn't matter to her anymore. I know she's your sister but you have to accept that, even if it's hard to see a loved one in that light."

"She wasn't a loved one. Not by me, anyway. Maybe Crystal loved her, but I haven't seen her in years. I'm talking as an investigator, not a relative in denial. Something doesn't make sense to me."

Sanchez bristled visibly at that. "We appreciate that you were an FBI agent, but that doesn't make you part of the investigation."

Cliff's voice rose. "Did the medical examiner say it was the drugs that killed her? Having drugs in your blood doesn't mean they were fatal. She had a bruise, and a plastic bag over her face. It sounds like she could have been smothered."

"Cliff, calm down. The only prints on the bag were hers. Relatives always want to find someone to blame other than their own family."

Cliff exploded. "Don't patronize me."

"He has a point," Martin said. "The levels were low. She could have been out from the reds, but instead probably died from the plastic bag. That's different from the other two."

Sanchez scowled at Martin. "Cliff, you aren't a detective. We do the investigating here. We'll check with the medical examiner on that. I'm sure they can explain it."

"That's crap! If you feed them the outcome you want, then maybe they'll find what you tell them to. Is that what's going on?"

"Okay we're done here," Sanchez barked and immediately regretted her tone. "Look. You're getting too heated. I'm sorry for your loss, but that's all we can share for now. I'm sure the medical examiner will have an explanation for us. Rob will go with you tomorrow and we'll continue to keep you informed. Please

let us know if you learn anything more.” She stood and looked at Martin who reluctantly also stood.

Cliff took his cue and rose. “Fine,” he said, his body language making clear it was anything but. “I’ll be at my hotel.” Rob Martin escorted him out.

## Chapter 7

Cliff returned to the Hampton and called Ellen at work to let her know how it was going. He updated her on the day's events, ending with his frustration that the detectives weren't taking the case seriously.

"I'm sorry you're having difficulties getting it settled. Will you be back tomorrow night as planned?"

"I'm not sure. I have to collect the TV and car tomorrow and then what am I going to do with them? It doesn't seem cost-effective storing them here in a rental unit. I suppose I could cancel my plane reservation and drive the car back home, but that's a two-day drive and another hotel stay on top of the airline cancellation charge. I think the car's a beater anyway and might not be something I'd want to drive that far. Even a nice car wouldn't be something I'd want to drive that far solo, not up I-5. I could list it all on Craigslist or eBay, but they aren't going to sell in two hours."

"I thought the police wanted to fingerprint it all. Can't they store it for you?"

"The sheriff's guy seemed pretty sympathetic. He might be willing. It's the woman from the P.D. who's trying to close the case."

"I'm sure you'll work something out. Pull the old fellow law enforcement angle. Be nice this time."

"This time? What's that mean? I'm not nice?"

"Sometimes you can be a little testy."

"Testy? You liked my testy tickles well enough last night."

"Now, now. I'd say something, but I'm at work. People can hear. As long as we're on that subject, we're going to have to get a nanny or an au pair. Theresa can't keep baby-sitting forever. You've been missing a lot of work and ..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. We've already been over this. I agree with you. We just have to make it happen. How do you hire someone for that? I mean it's our child. Our only child."

"... so far. I know another agent who got one recently. She's in the San Francisco office but, but I think she used a big agency. I'll call her and get details."

"Okay, but don't hire anyone until I get back. I'll want to be in on the interview."

"Don't worry. I won't. While you're there, you're going to pick up some geocaches aren't you? You don't have San Diego County on your map yet." Geocaching, sometimes called GPS treasure hunting, was a hobby Ellen and Cliff shared. Their first date was geocaching.

"I haven't really thought about it. I guess I'll take a look at what's around when I get a chance."

"Okay. Look, I know you think something's not kosher with the medical report or the investigation, but you're not a homicide cop. Denise's dead and



gone; you need to take care of business there and get back here. Just let it go. I gotta go. I have another call. Love you.”

“Love you.”

But letting it go wasn’t something Cliff was good at. Not when the “it” was a crime that someone seemed to be getting away with, especially since his niece was a victim of sorts. The low drug content in the blood was gnawing at him. And there were bruises on her arm. Still, he knew Ellen was right and he needed to stop obsessing. The five o’clock television news was about to start so he turned it on and let it run in the background while he was browsing.

No sooner had the news come on when he heard a familiar name. The announcer, a stunning young woman despite a few gallons of makeup, was reading a teaser involving an ongoing controversy in Sheriff Lewis Haines’s department about a shooting that had happened a week earlier. Cliff looked up and there was a picture of the sheriff. There was no doubt about it. That was the Lew Haines he knew. Lew had been a first office agent with Cliff in the Seattle office. Lew was older than Cliff by several years and had been in that office for two years when Cliff arrived fresh from the FBI Academy new agent class. As the only two single agents on their squad at the time, they had struck up a friendship. They’d often go to lunch together and occasionally stop for a drink after work. Cliff would order beer. Lew liked scotch on the rocks.

Lew made no bones about wanting to climb the ladder and become a Special Agent in Charge, or SAC, someday – maybe even Director. He’d gotten transferred out only six months after Cliff arrived and they’d lost contact. Agents in those days were transferred frequently and there was no email or facebook to keep track of your friends. Cliff had been transferred out himself a few months later. He’d known that Lew had become an SAC, although he didn’t realize it was in San Diego. Apparently Lew had retired from that position and been elected Sheriff. Well, well.

Reflexively, Cliff looked at his watch even though it was obviously five o’clock since the news was just starting. He immediately brought up a search engine on his laptop and found the phone number for the San Diego County Sheriff’s Office. He dialed it and asked for Haines. He got the runaround at first, but when he said he was a personal friend of Haines from his days as an agent in Seattle he was put on hold, then put through.

“Cliff. A voice from the past.”

“Lew, are you still a scotch rocks man?”

“I am indeed.”

“Can I buy you one?”

“I have to finish up a few things here. It doesn’t look too good to be the first one out the door. Where are you staying?”

“The Hampton downtown.”

“I’ll meet you at the Uptown Tavern on University in half an hour. That work?”

“I’ll find it.”

“Good to hear from you. See you in a few.”

• • •

Cliff arrived at the bar first and secured a small table and started a tab. Haines was right on time. Haines had aged well, Cliff noticed, with a full head of hair, now gray, and just enough lines in his face to convey a reassuring air of experience and gravitas to the electorate. He wore a gray gabardine suit and designer tie. His shirt had French cuffs secured with miniature pistols for cufflinks.

Haines spotted Cliff immediately, but walked directly to the bar and ordered; Cliff didn't catch the brand. He did, however, catch the “Put it on his tab,” which was unsurprising since Haines turned to Cliff and almost bellowed it.

Cliff was standing by the time Haines reached his table, drink in hand. He gave Cliff a hearty handshake followed by a backslap, all without spilling a drop. They sat.

“A goatee. I almost didn't recognize you,” Haines said. “And you're lighter, too.”

Cliff had been clean-shaven throughout his entire FBI career and even in high school he wrestled in the heavyweight class at well over two hundred pounds.

“I'm a new dad now. I had to shed the pounds.”

Haines, always quite the egoist, immediately launched into a spiel about how he'd retired from the FBI as SAC of San Diego Division a year ago and still felt the calling of public service, the needs of the people to have a true professional at the helm, blah, blah. Cliff let him ramble on, nodding admiringly as he finished his beer. He interrupted Haines's tale of glory only once to bring another round over from the bar. He wanted Lew well-greased when it came his turn.

“Anyway, enough about me,” Haines finally said, ten or twenty paragraphs past the “enough” point. “You've had quite the storied retirement, I hear. You married the Director's niece was it?”

“No, she's not his direct relative. The Director's best friend, a congressman, died young of a heart attack. The Director was the godfather of his daughter Ashley. Ellen, my wife, is the sister of his widow. Ellen helped take care of Ashley during those critical first months and got to know the Director that way. I met him too when he came out. He treats Ellen and me like family now.”

“That beats me. He treated me like a shoeshine boy when I was an SAC. That's one of the reasons I left the FBI when I did. So tell me about you. We lost track after Seattle. You got shipped out to New York, I heard.”

Cliff gave him a short rundown of his Bureau career – transfers to New York and San Francisco, work on foreign counterintelligence and then on high-tech crime.

“So what brings you to San Diego?”

Cliff had been waiting for the question. He launched into the whole story and didn't give Haines a chance to butt in until he got it all out.

Haines whistled softly. "Whoa. I heard about the new Gatekeepers case, of course, but I didn't know it was your sister. I think I have one of my homicide guys helping the P.D."

"You do, a young guy named Martin. He seems squared away. I have to tell you, Lew, I don't like the way the P.D. detective is treating me, though. Something's not right. It looks like it could be a homicide to me. The drug levels in her blood are low, they tell me, and she had bruises on her arms. The woman detective is trying to close it out as a suicide and won't give me access."

"Is that all you want, to see the reports?"

"Yes."

"Easy peasey. I'll deputize you and tell Martin you're working with him. The P.D. can't shut you out then." Haines waved to the bartender to bring another round for both of them. "Understand, though, that's just so you can follow the case and get access. I'll give you a badge but I don't want you out there running around investigating on your own. You've been POST certified since you were an agent. You carry?"

"No. I don't even own a gun."

"Good. Don't do anything without Martin okaying it. Technically, you'll be a law enforcement officer with arrest powers, but that's just a formality." Cliff nodded his assent.

"Okay. You swear to uphold the constitution and the laws and all that shit?"

"Sure."

"Okay, you're a deputy."

A barmaid arrived with the drinks. Haines looked pointedly at Cliff, who took the hint and dug out a five to tip her. He listened as Haines called his office and talked to someone about Cliff. He told him to see that Cliff got a badge in the morning and enrolled in whatever office computer systems he had to be in. Then he asked to be put through to Rob Martin.

It took a minute for the call to get routed to Martin, who was still at the San Diego P.D. Cliff could only hear one end of the conversation.

"Detective, I just deputized Cliff Knowles. He'll be working with you on this new Gatekeepers case....No, I'm not kidding. ... That's right ... I don't care. I'll vouch for his abilities. Listen to him and let him help you, but you're in charge, not him. ... Well, I know it's a P.D. case, but don't let them push you around. We've got our own and they're related. Is our case still open? ... Well I'm reopening it as of now. Got it? ... Good. He's going to show up at eight tomorrow to get fingerprinted and have a badge issued. Be there to help him through the system. ... Yes, they already know." He hung up. He looked at Cliff and winked. "You're good to go."

"Super. Thanks." Cliff raised his beer and they clinked glasses.

The next hour was spent telling war stories, most of which were by Haines about himself, and catching up on the Seattle agents they both had known. Haines decided he had to go and thanked Cliff for the drinks. He did at least toss a tip on the table before taking off.

Cliff paid the tab and felt he'd gotten his money's worth. He was now a deputy sheriff. That should open some doors. As he got to his car he realized he was probably over the legal limit. Haines had kept him drinking longer than he'd intended. He didn't want to leave his rental car there, so rather than take a taxi or Uber, he decided to walk it off. He pulled out his phone and fired up the geocaching app. At least he could find a cache or two. That would make Ellen happy.

He started walking toward the closest geocache, which was only a half mile away. It turned out to be a magnetic key holder under a bus bench. *Boring*, Cliff thought at first. This commonplace type of hide usually serves little purpose other than to add one more cache to the finder's total, but this one had a Travel Bug in it.

A Travel Bug, or TB, is a small metal tag similar to a dogtag. Each bears an unique imprinted number that is trackable online. Unlike other items found in some caches, they are not to be traded, but to be moved around. Owners often give them missions. Cliff looked this one up using its tracking number. The owner turned out to be a geocacher in Hungary, which accounted for the TB's name of Attila the Hun, and the small laminated Hungarian flag attached to it. Cliff clicked on the link to the map for this bug on its TB page. It was first placed in a cache in Budapest two and half years earlier. Since then it has logged over 40,000 miles, visiting in order: Italy, Spain, Florida, Belize, Brazil, Mexico, Texas, and finally southern California. It has stayed in the San Diego area for over a year. What most interested, Cliff, though, was its mission. The owner had been a student at San Jose State University in the 1990's before returning to his native Hungary. He had great affection for the place and wanted the TB to find its way back there as a memento of the hospitality and education he received there. Cliff knew exactly where this TB should go. There was a cache near that school called Hungarian Puzzle Box. He could drop it off there when he returned home. This was one time he could help a TB owner achieve his goal. He pocketed the TB, logged the TB find online, signed the log sheet and then logged the cache find itself online.

As he fumbled with the log sheet refolding it, he realized he still wasn't completely sober. There was a diner across the street, so he crossed over and sat down at the counter. He ordered a Cobb salad and milk, which he thought, correctly, would be quick. By the time he'd polished those off he could tell his head was clearing.

He walked around the area for another twenty minutes and ended up back at his car. By the time he got there he was clear-headed and in a good mood. He'd gotten the access he needed and found a geocache, picking up a new county in the process. He drove back to the hotel.



## Chapter 8

Saturday

Cliff met Rob Martin early at the sheriff's department and, with his help through the bureaucratic process, got officially sworn in once more, then received a badge as a deputy. From there they proceeded to the office of Naomi Morgenthal in a marked department SUV.

"Mr. Knowles," Martin said as they got out of the car. "How do you want to handle this? I'll just sit silent if you want."

"First of all, no more 'Mr. Knowles' crap. I'm a fellow deputy now. Haines made clear I was to defer to you, so you're my boss. How about just 'Cliff'?"

"Sure, Cliff. Whatever you say."

"No, whatever you say. Just handle it the same way you would have handled it if I was just the victim's relative ... which I am. I'm not uniformed and I'm not going to tell her I'm deputized."

The building was a one-story glass and sandstone job tucked between a strip mall with Spanish signage and an apartment building where an obese man stood in a wife-beater shirt watering the lawn. The sign out front said simply "Law Offices." The lobby door was open. The sole decoration inside was a pair of potted plants in matching tall vases. The receptionist's desk was unmanned. It bore three small signs on top, one with Morgenthal's name, one with a Hispanic name and one with a Chinese name. There was no "and" or "LLP" or other indication they were a firm. Just three sole practitioners who shared rent and reception, Cliff assumed, and not the high end kind.

Since Morgenthal's sign was the leftmost one, they walked to the door at that end of the lobby. The door was open, but Cliff knocked on the frame before entering. Morgenthal rose to greet them and indicated they should take a seat on the small sofa. There was barely enough room to sit down with the large television set partially blocking the way. The impressive desk at first glance looked like solid oak, but a closer look would reveal the veneer peeling away from the plywood underneath at one corner. The owner apparently liked brass, since the matching stapler, pen and pencil set, and business card holder were all made of that gleaming alloy. There was a fancy paperweight in the shape of a raised brass bar mounted on an oak base. A law school diploma and bar membership document hung in cheap frames on the left wall. A certificate behind the desk bore a replica of the Israeli flag over some text headed by the words "In Recognition" in a large font. Cliff couldn't read the rest of it, which was in a smaller font, but he assumed it was for a donation to some Jewish cause.

Morgenthal was short and compactly built. Her hair had been recently dyed and styled but the blonde color did not match her dark coloring. She wore jeans and a convertible shirt with several pockets and plackets. The sleeves had a strap attached above the elbow that could secure the rolled-up lower sleeve with

Velcro. It was informal for an attorney's office, but this was Saturday. Cliff judged her age at early forties, but she looked fit enough to be younger.

"Mr. Knowles, I'm so sorry about your sister. At least I can say that we have been successful in retrieving some of her donated property." She looked over to Martin expectantly. "And you are?"

"Detective Martin, sheriff's Homicide." He was already putting on cotton fingerprint gloves, precluding a handshake. He pulled out an extra pair for Cliff and handed them to him.

"Detective," she said, "I'm afraid fingerprints won't do you much good. Many members of the congregation have probably touched the TV and other donated items both when they were removed from the donation box and when they were retrieved to be brought here."

"We'll be the judge of that," he replied. He knew she was right about that from an evidentiary standpoint, but his real goal was to get as much identifying information on the cult as possible. If he could get a few more names to add to the list, it was worth the effort.

"Is someone else coming?" Cliff asked. He was hoping to see this Tohini person in the flesh.

"No," Morgenthal replied without explanation. She moved back behind her desk and opened a lower drawer. She removed a plastic bag and spread the contents out on the desk. There was a smart phone, a gold chain with an ankhang pendant, a bank card, and a set of keys. She then used a small key to unlock another drawer and pulled out two stacks of currency.

"Four hundred fifteen dollars donated by the Gatekeepers to help Lakshmi's daughter." She tapped the first pile. Cliff noticed that it consisted of mostly old bills with a five on top. Then she tapped the second pile, which was shorter, but appeared to be crisp new one hundreds. "This is eight hundred dollars from Tohini himself. I want you to understand that he had nothing to do with charging anything on the donated card, but he wants to be sure the church does not fall under suspicion. All this property was freely given to the Gatekeepers."

Martin reached for the phone and quickly put it in a plastic bag.

"Will you be probating the estate, Mr. Knowles?" she continued.

"I don't know yet. There doesn't appear to be enough property to warrant the cost and the delay of probate. I've filed the will. Do you know of any other will?"

"No."

"Did she have any close friends in the church, anyone who might know anything about her finances, about her ... well, anything?"

"I wouldn't know. I understand the police have already talked to Tohini and Uli and Lance. I'm not aware of anyone else who could help you."

"Is there anything else you can tell us that would help our investigation," Martin asked.

"Only that Lakshmi ascended to a higher plane of her own free will. There is no crime here, detective. You're wasting your time and the taxpayers' money. By the way, why is the sheriff's office investigating? I thought the death took place in the city."

"The previous Gatekeepers death was in county territory; we're working together."

Morgenthal let out a small snort of disgust. "They're not connected, other than the fact they each decided to ascend. That one was over three months ago. I doubt Lakshmi even knew him; she was quite new. Now will that be all?"

Martin looked over to Cliff who shrugged in return and shook his head. Martin handed the cash and keys to Cliff, bagged the remaining items, which he put in his pocket, and stepped to one end of the television set.

"Her car is the Ford Focus parked out front."

Cliff stood and nodded. "Thank you, Ms. Morgenthal." He still had the cotton gloves on, so he still did not shake hands. He picked up the other end of the television and together they walked it out to the SUV.

"The sheriff said you can keep this stuff with us as evidence until you're ready to claim it," Martin said as they closed up the trunk.

"I'll want to see the contacts in the phone."

"Whatever you want. You can see everything when we get back to the station. You're part of the investigation now."

"Does Sanchez know that?"

The hesitation told Cliff that she didn't and probably wouldn't like it. "Not yet. We'll tell her Monday."

Cliff drove the Focus and followed Martin back to the sheriff's office. After they stashed the television set they went into his homicide squad area and opened up the evidence bags. Martin let Cliff, who was still gloved, do the phone first.

Cliff was able to check the recent calls and texts without difficulty since the phone was not locked. Martin watched and was able to point out to Cliff the number representing the text to Lance in the early A.M. hours on Monday. Cliff continued to scroll back farther. Earlier Sunday and Saturday were a string of texts to and from another number, identified in her address book as Tony. Cliff copied the number. Over the weekend there were also several calls and texts to and from Beth, no last name, but the same number in the physical address book.

"Tony must be the mysterious boyfriend we heard about," Martin explained.

"She had a boyfriend?"

"That's what her co-worker said. Why don't you read through the whole file. It'll be easier than me trying to explain it all to you. I can't stay anyway. The boss said we're short on the overtime budget. He wanted me to get you settled and then go home. He doesn't have to pay you. Anyway, I have to get to my bagpipes lesson." He chuckled as he said it.

"Bagpipes? Martin doesn't sound Scottish."



"My grandfather on the other side is a MacDonald. He marches in the Scottish Games with the pipes every year. He doesn't have any sons so he wants me to carry on the tradition. I thought I'd give it a try, make some points with the wife. She's a Campbell."

"You do know the difference between bagpipes and a puppy, don't you?"

"Uh, well ..."

"No one gets upset when an eighteen-wheeler runs over bagpipes."

Martin looked shocked for a moment, uncertain whether or not to be offended. Then Cliff winked and grinned and Martin decided he'd better take a joke.

"Har har."

"How do I get in and out?"

"Oh yeah, you don't have the ID badge yet. Just flash your badge at the front desk and they'll buzz you in. We'll get you the plastic ID card on Monday. You're in the computer. Haines has deputized other civilians before. They're used to it up front and they saw you when you came in with me. You won't have any trouble."

"Do you have everything here? I mean the P.D. ..."

"Everything. Even the tapes. We often work at our own offices and need a duplicate file here. Sanchez has a duplicate of our Gatekeepers case file. No secrets."

He opened his desk and laid out all the files for Cliff. Once Cliff seemed to be oriented, he wished him luck and told him to call if he had any questions.

Cliff sat down and began reading.

• • •

Three hours later Cliff put down the case file. He'd read it all and reread the important parts – the interviews and lab reports. One thing stood out for him that he hadn't known about: someone had to have been there. Denise's phone, car keys, and bank card had all gone missing while she was in the room. He would have said it had to have been Lance who took them when he left except for two troubling facts. The text from Denise to Lance took place almost three hours *after* Lance had left. They had already established that that took place in or very near the hotel. Her phone had stayed at the same location during the entire time. There was a note questioning whether Lance could have texted himself from right outside the hotel. Cliff didn't see any indication that they had found out where Lance's phone was at the time that text occurred. He made a note on a Post-It to check that out and stuck it on the file front. Lance had denied taking the phone and Cliff didn't see a motive for him to have faked that text. He assumed the carrier record was going to show his phone was at his home.

If Lance had been really devious he could have taken her phone out, left it there somewhere near the hotel, traveled a distance away and left his own phone elsewhere, then returned without his phone and texted himself using her

phone so that the record would look like she texted him while he was away from the hotel, but that seemed awfully elaborate for something that was unnecessary. Lance wasn't even a likely suspect for being present, either, not if the time notations from the cameras were accurate. He had left almost immediately after Denise had checked in. He'd gone up to the room in the elevator with her and was back in the elevator going down less than two minutes later. That wasn't enough time for her to take that many pills, strip off most of her clothes, and lie down on the bed.

So if it wasn't Lance, then who else was there? The reports on the video said no one else came or left the floor except the maid and the Japanese couple. The people who were working on the rooms at the other end of the hall were off both Sunday and Monday. There were only two ways onto the third floor: the elevator and the stairwell. The elevator camera had shown Denise and Lance come up Sunday night, then Lance go down. The maid came up Monday morning, but apparently did not enter Denise's room since she left very quickly in the elevator. The interview notes said there had been a Do Not Disturb note on that door. Then the Japanese couple came up Monday afternoon. Denise would have been dead well before then if the medical examiner was right. They were there some hours before going out for dinner, and had time to enter her room. The video only showed their comings and goings in the elevator, not what happened on the floor. Tuesday morning Lance came up briefly and left, then the Japanese couple came down. The manager came up with them, then the three of them went down to the second floor with the couples' luggage, obviously changing their room. The manager returned to the third floor, presumably to see what was causing the smell. The timing of the elevator video was consistent with the phone call to 911 reporting the death shortly thereafter. The second floor stairwell landing camera showed people coming and going between the first and second floors, but no one went up or down the stairs to the third floor the entire time.

Cliff studied these reports on the videos three times and felt he had the sequence down, but found them hard to believe, Maybe they'd missed something. They must have. He decided he'd have to review the security video himself. That would take hours. He decided he needed to get lunch first, so he went out to the lobby and checked in with the desk officer.

"Hey, is there somewhere I can get something to eat around here?"

"Our cafeteria isn't open on the weekend. There are coffee shops around. Most of us bring our lunch on weekends. If you're desperate you can hit the Ptomaine Domain down the street."

"Sounds appetizing."

"It's a greasy spoon, but it's not so bad. Let 'em see the badge and they'll treat you okay. Stick with the bacon and eggs."

"Okay, thanks for the advice. I'll be back later. I'll need you to buzz me in. I don't have the electronic badge yet."

"No problem."

• • •

An hour later he was finishing his second cup of coffee and decided he needed to see the hotel for himself. He walked back to the sheriff's office and took his rental car to the site. It wasn't a great area, but he'd seen much worse in his day. He entered the lobby and there was a shrunken black man at the front desk. He knew this wasn't the manager since that had been a woman according to the reports. He pulled his jacket back to show his new badge and said he needed to see the third floor room where the suicide had happened. The desk man said nothing but came around and led him to the elevator as he pulled out an electronic key card. They rode up together, still silent. The man led him to the door, which was still taped off with evidence tape and swiped his card on the lock. The light turned green and the man opened the door a crack.

"There ya go."

"Thanks."

The man left and Cliff pulled the tape back enough to enter the room. The inside was as plain vanilla as they come, a sea of beige broken only by a few carpet stains from the Paleozoic Era. He spent twenty minutes examining every inch of it, which was fifteen minutes too many, and concluded that there wasn't anything to see. The bedspread was barely mussed. Denise must have lain down on top of it and not pulled open the covers. There was no balcony. The windows didn't even open. If anyone had been in here with Denise, the only exit was through the door and down the elevator or the stairwell. There was no place to hide in the room other than the obvious closet and bathroom, both of which had been searched.

He stepped out into the hall. Walking to the other end, past the elevators, he saw no security cameras. The rooms on the other wing all had their doors propped open. The furniture had been removed. They'd all been freshly painted but the floors were bare with exposed tackboard all around the edges. They were apparently waiting for the carpeting to be put in. There was no stairwell at that end.

He walked back past Denise's room to the opposite end. The stairwell door was closed. He opened it and stepped into the stairwell. He walked down a flight and made a turn at the first landing and saw the security camera below on the second floor landing. There was no way to get down past it without being recorded. He stepped on that landing and was about to continue down to the lobby and out to his car when something occurred to him. He turned around and went back up.

At the third floor landing the stairs continued up. He started up and came to a door labeled "Roof Access. Authorized Personnel Only." There was a pushbar on the door and an electronic lock on the wall by the frame. He pushed on the bar but the door remained locked. He remembered reading a report that

one of the responding officers had had the manager open the roof access door and had searched the roof area. There had been no one and no evidence on the roof.

Still, if someone had been in Denise's room and had gone up onto the roof, then maybe they could have gone down a fire escape. That would have avoided the cameras. He walked back down and asked the desk clerk to let him onto the roof. The clerk was busy checking someone in, so he told Cliff the combination was 1-2-3-4. A real genius thought that one up, Cliff thought, but was pleased to have the combination without someone looking over his shoulder.

He rode the elevator to the third floor, exited, and walked to the end of the hall where the stairwell led up to the roof. The combination worked, and the door opened for him. It was a flat roof with the usual projections – plumbing vent pipes, HVAC machinery, the tiny hut where the stairwell entered, and a low parapet around the L-shaped building. One thing that wasn't there, however, was an external fire escape. Cliff walked the entire surface looking for any sign of someone having been there, but saw nothing more suspicious than pigeon droppings. He walked to the spot where he thought he was directly over Denise's room. The nearest edge, facing north, looked out over the hotel public parking lot which curled around on the west side and behind to the north. The south and east directions both faced the street since the building was on a corner. He walked to eastern end over the corner, turned left onto the other leg of the L, and walked to the northern edge. This leg ended overlooking a narrow alley. From the reports he knew there was a security camera overlooking this alley.

The building on the opposite side of the alley was a mirror image of the hotel. They must have been built at the same time. It was now an apartment building, not a hotel. He figured the hotel had once been an apartment building, too, but had been converted at some point. It was about twelve feet across the alley. An athletic person with a running start could leap the distance, he decided, but if he planted a foot wrong on takeoff or caught a toe on the parapet, a fall to the alley would likely be fatal. And you couldn't see what was on the other side of the opposite parapet, either. You could land on a pile of scrap lumber or almost anything. Someone jumping the opposite direction had the same problem landing on this roof. This was a dead end. Still, the thought of a roof escape nagged at him.

Returning to the stairwell hut he punched in the door code and descended to the lobby then out to the street. He walked around the corner to the front of the apartment building on the other side of the alley. He tried the front door, but it was locked. There was a panel with buttons listing apartment numbers and, for some, names, but there was no listing for a manager. He pressed buttons until someone answered. He identified himself as deputy Knowles and said he just needed to enter the common area. The tenant buzzed him in without asking questions. He went to the elevator and went straight up to the third floor. The layout was identical the one in the hotel, a mirror image. He walked down to the stairwell and up the roof door. There was another keypad just like the one next door. He punched in 1-2-3-4 but nothing happened. He guessed two or three

more combinations but they didn't work. He gave up, chastising himself for pursuing what was obviously a silly idea. He went back down to the street.

Now that he had the layout fully lodged in his brain he concluded that no one could have gotten off the third floor without being recorded by either the elevator camera, the second floor landing camera, or found by the responding officers when they searched the roof and third floor. Still, that didn't mean the camera review had been done properly. He knew how difficult it was to watch hours of security camera footage looking for that one moment when someone passes by. There had to have been someone with Denise when she died, someone who took the phone and car keys and debit card. The officers just missed him or her when they reviewed the footage. Or maybe the recordings were altered or obstructed somehow. Either that or the person had managed to hide and stay undetected somewhere on the floor while the officers searched.

He sighed and drove back over to the sheriff's office. He couldn't avoid it. He had to review that footage himself. He made his way back to Martin's desk and loaded up the security camera files. He didn't care about the lobby or the alley. He wanted to assure himself that no one had left the third floor during the period from when Denise died and the police arrived. That meant the elevator and stairwell cameras only. He made himself a cup of coffee, hit fast forward, and leaned forward in concentration.

Four hours later he hit stop. He'd watched every minute of both camera views. The clocks had remained in perfect sync the whole time. The footage had not been altered or stopped; he knew what that looked like from his experience in the FBI. The only people up there with her were Lance, the Japanese couple, and the maid. Lance had left quickly well before Denise had died, as the evidence of the text had shown and the camera confirmed it. The maid had come out of the elevator late Monday morning and taken about three minutes before she had returned to go back down since the sign on Denise's door reportedly said Do Not Disturb. But if the medical examiner was right, Denise was already dead by then. That left the Japanese couple, but they hadn't checked in until Monday afternoon, even later than the maid.

Cliff looked at his watch and realized his flight left in two hours. He'd have to rush to get to the airport, return his rental car, and get through security. Immediately he knew this wasn't going to happen. The mystery wouldn't let him go. He had to figure out what was going on. He called the airline to change his flight to Sunday evening and extended with the rental car people, too. Then he called Ellen.

She gave him a piece of her mind, a rather large piece, for leaving her alone to entertain Tommy by herself. He apologized profusely and assured her that he would absolutely be back Sunday night.

He went back to his hotel and took a long, hot bath, something he hadn't done in months. He usually only took showers. As he lay in the bathtub staring at the ceiling a thought occurred to him. He jumped out of the tub, wrapped a towel around his middle, and logged onto his laptop. He scrolled through his address

book and found the home number for Gabe, a business contact who had run a startup drone company. Cliff had done a due diligence investigation for Google on Gabe's company and Cliff had learned how to fly an Acerodon, one of their drone models. Gabe had given him one as a gift when Google's acquisition had made him a multi-millionaire. It had been useful in his investigations, but met a violent fate some time back.

Luckily, he found Gabe at home. "Gabe, it's Cliff Knowles."

"Cliff. How you been, man? It's been what – two years? Hey, thanks again for the write-up. Google bought us out, you know."

"I know. Hey, Gabe, I have to get right to business. I'm in San Diego and don't have much time. Do you have an outlet here in San Diego, or maybe some instructor or user who will let me rent or borrow an Acerodon? It's important"

"What happened to yours? You crash it?"

"No. Well, yes, actually, but ... never mind, it's a long story."

"You have your FAA license?"

"Yes." Cliff said, unsure if his license was still valid. He hadn't paid licensing fees recently or taken any refresher courses or tests, but he figured since he was deputized, the FAA wouldn't give local law enforcement any flak about licenses. He knew he could still fly it.

"Give me a minute." Cliff could hear the tapping of keys. "There's an RC shop in the Horton Plaza Mall. Is that near you?"

"I'll find it. Is it open late?"

"Saturdays are their big day. They stay open until eight. You have two hours. Let me call them first. We're a major supplier for them. If they don't have any rentals available, they'll loan you one of their own. I'll text you the link to their website, but wait ten minutes before you call."

Cliff hung up and started to get dressed. By the time he was fully clothed the ten minutes had passed. He called the radio controlled hobby shop and the manager was expecting the call. He had an Acerodon he could rent Cliff.

Half an hour later Cliff had the drone and was back in his car. He drove to Denise's hotel and found a parking spot nearby. The sun was setting and he knew he didn't have much time. He placed the drone on the sidewalk and set up the transmitter and receiver. The camera checked out okay; he could see on his monitor in live time what the drone camera was recording.

He pushed the throttle forward on the radio control and the drone rose in the air. He sent it straight up, tilting the camera at a downward angle, until he could see that the drone was well above the height of the surrounding buildings. Then he navigated until it was over the apartment building next to the hotel. Although it was across the street, the loud, annoying whine from the electric motor could be easily heard. A man passing by stopped to watch.

"Hey, what're you doing?" the man said after a few moments. His angry expression and hostile tone made clear he objected to this activity. The man wore shorts and a muscle shirt. He had a pale, sallow complexion; he was of average height, but muscle-bound. His biceps were melons, his neck a redwood stump.

Every square inch of his calves was tattooed, a lush montage of red and blue weaponry, mostly from the medieval era. He stepped toward Cliff.

Cliff hovered the drone since he couldn't fly it while dealing with this bozo. He turned to face the man. He drew himself up to his full height, which was several inches more than the onlooker. Cliff thought about pulling aside his windbreaker to show the sheriff's badge on his belt but his hands were full and he knew he was exceeding his authority. Haines had deputized him so he could see the file and could tag along with Martin, not go out alone flying drones over people's homes. For a moment he wished he hadn't dropped those thirty pounds, but the thought disappeared in an instant. He could handle this better with brains.

"Hi there," he said cheerfully, a grin splitting his face from ear to ear. "Inspection. My man patched the roof today. I'm checking to see if he completed it and cleaned up like he was supposed to. These drones are great. I can check all my jobs in minutes with just a drive-by. No waiting for the owner to show up and let me up onto the roof."

He turned the screen so the man could see. "I don't see no patching," stump-neck growled.

"I know. He did a great job, didn't he? Right there by the corner. You can't even tell." He grinned again.

The man snorted skeptically, but seemed fascinated by the images on the screen. Cliff maneuvered the drone and camera over to the south leg of the L, the one facing the north leg of the hotel. There was a ladder lying flat right next to the low parapet. It wasn't visible from the adjacent building since the parapet obscured it from view.

"I hope that's not one of ours!" Cliff exclaimed. "Jose left one of our ladders at another job last month." He moved the drone in closer and lower, and zoomed in with the camera. The sun was now well below the horizon and the picture was becoming unfocused as the automatic aperture opened to gather the fading light and the depth of field shrank. Then he noticed dark shapes behind the ladder, long black shapes. He moved the drone back and forth over the alley, with the camera pointed straight down.

"What's going on?" a voice called from across the street. A portly dashiki-clad figure was hurrying from the lobby of the apartment building. "What's this all about?" Despite the African garb the man looked Mediterranean, maybe Greek or Italian or Turkish. He had a scraggly beard and long, curly black hair.

"Just inspecting the roof job," Cliff said, now getting a bit concerned. This new guy was a resident, not just a passerby. He began to bring the drone back.

"Roof job? I'm the building manager. There hasn't been any work up there lately. The tenants are complaining about the noise. What's going on here? Who are you?"

At this point the first man stepped forward again and clenched his fists menacingly.

"All right, all right," Cliff replied as he landed the drone at his feet. "I didn't want to upset anyone. I'm with the sheriff's department forensic unit. There was a death earlier in the week at the hotel on the corner. I'm just getting some additional crime scene photos. Strictly routine." He pulled back his jacket and showed the badge. The first man took one step back and unclenched his fists.

"Crime scene?" dashiki man said. "I heard that was a suicide, not a crime."

"Right. Right. Just a term we use. The Medical Examiner's Office hasn't ruled one way or the other yet so we're treating it like a crime scene, but I'm sure it will be ruled a suicide. Like I said, just routine."

"That's no police car," stump-neck said. He'd watched Cliff pull the drone from his rental car.

"That's my personal car. I'm on my way home. I wanted to grab those shots before the sun went down. I'm done now. Move along. Nothing to see here." Cliff picked up the drone and placed it in the trunk of his car.

"Why are you taking pictures of my building?" dashiki asked. "What's your name, anyway?" He had his phone out and was taking pictures of Cliff and his car.

Cliff got in his car and drove off without answering.

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It was nearly ten o'clock before Cliff had transferred the video to his laptop, returned the drone to the hobby shop, and grabbed a late dinner.

He began reviewing the video. The fading light and deep shadows made it hard to make out detail, but there was no doubt that there was a ladder lying flat on the roof, against the parapet. It was an extension ladder, not the more common folding A-frame stepladder. Long dark shapes behind might have been shadows, stains, or, Cliff thought, boards.

He tried to get a clear idea whether the ladder was long enough to reach across the alley. He froze the image on the screen from different angles and using his fingers or marks on paper, he compared it to the width of the alley. The fish-eye lens and differing angles made this difficult. The ladder was clearly shorter than the width of the alley, but extended it might be long enough to stretch across. Place boards on it and it might make a walkway. But ladders are designed to support weight when positioned vertically. Could the extended ladder support the weight of a person when horizontal? The video raised more questions than it answered.

He closed his laptop and turned on the eleven o'clock news. There was no mention of Denise's death or the investigation. The news cycle had moved on. He turned it off and went to bed.



## Chapter 9

## Sunday

Cliff helped himself to the eggs, bacon, pancakes, cereal, juice, milk, and coffee at the hotel's breakfast buffet. He had seconds for most of it. It was all included in the room price at a Hampton. No point in wasting the chance. He grabbed a banana to take back to his room as he left the lobby.

He couldn't get over the idea of a walkway between the two buildings. Why was an extension ladder there, anyway? There was nothing on the roof except for the HVAC unit and the hut over the stairway door. There was nothing to lean the ladder against up there.

He called Ellen and was relieved to hear that yesterday had gone well. Tommy had gone geocaching with her at one of the local parks. He loved opening the caches and taking a small toy. Beautiful weather had helped, too.

"How was Tommy?" he asked.

"Mostly good. Changing diapers in public restrooms is no fun, though, I can tell you that."

"You're feeling crappy?"

"Bad puns are not endearing."

"You sound pooped."

"Bathroom humor grew old by seventh grade."

"Not with guys. It never grows old with guys. You're a girl."

"I'm glad you noticed. It makes it easier to produce a sibling for Tommy."

"Thanks for the reminder. I'll definitely be home tonight."

"You'd better be. That task will have to wait. My parents are in town. They've been staying with Theresa, but they're having dinner here tonight and staying over, remember?"

"Task? It's a task? You're calling me a taskmaster?"

"Taskadequate maybe."

"I'm wounded. Besides, what do your parents have to do with it? It's our own house. Your parents want another grandchild, don't they? They'll probably have their ears to the wall and be rooting us on."

"It'd feel weird with them right next door. Just get your butt home. It's all academic when you're four hundred miles away."

"See you tonight."

"Love you. Tonight."

"That's the idea."

They hung up.

His mind returned to the ladder on the roof. He knew he wouldn't be able to dismiss the idea until he resolved it first-hand. He drove over to the apartment building again and parked. A city truck was parked in the intersection with a large tube or pipe of some kind snaking down into the sewer. The truck pump

was going full blast, making a terrible racket. He went to the front door. He realized he hadn't gotten the name of dashiki man, the building manager, the previous evening. He scanned the names on the buzzer panel and noticed that unit 101 displayed the name Demetriou. A Greek name on the first floor made him a likely candidate. He pushed the button.

"Yeah?"

Cliff recognized the voice from the single word. "Mr. Demetriou, this is the deputy from last night. I need to get access to your roof."

"What's going on? You told me last night it was just routine."

"I can't really explain. The investigation is ongoing. Just let me in, please."

There was a buzz and Cliff pushed open the door. He stood in the lobby for a minute, wondering whether to find unit 101 and knock, but Demetriou soon appeared wearing a bathrobe and bedroom slippers. He pushed the elevator button and scowled at Cliff without saying anything. They rode the elevator to the third floor and exited into the hallway. As they walked toward the stairwell, a Hispanic man passed them the opposite direction. A few yards behind him a white-haired woman with jeweled reading glasses hanging on a chain over her ample bosom came their way walking a dog that could have fit in a teacup.

"The light in the hall is still broken," she snarled at Demetriou, not bothering to use his name. She ignored Cliff.

"Working on it."

When they got to the stairwell the manager climbed the stair, punched in a code, then swung open the door and stepped through. Cliff tried to see the combination, but couldn't see around him.

"What's that code?" Cliff asked.

"You don't need it. I'll prop the door." He held the door open with his foot and bent to pick up a short chunk of two-by-four that lay on the roof, apparently there for that purpose. Cliff stepped out onto the roof and the man laid the wood flat between the door and the jamb. "Just make sure the door locks behind you when you leave," he said and disappeared down the stairs.

Cliff took one quick look around, but he'd already seen the video and knew that there was nothing of interest besides the ladder and whatever was with it. He looked back at the door to make sure the manager wasn't watching and walked to the roof edge by the alleyway. The sanitation truck was still pumping at full volume. Good. No one would hear what he was doing. The ladder was lying flat and in daylight Cliff could see that he'd been right about the boards. Four long one-by-fours lay underneath the ladder.

Cliff put on his fingerprint gloves, which he'd kept from yesterday, and picked up the ladder. It was aluminum and the main section was about eight feet long. The second section was the same length but slightly wider so that the first section slid freely inside like a drawer sliding on its guide rail. When fully extended the two pieces overlapped by one section, with clasp mechanisms on the end of each piece clamping onto the next-to-last rung of the other section. Its

extended length was somewhere around thirteen feet. Cliff extended it fully and began to lay it across the two parapets, bridging the alleyway. One end was on the near parapet, but as he lowered the ladder, the weight, or at least the torque, became somewhat hard to manage; as he was holding it at one end, the center of gravity of the ladder was out over the middle of the alley. It took someone strong to lower it steadily, he realized. As he strained to lower it gently, he heard a sound behind him. He twisted his head but couldn't turn his body without dropping the ladder.

The blow caught him on the back of the head. The world went black.

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When he woke he tried to stand, but discovered he was too woozy. Before he got fully upright he felt nausea come on, so he lay down again and stayed still. The nausea lingered for a few minutes but slowly receded. He decided to wait a few minutes and try again. When he tried to rise a second time, the same thing happened. Lying down he was fine. Standing he was dizzy and nauseous. He looked around as best he could and saw no one.

He knew he'd be in some kind of trouble if he called the sheriff's office or 911, but he needed to get off the roof. He discovered that he could crawl slowly on his hands and knees with only a minimal amount of nausea, which was quickly assuaged by just lying still for a few moments. He began crawling toward the stairwell door. He'd gone only a few feet when he realized that the door was closed. Whoever had clobbered him had locked him out!

He had no choice. He needed help. He had to call and deal with the flak he'd get for being out here on his own. He reached into his pocket for his phone. That's when the sinking feeling really hit him. The phone was gone and so was his wallet. He lay there a full five minutes before moving again. Doing nothing was not an option. He lifted his hand to touch his head and a bolt of scarlet pain ricocheted through his skull. The bump was the size of half a ping pong ball.

He now had a splitting headache and the nausea and dizziness were getting worse, hitting him now every time he moved his head. Even in his mentally impaired state he realized he must have a concussion. He needed to get to a hospital. He slowly hauled himself to the edge of the roof at the nearest point, where it overlooked the alley. He pulled his upper body up onto the top of parapet so he could look down. There was no one in the alley. He could only see a slice of the sidewalk at the end of the alley. There was no one there, either.

He called out for help as loud as he could, but he found that he couldn't yell at the top of his lungs. The agony was too intense. He called out several times over the next ten minutes, each time shuddering from the torment, but there was no response. Anyone close enough to hear him would have been even closer to the sanitation truck which was still producing its mechanical roar. He stopped to recover again and waited for the pain to subside. If he was bleeding in the skull he could die. He had to find a way off the roof and to a hospital.

He finally noticed that the ladder was still there. He had been lowering it across the alleyway when he'd been hit and it had fallen just where he was in the process of placing it. It was long enough to bridge the gap, but it had fallen at a slight angle so that only one of the long members of the extension section was actually resting on the far parapet. The other member ended about two inches short.

He scooted over to the ladder and carefully began to straighten it so that it was fully supported on both ends. A wave of nausea surged through him and he suddenly vomited over the roof edge into the alley. He saw a rat scurry away, startled by the noxious shower. He also saw his wallet and cell phone lying in the alley, now covered in his own vomit. Whoever had hit him wasn't a robber. They'd been trying to send him a message.

When he looked back over at the ladder, he realized he'd knocked it even more crooked than before. Now even the one member that was resting on the far parapet was within an inch of the edge. When he'd thrown up he'd almost knocked the ladder down into the alley. He had to be more careful. It was his only way off the roof.

Once again he began to straighten the ladder. He moved excruciatingly slowly and stopped instantly at the slightest sign of nausea. He had trouble telling whether the far end was setting on the roof or still partially suspended in the air. Then he realized he was seeing double. His head injury wasn't getting any better. He closed one eye and could see more clearly. Finally the ladder was in position. He leaned his weight on it and it seemed solid, but he was leaning over the top of the parapet itself. His weight was on the wall; of course it would seem solid. He couldn't tell if it would support his weight once he was out over the middle.

He pulled one of the boards up onto the ladder. It was almost exactly the same length as the extended ladder. This couldn't be a coincidence. These boards must have been part of a makeshift walkway between the roofs. Not only were the boards cut to fit, but why else would they be at this end of the roof? There was nothing else here. That encouraged him. If it had been used that way before, that meant it would be strong enough to hold him. The thin boards weren't strong enough by themselves to do much good. He realized, though, that the boards made the structure stronger by distributing the weight more evenly over the length of the ladder, which was what actually supported the load. They also provided a surface on which to walk – or crawl. He had to get all the boards in position.

One by one he pulled up the boards until all four were extended the length of the ladder, forming a walkway across the alley. There was a bump in the middle where two sections of the ladder overlapped. The extension lay underneath the piece on Cliff's end. This meant the boards couldn't lie completely flat. It would be like stepping off a curb in the middle. This didn't worry him since he was sure the contraption had been used successfully to cross, but he knew he'd have to be careful where the boards didn't make good contact with the ladder.

He'd been working from an odd position, lying with his arms and upper chest on the ladder, his legs and stomach on the surface of the roof. The parapet was only about two feet high, which made this possible. Now it was time to cross and he didn't think he could scoot or crawl up onto the ladder without risking knocking it or the boards loose. He needed to stand up straight and step onto the boards.

He tried slowly standing but the dizziness launched itself again and sent the rooftop whirling before his eyes. He staggered to his left then quickly bent over, elbows on knees and closed his eyes. Nausea hit him just as hard as last time, but this time he bit back the bile and kept from vomiting. He stayed in position for a long three minutes, feet on the roof, bent over with his elbows on his knees until both the dizziness and nausea passed. He couldn't risk standing up straight while on the ladder. Another staggering episode like that one would send him plummeting to the concrete.

Keeping his head down and level he inched forward until his shins were against the boards, his toes against the parapet. Slowly, slowly he lowered himself until his knees were on the boards and his hands were each on one of the long members of the ladder. He began to crawl. When he looked straight down all he could see was the boards and his own hands. He turned his head to the side ever so slightly to see if he could still see his wallet and phone. The sideways movement sent shards of pain coursing through his head once more.

He made his way forward, crawling an inch at a time. Left knee. Right hand. Right knee. Left hand. Again. He still had his double vision and a hellacious headache, but it was a stable state. He could make progress. He reached the midpoint, the spot where the two pieces of the ladder overlapped. The leftmost board was no longer straight. The repeated movement had caused it to skew slightly. The hotel end now projected over the side of the ladder by two or three inches. He wouldn't be able to grab the ladder member unless he straightened it out again to expose the ladder side. He shifted his weight to take it off that board. The ladder suddenly bent with a horrible noise and the board went sliding off the side.

The two sections of the ladder were normally locked in place by four small aluminum pieces, two that locked onto the penultimate rung of each section. One of the pieces had sprung free from its position. They were designed to stay in position when weight was applied from above, not in a horizontal direction.

With the board gone, Cliff's left knee plunged through the opening between two rungs. This in turn caused his weight to shift violently downward and to the left. The rightmost board went flying off that side. He dropped to his stomach and grasped the side members of the ladder with a death grip – literally – since he instinctively knew this was life and death.

The two remaining boards were no longer level or in line with the ladder. The right side of the ladder was still locked in position, but the left side was not. The separation between the two sections was slight, less than an inch, but it was

enough to cause the boards to start to slide to the left, with Cliff's body weight providing the accelerating force. His legs went over the side and he lost his grip with his right hand. With a desperate effort he managed to grab the long member with his right hand. The last two boards clattered to the pavement three stories down.

Cliff was now hanging from one side of the ladder, the left side where the two sections were beginning to separate. The body's natural shot of adrenaline had momentarily anesthetized him from the pain, but it came back in an instant with a vengeance. The ladder, the alley, the sky all whirled around him while his head felt like it was exploding with every heartbeat. He closed his eyes and wished he knew how to pray.

## Chapter 10

Dr. Bruno Pasquali, the Chief Medical Examiner of San Diego County, had been with the office for almost thirty years. He'd only been chief for the last three of those years, and he was already sick of the bureaucracy and politics of it. He still loved the forensic work, the detecting, even the testifying in court where he enjoyed matching wits with defense attorneys and their opinion-for-sale "experts." He almost always won. But he was ready to retire at the end of the year just to get out of the pressure cooker of his office.

The relatives of the Gatekeepers suicides were inundating his office with complaints. They wanted someone to pay. They wanted him to rule the deaths were homicide, not suicide. The police and district attorney's office wanted a suicide ruling because they knew that no jury would convict, not unless someone else was physically present or exerted some obvious and provable undue influence over the decedent.

There were plenty of other hassles and pressures, but here he had another Gatekeepers case to deal with and he'd heard from the police that the decedent's brother, a retired FBI agent no less, was saying it looked like a homicide. He'd pit Harold Potter's opinion against that of any FBI agent any day. What did the FBI know about medicine, anyway? Still, he'd need to look this one over carefully before ruling.

He liked coming in on Sundays because no one was around. He could review the forensic reports in solitude free of any pressures. He picked up the report on Denise Knowles. The first thing that jumped out at him was that it wasn't signed by Harold. It was signed by Elaine Cho, the newest of the medical examiners. He knew he had assigned the case to Potter, the first one on the scene, but apparently Harold had taken leave to see his new grandson be baptized in Arizona and Cho had taken over. She was well-qualified but still green. She missed things sometimes.

He looked at the lab reports. Police had alerted him to the low levels of barbiturates in the blood. That wasn't a frivolous concern. The victim was an alcoholic and their livers can be very efficient, but unless she was a regular barbiturate user that efficiency wouldn't apply here. He looked at the barbiturate level. That concerned him. The level was on the low side, very low compared to other overdoses. It was probably enough to put her to sleep, render her incapable of clear thought or physical exertion, but not nearly enough to cause respiratory shutdown in a normal person.

Then what caused the asphyxiation? She'd had a plastic bag over her head. That could have caused CO<sub>2</sub> toxicity but there were no signs of hypercapnia. She died from lack of oxygen, not from too much CO<sub>2</sub>. The petechiae proved that. He pulled the report on the bag.

The only fingerprints found on the plastic bag were the decedent's, a full hand print in the middle of the bag, directly opposite where the nasal mucosa was found on the inside of the bag. Pasquali knew this was suspicious but he couldn't

immediately identify why. It just wasn't consistent with other suicide cases of asphyxiation by a plastic bag. There had been other suicides where the deceased had put a full handprint on the bag, pressing the bag against their face until they passed out. But there were always other fingerprints. How did she get the bag open without leaving prints at the bottom edge? She didn't put on gloves to open it and then discard them. Even if someone else had opened the bag there should have been fingerprints on the edges. If the decedent – or anyone else – had placed the bag over her head there should have been prints all over the bag. The only scenario he could envision that was consistent with the prints was if someone else wearing gloves opened the bag and placed it over her head then pressed the decedent's own hand against the bag to block her nose and mouth. This would be smothering and a homicide, even if it was with the consent of the decedent, an assisted suicide. Still, just because he couldn't think of how else this could happen, that didn't mean that's how it happened. He knew that sometimes things just didn't have a good explanation. Maybe the prints didn't take for some reason. Maybe the fingerprint tech didn't do a thorough job.

He took a look at the photos in the police report. The crime scene showed the bag over the decedent's head. But it was what wasn't shown that sealed it for him. There was no tape or string around the bottom of the bag to hold it tight. He examined the inventory and confirmed that no such string or tape was found at the scene. The bag barely made it to the decedent's chin and flared out at that point. The other Gatekeepers suicides had taped the bags shut. This victim wouldn't have died from the bag in that position. Oxygen would have continued to flow into the bag. The bag had been pressed against her mouth and nose, pressed hard and continuously past the point of unconsciousness. That's what killed her. She couldn't have done that herself. Someone must have held the decedent's own hand against her face with considerable force. If she had held it against her face herself, she would have passed out and the flow of oxygen through the bottom of the bag would have kept her alive until she revived. This was a homicide, with or without her consent.

The relatives needed a death certificate. The morgue needed space. There was a Mexican gang war going on and the bodies were piling up in the hallway. He needed to close this case. He checked the Manner of Death: Homicide box, reviewed the form on the screen, and clicked the print button. The death certificate would be printed in the next room, ready for his signature.

He knew this would make the case a media event again and the police wouldn't like it, but that wasn't his problem. He did his job; they could do theirs. As a courtesy, he picked up the phone to let the police chief know his findings. They'd have to keep the homicide case open and the chief would probably need to prepare a statement for the press for Monday.



Eva Sanchez got the call from her lieutenant late Sunday morning. The Knowles case was going to stay open as a homicide. She wasn't going to be pulled off to help with the gang war. The media was probably going to make a big deal out of it so the chief had authorized overtime. He wants it closed as soon as possible.

She called Martin to give him the news.

"Rob, it's Eva. The Knowles case was ruled a homicide."

"No kidding? Not a suicide?"

"It could be a suicide, which, let's face it, it is. The Medical Examiner says someone must have assisted her. Something about the fingerprints and the toxicity reports. The chief has authorized overtime for this. He thinks the media will blow this up as a serial killing now with the other two cases. I don't know about you but I could use the OT. Did you get the phone yesterday?"

"Yeah, the phone and the TV and the debit card. The lawyer even came up with some extra cash for the girl, donations or something."

"You have the boyfriend identified?"

"Yeah, he was in the phone contacts. Tony, no last name."

"How about we try to interview him today? It's usually easier than on a workday."

"I'm up for it, but I'll have to call Cliff. He might want to come along."

"Cliff Knowles? What are you talking about? He went back to San Francisco, didn't he?"

"Uh, no. I was going to tell you on Monday. Haines deputized him and assigned him to work with me."

"You've got to be kidding! No way. This is a P.D. case. Is Haines out of his mind? He can't authorize some civilian to work a police case. Just because he's a fellow FBI ..."

"It's not just that. Cliff has solved some high-profile cases, even some murder cases after he retired. Haines says he's a top-notch investigator."

"So what? He's not a homicide detective and he sure as hell isn't a San Diego police officer. I can't stop him from seeing your reports if the sheriff lets him, but he sure isn't going on any interviews with me."

"I have to at least let him know. I'm under orders from the sheriff."

"Fine. Text him when we're done. What's the telephone number of the boyfriend, this Tony guy?"

"Eva, I got to let Knowles know. The sheriff will be tear-ass if I cut him out. If he shows up at the interview we can still keep him away."

"I don't give a rat's ass about the sheriff. Are you going to tell me the number or not?"

He sighed silently but gave her the number. Then he disconnected and sent a quick text to Cliff telling him he and Sanchez were on their way to try to find Tony and interview him. When he did not get an immediate reply text or call he was relieved. He could only hope Cliff wouldn't get the text in time to join

them. He could see this was going to be dicey keeping both Sanchez and Knowles happy.

Twenty minutes later Sanchez called back and said she'd reached Tony. They'd arranged to meet at the P.D. in half an hour.

## Chapter 11

Cliff glanced down. The concrete now looked twice as far away as it had from the roof. He looked up and saw the ladder, the two sections starting to part. The left edge of the first section, the one he was holding onto, was bending downward. His slide off the edge of the ladder had been slow, but the movement was still enough to set his head throbbing and he still had double vision. He closed one eye again and that helped clarify things but it didn't change the fact that he was hanging on a breaking ladder three floors up. The side pieces of the ladder were squared off, shaped much like the boards that had fallen. The corners were slightly rounded, but they felt like honed knife edges to his fingers.

Cliff had been a wrestler in high school, heavyweight class. He'd been a gym rat then, working tirelessly in the weight room, largely to compensate for his mediocre talent. He simply did not have the speed and athleticism of the top wrestlers, but his power and good technique had kept him in the middle of the pack among his fellow grapplers. With narrow shoulders and a thick midsection, he didn't look like a bodybuilder, but he did look like the weightlifter that he was. He'd continued a rigorous regimen of workouts and running throughout his Bureau career and since. One thing he knew, though, was that he couldn't hang there forever, and the longer he did, the more difficult it would be to pull himself up.

Pull-ups had never been one of his favorite exercises. It was the lighter guys who were good at them. One of his teammates in the 121-lb. class could do thirty. Even so Cliff had been able to do eight back then, more than respectable for a heavyweight. The last time he'd tried them in the gym he'd only been able to do three, and that was two years ago, but he'd been heavier then. He'd worn gym clothes that last time and now he was wearing a windbreaker and jeans.

Thinking about it didn't help. It was do or die. That phrase ran through his head and he regretted it instantly. He closed his eyes for a moment, opened them, and strained to lift his body upward. His chin reached the aluminum member. There's one. Now he had to somehow get on top. He hooked his chin over the edge of the ladder, swung his legs twice to get some momentum and removed his right hand from the side member of the ladder to grab the nearest rung with a lunge. He missed.

For a moment he hung in the air suspended by one hand and his chin. The squared off ladder piece cut mercilessly into his chin, but it took just enough weight off his left arm to give him time to grab the side piece again with his right hand. He let himself down again to rest in a hanging position. He knew he had one more chance at most. That effort had drained him. His temple was screaming at him and now his fingers, his arm muscles, and the bruise on his chin were, too.

He took a big breath and tried to clear his head. Waiting wasn't helping. His muscles were tiring by the second. You have to do this now! He remembered how some guys on his team used to "cheat" at pull-ups. They'd lift their legs as high as they could while hanging, thus raising the center of mass, then jerk them

down at the same time they pulled up with their arms, thereby reducing the effort needed on each pull-up. The coach wouldn't count those if he saw that. Well, there was no such thing as cheating now.

Cliff raised his knees up as high as he could and thrust down as though he was jumping to block a basketball shot. At the same moment he strained his biceps and lats to their max as he surged upward once more. This time he didn't hook his chin. He kept his momentum going just long enough to reach out over the ladder with his right hand before falling back. This time he caught the rung. He grabbed as tight as he could. It was much easier to hold onto the rung than the side piece. The rung was almost round. It was a fluted aluminum tube flattened on one side. Its cross-section was in the shape of a tire that was low on air. The side that people were supposed to step on was flat, but the rest of it was round for maximum strength. It didn't dig into his fingers.

With his right hand now firmly secured, he swung sideways a couple of times and when he swung up to the left, he brought his left hand over the top to grab the next rung. Now both elbows were over the edge of the ladder and both hands on the rungs. He slowly slid his hands to the far end of the rungs and with the leverage that gave him he hauled the rest of his upper body onto the ladder. He rested for a full five minutes before bringing his legs up on top. He stretched himself out on the ladder to spread his weight over as many rungs as possible. The ladder creaked ominously and he could feel the left edge sinking further. He began inching forward clumsily, a drunken sailor crawling from a pub after a thorough beating, knees and toes pushing against the rungs. The minutes passed agonizingly slowly but he finally found himself lying on the hotel roof. He'd made it.

He lay there looking up at the sky. He'd never been so exhausted in his life. Every part of his body ached. He moved his hand to the lump on his head. The ping pong ball had become an orange. At least the nausea had gone away. It was time to get out of there and to a hospital. He staggered to his feet and made his way to the door. He punched in the code. That one he could remember. The door didn't open. He sank to his knees.

• • •

Tony turned out to be Antonis Karras, a middle-aged paralegal at a personal injury firm. The pouchy skin and pot belly betrayed a certain level of dissipation, but the thick shock of wavy black hair and the long-lashed bedroom eyes retained an element of Omar Sharif or other matinee idols of yesteryear. Sanchez could see how Denise Knowles could fall for him despite his arrogance and generally obnoxious attitude. He wore a Chargers jersey and charcoal dress slacks with woven leather sandals. His fingers showed nicotine stains, but he didn't try to smoke in the station. The interview had started with him complaining about how long the police had taken to contact him and he hadn't let up on the attack since.

Sanchez counterattacked. "You were her boyfriend. Why didn't you make a missing person report? It's been almost a week."

"She wasn't missing. We didn't talk every single day or text every ten minutes like teenagers. I was busy at work and she was supposed to be doing something with that phony church group she was in."

"The Gatekeepers?"

"Yes, that one."

"What about when you read about the suicide?"

"I didn't know it was her at first. There was no name on the news. I'd texted her the day before. Then, when she didn't call me or text me for two days, I thought maybe that was her. I was afraid to be involved. I figured the police would contact me if it was her."

"Did you know she was going to commit suicide?"

"It wasn't a suicide! Not a chance. She was giving up on those wackos. She just wanted to see what the elevated state was like, or, really, what it wasn't like. That Tweenie dude told her that if she was sufficiently enlightened she might be 'taken aloft' without the need to take a lethal dose. She was really skeptical, you know. She was even planning to leave the church. She told me she had this friend Lance who was really taken in by them, a 'true believer' she called him, and she wanted to prove to him it was all B.S. When she woke up she was going to use that as proof. I mean, come on, aliens taking our spirits?"

"Tweenie? Is that Tohini? Can you describe him?"

"I don't know his name. I never met him. That's just what she called him. Tohini sounds right."

"Why didn't you stay with her to make sure she was okay?"

"She told me it was between her and Lance. He wouldn't believe anything if I was there. She didn't tell me what day she was going to do it, just that she'd be fine. She'd only take a couple of reds but she'd tell Lance later that she'd taken a larger dose, the dose that Tweenie guy said would be safe but enough to put her in an elevated state. She had it all worked out. She'd tell him it didn't work. She was on this soul-saving mission, you know. She was sure Lance would do it for real unless she proved to him it didn't work."

"So you think it was an accident?"

"It had to be. That or someone upped her dose."

"You think it could be murder?"

"It's possible, I guess, but I don't see why anyone would want her dead."

"How'd you meet her?"

"AA. I'm an alcoholic. I've been clean and sober for eight months now."

"How about her?"

"Longer. Two years she said. She still comes to meetings, though. I mean, she was still coming before .... We'd go together sometimes. She was my sponsor at first and then we hit it off."

"You think she'd have drunk alcohol with the reds?"

"No. Of course not. Absolutely not. She was sober two years. No way she'd ruin that. Besides, that's dangerous. Why? Did she have alcohol in her system?"

"We can't discuss that. Was she depressed lately, different in any way?"

"No, no. She was upbeat. Things were going well for her. She'd hit her two years milestone with AA, and she'd got that big new TV. She was addicted to the soaps. She recorded everything. That was one of the reasons she was giving up on that church; they don't allow TV watching."

"What about her daughter? Did she talk about her?"

"Her daughter? I ... I didn't know she had one. She told me she had no family."

"She has a daughter and a brother. He's in town to settle the estate."

"Now wait a minute! We were engaged. We made wills. I was going to file hers with the court once her death was confirmed. When I read her name in the paper I called the medical examiner's office, but they said the death certificate hadn't been issued yet. I was waiting for that. I'll be settling the estate."

"Her brother has already filed an old will, I believe. You'll have to take that up with him. What did her will say?"

"We left everything to each other, of course."

"So you get everything?"

"Hey, come on. She didn't have anything. She worked on a cannery assembly line, for Pete's sake, and lived in a garage. You cops – don't go trying to pin her death on me. I had nothing to gain. I lost my fiancée."

"You don't seem too broken up to me," Martin said. He'd deferred to Sanchez up until then since he knew she was touchy about Knowles, but he was tired of sitting mute. This guy was too slick and he certainly hadn't shed a tear.

"Hey, screw you!"

"Calm down you two," Sanchez said, glaring at Martin. "We have to check every possibility. It's not personal. As long as it's come up, where were you the night she died?"

"When did she die? The paper didn't say and the medical examiner wouldn't tell me."

"Somewhere between Sunday night and Tuesday morning."

"Oh come on. I don't know where I was every minute. That was a week ago."

"Start with Sunday night."

"Home. Watching TV. There was a game on."

"What time did you go to bed?"

"I don't know ... maybe eleven, eleven thirty."

"You didn't leave your apartment?"

"Not until Monday morning. Then I went to work like always. You can check there. This is ridiculous."

"Where'd she get the drugs?"

"Someone at the church, I'm sure. She didn't tell me. I work at a law office. She would never tell me stuff like that. I'd lose my job if I got caught up in anything illegal."

"Is there anyone who can verify where you were Sunday night?"

"Oh, give it up. I was home. She died of an accidental overdose. End of story. Quit trying to make a murder out of it."

"You seem pretty sure of that," Martin said.

"That's it. I'm not taking this crap. I'm outta here." He stood and pulled a cigarette from a pack somewhere under his jersey and pointed it in the direction of the door as he looked at Sanchez expectantly.

She glared at Martin again and then stood. "Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Karras. You've been very helpful. We'll be in touch if we need anything else."

"You can. Not him."

She let him out and returned to the interview room to confront Martin. "Great work. He was cooperating until you butted in."

"He was lying. I don't believe him."

"Lying about what?"

"I'm not sure, but he's a sleaze. Quit treating me like I'm a rookie. I was a good street cop and I've been a detective for two years. Just because it hasn't been in homicide, doesn't mean I'm green. I know a lowlife when I see one. Did you see how his eyes turned to saucers when he found out Denise had a daughter and a brother. He thought he was going to get her car and TV."

"Maybe, maybe not, but he's right. She was dirt poor. He has a good job. You really think he'd be involved in a killing for her car and TV? We can check where he was that night if his phone was on. You didn't have to challenge him like that."

"You noticed he didn't answer that last question?"

Sanchez looked at him quizzically.

"You asked him if there was anyone who could verify where he was. He didn't answer. He faked being offended and made that an excuse for leaving. Like maybe there was someone but he didn't want to tell us and didn't want to have to lie to a police officer either. It seemed awfully convenient to me."

• • •

Cliff sat for a second trying to think what to do next. The third floor of the hotel was presumably still empty. The workmen wouldn't be back on a Sunday and the noise from the sewer truck was still going in the street. He didn't think anyone would hear him if he yelled or jumped up and down. He couldn't go back to the apartment building, that was for sure.

He looked up at the lock. The display pad was still lighted from his touch. It showed a row of asterisks. Something looked wrong. His double vision was still there, causing him to see more asterisks than there should be. Or was it?

He closed one eye. There were still five asterisks! There should only be four. He must have hit one of the keys twice, or pressed two keys at once. His hands were like blocks of wood. He was so disoriented he must have messed up pushing the buttons.

He stood again on shaky legs and pushed the clear button. Then with painstaking care he pushed the 1 key then the 2, 3, and 4. The green light came on. He stumbled inside. He was regaining some strength now, but still had difficulty walking. He supported himself with one hand on the wall as he walked down the hall past the elevator to the first room being renovated. It was open and still had working plumbing. He washed his face and hands. The cool water was heaven. The vomit had gone over the wall and not a drop had landed on him. He had a pocket comb which he pulled out and ran through his hair, avoiding the lump. He actually didn't look too bad, but he was still seeing double and had the entire Chinese army in his head jumping on the pain center. He was unsteady on his feet and couldn't drive.

He made his way back to the elevator and rode it down. The desk clerk didn't even look up when he exited through the lobby. He walked around to the alley and found his wallet and phone. He wiped them off as best he could with some pages of junk mail sticking out of the nearby dumpster. By some miracle the phone still worked. It must have landed on the cardboard box lying against the wall before bouncing onto the pavement. His wallet still had all of his money.

He staggered out to his car and called 911 from inside. He reported that he'd hit his head and thought he had a concussion. He needed an ambulance because he was seeing double, was dizzy, and couldn't drive. He gave his location. The 911 operator told him she'd send an ambulance and police. He said he didn't need police, just an ambulance, but she said they always came just to make sure he was safe. She told him to stay on the line.

He did. While he was waiting on the line she kept talking to him, making sure he was responsive. She kept asking questions like how did he hit his head and was anyone with him. He just kept saying he was mugged and didn't remember exactly and to please just get the ambulance there. Meanwhile, he removed the sheriff's badge from his belt and slipped it into his pocket. If the police saw it, it would raise too many questions and probably get him in trouble with Lew Haines.

The police were the first to arrive. Two patrol officers took his name and other information and asked what happened. He said he'd been mugged. They asked him what had been taken; he produced his wallet and phone and insisted they'd run away without taking anything. He'd been assaulted but not robbed. When they saw he was from out of town they asked why he was visiting. He said he was a lawyer handling the estate of a relative who had died. At that point the ambulance arrived. He told the police he hadn't seen the attacker and didn't want to press charges. He never said a word about the roof or what he'd been doing. The EMTs took over, examined him, and said he needed to be transported to the hospital. The police let him go, puzzled about what had happened.



He was seen quickly at the hospital room. The MRI came back clean. No skull fracture, just a concussion. They put him in a room, gave him something, he wasn't sure what – maybe something about blood clots or to help the swelling go down, and had him hold an icepack on the bump. A hydration line was put in his arm and they brought him food. The doctors gave him neurological tests every half hour until he passed reasonably well. It took three hours but the swelling went down. His vision returned to normal. He still had a hellacious headache, but he lied about it and told them it wasn't too bad. The Motrin they gave him helped. They told him there wasn't reason to keep him overnight, but he should take it easy for a day and call the hospital immediately if symptoms returned. By three thirty he was discharged.

By this time he'd read the text message from Martin. He knew something was going on but he didn't know what. Why were they working on Sunday? They'd told him they'd be back at it on Monday. He had to let Sanchez and Martin know that he'd been attacked. Someone didn't want him snooping and that someone was violent. This was no simple suicide case.

When he left the hospital he realized he wasn't hitting on all eight cylinders, or all four as the case may be in today's fuel-efficient society. He also didn't have much time. He needed to get going if he was going to make his flight. He'd call Martin from the airport and tell him the story. He'd kept from the police the fact that he had been deputized and was on the roof, so he wouldn't be tied up in a long story and investigation, but now Sanchez and Martin needed to know. The homicide experts could take it from there. At the moment he was more concerned about how he was going to explain to Ellen about the bandage on his head.

He took a taxi back to his car. He checked it over to look for signs of vandalism, but it seemed to be untouched. He drove like the proverbial little old lady back to his hotel and packed. He drove to the airport and checked in. TSA had prescreened him, so the security line was short. When he got to the gate area he finally took the time to sit and call Martin.

"Cliff, where are you?"

"I'm at the airport. I'm flying back home."

"I thought you were going to stay and consult on the case."

"I'll be back down eventually to settle the estate and deal with the funeral people, but I need to get home. I can still consult with you from there. What's going on? I thought you weren't going to do any more until tomorrow but now you tell me you interviewed the boyfriend."

"Yeah, the Medical Examiner ruled the death a homicide. That means we can't close the case yet. It could be an assisted suicide, but that's still a homicide. So we talked to Tony. I'll send you a copy of the report when I write it up but the bombshell is that he says Denise wasn't intending to commit suicide. She was trying to prove to Lance that the whole ascent thing was a fraud. He thinks it was an accidental overdose."

"It was no accident."

“Why do you say that?”

Cliff told him the whole story of the drone video, the ladder, and getting attacked on the roof. Martin didn’t interrupt him once.

“Dammit, Cliff, what were you thinking going over there on your own without even telling me? Haines told you ...”

“I know, I know. My bad. I learned my lesson. I’m going to leave the field work to you pros. Don’t tell Haines, okay? He’ll blow a gasket.”

“I don’t know if I can keep it from him. It’s part of the investigation now. Sanchez will have to know, too.”

“I guess you’re right. But let me call him first. Do you have his home number?”

“No. I’m sure the office can reach him, but unless it’s an emergency...”

“Never mind. I’ll call him first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Okay, but there’s more. This Karras guy says he and your sister were engaged, and get this – they made wills and left everything to each other. He’s going to file his, he said. He didn’t know about Crystal, either.”

“That’s news to me. Well, I’d be surprised if she hadn’t made a new will in the last fifteen years. Maybe he can take over the administration of the estate. That would save me some headaches. But I’m surprised she didn’t leave anything to Crystal. The woman in Crystal’s room said she was looking into buying her a motorized wheelchair. If she had the money to do that, that gives him a motive.”

“If he knew about it, which he says he didn’t. Have you found any sign of assets?”

“No, not really, other than that remark from the woman. It’s like the cult leader’s attorney said, who would kill for a TV and beat up car? Hang on, you said his name is Karras? Like Alex Karras, the football player?”

“Yeah, Antonis Karras. Why?”

“That’s Greek. The apartment manager who let me onto the roof was Greek.”

“You think he’s the one who hit you?”

“I don’t know who else it could be.”

“Did anyone else see you go up there?”

“Maybe. We passed some people in the hall – an old woman, a Mexican guy. There was that guy on the street the previous day who got all hot and bothered about the drone. There was a street crew working below. But why would any of them care what I was doing up there?”

“Why would the apartment manager?”

“Look, if someone was with Denise and took her phone and keys and escaped across the roofs, then it had to be someone with access to that building and the roof code. The manager would be part of it.”

“You really think that’s what happened? It seems awfully farfetched to me.”

“I did it. Those boards were cut the exact length of that ladder. Just enough to form a walkway. And why else would they be at that end of the roof?”

There's nothing there. You should send someone over there to get the ladder and boards. Maybe there's some prints or DNA. The boards fell into the alley. The ladder should still be up there."

"I'll talk to Sanchez. We'll need a warrant."

"Not for the boards. They're lying in the alleyway where anyone could pick them up. And the ladder's in plain view, too."

"Yeah, but Cliff, you're a deputy. It wasn't in plain view when you went up there. It sounds like you needed a warrant to me."

"But I saw it on the drone video first."

"You're the lawyer, not me. Is that legal? We can fly drones over property and use that as probable cause?"

This brought Cliff up short. It had been years since he'd taught search and seizure law to his fellow agents. There hadn't been any such thing as drones. He remembered there had been some bad rulings about low flying planes and thermal imaging to catch pot growers, something about a zone of privacy above a residence. He'd also momentarily forgotten that he was no longer a civilian and had to comply with law enforcement rules. The evidence he'd gathered might very well be inadmissible.

"Okay, you may be right. I don't know. But you should still go get the evidence and let the lawyers argue about it later. If it gets excluded, it gets excluded. The important thing is that we now know that someone is worried about us digging into the death and looking at the roofs. I'm telling you, this is a homicide. They're calling for my flight to board. I have to go."

"Okay. I'll bring Eva up to date and we'll talk later. You okay to fly?"

The doctors had told him not to, but doctors told you lots of things you could ignore. Wear sunscreen every moment you're outdoors. Avoid processed meat. Floss every day.

"I'll be fine." He hung up.

• • •

"That was Knowles. He's getting on the plane now to go home."

"Good. That's one less headache," Sanchez replied.

"But listen to this. He went over to the hotel where his sister died and went up onto the roof. He even took pictures with a drone. He found a ladder and some boards making a walkway to the adjacent building. Someone could have come into the room where the victim was found and left across the roof without passing a camera. And he was mugged while he was up there."

"Mugged? Did he give you a name? Description?"

"No. He thinks it was the building manager, some Greek guy. Like Karras."

"I can't believe this guy. He's going to screw up our whole investigation. Flying a drone over the scene? Are you kidding me?! If someone hears that cops have been surveilling them with a drone we'll all get sued."

“He’s gone now.”

“Thank god for that. Tell me the whole story on the way back.”

## Chapter 12

When telling a lie, it's always best to keep it as close to the truth as possible. So when Ellen asked him how he got hurt, he told her he got mugged outside the hotel. He didn't mention which hotel.

"Omigod, are you okay?" She reached up to touch his head, but he winced and jerked back.

"I'll be fine. Fortunately they hit me on my head, nowhere important. I had it checked out at the hospital."

"Poor baby. Can I get something for you?"

His in-laws crowded around at this point, too.

"No, no. I'm fine. I just have a splitting headache. I'm sorry to be a party pooper but I'm going straight to bed."

Ellen's mother gave him a hug and told him to get his rest and not worry about them. Cliff hugged her back and disappeared into the back rooms. He stopped at Tommy's bedroom and looked in on him, but he was sleeping already, so he went on to his own bedroom and dropped his suitcase on the floor. He didn't bother to unpack or even shower or brush his teeth. He stripped off his clothes, throwing them on the floor, flopped down on the bed, and was asleep in minutes. There would be no baby-making this night.

• • •

The next morning he woke up late and found Ellen had already left for work. His mother-in-law was making a big breakfast for the three of them. She was a good cook – better than either Ellen or him – and he would be glad when she was gone for several reasons, including the fact he was eating too much with her around. Still, he couldn't forgo the culinary offering. He felt much better but was still only at 95% or so. He called Maeva to let her know he was going to work from home today. He didn't have any appointments, but he had a whole slew of calls and emails to return.

He told his in-laws that he would be home all day and would take care of Tommy. This freed them up to drive down to Monterey unencumbered to visit the aquarium or go whale watching, which they'd been wanting to do. They thanked him and wasted no time in leaving.

By the time they got going and he finished the morning routine with Tommy, it was after ten. He sat down in his home office and started to work on the calls. He returned the client calls first, then the client emails. He saw one from Mason Huang but skipped it at first. When he finally got to it after lunch he saw that the tax return had been accepted by the IRS and California Franchise Tax Board. Rubin Cox, the attorney from Pringle and Lowe, had returned his call, but that could wait now that the tax return was filed.

He didn't give out his cell number to most clients, preferring to have Maeva screen the calls, so he wasn't interrupted much while he was working.

Ellen called once to check in on him and Maeva let him know of a couple of important calls he needed to take. However, he'd left his cell number with both Sanchez and Martin. He wasn't surprised, then when his phone rang and caller ID showed the San Diego Sheriff's Office.

"Hi, Rob, what's up?"

"What the hell did you do?" The voice wasn't Rob Martin's. It was that of Lew Haines.

"Lew, uh, hi ..."

"I make you a deputy and you go out flying drones over residences? I'm getting complaints from some pissed off citizen. He sent me a picture of you."

"Look, I'm sorry about that. I meant to call you this morning. I forgot."

"Don't you read the papers? Don't you know that drones, especially law enforcement drones, are a hot-button issue?"

"Sure, I know, but ..."

"I told you that Martin was still in charge. Did you clear it with him?"

"No, he didn't know about it until I told him later. He wasn't there. Look, I didn't think anyone would even notice. I only flew it for about three minutes from a public sidewalk."

"These idiots think we're listening to their phone calls or watching them surf porn sites or whatever. You can't be doing this shit."

"Okay, I got it. I won't. I'm not even there. I'm back home now."

"Do you still have the badge?"

"Yes, but I'm not using it. I'm coming down again as soon as I can. I'll return it. I just wanted to be brought up to speed with the investigation. Have you talked to Martin yet?"

"No, he's waiting in my outer office now. I wanted to talk to you first so I didn't ream him out too bad if he didn't deserve it."

"He doesn't. He didn't do anything wrong. So you haven't heard yet about me getting mugged?"

"You got mugged? When?"

"Yesterday. I was up on the roof of the apartment building next to the hotel where my sister died."

"Why?"

"Because that's how the killer escaped without being seen by security cameras. He crossed over from the hotel to the next building on the roof."

"The killer? You think it's a murder case?"

"I do. Someone was trying to send me a message. They hit me over the head with something and locked me up on the roof. I had a concussion. I had to take the ladder and boards that were up there to cross to the hotel to escape. That's how I know it's possible."

"Possible doesn't mean it happened before. You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay. Talk to Rob. My boy's crying. I've got to go. Lew, the case is heating up. The death has been ruled a homicide and the boyfriend says my sister wasn't suicidal. She was trying to prove that the cult

was a fraud. If that case was a murder, the second one, the one you already closed as a suicide, could be too.”

The long silence told him Haines had calmed down and was assessing the new information. “Okay, I’ll talk to Martin.”

Cliff changed Tommy and put him down for his nap then went back to work. He managed to get through his emails by late afternoon. That’s when Ellen’s parents called to say they loved the Monterey area so much they’d decided to stay overnight and see Big Sur the next day. He told them to have a good time and thanked them for the call. Maybe tonight could be a baby-making night after all. He hadn’t thought about dinner until then but now he figured it would be up to him. He’d assumed Ellen’s mom would be cooking. He really didn’t feel like shopping or cooking. They’d go out to dinner. That just might increase his chances of getting lucky, too. He called Theresa, Ellen’s sister, to make sure she could take Tommy the next day, which she could.

He looked at his watch and saw it was almost five. That’s when he remembered what Martin had told him about Tony and the new will. He looked up Tony’s number from the list he’d copied from Denise’s phone and dialed.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Tony Karras?”

“Yeah, who are you?”

“Cliff Knowles, Denise’s brother.”

“Oh. The police told me about you. I’m glad you called. Did they tell you I have Denise’s will?”

No “sorry for your loss” or “wasn’t that terrible” or any other indication of mourning. Right to business. Cliff took an instant dislike to this guy. He ignored the question.

“I’m sorry about Denise. I didn’t know she was engaged. You must be heartbroken.”

“Oh, sure. Thank you. So I’m planning to file the will and ask for letters of administration.”

“Okay. Can you send me a copy of the will, or have your lawyer send it?”

“I’m doing this myself. I’m a paralegal.”

“I see. Did you write Denise’s will?” If he had, that did not make the will invalid. There was no law that said a will had to be written by a lawyer. It would probably mean he’d practiced without a license, though.

“No. She did.”

“She wrote her own will? Denise?”

“Well, she copied mine. I used a standard form we have here in the law office. It’s just a simple will. I left everything to her. She left everything to me. She just copied it and changed my name to hers.”

“What about Crystal?”

“Who’s ... oh, is that her daughter’s name? I didn’t know she had a daughter until the cop told me. I don’t know why she’d keep it a secret. Are you sure about that, because she would have told me.”

“Crystal is special needs. She’s in an institution. Denise didn’t like to advertise it.”

“She’s in an institution? How old is she? Denise must have thought she was taken care of. She doesn’t have to leave a child anything.”

This guy didn’t even care about the daughter except as an obstacle to him getting Denise’s property. He was right on the law, though. Crystal was neither a minor nor a dependent. If that will was valid, she was entitled to nothing.

“You’re sure of that are you? So far as I can tell Denise had almost nothing. Why do you even care?”

“Why do you?”

“I do because Crystal is my niece and a poor, dear girl who needs a special wheelchair and some other things. I want to see her get what she needs. I’m not probating anything because I’m trying to avoid the costs of court. I’m not taking any fees. I want Crystal to get every penny she can.”

“I’ll waive my fees, too.”

“How generous. You get everything either way and your reportable income is lower if you take it as a bequest instead of as executor fees. Denise loved her daughter. If you cared about Denise you’d want her disabled daughter to be taken care of.”

“I didn’t even know about Crystal, assuming she’s real. I loved Denise. If you did, too, you’d want her wishes to be followed. That’s what I want and what the law requires, too.”

“Just send me a copy of the will. If it’s legit you can administer the estate, but I’ll make sure Crystal gets what she’s entitled to.”

“It’s legit. You can get a copy from the court when I file it.”

“What kind of law firm is it where you work? What field of law?”

“Personal injury. Why?”

“And you’ve never argued a case before a judge.”

“I’ve been in court plenty.”

“‘Been in court.’ Hmm. Let me educate you, *Mr. Paralegal*, about a few things. For starters, if you file to administer the estate, by law you have to provide me and anyone else who has a claim, or might have a claim on the estate, a copy of the will and your petition so they can dispute it or dispute your suitability as administrator.

“Second, a probate court is a court of equity, not a court of law. That means the judges have wide discretion to do what is fair and just. They aren’t so rule-bound as courts of law. If they see some jerkwad has refused to provide copies of a will to a relative who requested it, they’re likely to sanction you or at least doubt your suitability to serve in a fiduciary position.

“Third, what is it you aren’t telling me? Because I’ll find out. I’m a retired FBI agent and a private investigator. You wouldn’t be fighting this hard



over a TV and piece of crap car. Her bank account was cleaned out by someone. You? You must know of some other asset. Denise was planning to buy Crystal a new wheelchair. That means she had some money somewhere, or thought she was getting some. What was it?

"Last, do your employers know what you're doing? They might just want to know one of their paralegals is practicing law without a license."

"Don't threaten me," Karras spluttered. "If you want the will so bad I'll send it to you. Satisfied?"

"Satisfied, no, but that's a good start. And I didn't threaten you. So what about number three? What aren't you telling me? What's the name of your firm?"

"Go to hell." He hung up.

Cliff looked up Karras online. His LinkedIn profile identified the law firm, Karras and Karras. Cliff sent him an email with his own contact information and a request for the will. If he refused, now there was a record. He copied the email of the senior partners for good measure. Tony would have some explaining to do.

His phone showed that Rob Martin had called while he'd been on the phone with Karras. He returned the call.

"Cliff, thanks for taking me off the hook with Haines."

"No problem. Sorry you were on the hot seat for a while."

"We went out to the hotel again and looked for the ladder and boards, but there was nothing there. The manager of the apartment building says he doesn't remember anyone coming by on Sunday to go up on the roof."

"Figures. He's lying. I'll send you the video from the drone."

"Please do. We've reached Beth, Denise's girlfriend. We're going to interview her this evening. I'll let you know how that goes."

"Okay. I just got off the phone with Karras. He's a real piece of work. We kind of got in a pissing contest about the wills. He's trying to cut Crystal out and he's fighting real hard to get Denise's estate. There's got to be something there I'm missing. So far as I can tell she was living almost hand-to-mouth. If he knows about some assets she's got, he's a prime suspect."

"Yeah, you told me that before. So you're the estate administrator. Get all her records. If you come up with something, we'll take a look."

"And go talk to Crystal's roommate, too. The lady's name is Kathy. I think you'll get a new picture of Denise."

"I'll let Sanchez know."

He ended the call when he got yet another call with a San Diego area code. It turned out to be the Medical Examiner's office telling him the death certificate had been issued and he could get copies from the funeral home. The body had been transferred to them.

He called the funeral home and reached the same man he had spoken to in person.

“Hello, this is Cliff Knowles. I spoke to you the other day about my sister Denise. I understand her remains are now with you.”

“Yes, Mr. Knowles. Of course I remember you. We have your sister.”

“I’ll need a copy of her death certificate, for banks, Social Security, or whatever.”

“They’re twenty-five dollars each. How many do you need?”

“Just one certified copy should do it. I’ll make photocopies if I need them. Most banks and other places will accept those or digital copies. If they don’t, I’ll get copies from Vital Records. Can we schedule the cremation now?”

“Well, there’s a problem with that. We’ve been contacted by a Mr. Karras. He says he was her fiancée and is going to be the estate administrator. We’re in a bit of a pickle about who’s in charge.”

“I see. I’ve spoken to him. He says he has a newer will, but I haven’t seen it. Has he given you any instructions?”

“Yes, he wants to have her services as soon as possible. We told him we’d have to contact you unless he has a court order appointing him the administrator.”

“Did he say what kind of services?”

“Cremation.”

“Well, that’s what she wanted. I think we can work something out that will satisfy both of us. I just want to make sure I can be there and so can her friends. I’ll pay for a memorial service. Could you contact Karras and suggest this Sunday for the service? Let him know I’m paying. We’re not on the best of terms right now. If you get any flak on that, call me.”

“I can talk to him. He didn’t seem all that concerned about the service. I’d guess he’ll be amenable. He mainly seemed interested in getting copies of the death certificate.”

“Multiple copies? Did he say what he wanted them for?”

“No, well not directly to me. Most estate administrators need multiple copies – insurance, social security, bank accounts, various things. He wanted certified copies, not informational ones, so he had to fill in that same application form you did when you were here. You have to be in certain categories to get them. That form would have said.”

“Certified copies? And what category was he in? I’m immediate family, he’s not. A fiancé doesn’t count. Neither one of us is the official administrator of the estate yet because the court hasn’t appointed one, nor is he an attorney. Did he claim he was?”

“I can’t share his personal information, but, no he didn’t claim he was an attorney.”

“Okay, I understand. Just let me know about the service. If this Saturday doesn’t work, see if the following one does.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

Cliff sensed something fishy was going on. Karras needed those death certificates for something, but what? He’d caught up with his business work. It

was time to get busy on Denise's estate. He dug out the piles of paperwork he'd copied at the San Diego P.D. and made stacks on his desk.

Tommy chose that time to wake up and start crying. Cliff went in to change him and get him into his playpen. No sooner had that been completed when Ellen arrived home.

"Hi!" she called. "Mm, what's that aroma I don't smell?"

"Oh, yeah. Your parents decided to stay over in Monterey. They're going to see Big Sur tomorrow. I thought I'd take you out to dinner."

"And a nice thought it was, too. So we're all alone for the rest of the evening?"

"We are."

"And you thought you could get me into bed by buying me dinner?"

"Well, you were the one who ..."

"No chance, Romeo. Dinner will have to wait." She pressed forward and grabbed him, pulling him hard against her.

When Cliff came up for air he said, "Is that a gun in your purse or are you just glad to see me?"

An hour later they were online looking at restaurant menus.

...

Beth turned out to be Elizabeth Dunn, a bleached blonde of ample proportions, or, more accurately, well-proportioned amplitude. She could be a plus-sized model if she were ten years younger and didn't have such a Roman nose. Sanchez could envision her as quite the draw in a Wonder Woman costume at Comic-Con.

"So how did you meet Denise?"

"We were both working at the cancer clinic in Mexico then. We both liked Comic-Con and just became friends."

"What happened to that job?"

"The doctor who ran the clinic got in some kind of legal trouble. The big medical and drug companies don't like competition from alternative medicine, so they got it closed down. The system's so corrupt, y'know."

"I understand you used to go to movies together, too?"

"Yeah. Me and her would go at least once a month when we could afford it. She just got her new TV so we've been watching streaming a lot more lately. Until she died, I mean."

"Streaming? How? We never saw a modem in her place."

"She had a smart TV and knew the password to the wi-fi in the front house."

"So you visited her at her home often?"

"Oh sure. All the time."

"Did she ever say anything about suicide?"

"No. That's crazy. She wasn't suicidal."

"Did she tell you anything at all about what she was going to do last weekend?"

"She was all 'I gotta help Lance' and like that."

"What does that mean?"

"Lance was, you know, thinking about ascending with those nutso Gatekeepers people. Denise was going to show him it didn't work."

"Denise wasn't a true believer in the Gatekeepers, then?"

"She was curious at first. She was a Hindu, or kinda studying them, when I first met her. I think when the Gatekeepers let her take the name Lakshmi and had Hindu gods in their church she thought they might be spiritual. Denise was an Indian princess in one of her earlier lives. I did a reading on her. So she wanted to check them out, attend their services a few times. But that ascending thing really got to her. When she heard about that she got turned off. She was going to drop them but she'd made friends with Lance there and was trying to get him to quit."

"So you're sure she wasn't trying to commit suicide?"

"No way. It had to be an accident."

"Was there anyone who might've meant her harm?"

"What? Like murder? I can't believe it. Lance might have thought he would help her ascend. I mean, he wouldn't mean to hurt her, but maybe he thought he was doing her a favor if he helped her."

"Do you have reason to think he did that?"

"No. I mean she did say he encouraged her to do the real thing, not just a dry run. Lance thought she was more spiritual than him and could ascend. He didn't think he was spiritually ready yet."

"She said that?"

"Yeah."

"Did you know Lance?"

"No. I never met any of her church friends. I thought they were nuts. They wouldn't even let their members watch TV. I think that's what really cut it with her. I think they didn't want the members to see all the news coverage about how crazy the church was. She'd never give up the soaps. She recorded them all at her boyfriend's and would watch them later."

Martin asked her, "What about her boyfriend, Tony. Did you meet him?"

"Oh sure. He's a really nice guy. She was lucky. He had a good job and everything. They were going to get married."

"Did he give her a ring?" Sanchez asked. They hadn't found anything resembling a traditional diamond engagement ring.

"No. She didn't care about that kind of thing."

"Did she talk to you about Tony a lot?"

"Yeah. Like after an argument. But I was around them all the time. She didn't have to talk about him. We'd all go to the movies together sometimes, or sit and watch TV at her place. I could see they were good together."

"You don't think he'd do anything to hurt her?"

"Tony?! God, no. He loved her. You don't think ..."

"No, no. We're not suggesting anything. We just have to check out all the possibilities."

"Wasn't it an accident? I mean, like, you really think someone killed her?"

Martin replied "We're just exploring all possibilities. What about her daughter, Crystal? Did Denise talk about her?"

"I just heard about that. That's so weird. She never told me she had a teenage daughter. I had no idea."

"How'd you hear about it then?" Sanchez asked.

"From Tony. He called me last night and asked me if I knew. I was like 'No' and we both thought that was just freaky."

"So you and Tony are friends?"

"Sure. Well, kinda. You know, like I said before. Through Denise. We'd all go to movies and stuff or he'd come over when we watched TV. He knew I was her best friend so he called me. He said the police told him about Crystal."

"What about drugs or alcohol? Did she ever use them?"

"No way. Her and Tony were both AA. Neither one of them touched alcohol anymore. She was clean of drugs, too. Street drugs, I mean. I don't know if she had any prescriptions."

"She had barbiturates in her system when she died. Do you know where she got them?"

"One of those Gatekeepers people, I'm sure."

"She told you that?"

"Not in so many words, but she said they had a big supply."

"Did she name names on who had the drugs? Lance? Tohini? Anyone?"

"No. Just 'They have reds up the wazoo.' Like that. It was always just 'they'."

"What about money?" Martin said. "We have reason to believe Denise had recently come into some money. Do you know anything about that?"

"The lottery, you mean?"

"The lottery? Did she win something in the lottery?"

"Yeah. Ten thousand dollars. A scratcher, maybe three months ago. That's how she bought the TV. She got her car fixed, too. She didn't usually play the lottery but her horoscope said it was her lucky day. And some people think astrology is baseless." A note of disgust crept into her voice.

"What about the rest of the money? Where did it go?"

"Well, half went to Tony. They bought the tickets together. I dunno about the rest. Bills, I guess. She must have spent it. She asked to borrow some money from Tony so she could pay her rent this month."

"When was this?"

"On the first. We were all here watching TV. The landlord came to the door and she didn't have enough money. She asked Tony for a loan. He didn't have much on him but he gave her some. I think it was only two weeks' worth

for the rent. The landlord told her he was going to evict her if she didn't come up with the rest. Tony offered to go to an ATM but Denise said she'd get paid in, like, three days and could handle it."

"Is there anything else you can tell us that would help us?" Sanchez asked.

"Not that I can think of."

## Chapter 13

The next day Cliff was back at work in his office when a call came in. Maeva was out serving subpoenas so Cliff picked it up himself.

“Cliff Knowles.”

“My name is Dmitri Karras. I represent Tony Karras.”

“You’re related?” Cliff had seen the name on the firm listing when he’d looked up Tony’s email.

“He’s my brother. And my client. He says you threatened him.”

“I didn’t, but believe what you want. Is that why you’re calling?”

“No. I’m handling the Knowles estate. I’ll be filing the will and a petition to administer the estate on my client’s behalf today.”

“Okay. Tony said he’d send me a copy of the will but I haven’t seen it. Can you please send me a copy.”

“I will. I understand you have a will, too. Can I get a copy of that?”

“Certainly. The original has already been filed. It’s old. I don’t have a digital copy, just the paper copy. I can scan it and send you an image.”

“That’ll work. When did you last talk to Denise?”

Cliff had expected something like this. Karras was fishing for reasons to make Cliff look unsuitable as an estate administrator, like a distant relative no longer part of Denise’s life.

“Starting discovery a little early, aren’t we?”

“My client loved the decedent. He was with her almost every day and helped her get free of her disease. She was clean and sober thanks largely to him. He should be the administrator.”

“That’s not how I hear it. She was in AA and clean for more than a year before he even joined. She was his sponsor; she helped him. Not the other way around.”

The attorney seemed nonplussed at this remark. He hadn’t expected Cliff to have much knowledge about Tony or the relationship.

“Mr. Knowles, don’t contact my client again. If you have anything to say to him, go through me. You’re an attorney, too.”

“I have no desire to talk to your client again. Just send me a copy of the will.” Cliff knew that he could contact Tony any time he wanted, which, at the moment he didn’t. Bar rules prohibited lawyers from talking to each others’ clients without permission from the other attorney, but it didn’t apply to parties. Cliff was acting as Denise’s brother, not as an attorney. Even so, he saw no point in throwing that in the lawyer’s face.

“What about the memorial service? Has Tony talked to the funeral director? Does he agree to holding that on Saturday?”

“Yes, he did. He told me that would be fine. He just wants to make sure it’s not some Gatekeepers ascension bullshit. He says they’re responsible for her death, even if it was accidental.”

“I’m with him on that. So I guess I’ll see him on Saturday.”

"I'll be there, too. If you have to talk to him, see me first."

"Goodbye, Mr. Karras."

Cliff ran Denise's will through his scanner and sent a copy to Dmitri Karras. Within an hour he received from Karras a barely legible scanned copy of the other will. As expected, it left everything to Tony Karras. He'd need to see the original to be sure, but he was almost certain Denise's signature was a forgery. The notary public who witnessed it was named Olivia Karras, probably a secretary and yet another family member in the same law firm. This could get messy, but only if there were assets. It wouldn't be worth fighting this unless something else was found. He forwarded the email to Martin with a note that he thought Denise's signature was forged.

• • •

By two thirty, Cliff was still obsessing about Denise's death. He'd spent the rest of the day with his business, talking to clients, and doing some actual investigation which private investigators must do from time to time. Fortunately, Maeva had pitched in like a trooper and had been keeping up with all the routine stuff, like serving papers and doing online records searches.

He wanted to sit down and go through Denise's papers more thoroughly than he had. So far he'd only riffled through them. He knew there was something Karras was hiding, but he didn't know what. He'd promised to take Ellen's parents to the Computer History Museum, which meant leaving work early. The museum closed at five and it wasn't something you could see in two hours.

He met them at the parking lot of the iconic Silicon Valley building, what was once the headquarters of now defunct Silicon Graphics, Inc., maker of one of the first high-performance graphics workstations. After the mind-blowing tour they drove to a local Chinese restaurant where Ellen joined them. After dinner they returned home.

The rest of the evening was spent with Ellen reminiscing, going through photo albums, and getting in some quality time with her parents. Cliff was anxious to get into Denise's papers but it had to wait until after ten, their bedtime.

"Thanks, sweetie, for putting up with us," Ellen cooed once her parents were in their bedroom. "I know it must be boring for you. But they just have a couple more nights with us. They go back on Friday."

"And I have to fly back down to San Diego for the memorial service on Friday, too. It's early Saturday."

"I'm coming, too."

"You don't have to, Ellen, really."

"I do. She's your sister. She's family. I've already talked to Theresa. She can keep Tommy for the weekend. Ashley can earn some babysitting money."



"If you really want to. You can find some geocaches, too. Fill in San Diego County on your map."

"That's not why I'm going, but I'll find a few while I'm there."

"I really need to get to work on Denise's papers. There's something going on with her estate. Her fiancé now has a lawyer and filed a petition to administer it. There has to be some money there somewhere."

"You're going to do that now? It's almost eleven."

"It's not that much stuff. A couple of boxes. I can at least do the bank statements and checkbook. An hour should do it."

"I'll help you, G-man. Make it half an hour."

"If you want to, G-girl." Cliff picked up one box of papers and set it on one end of the dining room table. Then he picked up the other one and placed it on the other end. "We can work together so you can ask questions. I'll take this end. Your spot's there."

"My G-spot is on the dining room table?"

"You have a dirty mind." Cliff's eyes locked on hers.

"Aren't you glad. Keep your pants on. I'm just teasing. So what am I looking for?"

"Assets. Anything financial. Any evidence she had money or was expecting some or that she was going to buy Crystal a motorized wheelchair."

They both dug into the pile of paperwork. Cliff took her check register and was the first to hit pay dirt. "She deposited ten K in her account three months ago. Then she wrote a check for half that to Tony. Maybe that's what he's after. The other half."

"What happened to it after?"

He flipped to the later pages.

"It looks like she spent it pretty fast. The big purchase was the TV. Then department stores, dentist, car repair, rent, cable bill, groceries. She was down to nine hundred odd when she died. She got paychecks, too, of course."

"That all sounds like normal expenses. Where did the ten K come from?"

"I can't tell. It just says 'Deposit'."

"Any indication why she gave half of it to her fiancé?"

"Not that I can see."

"I don't know. That doesn't sound like anything to kill someone over, and, anyway, she didn't have it anymore."

Cliff grunted agreement. "Still seems curious."

They went back to looking through the documents, a task at which they both were well-practiced as FBI agents. Ellen found the next one.

"Cliff, look at this. There's a folder marked Life Insurance. Here it says twenty-five grand face value. Taken out a month ago if the date is right. Tony's the beneficiary."

"Let me see that." Ellen handed him the sheet, a one-page computer printout.

"This is just a summary sheet. Is there a policy in there?"

“No. That’s it.”

“So it’s State Farm ... monthly premiums split into ‘employee contribution’ and ‘employer contribution’. Group name ‘San Diego County Bar Association.’ This is from Tony’s work. He’s paying the premiums. He and his law firm.”

“How is she eligible? She’s not employed there and she’s not his family, not yet?”

“Very good questions. There’s a code number here. Just a second. There’s a legend on the bottom. Here it is: spouse or domestic partner. Tony was claiming her as his wife already. He put her on his firm’s benefit plan.”

“Were they living together? Common law wife, maybe?”

“No. There is no common law marriage in California. And they’re not domestic partners, either. Neither one is sixty-two and they haven’t been living together.”

“Then they’re not domestic partners. He falsely claims her as a wife, takes out life insurance on her, pays the premium, and a month later she’s dead. Now you’re onto something.”

“You found it. This has to be it. I’ll have to let the detectives know about this right away.”

“Not tonight. In the morning.”

“In the morning.” He stood, walked around the table to Ellen’s side. She was standing by the time he reached her. He picked her up like a rag doll and twirled her around.

The papers were still spread out on the table in the morning.

## Chapter 14

The next morning Cliff got into work early to use the scanner and sent an image to Martin of the information sheet on the insurance. After some thought he sent one directly to Sanchez, too. He was tired of being ignored by the police detective. It was really a police case, not a sheriff's department case, and he knew that ultimately she'd have to be convinced it was a homicide. Martin was working with him because he had to. He wanted Sanchez to make it a true team effort.

Martin called him three minutes later.

"Cliff, good work. Again. We just got the life insurance sheet."

"Hi, Cliff. This Eva. We're on speaker here. Rob's right. This changes things. This gives Karras a real motive. Twenty-five grand ... people have killed for less than that. He was stupid to do it that fast, right after taking out the policy."

"Why waste all that money paying premiums, right?" Cliff joked.

"They're all too greedy for their own good," Sanchez said.

"That's not all. My wife and I – she's an FBI agent, by the way – were going through the papers last night and I found a deposit for ten thousand dollars three months ago. Then she wrote a check to Karras for five grand. She spent it pretty fast. I'm not sure what that's all about, but maybe he thought she still had that money. I also found out he's requested certified copies of the death certificate, not just informational copies. This policy explains why. He needs the certificate to claim the insurance money. Proof of death."

Martin again. "We can explain that ten grand. She won the lottery – a scratcher anyway, not the big jackpot. Her friend Beth says she and Tony split the money."

"Why? Did he pay for half the ticket, or did they pool their money?"

"Not sure. Apparently Denise bought the ticket because her horoscope said it was her lucky day."

"If she bought it, then it's all hers. I can go after that five grand. This is Mr. Karras's unlucky day."

"Cliff, when's the memorial service?" Sanchez asked.

"This Saturday, ten A.M."

"We'll be there. We'd like to see who shows up and how they act."

"Karras got a lawyer. His brother Dmitri. He's going to be there, too. You may not be able to talk to Tony."

"Doesn't matter. We don't want a scene. It's your ceremony and we wouldn't ruin that. We'll save the interviews for another time. We just want to watch."

"Here's something else," Cliff said. "In order to get a certified copy of the death certificate you have to have a family relationship, like me, or be a domestic partner or the estate administrator or lawyer. Or law enforcement. He didn't qualify. That's why he's pushing so hard to get named as the estate

administrator. He needs that to get the certified copy and get the insurance. I know he filled in the application form at the funeral home. He probably called himself the estate administrator.”

“You want us to talk to the county vital statistics people and stop them from issuing the certificate?” Martin said. “He’d have to come to us and open up to get his dough.”

“Good idea. I can stall things in court. He won’t get named administrator anytime soon.”

“Okay. We have a plan. See you Saturday.”

When they hung up, Sanchez said, “Okay, we have a motive and some suspicious behavior, but that’s all it is. It doesn’t prove that he had anything to do with her death. We need to get those phone records. Any word on those?”

“They should be ready today. We’ll see whether our friend Karras was at home that night like he says.”

“And we should talk to that woman who shares Crystal’s room. The funeral home guy, too. Knowles has given us quite a bit to work on.” Sanchez said it in a matter-of-fact tone, but Martin detected a note of respect.

“FBI agents can be good investigators, too. Maybe Haines knew what he was doing when he deputized him.”

“They know beans about homicide, if you ask me, but these are good leads. We’ve got our day cut out for us. Where to for lunch today?”

“Beans? That reminds me of Boston baked beans. How about Boston Market?”

Sanchez pretended to retch. Then she noticed his shoes for the first time, brown and white Gatsbys polished to a high sheen. “Are you kidding me? You auditioning for a Fred Astaire revival role?”

He looked at her black uniform door-kickers, made eye contact, and cocked one eyebrow without a word.

“Okay, okay, but they’re comfortable and practical. Boston Market’s out. How about the Monkey Paw?”

“You and your burgers. Fine. They have good garlic fries.”

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Martin was savoring his third cup of coffee as Sanchez got herself around the last of the garlic fries. Martin’s phone sounded a new email from Cliff. He read it and saw a link to a YouTube video. He opened it.

“This should be our next stop,” he said, turning the phone toward Sanchez.

She wiped her hands on her napkin and took the phone. It was the drone video of the apartment building next to the hotel. “Knowles wasn’t kidding. There are the ladders and boards. There’s nothing else there to use them on except to cross to that other building. Oh, wait. Did you play it to the end?”

“No, why?”

"There's the building manager, the guy Cliff thought assaulted him. There's a good photo as he's bringing the drone back." She handed the phone back.

"Recognize him?" He replayed the last few seconds.

"No. Do you?"

"No. We should run his name before heading over. Cliff gave us his name before. It's in the email, too. Demetriou."

"No first name?"

"No. But we have the street address. I'll have dispatch run it." He called the county communications center and gave them the name and address. Within two minutes the reply came back with full name and address, description, driver's license number, and a statement that he had no criminal record other than a speeding ticket, and no wants or warrants.

"Okay, let's go."

They pulled up to the apartment building but there were no legal parking spots on the street. Sanchez pulled into a red curb slot by the fire hydrant and hung the mike over the rear-view mirror before getting out.

Demetriou answered their buzz promptly, let them into the lobby, and met them there.

"How can I help you officers?"

Once again Sanchez led the questioning. "We're here about a report of an assault that took place in the building?"

"Assault? When?"

"Last Sunday. A sheriff's deputy was assaulted on the roof."

"The deputy was assaulted? This is the first I heard. The one with the drone?"

"Yes, him. You let him onto the roof, didn't you?"

"Yes. He asked, so I let him up. Why are you only investigating now? Monday some officers came by looking for a ladder they said was in the alley, but they didn't say anything about no assault."

"The deputy suffered a concussion. He didn't report the details right away. He was hit with something – a club or board or tool. What did you do after you let him onto the roof?"

"I propped the door so he could get down and then I went back to my apartment. Then I had a service call from one of the residents. I had to change the lights in the hallways."

"You never went back onto the roof?"

"A couple of hours later I did when I didn't hear from him, but the door was closed so I thought he'd gone."

"What happened to the ladder?" Martin demanded.

"What ladder? I told those patrol guys I don't know nothing about no ladder."

Martin held the phone in Demetriou's face about two inches from the bridge of his nose, the drone video playing. This made the man step back to

focus. Martin's boyish looks could never be described as menacing, but he summoned a pretty convincing imitation.

"I don't know nothing. I never seen it before. I didn't know it was up there."

"How about the boards? They fell into the alley. Did you clean those up?"

"No. I'm telling you, I don't know. Boards, ladders. I don't know how they got up there."

Sanchez took over again. "Who else has the combination to get up there?"

"I ... I don't know. The super before me, probably. The owner. Maybe some air conditioning or elevator guys. I've only been here eight months. I never changed the combination."

"The residents?"

Demetriou hesitated. "Maybe some. I found some of them barbecuing up there once. There's no balconies so that's the only place to barbecue. They're supposed to ask me, but they didn't that time. They told me the door was left open that time. I didn't give them the combination."

"Which tenants?"

"The Ruiz kid and his girlfriend. Three-H. They were here when I moved in. They could have given it to anyone in the building if they have it."

"Who's the owner?"

"Some real estate company in New York. I don't even know their name. They use a property management company out here, SDB."

"We need a name and number."

Demetriou pulled out his own phone and scrolled until he had a contact showing. He turned the phone so both officers could read the screen. Martin took a photo of the screen.

"Ask for Stu Birnbaum."

Martin stepped forward again. "Did you assault Deputy Knowles on Sunday?"

"No, of course not. Why would I?" Demetriou looked genuinely alarmed. "Assault a deputy? Do I look suicidal? That's a good way to get shot. He was a big guy, too."

"Do you know who did?"

"No, nothing. I told you."

"What about the woman who died in the hotel next door ten days ago?"

"No, nothing. The deputy asked me about that, too."

"Is this Ruiz in? Or his girlfriend? What's his first name?"

"Max. I don't know if he's in. I don't keep track. Probably not. He works in construction. I don't know what she does but I seen her leave in the morning sometimes. Working somewhere I guess. Waitress, maybe."

"What's her name?"

“Rae, I think, or something like that. She moved in with him a few months ago.”

Sanchez looked over to Martin who shook his head no. “Okay, that’s all for now. If you think of anything, give me a call.” Sanchez handed Demetriou her card.

The two detectives went to the third floor and knocked on the door of apartment 3-H but no one answered. They returned to their car and drove to the police department.

When they arrived, Sanchez found that the phone records on Karras had arrived as an email attachment. She printed out a copy for Martin. There were two separate records. The first was a list of his calls and texts. It did not contain the content of the texts, since they didn’t have a warrant for that, only the numbers he called, or which called him. The other printout was a list of the cell towers that Karras’s phone was in contact with over the eighteen-hour period in question. They split up the reports. Since both reports required some research to make sense of them, the two spent the next twenty minutes in silence.

Martin was the first to break the silence. “Karras appears to be telling the truth about Sunday night. At least his phone was at his apartment until midnight. He must have turned it off about then. Nothing after that until the next morning.”

“Without an exact time of death, that doesn’t really help. He could have turned it off and driven over to the hotel and done the deed by twelve thirty. Or he could have left it at home, gone over at eleven thirty, and been back in time to turn it off.”

“True, if he’d have that much foresight, knowing we’d track his phone. Seems unlikely. What about his texts?”

“I’m not through them all, but I don’t see anything during the time she was at the hotel. Earlier that day there were several texts and one twelve-minute call around one. Seems odd to me if he knew she was going to be doing this trial run thing that night. You’d think he’d want to know she was okay as soon as it was over.”

“He told us he didn’t know what day she was going to do it.”

“So he says. What’s your take on Demetriou, by the way?”

“I don’t trust him. He didn’t look all that surprised when I showed him the video of the ladder. I think he knew it was there. He was also too quick to point out that Ruiz could have told anyone about the door combo, like he wanted expand the suspect pool.”

“Did you notice that he said he’d been at that building eight months?”

“Yeah. And that’s important because ...?”

“That’s when Karras says he got on the wagon. Both Greek.”

“I don’t see a connection. What does him getting sober have to do with the building manager job? Do they even know each other?”

“Maybe nothing, but there’s only one Greek Orthodox church in the city. They all seem to know each other. Maybe we should check into that.”

"There's one in Cardiff, I know, and I think one in El Cajon. I had calls out there when I was on patrol. Maybe they don't even go to church."

"Somehow both of them having a life change at the same time ... and that was right before the first Gatekeepers case. It just seems too coincidental to me.

The phone rang. Sanchez picked it up. After a quick "Good. Thanks," she told Martin that Vital Statistics had refused to issue the certified death certificate to Tony Karras, but issued one to Cliff.

"Karras will have to come to us if he wants one," Martin said.

"Or get a court order. He's got a lawyer now. He'll have to prove to a judge why he needs it. If Knowles is right, maybe we can find out what asset he's after."

"You don't think it's the life insurance?"

"Could be that and something else. The insurance doesn't seem like enough money to commit murder for."

"There have been plenty of murders for less. Or for nothing."

"Sure, gang-bangers and domestic ones where the husband wants out but doesn't want to give up the home and the kids. But Karras had a good job and they weren't married. He could walk away any time."

"Did you contact the insurance company?" Sanchez asked.

"Done. I should get a copy of the policy by tomorrow. I wanted a good paper photocopy, in case there's a forged signature on it. Knowles might not even have known Karras insured her life."

"That summary sheet was in her papers."

"Sure, but did she know what it was? Why wasn't the policy there? Even if she did, did she put Crystal as her beneficiary? Karras submitted it to the law firm. He could have changed that beneficiary to himself on the form. Anyway, it may be over at the sheriff's office by now."

They finished the phone record review and called it a day.

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Maeva was about to leave for the day when she called to Cliff, "Mason Huang called today and asked about that check. He wanted to know if he should be preparing an amended return. He said it's easier to do when he has all the details in his mind. I told him we still hadn't figured that out. Did you ever talk to that lawyer?"

"No. Thanks for the reminder. I'll call him now." He waved as Maeva left. He looked up the number for Rubin Cox, the Pringle and Lowe attorney in Sacramento. His secretary answered.

"This is Cliff Knowles calling Mr. Cox. I called last week about a check on McKendrie. Is he in?"

"He's in but he's with a client. I can have him call you when he's free. I'm afraid I don't know how long that will be."



"I understand. I'm a lawyer, too. You don't want to cut short his billable hours." Cliff said it as a joke, but only a small one. He knew that if he had a paying client in his office, he'd make no effort to shorten the conversation and he didn't blame Cox one iota.

"Oh, don't worry about that. Mr. Cox doesn't bill by the hour. It's all covered in the fee."

That remark struck him as odd. Cliff assumed it must be a contingency case, although he thought Pringle only did defense work. It was normally plaintiff's firms, like Karras's, that took cases on a contingency basis, but Cox's billing practices were the least of his concerns. "It's getting late. I'll be leaving for home in a few minutes and I won't be able to deal with this there. Will he be in tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, and he has no appointments. Shall I have him call you then?"

"Have him try me here tonight first. If no one answers, can you ask him to call me in the morning?"

"Certainly."

Cliff worked another ten minutes with no call from Cox. He was just getting ready to leave and had already turned off the lights when an idea hit him like a Brunswick 16-pounder. What other attorneys worked for a flat fee? Probate attorneys! Probate fees were all set by statute. He turned the lights back on.

He was standing in front of his filing cabinets, so he opened the Pringle correspondence file and looked at Cox's letter again. "McKendrie PR2013-87334." Cliff didn't know the case numbering system in the Sacramento County but he'd bet PR meant probate. He mentally kicked himself for missing that.

He moved over to the next cabinet and looked into another file drawer, one that contained only personal matters. He thumbed through the folder tabs: "FBI career," "Certificates," "Bar," "PI License," "Living Trust" and on and on. Where would he have filed that? He flipped open "Estate Planning" but it wasn't there. "Living Trust" held only his own living trust. Finally he found what he was looking for in "Misc": the first letter from Rubin Cox, the one from 2014.

*In re: McKendrie PR2013-87334*

*Dear Mr. Knowles:*

*This letter is to memorialize our conversation of earlier today. As I told you, Ciella McKendrie, your grandmother's sister, died last year and our firm is probating her estate. Under the terms of her will, you are entitled to a share of the estate. The estate is small and the assets are to be distributed to a large number of relatives so you should expect only a de minimis bequest. We are still in the process of researching the family tree and doing a final accounting. We are having difficulty locating some relatives so I cannot give you a time frame for when you will receive your bequest. Feel free to call me if you have any questions.*  
*Rubin Cox*

Cliff slapped himself on the side of the head. So it was that guy! He remembered talking to him on the phone back in 2014. It had been a short conversation. When Cliff found out why he was calling he had little interest in the *de minimis* bequest. He was more interested in getting the investigative work to find all the relatives. That could be hundreds or even thousands of hours. He'd never even heard of Clella McKendrie before that call. He remembered that the estate was supposed to go to dozens of relatives he'd never heard of. Cox had told him that his reputation as a private investigator aside, he was an heir and had a conflict of interest. The fewer heirs he found to share in the estate, the bigger his own share would be. Cliff had laughed and said he could see his point.

So the \$8,165.40 had been a bequest from his grandaunt, or whatever she was. Bequests are tax-free. No wonder Pringle hadn't included it on a 1099. Neither he nor Maeva had remembered the first letter or the attorney's name. He looked at it again. At the top he had written in pencil 'Personal – Misc'. Maeva had filed it exactly where he had told her to. When the second letter had come in months later, they both had assumed it was just another fee payment and entered it that way in their office software. Huang would be happy. He'd get to do another return excluding that from income and charge another fee.

Cliff would be happy enough to reduce his taxes, too, but that's not what was occupying his mind right then. He was thinking that if he was entitled to a bequest, Denise probably was, too. What had happened to her \$8,165.40?

He looked at his watch. He was running late. This was the last night his in-laws would be there and Ellen's mom was planning to cook a big meal. Theresa was coming over with Ashley. It would be a night of Kennedy family reminiscences and lots of hugging. It was a command performance. Excuses would not be accepted. He turned off the lights, locked the door and headed home.

## Chapter 15

Friday morning Cliff drove Ellen's parents to the San Francisco airport. His mother-in-law rode in the back with Tommy and cooed over him the entire time. Ellen was working a half day and couldn't make the ride.

As they were driving up I-280 Cliff's phone rang. It was Cox. He hated to take a call with his relatives in the car, but he needed to talk to the lawyer. He answered with the Bluetooth.

"Cliff Knowles."

"Rubin Cox here. You called me yesterday?"

"Rubin, I need to talk to you about the McKendrie estate."

"Yes? You got your check, I know."

"Yes, that's no problem. It's about my sister's estate. Denise passed away and I'm administering her estate."

"I'm sorry to hear that. My condolences."

"I need to find out what happened to her share of the estate. She got the same amount as me, I assume?"

"That's right. We only sent her checks about three weeks ago. She was among the last. May I ask what she died of? She wasn't very old."

"The cause is listed as homicide. I think she was murdered, but it could be assisted suicide. The police are still investigating."

"Murdered? My lord. You don't think it had anything to do with the money, do you?"

"Probably not, but it's possible. The police will probably be contacting you. In fact, I've been deputized by the San Diego sheriff to consult on this case. I'm retired FBI and a private investigator. Consider this a police interview. Why did it take so long for her to get her money?"

Cox emitted a long sigh. "It was quite a probate. Let's see, you were her ... sister's grandson. Well, if this is going to be a murder investigation, I guess you'll need the whole story. Clella McKendrie lived to be one hundred one. She never married and died childless, so she had no direct heirs. Her estate wasn't large, not by our standards, but she wanted to share it with her whole family so no one would feel left out. In her case that meant her siblings and their descendants. We advised against that since it would be split into so many small pieces and because administration would eat up a big chunk of it. She had seven siblings - six sisters and one brother. Together they had twenty-seven children, including your mother. The next generation, yours and Denise's, had forty-four."

"Christ," Cliff said before realizing his wife's parents were listening. He looked over at his father-in-law, who sat tight-lipped, staring straight ahead. "I have forty-two first cousins? I only know of five on that side. There are some on my dad's side."

"Yes, your mother was estranged from the rest of the family, I believe, except for her sister Ida."

“Aunt Ida, right. Her kids ... they lived in Ohio or someplace. I only met them twice.”

“So anyway, the next generation after that had thirty-seven children and there is even one more generation with five. That’s a total of one hundred twenty people altogether in the family tree. Now usually an estate would be distributed by right of representation. The legal term is *per stirpes*. That’s where the estate would be split up among the top generation, or seven shares in this case for Clella’s siblings, and the entire share would be given to the top generation person if they were living. One of her younger sisters was still alive in her 90’s by the way. If that person was deceased, then that one-seventh share would be split among the next generation and so on. But for any heir that’s living, the splitting stops and their children don’t get anything.”

“I went to law school. I know what *per stirpes* is. Don’t tell me she specified *per capita*.”

“I forgot you were an attorney, too. Yes, every living descendant of Clella’s parents gets an equal share, except with a twist. Any children, those under the age of eighteen at the time of Clella’s death, got a double share. So of those one hundred twenty people, forty-one were already deceased and got nothing. There were a total of fifteen minor children, so that’s fifteen extra shares there. Altogether, the estate was divided into ninety-four equal shares. With fifteen children getting two shares each.”

“So if every share was the same as mine, that’s somewhere close to a million dollars, if my math is right.”

“Not bad for on the fly. Most heirs, including you, were in the first phase. Denise and Crystal were in the second.”

“Why the two phases?”

“It was taking a long time to find all the heirs. Most of the descendants were female, almost two-thirds of them, which meant a lot of changed names. They’re scattered all over the world. We had to hire an investigator. I remember talking to you about that. You wanted the job. I didn’t tell you the details then – I didn’t realize how many heirs there were going to be then – but you were conflicted out. You had a financial incentive not to find all the other heirs. Anyway, some of the heirs petitioned the court to force distribution early rather than wait for the very last heir to be identified and contacted. The court granted the petition, with a reserve kept back for the remaining heirs since there was no way of knowing how long it might take, if ever, to find them all. The total number of heirs and their birth names were known by then, just not all the changed names and current locations. Of course they kept back a reserve for additional investigation. Our legal fee was set by statute, but the court had to allow for expenses. As it turned out, the remaining investigation expenses were a bit more than expected but we were able to settle with the investigator for the reserve amount, so everyone in the second phase got the same amount as in the first phase. Denise and Crystal were among the most difficult to find. Denise had changed her name three times and lived in Mexico, Florida, and several other

places. You didn't even know where she was when I contacted you, or that she'd married and divorced again."

Cliff remembered the conversation, now that he was reminded. All he'd known then was that a relative he'd never heard of before had left him some small bequest and that he'd made a pitch for the investigative work.

"Crystal. She would have been a minor then. She got a double share, then?"

"Yes, we sent that to Denise as her legal guardian."

"But Denise wasn't her legal guardian. The county guardian is. Crystal's severely disabled and living on Medicaid. That money's missing, too."

A groan came through the speakers. "Great. That's all I need. Our investigator didn't tell me that. I'm sure Denise signed for Crystal's check, too. All the checks were sent certified mail, signature required. The checks have all been cashed, too. Probate's about to be closed."

"So that's almost twenty-five grand missing, eight grand for Denise, sixteen for Crystal. Can you find out where those got cashed – whose account they ended up in? This is a murder investigation."

"I'm sure I can get that. The probate bank account requires return of the paper checks just like the old days."

"I didn't know banks even did that anymore."

"You can get them if you pay for it. The bank fees are high, but you have to do it for cases like this. I'm sure we have the checks in our file."

"Get 'em and send me a copy. Keep the originals. I don't know if it's worth checking for fingerprints or DNA after they've been through the banking system and your firm, but the police may try that. So handle them with gloves or something. I don't have legal process, but I can get a warrant."

"No need. Probate is a public proceeding and anyway I have to get those to the police to protect my own ass. We could be hit for malpractice for sending Denise Crystal's check. We could try to get it back from the investigator's insurance, but if the police recover it ..."

"Out of curiosity, how much did he get paid?"

"She. Close to two hundred thousand dollars all told. She was working on it for over two years. Clella died in 2013. There was some travel."

Cliff let out a low whistle.

Cox continued, "More than ten times what any of the heirs got, even the kids. It's a shame really."

"For what it's worth, it may not be such a shame, not if we can recover that money. If it results in Crystal getting an electrified wheelchair, so far as I'm concerned it was money well spent. When do you think you can have the scoop on the checks?"

"I should have it before lunchtime. I'll call you when I get it."

"Super. I'm in my car. I have to go. My exit's coming up."

Cliff disconnected without waiting for a response. He pulled into the airport and navigated through heavy traffic to the terminal.

"Oh, Cliff," Ellen's mother said as they all got out of the car. "I had no idea you'd just lost your sister. Ellen never said anything about it. I am so, so sorry."

Cliff pulled the luggage from the trunk. "It's okay, mom. Thanks. We weren't that close, really, but I want to do the right thing by my niece."

"Of course you do. I'm sure you will."

"What's that about you being deputized?" Ellen's father said. "Are you running around with guns now?" The fact Ellen "ran around with guns" as an FBI agent didn't bother him. She was his daughter and could do no wrong, but he bristled at the idea of Cliff putting his life at risk.

"No, no. Nothing like that. I'm just consulting with the detectives who are working the case."

The man eyed the goose egg on Cliff's head suspiciously. "All right. Well, keep it that way. My grandson needs a father."

"Sure thing, dad."

They did their hugs and kisses thing with Tommy getting the most of it, and then were gone. Cliff got back in the car and headed south again. On the way he called Maeva and asked her to tell Mason Huang that the check was a bequest, not earned income. He told her where to find the 2014 letter and to make a copy for the Pringle correspondence file.

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Sanchez showed up at the sheriff's office this time instead of meeting at the police department. She wore a well-tailored pant suit of navy blue serge over a blue on white print blouse. She even wore a touch of makeup, although you had to know her well to be able to tell. She hadn't yet admitted it to herself, but Martin's ragging about her clothes had gotten to her. She didn't want to walk into his home turf looking like a pitiful frump. She needn't have worried, as anyone would look good in comparison to the aging building and scarred government furniture that looked like it had been reclaimed from the freeway cleanup crew.

"Eva! You're looking good, stranger." The remark came from Bert French, the most senior homicide detective at the sheriff's office. She saw him from time to time on cases and conferences, but not in the last six months.

"Bert. You're just as blind as ever, I see." She punched him on the shoulder. He grabbed her and made a pretend fist as though to return the punch, but pulled her into a bear hug instead, then released her. "Where's Martin hang out?"

"Pretty Boy Floyd? He's getting coffee. He sits right there," he said, pointing to an empty desk. "He said you'd be coming in. Here he is now."

Martin arrived with two coffees in hand, one with cream. "I knew you'd be here on the dot," he said. "Here. Cream, right?"

"Right. Thanks. So this is your bailiwick?"

“More baling wire than bailiwick, but yeah. This is where I protect and serve.”

She blew on the coffee after lifting the lid. It was still too hot. “So did you get the insurance contract?”

“I did. Have a seat.” He sat at his desk and she pulled up a loose chair. “Eighteen pages of legal gobbledygook. It’s a group policy for San Diego law firms. Karras and Karras is just one of many firms with the same general contract. It’s a typical employer policy that employees and their dependents can join. Each firm has its own employer and employee contribution percentages. They’re not all the same. The Karras firm split the premium cost fifty-fifty. They were up to date in their payments, the insurance rep said.”

“When did it take effect?”

“That’s the thing. The firm has been on the policy for years. They submitted Denise’s enrollment form one week before she died.”

“Have they paid off the policy?”

“No. Karras notified them of her death, but he hasn’t submitted a claim form. He needs to submit a certified copy of the death certificate.”

“Bingo! It’s a good thing we put a hold on that. Did you tell the insurance company we’re looking at this as a possible homicide?”

“Of course. There’s no way they’ll pay Karras until we clear him.”

“They weren’t even married yet. She wasn’t even eligible for the insurance. Did you tell them that?”

“Actually, that didn’t matter to them. The insurance guy said that it was pretty much up to the employer. The law has gotten pretty flexible in California for an insurable interest. Nowadays the term domestic partner can include any one adult person living with someone at least for insurance purposes. It’s more like ‘significant other’ now. A fiancée would count if they lived together.”

“Which they didn’t.”

“Still, the insurance company said it didn’t matter to them. Actuarially the cost to insure a girlfriend is the same as a wife. As long as someone’s paying the premium it’s all the same to them. The more the merrier, in fact. They make money on every person. The employer is the gatekeeper, no pun intended. It’s up to them to keep unqualified people off the rolls, since they have to pay half the premiums.”

“The partners are Karras’s father and brother and I think another partner. They must have given the okay.”

“Yup.”

“So where does that leave us?”

“Karras had a motive for murder. If we can’t pin this on him, he’ll get the twenty-five grand. His phone was at home, at least until he turned it off, but we can’t be sure about his person.”

“We need to find out if he had access to the roof of that apartment building. What about that realty management company? They should know who had the door code, or at least who was supposed to have it.”

“Birnbaum. Let’s go hit him up now.”

The detectives made a pit stop on the way out to the parking lot then piled into Martin’s department car. Before he left he asked dispatch to run Birnbaum’s name for vehicles registered and for wants and warrants. En route the answer came back that he had a clean record and owned two Infinitis. Martin drove to the office of SDB Property Management where they parked and walked in.

A hefty thirtyish artificial redhead – more of a magentahead, really – wearing a short, sleeveless blouse and big jewelry, manned the desk. She was stacking papers on a shelf behind the desk, exposing a stretch of skin between her waistband and the blouse. She had a large tattoo of a marijuana plant peeking out there. After a few moments she turned and sat at the desk.

“Can I help you?”

“We’re here to see Stu Birnbaum,” Martin said, smiling flirtatiously, a smile that was returned the same way.

“He’s not here right now, but I can help you. If you’re looking for an apartment, we have vacancies every week. We should have something open up any day. We have over a dozen buildings.” She handed Martin a rental application, leaning over to show her cavernous cleavage.

Sanchez showed her badge and shoved her face within inches of the girl’s. “We’re with the police and this is a homicide investigation. His car is in the lot. He’s here. Get him now.”

The girl did a good imitation of a Guernsey that had been whacked in the face with a board. She stood and rushed through a door to the back.

“Now who’s the bad cop?” Martin said.

“The twit was lying. She deserved it. She can drool over you in her dreams tonight. We don’t have time for that now.”

“So you think I’m droolworthy, do you? Nice to know.”

“To a nearsighted millennial who’s still trying to lose her virginity, maybe.”

“Ouch.”

Redhead reemerged, a bespectacled balding man with a bandaged ear leading the way.

“I’m Stu Birnbaum. What’s this all about?”

Sanchez said, “You manage the apartment building next to the Paradisio Hotel, the Metro Arms. Your building manager, Demetriou, gave us your name.”

Birnbaum held his hands out straight in a ready-to-be-handcuffed position. “I’m guilty already. You got me. We manage the Metro Arms building. So lock me up.”

“We’re investigating an assault that occurred on the roof of that building.”

“I didn’t do it. I was playing Mahjong with my cat.”

“Mr. Birnbaum, this is no joking matter. A deputy was seriously injured. He could have died.”



"Could have, could have, could have. I could have been a concert violinist if only I played like Heifetz. She told me you said it was a homicide. If the man didn't die ..."

"We believe it may have been connected to the death in the hotel next door. That's what he was investigating. Someone attacked the deputy while he was on the roof. Someone who knew how to get onto the roof. You have that door code."

"I know from nothing. I give that door code only to workmen who need to get up there. And the building manager. If they give it to someone else, I don't know about it. So the deputy was up there with the door locked? Demetriou was not supposed to give him or anyone else the code without telling me. He should have let him up and stayed with him. I will have a talking to our friend Mr. Demetriou."

"No, that's not what we're saying," Martin replied. "The door was propped so the deputy could get down, but the manager didn't stay with him."

"So you're saying anyone could have gotten up there. You don't even know if they had the door code?" He made an exaggerated shrug and rolled his eyes.

"Well, no. Maybe right then, but there was a ladder on the roof. Someone brought it up there and positioned it there. And later, after the deputy was locked on the roof, they removed it. Someone had to use the door code."

"Ladder, schmadder. You're not making any sense. What's all this about a ladder?"

Martin pulled out his phone and played the drone video. "That ladder. It was put on the south end so it could be placed across to the hotel roof. With the boards on it, it could serve as an escape route from across the alley."

"My dear officer ... um, what is your name, anyway? You haven't said."

"Martin, Deputy Martin, Sheriff's Homicide. This is Detective Sanchez with the San Diego Police."

"My dear Deputy Martin. No one holds our boys – and girls – in blue, or even plaid seersucker, in higher esteem than I do, but if you believe murderers are scampering around on ladders between buildings, I have a deed to the Brooklyn Bridge I'd like to sell you."

Sanchez broke in. "You can cut the cutesy crap. This is a serious matter. Someone in that building, or very familiar with it, attacked a deputy on the roof and may have been involved in a murder. We need you to tell us who might have access to that roof. We already know some of your tenants have gone up there to barbecue without getting the super to let them on top. We need a list of your tenants and their contact information."

"We have dozens of tenants in that building, Detective, and I've never given the code to any of them. Who in particular are you asking about?"

"Anyone who knows how to get on the roof. Let's start with Max Ruiz in 3-H."

"Our records are private. I'm afraid that's a hard and fast rule of our owners."

"And who exactly is that?"

"It's a company back east."

"Give me a name and telephone number."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, not without our lawyer saying it's okay."

"We can get a warrant."

Birnbaum laughed. "Detective, really. I watch the boob tube, too. Interesting term, that. Very appropriate these days, too, with all the female flesh bulging and heaving. The TV cops always say that and the business owner hands over the records, but if you could get a warrant you would have shown up with one in hand. Now if you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to. If you get your warrant, I'll see you then."

With that he turned and walked back through the door, which he shut behind him. Sanchez's glare threatened to set the door ablaze but Martin watched the redhead during the exchange. She looked cowed in all the meanings of that word and slipped cautiously back into her chair behind the desk.

"You have to work for that guy?" He said to her, his voice oozing sympathy.

"I know. Really. You have no idea."

"Some people have no sense of responsibility to the public. But I can tell a lovely young lady like yourself would never blow off a request to help in a murder case, now would you?"

"I c-can't."

"No, of course you can't. Your boss would fire you. But in case you know anyone who would ever like to make an anonymous call to the Sheriff's office about anything at all, here's my card." He handed her a card which she immediately slipped into her purse.

By this time Sanchez was outside standing on the sidewalk. Martin stepped out to join her. "Can you believe that guy," he said. "Laughs at us and leaves us standing there holding our dicks."

"Dicks?" She hissed through clenched teeth.

"Metaphorically speaking. Anatomically speaking it would have been singular."

"Screw your metaphors."

"Take a deep breath, Eva. It's not so bad. We can get the information easily enough. I'll bet Carrot-top will have a list of the other tenants for us before the end of the day."

"Your modesty astounds me. You like Ms. tramp stamp, do you?"

"Who says I liked her? He had a point, though. Knowles said the door was propped open. Anyone who knew he was there could have gotten up there. No one needed the code."

"It had to be someone in the building. He said he'd only been up there three or four minutes when he got hit. There's no way someone could have

followed him up there from the street without him knowing it. If it wasn't Demetriou then who? We don't need your purple-haired fan club in there. Let's go over to the building."

When they got to the Metro Arms, Martin parked at a metered spot nearby. They walked to the north side of the building where the entrance to the parking lot was. It was a ground level lot easily accessible to anyone on the street. Sanchez snapped photos of all the license plates in the lot.

"Two thirds of these are empty," Martin said. "Most people are at work."

"I know. I'll have patrol run by here tonight and pull all the tags. We can get started on these."

"Why bother? We can just run the address through DMV. Get all registered vehicles and drivers' license."

"That'll get most of them, but people move around and don't re-register. They get their mail at their parents' house or other places and use that for DMV. And that wouldn't get visitors, people like Birnbaum. He wouldn't live in a dump like this but he has access to the roof."

"What – you aren't thinking of a stakeout on this place, are you? That's the only way you're going to get all the visitors. There's no way my department would commit the manpower for that. We don't even know if the assault on Knowles is related to the death of his sister."

"No, my department wouldn't either. But we can't just let that go. It was no robbery. They threw his phone and wallet over the roof. They were trying to scare him off."

"It seems to have worked."

"I thought he was coming back for the memorial service tomorrow."

"He is. He's supposed to come in tonight, but I don't expect he's going to stick around long."

"We should meet him ahead of time. When does he get in?"

Martin checked his phone and scrolled through some emails. "Five thirty-five ETA. Hold on. There's a new one from him now." He read for half a minute. "He says he has some new information – a bombshell."

"He'll be tied up in rush hour traffic and have to get checked into his hotel. Let's ask him to meet us at the P.D. once they're settled?"

"Works for me. Let's get back to the office and run these plates."

...

Cliff and Ellen walked past the hundred plus passengers in the security line directly up to the gate officer. FBI agents are required always to be armed when flying. This means a few extra minutes at check-in to fill in the forms, and a brief meeting with one of the TSA officers, but it was nice to avoid that long security line. Cliff still had his San Diego Sheriff's Deputy badge so they could go through together.

At the gate waiting area Cliff went over the status of the investigation with Ellen, including the bequest from his grandaunt and how he'd thought it was a fee payment. It was also the first time he'd told her how and where he'd gotten mugged. He made the strategic decision not to tell her about nearly plunging to his death from the ladder. He was in enough trouble without that. He figured she could just assume he got down the same way he got up there, by the stairs.

"You inherited eight thousand bucks and didn't tell me?"

"I didn't realize it. The envelope, the check, they looked exactly like the ones I get all the time with my fee payments. I do work for that firm. It didn't say anything about probate or my aunt on it, just a lame reference to an earlier letter. I wasn't hiding it. You should be happy. We'll get a tax refund. Mason's doing an amended return."

"I know that. So you think these missing checks are connected with Denise's death?"

"Twenty-four thousand. It's a motive and the checks are missing. This guy Cox is supposed to call me to let me know who cashed them."

"What about the guy who cracked your skull? Shouldn't they be looking at that? This Demetriou guy."

"They told me they're investigating. I don't know if it was him or not. He had a clean criminal record and no reason to attack me that I can see."

"You should have preserved your wallet and cell phone. They could have taken prints."

"Yeah, I guess. But I needed my phone. I had a concussion. I had to call 911. I really wasn't thinking straight. Whoever it was probably wouldn't have touched them with his bare hands anyway."

"It had to be somebody there – in that building, don't you think?"

"It seems likely."

"So why aren't they checking those people out?"

"They are, I'm sure. They've got a lot to do. They're checking out Karras and the insurance. That Tohini guy and Lance what's-his-face. They'll get to it."

"Why don't you have Maeva do that. She's good at that stuff. She can find out the names and numbers of everyone in the building. Check 'em for criminal histories."

"The police can do that. Hang on, my phone's ringing."

Cliff's extracted the phone from his pocket. The screen displayed Rubin Cox's name.

"Rubin, I was hoping it would be you. Make it fast. We'll be boarding in a few minutes."

"Cliff, sorry it took so long. I got the checks. We make them non-negotiable without an endorsement as a precaution. They all had Denise's name written on the back. Because of our conversation I took the added step of pulling the mail receipts for when they were delivered to her. That took longer than expected. I compared the two signatures. They don't match. Not even close."

"I can recognize her handwriting. Can you send me the images?"

"I just sent you an email. They're attached. But the envelopes were signed for two days after we mailed them. That's normal. The checks were deposited three days later. Those are in the email."

Cliff paused the call and pulled up the email. The checks were received ten days before she died, so they were deposited a week before her death.

"That's her signature on the mail receipt, but not on the checks. Someone forged her signature when they deposited them. I can't make out the stamp under her signature, though. Can you?"

"I already checked it. It's a company called Astoria Property Holdings, Ltd., doing business as APH, Ltd. The bank it was deposited in is First Zion Bank of California. That's in San Diego. That's all I know."

"Okay, I can take it from there. Thanks." He ended the call.

"The checks were deposited in the account of a company called APH Ltd. Denise's signature was forged."

"Who are they?" Ellen asked.

"No idea."

"Are you going to call Maeva now?"

"Yeah, I should. The police don't know about this yet. Maybe I can give them a head start."

Cliff called Maeva. Although it was late on a Friday afternoon and the boss was on his way out of town, she was still at her desk working. He asked her to dig up what she could find on Astoria/APH Ltd. that does business in San Diego. He was about to hang up when Ellen asked him to hand her the phone for a minute.

"Maeva, did Cliff tell you where he got that lump on his head? ... Mugged? Yeah, but did he tell you it was on the roof of a building? ... Me neither. Men! Always have to pretend to be so macho."

"Pretend?" Cliff said, leaning over.

"Be quiet. I'm talking to Maeva. Maeva, someone in that building hit Cliff. He had a concussion. He's lucky he didn't get a skull fracture. See what you can get on who lives there, will you? ... Just a minute. Cliff, what's the address of that building?"

"I don't know the address. It was the one north of the Paradisio Hotel. Metro something."

"Maeva, look up the Paradisio Hotel in San Diego. It's the apartment building just north of it. I don't know the address. It might have Metro in the name. And whoever hit Cliff might have been the one who murdered his sister. ... That's right, murder. They don't know for sure, but it's starting to look that way. ... He didn't tell you? Typical. The murderer might have run across the roof from the hotel to the apartment building. Hey, they're calling our flight for boarding. The superintendant is called Demetriou. I don't know the spelling. He's suspect number one. Get it to Cliff as soon as you can, okay? ... Yeah, I'll tell him."

She turned the phone off and handed it back to him.

"Tell me what?"

"You're an idiot."

"She said that?"

"No, I said that. We're on your side, you know. Maeva loves you almost as much as I do. You should have told us everything. She said she hopes they find whoever killed your sister. Come on, let's get in line. I want to get a good overhead bin spot."

...

After they checked into the hotel Cliff and Ellen went by the funeral home to discuss the memorial service arrangements. Cliff then took Ellen by the Police Department and introduced her to Eva Sanchez and Rob Martin who were still in the process of running license plates from the apartment building and checking the records on the names that produced.

"I want to thank you both for all the work you're doing on this case. Please find out who attacked Cliff," Ellen said. "If there's anything I can do – the FBI can do – just let me know. I can see that it gets done."

Sanchez replied. "Mrs. Knowles, Ellen, be assured that we are doing everything we can to find out who attacked Cliff. He's one of our own, and we think it must be connected to Denise's death as well. But thank you for the offer."

"Come on," Cliff said. "We really have to go. I want Ellen to meet Crystal and her roommate. We have a short window between her physical therapy and mealtime. So we'll see you two at the service tomorrow?"

"We'll be there," Martin said.

"I just got some news that you'll want to hear. I found out that Denise received two checks from an attorney a couple of weeks ago, an inheritance. One was for her and one was for Crystal. They total almost twenty-five thousand. Both checks were cashed and deposited to the account of a company called APH Ltd., whatever that is. Denise's signature was forged on the checks. I'm having my assistant dig up what she can on them."

Sanchez and Martin looked at each other. "When were they deposited?" Martin asked.

"About a week before she died."

"We'll need a copy of the checks."

"I'm forwarding them now," Cliff said as he pulled up the email on his phone. "And I'll have Maeva send you copies of the letters from the lawyer about the inheritance, too. You'll want to talk to the lawyer handling the estate. His name's Rubin Cox. His number's on the letterhead."

"This could be important, I suppose," Sanchez said. "But if it's a week before Denise's death, I don't see how it's connected."

"I'll let you know as soon as I find out anything," Cliff said. "Now we really need to get going."

Cliff and Ellen shook hands with the detectives again and headed for Tranquil House. When they got there Cliff led Ellen directly to Crystal's room. Crystal was watching cartoons and Kathy was crocheting in the adjacent bed. The curtain between them was open.

Cliff approached Crystal and knelt to make it easier for her to make eye contact. "Hi, Crystal. I'm Uncle Cliff. Remember?"

Crystal's eyes met his briefly then returned to the cartoons. Ellen stood silent, feeling slightly awkward. Kathy was looking at her.

Cliff stood straight again. "Hi, Kathy. This is my wife Ellen."

"Au ah oo?" Kathy said. Cliff whispered "How are you?" in Ellen's ear by way of translation.

"I'm fine, Kathy," Ellen said without missing a beat. "Cliff has told me so much about you and how you have been Crystal's guardian angel. I can't tell you how much we appreciate what you do."

Kathy smiled and nodded, then began typing on her tablet. "*still 10 min on tv show then birds*"

By this time Cliff had moved around between the beds and could read the screen. "Thanks, Kathy. I'm going to take Ellen around to meet the staff. We'll be back."

Cliff went out to the front desk and found out that Roberta Browne was in and would be able to see him. After the introductions were over, Cliff explained to her about the missing checks.

"I will certainly urge the police to pursue that, Mr. Knowles," Browne said. "Thank you for letting me know. If they can track it down and recover it, we can apply it to Crystal's care."

"I'm working on it, too. The checks were in Denise's possession. So far as I'm concerned, they're part of the estate."

"You've been named administrator, then?"

"Well, no, actually. It seems Denise was engaged. Her fiancé plans to file a competing will. It will have to get sorted out."

"I see. Well, that doesn't change the fact that our office is legal guardian for Crystal. Her inheritance comes here. The taxpayers are entitled to the relief. They've been paying for Crystal for years."

"Wait a minute! The taxpayers?! That money is for Crystal."

"Mr. Knowles, as I'm sure you know, Crystal is dependent on public assistance. The law states clearly that when she or anyone in her position receives income or support of any kind from any source, her public assistance is reduced by that amount. I assure you that money will all be applied to Crystal's support. That will allow public funds to go farther to help others with critical needs just like Crystal."

"You're saying if you get your hands on that inheritance it won't benefit Crystal one bit – that it's just an accounting trick. You plan to deposit it into some account and then charge all her regular upkeep to that account until it's

gone. She'll get zero benefit? Denise was going to use that money to buy Crystal the wheelchair she needs, not pay for someone else's upkeep."

"Mr. Knowles, you're an attorney. You know the law. Even disabled people are responsible for their support to the extent they are able. The taxpayers pay the rest for the disabled like Crystal. Besides, Crystal is not eligible for a wheelchair. It's not a medical necessity. Denise was not Crystal's guardian and should not have received her check. I will make sure the police know to return it to our office where it belongs if they recover it."

"Look, I came here because I thought you'd be glad to hear that it may be possible for Crystal to get that wheelchair. Now you want to take her money and stick it in the general budget? So you can what ... hold another 'staff conference' in Maui like I just read about?"

"Now that's a total distortion. The paper got that story wrong. It was a training seminar on the latest issues we face ... how Obamacare has changed ..."

"Can it. I'm not interested. Let's go."

Cliff stormed out of the office, Ellen right behind.

"That went well," Ellen said when they got back to the lobby.

"I should never have told her about it. I didn't realize ..."

"It's okay. Relax. The money is probably gone anyway. Let's go back and see Crystal."

They returned to her room and this time the cartoon show was over. The nurses helped get Cliff set up with Crystal's chair and sun hat and let him take her out to the bird feeder, much like last time. Ellen and Cliff spent almost an hour with her there. It was obvious Crystal enjoyed it every bit as much as before. Ellen couldn't help but fall in love with the girl, too. She was such a pitiable creature but so full of warmth and joy despite her disabilities. When the nurse came out and said it was time to bring her back for dinner, they packed up the drawing materials and began to wheel her back.

"I'm sorry to drag you out here and put you through this," Cliff said.

"Don't be silly. I loved meeting Crystal. And I'm sure you'll work out all the estate stuff. We have a hotel room all to ourselves with no parents and no Tommy. We should enjoy ourselves while we have the chance, if you get my drift."

"I like the direction the current is drifting."

They arrived back at Crystal's room. Kathy was there as was an attendant who was arranging the meal trays for both Kathy and Crystal. Cliff and Ellen said their goodbyes and started the drive back into San Diego.

"You're drifting from your lane," Ellen said sharply.

"I'm fine," Cliff replied as he corrected. "I was just distracted thinking about your ... drift."

"There's time enough for that later. I'm starved," Ellen said as she spotted some fast food signs off the highway.

"You deserve someplace nice, not a fast food."



"Which means you want a steak or ribs." Ellen began searching on her phone for a restaurant. "Here's a spot close by that gets five stars on Yelp. The Driftwood. That sounds like karma under the circumstances." She gave him directions.

They enjoyed a hearty meal of steak and potatoes seated at an outside table on a beautifully tiled patio. They both passed on the wine. As he was paying the check, Cliff noticed that sunset had drawn its curtain and looked at his watch. "I'm sorry. I know you wanted to pick up a geocache or two while you were down here and now it's dark."

"You know that I didn't come here for that. Whatever you need to do, or need me to do, just tell me."

"No, I'm done for the day. We'll do the memorial service tomorrow morning, and that's it."

"Well, then, what are we waiting for? There's no rule that says we can't geocache after dark. There was a good night cache near here if I remember right."

"Night cache? I've never been on a night cache."

"You're a night cache virgin? I can't have my husband a virgin of any kind. I brought my gear. Flashlight, the whole works. Let's go." She stood and tugged at Cliff's sleeve.

Fifteen minutes later they were at the hotel changing clothes and a half hour after that they were at the beginning of a geocache called The Forbidden Forest, a spooky Harry Potter-themed geocache. The web page for the geocache gave the GPS coordinates for the starting point, located at a nearby park. The only way to find the cache was to follow a trail of reflectors, visible only at night with a good flashlight, and only if there was no full moon or other ambient light.

Cliff had done cave and tunnel caches, so geocaching in the dark wasn't totally new, but the experience of trying to find his way in the total darkness over a considerable distance held a spooky charm and required good eyesight, not Cliff's strong point.

They moved slowly and carefully, backing up frequently to verify they were on the right path. They had to first find a black box that held the coordinates to the final cache. About halfway to that first stage Ellen stepped off the path a foot or so to shine her light around a felled tree and walked right into an elaborate spider web.

"Ack! Spider web," she yelled and hopped back flailing at her face. "Get it off." Spiders were her only phobia. Cliff was already wearing gloves and brushed off her face quickly although it was nearly impossible to tell if he was getting all of the silken strands. Or the spider for that matter.

"It's gone. It's gone."

"Criminy! I wasn't expecting that," she said, her heartbeat returning to a non-fatal rhythm.

"Big tough FBI agent afraid of a widdle spidey?"

She punched him on the shoulder. "Just go on."

Soon they reached the markers for the black box. The coordinates were inside, but the box couldn't be opened. The cache page said the only way to get the coordinates was to reach inside and feel the numbers on the inside surface. After her spider encounter, she wasn't about to do that and Cliff's hands were too big to fit in the opening. But a geocacher comes prepared. She pulled a dental mirror from her bag and Cliff had a penlight. Together they were able to shine the light in the opening and see the next set of coordinates with the mirror.

On to the final stage, Cliff leading the way with a web-destroying wand in hand. Fortunately, the final stage was close. They found the cache and emerged with one more find racked up and another exciting adventure shared. Then it was back to the hotel for excitement of another kind.

## Chapter 16

The next morning Ellen was up early for a run. By the time she got back to the hotel Cliff was up and checking his email.

“Maeva found the owner of the apartment building where I was mugged,” he announced as Ellen entered. “It’s a company called APH Ltd., the same company that got Denise’s checks. Their registered agent for legal process is SDB. That’s a property management company run by a man named Birnbaum, not the building owner. She was able to determine that APH is a fictitious business name for another company called Astoria Property Holdings, Inc., which is reportedly a Grenada company. She found a record for Demetriou at the apartment address, but he has no criminal record she could find.”

“Astoria is in New York City, I’m pretty sure,” Ellen volunteered.

“It is. She checked the zip code of the P.O. Box for the parent company. Astoria is in Queens and so is the zip code. It has a lot of Greeks there – Greek restaurants, churches. So someone in New York formed an offshore company in Grenada and registered a fictitious business name in California for their property holdings.”

“Dollars to doughnuts it’s Karras behind this whole thing.”

“Doughnuts. I haven’t had my breakfast yet.”

“I haven’t either. Give me ten minutes for a quick shower and we can go down together.”

• • •

The memorial service was at ten A.M. Cliff had notified everyone he thought might want to come, mostly her phone contacts, but also including some people Rob Martin had identified for him, and was surprised that most of them came.

He and Ellen, the first to arrive, sat in the front row. On the other end of that same row sat Tony Karras between his brother and Beth Dunn. Directly behind Karras were three people later determined to be people from Denise’s AA group. Behind them sat Marisol, Denise’s coworker, and Lance from the Gatekeepers, along with Uli and two or three others from that group. Cliff had notified the cult through Naomi Morgenthal, the lawyer, and had asked her to spread the word. Neither she nor Tohini attended, but apparently the word had been disseminated. Cliff had made clear to Morgenthal that they were to behave and that the ceremony would be non-denominational without any mention of ascending or aliens. To the side in the aisle near Cliff, Kathy from Tranquil House sat in her electric wheelchair. The male nurse who had taken Cliff and Crystal out the first time sat directly next to her in the end seat on the row. Cliff couldn’t tell whether he was there to attend to Kathy or on his own account. Probably both. Crystal was not there.

Directly behind Cliff, Sanchez and Martin sat. They knew almost everybody, which Cliff did not, so they pointed out to him who was who while they were all waiting for the ceremony to begin. Ellen paid close attention, too. Somber, mournful music wafted through overhead speakers until Cliff got up and found the director and asked him to play something a little more joyful. He wanted something celebrating her life, not mourning her death. The funeral home was prepared for this and the music changed.

"Don't worry about us," Sanchez said to Cliff when he returned to his seat. "We aren't going to disrupt the service. We're just here to observe."

"I know. You told me that before."

After ten minutes of the assemblage listening to the music and staring at the closed casket and the flower arrangements that had been placed around it, it became clear that no one else was going to show up. The music faded away and funeral home director walked out clad in a black suit, white shirt, and muted blue tie. His black shoes were polished to a mirror-like sheen and his hair was plastered down with a vat or two of gel.

The speech given by the director took only twelve minutes, but to Cliff it seemed like an hour. The content consisted entirely of vague platitudes of a spiritual nature without once mentioning God or Christ or heaven. It was delivered perfectly in a rich voice, contained nothing offensive, and Cliff remembered not a word of it. When it was over, the director asked if anyone wanted to say anything.

Tony Karras stood and walked to the front. There was a small lectern there with a bible on it, but no microphone. He began to speak, if blubbling could be called speaking. Tears streamed down his face as he choked out something about Denise saving him from his addiction to alcohol and how she was the love of his life. When he sat, the director asked if anyone else wanted to speak. He turned to Beth. By this time her mascara was running down her cheeks and she just shook her head no.

The director made eye contact with Cliff and all the attendees followed his gaze. Cliff had not intended to speak and had not prepared any remarks, but he felt compelled to say something. He stood and walked to the lectern. He wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. After an awkward minute he said, "A big brother is supposed to protect his little sister. I didn't do a very good job." Then he returned to his seat, his eyes still dry. Ellen and Kathy both dabbed at theirs with hankies.

When no one else came forward, the director advised them that they could stay as long as they wanted. The music resumed and people began filtering out.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Cliff said to Ellen. "This is depressing." Then, turning to the detectives he whispered, "I need to talk to you. Outside. I got some new information last night."

Cliff stood and walked over to Kathy. "Thank you for coming."

Kathy replied with her tablet. *“thank you for letting me know its a treat for me to get out and an honor to be considered a friend to such a loving mother i liked Denise very much.”*

“Can you do me a favor? I need the name and contact information of that place you referred Denise to for the wheelchair.”

*“i have a card right here”* She reached into her purse and withdrew a business card that read “MobiMed – Serving Greater San Diego.” Cliff snapped a picture of it and returned the card to her.

He and Ellen then left the chamber and emerged into the sunlight, which was almost blinding after the darkened room. The two detectives were waiting for him in the parking lot. Cliff told them about the information Maeva had dug up on APH. Martin took notes.

“There’s Karras,” Sanchez said as Tony Karras, Beth Dunn, and Dmitri Karras came through the doors.

Ellen nudged Cliff. “You really should go and at least introduce yourself to him, Cliff. He seemed to really be broken up. I think he did love her.”

Cliff started to object, but then decided she was right about his duty at least. He walked over to the trio and extended his hand to Tony. “Hello, I’m Cliff Knowles. I’m sorry for your loss. I’m sorry about ... earlier.”

Tony Karras shook the proffered hand, imparting several times the necessary grip strength. Cliff met the force with his own. It was a standoff. “Tony Karras,” was the only reply.

At that point Dmitri Karras stepped forward. “I told you not to talk to my client. I’m Dmitri Karras.”

“Cliff Knowles.” He extended his hand again and Dmitri shook it perfunctorily. “I was just extending my condolences.”

By this time Ellen and the detectives had approached, stopping at a respectful distance but within earshot. Ellen nudged Eva Sanchez and whispered something in her ear. Sanchez nodded.

“My client has requested a certified copy of the death certificate and you’re blocking him from getting it. Why?”

Rob Martin overheard this question and came forward before an argument could break out. “That was me, Mr. Karras. I’m Rob Martin, Sheriff’s homicide.”

Dmitri directed his wrath to the deputy. “Same question. Why?”

“We didn’t want to do this here at this solemn occasion. We have some additional questions for Tony. We’ve developed some information that is troubling us that he can clear up. Can we make an appointment for him to come by our office on Monday?”

“We’re entitled by law to that death certificate.”

“I don’t believe so, Mr. Karras. Tony may have been her fiancé, but under the statute he’s not a relative or a domestic partner or other authorized party. Do you really want to discuss this now?”

“He’s the estate administrator.”

"Not yet, he isn't. There are two wills, as I understand it. Mr. Knowles has filed a competing petition. A judge will have to decide that."

"Is that true?" Dmitri demanded, turning to Cliff. "You sent a copy of the will, but no petition to administer."

Cliff nodded. "I mailed it yesterday. It should arrive at the clerk's office Monday or Tuesday."

"Why does he need the death certificate?" Martin asked. He turned to summon Sanchez over because he wanted her as a witness. They were getting into the key questions about motive. Sanchez was standing with Ellen who was talking softly with Beth, but she caught Martin's question and moved over to hear the response.

Dmitri remained silent for several seconds, indecision wrinkling his brow. Martin continued, "It wouldn't have anything to do with the life insurance policy he took out on Denise, would it?"

At that Tony lurched forward, his face flushed. "What?! Are you suggesting I killed Denise for the life insurance?"

"Shut up, Tony," Dmitri said. "I'll handle this." Although he was thirty pounds lighter and five years older, he had no trouble shoving his brother back. He turned to the detectives. "That's ridiculous. I'll be glad to explain it to you. But not with him here," he said, nodding his head in Cliff's direction.

Cliff raised his hands as though in surrender and backed away, rejoining Ellen. They moved out of earshot of the detectives and Karrases.

"What was all that with the woman, Beth What's-her-name," Cliff asked.

"I noticed something in there. Beth seemed enamored by Tony Karras and the feeling looked mutual to me."

"What? He was engaged to Denise and she was her best friend."

"I know. You've never heard of a best friend stealing a fiancé?"

"Well, yeah, but ... you even said he seemed to be genuinely moved. He was sobbing like a baby."

"You're so clueless about relationships. Just because he loved Denise doesn't mean he couldn't have a thing for Beth. She may be super-sized but she really swings what she's got. Eva noticed it too. They were holding hands when they came out of the building. Eva's going to request Beth's phone records to see where she was the night Denise died."

"Beth? Really? I don't know what to say."

"Do you want to go?"

"Let's stay to see what happens here. They're asking about the life insurance. I'm sure the detectives will tell us what they said."

He turned out to be mistaken in this. Dmitri Karras and the two detectives came over to him a few minutes later while Tony stayed back. It was Dmitri who spoke.

"All right, so you found the benefits printout on the insurance and I understand how that might make you suspicious. But it has nothing to do with Denise's death. I just told the officers. The policy isn't even in effect yet. What

you saw was just a printout acknowledging that her name was entered into our benefits system as Tony's spouse. That's because he anticipated they'd be married by October. It's open season right now for the insurance. He had to sign up now but it doesn't take effect until October first. Tony will get nothing from the insurance. That's why no claim has been filed. The insurance company was notified of her death only because her name was in their system already. Not only that, it has a suicide clause. It doesn't pay if the insured commits suicide within six months of it taking effect. Do you really think anyone would set up a homicide to look like a suicide if that was the one way he would not get the insurance money?"

"He was claiming it was an accidental overdose," Cliff protested.

"And it no doubt was. But that doesn't change the fact the policy wasn't even in effect yet. Not for her; only for the employees already signed up. You can verify all this with the insurance company."

"And we will," Sanchez said.

"Be my guest," Karras replied.

"So why does he need the death certificate?" Cliff asked.

"Well, you were going to find out anyway. We'd have to reveal the asset if we go to a probate fight. Denise was on title to a condominium as a joint owner. He needed to file an affidavit of death. I didn't want that to come out because I thought you'd try to include that in the estate."

"She didn't have the money for that. I saw the place where she was living and it was no condominium."

"She was in the process of moving out of there. Most of her stuff had already been moved over to Tony's condo, but it was too small for the two of them. They were buying – did buy – a larger one in the same building, but they hadn't moved in yet. Escrow just closed ten days ago. Tony was using his equity in his current condo to buy the new one, but he needed to come up with another fifteen grand for the new one. Denise won some money with a scratcher ticket a few months ago and wanted to 'pay her fair share' as she put it. She gave Tony five thousand dollars to be put down and she was made joint owner."

"If she owned half a condominium, I'll need ..."

"Damn it, I knew you'd try that. She did not, or does not, own half a condo. It was joint tenancy, not community property. When she died it became one hundred percent his. It doesn't even pass through probate."

"Okay, okay. Peace. Look, I didn't know anything about that. If what you say is true then I'm not going to try to take it away, but I'm not going to let Tony become administrator. He didn't even know about Crystal. I want to make sure she gets what she needs."

"What about the death certificate?"

"Let me be administrator and I'll send him one. If everything checks out like you said."

"I'll email you the address and parcel number of the condo. You can do a title search and verify it yourself."

"And who is Astoria Property Holdings?" Ellen suddenly blurted out.

Dmitri Karras looked up at her, since in her heels she was two inches taller than he was. "And who are you?"

"Special Agent Ellen Kennedy, FBI," she said displaying her credentials, "a.k.a. Mrs. Cliff Knowles."

"Sheriff, police and now FBI. Who's next? Mexican Federales?"

"How about an answer?"

"I've never heard of them. What do they have to do with anything?"

"How about APH, Ltd.?"

"Same answer. Are you going to tell me who these are?"

Sanchez said, "Enough questioning here. We'll need to ask Tony about these companies among other things and we have to check out what you just told us. Why don't we set up that appointment for Monday at our offices. No, let's make that Tuesday. That'll give us time to verify with the insurance company."

"Hold on," Cliff said. "What about that forged will?"

"Whoa. Nothing was forged, mind you, but there may have been a ... mistake ... with that will. I'm not sure it's valid; I've held off on filing it. My client won't file the will and his petition to administer if he's provided a certified death certificate as you promised. That's all he ever wanted." He looked nervously at the detectives.

Dmitri and the detectives made arrangements to get together on Tuesday while Cliff and Ellen conferred.

"We're going back out to Tranquil House to see Crystal," Cliff told the detectives after Dmitri walked away.

"Are we going to see you again?" Sanchez asked.

"Not this weekend. I'll have to come down for the final disposition of the property eventually. What about you two? What are you going to do with the investigation now?"

"Verify that information about the insurance, of course. If it's true, that destroys his motive. I'll want to have our forensics people compare the signatures on the will Karras sent you and the checks to Denise"

"I know Denise's signature. They're both forgeries. Dmitri was lying about that."

"I'm well aware. That's not what I'm going for. Let's assume Karras forged the will; but did he forge Denise's name on the checks? I want to see if our handwriting expert can tell if the same person did both. Since he hasn't filed the will with the court, it's not a crime, but if the forged signatures match, he would at least be an embezzler."

"Oh, right. Good thinking. I don't know. I don't think it was the same person. The one on the checks was completely different from Denise's. The one on the checks really wasn't even an attempt to duplicate her signature. The one on the will looked like it was traced. You'd think that if it was the same person doing both, they'd forge both the same way."



"If you're right about that, then it's looking less and less like Karras has any motive. The waterworks in there looked pretty genuine, too."

"We'll see. I don't trust big brother there."

"And I don't trust that Beth person, either," Ellen added. "You're going to check her phone records to see where she was the night Denise died, right?"

"I already called it in," Sanchez said. "I should have the results by this afternoon. We don't need a warrant for that. It's just cell tower information. A simple request does it."

"Keep me informed," Cliff said.

"We will. Give Crystal a hug for me, will you," Sanchez said.

"We will." They shook hands and all left in separate cars.

Cliff had Ellen drive while he called his office. "Maeva, I got your email this morning. That's good work, but you shouldn't be in the office on a Saturday morning."

"And you shouldn't be spending your time hassling with your sister's estate, especially since you haven't seen her in fifteen years. But we all have some things we just have to do. You were attacked and I'm not going to let that go. I'm sorry but I don't know how to get more information on the Grenada company."

"That's why I'm calling. You know where I keep my directories of the Society, don't you." The Society was shorthand for the Society of Former Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"Of course."

"Pull the latest one out. Look for a guy named Al Fournier."

A minute later she replied, "Okay, I found it. Should I call him?"

"No just give me the number."

Cliff copied the number, said goodbye to Maeva, and called Fournier.

"Yeah?" was the answer on the other end.

"Al? Is that you?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"Cliff Knowles. Squad twelve in SF."

"Who? ... Oh, Cliff? Really, 'zat you? Been what, ten years?" Fournier had served with Cliff in the San Francisco Office of the FBI but had left to become a supervisor at FBI headquarters and then the Legat, or Legal Attaché, in the Bahamas Embassy. He retired there and rumor had reached Cliff a few years ago that he was living very comfortably in Nassau with a lovely Afro-Bahamian woman a third his age, bonefishing and drinking rum. He sounded drunk now.

"It's me, all right. Hey, do you still have contacts in Grenada?"

"Grenada? What the hell you want in Grenada? It's a nasty, corrupt little country. Good cricket players, though."

"I need to find out who the real people are behind a company that's registered there but doing business in San Diego. It's called Astoria Property Holdings LLC. It has a dba of APH, Ltd."

"I still do some light P.I. work, but it's expensive. Five hundred a day plus expenses. I only stay at five star hotels and the flights only run twice a week, so you're talking three or four days stay for me to run down there."

"That seems awfully steep. You don't know anyone who's there already?"

"Who's this for? You a P.I. now?"

"I am, but this is for me." Cliff told him the whole story. It took twenty minutes and they were pulling up in front of Tranquil House when Fournier finally had a chance to respond.

"Why'n't you say so to start with? I thought you were charging a client. I don't need to go down there. This one's on the house. I have a guy in Grenada I can call. That corporate registration information is public. You go into the registration office and look in the book. It's just in a big paper log book, not online. A few Yankee dollars to grease the palm of the clerk to save two hours waiting and it's done. When d'ya need it by?"

"The sooner the better."

"The office won't open until Monday. I'll try to get it then, but things don't move so fast down there."

"Did you get the names?"

"Better give 'em to me again."

Cliff did, then hung up. They went inside and took Crystal out for another session of bird-watching. Crystal had her coloring book and crayons and concentrated on getting the colors right. After they'd been out for half an hour or so, Ellen asked her who her favorite cartoon character was, not really expecting an answer.

Crystal looked at Ellen, made her keening noise, and began laboriously turning pages back in the coloring book with her one good hand. She stopped at a page near the beginning. It showed a duck, which Crystal had already colored black, swimming on blue-colored water. It didn't look like any cartoon character Ellen knew, just a generic duck. Crystal looked at Ellen again and made a small noise.

"A duck? You like ducks?"

Crystal didn't say anything in response.

"Donald Duck, is that your favorite?" Cliff asked.

Crystal looked at Cliff and made another small noise resembling a grunt. Then she pulled a black crayon from the bowl and began coloring in the duck's feathers, despite the fact they were already black.

"Black feathers ... Daffy Duck? Is it Daffy Duck?"

Crystal made her keening noise again louder than ever and the crinkle around her eyes told him he'd gotten it right.

"Well whatta ya know. Daffy Duck," Cliff said. "We can communicate with her." He was so excited he wanted to run back in to the main building to tell the staff, but this new awareness of Crystal's ability reminded him about the

prospect of getting her an electric chair. He pulled out the card Kathy had given him and dialed the number.

After three rings, "MobiMed."

"Oh, I assumed you'd be closed on a Saturday. I was going to leave a message."

"I have the shop phone forwarded to my cell. Who's calling?"

"My name is Cliff Knowles. I'm calling about a power chair."

"Are you Denise's husband?"

"No, her brother. So you know her?"

"Of course I know her. She's been working with me on the specs for Crystal's chair for weeks. I'm ready to go as soon as I get the check. You haven't talked to Denise about this?"

"No. Denise passed away last week."

"What?! I was just with her out at Tranquil House two weeks ago. I measured Crystal and everything. What happened?"

"They still aren't sure. It's been ruled a homicide, but that could be an assisted suicide. The police are still investigating. I'm handling the estate. What arrangements had Denise made with you?"

"She ordered a custom chair for Crystal. I quoted her a price and told her I was ready to go. The public guardian wouldn't agree to pay for it but Denise was going to pay from her own pocket. She was going to mail me a check last Monday. I wondered what happened when it didn't come."

"For how much?"

"Eleven five. That was only to build the first version. Crystal's spine is so deformed she can't use a regular chair. I told her it might need modification after we saw how well Crystal was able to use it. That would cost more."

"I'm at Tranquil House now. Nobody told me you'd been here."

"They didn't know. I came with Denise and the staff probably thought I was just a friend. It was just Denise and me in the room with Crystal."

"If I get you a check for eleven five you can start making the chair?"

"That's right."

"How long before it's ready to deliver?"

"Probably two weeks, maybe three. I'm not sure how long to get some of the parts. She has to have a special electronically movable sunshade and a retracting table to draw on, the controls on a custom arm."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm with her now. Okay, I'm going to get you that check as soon as I can."

Cliff relayed the conversation to Ellen.

"The timing seems too close to be coincidental to me," Ellen replied. "The day she's supposed to pay eleven grand she commits suicide? She must have thought she had the money."

"But those checks were already deposited by someone at Astoria."

"Maybe she realized her money had been ripped off and she became despondent, suicidal," Ellen suggested.

"I don't think so. Not from what Lance said, and the woman at work too. She was in a good mood, upbeat right to the end. What if she was expecting to deposit those checks the next day and then send a check to MobiMed? What if she had stored the checks somewhere or left them with someone and that someone else, whoever took them, realized he was about to get caught when Ellen came back for them."

"But why would she do that – store the checks or leave them with someone else? Why not just deposit them immediately?"

Cliff mulled over the question but had no answer. He pulled out his phone and looked at the email from Rubin Cox again, the one with the check images. Up until then he'd only looked carefully at the back of the checks, the side that held the endorsements, with the forged signatures. This time he took a closer look at the front side.

"Look at this. The second check, the one for Crystal's share, is made out to 'Denise Knowles, for the benefit of Crystal Bachman'."

"Yeah, so?"

"Denise wasn't Crystal's conservator, her legal guardian. The office of the Public Guardian was. Maybe she wasn't sure she legally could deposit that one."

"Karras worked in a law firm. Maybe she went to him. You think she might have turned the checks over to him?"

"It makes sense. Tony, even Dmitri ... they could take the checks and tell her they'd look into it to see if she could legally cash them. Then when she asked for the checks they figured no one would know she'd handed them over."

"But why wouldn't she deposit the other one, the one made out to her?"

"I don't know. It wasn't enough by itself for the chair. Maybe she wanted to deposit them together. Maybe Karras or whoever gave her some BS about that one being questionable, too."

"You told me Karras said he didn't even know about Crystal."

"So he said. His surprise seemed genuine, but people lie. Or Denise could have gone directly to Dmitri without even telling Tony. Maybe she was afraid Tony would dump her if he found out about a disabled daughter. Dmitri would have to keep it from Tony. Attorney-client privilege. She didn't tell her friend Beth either."

Ellen scowled. "I still don't trust that woman. I think she was after Tony. Eva was going to check her phone tracking records. She and Tony could be in it together."

It was lunchtime and they had promised to get Crystal back for that so they packed up the coloring materials and took her back to her room. Kathy was there.

"Kathy, thanks again for being at the service," Ellen said.

Kathy nodded and smiled. *"how was your visit with crystal"*

"Great. She had fun coloring the birds. Did you know her favorite cartoon character is Daffy Duck?"

Kathy looked confused. *"looney tunes yes why do u think daffy?"*

"She told us," Cliff said.

Kathy shook her head no. *"shes brighter than people think but she cant talk or write."*

Cliff explained about Crystal coloring the black duck. Kathy turned to Crystal and said, "Kishuh, is it too? Oo ige affy mos?"

Crystal made her keening noise and what Kathy recognized as a smile.

*"well ill be i never knew she could talk not talk but answer questions they have therapists"*

"We'll see that she gets the therapy she needs," Ellen replied. Then to Cliff, "Come on, we need to tell the clinical staff about this."

• • •

Eva Sanchez walked into her apartment with two bags of groceries and set them on the counter. After putting them away she made herself a bologna and cheese sandwich, peeled a banana and popped the top on a diet Coke. She was halfway through her lunch when a text came in from the duty officer on her squad. There was always one homicide detective on standby on weekends. He'd been the one to contact the cell carrier for Beth's phone at Sanchez's request. The results were in. His text notified her to check her email.

She logged into her work account and looked at the email. The attached spreadsheet contained hundreds of lines, mostly numbers but with various abbreviations and occasional words. The dates and time records she could understand. The rest, she knew, were the alphanumeric designations for the cell towers that were primary on the phone search – Beth's phone. Her phone had apparently been on all night that Sunday night that Denise had checked into the hotel. The cell tower identifier didn't change all night long into Monday morning. Sanchez couldn't tell from the identifier where that was; the reference map she'd need was at the office. The cell tower was probably the one nearest Beth's residence. At least she could tell that she wasn't out running around with the phone that night. She was probably home sleeping. She'd check the location Monday morning when she was back at work.

She finished her sandwich and banana and was cleaning up the kitchen when she got the call from Cliff. He explained about the wheelchair order and his theory about the checks being stored or given to someone to hold while she got legal advice.

"You think it's Karras? He's a paralegal," she asked.

"Or his brother. Dmitri's the lawyer. Their father is still in practice, too."

"That's just a theory, though. Tony seemed pretty broken up at the funeral. He says he didn't know anything about Crystal. Is he that good an actor?"

"I don't know. Denise might have gone to his brother. She seemed to want to keep Crystal's existence a secret from Tony and Beth and almost everyone."

"We need to know who that Astoria Property Holdings really is. It has to be someone around here. Birnbaum must take orders from somebody. He has to get authorization for repairs and such, deal with lawsuits or whatever."

"I'm working on it. I should have an answer by Monday." He explained about his conversation with Fournier.

"I may have a faster way. Let me get back to you."

Sanchez called Rob Martin's cell phone. She caught him at bagpipe practice, but he took the call. Such is the life of a homicide detective. She detailed her conversation with Cliff.

"Do you think you can get that receptionist to tell you who the real owner is, the person Birnbaum calls when there's a decision to be made? The rental office should be open on a Saturday."

"I'm in the middle of something here."

"Dancing in your skirt?" Bagpipes could be heard in the background.

"Kilt. And it's marching, not dancing. It's a time-honored tradition."

"You aren't even Scottish. Martin's an English name. Scots and English have been rivals for centuries. You're cavorting with the enemy."

"You're a riot, Eva. Pardon me while I laugh." He blew a sound on his bagpipes that resembled a raspberry.

"Look, Rob, this is homicide work. Every day that passes is critical. This thing is heating up now that we know about the missing checks."

"All right. I'll go over there, but she wouldn't talk before."

"That was about the tenants. Just ask about the owners, that APH Ltd. Cliff said SDB is the registered agent for APH. That means he's authorized to accept legal process for them. They might do that for all their other property owners, too. Find out who they contact when they get served. Landlord-tenant disputes happen all the time, so they must have a regular procedure they follow."

When the call was over Sanchez starting feeling guilty about sending Martin over to the SDB office alone. There was good reason for sending him. She'd gotten up the woman's face, and the woman had obviously had the hots for Rob. He'd do better with her absent. But if he was willing to interrupt his bagpipes practice, she didn't have an excuse for taking the rest of the day off. She decided to go in and check the cell tower location on the map at the office.

When she got into the office it took her almost an hour to find the cell phone tower map she needed. A detective on the gang task force had borrowed it. When she went over to that unit, she got roped into helping translate some Spanish recordings. Finally she broke free with map in hand and retreated to her desk. She pulled up the spreadsheet from the phone company and started matching the cell tower identifiers to the symbols on the area map.

It soon became clear where Beth had spent the night Denise had died. She'd stayed in the city center area. Sanchez went back to the case file to verify

what her memory told her – that Beth lived in El Cajon, near Denise. But the tower location wasn't a surprise to her because she knew it well. The neighborhood was one she'd just researched - it was where Tony Karras lived.

She picked up her phone and dialed Martin. He answered.

"Rob, it's Eva. We have another suspect. Denise's good friend Beth seems to have spent the night at Tony's the night of the murder."

"Hmm. An old story but a favorite. Your boyfriend cheats on you with your best friend. Now we know why he dodged the question about anyone who could confirm his alibi when we interviewed him. You got that from the phone records?"

"Yeah."

"But if they were humping at Tony's place all night, then neither one was in Denise's room."

"Point taken. Her phone was on all night at his place, but his was turned off. He might have gone over to the hotel. If they were getting it on, they might have planned it together. Having her there with her phone on might have been a clever way to establish an alibi."

"Maybe. I notice something else, too."

"What?"

"You called it a murder, not assisted suicide. That's the first time you've done that."

"Yeah, well, I'm coming around to that way of thinking. Where are you now? Over at Birnbaum's?"

"I just came out of there and I have a surprise for you, too." He paused, apparently for dramatic effect.

"So are you going to tell me? Drop the other shoe already."

"You remember how Birnbaum said he couldn't reveal the name of the owner without an okay from his lawyer?"

"Yeah. Don't tell me it's Dmitri Karras."

"No. Guess again."

"Enough with Jeopardy already. Just tell me."

"I just found out his lawyer is Naomi Morgenthal."

There was silence on Sanchez's end while she let that sink in. "The same lawyer The Weenie uses. What do you think that means?"

"I'm not sure. You think Karras and the Gatekeepers are connected?"

"We haven't connected Karras with Birnbaum or the buildings. Just because they're Greek and so is Demetriou doesn't mean they have anything to do with it. Why would they use another lawyer? They got a whole firm full of them."

"Should we let Cliff know?"

"Know what exactly?"

"Everything. About Beth's phone records. About Morgenthal representing the building owner. She must be APH's attorney. He has a

legitimate right to track down those checks. He's still part of the criminal investigation, too."

"Still part of your investigation maybe."

"I'm under orders from the sheriff himself."

"So you tell him."

"I will. I have to."

...

After Cliff got off the phone with Martin he recounted everything to Ellen. "You were right about Beth and Tony. It looks like he was cheating on Denise. I totally missed that at the funeral."

"It makes sense about Morgenthal, too."

"How do you mean?"

"Naomi Morgenthal? That's a Jewish name. Birnbaum's Jewish, too. Is she his lawyer, or the lawyer for the building owners, the APH people?"

"I'm not sure, but now that I think about it, Astoria has a big Jewish community, too. And Tohini's real name is Shapiro. You don't get more Jewish than that."

"You think Shapiro is APH?"

"He had the rest of Denise's property. Maybe that's why he was so quick to give up the TV, car, and the eight hundred bucks. He wanted to placate me while keeping the checks."

"That could explain the timing of the check cashing, too."

"How so?"

"Think about it. She's a forty-year-old alcoholic divorcee engaged to Tony, this younger man, who's decent looking, has a good job. When she got the checks, she was worried about whether she could deposit Crystal's check since she wasn't the legal guardian. She couldn't go to Tony or his brother because she didn't want him to know about Crystal. He might break it off. She might think he wouldn't want a woman with a mentally disabled daughter on top of that other baggage. What if he wanted kids? Would he want a wife who produced defective children? Maybe she was afraid he'd think he'd become financially responsible for Crystal, or that he'd take second place in her life. So who would she go to for legal advice?"

"She could have come to me."

"Really? Count to ten and then say that with a straight face."

"Okay, okay, maybe not. So you're saying she went to Morgenthal?"

"Why not? She could have asked around the Gatekeepers, or even asked Shapiro himself."

"Okay, I'll bite. But how does that explain the timing of the check being deposited by APH?"

"She goes to Morgenthal and explains the situation about the public guardian for Crystal. She shows her the two checks. Morgenthal tells her that



cashing Crystal's is questionable. Maybe she gives Denise some baloney about the other check, too, tells her she better keep them while she researches the law."

"Then Morgenthal deposits them. I see. Maybe they were in her trust account. No, that doesn't work. APH is a real estate company. Her trust account would have to be in her own name."

"Right. She either is APH or has access to their account. She just flat out stole the checks. Then later Denise comes to her and wants to get that wheelchair and asks for her own share of the money at least. Morgenthal stalls her, or tries to, but Denise presses her for it. She needed to pay the wheelchair guy on Monday."

"So Morgenthal had to come up with the money on Monday but when she sees an opportunity to get rid of the pesky client on Sunday night, she takes it. It fits. But that's a lot of speculation. Besides, who clonked me and how did Morgenthal learn about Denise's plan for the dry run?"

"Yeah, there are some holes to fill."

Cliff took out his phone and called Maeva's cell phone. She didn't answer so he left a message asking her to find out everything she could about Morgenthal and Shapiro. He gave her Beth's name, too, but told her that was a lower priority.

"It's almost five," Ellen said when he was off the phone. "There's an event cache starting not far from here. Let's check it out."

"I could use the distraction, I guess. Where is it?"

"A pizza parlor. They have a room reserved upstairs. It's about three miles from here."

"It's a little early for dinner, but it's never too early for pizza."

"I thought that would get you interested."

"I'll look it up on my phone, too. What's the name of the event?"

"'I Never Sausage a Cache'."

"Cute. Let's go."

They spent the next few hours socializing with other geocachers. That was one of the things that drew both Ellen and Cliff to the hobby – the total openness and friendliness of fellow geocachers. There were games and prizes. No one recognized Cliff or associated him with the famous CliffNotes (his geocaching name) who had solved the Geocache Murders case. At most geocaching events that albatross was hung around his neck, but here he was unknown. To them he was just another out-of-town geocacher come to join the fun. The anonymity was as delicious as the pizza and beer.

## Chapter 17

Sunday morning Cliff and Ellen slept in. Certain family planning activities had kept them up late. They ambled downstairs to the free breakfast buffet and stuffed themselves while they watched the late morning news on the various screens.

"What are you planning to do next?" Ellen asked. "About the estate, I mean?"

"I want to see if I can get some information from that bank where the checks were deposited. Zion something. That sounds Jewish, too. They cashed a stolen, forged check. They can be liable, so I have some leverage. It's probably not open on a Sunday, though."

"You're still a deputy, right?"

"Yep. I have the badge, anyway."

"Why don't you take me over to the S.O. I'd like to read those files myself. I have my creds. It shouldn't be a problem."

"Really? You want to spend a child-free holiday reading police files? The weather's good and the beaches are beautiful here."

"Cliff, we had our fun last night. I can see this whole thing is eating you up. I want to get it resolved, and that means making use of our time down here. We have nice beaches where we live, too. I can do that any time."

An hour later Cliff and Ellen walked into the Sheriff's Office. Cliff showed his badge and had Ellen sign in as a visiting FBI agent. He took her to the homicide area and directed her to Rob Martin's desk. Denise's case file, consisting of two volumes, was positioned neatly, squared with the edge of the desk and organized chronologically. Cliff had read through them before, but he'd skimmed here and there. This time he gave Ellen the first volume and picked up the second one, then began to read every word in volume two. Two hours later they switched volumes and repeated the process.

"We should go back to the apartment building," Ellen declared matter-of-factly. "Whoever hit you is there. That's the key to this thing. Whoever it was is the person who's worried about you figuring out about the ladder. If your theory is right, that's who went across to the hotel and entered Denise's room. If she was murdered, the killer is there."

Cliff thought about this. It made sense. "All right. We have a better chance of catching people in on a Sunday. We need to be careful if we're potentially going to confront a murderer, though. Are you armed?"

"Does Maru like boxes? Don't worry, Mommie will protect you."

Cliff snorted. "Fine. Mock and load all you want. I'm going to let Rob know. I'm supposed to do that anyway."

"Whatever."

Cliff called Rob Martin on his cell. After he explained their plan to go to the apartment building Martin said he'd join them. He'd just been sitting around

watching a boring game anyway. Forty minutes later Cliff and Ellen were waiting in front of the Metro Arms building when Martin finally showed up.

"You planning on going pheasant hunting when we're done?" Cliff said to him as he eyed the belted wool sport coat Martin wore over a neatly pressed Oxford cotton shirt.

"Very good. It's about time someone knew what a Norfolk jacket was for. The straps are reinforcement because of the shotgun shells in the pockets. No flaps on the pockets, either, to make reloading fast. I think it's quite spiffy, actually."

"Spiffy indeed, old chap," Cliff replied in his best English accent.

"Enough, you two," Ellen said. "Let's go in."

They buzzed the manager. There was no answer. Martin began buzzing other apartments until someone let them in. They walked directly to Demetriou's door and began pounding but there was no answer there either.

"Come on," he said. "He must be out. Let's go up to the top floor. Eva and I were going to talk to that guy in 3-H but we haven't gotten around to it. He barbecues on the roof sometimes. He might know who else goes up on the roof, who knows the door code."

"Max Ruiz," Ellen said.

Martin looked at her quizzically, then over at Cliff.

"I just read all your reports," she explained.

"Yeah, okay. That's the guy."

Ellen nodded. "You two go ahead. I'm going to knock on some more doors. It'll go faster if we split up." She stepped over to the next apartment and knocked.

Martin and Cliff took the elevator to the third floor and knocked on the door of 3-H. After a few seconds and another knock, the door opened. An unshaven Hispanic male about age thirty stood in shorts and a T-shirt. He was short but muscular, with the rough hands of a construction worker.

"Mr. Ruiz," Martin said, "I'm detective Martin from the Sheriff's Office. This is Deputy Knowles. May we come in?"

Ruiz stood there mute looking back and forth at the pair. Cliff stepped forward, pushing the door open farther. "Thank you," he said, as Ruiz stumbled backward. Martin followed.

Before either of the detectives could ask any questions, Ruiz said, "Are you here about the ladder? I didn't steal it. I just borrowed it. I swear. I returned it already."

Cliff and Rob exchanged glances.

"You're the drone guy. Me and Rae saw you with the drone a while back. You were right across the street. She told me you were flying it right over the ladder and taking pictures of it."

"I was taking crime scene photos," Cliff said. "How did she know what I was taking pictures of? She wasn't on the roof."

"She peeked out the door and saw the drone, like, right there over the ladder."

"Hold on, let's back up," Martin said. "Let's get some basic first. You're Max Ruiz, is that right?"

"Yeah, Maximiliano."

"And Rae, is that your girlfriend?"

"Yeah."

"What's her full name?"

"Rachel. Rachel Schwartz."

Cliff and Rob exchanged another glance. "Rachel Schwartz. Does she also use the name Uli'uli?"

"Only at work. Her boss calls her that. He's this guru guy. He likes all those mumbo jumbo names."

"Is she here?"

"No, she's at the gym."

"So you put the ladder on the roof? When did you do that?"

"I don't know. Maybe two, three months ago. Really, I was going to take it back. My boss has ladders up the wazoo. He didn't miss it. If he needed it I'd'a returned it. I mean, I did return it. A few days ago."

"Why'd you put it up there?"

"Rae asked me to. She said her boss asked her if I could get a ladder."

"Why did her boss want a ladder on your roof?"

"Some kind of religious exercise, I think. Something about trust building. I don't know. I never watched."

"Watched?"

"Yeah, watched. I think they went up there together – Moishe and Rae and somebody. Maybe two held the ladder and the third one climbed up. I'm not sure."

"Climbed up? Onto what? There's nothing up there higher than the roof. It's an extension ladder, not a stepladder. Did they lean it on a cloud or what?"

"I told you I don't know. It never made any sense to me. Some weird thing about getting close to heaven or like that."

"Who was the other person?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there. I don't even know if there was another person. There coulda been a dozen of 'em so far as I know."

"What about the boards?"

"What boards?"

"There were boards with the ladder. Did you get those?"

"No. Someone else must've put those there. They weren't no boards there when I put the ladder there."

Cliff broke in. "Tell us about what happened after you saw me flying the drone up there. How did Rae get to see the drone? That door has a keypad lock."

"She knows the code. Her boss gave it to her. She opened the door and saw the drone hovering right over the ladder."

"Then what?"

"She came down and told me what it was doing. She asked me if my boss had reported the ladder as stolen. I said no and that was the end of it."

"The ladder's gone. You said you returned it."

"Yeah. A day or two later Rae said I should get that ladder back, just in case."

Cliff stepped in closer and leaned into Ruiz's personal space, about to confront him. Martin put a hand on Cliff's shoulder and pulled him back gently. "Let me handle this, Cliff. Please." Then to Ruiz, "How did Shapiro get the roof code?"

"Who's Shapiro?"

"Moishe Shapiro, Rae's boss."

"Oh, I didn't know his last name. I just knew them as Moishe and Naomi."

"Them? Moishe's girlfriend is Naomi Morgenthal? The lawyer?"

"I don't know her last name, but yeah, she's a lawyer. I don't think she's his girlfriend. What's going on? What's the big deal over a ladder?"

"Two weeks ago. Sunday night. Where were you?"

"Huh? I don't know. I can't remember."

"That was the night the woman died in the hotel next door. Where were you?"

"A woman died? I never heard about it."

"You don't watch the news? Or read a newspaper?"

"No. Just the sports. Regular TV shows."

Martin thought about it for a minute. "That was the night of the Country Music Awards show. You watch that?"

"Yeah, I did. Oh, that night. Me and Rae, we watched it together."

"Either one of you go out that night?"

"No. The show ran late. We went to bed after that. I had to get up early for my job the next day."

"What time did you go to bed?"

"Maybe eleven thirty. Why? Is this about a dead woman?"

"Are you a sound sleeper?"

"What? What the hell kind of question is that?"

"Are you a sound sleeper? Could Rae have gotten out of bed without you knowing it?"

"Hey, so are you saying she killed some woman? No way. She was with me all night."

"We're not saying she killed anybody. It might have been a suicide. Someone from that Gatekeepers cult might have helped."

"Not Rae. She didn't even believe that shit. It was just a job to her. She'd never do that. That was Moishe's thing."

"Did she call anyone that night, or get any calls?"

"I don't know. She always has her phone. She texts her friends. Like that."

Cliff lost patience and broke in again. "Look. Someone hit me hard when I was up on the roof last week, then locked the door so I couldn't get down. Was that you?"

"No."

"Did you ever stretch that ladder over to the hotel next door? Did Rae?"

"What? That's crazy. You think someone put it across to get to the hotel? That's stupid. You could just walk next door. Rae's afraid of heights. She can't even stand to get near the edge of the roof. When we barbecue up there I tease her sometimes by grabbing her and pretending like I'm going to drop her over. She screams and gets mad at me."

"What about you? You're not afraid of heights?"

"No. I work building roofs all the time. But I never put the ladder over to the next building. That doesn't make sense. If I wanted to go over to that roof, I'd put some beams and planks, not that ladder. It's not even flat. The two sections overlap in the middle."

"There were boards, too. Just the right length to reach over between the buildings."

"That wouldn't be stable. The boards still wouldn't lie flat over the overlap section. You'd have to be a monkey to make it across. I don't know if it would even hold my weight."

Ruiz's phone chimed. He pulled it from his pocket and looked at a text message.

"That can wait," Cliff said, but Ruiz ignored him. He started texting a reply.

After his thumb hit the Send button he looked up at Cliff. "That was Rae. I just texted her not to come home. You guys are trying to pin something on her. She didn't do whatever it is. Now I don't want to talk to you no more. Just get out."

"I think we're done here, anyway," Martin said. "One last thing. If it wasn't you or Rae, who else has the roof code? Anyone in the building?"

"I don't know, man. Just leave, okay?"

Martin looked at Cliff who nodded. They left. When they got to the elevator, Ellen was just arriving on the floor. She stepped out of the elevator, surprised to see them right there.

"You get anything?" Cliff asked.

"No. Mostly no one answered their doors. The ones who did didn't know anything. How about you?"

Cliff summarized the conversation they'd just had with Ruiz. Ellen's lips tightened in a grim expression as the story unfolded. "Do you believe him?" was her only question.

"Hard to say," Martin replied. "I think Ruiz is probably telling the truth about his own involvement. He looked scared when he thought we were there

about a stolen ladder. He relaxed when he found out we weren't concerned about that. If he'd been involved in a murder he would have gotten more paranoid, not less, and he wouldn't have copped to putting the ladder up there in the first place. I'm sure he's the one who put it up there. But I think he could be lying about Rachel. Even if he's telling the truth about her, she might be concealing the real story from him. Rachel looked pretty fit to me when we interviewed the weenie. I mean, she's at the gym now. She could have gotten up after Ruiz fell asleep and gone across to the hotel that night without him knowing a thing. And she lied to us back at the church when she said she lived with her parents. She didn't want us to know she was here the night Denise was killed."

"I buy that," Cliff replied. "So what do we do now?"

"Let's finish knocking on doors," Ellen suggested. "I haven't done this floor yet." The others nodded. They split up and began knocking on the third floor doors. Twenty minutes later they met back at the elevator with no further useful information.

Cliff's phone chimed. It was a text from Maeva asking him to call. He showed the phone to Ellen and Rob and suggested they go downstairs again. He didn't want to be talking out loud in the hallway where Ruiz or other residents might overhear. When they stepped outside Cliff placed the call.

"Cliff, I've been researching Birnbaum. He's been named in several lawsuits."

"What kind?"

"All landlord-tenant stuff or real estate related. Several evictions where he was the plaintiff. A couple of times he was sued or his company SDB was. Different buildings, different owners. Morgenthal was his attorney in a couple of them, but not all of them."

"That sounds pretty routine. Nothing criminal?"

"No criminal record. His credit is good. Went to college at San Diego State according to his resume."

"So he's local? No connection to New York?"

"Not that I've found. He was in the county honor band in high school there in San Diego. Clarinet."

"Anything else?"

"Not really. Plain vanilla on him. But I found something else interesting. That hotel, the Paradiso, it's owned by the same company as the apartment building, APH Ltd."

"I guess we should have expected that. Whoever walked across on the roofs had to have inside knowledge of both buildings."

"Shapiro has a record, though. It looks like him but I can't be one hundred percent sure. A fraud count in Indiana that was reduced to petty theft. No jail time. No details available. Several drunk driving arrests, one of which resulted in a conviction. His driver's license was suspended in Texas. It looks like he was from New York originally, but I can't pin that down."

"Okay. What about Morgenthal?"

"I haven't had time to work on her yet. I'm sorry but that's going to have to wait until tomorrow. I'm going cross-eyed from all this online work. Pete's taking me to the game this afternoon and then dinner. It's our anniversary."

Pete was detective Pete Hanssen of the Los Altos Police Department, Cliff knew, Maeva's boyfriend. "No worries. You go enjoy yourself. Say hi to Pete for me. I never expected you to work through the weekend, you know."

"I know. I wanted to."

"Thanks for your work. I'll see you Monday."

"Okay. Bye."

Cliff relayed the new information to Ellen and Rob. Martin suggested they try the manager at the hotel again, since they were right next door and the other two agreed. They walked into the lobby there and approached the desk clerk. After a quick round of questioning, it became clear he was nothing more than hired help and had no idea who the owners were. Any major issues were referred to the manager, the woman who had been interviewed by Sanchez the first day. She didn't work Sundays and wasn't available.

"Rachel has to be our first priority," Martin said when they were back out on the sidewalk. "She'll probably avoid her apartment now that Ruiz has warned her, but I can put out a BOLO on her car. She can't keep dodging us."

"I'll leave that to you," Cliff said. "I want to see Crystal one more time before going back."

"Me too," Ellen agreed.

"Okay, I'll put out the BOLO and head home. If patrol spots the car, they'll call me. Should I call you?"

"No, we only have a couple of hours before we head to the airport."

"So will I see you guys again?"

"Not today," Cliff said. "Ellen has to go to work on Monday. So do I for that matter. I still have the property and estate matters to finish up. I'm not sure when I'm going to get back for that."

"So what should I tell Haines? I can turn in the badge for you."

"No, let me hang onto it. As long as I'm a deputy it's better for you. I'm still turning up evidence. You're probably going to need a warrant eventually. It's better for probable cause if my info is written up as discovered by a deputy instead of an interested party. You don't know what this estate case is going to turn up, either. Karras could have been lying about the insurance."

"Okay. I'll let him know. Have a good flight."

"Thanks."

• • •

At Tranquil House Cliff and Ellen were surprised to find the male attendant Cliff had met on his first visit talking to a couple in the lobby, a couple he recognized: Tony Karras and Beth Dunn. The attendant was explaining to them that they couldn't see Crystal because they weren't relatives.



“What are you doing here?” Cliff demanded when he got close enough.

“We wanted to see her and give her some things,” Karras replied.

“What things?”

“Denise’s clothes and makeup. She had most of her stuff at my place. I thought it should go to her daughter. Even if she’s handicapped, I figured she still probably wants to look pretty. She’s a teenager. And besides, I just felt I should see her. I mean, I almost became her stepfather.” Beth held up a large tote bag for Cliff to see.

Cliff’s flint-hard expression softened. Crystal was half Denise’s size, if that, and would never look pretty, but Karras seemed to mean well. “She’s not going to be able to use those things, but thank you. I tell you what. Why don’t you walk with us while we take her out to see the birds. That’s her favorite activity.” Cliff looked at the attendant to see if that was acceptable. He nodded and left to fetch Crystal.

When he returned wheeling Crystal’s twisted, shriveled body bedecked in her sun hat and hospital robe, Beth gasped and whispered “Omigod!” Cliff, Ellen, and the attendant all scowled at her.

Karras grabbed Beth’s arm and muttered, “Uh, I didn’t realize she ... I thought maybe she was just low IQ or something.” Beth covered her face with her hands and huddled close to Karras, whether embarrassed at her own reaction or unable to look at Crystal, Cliff couldn’t tell.

Cliff gritted his teeth at Beth’s unseemly display and searched Crystal’s face for any sign of distress. The attendant stepped between Crystal and the visitors. “I don’t think she’s ready for so many visitors at once,” he said. “Just the aunt and uncle this time.”

“Yeah, yeah. I can see that,” Karras said. “I’m sorry. I, ... we ... we should go.” He took the tote bag from Beth’s hand and held it out to Cliff.

“Keep it,” Cliff said. “Donate it to charity or give it to Denise’s friends. If you sell anything of hers, send me a check and I’ll deposit it in my trust account.”

“Right, okay, then,” Karras mumbled and tugged Beth toward the door.

Cliff and Ellen took the wheelchair and began the journey out to the bird feeder. Fortunately, Crystal seemed oblivious to the little drama that had played out in the lobby. Ellen gave Crystal’s hand a gentle squeeze as they walked and was rewarded with the keening sound of pleasure.

“She likes you,” Cliff announced.

They arrived at the feeder and watched as Crystal began coloring again. An hour passed peacefully as they spent time with their niece doing nothing much at all. Ellen remarked to Cliff that they were so lucky but didn’t spell out what Cliff already understood, that they had a bright, healthy child who wouldn’t have to live out his life in an institution like this one.

“We need to get going to the airport,” Ellen said, looking at her watch.

“I’ll drive you. I’m going to stay another day. I feel like we’re right on the verge of breaking this thing wide open. I should get the info on that Grenada

company tomorrow. The police should catch up with Rachel Schwartz soon enough.”

“I’ve taken enough time off work already with my parents,” Ellen replied. “I want to get back to Tommy, too.”

“So do I. Just one more day. I can’t leave this like it is.”

“If you’re sure that’s what you want.”

They wheeled Crystal back and returned to the hotel. After Ellen packed her things, Cliff drove her to the airport. He spent the rest of the day on his laptop catching up on his work and preparing the paperwork for Denise’s probate.

## Chapter 18

Monday morning Cliff went through his normal routine. After showering, shaving, and wolfing down another motel buffet breakfast he returned to his room a few minutes before eight. No sooner had he entered than his phone rang. It wasn't Maeva's or Ellen ringtone, so he examined the number before answering. It was Al Fournier, so he answered.

"Hello, Al."

"Cliff, I got your answer."

"That was fast."

"Yeah, but Grenada's four hours ahead of you, so not all that fast. It's after lunch there already."

"Good to know. The names would be better."

"Don't be a wise ass. They're all the same name."

"It's a one-person company?"

"No, one family. Only one last name."

"Shapiro?"

"No. Who's Shapiro?"

"Never mind; just tell me already."

"Morgenthal. President: Naomi Morgenthal. Vice President: Ruth Morgenthal. Treasurer: Abraham Morgenthal. The only address is that same P.O. Box you gave me in Astoria, Queens, New York."

"No kidding. So it was the lawyer."

"You know them?"

"Naomi is the lawyer for the cult I told you about, and for the building manager. I didn't know she was the owner of the building, too. It looks like my wife was right. Denise must have gone to her for advice about the checks and she embezzled them."

"You think she killed your sister?"

"No. Denise was big and strong, over one fifty. Morgenthal is maybe one-ten tops, a middle-aged lawyer. I think whoever clonked me is the one who got to Denise. But she's the one who got the money. Shapiro, the cult leader, probably got someone to do it. He was out of town, but he's got a legion of devoted followers. Maybe his assistant Rachel. That's who the police are going after."

"Okay. You need anything else?"

"Yeah, Al, can you get me some kind of document on this? A certificate from the Grenada authorities, or an affidavit from your contact there or something admissible in court. I might have to sue Shapiro or Morgenthal on behalf of the estate."

"My guy already got a certified copy. I'm sending you a digital copy now. You'll get a paper copy in the mail eventually. Mail service is slow. It may take a couple of weeks."

"No problem. Thanks. I really appreciate everything. Let me cover your expenses at least."

"Nah. Don't worry about it. Now you owe me. Someday I'll need a lead covered out there and I'll charge someone a ton for something you can find out in ten minutes."

"It's a deal."

They hung up. Cliff switched to email and Al's email was already there. He forwarded it to Maeva, who would be starting her work day at the office any minute. He knew she was planning to research Naomi today so he added a note. He asked her to add Abraham and Ruth to that list.

He decided he was going to have to confront Morgenthal about the checks, but he knew he'd have to tread carefully. He called Rob Martin's number, but it went straight to voice mail. He told Rob what Fournier had told him and then forwarded that same email to him. He wasn't sure when Martin would get in touch with Eva Sanchez, so he opted to cover that base, too. He called her, but that also went straight to voice mail.

He knew this information was enough probable cause to get a search warrant for the bank records, and to get a judicial order freezing the account, but that wasn't something he could do by himself despite his technical status as a deputy. Sanchez or Martin would have to do that. Still, most banks will cooperate before you present them with legal process. You never knew when Morgenthal might withdraw that money, assuming it was still in the account. Better to touch base there as soon as possible, and definitely before he confronted her.

Cliff put on a coat and tie, looked up the address of First Zion Bank of California, and headed over there. The bank opened at nine and Cliff had to wait a few minutes, but he was let in as the first customer of the day. He displayed his sheriff's badge and asked to speak to the branch manager.

At first the manager refused to tell him anything about the APH account, but when Cliff explained that the two checks deposited by Morgenthal had forged signatures, and that the bank could be liable for accepting them, the manager became more cooperative. After some hemming and hawing, and a rather lengthy phone conversation with the bank's lawyer in a separate room, the manager returned to tell Cliff that the APH account no longer had the funds in it, only a small balance, but the bank would freeze the account for twenty-four hours to give the police time to get a warrant for the records.

Cliff left the bank feeling good. The case was coming together. He knew where the money went and how to get it back. Crystal was going to get her wheelchair. He called Martin again and the call still went to voice mail. There had been no return calls or texts, either, which he found irritating. Martin had been pretty responsive up until now.

He had no way of knowing when Morgenthal would find out her APH account was frozen. He decided not to wait. It was time to move. He texted Martin that he was headed over to confront Morgenthal about the checks at her office and asked him to meet him there in the parking lot.

He drove over to Morgenthal's office. He waited in the lot for fifteen minutes before deciding Martin just wasn't coming. When he walked into the lobby, the receptionist's desk was still unmanned. He walked over to her office door, which was open, and strode in. She was at her desk talking on the phone. She cupped her hand over the receiver.

"I'm busy, Mr. Knowles. You'll have to make an appointment. Please leave."

Cliff stood there unmoving. A voice could be heard through the phone on the other end, but Cliff couldn't tell what it was saying. The lawyer glared at him for ten or twelve seconds, apparently expecting him to leave, but it quickly became clear he wasn't going to.

She spoke into the phone. "I'm going to have to call you back. Someone's in my office. This should only take a few minutes." Then to Cliff, "I said please leave. You can't just waltz in ..."

"Shut up and listen. I know you embezzled those checks from Denise. She came to you with a question about whether she could deposit them since she wasn't Crystal's legal guardian. You deposited them in your APH account instead of your trust account."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Get out now or I'll call the police."

"I've already called the police. They'll be here soon. They have some questions about that ladder you had Rachel get from her boyfriend. The one up on the roof of your apartment building. You're APH. I just got the records from Grenada."

Cliff could see the gears turning behind the cold, dark eyes. "Rachel is a lying slut. She does whatever Tohini says. If she or her boyfriend put a ladder up there, so what? What does a ladder have to do with anything? Since when are religious ceremonies on rooftops illegal? It's my building. I gave them permission."

"Look, that's police business. I'm just here to get my money – Crystal's money. You embezzled your client's funds. If I were to report this to the bar association, you'd be disbarred and then there's criminal charges for forgery and fraud. Just return the money and I'll forgo any complaints to the bar or the police."

"You have no evidence of any of this."

"I do, actually. The law firm that issued the checks has the originals. They'll have your fingerprints all over them. And you deposited the funds in an account that you control."

"If you think I stole something, sue me. It'd cost you, or the estate, at least thirty grand to litigate. That's more than the checks were. I don't think so."

"More than the checks were.' So you admit you got the checks."

"I'm not admitting anything. Now get out."

"It's less than twenty-five grand. That's limited jurisdiction. I could do that standing on my head and you'd be the one needing to hire a lawyer since

you'd be disbarred or suspended. Just pay me the twenty-four five and this can all go away."

Cliff's phone rang. The display showed it was Rob Martin. "That's the police calling me now. What should I tell them?"

Morgenthal's eyes burned like coals for two more rings as she said nothing. Cliff knew his bluff was being called, although it was no bluff. He pushed the button to answer the call.

"Yeah, Rob, you got my messages?"

"Yes. Are you at her office now?"

"I am."

"Don't go inside. Rachel was picked up by patrol this morning. Eva and I have been questioning her for the last two hours. That's why we couldn't return your calls. She broke and coughed up the whole story. She's under arrest now. I'll tell you the rest later. Just come back to the P.D."

"Got it. I'll be there soon." They hung up. So Rachel was the murderer, just as Rob thought.

"It seems I'm needed back at the police station. Rachel is talking. She's under arrest. This is your last chance to make this right."

His phone sounded again. This time it was a text from Maeva. "Morgenthal was gymnast. On Israeli team. Call me. 911."

He looked up at Naomi for a second then his eyes landed on the brass paperweight. Suddenly he realized what it was. It was a replica of a balance beam. He leaned over to see it better. He couldn't read the upside down inscription on the base, but he could recognize the symbols etched in the metal: the five Olympic rings and a star of David between two horizontal stripes – the Israeli flag. She was a gymnast, a world-class gymnast, someone quite capable of walking across an alley on a rickety ladder three floors up and probably strong enough to move the ladder into position despite her small size.

He lifted his eyes from the paperweight and realized that she was following his gaze. He also realized that she now knew that he had put it together. There was no turning back. If he left now, she'd flee. He pulled his jacket aside to show the badge.

"Naomi Morgenthal, you're under arrest for the murder of Denise Knowles," Cliff declared in the commanding arrest voice he'd used dozens of times in the FBI. "Stand up and let me see your hands."

She stood. "You want to see my hands. Here they are." Morgenthal raised her right hand from below the desk. In it was a Keltec P-32 directed right at Cliff's belly. "Now back up."

He obeyed. She backed up as well. She was now well beyond his lunging range. The .32 caliber weapon was a pocket pistol, a girl's gun, but it could still kill. He knew in that moment how stupid he'd been to assume that his dominating size advantage was enough. He should have left when Martin told him to but now he had to focus on what to do next, not the mistake he had made.

"The police are going to be here any moment. Just put that away. You don't want to be caught pointing ..."

"I don't want to be caught period. The police aren't coming. You told them you were on your way there."

"Look, you're right. We don't have any evidence. Not enough to convict you of murder. It was an assisted suicide. That's not a real murder. Not something a jury would convict on. You might get hit for embezzlement, that's all. A white collar crime, first offense. You might not even get jail time. Put the gun away."

"That's not going to work. I'm sorry about your sister. It wasn't personal. I didn't mean to kill her when I went over. I thought it was a suicide. I just had to make sure. I'd already spent the money on my dad's cancer treatments. I've mortgaged the real estate to the hilt. It was her or my dad. Then I saw she wasn't dead. In fact she was starting to wake up. She put up quite a fight for a few seconds there. I figured I'd help her 'ascend' like she wanted, and I'd be in the clear with the checks, too. A win-win."

"It wasn't a real suicide. She was faking it to show Lance what a crock that whole Gatekeepers ascension is. She didn't take a full dose."

"Oops. A win-lose then." A wry smile twisted her lips.

"So did Shapiro help you set up the murder?"

"Moishe? No, he believes that shit. He helped, but only to pick up the property afterward. All that stuff about donating to the church. That was real. At least for him it was real. He knew it looked bad, like he was stealing from the dead, but he really thought Lakshmi, he called her that, Lakshmi was going to ascend to heaven or a higher plane or whatever, and wanted all her worldly goods to go to the church. He knew he couldn't have any of his people hang out with her or be there at the end. I had the idea of the ladder because I knew Uli's boyfriend worked in construction and I knew the cameras didn't go on the third floor of the hotel. I agreed to walk across to the hotel and pick up her car keys and purse so Moishe could collect those things but I really just wanted to verify she was deceased so I knew I was safe with the checks. She'd told me no one else knew about them."

"Naomi, there's no place in the world you can run to. The FBI will get you wherever you go. It looks worse if you flee. You can still beat the murder rap."

"Actually, there is somewhere. Somewhere that'll never extradite me. They love me there. I almost medaled." She looked down at the paperweight for an instant. I'm done here. I'll be disbarred, bankrupt, and facing a murder charge. It's time to move on. Look, I know what you're trying to do. Stalling for time. Sorry, but this isn't some corny TV cop show where the bad guy tells the whole story to the cop and leaves him alive. I need time to escape. You should have taken that two-by-four to the head the other day as a warning and left me alone."

She pulled the trigger twice. The sounds echoed around the room as the smell of cordite permeated the air. The first round was aimed directly at Cliff's

midsection. The second one went higher due to the recoil from the first. He fell forward, his head almost under the desk. He groaned in pain for a few seconds and then went silent. Morgenthal grabbed a few essentials from the desk and came around the desk, being careful to give Cliff's body a wide berth. He lay face down, unmoving. She still held the pistol in her right hand. She could see blood seeping from under his torso into the carpet. He looked dead enough, but as with his sister, she wanted to make sure. She stood directly behind him, backed up to be sure he couldn't kick her if he was faking it, took careful aim, and pulled the trigger once more, placing the shot in the back of his head. A crimson rose blossomed in the thick black hair. Blood splattered onto the front of her desk along with hair and fleshy matter. A red rivulet streamed onto the carpet by his neck. So much for the security deposit. Then she walked out, locking the door behind her.



## Chapter 19

Eva Sanchez went through the booking process with Rachel Schwartz. For now it would have to be for possession of stolen property (the ladder), conspiracy, and accessory to murder. Until they ran the facts by the D.A. they couldn't be sure what would stick. Schwartz had sworn she didn't know Naomi was planning to kill Denise, only that she was crossing over to the hotel to get the car keys and apartment keys. Lakshmi, as Denise was known to her, had told Tohini she was going to ascend. The plan was simply to enter the hotel room after the suicide and get her keys and other property for the church. It wasn't even stealing, she thought, since Lakshmi had told everyone she had no family. The church needed money. Donations were running low. This was just a quick way to avoid all that probate and court stuff. Tohini had told her he might have to let her go, so she had agreed to get the ladder, but there was no way she would try to cross over the alley. She was terrified of heights. No problem, Tohini had told her, Naomi would take care of that. Rachel didn't even get any of the property and swore she didn't know about any forged checks. Lance knew nothing about the plan to get the property, either, she said.

It had been a long interview. Rob Martin sat writing up his report while Eva took Schwartz through the booking. After half an hour of typing he realized Cliff still hadn't arrived. He texted Cliff again asking for an ETA. He got no response. The interview itself had been recorded, so he decided his summary was sufficient for now. He wanted to call the D.A.'s office immediately, but he knew that the Denise Knowles case was really Eva's case. Nothing Rachel had told them made the earlier Gatekeepers cases into homicides. To the contrary, her statement supported the conclusions that they had been suicides. It looked like Morgenthal had taken it upon herself to finish Denise Knowles off in order to conceal the embezzlement. Eva would have to work with the D.A. on the affidavit for her arrest.

With Rachel safely deposited in the county jail, Sanchez returned to her desk at the police department. "Where's Knowles?" She asked Martin. "You told me you called him."

"I was wondering the same thing. He said he was coming right over."

"I just listened to my voice mail messages. He said he was going over to Morgenthal's and you were going to meet him."

"Yeah, you and I were in the interview then. When we finished I called him and told him not to go in, just to come back here."

"How long was that after he called?"

Martin did some mental math. "Maybe twenty, thirty minutes."

"That's more than enough time for him to get there. And he didn't go in by himself?"

"I assume he was waiting for me in the parking lot. That's where he said to meet him. I told him not to go in."

"You assume? Did you tell him Morgenthal was the killer?"

"Well, no, not exactly. I just said Rachel was talking and to come here."

"Did he say he was outside waiting?"

"No. I guess he could already have been inside. Look, are you worried about him? He's a two-hundred-pound ex-FBI agent. I think he can take care of himself with a dwarf like Morgenthal. He probably just stopped somewhere or is on his way and can't reply while driving."

"He was unarmed and she's a murderer. I'm going to have patrol check the lot. Do you know what kind of car he was driving?"

"It was a rental, that's all I know. We took my car when we went together."

Sanchez dialed Cliff's number one more time. It went to voice mail again. She then called dispatch and asked them to send a patrol unit to the law office to do a welfare check.

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Morgenthal looked over the departure board. There were no non-stop flights from San Diego to Israel. The important thing was to get out of the U.S. as quickly as possible. There was a flight leaving in forty minutes to Mexico City. She could get a flight to Israel from there. She headed to that ticket counter.

She wasn't sure how much time she had. She was pretty sure the police would come looking for Knowles at her place but not right away. She'd run by her apartment and picked up a travel bag with some essential items, including her Israeli passport. It had the advantage of having been issued under her married name, Allen. She'd retaken her maiden name after the divorce.

At the ticket counter the clerk told her that only first-class seats were available. She agreed to the outrageous price. Her credit card was still good, at least for now. Then the clerk asked for her passport. She handed it over. The clerk flipped through it.

"Where's your visa? Mexico City is inland. You need a visa to go there."

"I thought you didn't need a visa. I've driven into Tijuana without one."

"The rule is twelve miles inland with no visa. Unless you're transiting."

"I am transiting. I'm returning to Israel."

"May I see your boarding pass for the connecting flight?"

"I haven't booked it yet. I thought I'd do that in Mexico City."

"I can't sell you a ticket without a visa unless you have a ticket to exit the country within twenty-four hours. I can book that for you if you want. Air France flies to Tel Aviv from there."

"Yes. Yes, that's fine. Do it. I'm in a hurry. Your flight leaves in ..." she said, looking at her watch, "... thirty-two minutes. I barely have time to get through security."

"Don't worry. You have time. It's actually running about twenty minutes late. The departure board hasn't updated yet." The clerk was tapping on her

keyboard. "I can book that for you now. The only Air France flight from Mexico City within that time frame leaves tonight. There are seats available. First-class only, I'm afraid."

"Yes, yes. Fine." She handed over her credit card. The clerk filled in the necessary information at her terminal and printed out the boarding passes for both flights.

"How many bags to check?"

"Just one carry on." She held up her rollaway bag for the clerk to see. Then she took her boarding passes and walked off.

The security line was relatively short. She passed through without incident and took a seat in the waiting area for her flight. It was crowded and passengers were grouching about the delay. The board at the gate was now saying departure in half an hour. Children were crying and the aisles were overflowing with overstuffed carry-on bags. Half the passengers were speaking Spanish. She approached the gate attendant, showed him her first-class ticket and asked if there was a lounge for the first-class people. As it happened, there was. The clerk directed her to an unmarked door nearby. She entered that lounge and sat in a clean, comfortable armchair. Several fellow first-class passengers were sitting reading or chatting. One of the older men nodded at her.

She was too nervous to read or do much of anything else. She began biting her nails, a habit she had broken years earlier, but, in times of extreme stress, it came back. She looked at her watch every three minutes, which only made time pass more slowly. She wondered whether she should have driven across the Mexican border. It was only a half hour south. But there were two problems with that. First, it was the most likely escape route and she'd have to pass through two checkpoints in her car, the American one and the Mexican one. If there was a lookout for her car, she'd be caught for sure there. Second, she'd be in Tijuana. Getting from there to Israel would involve at least two flights: a small carrier to Mexico City and probably a layover of a night. Tijuana police probably worked closely with San Diego. Mexico would probably extradite her without a problem. Better to get out of American airspace as quickly as possible to a major city where she could get on a foreign carrier to Israel the same day. With any luck she'd be over the Atlantic by the time the body was discovered. Finally the word came to assemble in the gate area. Boarding was about to begin.

...

When Cliff came to, he looked at his watch. He'd been unconscious about half an hour, maybe longer, although he was hazy on when exactly he'd been shot. While he had gotten Morgenthal engaged in conversation, he'd had his cell phone in his hand. He'd seen the telltale forward thrust of her gun hand the instant before the shot and brought his hand holding the phone, his right hand, up with the phone facing out to block the shot. People are surprisingly good at judging where a gun barrel is pointed, at least when it's pointed at them. That's

why so many gunshot victims end up with bullet holes in their palms, a fact well-known to emergency room physicians and coroners. The first shot had hit Cliff's cell phone, spraining his wrist, but going no farther.

The second shot had landed higher. Cliff had also instinctively raised his left arm to cover his chest and the shot had made first contact with his left biceps. The bullet has passed through that muscle and lodged in the muscles of his chest wall. Those thousands of curls and bench presses had paid off in a way he hadn't ever considered: the powerful arm and chest muscles he had developed had absorbed the force, stopping that bullet before it penetrated to his lungs or heart. He had collapsed and played dead, knowing that was his best chance of survival. He hadn't counted on the shot to the head.

The arm and chest wounds had bled extensively for several minutes, probably saving his life by misleading Morgenthal into thinking he was bleeding from inside his chest cavity. The head shot had splattered skin, hair, and blood onto the desk, but it hadn't penetrated the skull, a result perhaps more surprising to ER physicians, but by no means unheard of. Malala Yousafzai, the Nobel Prize-winning Pakistani girl, had survived exactly the same way, the bullet in her case had ricocheted off the skull and traveled around inside the scalp. Such victims often do not even lose consciousness. The record for the number of gunshots to the head incurred without serious injury was six.

Several favorable circumstances came together to save Cliff's life. A .32 caliber round from a short-barreled weapon has little penetrating power. If Morgenthal had had a larger weapon, either in barrel length or caliber, the result likely would have been different. The low angle of the shot also made a difference. She had stood well back, fearing that an FBI agent, and a big man, might have some training in martial arts that could allow him to take her down with his feet, had he been faking his death. That extra distance also made the angle of the trajectory more acute. If she had gotten close and fired perpendicular to the skull surface, the results would have been very different. If the bullet had penetrated the skull, Cliff's chances of survival would have been only about five percent, and even then he would likely have lost considerable brain function. But the bullet had hit in a relatively thick part of the skull, yet one more factor in his favor. Neurosurgeons, like realtors, like to say it's all about "location, location, location."

Even though he had survived, the force of the impact had caused trauma to his brain with its shock wave. He hadn't even realized when he first awoke that he had been shot in the head. The bleeding there had stopped relatively quickly, matting his hair so it was no longer running down his neck. He remembered Morgenthal facing him with the gun pointed at him, but everything after that just wasn't coming back. This loss of memory was normal, but it still disturbed him.

He took stock of his body. He could see that he'd been shot and needed attention. His left arm was covered in blood, but the bleeding there appeared to be slowed to a trickle. But how much blood had he lost? The carpet was soaked

over a large patch. His right wrist hurt and was swollen, too, although he wasn't sure why. He assumed it had been from falling forward. He tried to get to his feet, but he was unsteady and got only as far as sitting on the floor. Instinctively he reached into his pocket for his cell phone when he spotted it lying on the floor in a shattered mess.

He cursed his stupidity, his hubris, in thinking that his dominant size was sufficient to render Morgenthal submissive. Any arrestee, especially one facing a murder charge, can pose a deadly threat. He hadn't even had handcuffs with him, much less a weapon. He should have left when Martin had told him to and left the arrest to the police. If she'd fled, they'd have chased her down. Instead, this was the second time Morgenthal had gotten the better of him.

There had to be a desk phone. Cliff got up onto his knees and looked over the top of the desk. The phone was on a side table that formed an L with the large desk. He had to make his way around the corner of the desk, but when he tried to stand, he got woozy again just as he had on the roof. Slowly he edged his way toward the corner on his knees bracing himself with his arms on the desk. He rounded the corner and was able to reach the telephone. He lifted the receiver and heard the delicious sound of a dial tone. He dialed 911.

## Chapter 20

Ellen was at work when the phone rang at her desk.

“Kennedy.”

“Ellen, it’s Maeva.”

“Oh, hi. Thanks for all the work you’ve been doing on Cliff’s case, by the way. What’s up?”

“That’s why I’m calling. I think I know who the murderer is. I think it’s Naomi Morgenthal.”

“The lawyer? Why?”

“I’ve been researching her whole family. That Astoria Property Holdings is all them, her and her parents. Her mom’s deceased but her father is still alive. He’s one of the few children to survive Buchenwald. There’s this big article on her father when he hit eighty. He emigrated to Israel and met Ruth there. Then they came to the U.S. where Naomi was born. Anyway, he’s now in cancer treatments in New York, in Astoria. He filed for bankruptcy six months ago.”

“And why do think that’s important?”

“That’s not the important part, but it shows Naomi’s from Queens and needs money for her father’s treatment. When she was a teenager she tried out for the U.S. Olympic gymnastics team but didn’t make it. She ended up competing for Israel in Seoul. She has dual citizenship. And get this – her events were the balance beam and the parallel bars. Strength and balance.”

“So you’re saying she could handle that ladder and walk across it?”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“It sure could. You called Cliff with this?”

“I texted him to call, but he didn’t, so I called him, but I can’t get through. His phone’s been off for over half an hour. I’ve left a voice mail, but I think he would want to know this right away. Have you been in touch with him this morning?”

“I got a short text from him saying things went well at the bank where the checks were negotiated. That’s all.”

“When I texted him to call me, too, and put ‘911’ on it. We only do that if it’s really urgent. He always calls me right back.”

“He might be somewhere he can’t get service. I tell you what, Maeva, I’ll call Detective Sanchez to let her know this information. She should know where Cliff is.”

“Okay, thanks. And one other thing. She has a gun registered to her.”

This last remark hit Ellen like a brick. She immediately called Eva Sanchez. On the fourth ring she was afraid that this call, too, would go to voice mail, but Sanchez finally answered. Ellen relayed to Sanchez what Maeva had just told her about Morgenthal being a gymnast, her father being bankrupt due to expensive cancer treatments, and having a registered gun. Sanchez cursed herself silently for not having checked Morgenthal’s name for registered weapons. She thanked Ellen and said they were concerned about Cliff, too, but that they

expected him any minute. They would make sure he got this information. She also told Ellen that Rachel had confessed and confirmed that Naomi was the one who crossed over to the hotel on the roof the night Denise died. What she did not tell Ellen is that Cliff was last known to be at Morgenthal's office, alone and unarmed. She now had a bad feeling, a very, very bad feeling about that, and did not want to add to Ellen's concern.

As soon as she was off the phone she told Martin this latest wrinkle and said they needed to get over to Morgenthal's themselves, pronto. They rushed down to Eva's car and headed to the lawyer's office. They were no more than two blocks from the police station when Martin got a call. It was Sheriff Lew Haines himself.

"Martin, where the hell are you? You were supposed to stay with him."

"Yessir, uh, I'm with Detective Sanchez in her car. Are you talking about Cliff? What happened?"

"Hell, yes, I'm talking about Cliff. You haven't heard? He's been shot. He's en route to the trauma center at UCSD. Get your ass over there. I'm headed there myself right now."

"Jesus. What's his condition?"

"Alive is all I know. How did this happen?"

"He was going over there to discuss some money he thought Morgenthal had embezzled from the vic. He wanted to get it back for the estate. He was operating as the lawyer for the estate, not as a deputy. I called him and told him to meet us at the P.D. because we just got a break in the case, but he must have gone inside and confronted her. We just came out of an interview with Rachel Schwartz, the assistant to the cult leader. She confessed her part and gave us Morgenthal. I was about to call it in ..."

"About to' isn't good enough. He was your partner and he's got two bullet holes in him. We'll be having a longer conversation about this very soon."

"Yessir, I ..." but he was talking to a dead line. He turned to Sanchez. "Head to UCSD. Cliff's been shot."

"Omigod. Shot? How bad?" She wheeled the car in a sharp U-turn through heavy traffic, causing a black SUV to swerve amid a squeal of tires.

"Alive is all he told me."

"We'll both be up shit creek. C'mon, Cliff, don't die on us. Poor Ellen."

The radio dispatcher called Sanchez to report that the welfare patrol she had sent to Morgenthal's office was reporting that an ambulance had been on the scene when they arrived. The EMTs had taken a white male to the hospital with gunshot wounds to the head and chest. The lawyer's office she had mentioned was the scene of the shooting. The lawyer wasn't there and there were no witnesses to the shooting. The EMT's had had to break down the office door. The dispatcher asked if Sanchez was responding to that location.

"No, I'm headed to UCSD where the shooting victim is being transported. We're going to try to get a statement out of him. Send another homicide team to the scene. Over."

“Shot in the head and chest,” Martin said. “Christ almighty. No protective vest, either.”

Sanchez picked up the radio mike again and told dispatch to put out an APB on Naomi Morgenthal. She gave sufficient information to identify her and told the operator to run her for vehicles and get a description of the subject and all her cars out to U.S. Border Patrol, Tijuana Police, and the Harbor Police, which controlled both San Diego Harbor and the airport. She emphasized that the subject was wanted in connection with the shooting of a law enforcement officer and should be considered armed and dangerous.

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Morgenthal was among the first to board, being in first class. She removed the floppy hat and sunglasses she'd been wearing to help hide her face from cameras. The flight attendant placed them in an overhead bin for her. She stretched out her elf-length legs and took stock of her situation. She'd done a year on a kibbutz when she was in college and lived in Israel for five years after that, including the two years she'd been married to David Allen. She could live just fine in Israel, she was sure. She wasn't sure if the American authorities knew her married name or the fact of her dual citizenship. She'd always used her Israeli passport for travel to and from Israel and her American one everywhere else except for the Seoul Olympics. She'd never used the name Allen in the United States so far as she could remember. The marriage and divorce had taken place in Israel. She'd updated the Israeli passport from Morgenthal to Allen when she'd gotten married, but not after the divorce.

Would Israel extradite her? She couldn't be sure. It was never a question she'd bothered to research. She'd read about Jewish-Americans who'd successfully fled to Israel and avoided extradition, but she also remembered some news story about an American Jew who had committed a murder in the U.S., fled to Israel, been extradited, then been sent back to Israel for sentencing pursuant to some U.S.-Israel agreement. Israel did not permit the death penalty; the U.S. did. With her Olympic record and ties to the Jewish homeland she thought her chances were good.

Her stomach was tied in knots for what seemed like hours. Then the plane began to move, slowly, slowly away from the gate. The taxiing to the end of the runway seemed to be a hundred miles. Her nails were bitten to the quick.

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By the time the two detectives got to the hospital, they had received radio reports back that no one named Morgenthal had passed through the TSA checkpoints or obtained a boarding pass at the main San Diego airport. Border Patrol had reported back that no one with her name had crossed the border into Mexico in the last twenty-four hours, nor had the car registered to her.



They found Sheriff Haines and the San Diego Police Chief both waiting at the ER Waiting Room when they walked in. Cliff was in surgery. After each detective had received an individualized reaming out for allowing Knowles to be interviewing an armed murderer alone, Martin had had enough.

"All right, all right! I get it. We screwed up. I screwed up. We can't do anything about that now. We need to concentrate on catching Morgenthal now. We've put out an APB on her and her car. Nothing at the border or the airport yet."

"Have you told his wife he's been shot yet?" Haines asked. "She'll have to be notified."

"No, sir. When we talked to her we didn't know about the shooting yet."

"I can call her, sheriff," Sanchez volunteered. "I got to know her pretty well at the funeral. What can I tell her about his condition?"

"The EMTs said he was conscious when they arrived, but not very lucid. He called 911 himself. He's lost a lot of blood. He's in surgery. That's all we've been told."

Eva pulled out her phone and searched for the number of the San Francisco FBI office. She didn't have Ellen's personal cell phone or office number. She found the number and dialed it. She was connected to the main San Francisco switchboard. She asked for Special Agent Ellen Kennedy. Eva was not aware that Ellen worked in the Palo Alto Resident Agency, a satellite office of San Francisco which added twenty seconds for the connection to be made. It rang.

"Hold on," Haines said. "Here's the doctor now."

Ellen's voice sounded in Eva's ear. "Ellen Kennedy." Eva hung up.

The doctor approached smiling, which is always a good sign. "He's awake and doing well," the doctor said. "You can talk to him now. He's asking for Deputy Martin."

"Already?" Haines said, incredulous. "You just took him into surgery twenty minutes ago."

"His wounds were superficial, fortunately. We didn't have to put him under. We dug one bullet from his chest muscle using local anesthetic. The skull wasn't penetrated and neither were the lungs. We just had to stitch up the wound in the scalp. His hair will grow over the scar. Once we got some fluids and whole blood into him, he perked right up. He's saying something about a fugitive. You should talk to him now while he's feeling good. That local will wear off soon."

"I'm Martin. Detective Sanchez should be with me."

"I'm coming too," Lew Haines said. The police chief wasn't about to be the only one left standing around. Reporters were already starting to filter in. He wasn't about to make a statement. All four followed the doctor into Cliff's recovery room.

As soon as he saw them, Cliff blurted out, "I'm sorry. I blew it big time, but just listen. She's going to Israel."

"You look like shit, you asshole," Haines said with the disguised bond of affection of fellow FBI agents. "You know how scared you had us?"

"Hello to you, too, Lew. How about shutting that trap and doing some actual work for once?"

Haines came over and gave Cliff's right shoulder a squeeze, taking care to avoid the right hand and left shoulder. "Hey, I heard it was a flesh wound, nothing important. Just your brain."

Martin didn't dare break in, but the police chief had no compunction about doing so. "What's this about Israel? That's new information, isn't it?"

"Yes, chief," Sanchez said. "Cliff, why do think she's going to Israel? We have an APB out and no Morgenthal has crossed into Mexico or been through TSA at the airport."

"That's because she's probably not traveling under that name. The paperweight on her desk. It's engraved to Naomi Allen with the Israeli flag and said 'Seoul Olympics 1988'. She must be a dual citizen or something. Try Allen."

The police chief looked at Sanchez and flicked his fingers impatiently in a "get on it now!" motion. She dialed her radio dispatch again and relayed the information about the name Allen.

"Has anybody told my wife yet about, uh ... the incident?" Cliff asked tentatively.

"Getting shot in the head is an 'incident'?" Haines said. "So what was 9/11 – 'some unfortunate events'?"

"Eva was just about to," Rob Martin said. "I can call now and tell her you're okay."

"No! If she doesn't know, don't tell her," Cliff almost shouted. "Please. I'm in enough trouble already."

Haines looked at the police chief who said, "We're going to have to put out a statement. There were too many people at the scene and reporters listen to police scanners. They already know a deputy was shot."

Cliff mulled that over and replied, "I wasn't really a deputy. I mean I wasn't acting as one then, not at first. I was just talking lawyer to lawyer, trying to get Morgenthal to cough up the money she embezzled. Just say that a shooting incident occurred and that no one was seriously injured. Names are being withheld pending investigation. Leave it at that."

"I don't know," the chief replied. "It's going to come out sooner or later. We'll get her and try her for attempted murder of a peace officer. You're going to have to testify."

"Make it later. After I'm home safe and chipper so my wife doesn't worry. You always withhold names until the family's been notified anyway. Besides, you don't have to try her for attempted murder on me. She confessed to murdering my sister."

"She confessed?" Haines exploded. "And just when were you planning on dropping that little morsel on us? Or did you think we wouldn't be interested?"

"It's just like my wife thought. Denise came to Morgenthal on the recommendation of Shapiro and left the checks with her. Morgenthal deposited them and spent the money. So when she heard from Shapiro that Denise was planning to 'ascend,' she came up with the scheme to have it done over at her fleabag hotel where she could sneak over on the roof to avoid the cameras. She claimed she thought it was a real suicide, but when Denise started to wake up, she had to 'make sure.' She said Denise put up a fight. It was no assisted suicide; she was forcibly murdered. Shapiro knew she was going to get the car keys and apartment keys to collect the property after her death, but he didn't know anything about the checks or Naomi killing her. I'll have to testify about the murder, I know, but you don't have to charge her with my shooting. At least not yet."

"Okay I won't release any names yet," the police chief said. Lew Haines nodded his agreement. "The doctor did say your wounds were superficial. I'll tell him not to say anything more than that and not to name you."

Sanchez rapped the chief on the arm. "Chief, I just got a text from the Harbor Police. Naomi Allen passed through the security checkpoint forty minutes ago. She was ticketed on an American Airlines flight to Mexico City, transiting there for Israel."

"Has the flight left the ground?"

"Hang on. They're checking." After a long pause, "It left the ground twelve minutes ago. They're probably in Mexican air space already."

"Dammit!" Haines muttered. "Try the tower. Ask if they can get the pilot to turn around."

Sanchez repeated the request to the Harbor Police officer on the line. He said he'd have to call her back. It took five minutes and when he called, the news wasn't good.

"He says he tried but there's nothing they can do. The plane had already been handed off to Mexican air traffic control."

"Hand me the phone," Cliff said calmly. Sanchez sought approval from her chief with a look. He gave a nod. She handed the phone to Cliff.

He dialed a number from memory and reached FBI headquarters in Washington.

"FBI. How may I direct your call?"

"This is Cliff Knowles. I'm a relative of the Director. He knows who I am. This is a family emergency. I need to speak with him immediately."

Cliff had to go through this same routine with two more skeptical secretaries, but three minutes later the FBI Director came on the line.

"Cliff, is that you?"

"Yes, Bill."

"Is Ellen all right? And Theresa?"

"They're all fine. I'm the one who got shot."

"My lord. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Superficial wounds. The doctors patched me up. Whatever you do, don't tell Ellen. She'll have my hide. Or Theresa."

The Director chuckled. "Been there, done that. Mum's the word. So you didn't call me just to tell me that."

In a few short sentences Cliff explained the situation with Morgenthal having killed his sister and then shot him, now being in Mexican airspace fleeing to Israel.

"Who's the carrier?"

"American Airlines."

"And the pilot's an American citizen?"

"Probably. I don't know."

"I think I can help. I'll get back to you."

• • •

Morgenthal watched the landscape disappear below the clouds as the plane rose to cruising altitude. They were well into Mexican air space now. The Mexicans wouldn't bother her in Mexico City, not with her already ticketed to move on to Israel without leaving the airport. They'll let the U.S. argue it out with Israel and keep them out of it, if they're even notified by U.S. of her presence.

She reclined the seat and ordered another complimentary drink, finally able to relax. The in-flight movie was of no interest to her, so she picked up the airline magazine and began to work the crossword puzzle. That second drink made this one harder than usual. Soon she grew drowsy and closed her eyes.

The change in air pressure inside the cabin made her ears pop. That's what awakened her from her slumber. The flight attendants were patrolling, reminding everyone to buckle their seat belts. She brought her seat back to an upright position as instructed.

As the plane descended through the clouds she overheard one of the other first-class passengers ask how long this was going to take. The attendant replied that it should only delay arrival time by less than half an hour.

She stopped the attendant and asked, "I was asleep there for a bit. What's going on?"

"I'm sorry ma'am, but someone on board has had a medical emergency. We're having to stop to deplane him. We should be back up in the air as soon as we refuel."

"Where are we?"

"We'll be putting down in Tucson."

"Tucson? In the U.S.?"

"Yes ma'am."

*Just my luck. I pick a plane with some sick bozo on board, she thought.*

The plane continued to descend. The landing was smooth. She watched out the window, but saw no unusual activity. After a long stretch of taxiing the plane rolled to a stop. She couldn't get a good feel of the layout of the airport, but she could tell they weren't near a terminal. Why were they stopping way out away from all the buildings? Then she saw the mobile staircase vehicle driving up to the front of the plane. This didn't look right. Why would they try to haul a sick person down a set of stairs and across the airport tarmac when they could pull right up to a boarding ramp? There were no ambulances visible, either. She became alarmed. Passengers were requested to stay seated and to keep their seat belts on as this would only take a few minutes. *This is bullshit.*

She unbuckled her seat belt and stood.

"Please sit down ma'am," a burly male attendant said to her. She ignored him. He grabbed her arm, but she shook him off as another first-class passenger stood and stepped between her and the attendant and reprimanded the attendant for putting his hands on a first-class passenger. She rushed to the exit just as a female flight attendant was opening the door. The helmet of the lead officer rose into view as he rushed up the stairs. She bolted through the doorway onto the top platform of the mobile stairway. It was a long way down to the tarmac, but she knew how to land. She was a gymnast. She was lightly dressed in shorts and Nikes. She thought she could outrun the SWAT officers in their heavy Kevlar uniforms and with those massive shields and weapons. They wouldn't shoot an unarmed woman in the back.

She leapt just as the lead officer lunged for her.

## Chapter 21

San Diego, two weeks later

"The stitches are all out. Your range of motion looks good." The doctor was a woman half Cliff's age but she talked to him like she was scolding a child. "I don't want you doing heavy lifting, especially no weightlifting of anything heavier than ten pounds for at least a month."

"How about the scars, doc? Will my wife be able to tell I've been shot?"

"She doesn't know? Your hair has grown over the scalp wound nicely, but if she runs her fingers through your hair, she'll feel it.."

"That's okay. I can convince her that's from the blow from the two-by-four."

"You were hit on the head by a two-by-four, too? You must really like to piss people off."

"It was the same person."

"Not your wife, I hope? The other scars are small, but if you take your shirt off, they are quite visible. How well does she know your body?"

"We can make love in the dark for a while."

"Good luck with that. Does she see the medical bills?"

"The sheriff's department is picking that all up. Workmen's comp."

The doctor just shook her head. "The cognitive tests are looking good. You were pretty rocky with your balance there at first. There was some trauma to the cerebellum even though the bullet didn't penetrate your skull. Your fine motor skills and coordination took a hit, if you'll pardon the expression, but you're back in the normal range now. You may be a bit klutzy, suffer from motion sickness, and have some trouble with attention for a few weeks, but the brain heals itself pretty fast. Your wife may notice those things."

"No problem. She already thinks I'm an idiot half the time."

"Only half?"

"Quite the comedienne, aren't you?"

The doctor laughed. "Good luck, deputy Knowles. I hope I don't see you again." She walked out.

Cliff dressed and headed out to his car where he dialed Ellen. She answered.

"Cliff, tell me you've finally wrapped up the estate. This single-parent working mom gig is a heckuva lot harder than I realized."

"I did. I'm sorry about the delay, but it couldn't be helped. When Morgenthal was caught and it turned out the embezzled checks to Denise were part of the motive, I became a witness. I've been giving statements to the police and the sheriff's department. It's been crazy. But good news: the bank refunded the amount of the forged checks as soon as I sent them a copy of the civil complaint I was about to file. They aren't admitting fault in accepting the forgeries, but it's cheaper for them to settle than hire a lawyer for that amount.

The publicity would have killed them, too. I used the money to pay the wheelchair guy. He's building Crystal's chair now. Once he delivers it to Crystal I'm turning over the estate administration to Browne, that woman at the public guardian's office. That chair won't fit anyone else besides Crystal, so she can't sell it. She's agreed Crystal can have the chair; she'll sell the car and TV and close things out. Tony Karras returned Denise's five grand contribution to the condo, too, even though legally he wasn't required to. There'll be something for the guardian's office. Crystal will have her chair, Kathy and the staff to look after her, and now that they know she can communicate, speech therapy."

"That's wonderful. What about Morgenthal? Are they going to prosecute?"

"I doubt it, but it doesn't matter. She's a quadriplegic, blind and mute now. Landing on your head on cement after an eighteen-foot fall can be detrimental to your health. The cop who grabbed her foot as she tried to escape feels terrible about it. The D.A. is going through the motions, but the public defender is arguing that she's incompetent to stand trial and the D.A. isn't going to oppose. Rob says she's being housed out at Tranquil House."

Ellen snorted. "Seriously? That's got to be some kind of record for irony. She can listen to Daffy Duck with Crystal."

"That's not all. Rob says Morgenthal's father committed suicide the day after Naomi was captured. He'd saved up his painkillers and took a fatal dose. He'd been suffering terribly. Apparently he'd wanted to die for quite some time but he didn't do it before because he didn't want to disappoint Naomi."

"Did you ever find out what Denise was really doing that night? She gave three different stories."

"I think she told people what they wanted to hear – what she wanted them to think. She told Tony she was only doing it to save Lance because she knew he disapproved of the church. That might even have been true. She could have intended to tell Lance afterward it was a horrible experience to dissuade him from ever trying it. She told Shapiro it was for real so he'd give her drugs, and that version made it way to Morgenthal and Schwartz. I think the version she told Lance was the closest to the truth. Denise was always falling for everything characterized as 'spiritual.' I think she really wanted to see what it was like, hoping maybe there was a way to a reincarnation of some kind. Or maybe it was just an excuse for another drug binge before moving in with Tony. We'll never know for sure. The one thing we do know is that she didn't have a desire to die, not that night. She was looking forward to getting married and getting Crystal her chair. She fought Morgenthal at the end."

"So Morgenthal murdered someone pretending to commit suicide in order to keep alive someone who actually wanted to commit suicide."

"That's what Rob says."

How is Rob, anyway? They still haven't identified him to the press, but it has to be him, right? *'A sheriff's deputy received superficial gunshot wounds*

*from the suspect during an interview.*’ What I want to know is why Eva didn’t blow her ass away. What’re partners for?”

“Rob’s fine. And let’s not second-guess Eva. We don’t know all the facts. Maybe she wasn’t even there.”

“She had to be there. No one interviews a prime murder suspect alone. Rob can’t be that much of an idiot.”

“Well, don’t call her – or Rob – and ask about it. I think it may be a sore point with them. I’m flying home tonight. Can you pick me up at the airport? The seven forty-five flight.”

“Of course.”

• • •

Cliff tossed a giggling Tommy into the air and put him back in his stroller. A big wet kiss from Ellen and an R-rated hug in the baggage claim area completed the airport greeting. Ellen pointed across the room. Then Cliff saw the curly red hair in the crowd. Maeva had been standing back to allow Cliff a moment with his family, but when he made eye contact, he opened his arms wide. She hurried over for a hug, this one G-rated. He lifted her diminutive frame and winced as his injured arm screamed its protest.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, sensing his awkward movement.

“Nothing. Just getting old, I guess. I didn’t expect you here. How’s the business holding up? Do I even still have a business? I must have missed a dozen meetings and two big deadlines.”

“You’ll have some explaining to do to a few clients, but everything’s doing fine.” Her tone became tentative. “You may have a heart attack when you see my time sheets, though. I’m sorry for all the overtime, Cliff, but you were gone and ...”

“Not to worry. I won’t be paying you any overtime.”

Maeva’s expression turned to shock. She dropped her eyes and her lips tightened.

“Partners don’t get overtime.”

“Partners? Really?” A toothy grin split her face and she leapt onto him for another hug, this time more of a PG-13. Ellen gave him a big thumbs up.

Cliff claimed his bag and they rolled on out to the short-term parking next to the terminal. Maeva sat in the back with Tommy. Ellen climbed in the driver’s seat. When Cliff opened the door to the passenger seat, there was a small, neatly wrapped package sitting on the seat.

“What’s this?” he asked as he sat and fastened his seat belt.

“It’s a homecoming gift,” Ellen said. “You can open it on the way home.”

Cliff began fiddling with the bow as they pulled out into traffic. He knew Ellen liked to save the paper and bows if they were in good shape, so he took his time untying it and unwrapping the box. By the time they hit the freeway he had



the paper off. He lifted the boxtop. Inside was a home pregnancy kit. Both stripes were blue.

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To my view, it should go without saying that this book is a work of fiction, that the characters do not represent real people, and that the views expressed in the book do not represent those of the FBI or anyone else (even mine, since they are the views of fictional characters). However, the FBI differs with this view. As a retired FBI agent I must submit my manuscripts for their review. So here it is going *with* saying: *the views herein do not represent those of the FBI.*