

LAST RESORT

by

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CHAPTER ONE

A faded billboard shaped like a camel urged drivers to pull off the old desert highway to visit Halliday's Arabian Date Gardens.

At eight-thirty in the morning, the camel wasn't getting many takers. But I liked date shakes. And more important, I needed to speak with Sonia Tuttle, a waitress at Halliday's, whose car sat in the nearly deserted parking lot.

Stopping meant being late to work, but maybe this *was* work. Social workers make a lot of house calls. This house call just happened to be at a date ranch.

Halliday's other waitress, Millie Toovers, had parked her chipped Oldsmobile next to Sonia's compact. An empty police cruiser occupied the third spot. I pulled in next to it, wondering what a patrolman was doing here, especially at this hour of the morning. Halliday's was basically a glorified farm stand, a low rambling building left over from the 1920's, built on the premise that tourists were easily thrilled by dried fruit. The crime possibilities seemed pretty limited. Maybe somebody had made off with a jumbo date assortment.

More likely, Sonia was inside, serving the officer two eggs, over easy, with coffee and toast. Halliday's offered cheap breakfast specials which were popular with budget-minded locals, like cops and social workers.

Sonia had hired my agency to help look after her uncle, but she worried so much, she took up almost as much time as he did. She was about fifty, a hefty blonde with anxious eyes. Fretting was her specialty. That's why the message she'd left on my answering machine last night seemed odd.

“Betsy, I just want you to know that I’m...so happy.”

That was it. The receiver clicked.

I got out of the green Mini and brushed at the wrinkles across the lap of my linen skirt. The February sun warmed my back. The air was light and crisp, with that underlying coolness that marks the desert in the winter months. Soon it would be a sunny seventy-five degrees, perfect weather that fools Southern Californians into thinking nothing bad will ever happen.

Behind Halliday’s white frame building rose one of the oldest date palm groves in the Coachella Valley, spreading over thirty acres. Old timers—and in my line of work, I knew many—told me these dates groves or “gardens” once lined the highway on the outskirts of Sapphire Springs. Now only Halliday’s was left. Pink stucco hotels, restaurants and mini-malls pressed against the farm on two sides. Behind the lush grove, which extended back about ten acres from the highway, the pale gray Colorado Desert crept up into the gravelly foothills of the San Jacinto Mountains.

Up close, Halliday’s smelled old, exhaling the scents of worn wood and aluminum. The ancient screen door wheezed open. A bell tinkled.

Around me, in all its wrinkled splendor, was a sea of dates. Angled wooden tables displayed at least a dozen varieties, including big, moist, chestnut-colored medjools, small, tan deglet noors and mounds of pale, dry little bread dates. Faded posters with pictures of camels and harem girls proclaimed that dates were “The Snack of Sheiks.”

Nobody stood behind the retail counter where strange and overly sweet date confections were sold. No one stood behind the lunch counter. No one sat on the cracked,

red leatherette-covered stools. I checked behind the faded velvet curtains of the Date Garden Theater, where the marquee invited customers to view a frisky, agricultural slide show entitled, *Mating Habits of the Date*. On a scratchy recording, the narrator intoned, “Since the dawn of civilization, dates have been the delicacy of pashas and kings...” But the show was playing to an empty house.

Neither Sonia nor Millie responded to the shrill ding of the push bell on the lunch counter.

Time to check out back. The screen door banged behind me and sand crunched under my heels as I walked around the building.

Behind the store, an iron fence along the front of the grove brandished a life-size, painted wooden harem girl who invited visitors to “Tour the Sultan’s Private Date Garden.” As far as I knew, any sultans frequenting the place came straight out of Cookie Halliday’s imagination. Cookie had grown up on the date ranch, but her promotional ideas were strongly colored by years of dancing in Vegas shows. She and her husband, Lou, were among my more interesting clients.

An arched Moorish gate marked the entrance to the grove. Beyond it, rows of lofty, mature date palms reared up to heights of more than sixty feet. In front of the gate, in her waitress uniform, stood Millie Toovers, tiny but also mature.

I’m partial to Millie. With her gray marcelled hair and gung-ho attitude, she’s a relic of the 1920s, just like Halliday’s. She must be pushing eighty, so she views me—at thirty-seven—as a spritely young thing. She’s always asking what life is like for “glamorous redheads.” I pretend to know.

She was peering straight ahead, into the date grove, shading her eyes with a wrinkled hand.

“Millie!” I gave her a wave.

She turned and gasped. “Betsy, Honey!”

When I got close enough, she seized my hands. “Sonia parked her car out front, but I can’t find her. She don’t even have the morning shift today. Maybe I’m a silly old woman, but I called the cops. They didn’t want to come, but I made ‘em. A young Mexican guy showed up, little while ago. Very polite. Thinks I’m some old loony.”

I gave her gnarled fingers a gentle squeeze. “There’s got to be an explanation. Maybe her car wouldn’t start last night.”

She pulled away and dabbed at her eyes. “You’re right, Honey, I’m just being foolish.”

“Sonia called me from here last night,” I said slowly, remembering the Halliday’s phone number displayed on my answering machine. “In her message, she said something about being ‘happy.’”

Millie gave an odd little bleat and put the back of her hand to her mouth.

A man’s voice called, “Mrs. Toovers?”

Two men in suits and dark glasses rounded the building, followed by a police officer in uniform.

My gut understood before my brain. *The patrolman out in the date grove must have radioed for back-up.*

One of the men had a sloping pot belly under his gray, rumpled suit. The other, in a

khaki suit and light blue tie, was younger and trimmer. I recognized those tanned, even features, the crooked smile and the brush cut just turning gray.

“Betsy Kehoe!” he said, reaching us first and taking his sunglasses off. “What the heck are you doing here?”

My mouth began a smile, then went in the other direction. “I stopped in to see a client on my way to work.” I turned to the anxious older woman next to me. “Millie, this is Detective James Fitzpatrick, from the Sapphire Springs Police.”

“Just call me Fitz, Ma’am.” Fitz smiled at her in a way that worked wonders on older ladies. Useful, since he often worked in the department’s Elder Protection Unit.

He looked thinner than I remembered. His face was a gaunt version of handsome, with shadows around the eyes.

The older man’s bulk jiggled to a halt. “Detective Richard Moss,” he mumbled, giving his badge a cursory flash. “This is Officer Kelly.” He jerked his head in the direction of the uniformed officer, a young man with a clipboard and a bad sunburn.

“This is Betsy Kehoe, Rich,” Fitz told the older detective. “She’s a social worker with Desert Senior Care. I know her from the Dorado Case.”

Moss eyed us, then flicked cigarette ashes off his cuff. He turned to Millie. “You must be Mrs. Toovers.”

“What’s going on?” Millie asked, her voice shaking.

Fitz said gently, “Officer Sanchez just radioed us to come over. He’s the young fellow who responded to your call this morning.” He gestured toward the date grove. “I’m sorry, Ma’am. He found a body back there.”

“A—a body? Whose?”

“A woman. There’s no purse or other identification.”

Millie said, “How—how did she--”

Moss said, “Looks like homicide.”

Millie collapsed against me, her thin body as light as a bundle of sun-bleached sticks. I put my arms around her. Homicide? The word wailed through my mind, drowning out everything else.

Millie said hoarsely, “Who is it? Who? I’m not leaving till I know!”

Moss evaluated her like an item on sale. “Maybe you could identify the body, Mrs. Toovers. That would give us a leg up.”

Millie nodded, looking terrified.

A grisly encounter with a murder victim was the last thing her aging heart needed. With one arm still around Millie, I turned to the detectives, “I knew Sonia pretty well.” My dry lips forced the words out. “I can do it.”

Fitz shot a troubled look at his partner. “The crime scene people won’t like it if we take her in there.”

Moss rolled his eyes. “I’ve been doing this thirty-two years,” he said. “I can tell you, if this nice lady spends two minutes back there with us, it isn’t going to mess up any evidence.”

Fitz’s jaw tightened but all he said was, “I’ll find Mrs. Toovers a chair.” He went off while Moss conferred with Kelly and I used my cell to call the office and cancel my appointments. Then Officer Kelly took up a position guarding the entrance to the date

grove, clipboard in hand. Everyone who came in or out would be recorded, including us. Fitz returned with a rusty lawn chair and seated Millie in a little patch of shade. He turned to me. "Ready?"

Fitz opened the peeling, cast iron gate and the three of us were among the trees, the trunks thick and even, like an army of giants that could trample human beings underfoot. An odor of vegetation and wet earth met my nose. Overhead, shiny green fronds flapped in the sun but at ground level, each trunk sat in a damp depression. As Halliday's literature points out, dates like their feet in water and their heads in fire.

Our feet scuffed along the sandy, slightly elevated path, littered with broken palm fronds from the last winter rainstorm.

"Want a hand?" Fitz said, taking my arm.

I shook my elbow free. He raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Moss glanced from Fitz to me. "Ms. Kehoe, how do you know the missing woman?"

"Sonia hired my agency to help take care of her Uncle Godfrey," I explained. "He's seventy-four and diabetic. He functions pretty well but the complications get worse with age..." I trailed off. If Sonia was dead, what would happen to Godfrey? I forced my mind away from that unpleasant thought.

"You moved out here recently?" Moss said, puffing.

"About two years ago."

He nodded. "I knew you weren't from the desert. You ain't got the leathery skin. Plus, you have an East Coast accent. New York?"

It was my turn to nod. Actually, I'd grown up in Hartford, Connecticut, but my a's were

still broad. To Californians, it was all the same.

“What brought you out here?” Moss continued, with the easy sympathy of a good investigator. Fitz kept up with us silently, his hands jammed in his pockets.

“My husband died.”

Moss made an apologetic noise. “Married long?”

“Eight years.”

My husband, Mario Tomassini, had grown up in Queens and his a’s were plenty broad. He was a psychologist with the New York City Police Department, fifteen years older than me, and nothing special to look at. But I loved with the way he talked. His gruff baritone, with its Queens-y tang, was a great instrument: for recounting tales about his caseload, giving advice, kidding around, conveying love, narrating life itself.

After he was gone, New York’s weather seemed grayer, our apartment, smaller. My sister, Tessa, had just remarried again, this time to a genteel fellow from Pasadena. They had a weekend place in Sapphire Springs, a small, slightly faded desert resort town, where retirees liked to golf and hipsters from L.A. liked to renovate mid-Century Modern houses. Once Tessa started working at the local zoo, she began spending most of her time there.

Sapphire Springs, Tessa pointed out, was a perfect place for a social worker specializing in geriatrics because of all the retirees.

I thought the whole thing over for about five minutes before deciding to move. I liked the idea of living in a resort. I wanted to go on vacation from my life.

One shoe hit a rock and I stumbled. My slippery leather flats were not ideal for this kind of terrain. Neither was my new, green linen suit. All dressed up for a full day of

meetings. But this was one I hadn't counted on.

"How did she die?" I asked.

"Stabbed," Fitz said, glancing at me. An extra crease furrowed his brow.

Sonia, in her white uniform, shooting me her reluctant smile as she scooped vanilla ice cream into a dented, metal mixing cup...

Stabbed.

Up ahead, sunlight flooded a clearing among the trees.

Fitz's radio crackled. He pulled it out, listened and turned to Moss, "This is it."

Moss looked at me as if I might bolt. "Glad you can help us with this, Ms. Kehoe," he said smoothly.

I wasn't feeling glad. I glanced up at the fronds overhead, reluctant to leave the shade. In mid-February, most of the date harvest had been picked, but heavy clusters of late-ripening fruit still sagged from the tops of a few trees. Bell-shaped bags of coated paper protected the clusters from winter rains.

Tire tracks rutted the clearing, which contained a shed and a large irrigation ditch. In the bright sun by the water, a tall Hispanic cop guarded a mound covered with paper bags.

Date bags.

Moss took my arm. "Let me help you off the path. It's pretty rough."

"Hey," Fitz complained. "She wouldn't let me help her."

"She must know ya pretty good then," muttered Moss, puffing slightly.

The tall young officer came over to meet us, his genial, mustached face struggling with other emotions. Fitz explained who I was.

Moss eyed the mound, a couple of yards away, with displeasure. “Sanchez, tell me you didn’t cover the body with that stuff.”

Sanchez shook his head soberly. “Found her this way, Sir.”

My stomach lurched. The killer had covered her with paper bags, as if she was a pile of fruit.

Fitz watched me. “Betsy, you look kind of white.”

“I’m okay.”

Sonia made the first date shake I’d ever tasted: thick, beige, tasting of vanilla and brown sugar. I thought about the bundles of dates wrapped in paper and the paper-covered mound ahead of me. And with a surge of panic, I wondered if Mario’s death, instead of making me tougher, left me more vulnerable. In the hospital that night, I’d held his hand for hours. Around three a.m., I drifted off. *I never should have fallen asleep, I never--*

At a word from Moss, Sanchez bent over and pulled two of the bags aside.

Sonia Tuttle’s face looked up at me, as I had never seen it before. Her face was gray and sunken, her nose, thin and sharp as a razor. When the heart stops beating, the body fluids pool downwards. If the person is lying on his back, like Mario was, gravity sucks the skin down over the face, like gray shrink-wrap.

In life, Sonia never wore make-up. She dressed in baggy clothes. But in death, bright pink lipstick smeared the borders of her mouth. Frosted eye shadow circled her staring eyes. Large, fake pearls gleamed from her earlobes, above the ruffled lapels of a pink suit jacket.

Sonia had dressed up to die.

“Ms. Kehoe--” Moss began.

“It’s her.” The high, thin voice was nothing like mine.

“One thing more,” Moss persisted. “Sanchez, uncover a little more of the body. Ms. Kehoe, this is long shot. Any chance you recognize the knife?”

My gaze traveled down Sonia’s torso. Between the ruffled pink lapels protruded a long, wooden handle.

Those knives were “wicked sharp,” Cookie Halliday had told me. They had to be. Balancing seventy feet up, palmeros needed to trim enormous thorns off the leaves with a couple of swipes.

“Ms. Kehoe--” Moss began.

“Yes?” I was beginning to notice an odor, unspeakable and sweet.

“Okay, Rich, that’s enough.” Fitz’s hand came up under my elbow. I started to jerk away again but my stomach reeled and it felt as if there were no oxygen to be had anywhere. Even if there was, my lungs were not up to the job. Instead of going black, everything went blue and it seemed as if the sky beyond the date grove was descending and pressing on me very, very hard.

CHAPTER TWO

My face pressed against tan-colored fabric. It had a warm herbal scent, like sagebrush. I sighed and remembered Mario's arm around me, and actually there was an arm around me and a calloused, masculine hand clamped around my bare shoulder. I lifted my head out of the fabric and looked straight up into Fitz's gray eyes.

"Had a nice nap?" he said.

We were back in the shade, sitting on a peeling, wrought iron bench. On my left, lay my green linen suit jacket, neatly folded. On my right, Fitz smiled down from close quarters. Much too close. Foggily, I wondered if other women found him good-looking. The brush cut set off the clean lines of his face, with its straight, triangular nose and deep-set eyes.

Someone had helped me take off my suit jacket. Fitz? It was all a blur.

Now things were unpleasantly clear. Godfrey's niece, his only living relative, was dead. Godfrey was alone. The sight of Sonia's corpse had brought memories of Mario's death flooding back. But what hurt even more at the moment, was the fact that I'd been leaning against Fitz.

Angrily, I sat up and pushed myself off the bench. Voices and the crackle of radios drifted through the trees. "How did I get over here?"

He grinned, his gray eyes dancing. "You asked me to walk with you."

The memory popped into my brain. I bit my lower lip.

"Don't worry. Except for snuggling up on my shoulder, you behaved yourself."

"I wasn't snuggling and I didn't faint. I'm not a fainter."

"You didn't go unconscious," Fitz said amiably. "But I wasn't sure you could drive, so

I called your sister to come pick you up. Tessa Childe, right? See, I remembered.”

I grabbed my suit jacket off the bench. “I’ll go wait for her in the parking lot.”

Fitz stood up. “Hold on. You’re a witness, and I need to ask you a few questions.

Please, sit down.”

His radio came on. He pulled it out of his belt and barked, “Okay, okay, she’s alert now. I’ll be back in a couple minutes.”

He turned to me and extended a cellophane-wrapped package with a harem girl on the label and a paper cup of water. “Here. We got this for you from old man Halliday. Sit down. You look shaky.”

I sat down and took a few swallows of the water. I began to unwrap the little cellophane package. Date bread, of course.

Fitz pulled a notebook and pen from inside his lapel. He sat down next to me. “First of all, I need to check on your whereabouts last night.” He smiled. “Nothing personal. You knew the victim.”

“I was at a lecture with Lacey,” I said, gulping the water greedily. My throat felt like a sandstorm had blown through and my stomach was tight with hunger. “She’s a friend from work.”

He nodded. “Can I call her?”

“She’s at the office right now.” I gave him the number.

He scribbled it down. “We hear that Miss Tuttle left a message on your answering machine last night.”

“She left me lots of messages but they were mostly fretting about Godfrey,” I said,

between bites of date bread. “This one was different.” I told him about Sonia’s odd claim to be ‘so happy.’

“What time did she call?”

“Around seven, I think.” I hesitated. “Was that close to when she was...?”

Fitz shook his head. “We’re not sure yet. I’ll need you to save that tape.”

“Okay.” I thought for a moment, remembering her garish make-up and the pink ruffles. “She must have been planning to meet someone. She got all dressed up.”

“She normally didn’t dress that way?”

I shook my head. “When she was off duty, she wore baggy, gingham jumpers and long dresses with tiny flower prints.” And pigtails, I remembered. The effect was odd: a middle-aged Alice in Wonderland.

“Any boyfriends?”

“She never mentioned one.”

“Enemies?” Fitz asked. “Someone who benefited by her death?”

I shook my head. “I can’t imagine Sonia having enemies. And as for benefiting by her death...” I shrugged. “She made date shakes for a living. How much money could she have?” I thought another moment. “She did pay our fees at Desert Senior Care and they aren’t cheap.”

Fitz nodded. “What about her uncle? Does he have money?”

“No. Godfrey retired on a very small pension.” I thought for a moment. “I think she paid for things without telling him. She worried about his finances. Once she told me...something about a will or life insurance.” I snapped my fingers. “That was it. She took

out a life insurance policy on herself.”

Fitz looked up slowly from his notepad. “Did her uncle know about that?”

I glared at him. “Oh come on. He’s diabetic and seventy-two. He’s not going to bump off his niece for some measly insurance money.”

Fitz held my gaze. “You’d be surprised.”

I stood up, anger surging back into my chest. “Look, Godfrey is about to get a terrible shock. He’s frail. If you treat him like a suspect, it’ll kill him faster than the diabetes.”

His radio sputtered. He picked it up, barked, “Give me another minute, okay?” and clicked off.

I said, “I’ve told you everything I know. If I think of anything else, I’ll call the station.” I couldn’t resist adding. “And I’ll ask for Moss.”

Fitz sprang to his feet. “Look, Betsy--”

“Can I go?”

“In a minute.” He passed a hand through his brush cut, exasperated. “Jeeze. I’m in the middle of a frigging murder investigation--” He glanced at me. “Okay. I apologize.”

“Look,” I said, “I don’t need some fake apology from you just because you think it’ll make your life easier. If you really wanted to apologize, I would have heard from you in the past twelve months.”

A breeze stirred the palms and two unseen birds began arguing noisily.

Fitz caught my eye. A half smile twitched one corner of his mouth. “I like how mad you are.”

I felt my face go pink right up to roots of my hair. I turned away and mumbled, “I’ve

got to go.”

He followed. “Don’t run away. I want to apologize for the way I treated you last year. Not a fake apology, a real one. Long overdue, like you said.” He hesitated. “Just because I didn’t call, doesn’t mean I wasn’t thinking about you. That was a great night. I’ve never forgotten it.”

The little breeze sighed past again, like the warm evening air moving through the huge, open windows at Las Brisas, where we had gone to celebrate. A tricky case, a nephew who had been cleverly siphoning off my elderly clients’ art collection. I had called the police after smelling fresh paint on a 1922 Cubist work hanging in their dining room. I remembered the old couple’s shocked and grateful faces and the lime-scent of the margaritas and the way the tequila made me feel: exhilarated, giddy, coasting along, as though for the first time in years maybe life wasn’t all that bad. Maybe, sometimes, wonderful things could happen, like dusty paintings by early modernist masters Braque and Miro, found in a Los Angeles warehouse and returned to the old people who cherished them. Wonderful things like Detective Jimmy Fitzpatrick kidding around for weeks and then asking me out to dinner. He didn’t know Braque from Miro but he was funny and good-looking and...

I hadn’t planned to sleep with him. I knew better. I was newly widowed. It was too soon. Especially for someone like Fitz. He was too smooth, too good-looking, too experienced. I knew he was going to be a good lover. And he was, in that determined, masculine way that makes you forget—for awhile—about the need for something more.

He was right. It had been a great night. But the hangover was awful. When he didn’t

call the next day, the next week or the next month, I was surprised at how rotten I felt. Given that I still loved someone who was far superior to Fitz in every way, except that he was dead. Given that Fitz and I didn't have much in common. When I looked at it, he was actually kind of boring. A typical Southern California-type who never reads a book because the weather's too good. If he had called, I probably would have turned him down flat.

"Excuse me if I don't share the warm memories." My voice shook slightly, which made me furious with myself.

Fitz looked down at his black dress shoes. They were covered with dust. "I'm sorry. My life was complicated back then."

"How?"

"I was married. With three kids." He heard my gasp. "Look, I wasn't living with my wife. We were having trouble and I'd moved out. I figured we'd get back together. But then I met you and...you kind of shook me up. I didn't want to like you...as much as I did."

He spun the gold wedding band on his ring finger. "We're still separated. I'm living in a motel. And I put this back on, to keep myself out of trouble."

The ring hung loosely. I looked up and noticed the hollows around his eyes. He *has* lost weight over the past year, I thought. Hard times. I wondered about his wife, if she was hoping for a reconciliation too.

I crumpled the cellophane wrapper from the date bread. "You should have told me."

"You're right."

"Why didn't you?"

"Pure self interest." He gave a humorless laugh. "You still think I'm a jerk, don't you?"

“That’s a real possibility.”

“Okay.” He opened his eyes. Then he smiled. “But I’m a jerk who likes you. And I always did.”

A drone came from the sky. We both looked up. Between the treetops I caught the distant silver gleam of a helicopter.

Fitz jumped to his feet and yelled into his radio. “Is that a news chopper?” The answer displeased him. “Okay. I’ll meet you in the parking lot.”

He grabbed my jacket from the bench and draped it around my shoulders. “I’ve got to break the news to her uncle before the goddamned TV news does it for me,” he said. “Let’s go.”

The little breeze had strengthened, blowing white sand around the parking lot in glittering clouds. It blew long, reddish tendrils across the eyes of my younger sister Tessa, who was waiting, white-faced, just outside the gate.

“Oh no, oh no, Betsy,” she moaned, as I emerged. She threw herself on me like an affectionate collie, enveloping me in flying tresses and a slight odor of zoo. I hugged her tight.

“Oh this is terrible, I never thought--” She shuddered and clutched me tighter. “I hated her and now I feel so...so guilt-ified!”

In times of stress, Tessa invented words freely. Over her strawberry blonde mop, I caught sight of Fitz, listening.

“Tessa, this is Detective Jimmy Fitzpatrick.”

Tessa looked at Fitz, then back at me. Her mouth formed an ‘O.’

“You knew Miss Tuttle?” Fitz asked.

Tessa’s lower lip trembled. “Not really,” she said. She scuffed a sneakered foot in the sand. “I came here a few times with Bets. Sonia waited on us. Bets liked her but she...she used to slam my food down on the counter and glare.”

Fitz looked sweet and concerned. I knew that look. “She was rude to you, was she?”

Tessa looked at him quickly, then shrugged. “Oh, it was nothing. I barely knew her.” She put her arm around me. “Can I take my sister home now?”

Fitz glanced across the parking lot, where Moss was lumbering towards the unmarked blue sedan. He turned back to Tessa. “Take care of your sister, Mrs. Childe. She’s had a rough morning.”

We watched him walk across the parking lot, square-shouldered in his tan suit. Tessa murmured, “Was that the cop you--”

“Yes,” I said wearily. The door of the sedan slammed and sand whined under the wheels as it moved towards the exit.

When they arrived, Godfrey might be out on the patio, in his wheelchair. Maybe he’d be sipping artificially sweetened lemonade. Maybe he’d be chatting with one of his three hundred friends and acolytes about the fearful ordeal of coaching a well-known rock star who wanted to sing Gilbert & Sullivan.

“Dear Heart, she had a range this big,” he’d say, holding his thumb and forefinger one quarter inch apart, his eyes snapping with spite and glee. And then, the detectives would arrive.

Mario told me that when the police inform you about a loved one’s death, they

always say it three times. The first time, you can't quite hear it. The second time, you hear the words, but they sound like a foreign language. It isn't until the third time that you start to cry.

I pulled away from Tessa and felt in my bag for my car keys.

She clung to my arm. "Bets, what are you doing!"

"I'm going to follow them."

"Oh no!"

"Sweetie, Godfrey is old, ill, and somebody just murdered the only relative he had left."

"Do you want me to drive you there?"

I shook my head.

"Or...or I could go over to your place, and let myself in and wait for you."

In a fit of sisterly bonding, Tessa and I had exchanged car and house keys when I moved out to the desert.

Again, I shook my head. "Better not. I have no idea how long this will take."

My sister's eyes filled with tears. "Bets, don't get involved. This has nothing to do with us."

I looked at her curiously. Was all this emotion on my behalf?

"Thanks for coming," I said, giving her a quick hug. "I'll call you later."

Then I sprinted across the sandy lot to my car.

CHAPTER THREE

In a once-neglected neighborhood on the east side of Sapphire Springs, hip urban expats and other fans of mid-Century modernism had restored a clutch of seedy, old motels from the 1940s and '50s. Now the area was a giddy whirl of Rat Pack era design, lit by neon sombreros, flamingos and giant martinis.

Sonia's uncle, Godfrey Tuttle, owned a bungalow in this neighborhood, on the grounds of The Sputnik Inn, an old, restored motor court with a jutting, butterfly roof, right out of the early space age. At dusk, a little neon space capsule over the entrance began orbiting a neon planet. That's when people crowded into the inn's Cosmic Bar for Moonshots, a lethal mix of pepper vodka and sloe gin.

Just now, the inn was quiet in the hot, mid-morning sun. An ordinary time of day, not usually associated with murder. I waited in the inn's parking lot, leaning against my dusty, green Mini. Sonia's large, pleading brown eyes hovered in my mind. Was she asking me to protect Godfrey?

Godfrey Tuttle was just possibly my favorite person in all of Southern California. A voice teacher who'd retired after a busy career coaching Hollywood movie stars and before that, Broadway actors, he had a million funny anecdotes about gigantic egos and shaky diaphragms. Within fifteen minutes of our meeting, he cast me as Miss Adelaide in a fantasy version of *Guys and Dolls* and ordered me to get down on the floor and start lifting a telephone book with my abdominal muscles to produce "a rounder tone."

"Darling, I love that little touch of New York in your voice, you're making me homesick," he told me. "When you order me around, do it very Noo Yawk."

He and Sonia were an unlikely pair. She never got his jokes. Clearly she was devoted to her uncle and just as clearly, she disapproved of him. Every time he referred to one of his former boyfriends, she winced.

Ironically, the life insurance Sonia had bought to help her uncle made him a suspect in her murder. But maybe that would come to nothing. I doubted Sonia's policy was worth much. Fitz would meet Godfrey and realize how gentle he was, how civilized. How ridiculous it was to suspect such a man. With Godfrey's wit, charm, and encyclopedic knowledge of classic musical comedy, he was the kind of person who improved life just by being in it.

On the way over, I'd called Fitz's cell to explain why I wanted to be there when they broke the news. To my surprise, Fitz agreed. He asked me to wait until they showed up, which took another twenty minutes. They parked next to me and Moss lumbered out of the driver's seat. Fitz emerged from the other side holding a manila envelope.

"So this is where Mr. Tuttle lives," Fitz remarked, looking at the inn's neon sign, immaculate beige facade and sculpted ficus trees. "Is he gay?"

"Is it important?" I couldn't help staring at the manila envelope.

"Probably not. But I'll need to know about any major relationships."

I hesitated. "Godfrey has a lot of friends, but I don't think there's anyone special."

Fitz and Moss exchanged glances.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I said. "Godfrey's friends had nothing to do with Sonia's death and neither did he."

"Calm down, Betsy. We're not here to accuse anyone," Fitz said.

Moss jerked his head in my direction. “You sure about this?”

Fitz nodded. “The old man’s comfortable with her.”

I didn’t like the sound of that either, but I bit my tongue and walked with them under the little neon space capsule, through the lime green lobby and out to the patio.

Around the keyhole-shaped pool, dozens of well-oiled male bodies baked in the sun, without a pair of swim trunks in sight. Usually, I visited Godfrey early or late, when the pool area was empty. Never before had I seen this astounding array of beefcake.

As we walked by in our business suits, everyone looked up. Even the pool’s sole occupant, a young man with a bald spot, stopped swimming laps. Water slapped against the sides of the tank. Under the surface, the lap swimmer’s nude body shimmered and refracted. The smell of coconut sunscreen was overpowering.

Fitz’s radio broke the silence. Blushing and muttering under his breath, he pulled it out of his belt as every face turned to him. A sandy-haired young man on a chaise lounge propped himself up on one elbow and gazed admiringly at Fitz. “Officer,” he said, as we passed, “I’ve been bad. Arrest me, please.”

Beyond the pool, six bungalows with sliding glass doors and breezeways perched among cactus and grapefruit trees. The first on the left belonged to Max Greene, the owner of the Sputnik—a grouchy, ex-Brooklynite. Godfrey’s was next door.

This morning, Godfrey wasn’t in his usual spot on the patio and I could hear the reason.

“Take my hand, I’m a stranger in Paradise!” bellowed a male voice, slightly flat but trying hard. The piano accompaniment died.

“More breath,” came Godfrey’s resonant baritone from inside the house.

“Sweetheart, you’re trying to ride a bike with two flat tires. Give it some air!”

“Who is that?” Fitz muttered.

I winced as the flat singing recommenced. “Sounds like one of his voice students. Probably Hendryck Schwenk, a young Dutch guy.” My stomach twisted, and I wondered why.

Fitz rang the bell. After a moment, Hendryck emerged, with his pet iguana, Ignatius, on one shoulder. They made quite a pair. Hendryck was blond, about thirty-five and wore a rust-colored polyester shirt, the kind that elderly men bowl in. He was beautiful in a Nordic way, with a chiseled nose and wide-set, blue eyes. His scaly, green alter ego was three feet long, with a bulging mid-section, a spiny head with a set of dewlaps dangling under its lower jaw and splayed toes, like a tree frog on steroids.

“Hi, Hendryck,” I said.

Ignatius gave me a baleful stare. So did his owner.

“We are busy,” said Hendryck. Ignatius raised his tail and hissed.

The handsome Dutchman had been hanging around Godfrey’s cottage a lot in the past few months. Godfrey, who looked sheepish whenever Hendryck’s name came up, told me the young man had just moved here from Amsterdam.

Moss glanced at me and cleared his throat.

I said quickly, “Hendryck, these men are from the police. They need to talk to Godfrey.”

“What has happened?” Hendryck demanded. “Why do you bother Godfrey?” He

reached up and stroked Ignatius under the chin. Then he added, with an odd smile, “He is a useless old man. No good to anybody.”

His hostility startled me. I’d assumed that Hendryck was yet another one of Godfrey’s fans...at the very least.

Understandably, Fitz was losing patience. “Excuse us, Sir,” he said, pushing past Hendryck, into the house. Moss and I crowded in behind him. Down the hall, Godfrey had resumed playing the rest of *Stranger in Paradise*. He wasn’t half bad as a pianist.

Fitz motioned me ahead and I started to lead them towards the living room, which doubled as Godfrey’s studio. Hendryck followed.

Fitz turned to him. “We need to speak with Mr. Tuttle privately.”

“Did Godfrey commit a crime?” Hendryck asked, with a snigger.

Fitz looked at him with a genial smile. “Why don’t you give my partner your name and address, Mr., uh--?”

“Schwenk. I am Hendryck Schwenk.”

“You seem to know Mr. Tuttle fairly well.”

Hendryck pursed his sculpted lips. “If I do?”

Fitz refused to be provoked. “If you do, maybe you can help. This is a serious matter.” He turned away. “Excuse us, Sir.”

“No!” said Hendryck, his hostility instantly replaced by concern. “I must be with Godfrey!” His lower lip trembled. “If there is a problem, please understand, he needs me--”

His protests faded as Moss gripped his elbow and escorted him back outside. Fitz threw me a bemused glance but I didn’t smile back. Hendryck and his relationship with

Godfrey made me very uneasy.

The bungalow's Modernist architect would have been appalled by Godfrey's taste. A big Chinese vase full of peacock feathers dominated the front hall. Walls meant to be spare and white were lacquered a deep, clubby green and covered by framed Broadway posters and movie stills, with autographed photos from grateful stars filling in between.

The living room was down on the left. Just inside, an antique, ebony grand piano, covered with gilded chinoiserie, looked like it was about to can-can into the hall, kicking its severely tapered legs. More framed photographs crowded together on top of the piano, atop a fringed, silk shawl.

As we entered, Godfrey's big, gray cat Dorothy shot across our feet and disappeared. Smiling, Godfrey maneuvered himself up from the piano bench.

He stood, clinging to the instrument for support. "Good gracious, is it Betsy?"

A slight man, he had a huge voice, like a radio announcer turned up a notch too loud. His angular, black eyebrows—amplified by thick glasses—gave him a look of comical surprise. He wore a red and white striped dress shirt with a white ascot and dark trousers. His black crocodile loafers gleamed with polish. Underneath the left one, I knew, he was missing two toes, lost to diabetes.

"Come, in all of you," he boomed. "May I offer you some dreadful, sugar-free lemonade?" He held out his free arm and I gave him a hug.

"As your social worker," I said, "I demand that you sit down."

With a nod of relief, Godfrey crossed the room gingerly and dropped down onto his favored seat: a claw-footed Empire sofa, writhing with carved snakes and sphinxes. It

looked like a leftover prop from a bad Broadway show, which it was. He motioned me to sit next to him. The cat reappeared and jumped back into his lap.

“I hope Hendryck wasn’t rude.” Godfrey peered at me anxiously. “Oh, he was.” He stroked Dorothy’s back and sighed. “Poor boy, he’s frustrated. He works so hard...” He added with the glimmer of a smile, “With such dreadful results.”

Moss entered, rubbing his ear indignantly. “That damn lizard lashed me with its tail.”

Godfrey’s black eyebrows shot skywards. “Neither Hendryck nor his iguana are behaving well this morning,” he observed. “Now Betsy, who are these gentlemen?” He winked but I could tell he was uneasy. “Admirers, I presume?”

Fitz stepped forward. “Mr. Tuttle, I’m Detective James Fitzpatrick, with the Sapphire Springs Police. This is my partner, Detective Richard Moss.”

“What on earth--” Godfrey began.

“Godfrey...” I took his hand, a delicate construction of loose skin and veins. “It’s about Sonia, Godfrey. She--” to my dismay, tears welled in my eyes and my throat closed up.

Fitz said quietly, “Mr. Tuttle, I’m sorry to tell you this, Sir, but your niece, Sonia, is dead.”

Godfrey’s hand went rigid in mine. I held it tight.

“Mr. Tuttle, your niece Sonia died last night,” Fitz repeated.

“Yes, I heard you. I don’t believe you, though,” said Godfrey. He pulled his hand away from me, to concentrate on scratching Dorothy’s ears. His voice sounded almost cheerful.

“There must be a mix-up. Why on earth would Sonia die? She was just here yesterday

morning. She brought me my prescriptions and some awful sugarless chocolates.”

“She was stabbed, Mr. Tuttle. One of our men found her body on Halliday’s date ranch earlier this morning.”

Godfrey took off his glasses and peered down sightlessly at his cat. “Hello, Dorothy, hello,” he whispered. “Give me a paw.” After a few moments, two big drops fell on Dorothy’s shining fur. When Godfrey looked up, his lined cheeks were running with tears.

There is something lousy about seeing an older person cry. In my line of work, I see it often and it gets to me every time. Maybe I think that old age should be happy, after all people go through to get there.

I got Godfrey a handful of Kleenex. He stared at it blankly, while the tears coursed down. Finally I took the tissues away from him and wiped his face. Gently I patted his tanned cheek, which gave off a whiff of Aqua di Parma.

He looked up at me, childlike. Then he shifted his gaze to Fitz and asked, in a wondering tone, “Who would do such a thing?”

Fitz’s tone was flat. “We’ll find out, Sir.”

“She never did anything unkind to anyone,” Godfrey said. “I’m the one who’s old and unfit to live.”

He turned and stared blankly out the window. Distantly, a lawn mower hummed. Fitz coughed and glanced at the manila envelope in his hand. “Mr. Tuttle, do you mind if we sit down?”

Godfrey stared at the detectives as if they were visitors from Mars.

“Is it okay?” I asked him softly.

He nodded.

The detectives lowered themselves into a pair of spindly, antique slipper chairs, opposite the sofa.

Fitz leaned forward. "Mr. Tuttle, I realize you've had a bad shock. But our people just found an envelope in Miss Tuttle's apartment, and I wondered if you can tell us anything about it." He held up the manila envelope. "Betsy, it was addressed to you."

I sat up in surprise.

"I apologize for opening this without asking you first, Betsy," Fitz said. From the envelope, he pulled a bundle of photocopies. He held up a copy of a snapshot.

"That's a picture of Sonia," I exclaimed. "Godfrey, don't you have the same one?"

Godfrey stared. "On the piano," he said numbly.

Moss got up to take a look. "Same picture," he agreed.

"Any idea why she'd leave this for you, Betsy?" said Fitz.

I shook my head, mystified. The photo was very out of date. Sonia looked so much younger, thinner and happier, I could barely believe it was the same woman.

The picture showed only her face and shoulders. She was smiling dreamily. A few wisps of sun-streaked hair blew across her half-closed eyes. She sat on a stone wall surrounding the rear terrace of a dark, shingled house.

I glanced up. Godfrey was staring at the picture as if he was about to cry again.

"She gave it to me as a present. She told me she was in love with the man who took it."

"Who--" I began.

Fitz gave me a look. “Did she mention the man’s name, Mr. Tuttle?”

He shook his head. “When I asked, ‘who?’ the curtain came down. She—she used to drive me mad with those silences.” His voice trembled. “But even when I was snippy with her, she came over every day to see what I needed. She ran errands, helped me with medical bills.” He sat very erect. “I didn’t deserve it. I’m far too frivolous. She was appalled by most of my friends. But she tried so hard--it touched my heart.”

The room was silent. Godfrey lay back against his cushions and covered his eyes with one hand.

Fitz said softly, “I’m very sorry, Mr. Tuttle. If you think you can handle it, I’d like to show you and Betsy what else was in the envelope.”

Almost imperceptibly, Godfrey nodded. Fitz handed me a photocopy of a check. Sonia had written it out for twenty thousand dollars, payable to Desert Senior Care. A notation at the bottom said, “G. Tuttle.”

“This would pay our monthly fees for...” I did a rapid calculation. “About a year.”

“Did Miss Wishniak normally pay ahead?” Fitz asked.

“No,” I said. I glanced at Godfrey, and refrained from adding that I’d never understood how she could pay us at all. DCC wasn’t cheap, especially for someone on a waitress’s salary.

Godfrey said, “Good heavens, it sounds...as if she was going away. But she never said a word.”

Of one thing I was now certain. The message on my answering machine had been a farewell. Sonia had been planning to go somewhere. Presumably not where she ended up.

Fitz pulled out another sheaf of copies.

“This is the last item from the envelope,” he said, holding up a lengthy document full of tables and fine print. He handed it to Godfrey. “Mr. Tuttle, have you seen this before?”

Godfrey glanced over it and shook his head.

“This is Miss Tuttle’s life insurance policy.”

“Sonia mentioned some life insurance. I didn’t pay much attention,” Godfrey said.

“Was she worried about her health?” Fitz asked.

Godfrey shook his head. “She was a big, healthy thing who never missed a meal. I can’t believe she...she...”

“Do you know that you’re her sole beneficiary?”

Godfrey glanced at Fitz and then at the copies in his hand. “I suppose so,” he said. “Poor darling. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings but I thought the whole thing was silly and morbid.”

“Do you have any idea how much money is involved, Mr. Tuttle?”

Perspiration glistened on Godfrey’s forehead. He blotted it with some of the tissues.

“Mr. Tuttle,” Fitz repeated. “Do you have any idea how much money is involved?”

Listing slightly, Godfrey reached into a jar of candy on the coffee table. “Excuse me,” he said, fumbling with a butterscotch drop. “I think the old blood sugar needs propping up.”

I stared in horror. Fitz, I knew, might take all of this as a sign of guilt. I took it as the sign of an imminent diabetic seizure.

Before I could intervene, Fitz said smoothly, “Mr. Tuttle, you haven’t answered my question. So I’ll answer it for you. Your niece bought this life insurance about a year ago.

The coverage lasted only five years, so the premiums were low. But the benefits exceed a million dollars.”

Dorothy melted off Godfrey’s lap as he tried to stand up. “Can you possibly be suggesting--” he said, his voice shrill. He clung to the arm of the sofa, weaving. “Are you—you accusing me of--Oh my God.” With a groan, he started to fall.