

# *Splendor Bay*

A Mystery Novel By

**LB COBB**

“*SPLENDOR BAY* LANDS BILL GLASSCOCK... ON A WHIRLWIND SEARCH FOR THE WOMEN IN HIS LIFE, A MURDERER, AND PROOF OF HIS OWN INNOCENCE” — PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“IN *SPLENDOR BAY*, THE COMMONPLACE BECOMES EXTRAORDINARY DUE TO THE IDENTITIES AND EMOTIONAL INTENSITY OF THE CHARACTERS... COBB IS ONE HELLUVA WRITER” — MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

“THE EXCEPTIONAL SENSE OF PLACE DRAWS YOU IN... A SENSUAL, SUSPENSEFUL, MURDER MYSTERY” — REVIEW OF TEXAS BOOKS

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This Adobe eBook edition of *Splendor Bay* has a larger size text font than the trade softcover and library hardcover print editions of the book, hence it also has a greater page count.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

**B**ill Glasscock, a suspended-for-malpractice attorney, wakes from his girlfriend Sally Solana's bed and faces the challenge of his life. The stiff the local cops have just found on Splendor Bay beach below Sally's bayview mansion is Bill's soon-to-be ex-wife Eleana's lover, Governor Wallie Moreno. Girlfriend Sally, the state's attorney general, is missing. So is wife Eleana, head of the state archives. In addition to having a complicated love life, Bill is quickly the prime suspect of a host of cops—local, state, and federal. All of which is just the catalyst Bill needs to abandon his sabbatical from life for a quest to save those he loves from a murderer. Suspense, conflicted relationships, quirky characters you will love and remember, crisp dialogue, wry humor, and a feel-good ending are a few of the reasons Splendor Bay grabs you by the heart and sweeps you along on waves of emotion to its surprising conclusion.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.B. Cobb grew up in Tennessee and practiced geology before practicing law. She now lives in Houston, Texas.

# ONE

*Saturday, May 26, 8:00 AM*

There's not much to see around here if you don't count the view of sparkling turquoise water and ivory sand below buff-colored cliffs where mint-candy-colored houses dangle precariously. Some folks say the spectacular view of the bay is the reason God gave people eyes. Other folks don't say much. So, unless you're into tight-lipped people, glorious scenery, candy-colored houses, or our main drawing card, touristy restaurants enhanced architecturally by the hulls of old boats attached to their roofs, there's no reason to be here.

The view is what does it for me. On a clear day and with a clear head, a jog along Splendor Bay beach is reason enough to be living. It's my coming-of-age panorama, the place where my teenage ghost plays the male lead in the *Beach Blanket Bingo* adaptation of *Splendor in the Grass* always running on the drive-in movie screen in my mind's eye. The view and my ghost are the reasons I've never been able to grow up and leave home. Correction. I did leave once, for too many years, but I don't plan on ever doing that again.

Anyway, the day was one of those crisp, crystalline May days that come just before summer's heat, a day with a shimmering cornflower-blue sky and not a whiff of the refineries down the coast, a day for feeling young in my little spot of heaven on planet

earth. Even the booze ache behind my eyes had eased up enough for me to contemplate a jog on the beach as my workup to a day of pretending I still had my life ahead of me, still had time to get it right if only I'd give it one more try.

There I was, contemplating my woebegone past and my uncertain future, thinking maybe this would be the day I really would give it one more try, when I glanced down from my perch on the deck of Sally Solana's bayview manor and had an entirely different thought: why the heck is that John Doe near the water's edge choosing to be dead on such a day?

There he was, in a black tuxedo, with the diamond studs in his shirt glistening brighter than the mica in the quartz sand, washed up with the seaweed, spoiling my view, interfering with my contemplation of activities physical, right out there on the good stretch of beach where I should have been running.

Looking back, I guess it wasn't a matter of choice, for the stiff or for me. Things happen. Sometimes you have to ride the wave.

I had strolled out to the deck with my first cup of coffee just as the beach patrol discovered the body. That caught my eye. After shrugging their shoulders at each other, they called out Splendor Bay's finest. The men in tan arrived quickly with the siren blaring. That got my full attention. I finished my second fix of caffeine while watching the activities below through Sally's opera binoculars.

Tiny Sanders, the biggest of our local cops, was stomping around, doing just about every dumb thing imaginable to destroy the integrity of the crime scene, everything but kick the body to see if the stiff really was dead.

His partner, the newest and youngest member of the three-man Splendor Bay PD, a twenty-one-year-old black kid with the

Hispanic name Gomez, was puking his guts out behind the dune in front of the department's one and only squad car, a vehicle that I now respected.

The Police Caprice, with a 5.7 liter V-8, could outrun Baby, my sleek '57 Corvette rag-top with her original 283-cubic-inch, gas-guzzling, many-times-lovingly-rebuilt engine. I had discovered that sobering fact when Gomez gave me a run for my money, just before I failed his breath-analyzer test, just after I burned up what remained of Baby's brake shoes trying to stop before I landed in the middle of the bay.

When the rescue squad's elderly Bronco ambulance/coroner's meat wagon pulled in behind the Caprice, I bet myself that Splendor Bay's premier crime fighters would get one of the vehicles stuck in the sand before they finished the paperwork on the dead dude. When they pulled out the zip-lock stiff bag, curiosity got the best of me. I doubled my bet with myself and made the fateful decision to leave the safety of my girlfriend's cliff-hugging house for a closer look-see. Actually, "girl" is a mild stretch of the facts in Sally Solana's case. And I don't suppose you could call her my friend anymore.

Just so you know, I don't normally go poking my nose into crime scenes I'm not paid to poke my nose into. But this one was different. I don't normally find death on my doorstep. And with Sally's opera glasses, I had counted a dozen glittering diamond studs in the John Doe's pleated shirt. Since we don't get many stiffs on this section of beach and the ones we do get don't usually turn up wearing a tux, that had me extra curious. I wanted to see who he was, something I couldn't do from Sally's deck because his face tilted away from me in his final view of the bay. I was figuring someone might be willing to pay for a photo or two, or

a few unofficial facts on a stiff who could afford to die in diamonds. And I could use the cash since this month's Scotch trust fund allowance had already been spent at Fred's Fine Liquors, down the boardwalk from Fred's Fine Seafood Bar and Grill, up the beach from my own humble shack.

You never know, I told myself, John Doe might be somebody interesting enough for a grocery store tabloid. Or some rich relative might want to know where he was and/or who or what had done him in, which was part and parcel of my current line of work—private eyeing—when the weather wasn't suitable for surfing. Besides, I reasoned, if someone who knew something about protecting the evidentiary value of crime scenes, such as me, didn't get down there soon, what few clues there were would be washed away in the next tide.

Having concluded the cops could use my help, I pulled a pair of shorts on over my briefs, slipped on a T-shirt and flip-flops, picked up my camera, and casually descended the steep wooden stairs to the beach. Gomez was through puking when I got close enough for it to matter. He had started back around the vehicles toward the dead dude, ready to be a man about it, when I caught up with him.

"Who is it, Gomez? Anybody who anybody would care is dead?" I asked politely. I believe in being polite and direct. You never know, sometimes the truth pops out when you confuse people like that. If that doesn't work, you can always go to phase two—intimidation, or bribery.

"What're you doing here, Fragile Dick?" Gomez asked, being impolite as heck as he hitched up his pants just like Barney Fife on the old *Andy Griffith Show*.

Fragile Dick had been my handle since third grade. It was the worst thing any of the little guys could think of to do with a last name like Glasscock; there wasn't much you could do with a first name like Bill. Fortunately, for my self-respect and for the women in my life, Fragile Dick was a misnomer.

"Just happened to be in the neighborhood. Visiting a friend. Guess you could say ex-friend if you want to be meticulous in your terminology. Up there." I pointed to the enormous house where Sally-with-the-gorgeous-body-and-exceptional-brain had graciously allowed me to spend the night. Not that I was in any condition to leave when our friendship ended, mind you. Sally must have been. Able to leave, that is. Because she wasn't there when I woke up with the strong belief that a little sun on my face would take away the too-much-whiskey pain behind my eyeballs. So far, I had been half right. If I squinted with the left eye closed, I didn't hurt near as much.

I squinted at the kid. "Come, on, Gomez. Who's the stiff? Anybody important?"

"Maybe," Gomez allowed. "Tiny just told the Chief he ought to get his white honky ass out here, real quick. I was heading back over there when you so rudely interrupted me from my duties to the citizens of our fair town."

"Fair is right, Gomez. Do your superiors know you're a bigot? I bet Tiny never said the Chief had a white honky ass. It's probably a red pimply ass anyway. You're the only guy in town who doesn't have sun-bleached hair and all you do is lord it over us white guys. Just because you have a tan to die for. What do you use anyway? A minus SPF 45 sunscreen?"

"Why? You want to be beautiful like me, Fragile Dick?"

“Of course. Why do you think I spend so much time in the sun? I’ve seen the way girls turn their head when you drive around in the cruiser.”

“I’ll need some official identification before I let you near my crime scene,” Gomez said, a bit chattier now that I’d acknowledged his superior swordsmanship. “How do I know they didn’t pull your license for good cause since the last time I saw you? And I’d like to inventory the guy’s pockets before you get within ten feet of him. Routine procedure. Remember?”

“Come on, Gomez, just one teeny, tiny favor,” I whined, “and I’ll let you keep the diamond studs.”

Gomez didn’t answer. At that moment, we heard the squawk of the Police Caprice radio. Tiny Sanders, the other cop, was communicating with the world at large, the Chief in particular.

“Yeah, done that,” Tiny shouted over the surf’s roar. “Have a tentative ID on the floater. Driver’s license says he’s Wallace Moreno. Had five hundred in cash in a money clip, so he wasn’t robbed. I’d say you’d better get ready to vote for a new governor, Chief. The current one is a little under the weather.”

I have to admit, when I heard that, my first thought was—  
There is a God!

My second thought was—Oh, what a beautiful morning!

In my mind’s eye, my teenage ghost did a quick *Swan Lake* up and down the beach.

The slimy bastard was dead. Joy! Joy!

In addition to being the late Governor Moreno of our great state, he was the same self-serving cur who had aided and abetted my beautiful and soon-to-be ex-wife in the fine old practice of cuckoldry, or cheating, as in “Your Cheating Heart,” if you prefer Hank Williams to William Shakespeare, as most folks do.

My prayers had been answered. For reasons as yet known only to God, instead of enjoying my wife, the governor was now enjoying the state of final repose I had wished upon him.

My third thought was—Darn! I bet they'll think I did it.

I was right. It didn't take long for the cops to give my third thought serious consideration. By then, I had more acute concerns.

## TWO

*Saturday, May 26, 9:00 AM*

I snapped a quick dozen shots of Silent Wallie before three carloads of state police barreled onto the beach, followed a few minutes later by two cars of FBI special agents. What with the uniformed state guys and Brooks-Brothered Feds assisting the locals in kicking sand at Moreno, it was clear my volunteer services were excess to the event. I left the other guys to play murder investigation and climbed the stairs to Sally's house. No one seemed to notice my leaving.

I showered, shaved, and changed into clothes that I kept at Sally's in case she wanted to dine out where shoes and shirt were required for service. I found a buttondown shirt left over from my suit-wearing days, a clean pair of jeans, and a pair of tassel loafers. Socks were too formal for my planned activities. Having gotten myself presentable for snooping around Splendor Bay, I fixed an omelet, took it and a beer out to the deck, and watched the entertainment below through Sally's binoculars.

An hour passed while small groups of cops conferred with one another, milled about, conferred with other one another. Lab guys showed up looking for something to collect. The governor and a few sprigs of seaweed were it. Two carloads of state cops loaded up, squealed onto the pavement, ran a red light

to make the turn onto Cliff Road, and headed up the ridge in the general direction of Promontory Point. Then the rescue squad loaded the sun-ripening governor into the meat wagon for his trip to the county morgue in the basement of Brewer's funeral home in downtown Splendor Bay.

I felt a momentary pang of regret seeing those diamond studs drive away. They could have paid my tab at Fred's, a couple of months rent, and bought Baby some new brake shoes, with enough change left over for a day at the pony track. However, just knowing Moreno was now waiting his turn for the coroner's carving table tempered my regret immensely.

As soon as the recently departed governor departed the beach, the remaining state cops and the Feds took off in the same direction the first two cars had taken up the cliff. I briefly wondered what sort of cop convention was going on at Promontory Point today then turned my attention to Gomez and Tiny who had been left on the beach looking as if they had been told by their big brothers that they were too little to play cops and robbers.

The whole show was over in less than two hours. By then, it had turned into a dazzling morning. So resplendent a morning that even with the lingering pain in my head, I felt like exercising my inquisitive nature. I rejoined Tiny and Gomez on the beach to see what the official story was before I went snooping in town for gossip.

The only new information I picked up was that Moreno wasn't the only dead dude. His limo driver had been found in a burned out crash just beyond Promontory Point, the reason the big cops had sped away in that direction. The crash site was outside the city limits and SBPD's jurisdiction, the reason Tiny and Gomez had been left behind, or so Tiny said.

Tiny readily confirmed my initial observation—Moreno's cause of death wasn't immediately apparent. No gunshot wounds, no blows to the head, no slashed throat, no stab wounds, just dead and already stiff. That left a host of natural and unnatural causes of death for the coroner to choose from.

Gomez put his money on the safe bet—drowning—since the beach patrol had pumped a little sea foam out of Moreno before calling SBPD. Why he had gone for a swim in a tux wasn't a significant issue in Gomez's mind. Tiny picked the heart-attack-stroke-aneurysm category because of Moreno's age—fifty-eight—betting it occurred while Wallie was getting a little nooky on the beach. I placed my bet on drug-overdose because I preferred to think the worst of Wallie, and I didn't want to think about who the nookee might have been. Besides, this section of beach had its share of transactions which might lead to drug overdoses as thrilling as Viagra.

According to Tiny, the FBI was sending in an expert to assist the county coroner in analyzing Moreno's innards. The lab work would be expedited. Inquiring minds wanted to know. In the meantime, there were the matters of a state funeral and a successor to pick. And possibly a murderer to find.

The list of potential suspects was too long to go down the whodunit road, so we examined our political science knowledge and placed our bets. Tiny and I last had civics in high school, and Gomez had skipped that course, so our knowledge wasn't extensive. But we all agreed it would be the Vice President and then the Speaker of the House if Moreno had been President of the United States. Tiny and I remembered when Reagan was shot and knew for sure it wasn't Alexander Haig. Gomez was too young to remember Reagan or Haig, so he was easily convinced. None of

us had any idea what happens in state government when you don't have a vice-governor, although we tried to remember what they called the job in Texas when Bush II resigned to be president.

Gomez put his money on the state controller since, according to Gomez, looking after the money is the most important job. Tiny picked the head guy of the state senate, whatever that job is called, because making the laws sounded like an important job to a peace officer. And I put my money on the attorney general. I knew her. We agreed a special election was in order.

"Well, it sounds like you have everything under control," I said, intending to climb the stairs back to Sally's place to see if I could summon the courage to test Baby's brakes down Cliff Road, or the larger question, whether I could make it down Cliff Road without winding up in the same condition as Moreno's limo driver. In addition to buying Baby some new shoes, I thought I might poke around to see if anyone had anything to say on the subject of Moreno's passing, starting at Oma's Kitchen, one of the few places where you can get any chitchat from anybody.

"Wait up a minute," Tiny said as he headed over to the cruiser. "I need to call in."

"Yeah, sure." I turned to take in the view of the bay and a deep breath of sea air while Tiny did his calling in. I fully expected Tiny to suggest coffee at Oma's so we could play one of our little games of guess the perpetrator, a passable substitute for a game of checkers with Old Man McPeters. I was reciting the verse from John Keats' *Endymion* to myself—*Wide sea, that one continuous murmur breeds along the pebbled shore of memory*—one of the few verses I know, when Gomez strolled over to visit.

"You can tell me," I said. "What was the governor doing when he got himself killed?"

“I can’t tell you anything, Fragile Dick.”

Gomez wanted me to beg. “Just a tiny bit of speculation,” I whined. “Something I can trade for lunch at Oma’s.”

“I might as well tell you,” he said.

The thing I liked best about Gomez is you didn’t have to beat information out of him. Usually, you didn’t even have to buy him a drink.

“It’s this way, Fragile Dick. We’ve got nothing.”

“I owe you one.”

“Nothing but speculation,” Gomez expounded in response to my expression of gratitude. “You know his reputation. The governor was out tomcatting last night.”

“So I’ve heard,” I said. Sally Solana, my most recent ex-friend and the current state attorney general, was a Moreno staffer until she had enough on him to convince him to give her a real job. From time to time, Sally shared with me some of the sordid facts she picked up in her work, Moreno’s habits included.

“Nobody thought anything about his outing from the Mansion until he didn’t show up for his seven a.m. staff meeting. Then they started looking for him.”

“Really?”

“There’s a car that trails Moreno’s limo,” Gomez continued, “manned by two sharpshooter state cops. The limo driver’s also a state cop, which gives the governor three body guards with him at all times. For some reason, that didn’t happen last night. Seems this backup car had mechanical trouble. By the time they switched vehicles, the governor was out of sight. Cramer is grilling the two cops now.”

“Which two?” I asked.

“Last names was all I got,” Gomez said. “Block and Sartin. Bet their heads are going to—”

“Bill, the Chief wants you to give a statement,” Tiny yelled, interrupting Gomez just as he was getting to the good part.

I'd heard something recently about Stan Cramer, head of the state police. But with my still pounding head, I couldn't remember what, something Sally had insisted on sharing while I watched a ball game on TV. I'd filed it away in the gray matter, so I'd be ready for one of her you're-not-listening-to-me pop quizzes. The question was, what category? Work stuff? State secrets stuff? Can you believe cops stuff? It would come to me.

“Bill, you hear me?” Tiny yelled again.

“Why me?” I yelled back. “I didn't see anything until I saw you guys down here destroying evidence. I can give him that statement over the car radio if he wants.”

“Don't get smart with me, Bill,” Tiny growled. “One of these days, you're going to push me too far.”

Tiny Sanders outweighed me by a hundred pounds, and he was almost a head taller than my six-three. That didn't scare me. Tiny was too good-natured to scare anyone. He was like having a big teddy bear for a cop. If you could keep him from grinning, his size did a darn good job of scaring the tourists into good driving habits. The rest of us liked him too well to misbehave much. Besides, Tiny was one of only two guys I had gone through school with who never called me Fragile Dick. Fred McPeters, of Fred's Fine Seafood Bar and Grill and Fred's Fine Liquors, was the other. Which, to my way of thinking, proved Tiny loved me like a brother like Fred did. Tiny ought to. I was the one who explained the facts of life when we were eight and got him his first date in high school. If Mary Louise hadn't seen the potential

in him back then, Tiny probably never would have married. Heck, if Mary Louise hadn't seen the potential in him, he never would have had sex. He was just that aggressive.

"Don't shout at me, Tiny. I'm a little under the weather." I rubbed my head where it hurt the worst, between the eyes.

"Damn it, Bill. When are you going to get your act together? You had more going for you than any of us. Look how you've turned out."

"I turned out just fine," I said. "I'm a has-been, not a never-was. I'm on sabbatical from life. Early retirement, if you will."

"Sure. I bet Davy is real proud of his daddy these days. Now, wait for me in the cruiser. I need to talk to Gomez."

"I don't mind listening to you talk to Gomez," I said, deflated, rightly chastised by Tiny's remark. I looked away to my favorite view of the bay. Tiny had hit me where it hurt. My son was the only good thing I had produced in my entire life. I hoped Davy would forgive me for taking time off from being an adult.

"I don't have time for your crap today," Tiny said in a tone that almost made me think he didn't love me anymore. That bothered me, too. I was running out of people who cared.

"Get in the cruiser, Bill," he ordered, throwing me the keys. "Listen to the radio or something."

I got in the front seat, shotgun side, put the key in the ignition and turned it far enough to get the radio playing. Then I pushed buttons until I found the local station that played Peter, Paul and Mary, and other fine musical artists from my youth. I turned the radio off when I heard their plea for money to support the arts. That is, their plea for money to support the odd-ball tastes of people like me who can't handle new-age rock and roll and need

to get over it and the station workers, a group of long-haired, tongue-lip-ear-eyebrow-nipple pierced graduate students who ran the station out of their camper most sunny weekends. I was afraid that if I gave them any money they'd use it to pierce as yet unrevealed parts of their anatomies. As much as I love "Puff," I didn't want that on my conscience.

With nothing else to do, I lowered the windows to catch the breeze, hoping to overhear Tiny and Gomez, and lowered my seat back as far as I could with the cage in place to pretend I was taking a nap and wasn't interested in their conversation. Surf noises prevented much snooping, but before I got bored enough to push the button for the siren, the Center City Channel 12 Eyewitness News van arrived. Out jumped their babe reporter, Pam Somebody, and a cameraman with a long greasy ponytail. That's one thing you can say for living in an out of the way seaside town. By the time the TV news folk show up, there's little but the weather to report.

As Pam leaped around the news van gazelle like, her high heels stuck in the sand. But nothing could keep Wonder Reporter Pam from her story. She slipped out of the shoes and vaulted the rest of the distance in her stocking feet.

"Officer? Officer? What happened here this morning?" Pam shouted. "We've learned that a body, reported to be Governor Moreno, was discovered on the beach. What can you tell our viewers?"

"No comment," Tiny commented loudly. He pulled Gomez by the arm to the cruiser and pushed him into the back seat. Tiny went around the car, slid in behind the wheel, and cranked the engine.

Being a helpful person, I pushed the siren button.

Pam was quick. She stuck her head, microphone-holding right arm, and torso into the open window, draping her plasticized boobs across me as she aimed the microphone for Tiny's tonsils.

"Please, Officer, the citizens are entitled to know what the police are doing about this situation," she shouted, making my ears ring. "Are the state police and FBI involved? Who's in charge of the investigation into the governor's death?"

"No comment," Tiny muttered.

I decided to help Tiny. Since Pam was draped across me anyway, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her on her collagen-injected, red-tattooed lips.

She broke away sputtering.

While Pam was still confused, I pushed her out the window and pressed the button to raise it.

"Now's your chance, Tiny," I said, blowing a kiss at Pam who stood there with an open mouth, apparently in shock that lips had a purpose other than as an outlet for loud sounds. "It always takes women a while to get over my kisses."

"You better hope she doesn't file assault charges on you," Tiny said as he put the Chevy in gear and pulled around the Channel 12 van, not once losing traction in the sand.

I reached in my right pocket and moved the twenty over to the left pocket, promising myself I'd pay up on the rest of the bet when I got some cash.

## THREE

*Saturday, May 26, 11:00 AM*

Splendor Bay Police Chief Murphy Sanders was redder-faced than usual. “Damn it, Bill, what did you see?”

We had been talking only a minute when Chief decided to get high-handed on me and I shut up. You would have thought the voters were watching his performance, but I suspected the viewing audience was merely a minor contingency of state police and FBI agents behind the two-way mirror. Heck, the video camera wasn’t even on, or the little red light was burned out. Equipment maintenance wasn’t a major item in the city budget.

“Have you had your blood-pressure checked lately?” I asked politely. “A man your age ought to avoid stress.”

The least I could do with my part in this passion play was to act like a concerned citizen. Chief Sanders, Tiny’s uncle, was pushing seventy-five. He’d been Splendor Bay’s police chief most of our lives, his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him. Best I could figure, his ancestor must have broken up a gun fight in one of the founding father’s saloons, been appointed chief, and like some English lordship, the title had been passed down to the male heirs ever since.

“Cut the crap, Bill,” Tiny interjected, resting his big hand on the flap of his holster like he was going to draw on me. Tiny didn’t like any sort of controversy, but he was big on respecting

elders and protecting children. Besides, he had to set an example for Gomez as well as a starring role to play in the SBPD version of *Hill Street Blues*.

I acted contrite. “I’ve already told you, Tiny. I didn’t see anything until I saw you guys down at the beach. I had just come out on the deck to drink my coffee. Saw you guys messing around. Thought I’d see what all the commotion was about.”

“Did Sally see anything?” Tiny asked.

“I don’t know. She was gone when I woke up. Our state’s attorney general has more important things to do than lie in bed past daybreak with the likes of me.”

“Know where she is?” the Chief asked, his face not as red as before since I was now being a cooperative witness, and I’d reminded him I had connections. I’m not proud of it, but I can name drop with the best of the have-beens or never-weres.

“No,” I answered the question asked.

When I was a lawyer, I always told my clients to never volunteer information. As the Miranda warning clearly declares, what you say to the police can, and will, be twisted in ways you never dreamed possible and used to screw you over in a court of law if they can’t find anyone else to pin the blame on, or just because you’re handy, or just because they don’t like your face. The only smart thing to say to an inquiring cop is, “Get me a lawyer.” Then shut your mouth.

“Do you know when she left?” the Chief asked politely.

Cops were taught in police school to ask questions lawyers were taught in lawyer school to tell their clients not to answer. If both the suspect and the cop play the game properly, it can take a long time before the suspect gets trapped in enough uncertainty to raise the ante to probable cause for an arrest.

“No,” I answered, disregarding my own internal lawyer advice so we could get this game of twenty-questions over. I proceeded to elaborate. “We were getting along just swell until she got mad about something and left our bed. I have no idea what she did after that.”

“When was this?”

“I don’t remember. In the heat of the night. Before dawn.”

“What did she get mad about?” Tiny asked.

I shrugged my shoulders over the mystery of it all. “Who knows with women? One minute we were being friendly. Then she got mad and started yelling. Now that I think about it, it was when she asked me if I loved her enough to marry her. Have you ever noticed how women wait until you’re too weak to argue to ask such a question?”

“So what happened next?” Tiny asked.

Tiny liked my women-adventure stories, which I fabricated just for him. To my credit, I never talked about the actual details of any intimate relationship I’ve ever had because those have been with women I cared about. Of course, I’ve fabricated the number of adventures and the number of women and given lots of those “you know” hints, which Tiny was too proud to admit he didn’t.

“Guess I gave the wrong answer,” I answered just in time to keep Tiny from beating it out of me. “So nothing happened. She left the bed. I went back to sleep. Next thing I know, the sun’s up, I’m awake. She isn’t there. So I made coffee, took it out to the deck, saw you and Gomez on the beach kicking sand at the stiff. Now we’re here. Together again.”

The Chief glared at Tiny, then at me, and snapped, “Where can we find Sally?”

Good question, I thought, and proceeded to elaborate on my connections. “Seeing as how it’s Saturday, I doubt you’ll find her in her Center City office. She might be at her Center City townhouse, though. But you probably should try her sister’s beach house first. That’s where Sally usually goes when we have a tiff. Her sister’s name is Lizabeth Thorton. She’s married to Chester Thorton, Harvard Law lawyer, heck of a nice guy. They have a small cottage, about an acre under roof off Bayside Road, and a house on Grandview Avenue in Center City, and an apartment in New York, a ranch in Texas, and a place in Beverly Hills, and one in Paris, and—”

“That’s it for now,” Tiny said, concluding the interrogation before I got around to confessing under the pressure of it all. “But just in case you were thinking of leaving town, don’t. We’ll be talking to you again.”

“Looking forward to it.” I extended my hand. “Thank you, Tiny, for the ride into town. I’ll find my own way home.”

In the hallway outside the interrogation room, instead of turning right toward the front desk and outside doors, I turned left. I reached the room behind the mirror in two steps and opened the door to find the head of the state police, Stan Cramer, six or seven other big-belly state cops, the trim Feds from the beach, and the skinny Gomez huddled together discussing my probing interrogation.

Stan, who could have played the mean-bastard captain of the guards in that all time great prison movie, *The Longest Yard*, tipped his hat at me and glared a warning. Then Stan put his hand on his billy stick and stroked it purposefully, in case I mistook his glare for a friendly smile. I took his glare-smile to mean Stan liked his stick. Some cops do.

I winked at Stan. “Was it as good for you as it was for me?”

Tiny reached around me and pulled the door shut. “Damn it, Bill,” Tiny said as he pushed me down the hall, “Why the hell do you pull crap like that?”

“Just checking to see who’s wearing white hats today.”

“Pissing on the wrong man’s shoes, you mean.”

I shrugged and left the building, swaggering like Elvis in his jeweled white cape, strolling right through a quacking flock of newspeople, pretending to be both deaf and dumb as they yelled at me. I looked back to see Tiny shrug at the hopelessness of trying to redeem a screwup like me. Then he turned his attention to Channel 12 Pam and her brothers and sisters in crime reporting.

Across the street, I contemplated the situation. Tiny had been joined by Stan Cramer for a meet-the-press moment. Observing Stan in action, I bet myself he watched *The Longest Yard* on the cable TV free movie channel just like I did, and he was aching to get even for losing that ballgame between the guards and the prisoners. Fortunately, I didn’t look like the football-toting prisoner/hero of that movie.

Sally said I reminded her of *Magnum PI*, running around in shorts and driving a red convertible. I saw myself as more of a *Quigley Down Under* kind of guy, wearing chaps and shooting a big gun. Actually, I’m probably more a sitcom *Coach* kind of guy. My misadventures are usually of the chronic weekly variety, and I have a Dauber and a Luther in my life—Tiny and Fred. Well, sort of. Actually Tiny was an *Armed and Dangerous* kind of cop. And Fred? Even though he looked like a Dauber, Fred was definitely an Archie Bunker at heart. Besides, Sally wasn’t a Christine kind of gal. She wasn’t anywhere near as tenderhearted

as Christine. Sally was a... was a... Heck, I didn't know who Sally was. Sally was mystery enough for any man.

After another moment of silent reflection, I came to three conclusions: I definitely watched too many reruns and old movies on television; my friends and acquaintances were all archetypes; and, I really should spring for the expensive movie channel so I could watch movies from the more recent past decades. Maybe two more conclusions: I probably needed to get my own big stick or one of those big, long Quigley gun just in case Stan Cramer ever caught me alone in a dark alley; and, I really needed to get on with my Sally hunt before she ran into Cramer in a dark alley. On the other hand, Stan could probably look out for himself.

As I ambled down the street like a Matthew Quigley with a saddle across his shoulder *sans* saddle, it came to me there was always the possibility Tiny was Duke, the maniac killer in *The Wrong Guys*, the best Cub Scout reunion camping movie of all time. If Tiny was Duke, then I'd be Tim, the aging surfer going over the killer waterfall on a log in classic surfer pose. In that movie, the elderly den moms had saved the day.

It was definitely time to call on Mom. Come to think of it, Oma was our Cub Scout den mother when Tiny, Fred, and I were kids. How's that for karma?

## FOUR

*Saturday, May 26, 12:15 PM*

I swung into the drugstore to drop off the roll of film with the Wallie-in-death poses on it, scooted on down the sidewalk to the auto parts store and ordered Baby's new shoes, then headed to Oma's Kitchen, my home away from home during the daytime. Fred's Fine Seafood Bar and Grill was my nighttime home away from home. My home at home wasn't much.

The first thing on my list of questions was—where had Sally gone after she left me? Maybe she had stopped for breakfast at the Kitchen. Maybe somebody had seen her somewhere else. Maybe Oma was still serving lunch. Then there was the deeper questions—had Sally happened upon Moreno when she left our bed?

It wasn't just an idle question. One thing Sally had shared with me about her days as a Moreno staffer was that she and Wallie had been chummy for a while. She was just one of many ladies our late governor had been chummy with, including that special lady, my soon-to-be ex-wife, Eleana.

Did it bother me that Moreno and I had slept in two of the same beds? A little. Especially when I found him sleeping in my favorite bed. Which was before I started sleeping in a bed he no longer used. A good prosecutor looking for a little publicity might see enough in a bother like mine to conjure up motive.

Did the fact that Sally had once told me she hated Moreno enough to kill him bother me? Yeah. Just a little. Because Sally Solana was the kind of girl who did what she set her mind to do. She could do it. I didn't think she had done it. At least not last night. Because it seemed to me I was the object of her anger last night. Unless Moreno happened to be handy when she was enraged about men in general. The question was—was Moreno as handy as it appeared he might have been? If so, why?

Mom always told me a gentleman saw a lady to her door. For now, I would concentrate on being a gentleman. I needed to make sure Sally had made it to her intended destination, wherever that was, in one piece. But first, it was time for another consultation with Mom. Maybe she had something else she wanted to tell me.

Mom, now called Oma out of respect for her age and flock of grandchildren, was a short, round, German woman of seventy-something years who wore her silver-and-gold hair in braids around her head. She still spoke with an accent after over fifty years in the United States, coming to Splendor Bay as Bruce McPeters' war bride and staying to raise her own five children and a passel of strays on the proceeds of the town's breakfast and lunch appetites.

Oma's Kitchen was the only place where you could get a decent meal before Fred McPeters' Fine Seafood Bar and Grill opened for dinner at four in the afternoon. The McPeters family's two restaurants not only served delicious meals, they were about the only places to pick up gossip in Splendor Bay. Once folks started spooning Oma's gravy across her homemade biscuits or rolls, they forgot about being so tight lipped. If you caught them after the strudel, they could be downright talkative. If they were on their third round of drinks at Fred's, they might even tell the truth.

Fred McPeters, Tiny Sanders, and I were best friends all through school, pals before kindergarten, sworn blood brothers by the second grade, Cub Scout denmates, high school varsity teammates, all that makes childhood friends closer than brothers. Oma took pity on me when my own mother died and did her best to overcome nature with nurture. Whichever kid around her house was most in need of mothering got her frontal lobe attention. The others were watched by the eyes in the back of her head. I got my share of frontal lobe. Being a work in progress, I still do.

When I showed up in Splendor Bay looking for a place to lick my wounds, Tiny and Fred took over their old buddy roles and Oma resumed her mothering. Anybody in town who wanted to mess with me had to worry about Oma cutting them off from her strudel, or Fred cutting them off from their booze, or Tiny giving them a speeding ticket. That might not sound like much of a deterrent to city folk, but in small town Splendor Bay, that's about as punitive as it gets.

“*Morgen, Bill! Wie geht's* (Morning, Bill! How's it going)?” Oma called out as I opened the door.

“*Nicht schlecht* (Not bad),” I took a seat at the counter where she was busy preparing her famous chicken salad for Sunday's lunch menu. Today's lunch service was about over.

Oma opened the bread drawer, took out two slices of sourdough, and spooned a large helping of the fresh chicken salad between them. She slid the sandwich on a plate, grabbed a handful of potato chips out of a canister on the counter behind her, and placed the food in front of me.

“*Bier?*” she asked.

“Sounds good.”

I looked around. The State Farm insurance guy was getting up. He nodded in my direction, dropped a five on the table to cover the lunch special, and left. Oma and the Hispanic busboy seemed to be the only people in the place. Then I heard Bruce McPeters snoring in the far booth, resting up from his waiter job in the sun-warmed window seat.

Oma whispered, "*Hast du gehoert?* (Have you heard?)"

"*Hab' ich was gehoert?* (Heard what?)" The word was out.

"*Über den Governor?* (About the governor?)"

"*Was über ihm?* (What about him?)"

"*Er wurde um die Ecke gebracht.* (He was assassinated.)"

"Huh?"

She repeated without the idiom, "*Er wurde ermordet.* (He was assassinated.)"

"Who the hell would want to assassinate the governor?" I asked, giving up on German since running Oma's idioms through my brain for interpretation made my head hurt worse. "He's put a chicken in every pot."

"They say it's because he was pro-choice. Or the drug dealers, or someone he put in prison. Many people had reason. He was not a nice man, Bill. He was not a nice man at all."

Obviously, Oma hadn't voted for Moreno. She had her own grudge against him, one of those never-forget-or-forgive German grudges, for Moreno's part in Fred McPeters' one brush with the law. Moreno, never one to overlook an opportunity, used the publicity surrounding Fred's trial to turn a mediocre career as a county assistant district attorney into an appointment as the state's attorney general.

From there, Moreno led the charge against major oil companies on the environmental front during the 1980s, generating

enough publicity and party support to run for governor a decade later. He won his first term on a pro-choice/anti-gay/anti-drug campaign, an interesting position when you thought about it. In his view, women, but not men, could do whatever they wanted with their bodies, except take certain nonprescription drugs.

Fred, on the other hand, had seen a promising future in the outside world derailed at the station by Moreno's opportunism. Thrown out of college and with nothing better to do in life, he came back to Splendor Bay and learned the restaurant business from his parents. Fred's grudge against Moreno was even stronger than Oma's. After all, he had his dad's Scotch blood as well as Oma's German, which made for the human equivalent of a Pit Bull crossed with a Rottweiler.

"Oma, nobody assassinates governors because they're pro-choice, or if they do, they use bombs. And his anti-drug program was only words. The drug dealers threw him hundred thousand dollar a plate dinners. More likely it was a jealous husband. Who's been telling you all this assassination stuff, anyway?"

"Don't say that," Oma whispered, looking around to make sure neither the busboy nor the sleeping elderly Bruce McPeters were listening. The busboy didn't speak English. Old Man McPeters couldn't have heard us if he had been awake, and he wouldn't have remembered the conversation even if he had heard us.

"Don't say what?" I teased. "It's okay to slander the dead. At least that's what the law books used to say. Maybe not Elvis or Jerry Garcia. I'm not so sure either of them is dead. But take it from me, Wallie was no Elvis or Jerry Garcia, and he's for sure dead. I saw the body myself."

“Stop it, Bill,” Oma whispered, one hand partially covering her mouth as the other twisted her apron. “Don’t tease. And don’t say that about the jealous husband.”

Oma seemed truly distressed, and her distress bothered me. She had her share of old-lady medical problems, including adult onset diabetes diagnosed a few years ago.

“Okay, I’ll behave.” I dived into the sandwich.

Oma fluttered about, putting the place in order. I chewed and drank, watching her efficient movements as she wiped the food assembly and serving counters, cleaned and filled salt, sugar, ketchup, and mustard containers, and arranged them around the napkin dispensers.

I hadn’t spilled my guts to Tiny or Fred. Then, I told macho lies, that Eleana kicked me out, the implication being I was the swine who had been caught lusting with more body parts than Jimmy Carter’s heart. Eleana had been discreet enough to wait several months after filing for divorce to show up at political events with Moreno, so they believed me. I had told Oma the whole truth. She could be trusted with my heart’s pain.

The whole truth was that I had played the my-work-is-more-important-than-God-big-prick-lawyer-bread-winner game too long. Eleana found someone else to pay attention to her, and our son lost his parents. Blame me. I did. So did Eleana. I felt better when people blamed me. Heck, I kept the hair shirt and ashes at the ready for any Blame Bill Festival that came along.

When I found out about my wife and Moreno, I walked away from my *successful* life. I gave her the house and everything in the bank. I didn’t force Davy to choose which parent he wanted to live with, reasoning that he needed the stability of his room, his home, his friends, and his mother. Whatever else she was,

Eleana was a good mother. But the real reason was that I just didn't feel up to the job of being me anymore. Davy didn't need to witness my mid-life crisis. That's a hard thing for a boy to see in his father. I know. I had watched my own father go through his when my mother died.

So I walked away from my big prick lawyer game, leaving a big ticket case in the middle of trial. Both the judge and the client complained to the state bar. The state bar suspended my license to practice law. Still not happy, the client sued me for malpractice and quickly won a fat settlement from our firm's malpractice insurance carrier.

That didn't bother me as much as it should have. In my sober moments I even enjoyed the poetic justice of it all.

The new judge in my former client's second trial—first verdict overturned for ineffective assistance of counsel, namely me—ordered the former client to pay the money he had received from our insurance company as restitution to the people he had defrauded and then sentenced him to a ten year term, eight years longer than he'd received in the first trial. Our malpractice insurer gave up some of the premiums our firm had paid over the years because I admitted the malpractice right off and left them no room to stretch out the defense of the claim until everyone died. Then my law partners, miffed when the firm's insurance rates shot up, booted me out. That got me out of attending any more of those insufferable partners' meetings.

As my bonus for going quietly into that good night of hasbeendom, my ex-partners transferred my share of the firm's net worth into the two trusts I'd set up—the major money for Davy's education and some change to be doled out to me each month for the rest of my life in sufficiently small increments to

ensure some degree of moderation in my vices. Score one for Lady Justice, score one for me. If anybody ever sued me again, they'd have to do it for the fun of it. Nobody could touch a penny of the money in those trusts, and I'd given Eleana title to the rest of our formerly joint assets. All of which proves life can be simple when you open your clenched fists and let the grains of bondage fall through. Lawyer, heal thyself.

I came back to Splendor Bay to lick my wounds, rented a small house on the low rent section of beach, taking up the life I'd left off at eighteen, not bothered any longer by those pesky earning-a-living-and-insuring-your-future concerns. I spent a couple of months in near solitude, running up and down the beach and riding waves, dispossessing the nastiest demons in my soul.

Then I ran into Sally at Fred's Bar. She, fully advised of the sad facts of my disappointing life, decided she could rehabilitate me. Neither of us could think of a reason why she shouldn't try. I now filled my days working on getting the vow of poverty stuff right and my nights getting the living-with-Sally thing right. I kept my rented shack, but more often than not, I enjoyed the view from Sally's house and dallied in Sally's life of luxury. It's hard to break old habits, especially in support of a vow of poverty. Besides, her family had been living a life of luxury for centuries, ever since her Conquistador ancestor stole the Indians' gold, or to be politically correct, the Native Americans' gold, or the Indigenous Peoples' gold.

Whatever. At this stage in my life, I didn't see much wrong in being a kept man. I had been the keeper of womankind for years for all the good it had done me. And it was, after all, the Indians' gold. Every red-blooded Euro-American ought to steal some of it just to keep in practice for when we figure out how to rape and

plunder another planet. Besides, the gold had been stolen so long ago nobody was going to make Sally give it back, so she might as well share with those late to the theft.

My pride didn't keep me from eating Sally's food or enjoying her air-conditioning or playing pet gigolo at social events, but it stopped me short of asking her for spending money. So I let her get me a job. Sally used her state government connections to get my ancient PI license reinstated, the one I acquired when working my way through law school because I was then too proud to take my father's blood money.

I now had a means of earning enough cash to supplement my liquor trust income until the state bar lifted the suspension on my law license. When the rent was due or Baby needed new shoes, I hustled a little PI work out of one of my lawyer buddies. But mostly, I watched the waves and the sunsets and the stars and survived through the kindness of Sally and Oma and Fred and Tiny and anyone else I could make feel sorry for me.

Oma finished her cleaning and came back to take my empty plate. She looked me in the eyes. "Promise me, Bill."

I knew exactly what promise she wanted. "Don't worry, Oma. I didn't kill him. I never had the guts. If I had, he would have been dead a year ago."

"Don't talk like that," Oma said in her frightened whisper.

"Trust me." I took a sip of beer. "I didn't do it. I was with Sally last night. You wouldn't happen to know where she is, would you?"

"No." She frowned. "You're the second person to ask today."

"Who was the first?"

"Chester Thorton stopped in for breakfast. He said Sally called Lizabeth at their beach house very early to say she was coming

over, but she never arrived. He thought she must have stayed with you.”

I didn't say anything, chewing on this new piece of information, finishing my beer.

“Bill?” An alarmed look settled on Oma's sweet old lady face. A troubled expression must have been on my own.

“Sally and her Jaguar were gone when I woke up. Don't worry, I'll find her.”

At that moment, the phone rang. Oma wiped her hands on her apron and reached into the shelf beneath the cash register to retrieve it. She also kept a 38-caliber Smith & Wesson Lady Smith in there just in case a robbery-minded stranger crossed her path. She might look like a sweet little old lady, but Oma knew how to use a gun.

“Davy!” Oma smiled her grandmotherly smile when she learned the identity of her caller. “When are you coming to see me? I will make you my special strudel.”

Oma's face went from pleased to troubled. “Bill,” she said as she passed me the receiver. “Davy needs you. It's Eleana.”

“Dad,” Davy said. “Mom wasn't here when I woke up. I've called everywhere looking for her. She's not answering her cell phone or beeper or the phone at her office. I just heard about the governor on TV, and I'm scared, Dad.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“I'm on my way,” I said, praying this wasn't the day I got my three wishes. “Try not to worry. She's probably out shopping.”

I pushed the off button and handed Oma the phone. “Eleana wasn't at home when Davy woke up this morning.”

“You don't think she was with—”

“I hope not. Can I borrow your car? The brakes on the Corvette—”

“Sure, sure, the keys are on the hook.”

As I headed toward the alley door, Oma called me back. “Here, take this.” She pulled her Lady Smith from beneath the counter. “Telephone me when you know anything.”

I almost refused the gun. Then I had second thoughts. You never know, I said to myself as I took it from Oma. Looking back, it’s hard to say what the right choice should have been.

## FIVE

*Saturday, May 26, 1:00 PM*

I almost made it out of Oma's rear parking lot unaccosted. I was familiarizing myself with the buttons on Oma's new Cadillac and had discovered the switch that allowed the edges of the seat to come up and hug my butt snugly when Fred McPeters opened the door and slid into the passenger seat.

"Hi, Bill," Fred said.

"Hi, Fred," I said, looking at a flabby-biceps, bald ex-jock. Fred had a forceful build, a few inches shorter than Tiny, but taller and bigger all around than me. The young, firm body version of Fred had been our senior class football hero the only year Splendor Bay High won the state championship. He landed a football scholarship to State U and was starting to look like an all star in college ball when his luck ran out.

All the girls loved the blond, blue eyed, good-looking, muscle clad Fred of those days, which led to his undoing when Fred and a cheerleader named Beth Ann Somebody were caught in the act on a ping-pong table in the student lounge late one night. Beth Ann's parents brought statutory rape charges in a misguided effort to assert the virtue of their then still seventeen-year-old freshman daughter.

The charge was eagerly prosecuted by the daring young Assistant DA, Wallie Moreno. The trial made the papers and the

start of Wallie's public career. Fred got a probated sentence on a felony conviction—it was consensual but illegal sex—and lost his scholarship. The last anyone ever heard of Beth Ann she had married a Texas oilman who got some secretary of something job in Washington when Bush the First was President. On occasion, I've wondered whether, while Beth Ann ate dinner at the White House and enjoyed a lively discussion on the federal debt with some old senator, she ever thought of Fred and the ping-pong table.

"Where're you going?" Fred asked.

"Haven't decided," I answered.

"Heard there was a murder on Sally's beach."

"Yeah, I heard that."

"Heard it was Moreno."

"Yeah, I heard that, too."

"Did you kill him?" Fred asked.

"Somebody beat me to it," I said.

"Those are the breaks," said Fred.

"Yeah, life's a bitch, then you die."

"You ever think of going into the bumper sticker business?" Fred asked. "You'd be a natural."

"Hmm. Clichés for dollars? That's not a bad an idea. You know, I've always wondered why the intellectually elite are against clichés. Seems to me they sum up life's little truths in neat little packages everyone can understand, like sound bites on the news. Clichés, truisms, platitudes, proverbs, sound bites, bumper stickers? No additives like adverbs or adjectives needed. Like whole wheat bread. Hmm. Do you really think there's money in bumper stickers?"

I convinced Fred I didn't know any more than he did and got him out of the car. When I reached Bay Highway, I set about trying to read the buttons on the digital cell phone in Oma's new Cadillac. Her car also had a satellite tracking system to find it if it got lost. I felt comforted knowing that somewhere in GM's vast empire a technician was sitting in front of a big screen eating his or her hoagie and monitoring my progress as well as that of thousands of other Caddy owners to our final destinations, ready to send out a search party as soon as someone reported any of us missing.

I envisioned the screen looking like one of those wall size electronic maps in all the old bombs-are-coming and new aliens/meteors-are-coming movies, with little blinking lights where Caddies scooted here and there. I didn't want a GM technician missing lunch or any search parties coming after me, so the prudent thing to do was to let Tiny in on my plans so he wouldn't report me missing.

"Hey, buddy," I said, "I'm informing you that I've left town. Davy called me. He needs my help."

"What's wrong?" Tiny asked, concern in his voice. Tiny was more concerned about my son's welfare than he was his own son's welfare. After all, his son had a father and mine didn't.

"Davy's fine. Eleana's missing. She wasn't at the house when he woke up this morning, and she's not answering any of her phones, which isn't like Eleana at all."

"Was she out with Moreno?"

"I hope not."

"You need my help?" Tiny asked.

"I may, but for now I'd rather not make a big deal out of it. She could be out committing random acts of shopping. Could

you call in her Lincoln's tag number to the Center City PD. Have them call you back if they spot her car? You know, cop to cop, friend to friend. If they locate her, you call me, and I'll take it from there."

"I thought locating Sally was on your agenda."

"Still is. This is just an additional item since Davy called."

"This is a record for you, isn't it?"

"What's that?" I asked.

"Losing two women in one day?"

"They're not lost yet, just misplaced. But, with recent events, I'm not taking any chances."

"You don't think—"

"Not yet," I lied and steered away from the question I didn't want to think about. "Sally just wants me to chase her down and plead for her hand. I wouldn't be concerned at all, except Oma said Chester Thorton was in the Kitchen this morning asking about Sally. Which means she's not at her sister's house. It wouldn't hurt for you to call her Jaguar plates in as well, if you haven't already."

"Stan Cramer did that. Seems he thinks he's in charge of the investigation, wants to talk to our state's attorney general 'to resolve our respective jurisdictional issues,' as he calls it."

"That doesn't surprise me. He's afraid if you guys get into a pissing contest, someone might point out that it was his guys who lost Moreno last night. He's covering his backside."

"Yeah? He's running an offensive as well. He's real hot to pin it on somebody before the press hits on him. Which brings me to the subject of you."

"What about me?" I asked in my aggrieved-innocent voice.

"For some reason, Cramer doesn't like you."

“Really?” I said.

“Yeah,” said Tiny. “He thinks you’re too smart-mouthed. Thinks I ought to haul you back in here and beat a confession out of you.”

“Run interference on Mr. Wonderful for me, pal. After I find Sally, I might have more to say to him. I seem to recall she didn’t regard him that highly, from an investigation she had going. It seems strange to me that the night the governor gets killed, Cramer’s people have car trouble. Have you had anybody check out the facts on that one? Just in case Splendor Bay PD is actually in charge of the investigation. Sounds like a good job for Gomez. Well, I have to go. Oma’s not going to like me running up her car phone bill.”

“So that’s how you managed to disappear.”

“Didn’t Oma tell you?”

“No, but you’ll love the story she told me.”

“Tell me later. Right now, I’m headed to my ex-house to pick up Davy and see if we can find his mother. Call Oma and get the number for this phone, will you? You’ll be able to reach me on it or at my ex-house. Let me know as soon as anyone spots either of my ladies. Oh, another thing. I need to amend a gun permit. Oma loaned me her Lady Smith. Get the info off her permit and make me legal. Please?”

“Bill, don’t do anything foolish.”

“I don’t plan on it,” I said. “It was Oma’s idea that I take her gun. She’s all spooked about Moreno.”

“I told her there was nothing to worry about.”

“Me, too. I hope we’re right, but you have to admit Splendor Bay doesn’t have a dead governor wash ashore every day. And I’ve never lost two women in one day.”

“If you need fire power, call me.”

“I hear you. Now hang up so I can find Sally and Eleana. Once I do, I’m giving up women and joining a monastery.”

“And donating your pecker to the Smithsonian?”

“Nah. It goes to the Tagata shrine in Japan.”

“The what?” Tiny asked.

“The Tagata shrine, north of the city of Nagoya, in Japan. Adjacent to the shrine is a museum claiming to be the only one of its kind in the world. It contains the willies of scores of mammals, ranging in size from the dormouse to the sperm whale. Mine would go next to the sperm whale.”

“Where do you come up with this shit?”

“*National Geographic* or maybe the nature channel. When you’re on sabbatical from life, you have time to read and watch television. And you know what?”

“What?” asked Tiny.

“They seldom ever have pictures of bare breast native women in *National Geographic* anymore. For that, you have to read *Playboy*.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t know,” Tiny said, embarrassed.

So I continued. “Anyway, on March fifteenth every year, they hold a fertility festival celebrating the male god, Sky Father, coming from above to impregnate the female god, Earth Mother, so Earth Mother will bear fruit and grain to feed man and womankind.”

“You can stop now.”

“That’s not the best part. A Shinto priest leads the procession, scattering salt to purify the way. He’s followed by another priest carrying this huge pecker carved out of wood and painted red, which at the completion of the procession rests for one year at the

shrine. Along the way, the local populace drinks sake and enjoys the occasion, sort of like a New Orleans Mardi Gras.”

“Sounds like a hell of a party.”

“Yeah, next time I get rich, we’ll have to go.”

“First you’ll have to get a job.”

“First I have to decide what I want to be when I grow up.”

“Don’t wait too long,” Tiny said.

## SIX

*Saturday, May 26, 2:20 PM*

On the drive over to Center City, I called all of Sally's known numbers—townhouse, office, and cell phone—and got only recorded voices, mine at the townhouse. I was more successful in damsel saving at my ex-house. I found Eleana alive and well, curled up into fetal position on the leather sofa in my ex-study, bawling her eyes out. Davy was trying to talk his mother into a sip of my ex-Scotch.

I focused on the tranquil view of Eleana's garden outside. The white rose with the pink center that Eleana had spent several years perfecting and had named *Angela* was in full bloom. I glanced around the room. My ex-lawbooks were still on the shelves. Photos of my smiling face, cheek-to-cheek with one celebrity crook client or another on my ex-boat, still hung on the wall. One glance could tell you what kind of whore the ex-me had been.

Then I looked at Davy. He must have grown another two inches since last month. Now, at sixteen, he was almost my height. Damn, I hated not getting to watch him turn into a man. I tried to tell him that when his like-mine brown eyes met mine, but I chickened out.

"Your mother doesn't drink Scotch. See if you can find some water. I'll get her a glass of wine if that doesn't do the trick."

"Sure, Dad. Thanks."

“I’m glad you called me, son.”

Davy nodded. He seemed relieved to see me and relieved to turn his sobbing mother over to a man more experienced with the tears of women. He pushed the like-Eleana blond hair out of his eyes and looked at her with his like-mine frown. Then he bounded to the kitchen.

“It’s all your fault!” Eleana screamed at me as soon as Davy was out of earshot.

“What’s all my fault?” I asked.

“Wallie’s dead,” she sobbed.

“Yeah, I know. So how is that my fault?”

“I don’t know,” she wailed. “I don’t...”

“But we’d both feel better if it was my fault, wouldn’t we?”

I sat down on the edge of the sofa next to her and patted her rump in what was intended to be a comforting gesture. Eleana still had a girl-sized rump neatly attached by a tiny waist to the rest of her. Well, maybe not as small a waist as I’d remembered, but at age forty-two, she looked only a few days older than the girl I had fallen in love with twenty years ago. When I wasn’t hating her, I still remembered how much I had loved her.

I offered my condolences. “I know you loved him, and I’m sorry for your grief.” You loved me once, too, I thought.

Her sobs turned into muffled sniffing as she buried her face in a pillow. Davy returned with a glass of water and a bottle of herbal-medicine calming pills. She waved the pill bottle away. “No.” She took the water. “I don’t need them. I’m okay.”

I pulled the twenty from my pocket. “Here, Davy. I missed lunch. Could you run out and get some burgers. I’ll look after your mother.”

Relief flooded his face. “I’ll be back in fifteen minutes,” he said and headed to the driveway where the Land Rover, now his, was parked beside Oma’s Caddy.

“You want to tell me where you’ve been?” I said when the front door slammed. “You scared Davy by not letting him know where you were.”

“Don’t start with me, Bill,” she said. “Don’t start.”

“I’m not starting anything,” I said, moving to my ex-chair, a leather recliner, for a more tranquil view of the rose garden through the French doors. “I’m asking you, in a reasonable manner, where you were that you couldn’t let your son know you were okay?”

“You’re starting. And I’m not up to your recriminations.”

“I’m not. I was just worried about you. When Davy couldn’t find you, I came here, determined to save the damsel in distress.”

She glared at me. “They called me about a fire at the Archives. I thought I’d be back before Davy woke up.”

“Why did it take so long?”

“We weren’t able to get into the building immediately. Smoke spread through the ventilation system, so they had to make sure the fire was completely out. Then the fire marshal had to inspect the building to make sure it was safe—”

“I get the picture. So why couldn’t you have called home and let Davy know where you were?”

“I’m in no mood for this, Bill. If you want to depose people, go back to practicing law. I oversee a state office. I had to locate staff to begin a damage inventory. That’s not easy to do on a Saturday with the switchboard down. Then I had to make sure someone was in charge before I could leave.”

“How bad was the fire?”

“A lot of smoke and sprinkler damage, but only the files in one room burned...” Eleana trailed off, then she gave me a quizzical frown. “Wallie’s campaign records... You don’t think the fire is connected to his death, do you?”

“Not until now,” I said, knowing instantly they were connected. The first thing I had learned practicing law was that whenever you issued a *subpoena duces tecum*, a demand to a party in a lawsuit to produce records in their possession, they almost always responded no-can-do because “all my records were destroyed in a fire.” The one exception was a company on the Gulf Coast that responded their records had been stored in a trailer that had blown away in a hurricane. Their records were gone with the wind, as it were.

“Do you know where Moreno was last night?” I asked.

She walked over to the French doors and looked out. “He had a fund raising dinner at Stan Cramer’s house at Promontory Point. Dinner and poker with contributors.”

“Really?” I said.

She turned around. “He asked me to go to dinner and I told him I couldn’t. Then I heard the news on the car radio on my way home today. They said Wallie was found on the beach at Splendor Bay. That you... How, Bill? How did it happen?”

I ignored the implication in her question. “That hasn’t been determined. No obvious wounds on his body. He may have drowned. They found his car and driver in a crash off Promontory Point, several miles from where they found his body. He might have been thrown into the water during the wreck and washed up on the beach. Nobody knows at the moment.”

“They said you were questioned. I thought that—”

“Thought what?”

“I thought maybe the two of you had a fight, that you—”

“Eleana, you, above everyone else, should know there’s no fight left in me. Besides, I don’t blame him for taking advantage of a beautiful, available woman. Moreno, I merely hated. You, I blame for being available. And I blame me for letting you be available. Blaming I still have time for. But, I’m afraid, the time for fighting for your hand has passed. A year ago I might have killed him. Not now. Feel free to screw whomever you want.”

Eleana glared at me with unblinking eyes. Then, with a sigh, she turned to gaze out at her garden. Finally, she turned her ever-changing, blue-gray-green eyes back on me, her angry eyes now the dark green of a rose stem.

“What did you expect? That someday, when Davy was grown and you were finally too old to stand up in a courtroom, I’d be here waiting for you? To do what? Grow more roses? Serve you drinks? You didn’t have time to be a part of my life. I made the best life for myself that I could under the circumstances.”

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out,” I said just as Davy came through the door, loudly.

He glanced at us and apparently decided it was safe to venture into the toxic cloud of conflict in the room. “I felt like a pepperoni pizza instead of burgers. I had them put anchovies on your part, Dad.”

I smiled at my son. Pepperoni pizza had always been our father-son meal, the salty little fishes on only my portion. I looked at Eleana and she nodded, agreeing to a time out from our marriage-busting encounter. Time for a united parental front, for the sake of the kid.

“Shall we eat in the kitchen?” Eleana asked, coming away from the French doors to give our son a hug, assuring him she was okay, that he was okay. “What do you guys want to drink?”

## SEVEN

*Saturday, May 26, 3:30 PM*

We ate, then Davy wanted to practice his backstroke. I wanted to stay and visit with my son, but Eleana said she wanted to take a nap, a very clear hint that I should leave. Davy turned on the television to wait his requisite thirty minutes after eating, so I said good-bye to my ex-family and climbed back into Oma's Cadillac, ready to dash off and save the next distressed damsel on my list.

The first order of business was to define the search. While still in the driveway, I called Sally's numbers again—townhouse, office, cell—and this time the bayview house at well since she might have come home by now. The same recorded voices answered, mine at the townhouse and bayview house. Then I called Tiny.

"It's Bill. I thought I'd report in."

"Did you find Eleana?"

"Yeah, she was at the house when I arrived. It seems the State Archives had a fire early this morning. She went to check it out. And you'll never guess what burned?"

"What?"

"The Moreno campaign records."

"That's interesting!" Tiny said, clearly impressed with my new information.

"Isn't it? And you know something else?"

"What?" Tiny asked.

“Moreno was at Stan Cramer’s house at Promontory Point last night, for a fund raising event and poker game.”

“How do you know?” Tiny asked.

“Eleana told me.”

“Did you get the guest list?”

“Forgot to ask. How far is Stan’s place from the limo crash?”

“Less than a mile,” Tiny said.

“Isn’t that interesting,” I said.

“Maybe. So how did Eleana react to Moreno’s death?”

“Shocked, dismayed, in tears. What you’d expect. Well, unless you have anything else, I’ll get on with my damsel saving.”

“You tell her that you danced a jig when you found out it was Moreno?” Tiny persisted.

“That wasn’t a jig. It was *Swan Lake*. So I didn’t like him. It had nothing to do with Eleana. As you’ll recall, I’m the one who switched beds first,” I lied. “Nobody else liked him, either. He wasn’t a nice man. Ask Oma. But there’s something else you should know about his love life.”

“I’m warning you. If you say he messed with Mary Louise, I’ll have to kill you since I can’t kill him.”

“No, Mary Louise has eyes only for you, Lord knows why. But several years ago Sally and Moreno were close.”

“Let me get this straight. Moreno and Sally. You and Eleana. You and Sally. Moreno and Eleana. Isn’t that incest?”

“No, it’s just complicated.”

“You city folk sure know how to screw up your lives.”

“We try hard to be all we can be,” I said.

“Don’t you, though,” Tiny said. “By the way, you need to know that Cramer has state cops on stakeout at Sally’s place in case she shows up there, or you do.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“He was in here a few minutes ago,” Tiny answered. “And believe it or not, he didn’t mention a thing about the Archives fire or the party at his house last night.”

“Maybe he had other things on his mind.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Tiny conceded. “But he was pretty insistent we ought to be talking with you again since they haven’t found anyone else who saw anything on the beach, and he knows about Moreno and Eleana.”

“You can’t expect Eleana to pine over me forever. I moved on. She moved on. No big deal. Why isn’t he talking to the beach patrol guys? They saw him first. Or you and Gomez? You saw him next. And I didn’t see anything.”

“I don’t think any of us are newsworthy enough for a state police investigation. You, on the other hand, make good press. ‘Former big-time ex-lawyer is suspect in Governor Moreno’s death.’ Catchy headline, don’t you think? He has the state cops looking for you now, except they don’t know where to look. He’s confused by the fact your Corvette is still at Sally’s place.”

“Doesn’t take much to stump him.”

“Not much,” Tiny agreed. “He tracked you as far as Oma’s. She said you left her place on foot, told him you like to take long, solitary walks in the hills, working on your karma. Same story she told me earlier, for practice.”

“You didn’t rat on me, did you?”

“Come on. I always wear my white hat,” Tiny asserted.

“Glad to hear it. Now, if I were you, I’d start looking for those FBI special agents who were in your back room this morning, or their boss, to see if they want to assist the Splendor Bay PD in this investigation.”

“I think we have it under control,” Tiny said, offended.

“I have the utmost respect for your cop expertise, Tiny. But somehow, I don’t see you, Gomez, and the Chief as having much of a chance against a state police chief who wants to direct the investigation into the cause of the governor’s death. Especially since he hasn’t been open and honest with you so far. Maybe having the Feds on your team could even the score a little.”

“What makes you think the Feds would play on our team?”

“Why not? It’s a natural. I’ve never seen a FBI cop who didn’t think he was better than a state cop, and you know how they both pity you local cops. The Feds would get their charity points. Why don’t you go nibble on their ears and whisper sweet nothings like violation of civil rights, obstruction of justice, stuff like that. That will give them a hard on, maybe get them lusting after Cramer, maybe get Cramer off my tail.”

“I’ll have to think about it,” Tiny said.

“Do that,” I said. “Bye.”

My next stop was Sally’s townhouse. My next problem was getting into it without getting nabbed by the state cops. Oma’s Cadillac had darkly tinted windows, so unless I rolled the windows down and stuck my tongue out at them, likely as not, they would miss a drive-by inspection. But actually getting into the townhouse might take more work.

I thought about it and, still being in the driveway, got out of the car and went back into my ex-house.

Eleana was in the kitchen, sipping a glass of milk like it was a dose of castor oil. Davy was outside, playing a one-man game of pool basketball.

“Did you forget something?” she asked.

“Since when did you drink milk?”

“Bill?”

“The box. You mind if I take the pizza box with me?”

“If you need money, I could—”

“I’m not starving, Eleana, I just want the box. And does Davy have a jacket and a baseball cap I can borrow?”

“Bill?” Comprehension entered her eyes. “I guess I don’t want to know, do I? Upstairs, in his room. Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” I said as I stared out the French doors at the broad shouldered young man in the pool. “He’s a fine boy, Eleana. I want to thank you for that.”

“He reminds me of you,” she said softly.

And he reminds me of you, I thought and turned away so she wouldn’t see the dew in my eyes.

## EIGHT

*Saturday, May 26, 4:00 PM*

I did a once-around-the-block at Sally's townhouse, twice, to place all the state cops on the stakeout. A standard issue bubble-gum car with two uniformed officers inside was parked so they could watch the alley that ran behind Sally's row of townhouses. An unmarked white Crown Victoria occupied by two cops, one in uniform and one in a suit, was parked across the street from her townhouse. Obviously, Cramer didn't intend his stakeout to be a secret. And he wasn't very concerned about Sally's safety or there would have been more cops, blocking off the street, stroking their guns and battering rams, ready to go in and rescue her.

I pulled the Caddy over to the curb on a side street so I could keep the front-door car in view and thought about the situation. I had intended to play a delivery boy when I borrowed Davy's cap and jacket and the pizza box. Unfortunately, that plan wasn't going to work. Now, just how can I make a plain view entry into the townhouse, I asked myself. Hmm.

Before I could solve that problem, a black Mercedes sedan drove past me and turned into Sally's driveway. Garage doors opened and swallowed it. A minute or two later, a dark-haired woman who looked like Sally came out the front door and walked to the mailbox at the iron gate. The two cops in the unmarked

car sprang to life and out of the vehicle. At the gate, they flashed their badges and talked with the woman. She invited them inside. Five minutes later, the front-door cops were back out, in their car, driving away.

I had two choices. I could risk detection by getting out of Oma's car and knocking on the front door to find out what Lizabeth Thorton had just told the state police to satisfy their interest in Sally, or I could wait in Oma's comfortable car listening to Frank Sinatra on the CD until Lizabeth decided to leave then see if she would lead me to Sister Sally.

Actually, I had three choices. I could pick up Oma's cell phone and give the townhouse a ring-a-ding. Maybe Lizabeth would answer and tell me where Sally was.

I dialed the townhouse. My voice on the answering machine tape answered.

"Talk to me, Sally," I said.

No one did. So I pushed the seat button to recline, turned the volume up as Frank crooned "I Have But One Heart," and waited for Lizabeth to make her next move. While crooning with Frank, it occurred to me that I had met the suited cop in the Crown Victoria somewhere, but I couldn't remember where.

Ten minutes later, after Frank and I had crooned three more songs, I noticed the drapes at the living room window flutter. Another five minutes and the curtain in the front upstairs bedroom moved. It would seem Lizabeth was checking to make sure the cops were gone.

A couple of minutes later, the garage regurgitated the Mercedes and it headed out in the direction it had come. The bubble-gum copmobile pulled out of the alley and followed. In the next block, the unmarked car pulled out from a side street and got into line.

I joined the parade to Lizabeth Thorton's house, a small mansion on Grandview Avenue, the street where the old line, longtime, rich people live.

The Solana twins definitely qualified as old line, longtime rich. For three hundred years after their Conquistador ancestor's arrival, the Solanas gathered and held onto wealth in the form of great tracts of land that grew grapes and sheep. Their great-grandfather replenished the family coffer with money made from railroads that crossed the land. Their grandfather made more money from oil wells on the land. Their father and his half-brother, my almost ex-wife Eleana's father, had rested on the family laurels and done their best to spend everything left them on worthwhile things like polo ponies and Hollywood starlets and world travel. Fortunately, the grandfather had left the principal of his wealth in trust funds for the next generation.

The Solana women, my Eleana and her cousins, Lizabeth and Sally, were all exceptional women. Lizabeth and Sally, as beautiful as their movie star mom and as willful as two Scarlett O'Haras, had more money than any two women could spend in any lifetime. Still, they tried, especially Lizabeth who had very expensive hobbies.

In her youth, Lizabeth studied art and then occupied her time with society affairs and traveling the world with her much older and much less genteel husband, Chester Thorton, a man she had run away with and then married to spite her father. During her travels, Lizabeth acquired art, some of it good, all of it expensive. The Solana-Thorton house was filled with the stuff, which was one reason the Solana-Thortons employed a stable of security guards to keep lesser mortals away from their Center City premises.

Lizabeth and Chester were an interesting study in modern marriage. Chester, a cowboy archetype who used his slow-talking Texan demeanor to disguise his Harvard Law brains, managed Lizabeth's money very well, which kept him fairly busy. Twenty years ago theirs had been a sparky May-December match. They met and fell in love at Eleana's and my wedding. Soon thereafter, Chester left a wife nobody liked and Lizabeth left a too controlling father for a resorts-of-the-world *Lolita* adventure, which was covered in great detail in the press. However, in time, all good scandals fizzle. She turned eighteen; they married and lived reasonably happily ever after for quite a few years.

These days, Lizabeth and Chester were more niece and uncle to each other than wife and husband. Each was still fond of the other, but Chester, being mostly too old for desires of the flesh, didn't pay much attention to which bedroom Lizabeth slept in, or so he had once told me after our third round of drinks at Fred's. Chester was lying. Men don't get that old. He resented the hell out of Lizabeth's activities, but he knew if he tried to do anything about it, he would be the one left out in the cold. She graced his arm in public and gave him a loose reign in managing her money, but it was her money, and he was, after all, hired help.

Sister Sally, my recent very good friend, the younger by two minutes and more feisty sister, had studied law and taken up politics, an equally expensive hobby and an equally rebellious act to a father who preferred women to be arm decorations. Her ambition was to use her current job as the state's first female attorney general as a stepping stone to a term or two as governor and then run for the US Senate. Eventually, when she reached an age where she wasn't viewed as a sexual object, she said, which

was still a few years off in my own view of the situation, she would run for President.

Sally had been too focused on her career until recently to acquire a husband, so at age thirty-seven, she was still a single lady. She hoped to change that, she had told me the previous night before she left our bed. She thought I would make her a fine wife since I no longer had any interest in having a career, made a great omelet, and could be cleaned up enough to take out to thousand-dollar-a-plate fund raising dinners. At least that's what she said when she proposed, before she got teed off and left when I didn't jump at her offer of a lifetime pension as would be spelled out in a prenuptial agreement.

Don't get me wrong, I love Sally's fine analytical, lawyer mind, almost as much as I love her petite, curvaceous physique. A good battle of wits is definitely a turn on, and the pension she offered didn't sound bad. I just wasn't into long term commitments anymore.

But enough about sex and marriage. After waiting fifteen minutes for the cops to do something, which they didn't, I called Tiny again, to see if he could find out why the state cops had left Sally's place contented.

"I have a dilemma," I said when Tiny answered the phone.

"Moral or otherwise?"

"I'm parked down the street from the Thornton's Grandview Avenue manor, and I was just wondering."

"About what?"

"What Lizabeth told the state cops to get them to abandon their stakeout at Sally's."

I told Tiny about Lizabeth's visit to Sally's townhouse. If Lizabeth was calling off the woman-hunt, she wasn't that worried

about her sister's whereabouts. "I sort of wanted to know before I go knock on Lizabeth's door. To see if I get the same story."

"Give me a few minutes. I'll call you back."

Sinatra sang "My Way" again. I sang along. We crooned two more songs and I was about to experiment with the Cadillac's control panel to see if I could turn off the music without shutting down the engine and AC when Tiny called back.

"The story is the state cops think they talked with Sally, who explained she left you in bed sleeping to take her Jaguar to the shop for repairs and then borrowed her sister's car. They bought it, agreed to come to her office on Monday for a formal statement."

"That's interesting."

"Isn't it, though? Now Cramer can concentrate all his effort on finding you."

"I thought you said Sally alibied me."

"Lizabeth, pretending to be Sally, alibied you, but Cramer wants to know what you did after Sally left you sleeping and before Moreno was found."

"We've covered that."

"Yeah, but he's got this theory you were so enraged when Sally left you that you decided to take a run on the beach to get it out of your system, encountered Wallie, who just happened to be there for reasons unknown, and scared him to death or drowned him or something. Whatever Wallie died of, Cramer thinks you did it. Didn't I tell you all that exercise shit would get you into trouble?"

"He also wants to keep Sally in his sights. He has two cars watching Lizabeth's abode. I guess if I can prove I didn't do it, he'll try to pin it on Sally."

“Maybe he thinks Sally is visiting her sister and he’s just looking out for her welfare,” said Tiny. “After all, he wouldn’t want both a dead governor and a dead AG on his hands the same day.”

“Maybe.” I shifted the Caddy into drive. “See if you can keep Cramer confused. I want to talk with Lizabeth before she takes off again.”

“Oh, before you hang up, did you ask Eleana about Stan’s poker party guest list?”

“No, but I plan on stopping by later to see if Davy wants to go to a movie or something. I’ll ask her then.”

“Beep me when you get it. I’m going to visit the coroner, see if he has any opinions on Moreno’s cause of death. ”

“Have you given any thought to calling the FBI?”

“Yeah,” said Tiny.

“And?”

“Not yet. Let’s see how far Cramer goes.”

“As long as he doesn’t go after me,” I said. “Bye.”

I left my protected spot and headed for the Thorton’s driveway. I saluted the new security guard at the gatehouse.

Apparently he recognized me as an approved visitor on the photo ID chart inside his booth because he opened the gates and waved me through without checking with the master or mistress.

I drove up the long, curving driveway around to the kitchen entrance in back, hoping the cops parked out on the street hadn’t been able to get a clear view of my tags. On my walk through the house from the kitchen following behind the maid (not a bad experience since she’s a pretty maid), I remembered where I’d seen the suited state cop in the unmarked Crown Vic. He had been one of the security guards at the Thorton’s Texas ranch last fall when Chester and I played great white hunters while Sally

and Lizabeth shopped for new clothes in Paris. He probably moonlighted as a guard to supplement his public servant salary as many cops do.

“Hello, Lizabeth,” I said when the maid ushered me into the Thornton’s drawing room, which was twice as large as the whole house I rented at the beach.

“Bill?” she said in that lilting voice so similar to Sally’s, giving my first name three syllables. “So nice to see you. Why are you in town?”

“Well, I’d intended to see if Sally was in residence at her townhouse and the most interesting thing happened.”

“What was that, Bill?”

“This lady who looks like Sally, even wore her hair pulled back the way Sally does, drove into Sally’s garage. Next thing I know she’s out front talking with the state police who were looking for Sally.”

“Then Sally must be at home.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Because not long after some of the cops left, this Sally-looking person left in your Mercedes.”

“And you think it was me?”

“Lizabeth, I know it was you. I followed you here. I want to know what you told the cops.”

“I see,” she said.

“Well?”

She turned away from me to walk over to the window to assess her grounds. “Sally called me this morning. She thought the police might be at her place and asked me to pretend I was her, see if I could get rid of them. She said she’d be back in town on Monday and would deal with them then.”

“Lizabeth,” I said. “Do me a favor.”

“Certainly, Bill.”

“Look me in the eyes. Tell me Sally’s okay.”

Lizabeth turned her dark eyes in my direction and sighed. “She called around eight. She said she was okay, asked me to go to the townhouse and said she’d explain everything later. On the way back I heard the news on the car radio about Wallie. You don’t think?”

“I don’t know,” I said, thinking maybe I should listen to Oma’s car radio to see what was going on in the world.

“What are you going to do, Bill?”

“I’m going to keep looking for her, of course.”

“Bill, be careful,” Lizabeth said, sounding exactly like Sally.

But then, the sisters were identical twins. Almost. The only difference I had ever been able to detect was a little mole above Lizabeth’s lip and a small birthmark on Sally’s thigh, in a location only her doctor or a very close friend would notice. Come to think of it, I’d never checked to see if Lizabeth had one there. Maybe the only difference was the little mole above Lizabeth’s lip.

“Oh,” I said as I turned to leave, “just in case you want to keep this game going, a couple of cop cars also followed you here. They’re parked across the street. You might want to stay put so they’ll continue thinking Sally is visiting her sister. And I’d warn the guards about letting any strangers in, with or without a warrant.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And Lizabeth?”

“Yes?”

“Were you at your beach house last night?”

“No. I’ve been in town all week.”

“She called you here? Not at the beach house?”

“Yes, why?”

“Nothing,” I said, wondering if Lizabeth was lying to me. Oma told me Chester had said Sally called her sister at the beach house. But there was nothing to be gained by cross-examining Lizabeth now, so I left. As I was showing myself out, I ran into Chester Thorton coming into the house.

Chester extended his hand. “Howdy, Bill. To what do we owe the honor?”

Chester had an English country squire look about him, which was disconcerting since he sounded just like John Wayne playing cowboy. Chester had been a real charmer twenty years ago, when he and Lizabeth played the starring roles in their home movie version of *Lolita*. In fact, I’ve known him most of my life, and I’m charmed by him, too. Chester is one of my favorite human beings on earth, a man’s man, whatever that used to be—a hunter, a fisherman, a TV-football viewer—and a woman’s man as well, one of those guys who always held the door for his lady, walked on the outside of the sidewalk, remembered birthdays with flowers and diamond trinkets, and kissed his wife in public places for no reason at all except he loved her. Chester really, truly loved Lizabeth, all the time. Best I could tell, she loved him when she felt like it.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Chester glanced around. “I live here. I should be asking you that question.”

“No, I mean, Oma said you came by her place for breakfast this morning. I just assumed you were out at the beach today.”

“Oh, I was. Got some fishing in earlier, but I had business in town. So what are you doing here?”

“Visiting your wife,” I said.

“Really?” Chester raised his ample eyebrows.

“I thought she might tell me where to find Sally.”

“Did she?” Chester stroked his mostly salt, neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard.

“Not yet.” I said.

“I presume you’ve heard about Moreno?”

“What about him?”

“He met his maker,” Chester said.

“Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy,”

“So I hear,” Chester said, engaging my brown eyes with his own sky blues. “Anything you need to talk to me about?”

“Not unless you know where Sally is,” I said, irritated that Chester might think I needed to talk with a lawyer.

It really bothered me that the people who knew me best considered me capable of murder. Oma, Fred, Eleana, and Chester had all considered that possibility straight off. Their number one theory, in fact. Maybe they suspected I was as crazy as I acted. And maybe I was. At least Tiny hadn’t asked me if I had killed Moreno.

Chester shrugged a “no” and I continued to the door. That was probably a mistake on my part.

## NINE

*Saturday, May 26, 5:30 PM*

As I reached the Thorton's driveway gates, I remembered that I had forgotten to ask Chester about the guards on our hunting trip last fall. My irritation at his insinuation that I needed legal help had cleared all questions from my mind. I hadn't asked about the details of his inquiry into Sally's whereabouts either, but I was reasonably sure he hadn't found her or he would have told me, which was all I really needed to know. I'd worry later about whose story about who had phoned whom was the correct version later. Right now, I needed to get on with finding Sally.

I swung out of the driveway and headed toward town; the bubble-gum cop car tailed me. I meandered around the leisurely laid out neighborhood streets and through a couple of shopping centers at the edge of the residential area. I drove like Oma—in the left lane, below the speed limit, frequent abrupt stops at green lights. I lost the cops, or they'd had enough of my senior citizen driving style, before I got to downtown. Nearing my destination, I picked up the car phone to call Oma.

"Bill? Where are you?"

"Center City."

"You're not in trouble, are you?"

"No, Oma, I'm not in trouble."