

## Chapter 10

Ted's smart phone chirped. He looked at the screen. Text message from Maria.

"R we still on 4 dinner?"

He typed in "Nuevo Chaparral. Meeting C and H," then hit the send button.

He looked at the corner of his computer screen and noted the time. 6:13. He better get going.

His Wednesday tradition of dinner with Chris had expanded to include Hope. Now it was about to expand again. If Chris could bring his main squeeze (even if she was Ted's little sister), then ol' Teddy could bring his lady too.

He grabbed his jacket and headed out the door. The office was still a hive of activity. Flaherty & Associates didn't work nine to five.

It was already dark out. He couldn't get over how quickly it became dark in the fall. The heavy overcast helped blot out what little rays of sunlight might have tried to sneak in anyway. It seemed like only last week that the sun was still up at ten o'clock at night. He climbed into his black roadster and turned on the head lights.

It was a short drive from the SODO neighborhood where Catrina's office was (would he ever think of it as his office?) to Lake Union. He pulled into the parking lot and noted Chris's Porsche. Chris must be awfully anxious to meet him; he usually worked late every night. Hah! Meet him, what a joke. He knew good and well who Chris wanted to meet.

"Hey, amigo," Chris shouted when Ted walked in. He already had a Margarita and a basket of chips and salsa in front of him. Juanita, the waitress, was dropping off a tray with pickled onions, carrots and chiles.

“Greetings, gringo,” Ted said as he pulled off his jacket. The aroma of roasting chiles and garlic reminded him of Mama’s kitchen. “What’s the happs?”

Chris shoved a chip in his mouth. “New case. You’re going to love this one.”

“Me too. We got a lulu today.”

Ted waved to his sister near the bar, “*Cerveza, por favor.*”

“*Certamente, hermano,*” Hope shouted over the crowded bar.

Ted seated himself and grabbed a chip. “So, what’re you working on?”

Hope brought Ted a Corona and slid in next to Chris.

“I got a junk case handed to me by old man Johnson. Seems his wife’s cousin has a problem-child son.”

“Um-hm.” Ted took a sip of his beer.

“The kid’s been living in the woods on Camano Island. Breaking into peoples’ houses and stealing food, blankets, that kind of stuff.”

“Doesn’t sound like headline news.” Ted looked up to see a vision in green sweep through the door.

Maria hung her trench coat on the rack in the entrance way and flowed into the bar. She was dressed in a tight-fitting sea-foam green dress that complemented her eyes and showed off her trim figure.

“Mama, mia,” Ted said. “Look what Santa brought ol’ Teddy.”

“Hi guys.” Maria slid into the booth next to Ted. “What’re you up to?”

“Chris is just filling us in on his new case,” Hope said. “He’s a grown-up lawyer now,” she tugged at the shoulder of his charcoal gray suit, “with his first real case.”

“Cool. Don’t let me stop you.” Maria pointed to Ted’s beer. “I’ll have one of those.”

*“Juanita, una mas Corona, por favor,”* Hope ordered for Maria. *“Y un orden de carnitas, también.”*

“I hate to sound racists, but can we keep it to English?” Chris asked. “I guess I’m the only one here who doesn’t speak Spanish.”

“Well, you better get to learnin’, bro,” Ted said. “If you’re gonna hang with my fam, you’re gonna need it.”

“So tell us more about your case,” Hope bumped into Chris’s shoulder.

Chris explained his new client. “This boy’s got serious attitude problems. He thinks he’s smarter than everyone else and that the rules don’t apply to him. He thinks following rules is for suckers and he doesn’t want to comply. I want to slap some sense into him.”

Juanita showed up with a platter full of carnitas and side dishes with lime wedges, shredded cabbage, pickled red onions and roasted jalapeño chiles and a basket of tortillas. The fragrance of deep-fried meat almost drove Ted out of his mind.

“Mmmm,” Maria said. “Looks like home. Smells like it too.”

“So how about your new case?” Chris reached for a tortilla and started scooping up pieces of the pork into it. “What’s it all about?”

“Missing husband,” Ted said between bites. “This dude disappeared in the middle of the desert. The cops found his truck burned out alongside the highway. They think it’s murder and suspect his wife, she says he faked his death to get out of a jail sentence.”

“You guys work with the nicest people,” Hope said.

“It sounds to me like you both have anti-social clients,” Maria said, delicately picking up a chip with her long thin fingers and dipping it in salsa. “They’re both outlaws that can’t live within the constraints of the law.”

“This is the college professor talking,” Ted said.

“No, seriously,” Maria said. “Ted’s client is a huckster who’ll do anything to keep from having to earn an honest living. Chris’s client is an anti-social kid who can’t play by the rules. I think they’re both cut from the same material. If Chris can’t straighten his kid out, he’ll grow up to be Ted’s buddy.”

They all laughed.

“You know,” Hope said. “You guys are the anchors.”

“Huh?” Ted stopped with the beer bottle halfway to his lips. “Anchors?”

“Yeah, you guys are the rocks that need to hold steady, to bring these guys back into compliance with society’s expectations.”

\*\*\*\*

The lonely stretch of Highway 395 north of Victorville, California was hot and dry. Dust swirled in the wind and the occasional tumble weeds bounced across the road.

Catrina was not a desert person. Born and raised in the lush Pacific Northwest, the California high desert looked like the far side of the moon to her.

She and Ted had flown into Ontario International Airport, thirty-seven miles east of Los Angeles, and rented a Ford Explorer similar to her specially built Explorer that Ted liked to call the Batmobile. This was a common garden variety Explorer. Katrina’s had a huge V-8 engine and armor plating.

The hour drive from Ontario to the site where Randall’s pickup had been discovered could have been boring, but Ted was in one of his wacky moods. Katrina appreciated her handsome young companion’s humor and they laughed all the way to the site.

“This is it,” Katrina said as she pulled off the road.

“Nothin’ here,” Ted said.

They climbed out of the SUV and looked around. The highway disappeared to the north and south; a few brown hummocks with the occasional cactus surrounded them. There was no sign of civilization anywhere, other than a few plastic bags that had blown against a fence.

"You're sure this is it?" Ted asked. The burned out truck had long since been towed away.

"Yep. I wanted to get a sense of the place." Catrina slowly turned, scanning the horizon in all directions. "If you were going to disappear, how would you get away from your truck?"

"Hmmm . . ." Ted put his hand above his eyes and did a search in the distance. "You're sure as hell not going to walk out of here. If you went cross country, you'd leave some kind of trail. The Sherriff's posse has searched this area and found nothing. That leaves by car. Or air. I suppose you could fly out in a chopper. Even a small plane could land on the highway."

"But both of those ideas need an accomplice. Unless . . . I guess you could have left a vehicle parked here, alongside the road. Or maybe stashed back in the hills a bit."

"That don't work," Ted said. "Remember, the posse searched the hills. No sign of anything. The deputy said that there weren't any other tire tracks." He knelt down and picked up a handful of gravel. "If he parked a car alongside the road, the Highway Patrol would've noticed it and tagged it. No record of that. No tire tracks to indicate that one had been parked here."

Catrina leaned back against the hood of the Explorer. "Okay, that leaves two possibilities. One: he had an accomplice. Someone who had a car who was waiting for him. Or he was waiting for them. When they got here, he torched his truck and they drove off. The other car never left the road.

"Two: the sheriff's right, someone killed him and made off with his body."

Ted reached back into the SUV for a bottle of water. "I don't like door number two. What's the motive? Do you think Karen is capable of murder?"

"I don't see her getting her fingernails dirty," Catrina said. "But she could have hired someone."

“If she did, why? If she wanted to just get rid of him, she could file for divorce. As a matter of fact, she did file for divorce. If she was after the insurance money, she wouldn’t have gotten rid of the body. The insurance company isn’t going to pay off without a body.”

“She could want his businesses,” Catrina stared into space. “Maybe she wanted to take over his businesses for herself.”

“Do you think that’s really likely?” Ted asked. “She doesn’t seem like the ambitious businesswoman type to me. At least not from what you’ve told me.”

“Okay, so what was Randall doing in Cali?” Catrina asked. “He was supposed to be taking an espresso machine from Vegas to Seattle. California is way out of his way. He was on the highway from Vegas to LA. Why was he headed to LA?”

“You know.” Ted opened the Explorer’s passenger door. “He had an ex-wife in LA. It seems like he had an ex-wife everywhere.”

“You need to look into that. Find out all you can about her. Is he still in contact with her? What does she do? Is she still at her address, showing up to work?”

“Now that I think about it, that is a possibility,” Ted said. “He re-married Karen. He might be on good terms with his ex.”

“Check it out. Meanwhile, let’s get into Victorville and talk to the Sherriff.”

A short half hour’s drive had them pulling up to the San Bernardino Sherriff’s office in Victorville.

Ted held the door for Catrina as they entered the office. He couldn’t help think that she must make an imposing figure for the local bubbas.

With her tight-fitting jeans, pull over T-shirt with a low-cut neckline and ever present boots, she would get their attention. Her blonde hair and blue eyes and the steel melting smile that she could turn on when she wanted didn’t hurt either.

She wouldn’t have any trouble getting them to cooperate.

“Good mornin’, ma’am, can I help you?” The pudgy deputy behind the desk asked. Apparently, he didn’t know that Ted existed.

“Yes, I’m looking for Detective Wainwright. I’m Catrina Flaherty. I made an appointment to see him.”

“Just a minute please.” The middle aged deputy turned and shouted. “Wainwright. Front and center.” He turned back to Catrina. “He’ll be with you in a minute.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Flaherty,” the good looking detective said as he entered the waiting area. “Pleased to meet you.” He extended his hand.

Catrina took his hand. He had a firm shake. “I’m Catrina Flaherty, this is my associate, Ted Higuera.”

“Mr. Higuera.” The detective shook Ted’s hand.

Wainwright was dressed in cowboy boots, jeans, a blue oxford shirt and a brown corduroy jacket. He was eye to eye with Catrina, so he was probably a shade under six feet. His neatly cut brown hair and blue eyes sure didn’t hurt the overall package.

“Now, how can I help you?” Wainwright asked. “Let’s step into my office.” He held the swinging door in the counter for Catrina and Ted.

“Like I told you on the phone,” Catrina said as they entered the small office. “We’ve been hired by Mr. Randall’s wife to find out what happened to him. We would sure appreciate anything you could tell us.”

Wainwright’s office was neat as a pin. Not a paper out of place, pictures hung precisely on the walls. Not a speck of dust in a dusty environment.

“Here’s what we know,” Wainwright picked up a file folder off of the blotter on his desk. “Mr. Randall’s truck was found Monday morning at 0700. We got a report of a vehicle fire from a passing motorist. Normally, that would be a California Highway Patrol call, but all of their officers were busy.

“Deputy Ortega took the call. By the time he got there, the fire was burned out. There was no one in the vehicle and no trace of anyone anywhere near it.

“Deputy Ortega felt that it was a little suspicious, so he called in our forensics team. We have a pretty sophisticated crime lab in San Bernardino. Anyway, they found a blood stain under the truck. As a matter of fact, they say it was a substantial amount of blood. Probably a pint or two. They also found a bullet hole in the driver’s seat and the slug embedded in the back seat. From the angle of the hole and the slug, they determined that the shooter was standing outside the driver’s door. He was probably about six feet tall.”

“That sounds pretty thorough,” Ted said. “Any signs of a body?”

“No. We’ve searched the area. If he was shot, they took the body elsewhere.”

“If he was shot . . . ?” Catrina asked.

“Yes ma’am. We can’t prove that a crime occurred. We have forensic evidence, but without a body, I couldn’t go into court and say Mr. Randall was killed.”

“I see.” Catrina glanced at the pictures on Wainwright’s desk. A wedding photo with a pretty blonde. The same woman holding a baby in blue. “How are you proceeding with this case?”

“Ma’am, it’s a tough one. With no body, we can’t rule it a homicide, but I’m investigating it as if it were. Personally, in my experience, I always look at the spouse first.

“I’m kind of liking Mrs. Randall. No alibi. Big insurance policy. Marital troubles. Financial troubles. It all fits. All I need to do is find the body.”

“What makes you think . . .” Ted was interrupted by a kick under the table by Catrina.

“Thank you, detective. You’ve been very helpful.” Catrina handed Wainwright a business card.

“You’ll keep us informed, won’t you? Let us know of any new developments?”

“Of course, ma’am. It’ll be my pleasure.”



\*\*\*\*

The next stop on Catrina and Ted's itinerary was Las Vegas. Ted hated Vegas. He had been here for DefCon, the international underground hacker's convention, a couple of years ago and developed an intense dislike for the city.

It was all so plastic, so fake. This coming from a guy that grew up in LA. Everything was loud, and cigarette smoke seemed to fill the casinos. The only good thing he ever got out of Vegas was himself.

But here they were, sitting in a Denny's, sipping bad coffee, waiting for the insurance investigator.

"Tell me again, why do we care about this insurance investigator?" Ted asked.

Catrina put down her cup. "The police think that Randall's life insurance policy is motive for Karen to kill him. Or have him killed. We need to understand what the policy was about and if it will pay out for her."

"Mrs. Flaherty? Mr. Higuera?" A slightly plump woman with mousy brown hair approached their table. She wore a flowery dress with a blazer over it and carried a big blue handbag.

"I'm Joyce Lovejoy, investigator for American Life."

"Pleased to meet you," Catrina rose from the table and extended her hand. Ted was stuck inside the booth. "I'm Catrina Flaherty, this is my associate, Ted Higuera. Please, sit down."

Joyce sat at the large round booth and shook Ted's hand. "Ted," she said.

"Mrs. Lovejoy. It's a pleasure," Ted replied.

"Joyce, please. Everyone calls me Joyce."

"I suppose you know why we wanted to meet with you?" Catrina asked.

"Would you like a menu?" the waitress asked as she approached the table.

“No thank you,” Joyce said. “Just coffee.” She turned back to Catrina. “I presume you’re interested in whether or not Mr. Randall’s life policy will pay out?”

“Yes, basically that’s it. Our client, Mrs. Randall, doesn’t believe that her husband is dead, but the police are treating his disappearance as a homicide. They’re looking at her as a person of interest. If he is dead, she has quite a large sum of money coming to her. If he isn’t dead, then she wants us to find him.”

“I’m not sure I should be talking to you about this,” Joyce said. “After all, you aren’t the insured party. I should ask to see your ID too.”

“Here’s our ID,” Catrina said. She handed Joyce her badge and ID card. Ted reached in his pocket for his. “I have a letter from Mrs. Randall authorizing you to release personal information to us.” Catrina dug inside her light brown shoulder bag and produced a file folder. From inside the folder, she took the letter and handed it to the insurance investigator.

“Hmmm. . .” Joyce studied the letter. “I guess this is all in order. Nice to meet you.”

Joyce reached in her purse and withdrew a manila file folder. She placed the folder on the table and opened it. “Mrs. Randall only has a large sum coming to her if she didn’t have anything to do with Mr. Randall’s death. The San Bernardino County Sherriff’s Department contacted us and asked about the policy. The fact that they are investigating Mr. Randall’s disappearance as a homicide caused us to open a case. I was assigned the case to decide if there are sufficient grounds to determine that Mr. Randall is, indeed, deceased.”

“Um-hmm,” Ted said.

“Mr. Randall’s policy is over two years old, so it’s beyond the contestability period, not that this looks like a suicide anyway. With a suicide, you usually have a body.

“Anyway, the next step is to determine if Mr. Randall is deceased. The police found DNA evidence, blood evidence, at the scene to indicate that Mr. Randall lost a great deal of blood. They

found a bullet hole in the driver's seat of the vehicle and the bullet lodged in the back seat. However, there was no blood or tissue on the bullet. It was in pretty good shape, meaning that it didn't go through bone or anything like that.

"The problem is that, as a result of the fire in the vehicle, we can't clearly establish if it was a crime scene. The fire destroyed most of the evidence.

"With the absence of a body, we can't rule Mr. Randall deceased yet."

"Okay," Catrina said. "What happens in a case like this, where the body's never recovered?"

"We've had a few similar cases," Joyce replied. "If there is compelling evidence that the subject could not have survived, such as copious quantities of his or her blood at the scene, or if there are witnesses, we can go ahead and make the ruling.

"I had a case where a person fell off a cruise ship. There were witnesses who saw him fall and the ship's crew and the Coast Guard were not able to retrieve the body. They were too far from shore to reasonably expect that he could swim ashore, so we went ahead and ruled him dead."

"Was there enough blood in this case?" Ted asked. He was furiously taking notes on his tablet.

"It's hard to tell. The blood drained out into the sand. The police estimate that there was at least two pints, but they can't say that with any certainty. A person might survive losing two pints, if they got immediate medical attention."

"But there's no report of any 911 calls for assistance," Catrina said. "There's no indication that Randall got any medical treatment."

Ted put down his tablet and picked up the menu. "What happens if you can't rule Randall dead?"

"Then we wait for a death certificate. If a person is missing for seven years, the heirs may apply for a death certificate and the court may rule them dead. We would pay out, with accrued interest of course, after we received the death certificate. It would take seven years."

“Wow,” Catrina said. “That’s a long time to wait for a payout. That doesn’t sound like much motive to me.”

Joyce held up her empty coffee cup to signal the waitress for a refill. “I would think not. If your client can’t produce a body, I’m afraid she won’t be getting a payout anytime soon.”

“Thank you, Joyce, you’ve been very helpful,” Catrina said.

“My pleasure. Thank you for the coffee.” Joyce got up and walked out of the restaurant.

“Let’s order something. I’m starved,” Ted said.

“What did we learn?” Catrina asked. “If the insurance company isn’t going to pay off, then that removes that motive for murder.”

“But did Karen know that the insurance wouldn’t pay off?” Ted asked.

“If I was going to kill my husband for the insurance, I would figure out a way to do it without losing the body.” Catrina said. “Why would the killer take the body?”

“To hide the evidence,” Ted said. “If there’s no body, then the police can’t tie anyone to the crime.”

“But if there’s no body, there’s no bucks for Karen. Why else would she want her husband offed?”

“I’m not seeing it. She doesn’t seem the type to me that would want to take over his business. His finances are a mess, so she doesn’t stand to inherit a bunch of money.”

“But did she know that?” Catrina asked. “Maybe she was so ignorant of his finances she thought that there was money to inherit.”

“There’s always the jealousy angle.” Ted waved his menu at the waitress. “Maybe she wanted to get back at him for playing around?”

“I’m not buying that. She said she filed for divorce. She seemed very matter of fact about it. She didn’t seem overly emotional about it.”

“Yes, you ready to order?” the waitress asked, pulling a pad from her apron.

“Yeah, I’ll take a Grand Slam, over easy,” Ted said.