

Flowerfield Murder

No Secrets in Death

A Jake Smith Mystery: Book Four

by
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chapter 1

The older man is low on his knees within the flowers. His brown patent-leather shoes and navy slacks are muddy, soaked, and dripping from dew. Hard winds knife his causal brown-corduroy sports coat with contrasting leather elbow patches. The man ignores the steady hum of vehicle tires, carried on air currents from the nearby freeway. Salty eye-streams tickle his lips. Nothing relieves the pain.

The full moon immerses the Carlsbad flower field in a bright glow, as if sitting on a guidepost. The bone-chilling ocean wind drives thick onshore flow off the Pacific Ocean. Within minutes, fog will cover the region.

By early May, the picking season ends, but late rains keep the ranunculus blossoming this year. Red, white, purple, orange. The vivid colors attract hordes of daytime visitors. Fortunately, the nights usually were empty—maybe a few lovers entwined here and there.

Close to sixty minutes pass. Finally, time reaches the witching hour, May sixth, nineteen-seventy-four. Gray-laden air hangs wet, prepared to leak. The field intruder trembles while he pants for breath, oblivious to his surroundings.

A compact car pulls into the parking section and turns off the headlights. Stealthily, it slides next to the flower man's Lincoln Continental. The passenger slips on a pair of black cotton gloves and steps from the car. He stretches behind the seat and yanks out a wooden baseball bat; the handle wrapped in black electrical tape.

He tells the driver he will be right back.

“What are you doing?” shrieks the guy behind the wheel.

It is too late. The bat carrier runs into the field.

“Wait! Wait!” the driver jumps from the vehicle and runs in pursuit.

“Over there!” screams the man with the bat at his trailing friend.

The Lincoln man wipes the tears from his face and looks over the petal tops. He squints through his red, moist eyes and struggles to make out two dark figures running toward him—one after the other.

Andy and Buckie found me he thinks. He loves Andy and stands to wave. *We’ll work this out. Jay was just a mistake.*

The first arrival leaps high into the air. His fierce eyes pierce the moon-dosed fog. The hardwood-ash Louisville Slugger shatters the side of the man’s skull as the arched-back attacker swings double-handed with all his might.

“What are you...” never finishes parting the bewildered man’s lips before the bat connects his head. His eyes roll back. His joints buckle. Blood gushes. He crumbles into the flowers.

The second man catches up, screaming, “Stop! Stop! What are you doing?”

No answer comes. The frenzied batter continues. Blow after blow obliterates the victim’s skull and racks his body. Brain matter oozes from his head. A bloody swamp slowly expands through the plant bed.

The latecomer stares in disbelief. Unable to speak, he spins and dashes for the car.

The killer throws his wooden weapon and sprints after his friend.

A gopher hole trips the lead man, and he tumbles face-first into flowers. His pant knees stain a rainbow of colors. He jumps to his feet, continuing the escape. If he had not fallen, the follower would never have caught up to him.

The unforgiving viewers will sorely miss the popular weekend anchor on the local news broadcast.

chapter 2

The compact car backs up, and the driver grinds the shifter into first gear and hits the gas. The killer sprints and plunges headfirst through the open passenger side window as the vehicle starts pulling away, and he ends across the passenger seat, feet dangling out the open window. Finally, he cranes his neck and fixes his eyes on his friend. “What are you doing, man? You gonna leave me here?” screams the diver as he struggles to straighten himself into the seat.

“I want nothing to do with you!” the lead foot squeals his response.

The small vehicle bolts across the dirt parking area as a wall of dust blows behind and across the dirt patch, leaving the victim’s Lincoln alone at the other end of the lot.

With mere yards to freedom, a sheriff’s patrol unit pulls in, flicks on the overheads, and blocks their escape.

The frantic driver jams the brakes. The light car slides to a stop—a cloud of dirt enveloping both vehicles.

“What are we going to do?” shrieks the scared driver.

“Play it cool, man!” The passenger reaches under his light jacket, grabs a revolver, and slides it under his right leg.

“Where did you get that...?” He changes thought mid-sentence, “You can’t shoot a cop!”

The passenger stretches his white T-shirt out and wipes the blood from his face. After he pulls the dirty shirt back into position, he zips his jacket closed.

The officer exits his squad unit under his red lights’ intense, on-and-off flashes. The fog glows pink in unison. Then, while

manhandling his flashlight, he approaches the driver's side of the stopped vehicle.

The fidgety driver greets the Sheriff's deputy. Struggling to act innocent, "What's wrong, Sir?"

"What's your hurry, young fellow?" the officer asks.

"No hurry, Sir," the driver retorts the common lie.

"Why are you guys here?"

"I just pulled in to turn around, Sir."

The officer shines a beam around the soupy haze. He focuses on the lone car at the rear of the lot and stares. *What's going on here?*

The officer turns back to the task-at-hand and leans to the left, shining his light on the passenger, illuminating the younger man. The deputy recognizes fresh blood crawling down the left part of the rider's neck.

"What the hell?" He reaches for his revolver.

In anticipation, the passenger grabs his pistol and beats the deputy to the draw.

Blam! Blam! Two quick rounds fire.

After the slugs pass inches in front of his buddy's face, the first one connects with the officer's throat. The second bullet misses, and the man collapses.

Frightened and desperate to free himself, the driver tries to get out, but the moaning body prevents it. He slams the steel door back and forth, tearing the prone deputy's leather jacket and inflicting deep gashes into his arm. He turns to his accomplice, screaming, "We got to help him!"

The passenger attempts to hand the gun to his partner. "Finish him, man!"

"No... No! I'm not killing a cop!" stammers the driver.

The shooter thrusts the gun barrel into his companion's chest. "Do it, or I'm doing you, man!"

"I'm getting out of here. He won't recognize us." The motorist tries to turn on the ignition.

"The hell he won't! You want to fry, man?" The killer bends his buddy's hand and snatches the ignition keys.

The driver hesitantly takes the gun. Finally, he sticks his head and arms out the window and peers down at the wounded man. The name tag pinned to the deputy's chest reads; Ryan Platt.

"I can't," he mumbles and pulls his body back inside the cab.

The shooter grabs his pistol back. He lights a Marlboro, and after a deep drag, the gunman exits the car and casually walks around the hood to the dying man.

Officer Platt holds his spurting neck with both bloody hands. He looks up at the assassin while shaking his head. He cannot speak, but his eyes beg, "Mercy."

"You're dead anyway, man." He watches the deputy bleed while satisfying his nicotine addiction. Not that he considers ramifications, only enjoys the anticipation. The man takes the last drag and throws the cancer stick into the dirt.

Blam! One quick shot to Officer Platt's forehead.

He smiles, returns to his seat, and hands over the car keys. "Let's hit it, man."

The driver takes off, bouncing over the dead man's arm. Upon reaching the exit, the car slides out of the gravel lot and onto the two-lane asphalt road. Two miles later, traveling along Highway 5 with the sparse early morning traffic, the car slows down on the bridge, crossing Batiquitos Lagoon, pulling inches from the guardrail.

"Throw the gun out!" commands the driver.

The killer leans out the open window and chucks the gun as far as he can. Then, after what seems like an eternity of silence, it splashes into the black water far below them. Not waiting, the driver punches the gas before he gets adequately re-seated,

"What the hell, man! You almost dumped me out!" screams the passenger.

Without another word between them, the pair sped towards their home.

chapter 3

By one o'clock Sunday morning, Officer Platt has not answered his radio. Nevertheless, the sheriff's dispatcher knows from Platt's last transmission that the deputy is at the Carlsbad Flower Fields. He calls for a search of their missing officer.

Within minutes, the airwaves explode. "Officer down! Officer down! Carlsbad Flower Fields! Repeat! Officer down! 5704 Paseo del Norte!"

After the dispatcher radios for a bus, every available deputy races, code red, lights, and siren, to the field, filling the earthen parking lot with officers.

One deputy leans over Ryan Platt. He stands speechless, and he shakes his head. Their brother is gone.

A handful of uniformed men and women scour the parking area. Three inspect the Lincoln Continental automobile. Similarly, other deputies head into the blooming plant, causing flashlight beams to crisscross through the fog, showing the blurry figures trampling flowers.

"Over here! There's a body!" bellows a deputy.

The watch commander jogs towards the voice. Doorly stands aghast, looking at the obliterated man. "Is he alive?" he questions. In spite, the answer is obvious.

"No," affirms an unseen voice.

"Do we have any idea who he is?"

An officer bends and, with two fingers, picks a wallet from the sticky bloody trousers. She locates a driver's license and states, "Charles Westway."

No one places the name, and the head is an unrecognizable hamburger glob.

Other deputies keep searching.

Yellow crime scene tape stretched and hung across the parking area entrance—an officer assigned to guard the makeshift gate and allow authorized personnel only to pass.

The called Gold Cross Ambulance pulls into the parking lot. Two men leap from their van and run to Platt. The patient's vitals are unattainable. The blood flow stopped.

Thirty minutes from downtown San Diego is the small coastal North County community of Carlsbad. The county sheriff patrols the area, being too small for a police department but under the jurisdiction of the San Diego PD.

Detectives Max Marsh and his partner, Maurio Romero, are woken up and called to the scene. They arrive an hour and a half later.

The guard lowers the barrier tape to let the detectives onto the property; however, they must park away from congregated officers and approach on foot.

"Morning," greets Sergeant Doorly.

"Detective Max Marsh. This is Detective Maurio Romero."

"As you can see, we lost a deputy. And there's a male body in the flowers." He points to the floodlit section in the middle of the field. The detectives turn their heads and look.

"Sorry to hear about your man," Marsh offers solace.

"Thanks. Shot in the head and neck," the sergeant responds.

The detectives stare at the dark coagulated lake surrounding the downed deputy.

"Did your officer shoot the man in the field?" Puzzled, Romero wonders if the deputy shot the man in the flowers and made his way back to his unit to call for help.

"No way. That guy's a real mess. Bludgeoned beyond recognition." The sergeant continues with his analysis. "My deputy called in a suspicious vehicle in the parking lot and pulled in to investigate. I figure he encountered the murderer and shot."

“Has anyone called Doc Martin?” Marsh questions, referring to the county coroner.

“He’s en route.”

“Thanks, Doorly. We’ll look around the scene. Do we have a name yet?” asks Marsh.

“Deputy Ryan Platt. No official identification on the other corpse yet; however, his wallet contained a driver’s license stating Charles Westway.”

“So it wasn’t a robbery,” comments Marsh.

“Westway? That’s Jack Rhodes, a local news broadcaster,” Romero offers.

“Rhodes and Westway are the same people?” questions Doorly.

Romero responds, “Yeah. Rhodes is a stage name or something. Is that his car?” the detective points at the Lincoln.

“That’s correct, detective. We think he came here alone. Otherwise, the killer would have taken it.”

Romero and his partner crush flowers approaching the desecrated body. They reach the canopy and look over the guy’s disintegrated head. Marsh asks his partner, “How did you know Westway goes by Rhodes?”

“I don’t know. Common knowledge, I guess.”

“Someone sure did a number on him,” observes Marsh.

“You guys find the murder weapon?” Romero asks a pair of deputies mulling around the body.

“There’s a bloody bat over there,” waving a finger.

Marsh pulls out his flashlight. Romero does likewise. They wander around the adjacent flowers looking for anything missed. Marsh studies the many paths trampled through the flowers and makes an observant comment, “No way to tell which ones are the killers or which ones are ours.”

Romero questions, “If the prep had a gun, why was Platt shot and Westway beaten?”

“Westway was personal,” Marsh notes.

“I know that, Captain Obvious. The question, why out here?” looking around and thinking it over, Romero adds, “This murder could have taken place virtually anywhere.”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.” Marsh theorizes, “Maybe they came out here for sex?”

“What? The woman carries a bat to the rendezvous. Doesn’t make sense.”

“Ok. How about this? The woman comes here with Westway, and the murderer follows in his vehicle... with the bat. You know, a love triangle.” Marsh adds to his story. “Then the pair drives away in his car.”

“Why wouldn’t a jealous boyfriend just shoot Westway? He had a gun. There’s something else going on here,” Romero concludes.

The pair head back to the parking area to look up Doorly.

“What have your guys found?” Marsh asks.

“We got a good tire track and footprints in the bloody dirt. Look where the shoe prints fade out.” Doorly points his flashlight along the footprint trail.

Both detectives study the prints back and forth. They start strong and fade lighter as they go. Marsh understands and explains, “Platt’s body is front-right of his vehicle. He was at the driver’s window, so if the driver shot him, there wouldn’t be any footprints. There are two preps!”

“That’s my guess.” Doorly agrees. “And we found a Marlboro butt close to the deputy’s body.”

“Did your deputy smoke?”

“No,” he responds.

chapter 4

Coroner Edward “Doc” Martin joins the collected officers at the flower field scene. He approaches the Platt body and does the assessment. After this, Doc asks the closest deputy where the other corpse is. The woman officer does not speak, merely points towards the area. The coroner strains his eyes and sees the faint glow through the fog.

Martin crosses the crushed flowers, carefully stepping in previously left prints towards a group of officers. He returns acknowledgments from various colleagues and goes straight to the deceased. The coroner stands to stare at the barbarity.

Doorly approaches, “I guess you saw my deputy?”

Martin offers condolences and gets to work on Westway.

Detective Max Marsh approaches, “Morning, Doc.”

Martin responds in kind, without looking up at the detective. Then, after a few minutes, he asks Max to help with the gurney.

The two head back to Martin’s issued black station wagon. The words ‘SAN DIEGO COUNTY CORONER’ in small white letters on one line centered under the windows on the passenger and driver’s doors and rear tailgate. No other identifying marks on the vehicle sans the ‘E’ license plate. The first letter inside a diamond indicates law enforcement and exempt.

On the way to retrieve the gurney, Marsh asks, “Any prelims yet? Like a bullet hole.”

“Can’t tell much. The head’s a mess and no apparent shots in the body. This one’s going to take some work. What did you find?”

“A bloody baseball bat. Presume the murder weapon. And a tire track across the deputy’s arm and in the blood. A few shoe-prints.

And a cigarette butt.” He adds, “I’m sending everything to the lab for fingerprinting and analyzes.”

Martin offers the standard condolence. “I was sad to hear they killed a deputy.”

Thinking it over, the coroner decides the deputy is more straightforward of the two men to autopsy and states, “I’ll do Platt first, before Westway.”

After the pair retrieves and loads both corpses into the back of the wagon, Doc Martin heads to the county morgue.

As soon as they unloaded the bodies at the morgue, Martin went home for a couple of hours more sleep before going back to work.

Four hours later, Ed stands and stares at Westway’s battered corpse while finishing his first coffee. *Who would have done such a thing?*

Martin grabs another cup, then scrubs, wiggles into a pair of blue nitrile gloves, and moves to the stainless-steel autopsy table where Deputy Platt’s body lies.

He starts the external examination. “The body cold and not yet embalmed,” speaking into the micro-tape recorder strung from his neck. The MD continues with the length and weight of the body. Then, “Lividity fixed in the distal portions of the limbs. The eyes are closed. The hair is brown, approximately two inches in length. A three-eighth-inch diameter hole to the right-center forehead. An identical size hole in the left side of the neck. Both penetrations appear caused by a small caliber weapon. The lower right forearm contains five deep lacerations of unknown origin. The body possesses no other distinguishing marks, scars, or tattoos. Clothes and possessions cataloged.”

Moving onto the internal examination, the pathologist uses a scalpel and makes an incision across the head crown from the top of the right ear to the top of the left one. He peels back the scalp and face skin. Next, Martin grabs an oscillating bone saw, and with medium pressure, he cuts the cranium, careful to leave the soft tissue matter untouched. After separating the skull, Martin uses the scalpel to dig out the embedded slug from Platt’s exposed brain. He wipes and examines the piece of lead, all the while dictating. The coroner

continues and removes the second slug from the neck. He voices a note. “Both slugs appear the same caliber and presumably from the same gun,” though well aware they are twenty-two caliber. Still, he does not record his opinion leaving identification to the ballistics lab.

Over the next few hours, Martin examines the organs and body systems. He concludes his examination and ends with remarks, “Decedent presented to this office as a gunshot victim. Two entry-points present. First entry to the left side of neck penetrating Carotid Artery. Would have caused victim to bleed out in three to four minutes. Subsequent gunshot to forehead. Death occurred within one minute of the second shot. Notified San Diego Detective Max Marsh of these findings verbally upon conclusion of examination via telephone.”

Martin glances at the wall clock. *Lunchtime*. After which, he will start on the second victim.

“Charles Brent Westway, aka Jack Rhodes.” Because of the immense damage to the skull, Doc Martin works well into the evening. Finally, at seven-thirty, he cleans up and heads home—tomorrow, another day, and onto the rest of the cadaver.

The following morning, Martin gets back to work on Westway’s body. “Deceased bludgeoned. Body bones intact, though numerous lesions and bruising. Major organ damage and hypovolemia. The liver weighs four-point-four pounds: significant scarring and liver fibrosis. Probable alcoholism. The manner of death is system dysfunction due to brain damage, and the victim died of excessive blood loss within four minutes of suspected first blow to the right side of the skull. SDPD detectives were notified of these findings at once upon conclusion of the examination.”

It is after four PM Tuesday afternoon by the time he finishes the examination procedure, types up both reports, and forwards hard copies to Detective Marsh.

chapter 5

Monday, the sixth, Detective Max Marsh walks into his headquarters. After a late night at the scene, he slept in and did not wake until eight-thirty. First, he stops by the employee lounge for his morning mug of caffeine before heading to the second-floor squad room.

Romero already sits at his desk, on his fourth cup.

“You got here early,” Max comments.

“Haven’t been home yet. Came straight here from the scene,” smiles Maurio.

“Must have this thing solved then,” exclaims his partner.

“Hardly. I have been looking into Westway.”

“And?”

“And I called Channel 10. Talked to...” Romero checks his notes, “one Carly Turner. She’s the weekend news producer.”

Marsh interrupts and asks, “She was still there? At four this morning?”

“Her and a few coworkers. After word spread of the murder, most of them showed back up at the studio to see what was happening. Anyway, she told me Westway is better known by his stage name, Jack Rhodes, and everyone called him John.”

Again, his partner breaks in. “How did she find out?”

“Tina Tredberry, from Channel 8, covered the scene. Evidently, she and Turner are friends, and Tredberry called her.” Romero continues, “He has a private studio as a side business, Westway Productions.” Again, he refers to his notes. “2400 Kettner Blvd, Suite 106. He did voiceovers and produced commercials. Also, I received his home address and typed up search warrants for both.”

“We’ll head over and get them signed in a couple of minutes.” Marsh wants to finish his coffee and maybe down the second cup of caffeine first.

“We’re on the same page, buddy. Oh, she also informed me Westway was rich and single. Never married. She stated that shocked everyone because women chased him like a dog on a ball.”

“Rhodes seemed to be everywhere. Every time I opened the paper, there was a picture of him at some fundraiser or celebratory event with a different woman. I guess he just didn’t want to get trapped.”

“Turner doesn’t think that’s the case. Everyone at the studio thought he was gay,” Romero conveys.

Marsh thinks over the statement and asks. “The women were his cover?”

“That’s the popular opinion.”

“So, who was his male friends?”

“She didn’t know, but mentioned a rumor about Rhodes and the station manager. It started after last year’s Christmas party.”

“Who’s that? We need to talk to him.”

“Agreed. Jaylend Todd.”

“That it?” Marsh asks.

“Yeah.” Romero scans his notes. “If anything else comes to me, I’ll let you know.” He stands. “Let’s get the warrants and visit the studio first.”

“We also must find his next of kin,” Marsh adds.

The detectives arrive at Westway Productions in their plainwrap department vehicle. A permanent ‘NOW LEASING’ sign hung in front of the multi-unit industrial strip mall. Marsh makes a mental note of the phone number.

They park in front of unit one-oh-six. A ‘WESTWAY PRODUCTIONS’ sign screwed to the locked front door. Marsh tells his partner to check the back delivery entrance while he goes into the next suite to see if they know Westway or any of his clients. While he is there, he phones the landlord.

Marsh and Romero meet back at the studio door. “The landlord will be here in thirty minutes to let us in,” Marsh reports. “Let’s walk to the corner and grab a coffee and donuts.”

They are back sitting in their car when the owner pulls in and parks beside them. Romero grabs the thirty-five-millimeter camera before exiting their vehicle.

After unlocking the door, Marsh instructs the owner to wait in the parking lot, but the man tells the detectives to lock up when they are through and drives away from his property.

The detectives enter the well-furnished outer office. A conceptional Jackson Pollock piece hangs on the wall behind a high-polished mahogany reception desk. The desk is bare, except for a black push-button AT&T phone connected to a new-fangled PhoneMate answering machine. Two overstuffed plush pink visitor chairs and a matching loveseat with a magazine-strewn coffee table in front adorn the room. Romero checks the desk. It is empty except for half a dozen green legal-sized notepads, a box of paper clips, and an opened package of blue-ink Bic pens. Marsh throws the search warrant onto the desk. Romero snaps pictures of everything in the room.

The detectives go down the hallway; the right-side features six doors: all closed but two, the conference room and Westway’s office.

The pair enter the open corporate-like conference room. A pulled-down viewing screen hangs on the back wall, with a projector on the opposite wall. In the middle is a large oak table with ten chairs surrounding it. The dark purple, close to black, walls hung with framed stills from various client commercials.

Next, Westway’s office is not as large as expected but is mid-sized and comfortable. One wall features a cubism Picasso and across the room hangs a futurist Carlo Carra painting. A mahogany desk room center, a sand-colored leather executive chair behind, and two lavender guest chairs positioned in front. Marsh notices that the room is void of personal objects: no pictures, newspaper clippings, or awards. The traditional framed first dollar bill or posted business

license also is missing. It could be anyone's corporate office in any commercial building anywhere in the country.

The desk contains client records in a bottom-left file drawer. Assorted color tabbed folders hang from a Pendaflex steel frame. Romero flips through them. Nothing pops out. In the drawer above, he only finds miscellaneous office products, a calculator, scratch pads, rubber bands, and various disposable items.

At the other end of the desk, Marsh finds the same drawer configuration; a smaller top drawer above a larger bottom one. The detective pulls out the lower drawer; it shocks him to find smoking paraphernalia, three pipes, a pound-can of Borkum Riff, a Swedish rough-cut blend of Virginia and Burley tobaccos, and pipe cleaners. In addition, he finds a baggie of marijuana and rolling papers. Moreover, it contains a half-full bottle of Russian Stolichnaya 100-proof Blue Label vodka and four Cosmopolitan crystal glasses.

The center drawer holds pens, miscellaneous junk, and an address book. Detective Marsh flips through the names.

"Anything jump at you?" Romero questions.

"Looks like all client businesses. There's a lot. We'll go through them back to the office." Marsh closes the drawer and drops the book into an evidence bag and pockets.

After the office is the editing room. Here hangs Westway's business license and other documents. On one counter sets a Steenbeck flatbed film and magnetic sound editor machine, hand magnifiers, and a reel-to-reel machine. Included is a filmstrip projector. All set up to handle 16mm film. On the opposite wall is a white-patch-painted screen. Besides, the screen is a floor-to-ceiling film canister shelf filled with client commercials and other stock film clips—all feature handwritten or typed information labels. Romero removes the camera around his neck and snaps photos, recording all the titles. They will need to review these later. Then the detectives move down the hallway.

The room next door has the label and title area. A freestanding station features a VariTyper for black and white labels and another color-title-producing machine. This room also doubles as a lounge and file storage area with a small table and chair set, couch, hot

plate, apartment-sized refrigerator, and three file cabinets. Inside one wall unit is food and snacks. Behind the next unit, doors are five half-gallons of vodka, assorted other liquors, and a variety of bar glassware.

The sound studio presents foam-padded walls and three commercial microphones: a handheld and two on stands. The room includes a sitting area with four chairs. Against one wall, a counter holds two reel-to-reel recorders and a massive sound editor with dozens of buttons and slide adjusters. Apparently, set up for producing voice-overs and verbal advertising.

Only a few rooms remain to inspect: the dark room, film studio, prop room, and dressing room.

The dark room is standard for industry photo processing of 35mm stills and 16mm movie film. Both the detectives conclude Westway did most work in-house.

The large studio was cleaner than a surgical operating room, comprising a small stage with a lectern against one wall. On the opposite wall, a ceiling rack of photographic pull-down backdrops, including a blue screen. The backgrounds ascend into a seamless pure white plaster cove. There are three ARRI commercial movie cameras on heavy-duty rolling tripods. The ceiling painted flat-black and cocooned with lighting and spotlights with front-mounted color wheels—also, six stand microphones set in various locations around the room or hung from the ceiling. The roll-up door gives easy access to bring in added items as required.

On each side of the stage is another door. The right-hand one leads into a dressing room with a vanity, sink, and mounted makeup mirror. Clear, 100-watt light bulbs surround the mirror. The table comprises application brushes, makeup, a blow dryer, and assorted accessories. An inner door leads into an enormous bathroom and shower.

The other stage-left door leads to the property room, filled with papier mâché figures, plastic plants, and other might-need accessories. One wall is nothing but racked clothing.

The detectives, overly impressed at the extent of the operation, shoot two rolls of film throughout their inspection, seventy-two

frames total, before locking up as told. Then, they leave to drop off the film at their lab.

Romero glances at his watch. "Ready for lunch?"

chapter 6

After lunch, the detectives look up Westway's Gage Drive address on Point Loma. They drive off to the murdered man's home.

It is a lovely two-story older house located high on the point overlooking San Diego Bay and Coronado Island. They climb the stairs to the front door and ring the bell, checking that no one else lives in the home. When the buzzer goes unanswered, Romero pounds on the thick oak door as Marsh peers through the porch windows. Neither sees nor hears anything. The home is quiet as a mausoleum at midnight.

Marsh and Romero walk around the oversized lot, looking for an unlocked door or open window. The yard is immaculate and perfectly manicured. The bushes and trees trimmed the pool, sparkling clean.

"What does a single man need with all this?" Romero questions.

"With money, you can live in any style you want," Marsh grins.

They find unlocked double French doors leading from the patio into the house and enter, happy that they did not have to break and climb through a window.

"Wow!" is all Romero can say.

The pair wanders in envy through the downstairs rooms. The habitat is so clean they wonder if Westway even visited his abode. In the entertainment room, they find a full-size ornate billiard table with purple felt, plush lavender chairs, and an ostentatious bar area, complete with sink and frig. Behind the bar are shelves of liquor. At one end, next to the shelving, is a floor-to-ceiling wine rack. Under the bar, they find two full cases containing half-gallon jugs of Stolichnaya Blue Label.

“Doesn’t seem that he could get enough vodka,” Marsh comments.

They discover a study with only two pink-wingback Queen Anne chairs, separated by an enclosed walnut end table, in front of a twenty-five-inch Zenith Chromacolor television set. Next to the TV, a sizeable wooden cabinet stereo system covers four feet of the wall. Two other walls contain enormous bookcases, with glass-pane doors embedded with diamond-patterned wires holding a massive library. However, two shelves, completely stuffed with twelve-inch vinyl LPs, must be a thousand or more. Finally, a stately white brick fireplace encompasses the outside wall.

“Pink must be his favorite color,” Marsh mumbles as he pulls out one album after another, studying each title and cover.

Romero opens the end table. “More vodka and glasses.”

Romero heads upstairs, and Marsh, staying on the lower level, looks for the kitchen.

Off the pantry, Marsh enters what should have been the garage and finds it converted into a theater room complete with eight watermelon-colored recliners facing an immense screen. Glancing around, the detective spots a projector lens protruding through a small glassless window high on the back wall. He strides to the door on the far left and opens it. A short stairway leads up to a low-ceiling room. Besides the projector, a rack of movie canisters. He looks through the labels—everything from classic movies to pornographic films.

Marsh hooks back up with Romero in the master bedroom. He asks his partner if he finds anything interesting.

“Not much. There is a lot, and I mean a whole heap of vodka. This guy was defiantly an alcoholic.”

“Make that a gay alcoholic!” Marsh states.

“No way. Just because he likes pink?”

“That too, but quite a collection of porn movies. And not the Linda Lovelace variety.”

“Crap, you’re kidding?”

“I wish I was.”

Upstairs, the detectives stroll through the rest of the home. They find Russian vodka in most rooms. The main decor is pink, with light mauve shades and darker purple walls. Modern and conceptual oil paintings hang throughout many.

“Let’s get back to the office and go through his address book. We’ll have the investigation gang go through this place with toothbrushes.” Marsh starts for their car.

It startles detective Marsh when he opens the front door, and an obese middle-aged woman falls through and lands on the inside mat.

“What the hell are you doing?” Max snaps.

“There’s nothing wrong with my hearing. You don’t have to yell.” She lies staring up at Marsh. “Are you going to help me up or not?”

“Who are you?” without offering a hand.

“Mrs. Perry. I live next door. I thought you were robbers.”

“Do I look like a damn burglar?”

“Please don’t curse at me,” states the brunet-haired bumptious beauty.

“You’re interfering with a police investigation, and I talk any way I damn well please.” Max is not giving this intruder an inch.

“What’s going on?” Romero questions as he arrives at the entrance. At once, he bends and helps her onto her feet. “We’re the police, ma’am. I’m Detective Romero, and you’ve met Detective Marsh. Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” speaking directly to Romero, “I’m quite familiar with Charles and can help.”

“We don’t need your help.” Detective Marsh stomps out of the room.

“What’s your name?” Romero questions.

“Helen Perry. I saw Charles’ picture on the news. It’s so disturbing. When I noticed you two sneaking around, I thought you came to rob the house.”

“Mrs. Perry, we appreciate your help, but I must warn you, if you ever see anyone suspicious in the neighborhood, do not confront them. Call me.” Romero hands her a business card.

He escorts Mrs. Perry to the front porch and locks the door behind him. Romero excuses himself and runs to catch up with his partner.