

GRAVE GARDEN

Daughter, Sister, Killer

A Jake Smith Mystery: Book Six

by
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CHAPTER 1

Three days since her last fix, the rung out, filthy woman rises from her knees after servicing the last man. She quivers beneath her sweat-drenched clothes. “Give me my stuff!” Her screech reverberates through the bowels of the abandoned industrial warehouse.

The nineteen-year-old laughs while zipping up his jeans, “Slow down, sweetheart. The party’s just getting started.”

Two other men rock back on their rickety pecan crates, leftover after the packing plant closed years prior. Finally, the older, early twenties guy grabs at a fifth of vodka clutched in his buddy’s hands, and his rotten box collapses, sending him sprawling onto the chipped and cracked vinyl tiles. All three boys explode into undisciplined howling.

“Give me the damn powder! I’m outta here!” the forsaken vagabond shrieks.

“Sweetheart, you owe me, with that kind of service,” the commander barely spews out through cackles.

Out of nowhere, the silver nine-millimeter Beretta appears. Crack! Zing! Pop! Pop! The three men drop. She takes two steps forward. The twitching leader grasps his neck as his hand turns dark maroon and a pool develops beneath. Pop! He absorbs a death slug between his enormous eyes.

She stares at the other two. One motionless. The other leaks blood with every cough as he struggles to belly-crawl to safety. Pop! The crawler’s finished. She looks at the stiff. Pow! One, for good measure.

Calm as a cold codfish, she goes through each man’s jeans and

pockets and finds a few bills, loose change, and a two-finger baggie of weed. *Damn bastards, what kind of drug dealers are they?*

She drops the gun into her purse, grabs the surplus army-green canvas backpack off the floor, hoists it onto her shoulder, and traipses past the supply room door into the vast open warehouse. The high paned windows, murky with years of built-up grime, allow little light to pass—the only rays across the expanse ooze from the broken entry which led her into this purgatory.

She sticks her head around the bashed-in door frame and scours the block. All is quiet except for the distant carousing of school-age children playing elsewhere in a vacant dirt lot. She steps onto the fractured sidewalk into the thick summer heat of Atlanta. Eager to roll a joint, the woman hurries north towards the downtown area, desperate to escape the scene.

Blocks past the trash-littered streets and into a populated industrial section, she needs a brief rest and plops on a bus bench.

After many minutes, with salty sweat cascading down her body and constantly wiping her forehead on her sleeve, she pulls the knapsack open, hoping to find a hat or even a dry t-shirt. Instead, her eyes widen beyond their sockets, and she glances around before re-buckling the bag.

A marked unit slowly passes, and the deputy eyes the vagrant. Then, as the patrol car whips a U-turn at the intersection, she dashes into an adjacent shop and enters the office. “Good afternoon. I need a job application.”

The woman behind the desk eyes the intruder up and down. “We’re not hiring.”

“Would it be possible to get a drink of water? I’ve been looking all day.”

“There’s a cooler through that door. Be quick before my boss catches you.”

“I will.”

Once in a short hallway, she passes the water without so much as a glance and enters the back workshop. Surveying the place from the door, she observes a gray-haired gent fiddling with some machine along the left wall. Clickety-click. Clickety-click. A man

in the middle of a room turns on a printing press without so much as a glance in her direction. The woman darts across the expanse, heading for the large open roll-up door leading to the back access lane.

“Hey, you can’t be back here!” the elderly man yells.

Without a response, she keeps her gait steady.

“I’m talking to you! Get out of here. My insurance doesn’t cover non-employees.”

Halfway across the room, she latches onto a shoulder strap and breaks into a dash for freedom.

The befuddled man stares in disbelief before turning back to his task.

Once in the vacant alley, she spots a large commercial dumpster. The woman opens the backpack, grabs a handful of bills, and stuffs her jean’s front pocket as she walks. Next, she checks her other pocket, secure upon feeling the weed bag.

At the trash bin, she stops and looks over the area. Not a soul in sight, she pushes up the large black plastic lid. She places the canvas bag in the container stuffed with industrial garbage into an inside corner and pulls cardboard over it. Satisfied, the woman proceeds back up the alley, past the open commercial door, and walks to the street.

Red flashing lights capture her attention as a patrol unit pulls to the curb. She twirls and hastens down the sidewalk.

“Stop! Stay where you are!” screams the loudspeaker.

She turns with a surprised look and thumps her chest. “Me?”

The officer jumps from his vehicle. “Face the wall and put your hands on it!”

“I haven’t done nothing.”

“Do as I say! Face the wall, hands up.” He barks.

The uniform moves close behind her. “Do you have an ID?”

“Not on me.”

“What’s your name?”

“Clara Kobb.”

“Clara, where do you live?”

“San Diego.”

“What are you doing in Atlanta?”

“Just passing through on my way home.”

“Do you have a vehicle?”

“No. Taking a bus.”

“You’re a long way from the depot. What are you doing in this area?”

“Uh, I was looking for a friend who lived somewhere here and got lost. So I’ve been wandering around most of the day.”

The officer stands quietly, listening intently to his unit’s blaring radio. “Code forty-eight. Seven-eight-seven Windsor. The old pecan packing house.”

“What’s that?”

“Body. Get out of here and don’t let me catch you again!” The deputy spins and runs for his vehicle.

Clara watches him, lights flashing, siren blaring, screech a U-turn across the four lanes of traffic, and rocket down the street.

Clara returns to the dumpster with a wry smile forming on her lips, thinking, *my luck’s changing*. She retrieves her stash.

CHAPTER 2

“Officer Blunt on scene at seven-eight-seven Windsor,” the deputy radios as he pulls into the parking lot and drives around the warehouse, exploring the exterior. He discovers a side door hanging at an angle from its lower hinge and circles into the middle of the lot, parking many yards from the entrance.

After studying the area, Blunt steps from his unit before drawing his weapon. At the wrecked entrance, his free hand grabs his belt-mounted flashlight, and he squints through the opening, scanning the warehouse and listening for movement. He pulls the destroyed steel panel until the gap widens enough to squeeze through and steps into an eerie quiet.

A noise startles him, and Blunt spins, raising his gun, as his beam searches the back wall, picking up a squealing rat scurrying for safety. His heart feels as though it is about to explode through his chest. Thoughts raced across his mind *calm down Blunt. Find the body.*

He walks the perimeter. The officer halts and flings a shaft of light across the warehouse floor every few yards.

Advancing along the third wall, he comes across a doorless room and spots the body. Taking another step forward, Blunt discovers the other two bloody corpses. Three total. His rumpled mind tries to process what he sees.

“Blunt! You in here?”

After jumping out of his skin, he yells, “Over here!” and shines his light through the doorway.

Seconds after, two brothers in blue enter the room, pushing a trembling teenager between them.

“Who’s he?”

“Derick Turbid. He called it in. We picked him up at the Shamrock station on our way.”

“How did you find them?” Blunt questions.

“Them? Are they all dead, man?”

“Your entire gang, hey? Why weren’t you with them?”

“This is sorta our clubhouse, man. I was meeting the guys but running late, man.”

“Lucky you.”

“What do we have, Blunt?”

“Three. All shot.”

“Find a weapon?”

“Haven’t had time to look. Can one of you call the detectives? And coroner.”

“On it.” The new officer heads to his car radio.

“So, Derick, why did you kill your buddies?”

“Me! I didn’t do this, man!”

“If not you, who?”

“I don’t know. We were just going to hang out, man.”

“The four of you?”

“Yea.”

“No one else? Another friend?”

“Just us.”

“Hmm. Sounds fishy, Derick. Maybe you were meeting your supplier? Or a client?”

“No way. What are you saying, man?”

“I’m saying four dudes in a warehouse doesn’t make sense. You guys queer?”

“Hell no! They had a woman with them.”

“When were you going to tell me that?”

“I just told you, man.”

“Who’s the woman?”

“I... I don’t know. Just someone Steve met, man. She was into partying, if you know what I mean.”

“A prostitute?”

“Yeah, I guess, man.”

“Detectives and crime scene guys on their way.” The rookie reenters.

“You guys take over. I have someone to check out,” Blunt orders.

“A suspect?”

“A hunch. When the call came in, I was interviewing a woman a few blocks from here.”

“You think she could be our shooter?”

“Clara Kobb. Said she was passing through on her way to San Diego. She planned to take a bus, but it didn’t look like she had two nickels to her name and certainly no reason to be in this section of town.”

Blunt drives straight to the industrial units, where he witnesses the woman exiting the alley. He enters the corner suite, Economy Printers. The owner’s wife sits behind the counter. Eager to help, she explained the dirty street person was looking for a job and asked for a drink of water. During her description, a man enters from the back, wiping grease from his hands with a mucky shop towel. “What’s going on here?”

“This is my husband. He saw her too.”

The pair recounts what happened and describes the intruder.

Upon leaving, the officer drives in and out of complexes, in a six-block area, for two hours, stopping to question everyone he spies. Not one individual knows or admits knowing Clara Kobb or ran into any homeless woman today. His notebook pages remain blank. Blunt radios Kobb’s description in and requests an alert broadcast while heading toward the bus station.

Over the next hour, officials dribble into the old pecan factory, a detective team, coroner, crime investigation squad, and additional uniforms. A balding detective takes the lead, handing out assignments. The property, inside and out searched, the neighborhood canvassed, and evidence collected as flashbulbs lit up the building like a dry summer thunderstorm. The murder scene processing takes close to six hours, though not much uncovered; six shell casing but no weapon, many smudged fingerprints, and gallons of drying blood.

CHAPTER 3

Gotta get out of here. Hustling towards the downtown Windsor Street bus terminal, Clara Kobb formulates an escape plan. She makes the ten-block walk in twenty minutes, intermittently pausing in doorways to watch for followers.

Kobb was familiar with the station as she went in and out of the building the previous week, picking up brief naps in the hard plastic chairs for as long as possible before security kicked her back into the streets. She darts straight to the bank of steel cabinets, where she stores a small suitcase containing everything she owns.

Standing in front of open locker number four-seventeen, she unlatches the knapsack and pulls out a handful of crinkled folding money, quickly cramming it into a front pocket. Clara tosses her Barretta, followed by the bag, into the box before she stuffs the locker key into the same front pocket. She glances around, checking for snooping eyes before heading to the sidewalk.

Having spent most of her time wandering downtown, Clara begins toward the Woolworth store. She needs to purchase a good traveling outfit and a new pair of sneakers. Also, a purse would be handy.

As soon as she scoots through the revolving door, a plain-clothes store detective picks up her scent. Then, at Clara's first clearance rack stop, the following undercover woman approaches. "Can I help you?"

"No." Looking up, "Oh, sorry, I must be quite the sight. I've been on a bus for a day and a half, and their lousy air conditioning broke down. Just need some new clothes," quickly adding, "and a shower."

“I’d be happy to get a salesperson to assist you?”

“I’m fine, thank you. In a hurry to make a purchase and get to my hotel.”

The secret agent bids good luck and moves to the main aisle. But rapidly circles around and behind a rack. Her eyeballs can’t afford to leave this person for even a second. She’ll stay on her like a tic on a possum.

Finding a blouse, slacks, and shoes, Clara heads to the cosmetics counter. *Doesn’t that woman have something better to do?* Well aware of her shadow’s presence.

Clara snatches a hand-basket and dumps her merchandise in at the first cosmetic counter she comes across. She goes along the tables and adds deodorant, toothpaste and brush, shampoo, conditioner, lipstick, and nail polish, including miscellaneous primping items. Finally, she stands, looking at hair colors. *Red, blonde, brown, black?* She scratches irritating dirt on her cheek before snatching a Lady Clairol light blonde permanent bleach color. Her eye catches a Toni home permanent display at the end of the aisle. *A curly. Perfect.* She grabs a box and looks for curlers before heading for the front registers. On her way out, she stops by a large circular rack, separates the clothing, and tells the woman she’s leaving now.

Clara swings by the bus terminal, checking the menu board for scheduled San Diego trips. She also stops at her locker and picks up her suitcase and knapsack.

At Motel 6, five blocks south, Clara pays cash for two nights. The counter clerk asks for identification, and Kobb pulls out her Illinois driver’s license and registers under her married name, Rebeca Taylor.

Once secure in her room, Becky dumps the knapsack on top of the bed. Her wide eyes scan the baggies of grass, crumpled paper money, and miscellaneous items. Important things first. She separates the money, trying to smooth each bill, and sorts by denomination into piles. Once the bedspread gets organized, she takes inventory—eleven twenties, fifteen tens, eight fives, and twenty-two ones, totaling four-hundred-thirty-two dollars, which

does not include the shopping change in her jeans. Also, there are nine small bags of marijuana, assorted lighters, a pair of semi-rimless sunglasses, a journal notebook and pen, and a folding knife featuring a four-inch gleaming blade and sporting a pseudo ebony handle.

Rebeca plops down on the only chair in the room and opens the journal. After looking at the first page, she has seen enough. *What idiot keeps a list of drug sales and customers?*

Stashing the book, she scatters her Woolworth purchases across the bed. Then, after rifling through her booty, Becky rips off her filthy, sweat-stained clothes, which go into the empty five-and-dime paper bag. Finally, she's ready to tackle her hair job after a long hot shower, complete with vigorous scrubbing. Rebeca slips on a new pair of panties and a bra. She studies the instruction panel, and she gets started.

Her shoulder-length mouse-brown hair turned blonde in a puff-ball afro three hours later. Becky stares into the mirror without blinking for many minutes. Last, she finger-fluffs the curls. Quite pleased with the results, the new woman throws the used curlers and any trash into one of the empty shopping bags. She grabs both bags, trash, and old clothes and goes out for food. Across the lot, she spies the motel dumpster and discards the two paper sacks.

Close to three AM Wednesday morning, Becky sits in a booth inside the bus depot café, waiting for a burger and fries. She notices a uniformed officer come through the door and survey the room. Before their eyes lock, the former street urchin slyly reaches into her handbag for the sunglasses she found. Half a minute later, Rebeca takes a sip of water and slips on the dark glasses. *No way that pig recognizes me.*

The server approaches and sets down the food. "Do you need anything else?"

Becky's eyes dart over the table, spying ketchup, mustard, and a small paper cup of mayonnaise. "I'm good. Where is your ladies' room?"

Strolling past the officer, she boldly nods before looking for the restroom. The stake-out man glances at his sketch before going back

to his eggs.

When she returns to her booth, the policeman is gone. She removes her shades and enjoys a quiet supper. Becky surmises there isn't any reason to hide out for two days. *I'm getting out of this rat hole.* She throws a five on the table and bounds for the ticket counter.

"When's the next bus to San Diego?"

"Let's see... we have an express leaving at six-forty-five this morning and..."

Becky interrupts, "How much?"

"Just you?"

Her look answers.

"Round trip?"

"One-way."

The counter agent flips through a fare guide. "Here we go, twenty-eight dollars plus tax."

"I'll take it."

Becky hustles back to her room. *I can't take the weed. I should, but if they catch me? I can sell it. That's stupid! I need money. What about my gun?* Rebeca decides there is no option. She needs the pistol for protection and stuffs everything, grass and all, into her suitcase.

With further thought, she snatches the sunglasses and Barretta back out and puts them in her new purse. Before fastening, she counts the money from her jeans and adds another hundred from her case. Finally, the woman rechecks the room for missed trash. Her eyes perform a last scan at the door—the room's cleaner than maid service, and she purrs like a content fox.

The needless knapsack goes into a dumpster she passes on her way to the bus terminal. *No worries now. Nothing links it to me to this crap hole!*

Becky has over an hour to kill and searches for coffee before settling into a familiar plastic chair.

"Coach twenty-four-fifty-eight to Birmingham, Jackson, Shreveport, Fort Worth. Now loading! Gate five!"

Rebeca checks her boarding pass and glances at the giant wall clock. *Fifteen minutes. I better hit the washroom.*

She falls into the back of the line upon returning. Finally, on the top step, “Can I check your pass, Miss?”

She holds it out. “I understand I have to transfer at Fort Worth to another bus?”

“Uh, San Diego, huh? That’s correct, Miss. In Fort Worth and again in Tucson. If my memory serves, it’s a fifty to sixty-hour trip. You will be in San Diego early Friday afternoon.”

Becky stands surveying the seats. The bus is half full, maybe a little more, and she has a good choice. She picks a window seat on the south side and slides her suitcase under the bench.

Soon, the coach pulls into the early morning traffic. Within minutes, the bus hums west along Interstate 20. With nobody next to her, Becky removes her light jacket, fluffs, and slips it under her head while curling up in the seat. It’s twelve hours to Fort Worth but probably ends close to fourteen hours with the stops—hopefully, she can catch up on her sleep.

CHAPTER 4

It is August fifteenth, nineteen-seventy-five, and another steamy Southern California afternoon.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Blam! Blam! The heavy oak door opens an inch. A middle-aged woman peers through the crack. “Yes?”

“Mom, it’s me, Beth.”

“Beth? Sorry I didn’t recognize you in the new hair-do.”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course, dear.” The door swings wide, and Mrs. Howell steps aside.

The pair goes to the kitchen—Beth sits, her mother stands. “I baked chocolate chip cookies. Would you like a cup of coffee or a soda?”

“Do you have any iced tea?”

“We don’t drink tea, dear. Don’t you remember?”

“I’ll have water. Thanks, Mom.”

The pair catch up over drinks and cookies. Mrs. Howell hasn’t seen or heard from her daughter in six years.

“Where’s Andrew?”

“When did you stop calling him Dad?”

“When I found my real father. I still can’t believe you guys kept that from me my entire childhood.”

“We thought it was better that way. But, of course, we were always going to tell you when the time was right.”

“The time was right when I turned ten, not when I found my birth certificate—not at sixteen.”

“Dear, it’s water under the bridge. We’re just glad you came home.”

“So, where is he?”

“He’s golfing. Should be home anytime now. Are you staying for dinner?”

“Ah, I would like to stick around for a while. At least until I get settled around here.”

“We can discuss it over dinner. I don’t foresee any problems, but you know your dad; he’ll decide.”

Beth mumbles, “Like every damn discussion.”

“What did you say, dear?”

“Nothing. Where’s Jenny?”

“Your sister bought a condo in Ramona.”

“Half-sister. What the hell does she do in Ramona?”

“Please don’t use that language in this house. Jeanette lives there but works here in Escondido.”

“That’s quite a drive.”

“She says it’s not bad. And it’s where she could afford to buy. Everything around here is skyrocketing. I don’t know what kids are going to do these days.”

They hear the automatic garage door open and close. A few minutes later, Andrew Howell, Jr. stands in the kitchen doorway, gaping. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s good to see you, too.”

“After all these years. What, you want money?”

“I don’t ever need anything from you.” Beth stands and stomps through the home.

“Dear, please come back and talk. He didn’t mean it as it sounded. I’m sure he was just surprised to see you. Come back and sit.”

Beth, without a word, returns to the kitchen. She has no other choice and no place to go. Her four hundred dollars won’t last a week. She plops into the same chair and expressionlessly waits for Andrew’s apology.

“Well, tell us where you were and what you’re doing now.” Andrew overlooks apologizing for his accusations.

Flatly, “I was a lot of places. And had good jobs everywhere I was.”

“And what happened to all those good jobs?”

“Nothing happened... I just moved on!”

“You know, your sister really made something of herself, graduated from San Diego State College with a nursing degree. And now works in the pediatric ward at Palomar.”

“Good for her.”

“Beth, you’re a smart girl, too. You got your accounting degree from the state. I just don’t understand why you left a good job here without a word?” her mother questions.

“I’m head of accounting for Trident Financial in, uh, outside of Dallas. Just here on my two-week vacation and wanted to see mom.”

“In accounting management? That’s wonderful. Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

“I didn’t come here to impress you! It’s none of your business what I do with my life. I guess I better get going. I have to find a motel and check in.”

“I didn’t see a car in the driveway. So how did you get here?” Andrew interjects.

“Flew in and took a taxi.”

“A taxi? From Lindbergh Field? That must have been expensive?”

“Now you’re my damn banker?”

After many minutes of silence, Leslie speaks, “Honey, with Beth’s expensive trip to visit us, maybe she could stay here for her vacation?”

Andrew stares first at his wife, then at Beth. “Alright. But I don’t want any trouble for the next two weeks.”

Mr. Howell states he’s going to watch the game in his study and leaves the room.

“Why don’t you call Jeanette and see if she can come for dinner? Her number is on the frig, dear. I’m going to freshen up.”

Leslie knocks softly on the study door. Receiving no response, she forces a smile and sticks her head into the room. “Andy, can we talk?”

“What was all that garbage about?”

“Beth was trying to save face. However, it’s obvious she needs

our help.”

“She is not moving in! Probably on drugs.”

“We don’t know that, honey. Maybe Jeanette can get her on at the hospital.”

“And what? Jeez, she doesn’t even have a car. So how the hell can she get to work? And where would she live?”

“The girls were close growing up. So maybe she can stay with Jenny for a while. You know, until she gets back on her feet.”

“We can’t force her on Jeanette. And what problems will she bring to our daughter’s career?”

“They’ll work it out. It’s not up to us, honey. Let’s wait and see what they come up with. She’s talking to Jenny right now.”

“You already meddled?”

“No, Beth is inviting her to dinner. Let’s try to have a pleasant evening, and we’ll talk later, honey.”

At five-fifteen, Jeanette arrives. The girls share a long embrace before sitting in the living room chatting. Mrs. Howell gathers her family in the dining room for a sit-down stewed chicken and dumpling supper at six o’clock.

Mr. Howell first says grace, ending by giving thanks that his family is all together. It brings a smile to his wife’s face.

Over dessert, Mrs. Howell suggests Beth apply for an admissions position at Palomar hospital. Jeanette eagerly agrees and offers to put in a good word for her sister. Beth reluctantly nods.

Hours later, Jen gets ready to leave. Beth asks her to drop her off in Escondido. “Why?” The sister asks.

“I want to look up an old friend.”

“How will you get back?”

“I’ll have her drop me. Or walk.”

“You can’t walk. That’s five miles,” Mrs. Howell interrupts.

“Don’t worry, mom. I’ll find a way. Can you leave the back door unlocked?”

“Of course, dear.”

CHAPTER 5

The sisters reminisce about childhood stories on the drive to the city center. Jeanette drops her sister off at the fast-food drive-thru Beth worked as a teenager. After a quick, noncommittal hug, they split up.

As soon as her sister rounds the corner, Beth walks off. Over thirty minutes later, she enters an older neighborhood splattered with small homes in desperate need of paint and repair. She marches up the porch of the fifth house on the left. The place is dark; not even a night light shines through the rotting sheers. Without a thought of consideration, she bangs the door.

Many bangs and minutes later, Beth, halfway down the walk, hears a feeble, "Can I help you?"

"Is Rodney here?"

"It's awful later, dear."

"Is Rodney here or not?" Beth demands.

"Please keep it down, neighbors, you know."

"To hell with the neighbors! Where's Rodney?"

"I don't know any Rodney. I moved in here five or six years ago, now."

"Where did the people go that lived here before your sorry ass?"

"Well!" The door closes as hard as weak hands can push. Beth hears a lock click and then a second.

She pounds a few more times before giving up and walking away. At the corner, Beth looks hard up and down the lightless street. "Damn! Not a frigging light!" It's late and dark. She gets colder and more desperate by the second.

Headlights come slowly around the far block and creep toward

her. *Shit! I gotta get out of here!* She scans the closest yards before darting across the road and hurrying alongside the house, tripping past thick overgrown shrubbery, not noticing the branches tearing her left arm. Beth drops to her knees, peering back through the leaves.

Vroom! Vroom! The vehicle sits, rocking in the middle of the street, red-lining its tachometer. “Chiquita. Chiquita. We see you. Come out and play.”

Vroom! Vroom! “No se van, Chiqui. Chiqui, I’m here for you!”

The leaves rattle. Branches shake. An unseen voice heard, “I’m looking for a toot.”

“Oh, little Chiquita, you found the right guy. I fix you up.”

“How much?”

“For Chiqui, only eighteen dollar.”

“Let’s see it. Turn on your dome light and hold it up.”

Mumbling heard as the four Chicanos whispered back and forth. “Ok. Ok, I show you.” The interior light comes on, followed by an arm stretching to its limit through the window. The hand shakes a tiny zip-lock jewelry bag. “You see? You see?”

“I don’t see a thing. Hold it down in the light.” *Idiot!*

The shaking hand lowers into the light. “You see now, Chiqui?”

Beth struggles around the bush, tearing her pants. “Crap!” She continues to the vehicle. “Give me three.”

“I only have two, unless you like a gram?”

“Two for thirty.”

“Eeks cold out there. Why don’t you get in, and we share the gram?”

Beth looks at each of the wide-eyed teenagers for a long moment. “No.”

Vroom! Vroom! The sixty-four Impala lowrider creeps forward. The passenger sticks out his head. “Better hurry, Chiquita, we not sit here longer.” Beth looks over the bright candy-lime-green lowrider decorated with purple side scallops and pin stripping. The trunk features purple flourishes, and the back window reads *Logos Fantomas* in the highly stylized Durango script, complete with swashes, ligatures, and alternates.

“Wait up.”

The boy riding shotgun jumps from the car.

“You get in the middle.” Beth orders.

“Chiqui, men don’t sit together.”

Beth bends low and checks out each youth before she slides across the yellow vinyl bench seat. The passenger sidles next to her.

“What’s loga fantasy?” she asks.

The vehicle owner puffs his chest out, straining the buttons on his Mexican guayaberahis shirt, and turns to his guest. “Logos Fantasmas, Phantom Wolves.”

The woman can’t contain her laughter. “This car is anything but a ghost.”

The car jerks and slips into the night.

Back under control, “Where are we going?”

“I know a place.” The driver speaks—the two in the back giggle.

Beth sits quietly, wondering what she has gotten into while the excited young men chatter in Spanish.

They turn south on Centre City Parkway, Beth thinks, *at least they’re headed the right way*. Her thoughts get interrupted when the passenger grabs a handful of her boob. He receives an immediate slug in the ear. “What the hell, lady!” He massages the wound.

“I’m not a frigging prostitute.”

“Cálmate!” the driver orders his entourage. “We’re almost there, Chiquita.”

The lowrider passes Lost Oak Lane and turns left onto Beethoven. Within minutes, they pull into Kit Carson Park. The lowrider backs between shrub oaks at the far edge of the parking lot and cuts the engine. The driver winks at the backseat passengers. “Perfecto.”

He goes to the trunk and returns with a leather pouch. Quickly, he removes a baggie and dumps white powder onto a hand mirror, producing a single-edge razor blade for cutting the drug into a fine powder. Soon he scrapes the chalk-like powder into five lines. Next, the want-a-be cholo pulls out a dollar bill and rolls it into a tight tube before handing it to Beth. “You first.”

Beth can hardly wait. She sticks the tube into her nose, bends

over, and snorts a line. Before the others finish, she lays her head back, enjoying the euphoria. *God, it's been forever.*

"You feel it, lady?"

"Oh, yes."

"Me too. Junior, let us have the seat."

The backbench boys get aroused at the possibility of a show and can't control their enthusiasm. The passenger opens the door, but Beth's Barretta jams the driver's belly flesh before he can exit.

"I said I'm not a whore."

"Yes, no, I mean, I'm sorry, miss. I, I wouldn't do anything you don't want."

"Junior, keep going!"

The passenger jumps from his friend's car and jack-rabbits across the park.

"Let us out. We didn't do anything, miss," a voice floats from the rear seat.

"Nobody's going anywhere." Beth rifles through the shaving kit without jiggling her gun hand one iota and comes up with the two bagged toots. "For my trouble."

She slowly backs out the passenger door. After closing it, she leans into the down window hole. "Gentlemen, you have thirty seconds to get the hell out of here before I open fire."

I didn't know low riders could move that fast. Beth laughs from her stomach to her head and starts walking to her mom's house, a mile away.

She locks the back door and heads to her room. The addict does the last two lines and flops onto the bed, pleasuring herself.

CHAPTER 6

It's a slow crime day, the room packed with boisterous detectives laughing at lewd jokes. Most smoke cigarettes while drinking indestructible thick black sludge. Sly of ten, a voice blares over the speaker, alerting Max Marsh to pick up line four. He yells over the desks for everyone to calm down.

"Detective Marsh. How can I help you?"

"Good afternoon, detective. My name is Phil Morrow."

Marsh breaks in, "It's morning."

"Sorry, it's afternoon in Atlanta. Detective, let me get straight to the point. I'm working on a triple homicide. Our only suspect is a woman, presumably a hooker, who got stopped in the vicinity about the same time. The officer was in the middle of it when alerted of three downed men in a warehouse, so he dismissed her and got to the scene." Detective Morrow explains that this woman, Clara Kobb, was taking the bus to San Diego. "She's a streetwalker, and I'm hoping she shows up on your radar."

"Kobb? Doesn't ring a bell." After a brief thought, "Did she show identification?"

"No. Our patrolman didn't get that far. We checked bus departures, though the name never showed up. I think it was fictitious. One lone female passenger, Rebeca Taylor, purchased a ticket to your area but was gone by the time I got there. This Taylor woman left Atlanta Early Wednesday morning and should have arrived in San Diego late Friday."

Marsh writes Clara Kobb and Rebeca Taylor on his desk blotter. "Ok, got it, Phil, is it?" Already Monday, Marsh sure this woman is long gone and almost impossible to find. "I'll run a check on both

names. What's your number?"

Off the line, Max Marsh explains the conversation to his partner, Maurio Romero.

"We're not wasting time on this, are we?" Romero questions.

"Of course not." He checks the clock. "Let's hit Alvarez's for lunch. I'll call Phil with the bad news when we get back."

After an extra-long meal, the detectives go back to their squad room.

Marsh, at his desk, leans back and lets out an enormous belch.

"Real nice, buddy."

Lieutenant Holden sticks his head into the squad room. "Someone pick up three," but he stares at Marsh.

Romero watches his partner pat his overstuffed belly with both hands before the chair's front legs hit the floor, and he picks up the horn, shaking his head.

"Yes." "Yes, I see." "Humph." "No, Ma'am. I understand." "I'll find out and let you know." "Ok, Ma'am. Thank you." "Ok." "Ok." "I need to get going and check this out." "Ok, thank you."

The volume rises as everyone gets back to their punch line. Maurio lights his sixth Winston of the day.

"What's up, partner?"

"Some old busybody thinks her neighbors are in danger, and they've disappeared," Max answers.

"Aliens are grabbing people all over the country these days." Maurio spits out, laughing and coughing.

"Apparently, their daughter showed up unexpectedly and acting strange. On drugs or something."

"That equates abduction?"

"There's a little more. This..." Max checks his notes, "... Ester Farris went next door, and the daughter wouldn't let her in and refused to let her see them. When questioned, she said her parents went to Las Vegas for a few days." He reads more notes. "Or camping in the Sierras."

"Millions of people go to Yosemite, so what's the problem?"

Marsh leans back, hands interlocked behind his head. "This daughter, Beth, is the oldest and estranged from the family for years.

So this daughter arrived unannounced and evidently plans on staying.”

“That doesn’t mean much. We have family reunions.”

“Hell, your horde gets together every weekend. You know the difference between a Mexican wedding and a Mexican funeral?”

“Don’t go there!” Romero threatens.

“I never realized you were so sensitive, pal.” After some thought, “Beth Howell arrived Friday. You think Taylor and Howell could be the same person?”

“That’s a long shot.”

“Anyway, this Howell girl is supposedly on drugs and can’t keep her story straight.” Ignoring Romero’s comment.

“What’s the address?”

“Escondido. Turn it over to the sheriff. It’s their jurisdiction,” Marsh orders. And mumbles, “Why do we get every crackpot call?”

“Let’s take a ride. It’ll get us off this damn paperwork for a couple of hours.”

Marsh stands and slips on his jacket. “Now you’re thinking, buddy.”

Fifty minutes later, the plainwrap, white Crown Victoria, pulls onto Lost Oak Lane, a dead-end street just off the freeway in South Escondido. Sporadic aged homes sit scattered among overgrown weed patches. They pull up the dirt driveway of a newer custom-built home and park on the circular driveway.

Marsh pounds the large oak door with no answer. They decide to search out the complainant and walk across the only well-manicured yard in the neighborhood. Three-quarters of the way, the lawn turns into weeds.

“Must be Farris hiding behind that scarlet flowered oleander hedge.” Marsh notices an older woman clutching a tree, watching them. He removes his sports coat and wipes the pouring sweat from his face.

“Good afternoon. You must be Ester Farris?”

“Did you find Leslie and Andrew?”

“They’re not home.”

“That’s what I told you.”

“I mean, even the daughter.”

“She’s there.”

“How can you be sure?”

“The car’s never left the garage.”

“What type of car does she drive?”

“Beth? She doesn’t have one, but now she’s driving her mother’s. Always gone.”

“Do you know the model?”

“It’s a Mercedes sports job. She keeps the top down and drives too fast. It scares me when we go shopping.”

“Shopping? Oh, you’re referring to the mother. What does Mr. Howell drive?”

“Big white one. Maybe a Lincoln or Cadillac. Something like that. There!” Ester points, almost collapsing to the ground. “Did you see that? She’s peeking out the upstairs window. I told you she was home.”

Both detectives spin. Romero spots a curtain ruffle.

“Don’t see anything,” Marsh comments. “Here, let me help you.” He pulls the woman’s walker close.

“First window, upstairs, front,” Romero confirms and starts back across the yard, studying the house. At that moment, the garage door raises, and a black sports car races down the driveway.

“Must be late to the beauty salon,” Romero observes.

Two strides behind, his partner says, “Let’s check the garage and see if Mr. Howell’s vehicle’s there.”

The two-car garage is empty. The detectives discuss Beth’s related story—the Howells are out of town and drove. It’s easy to check out, the lead detective explains. Farris states Beth has a younger sister, Jeanette, a nurse at Palomar Hospital.

Twenty-one minutes later, at the front information desk, the volunteer tells Marsh and Romero where to find the pediatric department and RN Howell.

The men approach a white-dressed woman sitting behind the nurses’ station. Flipping out his badge, “I’m Detective Max Marsh. Are you Jeanette Howell?”

Across the hallway, a head snaps. “I’m Nurse Howell.”

In seconds, the men discover Jeanette went to dinner at her folks' home the previous Friday, and everything was normal, except for Beth showing up. And she hasn't been back or talked to either parent since.