

MONTEREY WIDOWS AND ORPHANS DINING CLUB

A Beachside Paranormal Cozy Mystery

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CHAPTER ONE

SPOOKED

Olivia Mallory was born charming. Too bad she wasn't born lucky.

The gray Pit Bull, two Rag Doll cats – Ruggles, Snuggles, and Huggles, respectively – and Olivia stared at the woman's body sprawled across the green bedspread. They all shared roughly the same expression of surprise.

The woman was wearing an emerald-green kimono several shades darker than the bedspread. It was embroidered with cranes, plum blossoms, and pine, all lucky symbols in Japan. Sadly, they had not lived up to their promise.

Her long, wavy red hair covered her face. For which Olivia was grateful. Her arms and legs were splayed awkwardly. She had on one blue silk tasseled slipper with a kitten heel. The other foot was bare. There didn't seem to be any blood.

That was good. Bodies had a lot of blood. Too much.

The figure on the bed blurred. Instead of one body, there were dozens, torn and bleeding across the slick linoleum. Men and women and James. Her James.

Olivia closed her eyes and counted slowly to ten.

Ruggles whimpered

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she breathed, perhaps more to reassure herself than the dog.

When she opened her eyes again, only the dead woman on the bed remained.

Okay, that was not exactly true.

The ghost was back as well. A barely-there phantom hovering above the bed.

Ruggles had woken her a short time ago, barking at the foot of the stairs. He was actually a quiet dog. Very quiet for a Pit Bull. Olivia paid attention. She pulled on her sweats, strapped the brace tightly on her left leg, gathered the cats, and went to see. The ghost was hovering a few feet above the dog.

In proper horror movie style, they'd trooped up the stairs following the ghost. It passed one, two, three, four, five doors before stopping at the last room on the landing. They'd opened the doors to...this.

Olivia wanted an espresso. Or a drink. Maybe both as soon as possible. Which, once she called the police, was not going to be soon at all.

Huggles stretched up, demanding to be hugged, her green kitty eyes wide. She was not happy. Though whether about the ghost or the body, Olivia wasn't sure.

Snuggles, her sister, was made of sturdier stuff. The big cat reared back on her hind legs and hissed at the ghost, batting the air with kitty uppercuts, determined to do battle. She'd protected Olivia the past two days from dust bunnies and stray socks. The undead would not deter Snuggles from her chosen role as the temporary pet-sitter's bodyguard.

The ghost didn't seem to take any interest in them, which was probably for the better.

Olivia pulled out her cell phone, no easy feat holding a twenty-two-pound cat. Ragdolls are not lightweights. She managed to tap 9-1-1.

"What's your emergency," came a man's voice on the line.

"My name is Olivia Mallory." Unfortunately, what came out was, "*mmph-mumble-pleah*," because Huggles shifted position and she got a mouthful of cat fur.

Spitting it out, she tried again. "Sorry. This is Olivia Mallory. I am at 1373 Rancho Verde, in Pebble Beach. There appears to be a dead woman in the upstairs bedroom of the house. I'm pet-sitting for Samuel and Amanda Beckett while they are away. This woman came by last night and the Becketts said via phone to let her stay."

An understandably surprised flurry of information flowed back and forth following this dramatic announcement.

After she assured emergency services she was not in immediate danger, Olivia hung up.

She took a moment to look around the room. The police were going to be full of questions.

It was a corner room at the end of the landing with two big picture windows opposite the door. A pair of high-back chairs and a lamp stand made a seating area between the windows. There must be a stunning view of the California coast when the curtains were open. They were closed now.

The bed faced the entrance door, not the windows, a few feet between it and the seating area.

The wall on the right had a chest of drawers. No T.V. Another door directly to her right must lead to an *en suite* bathroom.

Oddly, the wall on the left, the one that must form one corner of the house, had no windows. Instead, it was covered floor to ceiling, corner to corner, by an intricate and unnervingly realistic sculpture of thorny green vines.

Olivia stepped closer.

The vines were natural wood and what looked like real thorns. Branch after branch twisted and turned over, under, and around in dizzying interlocking patterns.

What a strange piece of art for a bedroom.

What a strange piece of art, period.

Rich people. Go figure.

Together, Olivia, Ruggles, Huggles – still holding tightly – and Snuggles made their way downstairs to await the arrival of the police and possibly assorted other public officials. Olivia winced as she took the steps. A double dose of Ibuprofen was calling her name. At least she could bend her knee a little more now and didn't have to hop every step.

Disabling the alarm on the front door, she stepped out. They could all use some fresh air.

Ruggles paused to look back up at the second floor. She followed his gaze. Luckily the ghost seemed content to stay where it was.

Outside, it looked like a gardener's truck had tipped over and carelessly dumped its contents all over the driveway. Broken branches and leaves littered the wide front drive from the street to the front door. Detritus from last night's thunderstorm covered a midnight blue BMW. Series Seven, if she wasn't mistaken.

A heavy branch from one of the Black Oaks had broken off and lay across the hood. The dent was noticeable even from where Olivia stood. Well, the woman certainly wouldn't need the car now.

Ever.

Her little Honda Fit was around the back of the house by the kitchen. Good thing, too.

The morning overcast hadn't lifted, and the wind was still blowing hard. Probably more storms headed across the Pacific. She could see the ocean from the front doorstep. Angry white caps stretched to the horizon.

Shifting Huggles onto one hip, she did what any intelligent, phantom-seeing adult on this part of the Central Coast would do. She called Ella Mae Gainsborough, Co-Warden of the Monterey Widows and Orphans Club.

She glanced at the time on her phone: 7:30. What day was it? Tuesday? Ella Mae joined a walking group on Tuesdays. One run by the other Warden, Joan D'Angelo. They'd be together. Good. After attending her first meeting of the Monterey Widow and Orphans Dining Club she knew both women's schedules. In fact, she knew more about a great many things she rather wished she didn't.

Ella Mae answered on the third ring.

"Ella Mae, Olivia. Is Joan with you? Okay. There's been a death here at the Becketts. A woman. Rachel something. Also, I've seen a ghost," she sighed. "I am not sure if it's the same ghost from the beach house or a new one."

Her life seemed to have rather a lot of ghosts lately.

Before Monterey she did not believe in spooks. Which was kind of ironic since she was one. Just not the supernatural kind.

Dead bodies they had in her line of work.

Ghosts?

Not so much.

Maybe she should have stayed a spy.

CHAPTER TWO

TWO WEEKS AND SEVERAL DEGREES OF SANITY EARLIER

Joan D'Angelo looked at the Tarot deck spread out on the table and frowned.

"Don't you frown like that, Joan," said the woman sitting across from her wagging a scarlet fingertip. "I know that frown. That's your 'there's a bundle of trouble comin' Ella Mae, and you can't run and you can't hide' frown!"

"Not trouble," she corrected, "change. The cards show change and change can be good."

"Hmph," snorted the other woman. "That's the Tower," She let her fingertip hover over the card, "and that is the World card. Change my butt cheeks. That spread spells trouble."

The two women were much the same age and the same shape due to a shared fondness for pie. Especially the coconut cream they used to serve at Coco's on the corner of David and Lighthouse. It was probably better for their hearts that Coco's had closed.

Joan carried her weight in her bosom, Ella Mae in her hips, so they balanced each other out very well. Both in weight and temperament.

Joan was blond - thanks these days to a bit of help from L'Oréal — fair with pale blue eyes, a heart-shaped face, a slight double chin, and smile lines around her eyes and mouth. She looked like her name should be O'Brian, not D'Angelo.

Joan's signature store was Target. Today she was wearing white capris, sensible slide-in sneakers, a sky-blue tunic top, and a blue and white striped knee-length cardigan.

Her best friend, Ella Mae Gainsborough, was dark. Dark skin, dark eyes, black hair worn big and bold in its tight natural curls that framed her full-moon face. She had a broad forehead and a generous mouth. The wattage from her smile bordered on fusion reactor strength.

"So, exactly who is this change for!" Ella Mae demanded, crossing her arms over her ample breasts barely contained in a green knit shirt with a pink all-over geometric pattern. Ella Mae's signature store was Chicos. No color too bright, no pattern too bold.

"Don't you say it's for me. Cause if it is, I don't want to hear it. You know how I feel. None of that glass-half-full-half-empty BS. My glass is always brimming over with goodness. Nobody better tell me otherwise!"

They were sitting at their favorite table at Tea and Tarot in Pacific Grove. Tea and Tarot always smelled richly of teas and coffee, freshly baked apple muffins, and an indefinable spicy scent that

changed depending on the time of day and alignment of the stars. Mercury was currently in retrograde. This afternoon the smell was nose-tickling and peppery.

The tea shop was housed in a little sandy-colored stone building far down Lighthouse, past the antique and resale stores, the auction house, the bank, and a dozen eating establishments, small and smaller, almost to the Post Office.

It was bigger than it looked from the outside. Seven tables with five chairs each stood on a circular midnight blue carpet with the major constellations in their classical Greek forms woven in gold wool. Ella Mae and Joan were sitting at the table over Orion. Despite a steady stream of coffee and tea and tasty bites being carried across it daily, the carpet never looked soiled or stained. Every table held a thick white candle that burned from opening to closing time, those hours decided by the owner, Anita Ochoa.

A counter with nine stools stood to the right of the entrance. Joan and Ella Mae never sat at the counter. "High stools are not made for boldly proportioned women," Ella Mae always said, and Joan had to agree with her.

Running the length of the wall in front of the counter was a glass display case, prep area, and the cash register. Wall shelves were lined with decorative jars containing loose teas as exotic as Nine Bend Black Dragon to familiar Orange Pekoe and English breakfast. Coffees were kept in their own metal-lined bins under the counter.

The opposite wall held built-in wooden and glass display cases, some open, some locked. The locked cases were for Tarot decks for sale or to sign out. A few particularly resonant Ouija boards were kept here as well. Those were reserved for the truly gifted or cursed, depending on your point of view. Ouija boards were no parlor trick.

Tame Tarot decks, Ouija boards, and a collection of illustrated how-to guides sat stacked in the open shelves, free to use by patrons.

Tall bookcases lined the back wall arranged asymmetrically. They held a little lending library of fiction and non-fiction books on fantasy, the paranormal, supernatural creatures, and whatever took the Ochoa's fancy. Though no horror. Tea and Tarot disapproved of horror.

"I'm getting a weird vibe from your table," said Anita Ochoa, wiping her hands on a paisley-patterned dish towel and stepping out from behind the counter. She had just finished pressing out a batch of peanut butter cookies to pop in the oven. The Seaside/Sand City Spiritualist Society was meeting there tonight at seven. "Why am I getting a weird vibe?"

"Ask Joan. It's all Joan's fault," pouted Ella Mae, her mouth turned down in a disapproving frown.

Joan frowned back at her, sticking out her lower lip. “Now that’s not fair. The cards are in charge; I only interpret them. You know that.”

“Well, interpret them to predict puppies and kittens and maybe donuts. Why don’t they ever forecast donuts!”

“Donuts?” piped up one of the customers at the counter, an older man with salt and pepper hair and the sun-stained, wrinkled face and forearms of a farmer. “If it’s donuts you’re looking for, Diablo’s is gonna’ have a pop-up over at the Rose Café next to Citibank this Saturday. Read about it online.”

Ella Mae nodded, “Now that’s what I’m talking about! Good news involving donuts! Thank you, Edgar! Thank you very much!”

“Diablo donuts,” muttered a lean young man with coppery hair and a starburst of freckles from forehead to chin, shaking his head. “Putin’ the ‘D’ in donuts is what he’s doing!”

The young man was one of two at the table resting on the Hercules constellation. His name was Jeff Jones. He and the other lad, Alan Lee, were regulars to Tea and Tarot, as were their mothers. The pair were still studying the Tarot and had several guides spread over the table. Inseparable in or out of school, they always worked the cards together.

Ella Mae raised her eyebrows at the young man, “Why Jefferson Andrew Jones! If you’re sayin’ the ‘D’ I think you’re sayin’ your mama...”

Jeff suddenly seemed to realize what that ‘D’ could stand for. He threw his hands up in the air interrupting Ella Mae. “No, no, no! Not that ‘D’! Not di..”

His friend punched him in the arm before he could finish the word.

“Sorry,” his face flushed with embarrassment. “I meant the demon ‘d’. D for demon, not...uh...you know...”

“I think there may be a little bit of both in that man’s cooking if you take my meaning,” declared Ella Mae with an exaggerated wink. “He is one fine-lookin’ chef. And personally, I don’t care whose claws are in the kitchen if he can turn out such damned fine pastry.”

“Emphasis on damned,” said Alan with a sly smile. The pair chuckled conspiratorially.

The man at the counter pointed a finger at his watch and tapped it, “You better get there early. Last time they had a pop-up, the line ran clear around the block. All the cream-filled, banana, and chocolate ganache were gone by the time I got inside. The only thing on the counter were those sugared donut holes.”

“I hope you said you didn’t wait all that time for some dang donut holes!” declared Ella Mae indignantly.

“I did. Me and about ten other people! Mr. Diablo himself pulled out a tray of jelly-filled said he’d been holding back for us. They weren’t the same as his Chocolate Ganache but were pretty darn good.”

“Better than donut holes, that’s for sure!” Ella Mae made an ‘okay’ sign with her right hand. “I will see you there bright and early Saturday morning. They open at nine o’clock?”

“Yep. Nine.”

“I’ll be in line by 8:30 at least.”

All right then, 8:30 it is,” said Edgar, turning back to his deck.

There was a brief whispered conversation between the two young men. Alan raised his hand. “Us, too! We want a chance to observe Mr. Diablo up close.”

“And try one of those banana creams,” whispered Jeff.

Anita laid a hand on Joan’s shoulder. “Now that we’ve settled what people are doing with their Saturday morning, perhaps you can tell us what you see in the cards that have Ella Mae’s feathers ruffled.”

“She saw change is what she saw,” Ella Mae said before Joan could answer.

Anita stood up straight, her smile slipping ever so slightly.

“See,” Ella Mae pointed, “see! Look at that face. That face knows change is trouble.”

Anita looked expectantly at Joan.

“Change, yes. Change for us. Us as in the Dining Club. That’s what this,” she pointed at a card, “first the Tower and then,” she tapped another, “the Wheel of Fortune.”

“Was your question for the Dining Club?”

“It was...” she paused to consider her words, “more about our, um, current problem.”

“Well,” Anita took a moment to regard the position of the cards, “you got an answer though maybe not the one you were hoping for. Looks to me like we’ll need to set another place at the table for this month’s Widows and Orphans Club meeting, don’t you agree?”

Joan nodded, “If all goes according to the cards.”

“Uh oh,” said Edgar from the counter. He looked over his shoulder at the women, frowning.

There was a sharp intake of breath from the two young men at the table on the Hercules constellation.

They also turned to face the three women.

“Um, not sure, but this might be *uh oh*, too,” said Alan. “Mrs. Ochoa or Miss De Angelo, could you have a look, please?”

He and Jeff pointed to their cards.

Anita motioned to Joan. She stood and walked to the table while Anita returned to the counter where she had been laying out her own cards. They were mostly covered with a light dusting of flour as she'd been mixing cookie dough.

Joan spent a few minutes studying the boys' cards before walking to stand beside Edgar. He leaned away to give her a clear view.

"Okay. This is weird," she said. "Everyone's doing a different spread. Five, seven, and me, a Celtic Cross. But everyone has the Tower and the Wheel."

Returning to the counter, Anita slowly turned over another card and then another, and then the final one.

Her eyes met Joan's.

Walking around the cash register, Joan spent a few moments to study the layout.

"Oh dear," she said at last.

"Yep. Me too."

Ella Mae looked on in alarm. "What's oh dear? Why oh dear?"

Joan said nothing, her hands clenched tightly.

Ella Mae lifted both arms to encompass the whole group. "Out with it!"

Joan took a deep breath before she spoke, "Well, Anita has the Tower and the Wheel as well. Someone is trying to tell us, no not tell, shout that change is coming. However, Anita's last card was Death."

"Damn it," groaned Ella Mae, sitting down heavily, "Not again!"

The front door opened, jingling the little string of brass Tibetan bells hanging from a hook at the top.

All eyes at Tea and Tarot turned to look.

A woman in perhaps her early thirties paused in the doorway, half-in, half-out. Her auburn hair was pulled back in a springy ponytail with a long drift of bangs halfway covering her large brown eyes, paused in the doorway. Her face was heart-shaped, skin caramel cream, strong brows, straight nose, and small mouth. Around five foot four or five. Trim but curvy with an hourglass figure and good shoulders. She was dressed in a loose black turtleneck, steel gray yoga pants, and most noticeably, a high-tech jointed steel brace around her left leg, ankle to thigh.

She paused half-in, half-out of the doorway with a decidedly deer-caught-in-the-headlights expression. And who could blame her?

Seven people of wildly disparate ages and appearances were staring. Stepping back, though keeping one hand still on the door handle, she looked up as if to confirm something, then bobbed back in.

“Uh, hello...is this... um... is this Tea and Tarot?” She had a clear voice despite the hesitation, no accent.

Ella Mae cleared her throat pointedly. Everyone suddenly got busy. The boys went back to their books. Edgar reshuffled his cards, and Joan and Ella Mae picked up their coffee.

Anita stepped from behind the counter to hold the door and usher the woman in.

“Yes, we are,” she chirped. “I’m Anita Ochoa,” and she held out her hand. “This is my place. Welcome.”

The woman hesitated for a moment before shaking it, “O...Olivia,” she stumbled over the name, then, meeting Anita’s eyes, said more firmly, “Olivia Mallory.”

Anita gave her an even bigger smile and practically pulled her through the doorway, still holding her hand.

“What can I get you? Coffee or tea? And you must try one of our apple cinnamon muffins.” She chattered, cheerfully guiding the newcomer to the counter – whether she wanted to go or not, Ella Mae thought.

“My muffins are the best on the Central Coast if I do say so myself. Really the best.”

Anita pulled out the nearest stool. Despite the leg brace, the woman climbed onto the tall seat easily enough.

“On the house,” Anita continued, smiling brightly at the newcomer, her cheeks creased in dimples. “First-time visitors get coffee and a treat on the house. What would you like?”

Ella Mae and Joan exchanged looks loaded with the unspoken telepathy of old friends.

‘Free coffee and a muffin?’ the looks said, ‘Since when?’

“Thank you very much.” The woman, Olivia, spoke each word clearly and distinct like a newscaster. “I’m an espresso drinker. So... if that wouldn’t be too much trouble?”

“Not a bit. And let me warm up your muffin.”

“Thank you, sounds good.”

Edgar abruptly stopped shuffling his cards. His head came up and he took several deep, audible breaths. Ella Mae watched as his hand shot out across the empty stool between him and Olivia.

“How do you do,” he said with a smile as big as Anita’s. “Names Edgar. Edgar Francis. I work in bugs. For the Agro business in Salinas Valley. Any bug trouble you got, I can handle it.”

Olivia automatically took his hand. Ella Mae thought she was trying not to look surprised at Edgar’s hearty outburst. She was doing a pretty good job.

“Bugs,” said Olivia, nodding, “I see.”

The older man blushed, the color rising from his cheeks to his forehead.

“Get me my Ouija Board,” demanded Ella Mae sotto voce to Joan. “Now!”

CHAPTER THREE

CHARMED, I 'M SURE

Olivia had paused before handing over her name to the tall, Mallory wasn't even her real last name.

The agency-that-shall-not-be-named had given it to her twelve years ago when she'd given up her past to sign on the Federal dotted line. And even before that, her name wasn't her own. She'd woken up in the pediatric ward of a Phoenix hospital, a confused nine-year old with a head injury, no memory, and no one to claim her.

Olivia Mallory would do fine. No one on the Central Coast had a clue who she was. Hell, Olivia didn't even know *she* was coming to Monterey until the day of her discharge from the hospital in Bethesda and an unexpected phone call from her teammate Rafael Santos. Rafe. Who cared if she used her fake-real name in this tea shop with everyone staring at her like she was an alien?

Californians were so weird.

The owner placed the espresso in a ceramic cup and the muffin with a scoop of what must be honey butter in front of Olivia. She could smell the fragrant aroma of apples, cinnamon, and honey rising off the plate. Spreading the butter on a piece of muffin – which broke off cleanly, not crumbling to bits – she took a big bite. Yum. Melt in your mouth moist.

California's might be weird, but they were very hospitable.

The man next to her, white-haired and with the deep wrinkles and dark tan of a life spent under the sun. Anita continued to smile at her as she smoothed the honey butter on another bite of muffin.

Really hospitable.

Too hospitable.

She tuned into her inner self. Oh crap. Her charm-o-meter must be on 'high.' She'd been surprised when everyone looked at her in the doorway. Except for the doctor and the therapist at the VA clinic in Marina, she'd barely spoken to anyone in the weeks since she arrived. The sudden attention made her jump and her charm automatically clicked into its fight-or-flight protective mode. It was an automatic response. Make yourself so charming no one wants to hurt you.

Olivia had been born with the ability to charm anyone.

With a mental effort, she toned the meter down.

"What brings you to Tea and Tarot?" asked Edgar.

It was Olivia's turn to blush. "I came for the meeting of the Monterey Spiritualist Society," she said, aware that the other customers were probably listening. "It starts at five, I think? I'm a little early. Or is this, or rather, maybe are you, the Spiritualist Society?"

Anita glanced over Olivia's shoulder and Olivia swiveled around to look.

There were two women at a table behind her, one dark, one light, one dressed in bright colors, the other more muted tones. The darker woman had her back to Olivia. She was bent over something on the table, her arms moving almost imperceptibly.

The other woman answered, "A little early. Your group always sort of straggles in. They should be here shortly."

She was tall and strongly proportioned. Not fat. Sturdy, Olivia thought. Like a linebacker. She had fair hair, a little thin, and pale skin. Her eyes behind a pair of tortoiseshell glasses, the lightest of blues. Her face was deeply lined but in a good way.

"Anita is making peanut-butter cookies for them."

Anita bent down and in a second, there were cookies on Olivia's muffin plate.

"Here, try them," she said brightly. "Best on..."

"The Central Coast," finished Edgar.

'Damn it, charm-o-meter, down!' Olivia growled at her inner self. 'Down, I said.'

She hoped the group would show up soon because she was on the verge of running out the door as fast as her gimpy leg could manage. It had taken a lot of internal convincing and a significant amount of courage to come here. A spiritualist meeting, for heaven's sake. Inner reflection was not on her personal CV. Never had been. Not as a foster child and not in covert ops.

Olivia believed in intel. She believed in analysis. She believed in herself and two other people. Her teammates: Rafael Santos and James Monroe. Her heart gave a twinge. One, now. She believed in one other person.

For twelve years, Olivia worked as a Field Agent on the intel-gathering side, identifying potential assets and helping to recruit them. She did not assassinate targets, or drug people with little poison pills, or tie them up and throw them in the trunk of late-model BMWs. Well, not often.

It had been *at least* a year since she locked a man in the back of a Volvo and drove him across the Ukrainian border. In her defense, he'd asked her to do it.

Her official title was a Protocol Officer in the U.S. Foreign Service. The cover gave her the flexibility to zip in and out of embassies or any official entourage anywhere in the world. The State Department needed Protocol Officers to navigate the complexities of other cultures and political systems. They routinely popped up at every sort of official or unofficial function. They were wallpaper. Extremely useful wallpaper in Olivia's case.

“Ghosts!” said the dark woman in bright colors, straitening up abruptly. “I see ghosts!”

“You too?” said Olivia wide-eyed, then clapped her hands over her mouth.

The eyes of all seven turned to look at her again.

Crap. Olivia hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

People who saw ghosts were crazy. The agency-that-shall-not-be-named did not believe in ghosts. They did believe in crazy. The government overlords liked crazy, but only specific varieties. Like Rafe. Rafael Santos. Her teammate and currently her landlord. They loved his kind of crazy. Rafe excelled at knocking people out, locking them in car trunks, and driving them secretly across borders. He thought it was fun.

If the Agency learned she’d been seeing ghosts, they’d never put her back on the active-duty roster once her leg fully healed. In fact, they’d probably place her on a three-day lock-up with a full dose of anti-psychotic meds.

Maybe she needed them.

CHAPTER FOUR

SQUAD GOALS

Olivia opened the white vertical blinds on the oversized picture windows revealing blue sky, blue sea, and green ice plants with frilly magenta blossoms rolling over the sand dunes a few yards away. Monterey harbor curled around the bend in the bay to the left, the adobe colors and tile roofs making it look like a Mediterranean village.

She could hear the barking of the sea lions clustered around the Municipal Wharf through the glass. Sometimes they barked all night. The noise had taken a little getting used to. Olivia kept thinking, “What is there to talk about? You’re Sea Lions. Shut up!”

But they barked on.

A whale-watching ship headed out into the channel with the morning’s first load of camera-ready tourists. It wove around half-a-dozen small sailboats trying to catch a breeze. The ocean was calm and still today. To the right, far down the bay, she could see the giant double cement smokestacks of the old Moss Landing Power Plant. A gray haze hid Capitola forty miles away on the opposite side of the water.

Olivia gave a massive yawn and rubbed her eyes, tired and discouraged despite the beauty of the day. Last night had been bad. First, there’d been the nightmare, followed by the cold sweat and tremors. Then the damn ghost appeared.

Again.

A little spectral fog hovering in the corner of the bedroom by the door to the balcony.

Switching on the light in the *en suite* bathroom, she’d turned her back resolutely to the corner and streamed one of her audiobooks all night. The voices soothed and calmed Olivia, talking of other places and fictional people.

Up until she arrived here, she thought she was getting better. Her old therapist at Bethesda thought she was getting better. And then the ghost showed up her first night at the townhouse.

Guess not.

Olivia sank onto the low platform bed, looking from the bunched blankets and pillows to her knee brace and back to the view outside and contemplated the day. It was Saturday. She was going for a walk and then donuts. Which was odd. She didn't even like donuts.

Blame it on the weird people at Tea and Tarot. They'd hypnotized her or something.

Wait, did she believe in hypnotism? Hmmm. Well, she believed in hypnosis more than ghosts. Though it was getting harder to deny the latter.

She'd never seen ghosts before coming to Monterey.

She hadn't explained her outburst about ghosts to the other customers at Tea and Tarot, though clearly everyone was waiting for more. They'd all been too polite to ask.

As expected, the Spiritualist meeting hadn't taught her anything useful. Perhaps if she'd introduced the topic of ghosts, there might have been some progress. But no. She sat silent, listening to what seemed to her increasingly improbable conversations: Spirit animals, spirit guides, elemental energy, negative auras, positive auras, angels, energy vampires. What the hell was an energy vampire?

They were crazier than she was.

As the spiritualists wandered out, the two women introduced themselves as Ella Mae and Joan. They invited her to sit with them and chat.

Chat.

They'd used that exact word.

"Let's chat," said the blond woman with a smile.

"Yes, chat," echoed Ella Mae. "Nothing like a good chat."

Anita Ochoa brought over three bottles of beer.

"Figured you all must be about done with coffee," she said with an easy smile, placing them on the table.

'Amen to that,' Olivia thought. Her hands were shaking from too much caffeine.

Olivia sat with them for a good hour, talking about the Monterey area. No mention of ghosts. And it was... nice. Really nice.

Olivia pretended to like people, but generally, she didn't. Maybe that was the wrong way to put it. Before the explosion, she was *indifferent* to most people. They served a purpose. She wasn't mean or cruel. Unless someone was trying to kill her. Then those agency-that-shall-not-be-named skills came into play. Or if they needed help. She was a sucker for people who needed help. She'd needed help plenty of times growing up and knew what it was like to cry out and be ignored.

Talking with Ella Mae and Joan was... soothing. There was something about these two women. Or the cafe. The fluttery feelings Olivia got in her stomach and the little tremors that silently shook her whenever she went out since the explosion calmed.

Weird, yes. But kind of a good weird.

They asked politely what brought her to Monterey.

Joan wondered if her parents lived here.

“No parents,” she answered. “I’m an orphan. And a friend owns a townhouse here. They offered it to me while my leg recovers.”

“An orphan?” said Ella Mae. “Joan and I as well. We grew up in foster care.”

Olivia dutifully nodded yet said nothing more about her childhood.

The women seemed quite intuitive. They carefully did not press her for more information.

Somehow, Joan convinced Olivia to join her Saturday walking group on an easy trail along the shore in Carmel the following day.

Monterey was full of walking groups according to Joan. In fact, tomorrow’s group was one she organized through a local sports app. She led another morning walk on Tuesdays via the same app.

They’d been surprised Olivia hadn’t explored the local recreational trails.

“The coastal rec trail runs for miles,” Joan explained enthusiastically. “Though tomorrow’s walk is on a different trail. One in Carmel. Still, good for that leg of yours. Easy way to get to know people locally, too.”

‘Did she want to get to know people?’ Olivia had asked herself.

Her therapist would say, “Hell, yes!”

Olivia didn’t have a quick answer to that question. For so long, getting to know people was work. Not pleasure. She had Rafe and James. They were enough.

That was then. This was now.

She agreed a walk would be good.

Ella Mae had followed up with an invite to a pop-up donut event right after.

“Rose Café, Lighthouse Ave., Pacific Grove, 9 a.m., Diablo’s Donuts. We’re all going.”

“His donuts are amazing,” Joan agreed. “Not Monterey good. Real, big city good!”

Olivia laughed. “What’s ‘Monterey good?’”

Joan leaned in, dropping her voice to a whisper, “There were and still are a group of powerful old-time business owners who sort of control things unofficially around here. They emphatically do not like change. I’ve been back in Monterey for over ten years, and the whole area feels like it’s stuck in a time warp. Restaurants the former generation would have been comfortable at. Dark dining rooms, leather banquettes, big portions, bigger price tags. Fat menus, fat people.” She patted her hips, “Not that I should throw stones. But it’s sort of boring. Although the tourist board would scream bloody murder at me for saying it. That’s been changing with fun and affordable places slowly opening here and there at last.”

Olivia nodded, “I get it. There’s a sense of complacency in a lot of tourist towns. They start to resist any change out of habit. You know.” She dropped her voice, adopting a blustery tone, “It’s worked fine for forty years. Why should we change now?”

Both women laughed.

“Exactly,” agreed Ella Mae. “Pop-ups like Diablo’s Donuts tomorrow are part of the change. We like to support that.” She winked, “And his donuts are to die for.”

Olivia wasn’t a fan of donuts, but she liked Joan and Ella Mae. She did. Which was rare. And she’d agreed to meet for donuts as well. Despite telling herself it was a stupid idea.

“A few of us friends meeting for breakfast. We’ll sit outside, have coffee, chat. You know. Lots of laughing.”

Laughing was good. Olivia needed to laugh more.

Besides, what else was she going to do on a random Saturday?

She could go to Target. There were two, one in Sand City and one in Marina.

She could go to Homegoods. She could go to Trader Joe’s or Safeway and pick up groceries.

She could go to the Sports Center and work on her physical therapy.

Oh, *screw* that. She crossed the Sports Center off her mental list immediately.

Or she could go back to bed, stream reruns of *Alias* and wallow in self-pity with maybe a bowl of canned tomato soup on the side.

Wallowing and *Alias* reruns had been her activity of choice for a while now. However, her leg was practically screaming, ‘Please, dear God woman, take a walk!’

By ‘walk’ her leg probably meant something more strenuous than up and down the aisles of Target. As if to emphasize its point, the knee joint gave a sharp twinge making her gasp.

“Okay, okay!” she told her leg. “You win. We’ll walk.”

It was mid-February. In California, spring was already beginning. Mornings had not received the change-in-seasons message yet. The bedroom was cold which meant it would be colder outside.

Olivia carefully pulled on a pair of Old Navy black yoga pants. They were the most comfortable thing to get her knee brace around. She topped them with the same oversized black turtleneck she’d worn yesterday and her old North Face dark green full-zip fleece. Twisting around awkwardly, she managed to get her socks on. The left leg was always difficult because it still couldn’t bend at much of an angle.

Wearing her open-back sports shoes, she negotiated the stairs to the first floor, grabbed her puffer jacket, and turned the deadbolt on the front door.

Rafe, landlord and teammate, said he never bothered locking the door at his beach house. Olivia thought that might be because Rafe was six feet two inches of hard muscle and lethal fighting skills and

partly because of the booby trap he'd rigged up. Turn the doorknob to the right instead of the left, crack it open, and a blast of purple ink burst in the intruder's face and set off a siren as loud as a foghorn.

Olivia had forgotten about the booby trap the first day she took possession of the little townhouse. The ink bags were currently in exile in the garage. She still had a streak behind her left ear that was gradually fading to lavender.

Beyond a couple of texts telling her when and how to access the beach house, plus a FedEx package with the house keys, Rafe had kept silent. She'd stubbornly remained the same.

She absolutely was not going to tell the therapist on the Agency's payroll she was seeing ghosts. Maybe it wasn't her. Could it be one of Rafe's booby traps she'd inadvertently triggered? Like the exploding purple ink.

Tapping in the garage door code, she eased herself into the little steel-gray Honda Fit. The car and keys, along with a post-it note saying, 'Use it,' had been here when she arrived. She didn't see Rafe as a compact car kind of guy but whatever. It saved her from having to lease one.

Pulling her long auburn hair into a ponytail, she secured it with one of the stretchy bands she kept around the parking brake. She brushed ineffectually at her bangs. 'Side swept' had degenerated into unkempt a couple of weeks ago.

Waiting for the car to warm up, she texted Rafe.

'Is your house haunted? Because I am seeing a ghost in the upstairs bedroom. Is it real or a Scooby Doo thing?'

He'd understand the Scooby Doo reference immediately. She and Rafe and the third member of their team, James, had created a virtually unbreakable secret code based on bad movies, classic cartoons, and iconic television shows from their childhood. Scooby Doo was a reference to the cartoon's plots in which it was never really a monster or phantom wreaking havoc but someone pretending. Ergo, had someone rigged up the ghostly projection?

She didn't know if he would reply soon.

Or today.

Or ever.

Their relationship had changed. No, that wasn't dramatic enough. Their relationship had crashed and burned. The explosion had taken Rafe from her as well as James. The phone call as she gathered her things together in Bethesda had been the first time they'd spoken since *that* day.

Reading between the lines of the news, she thought Rafe might be in the Ukraine or possibly one of the Stans — Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, *whatever-stan*.

Backing out of the garage, she thanked the stars as she did every time she drove the little car it was her left leg not the right one that was ripped open in the blast. Not being able to drive would be a nightmare.

As she waited for the security gates at the entrance to the townhouses to swing open, damn if Rafe didn't text back. Siri read it out loud automatically.

"No," came the reply in Siri's perky AI voice. "My beach house is not haunted. What have you done?"

Olivia bristled slightly. "Why would you assume it's something I did?" she told Siri to say.

He sent the frowning purple devil face and one word, "You."

Well, crap. She was hoping it was him, not her.

"Can't talk," Siri said.

He could never talk anymore.

Olivia turned south on Del Monte Avenue then a quick left to pick up Highway One. It was still early with little of the Saturday tourist traffic that would soon slow the road to a crawl as day-trippers headed for the Monterey Bay Aquarium and other tourist spots.

"Tourists!" she said dismissively. Because she was not a tourist. She was not passing through on her way to the American embassy in Vienna or Prague, Budapest, Stockholm, Sofia, or Moscow. Olivia was currently a bona fide resident of the United States of America with a mailbox at the UPS store to prove it.

Whether she liked it or not.

CHAPTER FIVE

CENTRAL COASTING

Carmel-By-The-Sea is not the friendliest little town on the Central Coast, but it's one of the loveliest. As long as you don't define lovely by smooth sidewalks and streetlights, because then, well, damn.

This aching expensive strip of land rolled rapidly downhill from Highway One to the sea. The proximity of Monterey Bay made the "By-The-Sea" part a bit redundant. However, the town was full of rich people who had the right to call it whatever the hell they wanted.

Juan Rodrigo Cabrillo first sighted this strip of shore in the mid-1500s and put it on the map. In 1602 a Carmelite Father and some of his fellow tonsured pals stumbled on the river in the nearby valley and named it El Rio Carmelo. Fast forward to 1777 when Father Junipero Serra and his jolly band of Conquistadores skipped merrily along what would become the El Camino Real and founded the Carmel Mission.

The good father informed the local natives that the place was now named after a Catholic Saint and, lucky them, they could all convert to Catholicism by God's righteous bounty and the pointy bits of fine-honed Spanish steel.

Early residents like Robert Louis Stevenson and John Steinbeck chose Carmel partly because they wanted to create a zone of intellectual freedom and culture on the Central Coast and partly due to the Post Traumatic Stress of the 1906 earthquake that leveled San Francisco. The earthquake scared the intellectual hell out of everyone. They'd run like scared rabbits for more geologically stable pastures, and Carmel was born.

Carmel residents prided themselves on promoting the arts and being rude to outsiders pretty much in equal measure. The rudeness didn't discourage the tourists who'd been flocking here for decades. The median property value was now around \$1.23 million. Olivia knew because she'd researched the entire area in her usual careful fashion. Note to therapist: Careful. Not paranoid.

There was a sense of entitlement to the body language, clothing, and cars, of the residents and many tourists. Carmel was a sybaritic rainbow-hued bubble on a Coast otherwise busy with farming, fishing, the service industry, and for the less fortunate residents of Seaside and Salinas Valley, daily survival on hourly wages with no health care.

The town, she'd concluded, knew precisely how much it was worth. As did the four thousand residents who lived there.

Olivia had walked along picturesque Ocean Avenue and a few side streets twice since her move to Monterey. She automatically familiarized herself with wherever in the world she was. Whether for reference or to map out a quick escape.

Her leg brace had discouraged her from investigating the shops, restaurants, and tasting rooms of the downtown area more. How the many older residents negotiated gnarled tree roots and broken sidewalks without breaking a hip regularly, she did not know.

Today she turned off Ocean and then again onto Eighth Street. She drove past the picture-perfect pastel cottages – a few still in the English Cottage Style of Hugh Comstock –and romantic fairytale houses jumbled together with Neo-Haciendas, East Coast Salt Boxes, and everything in between. Brightly colored gardens bloomed on every lot; streets were lined with cypress and shaggy coastal pines.

Rolling down Eighth, she spied the sea and what must be the start of the coastal walkway about a block away. Cool. She hadn't known about this scenic walk. She patted herself mentally on the back. Knowledge was always a good thing. Like G.I. Joe said, "The more you know!" or was that "Stop, drop, and roll?" Well, someone had said it.

A parking spot opened directly ahead. She swooped in. The strictly enforced hourly parking rules of downtown didn't apply to the more residential blocks.

With the binoculars she'd liberated from a closet in Rafe's beach house, Olivia picked her way carefully to the partially paved sidewalk and start of the scenic path. She saw at once the route was worthy of the hype and smiled.

Rocky cliffs fell steeply to the beach about twenty or thirty feet below. A rough-hewn brown stone wall followed the winding cliff face to keep walkers from tumbling over the edge. Cypress, pines, and hardy flowering shrubs blooming in blues and purples, russet and red, filled landscaped beds meant to look wild and natural. The wind was brisk and the air smelled of kelp and saltwater. It made her nose tingle.

Carmel Beach was broader than Del Monte Beach in front of Rafe's town house. Here, the sand backed up onto the cliffs and skirted around tide pools making an iconic California Tourism Bureau picture postcard.

The ocean was also rougher on this side of the bay. Big waves breaking into white foam. The ins and outs of the rocky coastline made the sea changeable the closer you got to Big Sur and the mighty Pacific currents outside the Bay.

A few cars already snaked along the narrow one-way street; cell phone cameras aimed out the open windows. Opposite the cliff face, grand houses were mixed with cottages half their size. Many were new or at least refurbished and all had gardens overflowing with annuals and flowering shrubs.

She watched the cars and the people passing, listening for those coming behind until she realized she was operating in work mode. Memorizing faces, identifying makes of cars, considering threat levels.

“God damn it, Olivia,” she chastised herself out loud, “stop it!”

Benches were set at intervals giving walkers a perch to enjoy the picture-perfect vistas of ocean, waves, and rocky shore. She sat down on one, purposely setting her back to the street and ignoring the scattering of other walkers. Joan said to meet here at 7:30 a.m. She was about five minutes early.

Binoculars do your stuff.

She scanned the wide channel for whale spouts. Although December was the big Humpback migration month, the Internet told her a variety of whales including Grays and even Blue Whales, could be spotted all winter long. The presence of the whales also meant the Orcas who hunted them were nearby. She’d seen an Orca fin from the living room windows in the townhouse a few days ago. Only a few hundred yards offshore, the big black triangular dorsal fin was instantly recognizable

Free Willy be damned, Orcas we’re not her favorite creatures. Orcas were predatory. She was wary of predators in human or animal form. She’d been hunted before. Running for her life. Frightened and desperate. Olivia understood the terror of the whale calves and other sea mammals on the Orca menu all too well.

Within a few minutes she spotted several spouts from what looked like a pair of whales traveling together. She wasn’t sure what kind. A pod of dolphins leaped into view, hunting and playing close to shore.

With her attention focused on the sea; she gave a squeak of surprise when a cat jumped into her lap followed by another nearly identical to the first. Big cats, their calico fur was thick and luxurious. They both began to nuzzle her neck and paw at her hands to put down the binoculars and pet them.

She barely had time to say, “Cats?” before a pit bull leaped on the bench beside her, wide tongue lolling. He rolled on her shoulder and slipped onto his back on the bench, wagging his tail wildly in happy canine abandon.

CHAPTER SIX

The cats had harnesses as did the dog she noted immediately. They must have gotten away from their owner or owners. Though she had almost total control over her charm with people, dogs were something else. They lost all interest in anything but her once they caught her scent. Cats too, though with slightly less goofy enthusiasm. This was sometimes a problem. Like that damn yappy Pomeranian in Budapest who'd almost gotten her and James killed.

Olivia resigned herself to the love fest until whoever held their leashes showed up.

She didn't have to wait long.

A particularly robust bed of flowering shrubs near the bench blocked her view of the path until the woman was quite nearby. Spotting the animals and Olivia, she waved both arms. She was laughing and her face creased in good natured lines. It was Joan from Tea and Tarot.

Today she wore thick-soled sports shoes, white capris, and a turquoise tunic shirt. A cross-body canvas bag was slung around her side. She walked with a slight side-to-side rocking gait as if she had hip trouble or maybe a bad knee.

About ten feet away, she leaned over with her hands on her thighs. Olivia thought the woman had over-exerted herself, then realized she was laughing so hard she'd had to pause to catch her breath. She straightened up after a few moments and walked to Olivia, still laughing.

"Huggles pulled away," she said breathlessly as she laid a hand on one of the cats, "then Snuggles," she touched the other cat, "and finally, Ruggles took off." She tickled the pit bull under the jaw. "They kept right on the path though, so good girls and puppy! And there was me, screeching and trying my best to run or I should say hobble after them yelling 'stop, stop,' and everyone staring and jumping aside! No damage?" she asked brightly.

Olivia shook her head, "None at all. Are they yours?"

"Heavens, no!" she said adamantly. "I do pet sitting. Cats and dogs. Their mom and dad are off on a cruise or some such thing. This is Ruggles," the dark gray Pit Bull's tail pounded the bench at the mention of his name. "I think I said that?"

Olivia nodded.

"The kitties are almost identical. Huggles has a brown patch over one eye and her sister Snuggles is the one with the black mask."

Olivia dutifully noted the differences.

“And the cats walk on harnesses?” she asked, shaking her head. “Actually walk?”

Except for the few intrepid felines Olivia had seen on the Internet, most cats turned to a liquid state at the mere touch of a belly strap.

“Oh my gosh, I can’t take the pup out without them. As soon as I get Ruggles leash, they run to the hooks with their harnesses and paw at them, ready to go.”

Her senses came alert as Olivia spied another woman coming around the flowering bushes, walking purposefully in their direction.

Joan followed Olivia’s gaze and waved an arm.

The new woman was tall, maybe five foot ten, sturdy, walking with a bold stride. She had thick curling gray hair cut in an unruly pile on her head with bangs past her eyebrows. As she got closer, Olivia noted the lines in her face and deeply tanned arms and neck. She looked like someone who spent time out of doors. Like the man Edgar at Tea and Tarot yesterday. Weathered.

She took in the cats and dog sprawled over Olivia. Her face broke out in a hearty smile that deepened the wrinkles around her eyes and cheeks.

“Joan, you’ve found them. I say, stating the obvious,” the woman said, her voice deep and throaty.

Laughter gurgled up again and Joan slapped her thigh. “Did you see me running?”

“Like a bat out of hell!” said the new woman.

Joan flapped her arms, gurgling, “Plus-sized variety!”

Olivia could feel her smile stretching the muscles on her face. Joan seemed ready to laugh not only at the world but herself. Olivia felt some of the tightness in her chest loosen ever so slightly. Like yesterday. She felt... What? Relaxed.

“Didn’t find them,” Joan said at last, “they found her.”

All three animals snuggled closer. Ruggles attempted to throw himself on Olivia’s lap to demonstrate how much he loved his new friend. What with the cats, the space on her lap was somewhat limited. The move toppled him right over the edge. The women all let out surprised squeaks, but Ruggles was back up on his feet and on the bench in the blink of an eye.

“Isabelle Goode,” said the new woman holding out a hand to shake. “Izzy to my friends.”

Something made Olivia want to shake hands too. With some difficulty, she removed her right hand from Huggles’ grip and reached out.

Their fingers met and Olivia felt a little tingle travel from her palm to her wrist and arm. Huggles reached out with her big paws, wrapped them around Olivia’s wrist and tried to pull it back, demanding that hand be reserved for petting her.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” Joan said to her friend.

The older woman’s head was cocked to one side regarding Olivia. “Well, of course the animals ran to meet her. Who or what could resist such a charmer?”

Olivia was surprised at the woman’s choice of words. Because that’s exactly what she was. Charming.

Joan gave her an assessing look. Olivia had a slight tingling sensation over her skin. Not bad. Not scary. She didn’t quite know how to describe it.

“You’re new in town,” Isabelle Goode stated. “Hard on your own. Starting over,” and she smiled sympathetically. “Had to start over myself a few times.”

Olivia kept her face impassive, hiding her surprise. That assessment was surprisingly accurate.

“Hello!” called a high-pitched voice from the other direction. “Joan! Izzy!”

Olivia turned and saw a smiling Asian woman holding the crystal-studded leash of a perfectly groomed black and tan Shih Tzu come jogging up.

“Hey there, we’re late. I was sure we’d missed you,” the newcomer said. “This is great!”

The little dog caught a whiff of Olivia’s charm and promptly fell over onto its back, four paws in the air.

“Eeek!” the woman squeaked, dropping to her knees, “Gigi!”

Olivia rubbed the dog’s tummy and chest gently with her uninjured foot. Her leg brace wouldn’t let her bend all the way to the ground.

“She’s fine,” Olivia soothed, “That’s a submissive thing. Come on, pup,” she urged, “it’s okay, get up.”

Gigi came back to life, wagged her fluffy tail, rolled onto her stomach, and panted enthusiastically. Huggles took instant exception to this. Jumping down, she squeezed herself between Olivia and Gigi. The cat placed herself over the little dog and purposely sat on him.

“Huggles!” scolded Joan.

Olivia scooped the cat off. “And *that* is a dominance thing.”

Both Joan and Isabelle laughed.

“Whatever made Gigi fall over like that?” said the woman looking around the group as she brushed gravel off her dog’s fur. “I thought she had a heart attack.”

Olivia smiled and shrugged.

“Daisy Nguyen,” introduced Joan, “and Gigi, this is Olivia.”

Daisy smiled and waved. She picked up Gigi’s paw, making it wave too, “Hi!”

She was older than her smooth skin and light, girlish voice indicated. Probably late thirties, Olivia thought. She was wearing a retro-style Fila jogging suit in navy with red and white stripes down the sides

and New Balance running shoes. Dior signature sunglasses were pushed up into her long, straight black hair. Her body language was open. Her smiles natural and immediate.

With a start, Olivia realized she was assessing the newcomer. Looking for clues to her personality, possible threats or advantages she could exploit.

‘Stop that!’ she admonished her inner self.

“Joan must have told you about the walking group,” Isabelle said, playfully tugging on the Pit Bull’s hind leg as he waded it in the air squirming onto his back again and looking adoringly at Olivia.

Olivia nodded.

Isabelle continued, “The Central Coast is full of them! Generally, we meet here on the path Saturday mornings at 7:30. You’re walking with us, right?” Isabelle waved a hand at the animals trying to collectively merge their bodies into Olivia’s. “Otherwise, we may have to stay here with you on the bench, perhaps indefinitely.”

Olivia looked at the three women. She rummaged around her psyche for the familiar flash of fear or suspicion.

No flash.

In fact, none of the heightened awareness urging her to tighten the straps on the Kevlar vest cloaking her emotions when she was with strangers. The only message from her nervous system was, ‘nice doggies, nice kitties, nice ladies, what a pretty day,’ said with a vacant sort of smile.

She pulled away from her inner self, asking, ‘Really? That’s all you’ve got for me?’

Her inner self nodded and kept smiling. ‘Nice,’ it said.

“Some of the group will walk to Carmel River Beach.” Joan pointed into the distance. “I’m going as far as the Butterfly House. It’s not that far. If you’re up to it.”

The women had politely not commented on her leg brace.

Olivia did not know where the Butterfly House was. She did know that she needed to walk.

No one was chasing her. No one was psyching her out here in Carmel for some shadowy purpose. They were being friendly. Period.

“Also, we can show you where the public restroom is,” added Daisy as a further inducement. “The bathroom is nice,” she assured Olivia with a knowing nod. “Not gross. After all, this is Carmel.”

“Always good to know where there’s a bathroom!” Olivia said as she eased the cats to the ground. She made to give the leashes to Joan, but the other woman pushed them back into Olivia’s hand.

Holding the three leashes as if it was the most natural thing in the world, she fell into step with the others.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BODY OF EVIDENCE

The Butterfly house turned out not to have any butterflies, much to Olivia's disappointment. The designation referred to the distinctive triangular shape of the roof. She met several other people who were regulars to the Saturday morning walking group. Olivia automatically categorized them for threats, fiscal soundness, and weirdness before she remembered to make herself stop.

She did stop, and she did have fun. Fun. Oh my god. How long had it been since she enjoyed talking to other people?

The two Rag Doll cats appeared indefatigable, trotting happily with their adopted Pit Bull brother. Olivia couldn't walk fast; Joan slowed her pace to stay with her. Her leg twinged, forcing her to stop a couple of times Olivia had to stop for the pain to pass. Both the animals and Joan waited patiently.

Most of the group kept walking but at the Butterfly House she and Joan turned around. Daisy and Isabelle declared their hope she would join them again next Saturday. Isabelle gave Olivia her card.

'Goode Wines. Isabelle Goode, Owner and Chief Vintner.'

"You're that Goode?" Olivia said. "I've seen your wines at the supermarket."

Isabelle gave a courtly bow. "Have you tasted them?"

Olivia shook her head.

"Come to the tasting room. We have one right on Cannery Row. The address is on the back."

Waving, she turned to catch up with the others striding ahead.

"Nice." Olivia tucked the card into the pocket of her yoga pants.

"Izzy is a wonderful person." Joan scooted to one side of the path to let a faster group of walkers pass. "Do you like wine?"

Olivia snorted, "Well, yeah!"

"Then you're in the right place. So many tasting rooms around here. Cannery Row, Carmel, the Crossroads in Carmel Valley, out on River Road near Salinas. Or over in Paso."

"Paso?"

"Sorry, that's what locals call Paso Robles. About a hundred miles south. Have you visited any tasting rooms? Locally, I mean."

Somewhat shamefaced, Olivia admitted she hadn't. She'd been busy wallowing.

“Ella Mae and I belong to several wine clubs. You can come with us one weekend if you like. Odenata Winery out on River Road is especially restful. Outdoor patio. View of the hills. Lovely on a warm afternoon. They make delicious sparkling wines.”

Before Olivia could think of some sort of protest, Joan added, “We can take a guest for free. It’s part of the perks of membership.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

Would she go if they asked? Olivia felt the familiar flutter of panic. Because of her team and her work, she hadn’t spent much time with other women in a purely social setting. Time with no strings attached. No ulterior motive. Sitting outside sipping chilled wine on a warm California afternoon sounded like something she might like to do.

Ruggles turned and thrust his nose into her hand, his brown eyes looking up at her.

“It’s okay, puppy,” she reassured him. “I’m okay.”

She took a deep breath. But maybe Joan was just being polite.

“Not being fake polite if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Olivia’s eyes widened.

“We genuinely enjoy introducing people to wineries we like. Very much a Central Coast thing.”

When Olivia didn’t answer, Joan asked, “Is it your leg?” Her brows creased in concern. “Am I walking too fast?”

Olivia shook her head. “Sorry. No. I’m fine. Let’s go on.”

“Right. Donuts are calling.”

They had gone no more than a couple hundred yards further when Ruggles started to growl. He stopped to face the other side of the street. Olivia noticed a knot of people gathered around a sloping green lawn.

“Another dog?” Olivia asked. “Is he aggressive around dogs?”

“What? No. Not at all.”

Some of the crowd shifted position. Olivia saw a naked body sprawled across the neatly trimmed grass. A man. White. Strong and muscular.

Police cars, sirens screaming, screeched to a stop in front of the house. An unmarked police car with a flashing light on top followed close on the black and whites.

“I know that house. That’s Saint Fleur’s place. We walked by here no more than twenty or so minutes ago. Did you notice anything?”

Olivia shook her head. “No. Not me.”

Up the curving slope of lawn was a stunning two-story home in a mix of classic Art Deco and Streamline Modern styles. White with contrasting black trim and a blood-red door at the end of a long portico.

“Somebody must have placed him there in the last few minutes. I mean, the body is naked. Surely, we would have noticed.”

“Us or the animals,” agreed Olivia. Especially her. She had a habit of scanning the area around her as she walked. Looking for anything out of place. Careful. Not paranoid. A naked man lying inert on a lawn would have caught her attention.

“He’s also covered in some kind of calligraphy,” Olivia pointed out. She held up the binoculars, focusing on the body. ‘Yep. There’s some kind of writing, almost like painting all over the skin. I’d call it calligraphy for sure.’”

Joan stepped closer. “You... you can see that?”

“Yes, I can see it. Look.” She took the binocular strap off so she could hand them to Joan. “Black symbols covering his skin, head to foot.”

“You-can-see-them?” Joan paused deliberately between each word.

Olivia copied her tone with equal slowness. “They-are-pretty-obvious.”

Joan turned her head from the body to Olivia and back again. “No. No, they’re really not.”

She didn’t even look through the lenses, handing the binoculars back.

Several uniformed police were pushing everyone back to the sidewalk. Others were scrambling to set up a plastic sheet to shield the body. They were being careful to keep their distance from the body itself. The forensics team would need to analyze the immediate area for clues. Provided Carmel had a Forensics team and didn’t have to borrow one.

“I, um, well, I cat-sit for the neighbors. Would you stay here with the critters while I go talk to Detective Suzuki?”

She didn’t wait for a reply.

Olivia watched as Joan jogged across the street to hail a tall woman in a dark pantsuit who exited the unmarked car. Asian, black hair cut short.

Instead of being rebuffed, as Olivia expected, the woman immediately turned to speak with Joan. Observing her body language, Olivia saw the detective lean forward, making eye contact, obviously listening. Okay. That was a surprise. Joan was the alpha in the conversation.

Interesting.

After around five minutes, Joan walked back to Olivia.

“Is the body Saint...um... Saint, what was his name?”

“Saint Fleur? No. No, it’s not.” Joan looked back at the lawn. “Sorry, but I need to stay here for a little while. Give me the leashes, I’ll take the animals.”

Olivia couldn’t help herself. “Why?” she asked. “Why do you need to stay?”

Joan gave her an appraising look. She hesitated before answering, “I know the man who own the house and the neighbors.”

“Not the victim?”

“No, though I have my suspicions.”

“Is no one home?” Olivia asked.

“Seems not.”

“Only the cat’s home. Next door.”

“Cat?” Joan looked confused then her eyes widened, “Yes. The cat. Right.”

“And what? The cat might have seen the criminals and you need to translate for the police?”

“I can’t really explain. Could you tell Ella Mae I’ll be along as soon as possible? And maybe, grab a couple of donuts for me? Anything with chocolate. I’ll pay you back. I’d hate to miss this pop-up.”

She said it with such longing Olivia couldn’t help but agree. “Sure, of course. Chocolate. Got it.”

“You’d better get going. It’s almost eight-thirty. The doors open at nine.”

Joan took the leashes. She had to drag the two cats and the dog across the street with her. They kept looking at Olivia with obvious longing.

“Well, that was weird,” Olivia said, walking back along the path. “Even for California.”

Why would anyone paint calligraphy on a dead body?

CHAPTER EIGHT

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Olivia took Highway One to the turn-off for Pacific Grove. This was a back way to town along a twisty-turny road through the hills. The road brought her right onto Forest Avenue. Following it down the hill, she ended up on the main street of Pacific Grove.

After Rafe gave her the keys to the townhouse, Olivia researched the little towns crowded together around Monterey. Pacific Grove, the butterfly capital of America, was established in 1875 as a Methodist seaside resort. Old-time Methodists frowned on most sorts of fun: Gambling, dancing, drinking, and fast buggy riding were outlawed. Damn you fast buggy drivers! You're going straight to hell. They also frowned on nude swimming and dirty outhouses.

Olivia liked a clean bathroom, so she could get behind the Methodists on that last one at least.

Pacific Grove grew from tents to cottages to houses to its current population of around 15,600 and a median income of a little over \$70,000 a year. Which is not bad considering the US average is around \$28,000.

Olivia tended to form opinions quickly of people and places. Her training in the-agency-that-shall-not-be-named had forced her to make quick assessments. Despite the small-town exterior, people didn't look you in the eye and say hello. Generally, indicating a bad neighborhood or one that thought of itself as too good.

It wasn't always easy to find street parking in Pacific Grove on a weekend. Her luck held and she got a spot almost across the street from where the map app showed the Rose Café. She hadn't needed the app. At least twenty people lined the sidewalk. Unless there was some other pop-up on Lighthouse this morning, this must be the place.

She wasn't far from Tea and Tarot. Maybe three blocks? Like Carmel, Olivia had been to Pacific Grove several times exploring Lighthouse Avenue, the main thoroughfare, and side streets. Getting a feel for the town and its pace of life.

Olivia recognized people from yesterday waiting in line: the two teenage boys, Edgar, the bug guy, and Ella Mae. Ella Mae turned first, then the others. They waved enthusiastically, all smiling.

They were waiting for her.

No one had waited for her in many months. Her eyes swam without warning. She swiped at them brusquely with the sleeve of her jacket.

"Chilly," she said as she approached the group, "the cold always makes my eyes water."

Ella Mae gave her an up-and-down look. Olivia thought the tall woman might not have believed the story.

“Joan is on her way,” Olivia told them. “There was some sort of incident. Police and ambulances. A body on the lawn.”

Ella Mae nodded. “She just called me.”

“What’s going on?” Edgar asked.

One of the boys spoke, “Yeah if Miss D’Angelo stayed, it means something happened. You know, *something*.” He waggled his eyebrows significantly.

Olivia caught the glance Ella Mae darted in her direction. “I don’t have any more information yet.”

“He was naked and covered in black calligraphy.” Olivia supplied.

They stared at her.

“Calligraphy?” said Edgar.

“Yep.”

He shook his head, “Oh, that’s not good.”

“Is there a paintbrush-wielding psychopath on the loose I should know about?”

All four of them were quick to disclaim, “No, no. No psychopath.”

“You guys know more than you’re telling,” Olivia said flatly, letting a little of Agent Mallory peek out. She hadn’t ramped up her charm-o-meter yet, but she could.

“Why don’t we wait for Joan,” Ella said. “She’ll give us more information. Okay?”

“Hmm,” was all Olivia said.

They were about ten people from the front of the line. As she watched, more people joined the queue until it was around the corner. Everyone was checking their watches.

“The Chocolate Ganache is pure decadence right in your hand!” gushed a woman behind Olivia.

“Tiramisu cream-filled,” said the man at her side, putting his fingers to his mouth and snapping them wide. “Perfection! That’s what I’m waiting for. Anyone can pour chocolate, but there’s an art to tiramisu.”

“Banana cream-filled,” chorused the two teenage boys from Tea and Tarot.

“Bring ‘em on!” said Ella Mae. “Open those dang doors. I’m ready for some donuts.” She swiveled her direct gaze to Olivia. “Aren’t you ready for some donuts?”

“I...I don’t know,” Olivia stuttered, rocking back a step, “am I?”

Apparently, people took their donuts seriously on the Central Coast.

The excited murmuring grew in volume. A cheer went up when the doors opened at precisely nine o’clock.

Olivia soon understood why there was a line.

They entered the small café, frozen in time somewhere around 1975, like a lot of things in this part of California. Rickety dark walnut wooden chairs were pushed into square tables stained the same color. Odds and ends of cards, faded art prints, and, she stared harder, sheet music? Yes, sheet music was framed on walls painted Smurf blue. Fluorescent lights gave the room a harsh illumination. Sun-bleached white lace curtains framed big bay window facing the street. Despite the name 'Rose Café' Olivia saw no evidence of roses.

Trays of donuts were arranged on foldout tables by the wall. Straining to see over the heads of the people in front of her, Olivia marveled at the display.

These were no common, ordinary donuts. Each was a work of art, decorated with frosting, nuts, whipped cream, crumbles, custard, ganache, and she did not know what. The only resemblance they had to a donut Olivia could see was the vaguely round shape at the base. You'd need a knife and a fork to eat one.

She insisted the others from Tea and Tarot go ahead. They protested. As a first timer, she should have first choice.

"I need more time to look."

They accepted that.

Edgar nodded, "Understandable. Not easy choices to make."

"Don't worry about Joan's," Ella Mae said, "I'll get hers."

The line moved slowly since people took their time over every choice.

"Are there still tiramisu donuts left?" the elderly man behind Olivia asked as she approached the table.

She squinted at the trays, looking over the beautiful confections. "What do they look like?"

"Creamy off-white and dark brown with a dusting of powder on top."

"Yep, yep, I see some. At least a dozen."

"Oh, thank heavens," he sighed in relief.

When it was at last her turn, Olivia surveyed the sumptuous selection.

"Hello, I haven't seen you here before."

Olivia looked up.

A handsome man with a sweep of dark brown hair combed back and arctic blue eyes smiled down at her from behind the table. He was wearing a white chef's coat and black trousers.

Not sure he was talking to her, she pointed at herself, "Me?"

He gave a stunning smile, revealing perfect bright white teeth. Double dimples creased his cheeks.

He tilted his head almost coquettishly. “Yes, you.”

She raised an eyebrow and gestured at the crowd, “You know all your customers?”

“Most of them. How do you do.” He stretched s out a hand to shake. His fingers were long and beautifully tapered. The skin smooth and pale. The other hand was curled around an oversized spatula with a towering chocolate confection of cream, custard, and frosting balanced on top. “Daniel, Daniel De Leon,”

She was looking him in the eyes as he introduced himself and noticed the slight dilation in his pupils and quick blink-blink. Olivia couldn’t help herself. Instead of shaking his hand, she put her hand over her mouth and snorted.

“Daniel De Leon,” she repeated, “Really? Daniel of the Lions? Maybe Daniel in the Lions’ Den? Or perhaps you are related to Ponce? Ponce De Leon and his search for the Fountain of Youth?”

Olivia had a knife-edge sense of humor that had not been let off its leash in a long while. She sensed he was trying to charm her. For some reason, that triggered Foreign Service Olivia used to sparring with the smartest of the smart and the meanest of the mean.

The handsome man’s smile froze in place. The spatula dipped ever so slightly. The top-heavy donut slid to the edge. It teetered for a heartbeat before dropping top down. The chocolate whip cream smooshed out in an untidy circle.

The man waiting for tiramisu behind her gasped, “No!”

The man in the chef’s coat continued to look at her. “You don’t believe me?”

“About what? David or Ponce?” she asked.

He gave her a long look down his perfectly straight nose, his chin up ever so slightly. Perhaps he wasn’t used to being sparred with. Too bad. Foreign Service Olivia was dying for some cutting conversation.

“What would you like?” he looked from the overturned donut to her, his smile not quite so wide.

Olivia contemplated the opulent array of sugary sweetness before her in pinks, whites, pretty pastels, and velvety brown.

The older man waiting for his tiramisu nudged her, “Move ahead, you’re holding up the line.”

She pointed to one of the trays at the rear of the table. “I’ll have a donut hole.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Daniel Whatever-his-name-was.

“I beg your pardon,” said Tiramisu Man.

“Donut hole,” she said.

“Donut hole,” said the Donut Guy.

“Donut hole,” repeated Tiramisu Man.

“One.” Olivia held up her index finger and pointed at a sugary donut hole on the tray, “that one.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Tiramisu Man put a hand on her arm, “Are you okay? Nobody waits in Diablo’s line for donut holes. They’re the booby prize.”

“I don’t like sweets,” Olivia said honestly, and she didn’t.

The handsome man’s face went pale, as if she’d stood up and sworn in church. “Then what are you doing here?”

“Making friends,” Olivia answered.

“Not with me,” declared the Daniel the Donut Guy.

Frowning, he dropped the donut hole on a cardboard tray.

Taking her single donut hole, Olivia moved to the cashier, asking for a black coffee. Looking over her shoulder she saw the man’s arctic blue eyes on her.

She’d been right. Central Coast people took their donuts way too seriously.

Ella Mae had scored one of the café’s few outside tables, pulling chairs for three of them to sit with the two boys perching on a large concrete planter full of white geraniums separating the patio from the sidewalk.

People still waiting in line stared longingly at the donuts in their cardboard pastry boxes as they filed slowly past.

Olivia sipped her coffee and watched Ella Mae and the others enjoying their treats. People seemed too engrossed in the tasty act of eating to chat.

The sun had been playing peek-a-boo all morning with the clouds and finally came out. Light and warmth flooded the patio.

A beautiful woman with long silver hair and snowy white skin strolled into view as the sun broke through. She was holding the leashes of two white Russian Wolfhounds. The woman and dogs were thin and leggy and... covered in rainbows.

How were they covered in rainbows? Okay, not actual rainbows. Rainbow-colored prisms of light shining around them. As if bursting from the woman and the dogs.

It had to be an optical illusion.

Olivia craned her neck, looking for the mirrors or glass prism that must be creating this illusion.

She couldn’t seem to get a clear look at the woman’s features, the light was too bright.

As soon as the dogs scented Olivia they jerked away from their mistress, leaping like thoroughbreds in a steeplechase over the boys on the white planters. They tried to crawl into Olivia’s lap.

Surprised “Eeks” and “Awks” followed as the group scrambled to save their donuts and coffee from the canine onslaught. Ella Mae burst out laughing.

The silver-haired woman hurried over, growling out a command in another language. The dogs ignored her.

Fending off doggy kisses with one hand, Olivia automatically gathered their leashes in the other. She held them out for the woman to take. Her charm had given her far too much experience with overly-friendly dogs and surprised owners.

The Wolfhounds wriggled around on top of her in doggy bliss. Olivia had the impression of more weight and mass than the average anorexic Borzoi hound. Looking more closely, she thought their coats were thicker and longer than others she'd met. And not white but silver like their mistress's hair. The dogs grinned at her.

And their teeth bigger.

Rainbows were shooting off the silver-haired woman like laser beams. She stared haughtily at Olivia as if the incident was her fault. Which it kind of was. Even with the charm-o-meter turned down, dogs could not resist her. However, this pair seemed unusually enthusiastic.

The woman took the leashes and spoke again in a language Olivia didn't recognize. Whining and ducking their heads, the two dogs jumped around the boys and back over the planters. Tails between their legs, they slunk to her side.

With her head high, the woman walked away as if nothing had happened. The two dogs gazed longingly over their shoulders at Olivia.

"What the hell was up with rainbow woman?" Olivia asked the group, shaking her head. "Could she be any ruder?"

Ella Mae gave her a surprised look, eyebrows raised. "Rainbow woman? Why would you call her that?"

"Didn't you see the rainbow lights glinting off her?" Olivia looked around the immediate area again, "there had to be a mirror or something reflecting off jewelry or clothing she was wearing."

Ella Mae, Edgar, and the boys exchanged glances.

"What?" said Olivia. "Don't tell me you didn't see the rainbows."

"We did," said the boys together. "We totally did. The question is, how could you?"

Olivia gave them a look, "Meaning?"

"Did the dogs have rainbows?" asked Edgar.

Olivia considered the question, "Looked like they did. Probably Swarovski crystal collars. Their mama looks like she has money to burn."

Before Olivia could pursue the matter further, the handsome man in the chef's coat came hurrying over.

He held a plate with bite-sized donuts. Not donut holes. Actual tiny donuts frosted and decorated exactly like their full-sized counterparts.

Everyone at the table *oohed* and *aahed*.

People still in line leaned to snap photos. Those at the other tables crowded around, exclaiming. “The perfectionist in me couldn’t let you go without trying to tempt you to take a taste,” he said, offering her the tray.

Everyone at the table pulled their eyes away from the tray to look at Olivia.

“Do you know each other?” Ella Mae asked.

Olivia shook her head, pushing her uneaten donut hole further under a napkin. She wasn’t joking when she said she didn’t like sweets. This morning, for some reason, the excess of cream, chocolate, toppings, and frosting that tempted the others had ruined her appetite. She couldn’t even think of eating it.

He presented the plate again.

Something in the way he kept insisting triggered Olivia’s defenses. Her partners had christened her early warning system ‘Olivia Def Con’ with an appropriate corresponding number in order of urgency.

Olivia and her partners paid attention when this popped up. It had saved them all on more than one occasion.

Instead of taking a donut, she asked, “Have you decided on a name yet? Daniel, David...”

He smiled though the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Anthony?” he queried, still watching her. “How’s that?”

“Anthony?” chirped one of the boys. “I thought it was Diablo.”

The chef gave the boy a sour look.

“Sorry,” said the boy, dropping his eyes.

His friend shoved him in the shoulder, “Dumb ass,” he whispered.

“Anthony. Caesar or Cleopatra in attendance?”

He didn’t answer.

“Probably better that way. Things didn’t turn out so well for Anthony.”

He stood erect, narrowing his eyes at her.

Olivia could tell he was used to charming people into doing what he wanted. He wanted her to eat these donuts for some reason and was miffed she refused.

‘You can’t charm a charmer,’ she thought to herself.

Breaking eye contact, he set the tray on the table.

People in line gasped in envy.

The smile returned. He flashed it at their group. “Thanks for coming out today. Hope you enjoy the donuts.” He turned on his heel and disappeared back into the coffeehouse.

“That was odd,” said Ella Mae.

“Definitely odd,” agreed Edgar.

“Are you going to eat those?” asked both boys, eyes gleaming.

Olivia waved a hand over the tray, “Go ahead. They’re for all of us, surely.”

A small dark-haired woman flanked by a tall, quite good-looking man approached their table and stopped abruptly. She looked hard at Olivia, her heavily penciled eyebrows slowly rising. Olivia stared back, puzzled. The woman was obviously interested in her. It wasn’t like Monterey or Pacific Grove was so small, any newcomer got noticed.

“You should inform me when a new practitioner moves into the area,” the woman snapped.

Olivia wasn’t sure who she was speaking to.

Ella Mae stood, placing her not insubstantial self between Olivia and the woman. “We don’t have to tell you a thing.”

The woman’s sharp eyes snapped to Ella Mae. “There has been a murder.” She pronounced it ‘*muurrderrr*’ rolling her tongue in a thick, Eastern European accent.

“We know,” Ella Mae replied.

“The guy on the lawn?” Olivia asked.

“*Yesss*, murder,” the woman trilled. “The spirits, they spoke to me on the way here.”

“Through the police scanner?” Olivia asked in an innocent voice.

The woman turned her glare back to Olivia.

Meeting her eyes, Olivia stared right back. The handsome man standing behind the woman blinked once, twice rapidly. Olivia saw him purse his lips and take a quick breath. His mouth made a little ‘O’ as though he’d discovered something.

“I am sure the police will ask for my help with their inquiries,” the woman said haughtily, raising her chin to look down her nose at the group.

She gave ‘inquiry’ about three extra syllables.

Happy barking heralded Joan’s entrance with Huggles, Snuggles, and Ruggles tugging her along.

The woman with the accent frowned.

The cats leaped the geranium barrier, sailing past the two boys to land more or less in Olivia’s lap. Ruggles, not quite as athletic, stuck his big head through the plants, whining.

“Awk, sorry, Olivia. Apologies for the delay,” Joan panted, out of breath. “What have I missed?”

Trying to bat Huggles’ tail out of her face, Olivia quipped, “This lady heard about the man on the lawn from the spirits on the police scanner.”

The accented lady hissed at her. Literally hissed.

It took serious effort for Olivia not to laugh. What was up with her this morning? She was relaxed and feeling sassy. The way she used to feel with Rafe and James.

“I was there,” Joan said. “I spoke with Detective Suzuki. They haven’t identified the body yet.”

The woman did not look pleased.

“If the crime is satanic in nature, I am sure they will call me in.” She visibly preened. “I am experienced in these things.”

This woman was a rival to Ella Mae. Her body language and tone of voice made that obvious. She also did not sound overly sorry about a heinous crime being committed here on the coast. Olivia quickly decided she was on team Ella Mae and Joan.

“Because you’re a Satanist?” asked Olivia. “The dark lord speaks to you personally? Maybe channeling through the police scanner?”

Ella Mae snorted a laugh.

The woman’s handsome companion looked at Olivia and shook his head almost imperceptibly.

“I would not be surprised at all,” chuckled Ella Mae. “Tell us, Esmeralda, do you see him in that oversized crystal ball of yours?”

The dark-haired woman flushed a deep red. She opened her mouth, probably to give Olivia and Ella Mae a sharp set down.

“You better get in there quickly,” Edgar advised quickly. “There might only be donut holes left.”

The woman’s expression darkened. “Only donut holes?” She barked, “Stefano, we must go. I will *curse* that fool of a baker if the tiramisu are gone. I will give him an evil eye like no other.” And with a whirl of her black lace shawl, she was off.

The man stayed where he was. “That was very brave,” he said.

Olivia pointed to herself, “Me?” she laughed, “What’s she going to do? Curse me?”

His eyes widened.

“*Stephanooo!*” A howl floated out of the café. Without another word, he hurried off.

Ella Mae gave Olivia a knowing smile, “Well, look at you. Not taking anything from anybody but lookin’ like butter would melt in your mouth, as my granny used to say.”

Edgar nodded, eyes twinkling. “Respect!”

“Too much?” asked Olivia leaning back in her chair. “I’m used to playing on a big stage with big egos.”

“Play away!” declared Edgar raising his donut to her in salute.

Joan released the cats’ leashes and led Ruggles, much to his relief, through the little gate onto the café’s patio.

“Ruggles, behave!” Joan said in a commanding voice before the Pit Bull could clamber onto Olivia’s lap. Whining, he settled for shoving his big body between her chair and the planter.

“Who was that?” Olivia asked. “And what’s with helping the police? Her tone implied she stole a jump on you.”

When the two women didn't answer right away, the red-haired boy said, "That was, I mean *is*, Madame Esmeralda Valencia."

"Central Coast's very own Gypsy fortune teller," his friend added.

Olivia made a face. "Gypsy? Really? Because that accent sounded like Bela Lugosi, the original Dracula."

Joan and Ella Mae burst out laughing.

"Essie's been using that damn accent so long I think she forgot she doesn't have one!" said Edgar. "She and her mama were both born and raised in Salinas. As Californian as I am," he pointed at his chest. "I went to school with Violca, Esmeralda's older sister. Not that they aren't true Romany. The family came over in Great-Grandmother Jaelle's time. Baba Jaelle was the one running around the valley, giving everyone the Evil Eye. Scared the hell out of all us kids, even her own!" He lowered his voice, "Personally, I don't think Essie has the power to give the eye."

"Well, she has the spit and vinegar for it," said Joan sourly.

"I wouldn't test her," said the two boys as one.

Ella Mae gave a sniff and crossed her arms over her ample bosom.

Olivia wasn't quite sure what to say, not having an opinion on the Evil Eye either way.

Instead, she asked, "What was that about?"

Ella Mae scooted by and sat back in her chair. "Madame Valencia is a fortune teller."

"Psychic reader," interrupted Alex.

"If you spell Psychic Reader s-c-a-m a-r-t-i-s-t.," said Ella Mae with a dark look in Valencia's direction. "Angel readings, past life regression, you name it, she claims to be able to do it. Crystal ball and all. Their salon, or whatever you want to call it, is in Salinas near the Steinbeck Center. The real money is online. Stefano, her son, handles that."

Joan and Ella Mae shook their heads over the gullibility of fools and their digital cash.

"Is it all a scam?" asked Olivia. Her newfound interest in the paranormal made her curious. The Romany she usually saw were panhandlers in European cities – plump Romany women handing out sprigs of Rosemary. If you took it, you had to give them a 'contribution' or they raised hell. Olivia routinely ignored or gave them the stink-eye. They left her alone.

Ella Mae snorted, "The only angels talking to that woman would be the Fallen kind."

"Now, now, we both know she has a touch of the sight, as people call it. Enough to make her sound plausible. Mostly she cold reads people, like a Mentalist. If you know what I mean."

Olivia knew precisely what Ella Mae meant. Covert operatives needed to be able to cold read people for a hundred little clues giving them insight into the person and whatever subtext there was to a

conversation. She was an excellent cold reader herself even before she joined the agency-that-shall-not-be-named. Foster care had honed that skill.

“Anyway, forget about the weird Gypsy lady. I want to know more about the dead man with the calligraphy on his body.”

“She saw the writing on the body,” Ella Mae said to Joan.

“The writing on the body,” the two boys echoed.

“On the body,” Edgar repeated.

“I know,” said Joan.

“Yes,” said Olivia exasperated. “I saw the calligraphy. Why are you all reacting like this?”

Ella Mae crossed her arms over her chest. “Because you have to have magic to see it.”

CHAPTER NINE

TRICK OR TREAT

Olivia laughed, “Okay, okay, what’s the real story?”

Joan was shaking her head, “You shouldn’t have broken it to her like that. We don’t even know for sure.”

“Give her the card,” said Edgar. “The card will know. “

“We’re not just friends from Tea and Tarot,” Joan explained. “Ella Mae, Edgar, Anita Ochoa, these boy’s mamas, and many more besides belong to the Monterey Widows and Orphans Dining Club.”

Olivia’s eyebrows shot up somewhere near her hairline.

“What’s that?”

“A philanthropic society started by four friends in the 1890s. Here, this is our card.”

Watched by the others at the table, Ella handed Olivia a business card.

The card did indeed have ‘Monterey Widows and Orphans Club’ in a simple black font across the front with a website address in small print beneath. Olivia flipped the card over. A green and blue symbol inside interlocking knots of silver with a heart in the center took up half the card. It glowed and seemed almost to pulse with light.

“What’s this?” Olivia asked, holding the card out with the symbol showing. “The pulsing effect is cool.”

Was it her imagination, or did everyone at the table gasp?

Ella Mae and Joan were nodding.

“I knew it,” Ella said. “I knew it soon as she walked into Tea and Tarot.”

“Knew what?” Olivia demanded.

This was not a joke. They weren’t messing with her. Whatever was going on here felt important to everyone at the table.

“What did you know?” Olivia asked again, exerting some of her charm.

“Oh, there it is!” exclaimed Joan. “You’re using it, aren’t you?”

Olivia abruptly sat back in her chair.

“Using what?”

“Your charm. Can you really turn it off and on?” Joan snapped her fingers. “Like that?”

“How do you know?” sputtered Olivia, not bothering to deny it. “Can you do it too?”

Joan shook her head.

“She’s like a human radar system for... ow!” exclaimed one of the boys.

“Shut up,” said his friend.

“Human radar system for what?” Olivia asked.

“Good things generally,” said Joan evenly. “You have a gift. Charm, if I am correct. You are also being haunted. A single spirit. At least that’s all we’ve seen so far.”

Olivia stared.

Ruggles pushed his snout under her arm. She petted him reflexively as the cats rumbling purrs vibrated through her chest.

“The Dining Club has nurtured and protected widows and orphans all over the Central Coast for more than a century,” Joan said. “I take it you’re an orphan?”

Olivia’s eyes widened. “How?” she croaked.

“The symbol in the card tells us several things. Whether a person has the gift. If they are a widow or an orphan, even both occasionally. A blue and green glow signifies an orphan. If I may?”

Ella Mae reached for the card and Olivia handed it back.

Keeping the symbol turned to Olivia, she asked, “What color do you see now?”

“Still blue and green.”

“Orphan. That’s me. Boys?”

The boys took the card each in turn.

“What color?” Ella asked again.

“Yellow,” Olivia replied. “Both of them.”

Ella nodded. “They have the gift but are neither widows nor orphans. They are legacy members from their mothers.”

Joan reached over to stroke the cats. “You have the gift of Charm. Very rare. But you know that already, don’t you?”

And she did. Olivia always knew other people could not do what she did. The agency-that-shall-not-be-named quickly knew it as well.

No one until now had ever dared put a name to it.

Magic.

“You met us for a reason, Olivia.”

“The signs have accelerated. You shouldn’t have been able to see the calligraphy on the body. The police certainly can’t. Those rainbows reflecting from the woman and her dogs? She’s not human. No

one else saw those rainbows apart from us,” she gestured at the people around the table. “Your ghost? Well, it’s definitely haunting you.”

“Is it here now?” Olivia couldn’t stop herself from asking.

Ella Mae stared, “Not now. It was when you first came. And I am afraid it probably went to wherever you live.”

They didn’t have to tell her. Her specter floated every freaking night in her bedroom since she came to this bloody town.

“We believe we can help you identify your ghost. And…” Joan glanced at Ella. “We think maybe you can help us.”

Joan took a pen out of her little crossbody bag, writing on a napkin. “This is where the Dining Club is meeting this month and when. Please come. We are good people. You did not come to Tea and Tarot by chance. We’re meeting at Sorrento’s, off Cannery Row. Tuesday night, 5:30. I’ve written it on the napkin.”

Olivia took the napkin. Laying it on the table, she smoothed it with one hand.

Ella Mae yawned and stretched. “I don’t know about you all, but I am going home for a nap. I always get sleepy after Diablo’s Donuts.”

“Me too,” said Joan.

“We should be buzzing after all the sugar,” Edgar said, “but it’s like you say. I need a nap.”

Even the boys yawned.

Ella Mae and Joan stood. Joan gathered the animals’ leashes, pulling them away. The others followed, grabbing their leftover donuts and cardboard trays.

“Please text if you want to,” Joan said, giving Olivia another card. This one also had a glowing symbol on the back. Olivia felt it beating like a heart beneath her fingers. “I didn’t mean to throw this curveball at you so soon. You probably think we’re crazy. We’re not. And neither are you. My number’s there. Ella Mae’s as well.”

Smiling, they waved goodbye and walked away, leaving Olivia to stare after them, holding the card.

Joan recognized her charm. No one had ever sensed her turning it on. Ever.

Olivia had been born with the ability. At least, she assumed she’d been born with it.

Her memories began at the age of nine in a Phoenix hospital. She’d suffered severe head trauma leaving her with permanent amnesia. Nothing the doctors or therapists tried could evoke a personal memory beyond that morning in the hospital. Ever.

Oh, she could read and write and talk. She spoke English. Those faculties were unaffected. She just couldn’t remember her past. But she could charm. Oh, yes.

Instinctively she knew she could charm people into doing, saying, or participating in almost anything. Olivia never questioned her ability or how she understood how to use it. There was no logical explanation. No scientific reason for it.

An orphan caught up in the Foster Care system, Olivia needed any help she could get. Subtle experimentation over the years taught her how to fine-tune the volume of her charm-o-meter.

The Agency spotted her skills probably before her first interview.

She'd been identified as a possible recruit as a sophomore in college. The Agency could not scoop her up fast enough once she graduated. Truth be told, they didn't have to try very hard. Orphans make some of the best recruits, as they know very well.

She ticked so many of their little boxes:

Political Science Major: Check

Communication Skills: Check

Smarts: Check.

No family: Check

Good looks – but not *too* good: Check.

Charm: Oh, check, check, check. In fact, checked to a scary degree.

It turns out charm is a rare and valuable asset in the dark world of covert operations.

After graduation, she'd left her name and past behind without a backward glance, easily slipping into her cover as a Protocol Officer attached to the Foreign Service. This designation gave her the flexibility to zip in and out of embassies or any official entourage as she supposedly helped politicians or embassy officers navigate tricky cultural protocols around the world.

Her charm worked on everyone.

With one exception.

Rafael Santos.

Somehow, he was immune. Maybe the agency knew. Olivia always wondered if that's why they initially paired her with him and their high-tech whiz kid, James Ward. It was impossible to know what the agency-that-shall-not-be-named knew and did not know. There was so much more to the shadow world of intelligence than the glib acronyms people so carelessly toss around.

Rafe and James had been at what they laughingly called Spy School together. And they did not mean Langley. Olivia transferred in on loan from another even more secret department than theirs. The three of them clicked within the first hours of meeting. It had been like love at first sight.

Their different skill sets worked in uncanny synchronicity.

James and his tech genius and hacking.

Rafe with the street smarts, lethal skill set, and nerves of steel.

Olivia, with her charm and knowledge of cultures and customs.

The three of them quickly developed their own secret code based on James' obsession with bad movies and the shared childhood memories of Cartoon Network. Their code made no sense to anyone but them.

Typing in 'Manos the Hands of Fate' stood for exasperation over working with a bunch of amateurs. Because it had to be one of the worst films ever made.

James had it in his collection and made them watch it. Several times.

"Santa Claus versus the Martians" was a catch-all for when a mission was unsalvageable. That did happen.

"Thundercats," in a text meant to get the hell out of there because 'Thundercats are go!'

'G.I. Joe' in a text or conversation had nothing to do with the military or a military strike. G.I. Joe' meant they needed more information on the current assignment. Because as G.I. Joe said in his cartoon public service messages, 'Knowing is half the battle.' Ergo, they only had half the intel they needed.

Unlike spy movies, covert operatives try to keep shootouts and car chases to a minimum. Their main job is to gather intelligence which is collated and analyzed and hopefully acted upon. Olivia and her teammates talked and mingled and worked and listened. Although for James, that was primarily through computers and digital devices. He was not much of a people person.

They followed and photographed, tracked and trailed. Breakthroughs were the result of endless hours of intelligence gathering and analysis. Occasionally they were ordered to act. Placing surveillance gear was pretty much at the top of that list.

The team often integrated with agents already on the ground. Still ultimately, it was the three of them who remained together as a unit mission after mission.

Without James and Rafe, Olivia would have never found genuine companionship. There were people in the agency who kept their hearts as tightly shielded as she had her whole life. In fact, covert work attracted exactly that sort of person. Strong, dedicated, cold, and ultimately empty. Missions filled them up. Analysis filled them up. Action and pain filled them up. Love? Not so much.

Olivia, Rafe, and James were teammates and friends. Well, more than friends eventually. Eight years into their partnership James and Olivia finally stopped trying to deny their feelings for each other. If Rafe had been disappointed, he never showed it. The trio had such a symbiotic relationship; somehow, the triangle still worked.

Though her charm mysteriously didn't affect Rafe, it did James. Very quickly in the team's partnership, she'd sworn never to use it on James.

She kept that promise right up until the explosion at the airport.

Finding him broken and bleeding, she pushed her charm-o-meter to the max. Holding his hands tightly, she'd told him it was going to be alright. Everything would be fine. The pain was already gone, wasn't it?

He'd nodded, surprised, the ghost of a smile on his lips.

"You're already feeling better," she'd said. "When you get out of the hospital, we're going to take a vacation. Kuai. The Hyatt Regency. At Poipu Beach. The one we love. Remember?"

He'd nodded.

"In fact, while you're in surgery, I'll make the reservations. And this time we will *not* let Rafe come."

He smiled more widely.

Rafe always showed up on vacation no matter where or when. Hers. James. Theirs. Always.

"You and me, James," she told him. "Just us. Like we talked about. Right?"

He nodded. "At last," he'd sighed. "Just us."

His smile became fixed, and she'd kissed his eyes closed.

Then the second bomb went off.

Olivia was still sitting at Café Rose when the last of the donut crowd cleared away their crumbs, cups, and trays.

She finally looked at the card.

'Joan D'Angelo, Ella Mae Gainsborough. Wardens. Monterey Widows and Orphans Dining Club.' With cell phone numbers beneath.

'Warden?' she thought. Weren't wardens kind of like sheriffs?

Why did a philanthropic dining club with delusions of magic need sheriffs?

CHAPTER TEN

SHIFTY BUSINESS

Olivia stood outside Sorrento's Italian Eatery at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday night wondering if she had lost her mind. Probably. Covert espionage was not the career choice of a normal person.

Her damn ghostly specter had shown up in Safeway on Sunday. Floating in the produce aisle between the broccoli and asparagus. Olivia had squeaked in surprise, drawing the attention of several shoppers.

She'd apologized, saying she tweaked her leg.

The ghost followed her all over the store. Stupid ghost. What kind of ghost goes to the supermarket?

To succeed in her chosen career, you needed some hiccups in your character. And she had been very successful. Perhaps, her hiccup was... magic? Or insanity.

That day at Tea and Tarot, she'd felt a connection with Ella Mae and Joan. Hell, with the whole place. Before the spiritualists showed up. It was uncannily like her feelings meeting Rafe and James for the first time. A click. A connection that had nothing to do with similarity in temperament, gender, or age.

The thought was both scary and comforting. Her charm defied logic. So did the ghost haunting her.

Hauntings were not the only reason she decided to show up. She was bored.

Bored. Bored. Bored.

Olivia had no purpose to her days. She'd been a driven girl and woman. As a foster child, she'd pushed herself to excel in school, earn scholarships, collect accolades from volunteer work. Find summer internships at college. Participate in whatever could help her succeed. Work with the agency had been driven but with a difference. After she met James and Rafe for the first time in her life, she wasn't alone.

Now James was gone and Rafe too, seemingly.

Was she being heartless? Wanting to move on?

No.

She'd been given the gift of life when James and so many others lost theirs that terrible afternoon at the airport.

Heartbreak was exhausting. She wanted to wake up and look *forward* again, not constantly back.

If it were possible.

She hoped it was.

Besides, who knew if she would ever be recovered enough – mentally and physically – to be cleared for fieldwork. She was no analyst. What could she do behind a desk?

The murder on the walking trail and Tea and Tarot gang's reaction to it had intrigued her. Olivia had not been intrigued by anything in many months.

And Olivia had resources most civilians could not call on. James was a little paranoid. Okay, really paranoid. About everything. His fears were not unfounded. As a covert operative, particularly an operative with master-level I.T skills, he knew we all had a lot to be paranoid about.

He trusted her and Rafe implicitly. She knew where he kept some of his backup laptops and encrypted phones. On her way to Monterey, she'd stopped by two of his hidey holes. At the time, it was out of sentimentality rather than need. There was so much of him in those digital devices. The way he thought, his sense of humor, even the names he chose for individual files. They were a part of him she could keep with her.

Now his backdoor black ops access could come in very handy.

Olivia didn't worry someone would swoop in and confiscate them. She sincerely doubted the agency-that-shall-not-be-named would waste valuable manpower watching her. No one cared as long as she stayed out of trouble and didn't do anything stupid.

She knew James's passwords for the laptop like he'd known hers.

Very quickly, Olivia was inside the local police database looking at the report from Saturday's murder. James had written an algorithm that searched for back doors into law enforcement websites. All she had to do was type in the city for the algorithm to go to work. This sort of access was especially valuable for research since the agency-that-shall-not-be-named mostly worked internationally. Emphasis on *mostly*. Domestic research often involves going through channels. James hated going through channels.

It didn't take long for James's program to creep unseen into the local law enforcement databases. The victim's name was Justin Morgan Henderson. Address in El Segundo, California.

So, not from this area.

Justin Henderson owned Henderson Contracting, a small building firm with a full-time staff of four, including his wife.

He had been a missing person case opened three years ago by his wife, Marion Henderson. Also, of El Segundo.

The police had tracked his whereabouts for most of the day he disappeared through his work crew and with CCTV. His last known sighting was eight-thirty in the evening outside Walgreens drugstore on Alvarado Avenue in Old Monterey.

His car was discovered parked a block away on Calle Principal.

No immediate cause of death had been determined. It would take a couple of days for that to be posted probably. Unlike the instant gratification of television, real police work moved at a measured pace.

According to his wife's statement, Justin's contracting firm was hired to work on a major renovation to a house and adjacent property in Pebble Beach by Samuel Beckett acting for the owner, Charlotte Aston-Grey.

Mrs. Henderson said her husband had been told to hire his work crew exclusively from Southern California. No one local on the Central Coast was to be contracted. Transportation and lodging would be paid for by the home's owner.

Mrs. Henderson thought that was odd and Olivia agreed. Why would you bring in outsiders? The expense doubled.

Well, you would if you had secrets.

Secret vaults.

A Safe Room.

She couldn't really think of anything else. Beside people talk. A few hundred miles wasn't going to make much of a difference.

Skipping forward and scanning for a few keywords she uncovered another interesting fact. One that could have a direct bearing on keeping secrets.

The police discovered undocumented workers made up most of the labor crew on the project. This interesting bit of information emerged during questioning of Ralph Lincoln, Henderson's crew boss. He'd been the last person to interact with Henderson. Understandably, police had focused on his possible involvement.

The workers were paid off their last day and scampered away. No transportation had been arranged to take them back south on a job that lasted nearly eight months.

Mr. Henderson disappeared the day the work was completed.

Curiouser and curiouser as Alice said in Wonderland.

Nowhere in the report was there any mention of calligraphy on the body. Nor in the photos from the scene. The autopsy photos weren't up yet.

How was that possible? She'd clearly seen the scrolling black script covering him literally from head to toe.

The owner of the Pebble Beach house Henderson had renovated, Charlotte Aston-Grey, was a British Citizen. She also owned the adjacent property. Ms. Aston-Grey had not been in the United States during the renovations and had not met Mr. Henderson in person.

The police carried out their due diligence and confirmed Ms. Aston-Grey did not leave Great Britain at that time nor did she currently live in the Pebble Beach House. According to the police report Samuel and Amanda Beckett leased the property from Ms. Aston-Grey.

Olivia did some digging next trying on Saint Fleur Joan. The house where the body was found belonged to Alistair St. Fleur. There was virtually nothing about him online. No Social Media presence at all. All she could find were a few public records such as the value of the house, etc. That alone made him suspicious. Everyone except clever criminals had a digital footprint.

Olivia programmed an alert with various keywords to notify her when files were uploaded or updated by the police.

James would be so proud she was using the skills he had honed.

Smiling, she put the information she had on a flash drive and printed out a couple of copies of the police report. Everything she'd found was in her cross-body bag as she walked into Sorrento's to see what this mysterious Monterey Widows and Orphans Dining Club was about.

Olivia blinked at the darkened interior of the restaurant trying to get her eyes to focus. The place was two blocks up from Cannery Row, with Foam Street at its back and Lighthouse Avenue one block beyond. They had their own parking lot for which Olivia was grateful. Parking, she had discovered in her short sojourn here in Monterey, needed planning, especially with her leg. This was a tourist town. Parking was always an issue. Even on weekdays.

She quickly recognized Joan and Ella Mae's solid forms. They both exchanged broad smiles before turning the wattage on Olivia.

Ella was wearing a geometric pattern tunic in orange, purple, and green with three-quarter length sleeves over loose green pleated pants. A necklace of crystals in matching colors hung on a long gold chain anchored firmly between her breasts.

Joan wore a long pale pink cardigan over a pink cotton blouse and navy-blue trousers. A choker of what Olivia thought were lapis lazuli beads around her neck.

"You came!" they said in unison.

Ella Mae thrust out her hand to give Olivia's a vigorous shake.

"We are so pleased," said Joan taking her hand next.

Olivia felt a jolt of energy from the touch of both women. Not unpleasant. Sort of like the espresso kicking in on a morning when you're feeling a bit low. Suddenly things don't seem so bad.

"I was curious," Olivia said honestly. "Also, I have some information on your body on the lawn."

"How?" Ella Mae asked.

"Later," said Joan giving her friend's arm a squeeze. "More important matters at hand."

Ella Mae's expression seemed to say, 'More important how?' but she said nothing.

"Do you want to take her in, or shall I?" Joan asked.

"You go. I'll do door duty." Ella Mae drew herself up to her full height and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Do you get gate crashers?" Olivia asked as she walked with Joan past the bar into the dining room.

"Occasionally," she conceded. "Having the *gift* doesn't mean they automatically become a member of the Dining Club."

"Why not?" Olivia purposely ignored the 'gift' part of the explanation.

"As the name implies, we were created to help those who far too often fall between the cracks. Expressly, widows and orphans."

"But with the 'gift.'" Olivia put air quotes around the word.

Joan smiled as if sensing her skepticism. "Not at first and not always. Our secondary purpose came out gradually. We can talk more about the history later. First, why don't you help yourself to a drink."

She gestured to a buffet table with bottles of red and white wine, beer, soft drinks, bottled water, and pitchers of juice or maybe cocktails.

The wine was from Goode Cellars. Was Isabelle Goode a member?

As if hearing her question, the woman herself walked over.

She was dressed in a long, flowy cotton dress of taupe with a scattering of orange poppies across it. Her gray hair pulled up in a tidy bun, her fringe of bangs almost to her eyes. A pair of glasses hung around her neck on a sparkly jeweled chain. No make-up. She didn't need it, Olivia thought. The lines on her strong face added character. Why disguise that?

"Hello, how wonderful you came."

Shaking her hand, Olivia felt the same pleasant resonance of energy buzz through her fingers and arm.

Joan excused herself, rejoining Ella Mae at the door.

"I didn't know you were a member," Olivia started to say, then laughed at herself. "What am I saying? I don't know anyone!"

Isabelle gave an easy laugh and gestured at the table. “What can I get you?”

“Oh, um, let’s see. Some white wine would be very nice.”

“I have a lovely non-oak Sauvignon Blanc or sparkling Blanc de Blanc.”

“Sauvignon, please. I actually like mine non-oak aged. I find it lighter in flavor.” She flushed a little remembering she was talking to the winemaker herself.

“Very true,” said Isabelle handing Olivia a generous pour in a large glass. “California used to be all about oak. Even now, people will debate the impact of oak and other woods on the flavor of their wines. They’ll say, ‘wine aged in oak tastes more expensive.’ What does that even mean? I can get rather eloquent on the subject myself. But for the Sauvignon? I prefer steel for a slightly crisper feeling on the tongue.”

Isabelle excused herself to answer a wave from the barman.

Sipping her most excellent chilled wine, Olivia looked around the restaurant.

It was decidedly old-school. Dark heavy wooden tables and chairs. Wall-to-wall carpet in tight Persian-style patterns and colors. Large flower arrangements near the entrance. Bud vases with tiny arrangements on each table. The bar was set higher than the dining room floor by several steps. Smaller copies of the chairs and tables in the dining room lined a wooden balustrade with low-backed leather upholstered stools at the bar. A large mirror reflected the dining room and bottles of liquor. Old school American dining décor, Olivia thought. An esthetic that stretched from coast to coast, settling into a middle-aged spread in the Midwest.

Smaller dining rooms branched off a hallway on the right. Olivia walked over for a better idea of the restaurant’s layout, telling herself she was *not* looking for alternate escape routes. That would be paranoid, and she was not paranoid. Most women did this, didn’t they?

The two intimate dining rooms were closed spaces. No secondary escape routes. A clearly marked fire door in the hall on the left. The hallway ended at the entrance to a lovely, enclosed glass atrium holding perhaps twenty tables. One fire door stood at the far end. The glass looked like it could be broken with a chair if need be.

Not that there would be any need, she reminded herself. This was not Kiev or Karachi.

Returning to the main dining room she checked the location of the bathrooms. A narrow staircase led downstairs. No escape there. The swinging doors to the kitchen were hidden behind a decorative carved screen of flowers and birds. There would be a service entrance through the doors. Satisfied she understood the layout and could escape if she had to, not that she was thinking about that, she sipped her wine and people-watched.

A whiteboard had been set up near the drink table.

Men and women wandered in from the entrance. Greeting each other with hugs and handshakes. All ages from mid-twenties to a couple of elderly folks leaning on walking canes. The ratio of women and men seemed skewed a little towards women.

Olivia saw Edgar come in. He was dressed in trousers and a dapper navy sports jacket. With a wave, he squeezed through the growing crowd to her side.

“Well, hello. So glad you decided to come.” His smile was wide and generous. Olivia couldn’t help but smile back.

“Not sure why I’m here.”

“Meant to be.” He said it with a straight face sounding completely sincere.

“What’s the timetable for the meeting?”

“Drinks,” he pointed to her glass. “Then sit down for dinner. Oh, speaking of. Come here.”

Taking her elbow, he guided her to a table. “Every seat has a number. Like this is No. 9. After picking your seat, go to Lorenzo, the barman. He has the menu. Put your number next to the entrée you want.”

“Like at some of the pubs in London,” Olivia declared. They had a similar system. Pick your table number, order, pay at the bar, and the server brings the food.

“Oh, I like London,” Edgar declared. “My partner and I had our honeymoon there. Course, we couldn’t call it that back in the day.”

He gave her a significant look.

She raised her eyebrows, not sure if she understood.

“With my husband...”

“Ah, got it. I love England, too.”

She checked the position of the table he’d chosen and pointed one table over.

“Would you mind if I sat over here at sixteen?”

Seat sixteen faced the entrance with the kitchen on the right, the wall at her back, and a view of the hallway leading to the other parts of the restaurant.

“Sure. Anywhere you want.”

She went to the bar to look over the menu.

The bartender held out his hand, “Lorenzo,” he said smiling.

Californians were sure friendly.

“Olivia,” she said, shaking his hand.

Everyone seemed to be shaking hands.

The menu she saw immediately was ‘Wow.’ Absolutely wow. When they said Dining Club, they meant it. Calamari Steak, local Sea Bass with herbs, and Scallops in lemon butter started the list of entrees. For meat eaters, there was Skirt Steak with a Ponzu sauce and grated white radish or Seared Pork

Chops marinated in a coffee and Chinese Five-Spice powder rub. Several vegetarian options were included. Olivia didn't bother to read those. She was not a vegetarian.

Each entrée came with choices of vegetables, potatoes, rice, etc., etc.

Lorenzo nodded his approval over her choice of the calamari steak for her entrée with a double order of mashed potatoes.

“Calamari is one of Chef's specialties. You will not be disappointed. May I suggest the basil tomato soup as the starter? I know it sounds boring. Believe me, it is not. A hint of lime and cilantro transforms the flavor to sublime.”

Olivia gave him a thumb's up. “Sublime sounds good.”

“Excellent.”

She gave him an appraising look. “You're not the bartender, are you? Despite your position behind the bar.”

“Very perceptive. I am co-owner along with Chef.”

“And a member of the Dining Club?”

“Oh yes. We all are. Chef and I, and a few others, are serious about the word ‘dining’ in the Club's title.”

Thanking him, she carefully maneuvered down the four steps to the dining room floor. Her leg brace made ascending and descending stairs awkward. Sipping her wine, she leaned against the bar balustrade, taking the weight off her leg. In normal agent mode, she would already be assessing threat levels. Scanning every face in the crowd. Watching newcomers as they entered. Olivia color-coded her threat levels. Like little lighted bars in a video game above each person's head. Red, orange, yellow, green, and blue. High risk; possible risk; medium risk; little risk, no risk. Generally, the only things getting blue were toddlers or small dogs.

Except for Chihuahuas. Chihuahuas were always red because, you know, Chihuahuas. Fifty percent shiver, fifty percent fury.

Tonight, she thought initiating her risk assessment habit really would verge on paranoia. No one here gave off even a hint of a dangerous buzz. Using her sight-reading abilities, she observed nothing but open postures, welcoming expressions, and gestures, coupled with body-forward stances indicating genuine interest in what the other person was saying.

Even as she relaxed, a prickling along her neck had her scanning the room. Someone was watching her.

By the drinks table, three people faced in Olivia's direction. An Asian man and woman. A couple, Olivia thought, judging by their close body language. Next to them stood a small plump woman with curly red hair.

Meeting her gaze, the red-haired woman smiled and all three trooped over to Olivia.

‘Well,’ Olivia thought, ‘this is a social club.’ She’d have to expect people to be social.

The red-haired woman gave her a finger wave. “Are you Olivia?”

Surprised, Olivia acknowledged she was.

“We’re not telepathic,” she gestured around the room, laughing, “though around here, I wouldn’t be surprised if you thought that.”

The Asian couple laughed with her.

“I’m Carol Jones.”

“Lilly and Ryan Lee,” said the other woman with a gesture toward the man.

They all beamed at her as Olivia stared cluelessly back at them.

“And that would mean...” she led with at last.

“You met the boys,” said Ryan. “Alex is ours. Jeff is Carol’s.”

“The donut pop-up?” Olivia understood. “Of course. Nice boys.”

“They couldn’t stop talking about you,” said Carol.

Lilly nodded in agreement. “Olivia saw the rainbow lady. Rainbow Lady’s dogs loved Olivia. Olivia recognizes *those* languages,” she waggled her eyebrows. “Olivia saw the card. Honestly, you quite impressed them.”

Olivia was torn between being appalled and gratified.

“Don’t forget Madame Valencia took an instant dislike to her,” said Ryan Lee. “Always points for that.”

They all chuckled.

“Are the boys not here tonight?” she asked, trying to cover her shock at being discussed by teenage boys and their parents.

“This is adults only,” said Carol. “The Dining Club has family events, of course.”

“Of course,” echoed Olivia.

“But tonight is official club business,” she finished.

“Oh look,” Lilly pointed, “There’s Brianna and her partner. We need to see if they have that snag in the logistics chain worked out. We’re in fish,” she said in an aside to Olivia.

“Fish,” repeated Olivia.

The trio hurried away, calling out to a statuesque woman in a trim pantsuit with short brown hair buzzed at the sides.

“Fish. Okay.”

People gradually settled into their chosen places. Olivia returned to Number Sixteen to find herself seated between two enormous people. She was literally dwarfed by their size. They introduced themselves as Victor and Victoria Morales. Brother and sister.

The siblings, probably in their late twenties, proved to be lively dinner companions. Both worked with Isabella at Goode Winery.

‘Probably juggling wine barrels by hand,’ Olivia thought.

They asked what brought her to Monterey. Keeping it simple, she said she was recovering from an injury. Politely, they did not press her for more information. In fact, no one she had met so far, including Ella Mae and Joan, quizzed her about her past.

She asked them if they knew the history of the Dining Club.

“You mean you haven’t gotten the indoctrination talk?” Victoria feigned shock.

“Indoctrination?” Little zings of apprehension zipped up and down her arms.

“Stop it, Victoria,” said Victor. “You scared her. The Dining Club has an interesting history. I’ll give you the short version.”

Victor described Monterey in the farming and fishing days of the 1890s. Monterey’s main street was Alvarado. Dirt, of course. Busy seaport. Farmlands in the Salinas Valley and on the outskirts of Monterey.

Chinese and Japanese immigrant settlements dotted the coast. Locally, the Chinese mainly stuck to fishing, with a village perched precariously on the shore in Pacific Grove. Japanese immigrants worked in both fishing and farming.

Wheat had been a staple of many farms until Claus Spreckels’ vision to build a sugar refining factory slowly transformed the area. He built his sugar factory in 1881, creating the little factory town of Spreckels on the edge of Salinas. After many false starts, trials, and tribulations, sugar beets became a staple cash crop from Salinas to King City.

Leticia Allen was a young mother and farmer. She and her husband grew neither wheat nor sugar beets. Instead, they supplied the many trading vessels docked in bustling Monterey Harbor with fruit and vegetables. After her husband Leonard died of tetanus, leaving her with a baby and a toddler, things could have gone very badly. But they didn’t. Letty had an uncanny gift for growing things.

Victor winked broadly as he said this.

Olivia nodded with a knowing expression though she had no idea what he was alluding to.

Leticia was also a helluva’ presence in her own right. Taking the buckboard to Monterey with the baby in a sling and the toddler holding onto her trouser leg, she confronted ship stewards, ready to cancel the farm’s contracts. Appealing to their bottom line; offering new deals at cheaper rates than the competition. If she didn’t deliver to the pound, they didn’t have to pay her.

Leticia filled those orders and got new ones.

Farms need farm workers. At first, all Leticia could promise local farm workers was room and board. For new Japanese immigrant Jun Shimazaki, that was the best offer he'd gotten since getting off the boat. He had been a farmer near Hiroshima and was excellent at coaxing a lot from a little land.

Leticia expanded the farm. She bought land others thought was too rocky or hard to cultivate and made it thrive. And she made friends.

Rodrigo Fernandez had a carting business. Ferrying supplies to and from the farms and port to the railroad stations in Monterey and Salinas was a good business. He started out as an orphan Mexican boy with one cart and a donkey. By the time he was twenty-five, he had the same number of carts as his age. He approached Leticia with a deal to transport vegetables. They hit it off instantly.

Through Rodrigo, Leticia met Ai Mee Ying. A Chinese widow.

The history of the Chinese in the Monterey area was not a happy one. Prejudice and jealousy were rampant, as it was all over the West Coast. They were harassed, murdered, burned out, and legislated against. The Chinese Exclusion Act wasn't repealed until 1943. America was not an easy place for Asian immigrants.

Ai Mee Ying lost her husband to hate. There were few job opportunities for a Chinese mother of three children. Yet she stayed on. What else could she do? She had her husband's small fishing boat. As Hakka, Ai Mee had been raised on the water before coming to America. She would not be forced out.

It would be a long time before Calamari appeared on happy hour menus in the U.S. But dried squid was a cash crop in the Far East, as good as gold. Abalone, too. Something the local Chinese fisherman capitalized on for income. Ai Mee caught and dried squid and abalone. Sailing out to the trading ships, she offered it to them directly.

Then she lost her home. The prosperous Chinese fishing village of Pacific Grove mysteriously burned to ashes in 1906. Honestly, there was no mystery about it. Jealous fishermen, immigrants originally themselves, wanted to claim the Chinese fishing grounds and the new lucrative business of abalone and dried squid they had successfully pioneered. And they did. The Chinese immigrant fishing industry never really recovered.

Ai Mee and her children lived on the boat and kept fishing. No matter where the bigger boats pushed her, Ai Mee found fish. Her nets were always full.

Selling on land was a different matter altogether than selling to ships on the water. She couldn't transport her fish far from the docks, and prejudice kept trying to shut her out of local sales.

Rodrigo helped change that. The man recognized a quality product. He would buy her fish, fill up his carts with fish and ice and take them to the Southern Pacific train station for sale to towns in the valley and along the coast. He also sent some of his Carters to stand on the pier to make sure Ai Mee wasn't

harassed by the other fisherman as her children helped her unload. A Carter in those days was a big man who could toss full barrels of fish. After a few brawls, the other fishermen left the Ying family alone.

Over in the valley, Jun Shimazaki was almost as gifted at growing things as Leticia. Within a few years, he went from plowing fields to farm manager and eventually a full partner in the business.

They were making money, and Leticia wanted to do something with her success. After conferring with her closest friends: Jun, Rodrigo, and Ai Mee, they rented a hall in town. They took out an ad in the local paper and put flyers up announcing: The Monterey Widows and Orphans Dining Club. Monthly meetings. Please join us for dinner and conversation. Food and Drink provided by the Club. Widows and Orphans welcome all others need not apply.

She did not include widowers because then, as now, men always have an economic and physical advantage over women.

Leticia's talents didn't lie solely in growing plants. The Monterey Widows and Orphans Dining Club was a success. Within a year, it took on a life of its own. Friendships blossomed, support among the group thrived and spread. No one had taken an interest in these people, except maybe the bible thumpers who always had their own agenda. It was an equal opportunity club back when the words 'ethnic diversity' did not exist.

The group held suppers twice a month for hungry widows and orphans. Also, sometimes just the hungry. A full meal followed by talks on employment and education. A weekly reading club soon took shape to teach those who hadn't had schooling their letters and elementary math skills. Many of the orphans in the beginning were children, already working as adults to feed themselves or their siblings. A pantry helped tide over hungry members between the suppers.

Leticia and her friends expanded their businesses. Ai Mee bought another fishing boat and then another. Her daughter captained one, her son the other, while the youngest boy manned the business office.

Victor pointed to Lilly Lee. "She's a direct descendent of Ai Mee Ying. Nobody knows fish like Lilly Lee. Her son has the same gift."

"What about her husband?" Olivia asked.

"He has a way with water and currents. Very handy in their line of work."

Rodrigo went into transport and logistics as the world mechanized, leaving horses and carts behind. He built warehouses with cold storage to keep fish or meat fresh for transport.

Together they or their sons, daughters, or partners invested in canning fish. They also wisely divested themselves of that business before the California sardine industry crashed in the 1940s.

Together, the original and new members brought in young orphans, teaching them agriculture, fishing, canning, and business management. Orphans grew into adults. Some stayed, others left. But they always remembered the Monterey Widows and Orphans Dining Club.

Eventually, the Dining Club was well enough funded to evolve into more comprehensive philanthropic efforts.

“Is everyone a widow or an orphan?” Olivia asked.

“New members are. That’s the rule. However, there are a lot of legacy members, as you can imagine. The club’s been around for more than a century.”