

"Oh, boy." Officer Stacey Wilbur keyed her radio and requested assistance, quickly describing the single vehicle accident in front of her.

Working the four-to-midnight shift, Stacey had been returning from a burglary call at a secluded ranch located far into the foothills that backed the community of Rocky Bluff. When she maneuvered her police unit around a sharp corner, she came upon the light green Toyota smashed into the trunk of a massive oak tree.

It was obvious the accident had happened recently. Though not a busy road, there were enough homes and ranches nestled in the valleys for someone to have come upon the scene if it occurred much before her arrival.

Hoping for survivors, Stacey shined her flashlight beam in the open driver's window. Squashed against the bent steering wheel was the woman driver. Blood splattered the sea foam green seat and the floor of the car. The puddling blood hadn't congealed. The speedometer needle pointed to 75. Steam erupted from

the radiator.

An abundance of dark hair, wet with blood, covered the victim's face. Though Stacey knew there wouldn't be any, she reached through the window to feel for a pulse on the woman's neck. Nothing.

Stacey put her hand on the hood of the car. As she'd expected it was warm. Quickly, she went over a check-list in her mind. There were no witnesses to question. The driver was dead. There was not enough traffic on the country road at that hour to worry about.

Despite the unrelenting Santa Ana winds that had been blowing down the canyons for the last two days, there didn't seem to be any danger of fire. Usually ocean breezes kept the southern California beach town cool, but they didn't have a chance against the power of the seasonal blast coming from the deserts.

Going back to her unit, Stacey called in the license number on the plates. While she waited for the information, she suspected this was more than an accident.

Using her cell phone, she dialed Doug Milligan's home number. A homicide detective, he was also a special friend of Stacey's. If they could find a way to spend more time together, their relationship might develop into more than a friendship. She often reflected on how wonderful it felt the few times she had been in his arms.

She should call the duty sergeant, but she could do that after she talked to Doug.

He answered on the first ring. "Milligan."

"Hi, it's Stacey."

His voice immediately softened. "Aren't you working tonight?"

"Yes, that's why I'm calling you. I'm at the scene of an accident, but it looks like it might be more than that."

"Tell me where you are and what you've found."

She gave him a quick description, ending with, "...there's blood on the seat of the car and the floor."

He interrupted. "Do you know who it is?"

"No, I can't see her face and I haven't touched anything except when I tried for a pulse."

"I'll be there in a few minutes," Doug said.

"Do you want me to call the sergeant?"

"Who's on tonight?"

"Abel Navarro."

"No, I'll do it. Don't let anyone touch anything."

Stacey heard the approaching wail of sirens.

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Doug dressed quickly. It never failed. No sooner had he put his head down on the pillow when the phone rang summoning him to a suspicious death. No one ever seemed to die under questionable circumstances in the day time. Rather than an annoyance, the call charged his adrenalin—and since it came from Stacey, he was eager to go.

A vision of her came into his mind, bringing a smile to his lips. Though he'd known Stacey since she'd started on the Rocky Bluff Police Department, he hadn't become attracted to her until she'd helped him solve three murder cases. He'd always admired her ability to defuse tense situations and to talk the toughest suspects into handcuffs. When he'd expressed his admiration, she'd shrugged off the praise with, "Hey, I know that almost everyone I come up against will be bigger than me, that's why I have to out-think them."

As he noticed how her short, gleaming honey-colored hair curled around her ears and at the back of her slim neck, and how her deceiving femininity and vulnerability contrasted with her internal toughness, it wasn't long before his admiration turned into something more. Though not glamorous like Doug's former wife, Stacey had wonderful characteristics Kerrie lacked. Stacey loved law enforcement almost as much as he did.

Unfortunately they worked different shifts, and

coupled with Stacey's devotion to her five-year-old son, they hadn't had much time to develop a relationship, even though he knew the attraction was mutual. He had to take some of the blame; his dating skills were pretty rusty. Since his divorce, his job had taken up the major part of his life, and if he were being honest, before the divorce too.

Doug wet-combed his thick dark hair, strapped on his shoulder holster, fastened his badge to his belt, and hurried down the uncarpeted stairs of his Victorian home trying not to clatter and wake his renter, fellow police officer, Gordon Butler.

Using his cell, Doug called Navarro. Newly promoted to sergeant, Abel didn't seem disturbed that Stacey by-passed him to report the suspected homicide to Doug.

Abel's response was a quick, "I'll meet you out there."

Doug stashed the cell and started his vintage MG.

* * *

Stacey had done a good job securing the scene. She had crime tape surrounding a large area. Far enough away not to cover any skid marks or other evidence, a fire truck was parked, its personnel leaning against it.

Hurrying toward Doug, the wind whipped Stacey's hair and snatched at her uniform. "The ambulance has been and gone. No one has touched anything. The victim was an obvious code blue. I told the firemen they could leave too, but they're worried this wind might kick up a spark."

"Did you find out who the car belongs to?"

"Yes, I called it in. The vic may be someone I sort of know. The car is registered to Reverend Paul Cookmeyer and his wife Mallory. I think the victim is

Mrs. Cookmeyer. I can't be sure because I haven't see her face, but the hair is the right color and the build right."

Doug frowned, the name was familiar, but he couldn't place it. There were lots of churches in Rocky Bluff and he didn't attend any of them, not that he had anything against formal religion, there just wasn't enough time to squeeze anything else in.

"Tell me what you know about the Cookmeyers," he said, walking toward the driver's door of the Toyota. The left front fender was embedded into the unyielding trunk of the oak.

"He's the minister of Rocky Bluff Community Church." Stacey hurried along beside him. "That's the church my folks and little boy attend. Me too when I get a chance, which isn't often, I'm afraid."

"The big church on the bluff." Doug bent over and shined his pen light inside the car. As Stacey had described, blood splattered the seat and the floor.

A police unit drove up and braked to a squeaking stop on the other side of the fire truck. Without looking, Doug knew it was Abel.

Moving his flashlight beam back and forth, Doug searched in vain for footprints or anything else suspicious. It hadn't rained all summer so the ground was hard and dry. Golden brown, the weeds and grass crunched underfoot. Explosive chaparral covered the hillsides. No wonder the firemen waited.

Again, Doug peered inside the window at the victim. Blood matted dark hair that hid the face. The slim body was clothed in a light-weight beige jacket of expensive material, matching skirt hiked up to reveal tan legs and feet in high-heeled sandals.

"What've you got so far?" Abel approached Doug. "Hi, Stacey."

She nodded.

"It didn't happen long ago. The engine is warm. The body isn't in rigor. Stacey, tell him who you think it is," Doug said.

When she did, Abel lifted his straight black eyebrows and frowned. "Tough break. I've notified the coroner's office, are you ready for them?"

"Sure."

Abel asked, "What's the story here?"

"Looks like an accident, but won't know for sure until the coroner takes a look at the body."

"I didn't spot any skid marks," Abel said.

Doug nodded. "Me either. While we're waiting for the coroner, lets get some photos and see what else we can learn." Doug flipped open his notebook and began jotting notes.

Abel went back to his unit for a camera.

By the time the coroner's van arrived, photographs of the vehicle had been taken from every angle possible, along with what shots they could get of the victim without touching anything. Fingerprints had been collected from all logical outside surfaces of the Toyota, and some that weren't so logical, and attached to cards with the locations noted.

Stacey and Doug had combed the general area searching for anything that might be classified as evidence. The rearview mirror was set for a woman the size of the victim. The only substantial item was a snake skin purse on the floor of the front seat. That too would be collected by the coroner and taken to his office, to be turned over to the detectives later.

"The lady seems to have expensive clothes for a preacher's wife," Doug noted.

"Reverend Cookmeyer is no ordinary preacher," Stacey said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the Rocky Bluff Community Church brings in a lot of money, Cookmeyer has a substantial salary. He and his wife always wear the latest fashions. The church members are proud of the way they look."

Before she could continue, Eliseo Alvarado, a deputy coroner, arrived. "More than a traffic accident, you think?" A tiny gnome-like fellow with olive skin, and

long, thin black hair, he was known for his gallows humor.

"Possibly. Waiting for your opinion, of course." Doug pointed to the body.

All three of the police officers watched as the coroner slipped on latex gloves and began his work. When he brushed the blood-matted hair away from the victim's face, he said, "Oh, ho, what do we have here?" He'd exposed a small wound to her right temple with visible tattooing. "The victim was shot at close range with a small caliber gun."

"I thought it might be something like that." Doug shifted his weight, and scribbled in his notebook.

Before the coroner's deputy and his assistant took the body away, the coroner retrieved the woman's purse. Inside the wallet was her driver's license with her photograph and name. Mallory Cookmeyer.

"Let's notify the husband and find out if he knew where his wife was going this evening," Doug said. Sometimes the coroner made the death notification, at others it was the police department.

"Fine with me."

Doug glanced at Stacey. "You up to it?"

Stacey made a face. "I had a feeling you were going to give me the job."

"If you really don't want to..."

She touched his chest. "No, of course I'll do it."

"You'll need to find out if he knows where his wife was supposed to be. What her plans for the evening were. And pay close attention to his reaction to the news. Learn whatever else you can, and let him know that we'll want to talk to him tomorrow.

"Abel and I will finish here. I'll be at the station when you're done."

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Stacey knew it was important for her to find out as much as possible from Reverend Cookmeyer. Whenever a woman was murdered, the husband and/or boyfriend became the first suspect. But she couldn't imagine Cookmeyer being a murderer, after all he was a man of the cloth. She laughed to herself. It wouldn't be the first time a preacher broke the law—man's or God's. Still, it didn't seem likely.

She'd talk to her folks and find out what they knew about Cookmeyer, his marriage, and his past.

The well-lit, flag-stone path curved its way through the lush green lawn toward the brick terrace leading to the white double-doors of the Cookmeyers' large Cape Cod style home located on the bluffs and about three-blocks from their church. Stacey didn't know if the luxurious home actually belonged to the Cookmeyers or was owned by the church. That was something else she'd have to ask her parents.

She pressed the doorbell and heard the sound of chimes echoing inside. She waited a few minutes before setting them ringing again. It was at least five more minutes before she heard movement on the other side of the door. Finally, it opened slowly.

Cookmeyer, though merely in his early forties, had a thick shock of white hair which at the moment was disarrayed. His tall, lean body was wrapped in a dark blue terry robe with a gold crest. He had on navy-and-white striped silk pajamas, and his feet were bare. It appeared Stacey had awakened him.

He blinked his blue eyes at her, a puzzled expression on his un-lined deeply tanned face. "Yes? Don't I know you?"

"Yes, sir. I'm Officer Wilbur. I come to your church sometimes, and my folks Clara and Clyde Osborne are members."

He smiled broadly, and extended his hand. "Yes, yes, of course. Stacey, isn't it?"

She was surprised he remembered her name. The church had three Sunday morning services because of its

large membership. "Yes, sir."

The smile disappeared. "What is it? Why are you here? You have some bad news?"

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid I do. May I come in?"

He opened the door wider. "Certainly." He led the way through a tiled entry filled with plants, into a darkened living room. He switched on a lamp, revealing a spacious area furnished with an intriguing mix of antiques and modern furniture, the overall color scheme a blend of pale greens, yellows and off-white. "Have a seat, please." He pointed to a large, overstuffed circular couch that faced the white marble fireplace.

He absently backed toward a nearby wing-back chair. "This isn't about Mallory, is it?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

But before she could say anything more, he said, "Where is she? Is she okay?"

There was no gentle way to deliver the news. "No, sir, I'm sorry to have to tell you, but your wife Mallory is dead."

"Dead? Was she in an accident?" He took another step backwards as though he'd received a physical blow and sank into the chair. "How? What happened?"

"There was an accident, but I'm afraid there's more to it than that."

"I don't understand. What do you mean, more to it?" He blinked his eyes several times and his forehead furrowed. His reaction wasn't unusual. It often took awhile for such bad news to sink in.

"There's reason to believe your wife was murdered."

"Murdered? I don't understand."

"Mrs. Cookmeyer was shot."

Cookmeyer blinked and his mouth dropped open. "Oh, my dear God. Who would do such a thing?"

"Sir, we don't know yet. Perhaps you can help us. Did you know your wife's plans for this evening?"

He shook his head, running his fingers through his thick mane. "I can't think. I'm sure she must have

mentioned it, but I left the house before seven. I went to the church to practice my sermon, and she was still home."

"Maybe it will come to you later. Detective Milligan will want to talk to you tomorrow. Perhaps you'll remember by then. Sir, is there someone I can call for you? You should have someone here with you."

Tears flooded his eyes. "Mallory, gone, I can't believe it." He shook his head again. "Isn't it funny, I've often had the role of the consoler. Now that I'm on the other end, I can't even think what I should do."

"Is there a family member or a friend who is particularly close to you? Someone who can come over and stay? Give you a hand?"

"What will I do about church tomorrow? I can't possibly preach a sermon."

"That's why you need someone to help you solve these problems. Who can I call?"

He stood and began pacing the floor. "Mallory's dead...murdered that's all I can think about."

Stacey got to her feet. "I know how hard this is. What about your secretary? Wouldn't she know who to get in touch with?"

He halted. "Oh, good idea. Katherine will know what to do."

"What's her number?"

"Oh, dear, I can't think."

"Tell me her name, I'll ask information."

"It's Katherine Danfelt. Her number is the first one on the list by the phone in the kitchen."

Everything was spotless in the house. The kitchen was ivory with splashes of blue and green. She found the phone on the tile counter, a memo pad with names and numbers beside it. Despite the lateness of the hour, the call was answered on the first ring.

"Ms. Danfelt, this is Officer Wilbur of the Rocky Bluff Police Department, and I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"Oh, dear, what is it?"

"Mrs. Cookmeyer has been murdered."

But before Stacey could say more, the secretary gasped, and blurted, "Oh, no, the reverend killed his wife."