

CHAPTER 1

CINDY THOMAS WAS tuned in to her police scanner as she drove through the Friday-morning rush to her job at the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

For the last fifteen minutes there'd been nothing but routine calls back and forth between dispatch and patrol cars. Then something happened.

The Whistler TRX-1 scanner went crazy with static and cross talk. It was as though a main switch had been thrown wide open. Codes in the four hundreds jammed the channel. She knew them all: 406, officer needs emergency help; 408, send ambulance; 410, requested assistance responding.

Cindy was an investigative journalist, top dog on the crime beat. Her assistance was definitely not requested, but she was responding anyway. Tips didn't get hotter than ones that came right off the scanner.

The location of the reported shooting was a Taco King

on Duboce Avenue. Cindy took a right off Otis Street and headed toward the Duboce Triangle, near the center of San Francisco between the Mission, the Castro, and the Lower Haight.

With the sirens from the patrol cars ahead and the ambulance wailing and honking from behind, she sure didn't need the street number. She pulled over to the side of the road, and once the emergency medical bus had passed her, she drafted behind it, pedal to the floor and never mind the speed limit.

The ambulance braked at the entrance to the Taco King at the intersection of Duboce Avenue and Guerrero Street. Cruisers had blocked off three lanes of the four-lane street, and uniformed officers were already detouring traffic. People were running away from the scene, screaming, terrified.

Cindy left her Honda at the curb and jogged a half block, reaching the Taco King in time to see two paramedics loading a stretcher into the back of the bus. She tried to get the attention of one of them, but he elbowed her out of his way.

“Step aside, miss.”

Cindy watched through the open rear doors. The paramedic ripped open the victim's shirt, yelled, “Clear,” and applied the paddles. The body jumped and then doors slammed and the ambulance tore off south on Guerrero, toward Metro Hospital.

Police tape had been stretched across three of the four lanes, keeping bystanders from entering the parking lot and the restaurant. At the tape stood a uniformed cop—Al Sawyer—a friend of Cindy's live-in love, homicide inspector Rich Conklin.

She walked up to Sawyer with her notebook in hand, greeted him, and said, “Al, what the hell happened here?”

“Oh, hey, Cindy. If you hang on, someone will come out and make an announcement to the press.”

She growled at him.

He laughed.

“I heard you were a pit bull, but you don’t look the part.” She wore blond curls, with a rhinestone-studded clip to discipline them, and had determination in her big blue eyes. That was how she looked, no manipulation intended. Still.

“Al. Look. I’m only asking for what everyone inside and outside the Taco King saw and heard. Gotta be forty witnesses, right? Just confirm that and give me a detail or two, okay? I’ll write, ‘Anonymous police source told this reporter.’ Like that.”

“I’ll tell you this much,” Sawyer said. “A guy was shot through the windshield of that SUV over there.”

Sawyer pointed to a silver late-model Porsche Cayenne.

“His wife was sitting next to him. I heard she’s pregnant. She wasn’t hit and didn’t see the shooter. That’s unverified, Cindy. Wife’s inside the squad car that’s moving out of the lot over there. And now you owe me. Big time. Give me a minute to think so I don’t blow my three wishes.”

Cindy didn’t give him the minute, instead asking, “The victim’s name? Did *anyone* see the shooter?”

“You’re pushing it, Cindy.”

“Well. My pit-bull reputation is at stake.”

He grinned at her, then said, “Can you see the SUV?”

“I see it.”

“Take a picture of the SUV’s back window.”

“All right, Al, I sure will.”

Sawyer said, “Here’s your scoop: the victim is almost famous. If he dies, it’s going to be big news.”

CHAPTER 2

SAWYER SHOOK HIS finger at Cindy, a friendly warning.

Cindy mouthed, “Thank you,” and before she could get chased away, she ducked the tape, got within fifty feet of the SUV’s rear window, and snapped the picture. She was back over the line, blowing up the shot, when Jeb McGowan appeared out of the crowd and sidled up to her. McGowan looked like a young genius with his slicked-back hair and cool glasses with two-tone frames. He played the part of journo elite, having worked crime in his last job at the *LA Sun Times*. He had a daily column—as she had—and had done some interviews on cable news after he reported on the Marina Slasher two years ago.

Back then McGowan had implied that San Francisco was small-time and provincial.

“Why are you here?” she’d asked.

“My lady friend has family in Frisco. She needs to see them more. So whaddaya gonna do?”

Cindy had thought, *For starters, don't call it Frisco.*

Now McGowan was in her face.

“Cindy. Hey.”

That was another thing. McGowan was pushy. Okay, the same had been said of her. But in Cindy's opinion, McSmarty was no team player and would love to shove her under a speeding bus and snatch the top spot. Or maybe he'd just stick around, like gum under her shoe, and simply annoy her to death.

“Hiya, Jeb.”

She turned away, as if shielding her phone's screen from the morning sun, but he kept talking.

“I had a few words with a customer before she fled. I have her name and good quotes about the mayhem after the shooting. Here's an idea, Cindy. We should write this story together.”

“You've got the name of the victim?”

“I will have it.”

“I've already got my angle,” she said. “See you, Jeb.”

Cindy walked away from McGowan, and when she'd left him behind, she enlarged the image of the Porsche's back window. A word had been finger-painted in the dust.

Was it *Rebearsal*?

She sucked in her breath and punched up the shot until *Rebearsal* was clear. It was a good image for the front page, and for a change, no friend of hers at the SFPD was saying, “That's off the record.”

As she walked to her car, Cindy wondered, *Rebearsal for what?* Was it a teaser? Whatever the shooter's motive for

shooting the victim, he was signaling that there would be another shooting to come.

Cindy phoned Henry Tyler, the *Chronicle's* publisher and editor in chief, and left him a message detailing that her anonymous source was a cop and she was still digging into the victim's identity.

Back in her car, she listened to the police scanner, hoping to catch the name of the victim. And she called Rich to tell him what she'd just seen.

He might already know the victim's name.

CHAPTER 3

YUKI CASTELLANO LOCKED her bag in her desk drawer, left her office, and headed to the elevator.

A San Francisco assistant district attorney, Yuki was prosecuting an eighteen-year-old high school dropout who'd had the bad luck to sign on as wheelman for an unidentified drug dealer.

Two months ago there'd been a routine traffic stop.

The vehicle in question had a busted turn-signal light and stolen plates. The cop who'd pulled over the vehicle was approaching on foot when the passenger got out of the offending vehicle and shot him.

The cop's partner returned fire, missed, and fired on the vehicle as it took off on Highway 1 South. The cop called for assistance and stayed with the dying man.

A few miles and a few minutes later the squad cars in pursuit forced the getaway car off the far-right lane and road-blocked it. The police found that the passenger had

ditched, leaving the teenage driver, Clay Warren, and a sizable package of fentanyl inside the car.

The patrolman who'd been shot died at the scene.

Clay Warren was held on a number of charges. The drugs were valued at a million, as is, and impounded. Warren and the car were identified by the dead cop's partner, and Forensics had found hundreds of old and new prints in the vehicle, but none that matched to a known felon.

Bastard had worn gloves or never touched the dash, or this was his first job and he wasn't in the system.

Yuki doubted that.

So in lieu of the killer dealer, the wheelman was left holding the bag.

The DA was prosecuting Clay Warren for running drugs in a stolen car and acting as accomplice to murder of a police officer, but largely for being the patsy. Yuki had hoped that Warren would give up the missing dealer, but he hadn't done so and gave no sign that he would.

Using the inside of the stainless-steel elevator door as a mirror, she applied her lipstick and arranged her hair, then exited on the seventh floor and approached Sergeant Bubbleen Waters at the desk.

"Hi, B. I have a meeting with prisoner Clay Warren and his attorney."

"They're waiting for you, Yuki. Hang on a sec."

She picked up the desk phone, punched a button, and said, "Randall. Gate, please."

A guard appeared, metal doors clanked open, and locks shut behind them. The guard escorted Yuki to a small cinder-block room with a table and chairs, two of the chairs

already occupied. Clay Warren wore a classic orange prison jumpsuit and silver cuffs. His attorney, Zac Jordan, had long hair and was wearing a pink polo shirt, a khaki blazer, jeans, and a gold stud in his left ear.

Zac gave Yuki a warm smile and stood to shake her hand with both of his.

“Good to see you, Yuki. Sorry to say, I’m not getting anywhere fast. Maybe Clay will listen to you.”

CHAPTER 4

ZAC JORDAN WAS a defense lawyer who worked pro bono for the Defense League, a group that represented the poor and hopeless.

During a brief break from her job with the DA, Yuki had worked for Zac Jordan and could say that he was one of the good guys and that his client was lucky to have him.

In this case, his client was facing major prison time for being in the wrong car at the wrong time.

Yuki sat down and asked, “How’s it going, Clay?”

He said, “Just wonderful.”

Clay Warren looked younger than his age. He was small and blond haired, with a button nose, but when he glanced up, his gray eyes were hard. After his quick appraisal of Yuki, he lowered his gaze to his hands, the cuffs linked to a metal loop in the middle of the table. He looked resigned.

“Clay,” she said, “as we discussed before, a police officer is dead. You know who shot him. I’m asking you again to help us by telling us who did that. Otherwise, I can’t help

you, and you'll be charged as an accomplice to murder and for possession of narcotics with intent, and tried as an adult. You're looking at life in prison."

"For driving the car," he said.

"Do you understand me?" Yuki asked. "You're an accomplice to the murder of a *cop*. If you help us get the shooter, the DA might help you out. The charges could be lowered significantly, Clay."

"I don't know anything. I was driving. I heard the siren. I pull over and get charged with all of this bullshit. It's wrong. All wrong. I was speeding. Period."

"And the drugs inside the car? Where'd you get a million dollars' worth of fentanyl?"

Yuki knew that there was a tentative ID on the dealer. The cop who'd watched his partner die on the street had reviewed photos of likely suspects, big-time drug dealers, and thought the shooter might be Antoine Castro, but he wasn't entirely sure.

Yuki said, "Why are you taking the weight for scum like Antoine Castro?"

The kid shook his head no.

Castro was on the FBI's Most Wanted list. By now, Yuki was willing to bet, he'd left the country and assumed a new identity.

Zac said, "Lying isn't helping you, son. I know ADA Castellano. I'll negotiate for you."

"For God's sake," Warren shouted. "*Leave me alone.*"

Yuki imagined that if the killer dealer was Castro, he'd gotten word to the kid. Warned him.

You talk. You die.

Clay Warren wasn't going to talk. Yuki stood up.

"I'm sorry, Zac."

"You tried," he said.

She went to the door and the guard opened it for her. She left Zac Jordan alone with his client, a scared kid who was going to die in prison, just a matter of when.

CHAPTER 5

FRIDAY MORNING AT 9 a.m., give or take a few minutes, homicide lieutenant and acting police chief Jackson Brady strode down the center aisle of the bullpen.

The night shift was punching out, day shift straggling in, calling out, “Hey, boss,” “Yo, Brady.” He nodded to Chi, Lemke, Samuels, Wang, kept going.

At the front of the room there were two desks pushed together face-to-face. Boxer and Conklin’s real estate. Brady had partnered with both of them when he first came to the SFPD as a switch-hitter. Stood with them with bullets flying more than once. He counted on them. Would do anything for them.

Brady slid into Boxer’s desk chair. He looked at Conklin over Lindsay’s small junkyard of personal space, swung the head of the gooseneck lamp aside, moved a stack of files and a mug to make space for his elbows.

Conklin looked up, said, “You okay, Lieu?”

Brady knew that he looked like shit. Too many hours

here. Too much junk food. Too little sleep. Worried eighteen hours a day. His collar was tight. He loosened his tie. Undid the top shirt button.

“So the way I understand it,” Brady said, “Boxer had a doctor’s appointment yesterday afternoon. A checkup. She calls to say, ‘I’m fine, boss. Doctor said I need to start taking me time.’”

Conklin said, “She told me the same.”

Brady thought about when Boxer had been very sick. Took off a couple of months and came back. Said she felt perfect. So now what was she saying?

“You think she’s all right?” said Brady.

Conklin said, “She’s fine. Doctor told her she shouldn’t run herself into the ground like she does. So her sister has the wild child, and Lindsay and Joe took off to parts unknown for the weekend, maybe another day or two. You know, Brady. Most people take weekends off.”

“Oh, really? I don’t know many.”

Brady gathered up loose pens and pencils and put them into a ceramic mug.

Conklin said, “What worries me is how *you* look.”

“Don’t rub it in.”

Brady had been working two jobs since Chief Warren Jacobi had been retired out. Filling Jacobi’s old chair on the fifth floor as well as running the Homicide squad room felt like having his head slammed in a car door.

The mayor was pressuring him; choose one job or the other, but decide.

Brady had talked it over with Yuki, who’d offered measured wifely advice, not pushing or pulling, just laying it out as a lawyer would.

“I can make a case for taking on more responsibility while working fewer hours per day. I can also give you reasons why Homicide is where your strengths lie. And you love it. But you have to make a decision PDQ, or the mayor is going to make it for you.”

Conklin was saying, “I can work with Chi and McNeil until Boxer is back.”

“Yeah. Do that.”

Brady left Conklin and the bullpen, took the fire stairs one flight up to five. When he got to his office, his assistant said, “Lieu, I was just about to look for you. Check this out.”

He took a seat behind the desk. Katie leaned over his shoulder and brought up the *Chronicle* online, paused on the front page, and read the headline, “‘Roger Jennings Shot at Taco King,’” then added the takeaway, “He’s in critical condition.”

Jennings was a baseball player, a catcher nearing the end of his professional career.

Why would anyone want to kill him?

CHAPTER 6

I'D CALLED JOE as soon as I left my doctor's office and told him what Doc Arpino had said: "Lindsay. Live a little. Get out of town for a few days. Go to a spa."

My dear husband had said, "Leave this to me."

I'd left word with Brady and Conklin: "I'm off duty."

Words to that effect.

Now, with our phones locked inside the trunk, Joe and I were heading north, breezing across the Golden Gate Bridge, sailboats flying below us across the sparkling bay.

Joe was at the wheel and I was sitting beside him, saying, "I did not."

"You did, too. You came to the airport. You said, 'I want you. And I want the jet.'"

I laughed out loud. "You're crazy."

"You remember the company plane?"

"Oh. Yes."

"Louder, dear."

"Oh, YES."

We both laughed.

Joe and I had met on the job, heads of a cop and DHS joint task force charged with shutting down a terrorist who was armed with a deadly poison and a plan to take down members of the G8 meeting in San Francisco. He killed a lot of people, including one very close to me, before we nailed the bastard and took him down.

I blocked thoughts about all of that and said, “You remember when we broke away from the G8 case for the investigation in Portland?”

“Do I ever,” said Joe. “Inside that conference room with a dozen people working a national-security murder and you saying, ‘If you keep looking at me like that, Deputy Director Molinari, I can’t work.’”

I laughed and said, “I told you that afterward. I didn’t say that out loud.”

I was sure I was right, but it was also true that working with Joe under so much adrenalized fear and pressure had unleashed some pretty amazing magic between us. And before we’d left Portland for San Francisco, we’d fallen in love. Hard.

Was it perfect from then on?

Hell no. We lived on opposite sides of the country, and so we rode the long-distance relationship roller coaster for a while, cured loneliness and longing with adventures for a few days a month until Joe gave up his job and moved to the City by the Bay.

About a year after our wedding, I gave birth to Julie Anne Molinari while home alone on a dark and stormy night with electric lines down across the city. While I panted

and pushed and screamed, surrounded by firemen, Joe was thirty-five thousand feet overhead, unaware.

He'd made it up to me and our baby girl when he finally reached home. Joe Molinari, intelligence agency consultant and Mr. Mom.

He asked now, "Where are you, Lindsay?"

"I'm right here."

I leaned over, gave him a kiss, and said, "I was remembering. Where are *you*, Joe?"

He put his hand on my thigh.

"I'm here, Blondie, thinking about what a good mom you are, and how much I love you."

I told him, "I sure do love you, too."

This weekend Julie was staying at the beach with her aunt Cat, two cousins, and Martha, our best doggy in the world, while Joe and I got to be two fortysomething kids in love.

Joe turned on the radio and found the perfect station.

We were cruising. The weather was sunny with a side of sailboats, and we were singing along with the oldies: "Free to do what I want any old time."

When we reached our first destination, Joe and I were in a honeymoon state of mind.

CHAPTER 7

JOE SLOWED THE car and parked us in front of a modest-looking two-story building made of river stones and timbers, surrounded by greenery.

I recognized it from photos of where to go in Napa Valley. This was reportedly one of the best restaurants in the world, as it had been for the last twenty years.

Yes, best in the *world*.

I shouted, “The French Laundry? Seriously?”

I’d read about how hard it was to get into this place, revered by foodies all over and winner of Michelin’s top ranking, three stars. A two-month waiting period for a lunch reservation was *typical*.

“You didn’t pull this off overnight.”

“I have a connection,” Joe said, giving me a twinkly grin.

Wow. After the burger-and-coffee diet that went with being on the Job, I wondered if I could even appreciate fine dining. But now I knew why Joe had said to wear a dress—and surprise, surprise, I had one on. It was a navy-

blue-and-white print, and I'd matched it with a blue cashmere cardigan. I pulled the band from my sandy-blond ponytail, flipped down the visor, and looked at myself in the mirror.

I fluffed up my hair a little and pinched my cheeks.

I looked nice.

The restaurant's farm garden was across the street, and it was open to visitors, a lovely place for a Friday stroll. I told Joe I was going to need my phone after all so I could take pictures. He got out of the car, and the trunk lid went up.

That's when a panel van pulled up to the rear of the car and buzzed down its passenger-side window. I couldn't see the driver, but I heard him yell, "Joeeyy."

Joe called back, "Dave, you crazy SOB."

I watched him go over to the van, open the door, lean in, and hug the driver. Then he came back to me and said, "You're finally going to meet Dave."

When Joe spoke of David Channing, it was always with love and sadness. Dave had been Joe's college roommate at Fordham back east in the Bronx. I'd seen pictures of them on the field. Dave was a quarterback and Joe played flanker. He'd shown me pictures of the team, whooping, high on victory, both Joe and Dave tall, brawny, handsome, and so young.

Joe had told me that after a day like that, a win against Holy Cross, there'd been a sudden cold snap and a snowstorm had blown in from the west. Dave had been driving his girlfriend, Rebecca, home to Croton-on-Hudson, about forty-five minutes up the Taconic, a lovely twisting road with a parklike median strip and beautiful views.

But, as Joe had told me, on that late afternoon the snow had melted into a coating of black ice on the road. Dave had taken a turn where a rocky outcropping blocked his view of a vehicle that had spun out of control and stopped across both lanes. Dave had braked, skidding into the disabled car, while another, fast-moving car had rear-ended him.

Before it was over, thirty-two cars had crashed in a horrific pileup. Rebecca had been killed. Dave's spine had been crushed, and the young man who was being scouted by NFL teams had been paralyzed from the waist down.

His parents, Ray and Nancy, had brought Dave home to their little winery just outside Napa, and there'd been years of painful rehab. During those years, Joe had said, Dave had walled himself off from his friends and pretty much the whole world. Lately, he kept the company books, ran a support group for paraplegics, and mourned his mother's death from lymphoma. That was all Joe knew.

Joe opened my door, offered me his hand, and helped me out, saying, "I've been waiting a long time for this, Linds. Come and meet Dave."

CHAPTER 8

DAVID CHANNING DID some show-off wheelies, pushed his chair wheels to fade back, and told Joe to go long.

He tossed an imaginary football, and Joe made a big show of snatching it out of the air, running across an invisible goal line, and spiking the ball in the end zone.

Dave laughed as Joe did a victory dance. Then he grinned shyly and held out his hand to shake mine, and I turned it into a hug.

“It’s trite but true,” he said. “Joe has told me so much about you.”

“Back at you, Dave. He can really riff on you, too.”

Joe squeezed his friend’s shoulder, said, “Shall we?”

Dave said, “I’d love to join you, Joe, but I’m just here to finally meet Lindsay, and now I’ve got to get back.”

Joe said, “*Hell no, you don’t.* I haven’t seen you in three years. We’re having lunch together. All of us. It’s on me.”

Dave protested. He said that this was our weekend, lunch

was all set for us, he didn't want to be a third wheel—but he didn't have a chance versus Joe.

I heard him mutter “You're still tough, old man” as Joe, steering us toward the restaurant and holding open the shiny blue-painted door, ushered us inside. We were greeted by the maître d', who called Dave “Davy,” and we were shown to a table, seated so that I was between Dave and Joe, Dave saying, “These folks are customers of ours.”

Joe said, “I think we'll be having the Channing Winery Cab.”

Sounded good to me.

Claire Washburn, my BFF, had been here for her anniversary last year and had given me the CliffsNotes, saying, “A meal at the French Laundry changes your life.”

I didn't doubt my friend. In fact, I couldn't remember a time when she'd been wrong about anything. But I wasn't sure that a single meal could change my life, even for a day. Joe's lasagna was a high bar and possibly my favorite dish—in the *world*.

I looked around and immediately warmed to the restaurant; the main room was comfortable and homey, with sand-colored walls, a dozen round tables, a coved ceiling, and sconces between the casement windows.

Our menus arrived and Dave said, “I recommend the tasting menu. Today's version will never be served exactly the same way again.”

Lisette, our server, concurred. A quick look at the menu laid out a journey of nine little courses of classic French cuisine with a three-star spin. And along the way there would be wine to taste.

I'm no math whiz, but it was easy to see that lunch for three was going to come in at over a thousand dollars.

Possibly well *over* a thousand.

Joe put his arm around the back of my chair and pulled me closer to him.

Dave apologized for not making it to our wedding, and I told him that we'd felt him there nonetheless.

"Love the wedding present, Dave."

He laughed, said, "Not everyone loves an antique gun safe."

Joe and I said it together.

"We do!"

CHAPTER 9

BEFORE THE FIRST dish arrived, the two old friends started catching up on who'd married, who'd gone into politics, who had passed away.

The salmon tartare was served in a little cone. Adorable. My taste buds maxed out but rallied in time to taste what Lisette said was one of the French Laundry's signature dishes: two oysters on the half shell with pearl tapioca and Regiis Ova caviar, served in a small white bowl. I dipped a fork into the oyster shell and brought the creamy, buttery, salty aphrodisiac of foods to my mouth.

It was good. Very good. I was still thinking about the unusual textures and flavors when the next in a procession of beautifully plated delicacies arrived.

I didn't quite get the creamed English peas and pork jowl, the marinated nectarines, the soft-boiled red hen egg in the shell that looked as though it were made of porcelain. But from the ecstatic expressions at my table and surrounding

ones, I understood why the French Laundry was the gold standard for people with sophisticated taste.

Three hours later, when we were sipping our coffee and sampling the wondrous variety of sweets, we convinced Dave to talk about himself.

“Joey knows this, Lindsay, but my mom passed away just before you two got married. My dad and I were always close. But working together has really given us a—I don’t know what else to call it—a deep friendship.”

Dave sighed.

Joe put his hand on Dave’s arm and asked him what was wrong.

Dave said, “Dad’s sick, in the hospital, and I’m very worried.”

“Why? What happened?” Joe asked.

“He has a thoracic aortic aneurysm brought on by high blood pressure. It’s grown to the size that might require surgery. His doctor prescribed him beta-blockers but says he’s got age-related system breakdown. But I’m not buying it. He’s seventy-two. He’s never been sick before.”

Joe said, “I’m sorry to hear this, Dave.”

“If you have any time, Joe, I know he’d like to see you. He was our biggest fan.”

Joe looked down at the table. I’m pretty sure he was flashing back on those college football years, their families screaming from the stands.

Joe lifted his eyes, looked at his friend, and asked, “When would be a good time to see him?”

CHAPTER 10

AS WE PULLED out of the parking lot, I told Joe, “He’s great, Joe. I feel bad for him.”

“It was good to see him. Hey, you’re sure it’s okay?”

“Of course. You go see his dad and I’ll go to the spa.”

Joe nodded, said, “I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

“Perfect,” I said. I was thinking of a massage, some kind of exotic wrap. Freak out the guys at work by getting a manicure. I could almost hear Brady saying, “What happened to you, Boxer?”

I grinned, but when I turned to share my joke with Joe, he was in deep thought.

He saw me out of the corner of his eye and said, “I can’t help but think about what his life might have been but for that bad turn in the road.” And then, “I think that a lot of guys who play pro ball have broken lives. Not just physically, but the fame and money and disappointments, all of that. I’m just glad he’s the Dave I know.”

I nodded my agreement.

He said, “And you, sweetie? How was your lunch?”

“It was fabulous, the best meal I’ve ever had, and you know why? Because you thought of it, Joe. You made this great plan in a split second. You called Dave and got it done. You spent a bundle on *lunch*.”

“What about the food? You didn’t mention the food.”

“Well, may I be honest? I’m sure that I’m crazy and I should have loved the farm lamb and that steak thing and the green-pea puree and the whatever, but you know what I liked the best?”

“Let me guess,” Joe said. “That little glazed donut at the end. Like a mini Krispy Kreme.”

“Come on. How’d you know?”

“One, you’re a cop. And two, you were making some very sexy noises.”

“Huh. Maybe I was thinking about you.”

“You were not.”

“And since I’m going to the spa, I should be very relaxed and dreamy and smelling like flowers when you get back.”

“Hold that thought,” said Joe.

CHAPTER 11

THE MILLIKEN CREEK Inn is perched on a terraced hillside with views of the Napa River.

I came back from the spa to our room with its balcony view of the river, its fireplace, and its huge bed with a novel feeling. I felt no stress whatsoever. No rush. No hurry. No worry. Nowhere to go and nothing to do—but rest.

I dressed in a white robe and a pair of socks, then climbed aboard the California king with its down comforter and regal headboard. I woke up to Joe calling my name, flipping on the lights in the darkening room.

“Sorry, Linds. Didn’t mean to wake you.”

“What time is it?”

“Seven something. Seven twenty. When we came back from seeing Ray, Dave and I got into a pile of yearbooks and photo albums, and then, of course, I told him everything Julie has said and done since she was born.”

I said, “Oh, man. All caught up now?”

Joe laughed, asked, “Do you want to go to the restaurant for dinner?”

I shook my head no. I was so comfortable.

“Me neither. I want to clean up and get into bed. But wait,” he said.

He sat on the side of the bed and phoned room service, ordered cheese and fruit for two, basket of bread, bottle of Channing Winery Sauvignon Blanc, concluding with, “You got some candles? Good. Twenty minutes would be great.”

He hung up the phone, shucked his jacket, came back to the bed, and kissed me.

“God,” he said. “You *do* smell like flowers.”

I showed him my newly polished fingers and toes, and he kissed me again, lifted a few strands of my hair away from my eyes.

“I’ll be back,” he said.

I fluffed my pillow, gazed out through the sliding doors to the balcony as the glow left the sky, and listened to Joe singing an old rock-and-roll hit in the shower. That oldies station we’d driven to must have gotten stuck in his head.

“Do you *love* me? *Do* you love me?”

He burst out of the bathroom in a robe singing the chorus.

“Now...that I...can *dance*.”

I laughed and opened my arms to him, and he got into bed.

I put my arm across his chest. He drew me close, and I tipped my head up and kissed him again, this time putting a little heat into it.

He said, “Look at us. Two oysters in white. No caviar required.”

“Call your daughter,” I said, “before it gets too late.”

Joe got up, found his phone in his jacket pocket, and came back to bed. Together we FaceTimed my sister, her two shrieking little girls fighting over who should tell Uncle Joe about their day. And then we shared a sweet conversation with a sleepy Julie, who I could see was in bed with Martha. Julie said, “Mommy, say ‘woof.’”

I did it.

“Nooooo. Say it to Martha!”

Cat cackled in the background as Julie took the phone to my old dog. I woofed on command. Then Joe and I kissed Julie through the screen of the phone and told her to sleep tight.

When we were alone again, Joe told me that Ray Channing looked terrible, but that he couldn’t suppress his happiness at seeing Joe again after so many years.

“Told me I hadn’t changed a bit.”

We both laughed, and room service knocked and delivered.

Joe and I sipped wine. We nibbled. We talked, and then Joe put the candle in its little glass globe on the dresser before rolling the cart outside and locking the door.

He took off his robe and tossed it over a chair, came back to bed, and helped me out of mine.

“I have a confession,” I said.

“Now? You wish my chest wasn’t hairy?”

“I love your hairy chest. The lobster mac and cheese. That was my favorite course.”

“It beat out the mini donut?”

“It was the best thing I’ve ever eaten.”