

TARNISHED IDOLS

A Silver Screen Murder Mystery

By

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Dedication

To Barbara Moloney,
who, unknowingly, made me feel guilty everyday for not completing it.

To Lynda deGreif,
who, knowingly, gave me everything I needed to get it done.

And

To Simon, Pogo, Pawley & Tucker,
Who put up with being occasionally ignored and, sometimes, being fed a little late.

CHAPTER ONE – The Past

Scandals. The studios dreaded them, the fans devoured them. As for Jennifer Deane, the subject of a steady stream of rumor and innuendo, the scandals were now devouring her.

For nearly all of her fifteen-year professional life, Jennifer skated the thin ice between one sordid headline and another. Always, the gossipmongers, caring only for the story and never for the source, followed their target in hot pursuit.

The ice beneath her began to crack. Jennifer knew she would soon be plunging to the unfathomable depths of a broken career. And to Jennifer, that amounted to a broken life.

There is a fine line between perception and reality. In the state of paranoia, those lines are even more indistinguishable. To say that Jennifer Deane was paranoid was, perhaps, not saying nearly enough. Her life and her career were one continuous drama played out on the world stage. That world adored her in the beginning and, truthfully, continued to adore her in spite of itself.

It was true that the career she had worked on so feverishly appeared to be in shambles. The film going public, a hypocritical mass of humanity that was secretly titillated by the excess of her lifestyle, was now openly vehement in its outrage. A legion of moviegoers was threatening

to boycott any film produced by Pinnacle Pictures, the home of every film Jennifer ever made. The title of her latest film lent itself quite easily to the poisoned pens of her most severe critics. “In this instance, *All That Glitters* is definitely *not* gold!” The actress whose talents were once considered brilliant and limitless was now unmarketable and far too risky for a studio that once survived bankruptcy by her presence alone.

But even the best filmmakers made bad films once in a while. And scandals alone did not kill a career. Where fact and fiction intertwined was in the studio’s response to her fall from grace. Perhaps the truth would never be completely known or understood.

What mattered at this moment was how Jennifer perceived her demise. To her, loyalty was never a factor when potential profits were on the line, and she saw the studio acquiescing to public demand. The Sex Goddess had to go. In response to the public outcry, the studio brass began the heartless, calculated destruction of one of its own.

Bound by a contract giving her little or no control, Jennifer appeared in a string of less than forgettable films. Pinnacle Pictures, her protector and haven of safety, was now the enemy forcing her out of an industry she had glorified in as the ultimate sexual fantasy. The future was clearly defined and Jennifer, herself, acquiesced. Each day brought new revelations, new turmoil. Her spirit of fierce pride and determination was broken, her dreams and aspirations shattered, her strength to fight was gone.

Maintaining her sense of professionalism, she obediently followed the studio’s command. Without protest, she allowed it to extinguish the flame that had once been Jennifer Deane.

As her value in the movie market dropped, so did her bank account. Her beloved mansion, her palace of success, high atop Beverly Hills, was no longer within her financial means. As she vacated its premises, most of her prized possessions were left behind.

She found herself now in a much smaller house. Gone were the lush trees, manicured lawns and well-ordered gardens. Missing from view were the tennis courts and swimming pool. The only sights in this neighborhood of Hollywood disgrace were the nondescript houses of other tarnished idols, has-beens whose names could not be remembered until death restored them, if only briefly, to the limelight of glory and fame.

Here, in what she considered her palace of failure, Jennifer wandered aimlessly from one tiny room to another. She stumbled over cartons containing the few, meager belongings that remained. In her hand, she carried a bottle of wine, her all-consuming passion and only friend. She tripped over an unseen object and collapsed on a nearby sofa littered with other bottles long ago emptied. Her mind was ravaged not so much from the alcohol as from the confusion of her thoughts.

The story would break tomorrow. She knew that and, although she thought she was ready, deep inside she wasn’t. It could be the end of everything she had left. She doubted very much if Jennifer Deane could once more rise to the challenge and take control of an ugly situation. Times had changed and she believed there were few to care about her fate, including, at the moment, herself.

The cold steel pressed against her temple.

“Funny,” she thought to herself, “I don’t remember finding a gun in all this mess.”

Nor did she remember picking it up. Had she lived long enough, she would not have remembered pulling the trigger.

CHAPTER TWO – The Present

In one week, Peter Gregory would be fifty years old. The number itself didn't bother him. At least that's what he told his friends. He certainly didn't feel fifty, although he wasn't exactly sure what fifty was supposed to feel like.

He felt the same confusion when he turned forty and also when he turned thirty. Milestones seemed to always creep up on him and he never seemed prepared for their arrival.

In reality, he could complain very little about the past five decades. He did pretty much what he wanted to do whenever he wanted to do it. A sizeable inheritance had been carefully attended to by a network of financial wizards. Unlimited wealth had made his life much easier.

He tried his hand at law school, but dropped out because, while he liked studying the law and the thought of practicing it, he didn't care for any of the lawyers he knew and didn't want to be like them. He gave a few years of his life trying to manage a restaurant, but was forced to admit that he lacked the necessary discipline to run his own business. He spent two years serving his country. Both he and his country were greatly relieved when those two years were over. At one point, some shortsighted friends, in an attempt to give his life some direction, suggested Peter run for public office. Luckily for mankind, that particular plane never got off the ground.

He proved even less successful in the marriage department. Two attempts had quickly run their course when Peter spent more time engaged in intellectual pursuits than in what it took to make a marriage work.

In the classic definition, Peter might have been considered a perfect failure were it not for one, redeeming quality. When at last he settled down and found his niche, he surprised everyone with what he found.

Peter Gregory could write. What he wrote were plays and, for the most part, what he wrote was very, very good.

His home base was odd for a man of his abilities. He preferred the subtle charms of his home town, Baltimore, to the hectic pace of New York City. Fearful of the high-pressure city, he had no qualms about commuting the distance when his work was in production.

It was an arrangement that served two purposes.

A writer, by the nature of his craft, spends a great deal of time alone. For many like Peter, this isolation breeds an almost neurotic fear of being in the public eye. In the midst of all his success, he could easily retreat to his private sanctuary where he could quietly revel in triumph yet be far removed from the spotlight's demanding crowds.

To the other end, the center of attention was the last place to be when a long-labored on project was an abysmal failure.

Either way, Peter was safe from the ever fickle theatergoer and the always unpredictable critic.

Experience and personal interest formed the foundation for his talent.

His turned an undistinguished stint with the military into the thought provoking and critically acclaimed *Banner Wave*. As an adoptee, he drew upon both its privilege and pain to create the touching, Tony Award winning *Somebody's Child*.

Peter did not let his ongoing love affair with the movies impair the honesty he brought to his latest achievement. His most successful, and most controversial, work to date, *An Actor By Blood*, was a biting satire on the golden age of the Hollywood establishment and the effects it produced on an unstable, hedonistic thespian. Clearly, the play centered on a bygone era, but there were enough comparisons to present day Hollywood mentality to make the most minor executive squeamish.

Such obvious criticism of that particular industry was not to Peter's benefit. Not all of his work was for the stage. In fact, some of his best efforts had been written for the screen, both large and small. In a corner of his apartment, on top of a stack of books that had never made its way to the bookcase, was an Emmy he received for a made-for-TV movie, the title of which he could barely remember.

To the powers that be in the cinema capital, Peter Gregory was an enigma. Unquestionably, he was a good writer. He certainly possessed the ability but, in this business, talent alone was not sufficient. His lack of ambition and utter disdain for studio politics made him unpopular in the movie community. In a world that saw publicity as its lifeblood, Peter's fear of open recognition made him not only unapproachable but, more to the point, undesirable.

An eccentric to his followers, disorganized to his friends, an oddball to the world at large. These were the outward traits that best summarized the man. But in spite of this, Peter's inward self and his intrinsic creative abilities became the object of one man's crusade.

For nearly every executive in Hollywood, putting Peter Gregory on the payroll was out of the question. A screenplay here and there, delivered long distance with no face-to-face interaction, was one thing. A steady diet of his artistic neuroses was quite another.

Except in the eyes of Zachary Max.

Celluloid was more a part of his physical make up than tissue and bone. His father, Jacob Max, had been a youthful pioneer in the new art form and later became the legendary mogul at the head of Pinnacle Pictures, the most glamorous and successful of the dream factories. He instilled in his son a passion for film equal only to his own.

Zachary had been there in the glory days and he had seen the system die. He watched helplessly as the new era of filmmaking consumed the old. And he watched in pain at the destruction of the giant his father had been.

The Hollywood Peter had written about was one of immense power.

Since the strength of the medium had first been unleashed, a new sovereignty had been established. Those at the helm of this unwieldy vessel had learned early how to best exercise their authority. Throughout the entire history of the movies, those in control knew what they wanted and who or what needed to be removed in order to achieve it.

This merciless perspective was necessary. Even in its infancy, the movie industry provoked intense competition. To stay one step ahead of a rival very often meant the difference between life and death.

Although generations had passed since the motion picture's inception, and the star studded days of the movie moguls had long ago vanished, the same brutal manipulations of the Hollywood machine pressed onward. The onslaught of television and the advent of home video intensified the ruthless behavior in the quest for continued survival.

An apprentice under his father's supervision, Zachary's name had been attached to some of the finest movies ever made. Through the years, he earned his own reputation as a giant. He was a man to reckon with in the modern movie world but his early exposure to the all powerful studio traditions defined his approach to movie making. In his current role as Production Head of Century Cinema, the reorganized remains of his father's Pinnacle Pictures, Zachary ruled with an iron hand. At every other studio in town, the studio system was long ago dead and buried. At Century, not only did it linger, it thrived.

Therefore, the teaming of Zachary Max and Peter Gregory was a questionable enterprise. Indeed, most of Zachary's colleagues thought the idea was ludicrous. His subordinates, while openly supporting his latest brainstorm, privately thought the old man was unhinged.

But Zachary was not crazy. He sat spellbound at the Los Angeles premier of *An Actor By Blood*. If a play of such depth and perception could be written by someone so far removed from the industry, imagine what could be written from an intimate knowledge.

Getting Peter Gregory to accept a long term assignment would be difficult. Persuading him to move to a city he would hate might be impossible. As with any other potential employee, Zachary launched a full scale investigation. In his well scrutinized research of his intended prey, Zachary found the icing to frost his cake.

Peter Gregory was a man with a lifelong obsession. His apartment was crammed with books, magazines, movies, posters and assorted paraphernalia of and about an actress decades dead. He was completely and uncontrollably obsessed with a one time, worldwide, sexual fantasy.

The Sex Goddess. His father's last, great discovery and the crowning achievement of his legendary career. How ironic that the writer chosen by Zachary to bring to life his pet project should have an unnatural fixation on the subject of that project. Jennifer Deane.

CHAPTER THREE

Peter hoped the conversation was not going well.

"Gee, Mr. Max, I don't know," Peter said in his best imitation of a country bumpkin. "See, I really don't think I'm the guy you're looking for."

Zachary Max was the shrewdest of businessmen. He knew very well this was no backwoods farm boy. Peter was passionate, articulate and a borderline genius. It was perhaps this genius which gave him the right to be crazy. But crazy or not, his obsessive nature made his quality of craftsmanship ideal for Zachary's purpose.

With the mere mention of Jennifer Deane, Peter would have been instantly hooked. Definitely, the quickest way to catch his fish. But Zachary wanted a more effective capture. He wanted Peter Gregory heart, mind and soul. Toward that end, a long, drawn out campaign was in order.

After an endless stream of pleasantries where saying much was saying little, Zachary ever so slightly took control of the conversation.

At first, they discussed writing in the vaguest possible terms, almost as a curiosity. Then Zachary focused more clearly on Peter's own work and the success it enjoyed. As the talk became more technical, Zachary's appreciation intensified until Peter, unintentionally, was openly courting the praise of this new admirer.

The change in Peter's demeanor was not lost on the man in Hollywood. Zachary sat back in his high-backed chair, lit a cigar and relaxed. Phase One of "Operation: Hoodwink" was successful. Very carefully, he slid into Phase Two.

"I get so enthused by good writers talking so positively about their craft. Out here, that's a rarity. Too many of them take their gift for granted, if they have a gift at all. Which brings me back to why I called you."

"It was something about a project of yours," Peter interrupted, far removed from his natural state of fear and suspicion, "but you never really said what the project was about."

"Well, what I have in mind is far too complicated to discuss on the phone, but I sure don't expect you to make the long trip out here." Properly placed pause. "Tell you what," Zachary said, making it sound like an idea that just popped into his head. "I have a meeting in

New York next week with our East Coast people. Why don't I swing by Baltimore first? We could talk about it at length over dinner. My treat, of course."

Peter's jaw dropped below his lap. *What have you done?* he thought to himself. Suddenly, he was trapped without a clue how it happened. Something inside let his defenses down and he found himself agreeing to a meeting he was very much against. Still, even the most successful like a free meal and the least egotistical like being pampered.

Clutching the receiver with his chin so he could dry his sweating palms, Peter conveyed his agreement and his thanks.

After settling on a day, time and restaurant, Zachary hung up the phone and looked at the clock. One hour and seventeen minutes. This was one long distance call that was worth every penny.

The day of the meeting, Peter walked the streets of Baltimore in a neurotic frenzy. He wandered along the harbor, staring long and hard at the sights around him. It was as though he believed this Hollywood producer would spirit him away to the land of celluloid dreams. He stopped at a harbor side bar to calm his frazzled nerves with a beer or two.

Peter was hoping to go to dinner that night and walk away unscathed. But a gnawing feeling he couldn't quite shake ate away at him. Somewhere deep inside, he knew that after tonight his life would never be the same.

Yet despite his premonition of impending doom, Peter didn't run. Like an overly dramatic character in one of his plays, he had resigned himself to accept his fate. He looked at his watch and, after finishing off a third calming draft, made his way to the appointed place.

The area, Little Italy, and the restaurant, Antonio's, had been carefully suggested by Peter. A frequent visitor, he was comfortable here and, always of major importance, he felt safe. It was here Peter chose to dine with theatrical bigwigs intent on securing his services. The proprietor of the establishment, Antonio himself, reveled in the celebrity atmosphere Peter created. The word was out that, no matter how little notice, a table was always available for Mr. Gregory.

Uncharacteristically, Peter arrived with an air of confidence, no doubt enhanced by the three beers. Combining those beverages with the familiar surroundings and a home turf advantage relieved any remaining trepidation. He met Zachary Max in the lounge and they shook hands in the guarded, friendly manner of two candidates before a debate. Antonio, all smiles and professional courtesy, led them to the isolated room in the back, usually reserved for Peter and his guests.

The rules were silently understood. No business would be discussed until a suitable wine had been chosen and the menu appropriately perused. The conversation was general in nature ("How was your flight?", "Charming little restaurant", and the obligatory "Wonderful weather.") After the wine had been dutifully tasted and the waiter had taken their order, the rules changed. Zachary Max was ready to talk business and the confident Peter Gregory withdrew into caution.

"I certainly appreciate you giving me your time," Zachary began. "I know a writer of your caliber must be overburdened with projects."

Peter smiled. His projects were less of a burden than this meeting could prove to be.

"No, problem, Mr. Max ..."

“Zachary. Please.”

“Zachary,” Peter spoke softly, eyes glued to the table.

This type of familiarity was exactly what Peter hoped to avoid. What unnatural forces were destroying his defenses? Whatever they were, they were doing a good job.

“Zachary,” he continued, “It’s no secret in the industry that I’m a bit of a recluse when it comes to my writing. That’s an annoying nuisance to those I work for. Everyone who has ever hired me knows I work best independently. I write, they read, that’s it.”

“And the thought of working at such close quarters with a producer like me terrifies you?”

“Yes, quite frankly, it does. A lot. See, the way I work and where I work puts the power of artistic control firmly in my hands. In New York or Los Angeles, the producers are in charge. I’m not willing to sacrifice that kind of creative freedom.”

Peter could feel the perspiration rolling down his back. This was quite an oration for one of such a retiring nature. Zachary realized this and knew the best way to proceed.

“Let me say this,” he began with fatherly concern. “I appreciate what you’ve said and I respect your need for creative control. In fact, I more than respect it. I require it. For what I want to do, for reasons that will become obvious later, I can only be involved on a peripheral basis.”

“And what exactly do you want to do?”

“I want to make a movie about Jennifer Deane.”

Ace in the hole. A simple statement that effectively produced the desired result ... and then some.

Zachary got in person what he would never have gotten over the phone. Peter’s eyes lit up and his passive, detached expression became vibrantly alive. His innermost defenses were shattered and replaced by an enthusiasm he had trouble controlling. *Calm*, he told himself. *Stay calm*. It was a pointless endeavor.

“A biography of Jennifer Deane?”

“Well, not a standard biography, no.” Zachary reached for a cigar. Apparently, the producer was unfazed by the City’s No Smoking policy. For that matter, neither was Antonio or any of the other restaurant personnel. In this room, reserved only for the most important movers and shakers, anything went. Regardless, Zachary politely asked Peter for permission to smoke (as if at this point, Peter would care), and took his time in the lighting process. The longer it took, the more Peter stretched across the table. Zachary thought it best to continue before Peter fell into his lap.

“Your basic Hollywood biography goes like this: so and so was born; so and so grew up; wanted to be an actor; became an actor; stardom destroyed him; he died. Not very exciting stuff. Like I said standard issue. If we’re lucky, the public turns out in the hundreds and a once, great idea becomes a late night movie in some God-forsaken part of the Midwest.”

“That couldn’t possibly happen to a movie about Jennifer Deane.”

“Have you ever seen the so-called Deane biography, *Drowned by Fame*?” Peter nodded. “Piece of crap, Peter. Total piece of crap. Conceived by a local, written by a local, and produced by a local. See, those guys out there are surrounded by actors on a daily basis. Stardom holds no awe for them. It’s a case of business as usual. They see stars as necessary evils. A commodity they need to stay employed. That’s why I need to go outside of the community. I need someone removed from that natural bias. Of course, it doesn’t hurt to find someone who’s also a devoted fan.”

At that, Zachary's eyes twinkled. Peter caught the full extent of what Zachary was saying.

"I see you've done your homework. Yes, I'm a huge fan of Miss Deane. Have been for most of my life. And that's exactly the reason why I couldn't be part of a glitzy movie about her. Anybody could do that. There's plenty of material to review. I should know. I own most of it."

"Precisely, Peter. That kind of film, anyone can make. But what I want are things people don't know. Not the tabloid headlines, but what lies beneath. I guess what I want is the truth. All of it."

"The truth," Peter paused in thought. "You mean about how she died? Lot of speculation there. Many people don't think she killed herself."

Zachary interrupted. "Not many, but enough. Problem is anyone who knows anything won't talk. Not even after all these years."

"After all these years, who would care?"

Peter stared at the veal parmesan placed before him. He was being given a chance to become actively involved, if only after the fact, in the life of Jennifer Deane. His cautions and fears gave way to unbridled zeal.

"And you say you won't be involved in the writing end of this?"

"How can I? The death of Jennifer Deane was the last major earthquake under my father's studio. The questionable suicide and the scandalous trail it followed led to his ultimate ruin. I can't even produce the picture under my own name. If I did, the critics would jump to say it was created under prejudicial influence. And in all probability, the label would fit."

"And I would have complete control over the script?"

"The story would be yours from start to finish. To get the movie I want, my involvement must be almost nonexistent. So what do you say? Are you up for the challenge?"

Peter took a long sip of wine, accepted a proffered cigar and smiled.

"Well, Mr. Max. Zachary. Looks like you've got the right guy after all."

CHAPTER FOUR – The Past

They came from across the country and around the world. They came from the splendor of Beverly Hills and the poverty of Watts. They were colleagues and competitors, admirers and detractors. Some were genuinely grieving, others merely curious. Although the reasons for their presence were as varied as their sizes and shapes, one common thread held them together. The thread was Jennifer Deane.

In her final, confused moments, she may have believed herself forgotten, but this day proved her wrong. This day, the world could talk of nothing else. No other news existed. This was the day of her funeral.

And yet, the entire hullabaloo this funeral produced was almost anticlimactic. The discovery of her body had been a full scale media event. It had broken through the news wires faster than any story before it. The police and paramedics arrived only slightly ahead of the well informed reporters (a curiosity no one seemed to question). And, once again, Jennifer Deane was headline news.

Her death, in fact, had managed to undo all the damage wrought by her final days. In an instant, Jennifer was a sympathetic character. Hers was a pitiable tragedy. The doomed starlet suffered her fate at the hands of Hollywood excess. Her professional demise would have cast her into obscurity. Her death guaranteed her star an eternal flame.

For some, the funeral was just another Hollywood illusion. Those who sought her destruction for their own salvation were, today, at their hypocritical best. Here, with their masks of respect firmly in place, they joined the throng of mourners and dutifully filed by the open casket.

The chapel at Gardens of Peace was well equipped to handle large gatherings. The movie world's best and brightest had been buried from here, always with a sizeable crowd in attendance. But no one, in either recent or distant memory, could recall anything like this.

The sanctuary overflowed with flowers, everything from mammoth arrangements to a single rose. So deeply packed were these floral tributes that mourners were in danger of tripping over them as they made their way through the intricate maze surrounding the coffin.

Hours had to be extended on each of the three days she lay there in order to accommodate the multitude.

Then, on the last day of the viewing, traffic in the immediate area came to a halt as drivers took any piece of empty asphalt for a parking space.

Hymns at variance with her lifestyle drifted up through the chapel walls and echoed out over the open space of the cemetery.

The often repeated and impersonal eulogy of the haggard funeral director could not diminish the surge of emotion sweeping through the church. People who came only to be seen were choking on unexpected tears that rolled uncontrollably down their cheeks.

Then the casket lid was closed on the most recognized face in the world. The pallbearers lined up and, with great care and tenderness, delivered their charge to her final home.

The procession wound its way around the narrow lanes which led to a secluded spot overlooking the ocean. There, where willow trees bent over to protect her, Jennifer Deane was finally laid to rest.

CHAPTER FIVE – The Present

Peter traveled the highways in his “too young to be vintage, too old to be valuable”, faded yellow Mustang convertible. Although his decision to go west surprised everyone, no one was surprised by his mode of transportation. It would have been uncharacteristic for Peter Gregory to be anything less than pathologically afraid of flying.

With a fully equipped apartment awaiting him in California, Peter had the luxury of traveling light. A suitcase of casual clothes and one good suit (which he would avoid wearing) was stuffed on the floor next to him. The backseat held boxes containing reference material, representing only a small portion of his Jennifer Deane collection.

His lightness of being did little to reduce the journey's length. He managed to extend a five day trip into twenty-six by stopping here and there to visit fellow literary eccentrics. The consensus was unanimous. By accepting such a high visibility assignment, Peter made lunacy a new art form.

Undaunted by these skeptics, Peter pressed onward, albeit slowly, to the challenge ahead.

When he finally reached the promise land of Southern California, he had little trouble finding his new home. The Hollywood Palms apartment complex was a luxurious community situated on a slight incline at the foot of Beverly Hills. Here he would have easy access to all of the places he needed, and wanted, to be.

This was not his first trip to the West Coast. On several occasions, business had forced him to reluctantly travel to Hollywood. In each instance, the length of the visit was restricted to the matter at hand. Very often, Peter departed within hours of his arrival.

Now gazing at the expansive view from his balcony, Peter did something his previous journeys to Los Angeles had never allowed him to do. He thought about how he would spend his day.

Ironically, on his first, full morning in Los Angeles, time would be a hindrance to his plans. Peter was scheduled to meet Zachary Max for lunch at the Century Cinema Commissary. The three hours remaining before his appointment could not accommodate all the places he wanted to visit. The mansion in Beverly Hills, the bungalow in Hollywood proper. As for the Pinnacle Pictures archives, a week would not be long enough, much less a few hours.

All of these places were essential to establishing the background for his research. Yet none of them drew him more forcefully than the one which drew him now. Peter knew where he would spend his morning. He would begin at the end.

Clutching an armful of specialty maps and a cup of lukewarm coffee, he got into his car. Having plotted the easiest course, Peter turned on the ignition and, after a few sputters and grinds, pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward Gardens of Peace.

As he drove along the streets lined with palm trees, Peter delved into his mental archives. He remembered everything he'd ever read about the last time she had made this journey. The time of year, the weather. All very much like today. He could picture the hearse and the long line of limousines. He could see the people on the sidewalks silently watching the procession's progress. He could almost hear the occasional crying, could almost feel the sadness.

He returned to the present with a jolt when he realized he wasn't paying attention. But the real surprise came when he realized where he was. As if the car was on automatic pilot, the Mustang had arrived at the cemetery gates.

The mind is an unbelievable thing, he thought, stopping for a moment at the entrance. My subconscious self is deeply engrossed in its thoughts while my conscious self is aware enough to find a place it's never been before. Incredible!

Gardens of Peace was as old as it was large. In days gone by, it was far removed from the tiny film community. Nearly all of the biggest names of the silent movie era were buried here. As Hollywood grew up and expanded around it, however, the cemetery maintained its air of detachment. When the privileged found it no longer fashionable to be buried there, the Gardens opened its gates to all manner of souls.

Peter solemnly took it all in. He slowly drove past both grand monuments and untended plots. He finally reached the end of the cemetery road and there, in the distance, he saw it. The simple tombstone he'd been seeking. He parked the car and, holding a small bouquet of flowers he purchased on the way, walked toward the gravesite.

On his approach, he was struck by how isolated it was. No other graves surrounded Jennifer Deane. In death, she'd been left as lonely as in life. A sudden sadness gripped his heart. When he bent down to place the flowers at her stone, tears welled up in his eyes. He looked up at the willow trees, her only neighbors, standing as proud and as tall as they did fifty years ago. His mind played a series of film clips and newsreels showing a vibrant young woman at the height of her career. The sadness grew inside him and the tears rolled down his cheeks.

Peter had no idea how long he'd been standing there absorbed in his mental movies. He was startled by the sound of a young woman's voice coming from behind him, no doubt sitting on the wrought iron bench a few feet away. Peter was embarrassed to turn around, afraid the stranger might see the redness in his eyes or the tears on his face.

"It's very sad, isn't it?" she asked in a quiet, childlike voice. "So alone."

Peter tried to figure out how to dry his face without giving himself away. Coming up with no ideas, he decided to remain standing where he was, with his back to the woman.

“Yes, it is. Very lonely.” He fought back the urge to cry again.

The woman continued. “It’s a terrible place to be buried. I mean, it’s a beautiful spot, the most beautiful spot here. It’s just so out of touch from the others. It would be so much nicer over there with the rest of them. Don’t you think so?”

Her voice had a dreamy quality he recognized but couldn’t quite place.

“I agree, yes,” Peter said, “but I guess it’s what she wanted. I suppose it keeps alive her air of mystery.”

The woman laughed. “Untouchable is more like it. There was never any question of mystery. The life of Jennifer Deane was an open book. And for this place, it sure wasn’t my,” she hesitated for a fraction of a second. “I understood the studio picked this place. Put the faded movie star in a faded cemetery. Even at the end, they had to have their one last joke on Jennifer Deane.”

It was the momentary pause that alarmed him. Then came the full and frightening realization. Oh yes, he knew that voice. He’d heard it thousands of times before. Its cadence was her unmistakable trademark.

The early morning sun beat down hard upon him, and driving up from the ocean below, a warm breeze blew across his face. In spite of the heat, Peter was shivering from an unexplained cold which engulfed him from head to foot.

So still did he stand, not only could he hear himself breathe, he could hear himself sweat. And it wasn’t the heat causing perspiration to spill from every pore. It was sheer, abject terror.

Don’t turn around. Don’t turn around, he repeated the mantra over and over, sometimes out loud, sometimes to himself.

Curiosity can be a wicked thing. It’s killed many a cat, the legend goes. Although he knew (or was fairly certain) he wouldn’t die, Peter was so close to passing out he could taste it.

And yet, a force stronger than reason took control of his body. Slowly, he turned around, his steadily increasing heartbeat bursting his eardrums like cannon fire.

He continued to turn until finally he came face to face, eye to eye, with the surrealistic voice.

A cry that could have awakened the dead remained trapped in Peter’s throat. At the very moment he began to scream, his knees buckled, his body collapsed, and his head hit the tombstone of Jennifer Deane.

CHAPTER SIX

Zachary paced up and down the stark hospital corridor. His mind was a jumble of confused thoughts. In the midst of his confusion, he could focus only on the white coldness around him. Sterile walls, sterile ceilings, sterile floors. He wondered whether all this sterility could be contagious, then sighed heavily in gratitude for the children he’d already produced.

A sharp, severe voice brought him back from his mental meanderings. He turned to see the exasperated face of Dr. Mooring glaring at him. He had apparently been calling Zachary for several minutes. Mooring was a no nonsense professional who believed dealing with those Hollywood people was his punishment for undetermined sins.

After a brief, clinical discussion with the doctor, Zachary was allowed to visit the patient. He looked down on the bed at the crumpled figure of Peter Gregory. Peter’s eyes were barely visible beneath the massive bandage covering his head, but he was obviously awake. He became

quite agitated when Zachary entered the room. Zachary hurried to the bed and tried to calm Peter down. In the process, he himself became agitated.

“What happened out there? What the hell happened?? Jesus, Peter, I didn’t bring you all the way out here so you could keel over a tombstone! A stone, I might add, belonging to the subject of your screenplay!”

Peter tried a half hearted smile and said weakly, “Well, it should get you some publicity.” Wrong comment at the wrong time.

“The *worst* kind of publicity! Dammit, I want to make a serious movie here, Peter. How serious will I be taken when this gets out? God, I can just see the headlines. LOVESICK LUNATIC COLLAPSES WHILE WORSHIPPING DEAD ACTRESS. Sound crazy, Peter? Well, that’s what everyone will think. They’ll think you’re crazy. And, by association, they’ll think I’m crazy.” He paused as the tirade started to subside. “Hell, maybe I am.”

Peter lay still during this verbal explosion. Before it began, he’d been anxious to tell Zachary exactly what happened. Now, evidently, was not a good time for honesty. If Zachary thought Peter was crazy, he was under no obligation to prove it.

“I fell,” he said simply.

The look on Zachary’s face made it clear that this explanation was not acceptable. It also indicated the matter would not be pursued. Zachary had been in this business long enough to know that the truth was seldom necessary.

In the brief seconds that followed, an uncomfortable tension took root. Peter made the first move to end the silence.

“So what did the doctor say? Will I live?”

Zachary laughed just long enough to ease the strain.

“That depends on how many more trips you make to the cemetery. Actually, you have a nasty gash and a mild concussion. He wants to keep you overnight for observation and suggests about ten days of rest and solitude. I thought maybe you could spend a week or two at my beach house. It’s restful enough and, with me stuck in the city, you’ll have plenty of quiet.”

“I really have a lot to do, Zachary. I’ve got a ton of research ahead of me.”

“So begin at the beach. You’ll only be about a mile away from *Casa Deane*.”

“Walter Deane’s place?”

“Same. Though I don’t think he lives there anymore, if he lives anywhere. Funny, I can’t remember if he’s dead or not.”

“If not, he must be about a hundred and fifty.”

“Near enough. I know he faded from public view several years after Jennifer died. Rumor has it he went nuts and was put in some kind of asylum, but I’m not sure how true that is. Anyway, *being sure* is your job.”

“Who takes care of the *Casa*?”

“I think the sons stay there occasionally, not often and never together. Regardless, the place is fully staffed. I’ve heard it’s almost the same staff of fifty years ago. Real Hollywood relics.”

“Really? Who dusts the butler and the maid?”

“Watch the cynicism, son,” Zachary said with a grin. “A decadent society is only as strong as the faithful servants it pays to keep silent.”

Peter looked thoughtful, or at least as thoughtful as one could look with a head covered in bandages.

“Zachary,” he asked, staring into space, “how did I get here? How did *you* get here?”

“Well, I understand a woman called for an ambulance ...”

“What woman?”

“Huh? I don’t know Peter. Just some woman from the cemetery. I guess she was out there paying her respects to someone when she saw you hit the stone. Why? What difference does it make?”

“But who called *you*?”

“How the hell should I know? My secretary took the call. I thought it was someone from the hospital. Didn’t you ask them to call me?”

No, I didn’t, thought Peter. But he couldn’t say that out loud.

“Oh, yeah. I guess I did.”

Peter’s face was ashen and his expression blank. No one else had been near the gravesite. He’d been completely alone. Except for ... oh, God, that was impossible!

He came back from the pain of his private thoughts to see the worried face of Zachary Max staring at him intently.

“What is it, Peter?” he asked in a whisper. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, Zachary. Really.” His voice was barely audible. “I’m just tired. I need to get some sleep, that’s all.”

Zachary nodded in agreement and started to leave when he saw Peter’s trembling hand reach for Zachary’s arm. He stood there long enough for his arm to be released and to assure himself that Peter was asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The early morning sun danced across the gently rolling ocean waves. Although the brilliance of its glow caused his eyes to burn and water, Peter continued to stare transfixed by the hypnotic appeal of the scene.

Zachary had been right about this place. Its solitude and peaceful silence had revived his senses. In the few days since his arrival, Peter began to feel whole again and the throbbing in his head steadily decreased.

Yet despite the healing tranquility, the throbbing in his mind would not be stilled. Events at the cemetery could not be simply ignored. She had been there. He had seen her, had spoken with her. For reasons not clearly understood, it was to him she had chosen to reveal her ghostly image. The very thought sent an icy chill throughout his body.

Perhaps the morning air has grown colder, he unconvincingly lied to himself.

Unsteady legs found their way from the balcony back inside. He rubbed his hands together to generate some heat. Having failed, he headed for the kitchen and the coffee pot.

The steaming hot liquid did its work well. As his insides began to defrost, his brain began to clear. He could now focus in a more rational manner on the situation at hand. Taking a quick, pleasantly burning gulp of the coffee, he formulated a plan.

Peter walked into the study and looked at the books lining the shelves. He’d never seen such an extensive collection of Hollywood related materials. Every facet of the industry was covered by this library, no aspect too minor to be overlooked. Exhaustive histories of the medium, technical missives on lighting and sound, in depth exposés on actors, directors and the films themselves.

A determined search yielded reward. He found three separate volumes dedicated to the life and work of Walter A. Deane.

Familiar as he was with Jennifer, he knew little about the players in her life's drama. Armed with the three biographies of her husband, Peter returned to the living room. He sat down on the sofa at the sliding glass doors facing the beautiful ocean view. He picked up one of the books and stretched out, making himself comfortable. As he turned to page one, Peter felt a warm feeling of satisfaction. His research has finally begun.

CHAPTER EIGHT – The Past

For the seasoned Hollywood cynic, God holds no claim on sacred matrimony. Marriages aren't made in heaven. They're made in a studio publicity department. Consequently, no one lives unhappily ever after. Marital harmony reigns supreme.

Half of the publicist population was overpaid to present this image to a gullible world. The other half was underpaid to cover the mess of reality.

The Dream Factory didn't only make movies.

Each time a decidedly handsome and undeniably married leading man had a fling with his leading lady, the unsuspecting public was deluged with photographs of wedded bliss. Photos would suddenly appear of the lovely little woman on one arm, a child or two on the other, and a family dog at his feet.

Should the married leading man be more attracted to another leading man, those same photos would be issued to the press. But this time, in addition to the photographs, a rumor or two would be circulated about a baby on the way or maybe suggest an affair with his leading lady. Ah, Hollywood!

Of course, the biggest (and perhaps the only) believers of this deception were the deceivers themselves. Most of the human population wasn't stupid enough to swallow completely the meal being served. Those that were that stupid were those doing the serving, namely, both halves of the publicity department. Not one half against the other but both, collectively, as one giant unit of hapless and hopeless, "*your future depends on this*" company men.

What a comfortable position for the publicity family at Pinnacle Pictures! Your biggest star is the sexiest woman in the world and she wants to marry a very talented, but utterly boring, gnome of a man. She lights up the universe. He dims the bulb.

She loves him, they think (or at least suppose). But their thoughts and suppositions don't make box office draw. Reality, once again, takes a dive.

But what exactly is reality in this particular case? What truths lie behind this oddest of couples?

Jennifer Gibbons was a mousey brown, nondescript extra in films that were too bad to be called B-movies. It was in a bottle of peroxide that she found the courage and conviction to rise to the top. In the beginning, though, not many looked beyond the platinum blonde to the heart and soul within.

Jacob Max, the head of Pinnacle Pictures, did. He wanted her groomed to be the best and knew there was no one better than his most successful director. He proudly introduced his latest discovery to Walter Addison Deane.

Slight of build, a somewhat hunched back, with his reddish hair thinning prematurely, Walter was admittedly not much of a man to the naked eye. But no one questioned the precision of his mind or the abilities he possessed. Under his direction, the worst actors delivered stunning performances.

When he first encountered Jacob's Next Big Thing, Walter, like his boss, saw more than an empty headed bombshell. He knew the perfection of art when he saw it. He saw that perfection and so much more in Jennifer Gibbons.

It was a natural fusion. A sensuous beauty with untapped resources. A Svengali with a Midas touch. Walter was filled with an overpowering need to mold and shape this woman into the definitive actress. Jennifer willingly yielded her clay.

In the background, Jacob Max watched the scene with a skeptical eye. Of course, he wanted his actors and actresses to be talented, the best they could possibly be. Profits weren't realized otherwise. But this time, with this woman, more was at stake. This was more than a potentially good actress. This was a potential star. The two were not necessarily interchangeable.

Star quality was not dependent on talent. Stars were manufactured and presented in a tidy package for public consumption. If you had the right face, the right attitude and the right amount of luck, you were at a definite advantage. If you had the right studio, you were home free.

Jennifer had the right face and attitude. Pinnacle was the right studio. Jacob had the power to provide the luck. And all could be for naught if this sexy little profits-maker succumbed to the ideals of art. Directors could afford to be artsy. Sex symbols could not.

Jacob discovered too late that this situation was riddled with pitfalls. Walter Deane was the best director in the business and a frequently scouted one. He remained at Pinnacle Pictures through an uncommon sense of loyalty. To do anything to annoy him meant putting money in someone else's pocket.

Even after hours of rehearsal, he still dreaded the meeting about to take place.

Jacob's office was surrounded on three sides by large windows overlooking the kingdom of his studio. Areas not covered by glass were painted the purest of white. The furniture was strategically placed and solid black. The effect was power and commanded respect. True, many careers ended in this room. Yet many more wayward children renounced their reckless ways when confronted by The Boss in these intimidating surroundings.

His secretary buzzed the intercom. Mr. Deane was here for his appointment.

Regal bearing, family father. This approach brought back many a stray. Should the gods smile favorably, it would work again.

"Walter, my good fellow. Come in, come in! Miss Carstairs, coffee, please. No trouble at all. Sit down, Walter. Make yourself comfortable."

The dutiful Miss Carstairs returned with a perfectly prepared cup of coffee and wordlessly withdrew.

Jacob played with his imported cigar for a few moments before lighting it. Then he inhaled deeply and blew out several flawless rings of smoke.

"I've just seen the rushes of *Hannibal Pass*. Might be the best western ever made. You've done a superb job."

"Thanks, Jacob," Walter responded. "I'm rather pleased with it myself. Never really thought of myself as a cowboys and Indians director."

Jacob smiled warmly, half sincere and half for effect.

"The problem with you, Walter, is that not only can you direct anything, you can always be counted on to direct it well."

Walter smiled, a little embarrassed. Praise, even when justified, made him awkward and uncomfortable.

"I appreciate those kind words, Jacob. One likes to please the boss."

“Ah, and please you do! I see you’ve been working with the Gibbons girl. Let me tell you, the improvement is astounding. You’re making her into quite an actress.”

“Well, thank you. Believe me, she has a natural gift or my help would mean nothing.”

“Maybe so, maybe so. But you must be working her pretty hard to achieve the results I’ve seen. How often do you work with her?”

“Oh, every chance I get. Mostly outside the studio, of course. No time during the day. On the weekends, she comes out to the beach house and we’ll spend hours working on diction and timing. I’ve even got her memorizing the classics. I tell you, Jacob, she is truly gifted.”

Jacob winced slightly at the word *classics*, but fortunately Walter didn’t notice.

“Well, that’s splendid, Walter. I think it’s wonderful someone of your caliber has taken such an interest in her career.”

Suddenly, his face clouded over and his look became one of paternal concern.

“Walter, did you say *weekends*? You don’t mean she stays overnight?”

“Oh, it’s okay, Jacob. We’re pretty much secluded out there. And besides, I have a live-in housekeeper and butler.” Walter chuckled. “A built-in chaperone, if you like.”

Jacob remained serious. “Still, it doesn’t look good. You know how the press is, Walter. They’ll jump at this sort of thing. They always do. Young Jennifer’s career could be ruined before it even begins.”

The surprisingly naïve director was visibly stricken.

“Jacob, I’m not a lecherous old man,” he stuttered. “My intentions are strictly professional! You understand that, don’t you?”

A sudden revelation flashed through Jacob’s mind. *My god, he hasn’t slept with her yet!* He was at once filled with amusement and scorn. Neither emotion showed.

“I do, my boy. Of course, I do. But those newspaper folk don’t care what’s honorable and what isn’t. If they get wind of this, Jennifer could face a future of non-speaking parts in low budget movies.” He made a dramatic pause. “If she even *has* a future.”

Silence hung between them for several minutes. Walter’s face was drawn and pale as he sat stunned by this mounting dilemma. The only outcome he desired was Jennifer’s success.

“Jacob, I’m sorry. I should have used my head,” he spoke quietly. He hung his head and stared at nothing. “I’ve been around a long time. I should have realized the damage this could do.”

Jacob got up from his chair and walked around the desk. He gently patted Walter’s slumping shoulders.

“No harm done yet, my boy. But I think it would be best if these weekend get-togethers stopped for a while. Let the press get its dirty gossip elsewhere.”

“I agree. Absolutely.”

Walter glanced at his watch and jumped from his seat.

“The time! I’d no idea! I’m sorry, Jacob. I’ve got to run. I’m shooting a scene in ten minutes.”

He walked briskly to the door, but looked back at Jacob before leaving. He bore the expression of a young boy adoring his father.

“Thank you for your help and understanding. I really appreciate it. No wonder you’re in charge.”

Then, he was gone.

Jacob Max stood there, smoking. Little by little a smile appeared on his face and grew until it reached from ear to ear. He buzzed Miss Carstairs on the intercom. "A glass of sherry, please," which was promptly delivered.

He walked to the window behind his desk and stared at his vast empire. He sipped the sherry and was filled with its warmth. But he was warmer still from the satisfaction of his own superiority.

It would be a short lived triumph.

One week later, Jennifer Gibbons became Mrs. Walter Deane.

CHAPTER NINE - The Present

If you had asked Peter his motive the following morning, he'd have innocently and honestly replied, "I wanted some fresh air." That the air was as fresh in the opposite direction of *Casa Deane* was of little consequence.

He lumbered along the water's edge for a mile or so. From the shoreline, he looked up at the house jutting out over a rocky peak. Having come this far, Peter suddenly realized he had no plan. How could he gain access to the celluloid sanctuary? He couldn't simply just walk in.

He stood there staring for some time, his mind furtively seeking a solution to this problem. Absorbed by his thoughts, he didn't hear the approaching boat, nor did he hear it slip into the dock.

What he did hear was the strong, sharp voice of a man no more than two feet away.

"What do you want?" came the unfriendly question.

Peter dutifully jumped, to the satisfaction and amusement of the stranger. Already jittery from the recent past, Peter's last nerve crumbled and his knees gave way.

A strong arm grabbed him before he fell. His first look at the face with the foreboding voice relieved his fears. The face looking intently at him now was filled with concern.

The unidentified man guided him gently toward the steps which led up to the house. With great care, he helped Peter sit down on one of the stone slabs, and then sat down beside him.

The man stared at him for some time before speaking again. His eyes took in every feature of Peter's face, finally resting on the uncovered remains of the wound on his forehead. Self-consciously, Peter raised his hand to cover the scar.

"I suppose I should apologize for scaring you," said the stranger. The hard edge to his voice had become somewhat mellow.

"No, no," Peter said, "My fault. I'm trespassing."

"Well, technically, you're not. The beach is open to anyone. But what I want to know is what's so fascinating about that place?" He nodded his head in the direction of the house.

"Oh. See, I'm a bit of a movie buff. A historian, actually. If I'm not mistaken, I think that's *Casa Deane*. Where the famous director lived."

"Interesting," said the man. "Most people spying out the premises do so only because of her. The hardly seem to know who Walter is ... or was."

Unwittingly, Peter had said the right thing. Now he gazed intently at the stranger's face. It was the face of a man slightly older than himself. Steel blue eyes were surrounded by thick brown hair with a reddish tint. The suspicion in his eyes vanished. A kindly compassion remained.

The stranger leapt to his feet.

“So you’re interested in Walter Addison Deane, Director of the Stars? Well, you’re in luck. I shall take pity on you since you are obviously a wounded man. If you are up to the climb, I will lead you onward and upward to the inner sanctum of a creative genius.”

Peter started to offer confused protest, but was dismissed by a wave of the stranger’s hand.

“We won’t be shot as trespassers, I assure you,” he said with sarcasm. “They hold little sacred in that shrine up there except for the memory of the legend.”

Still, Peter hesitated. “And they won’t mind us barging in?” he asked.

“You, perhaps, they’ll mind. Me, they have to accept. Allow me to introduce myself. I’m the offspring of that legend of legends. I’m Jeremy Deane.”

“Oh!” Peter stopped halfway up the hill. “Walter and Jennifer’s youngest son. How stupid of me! I should have guessed. Look, I’m sorry. I can’t impose on you like this.”

He started to retreat down the steps. Jeremy grabbed his arm and continued the ascent.

“Now you’re confirming your stupidity. You’ve already imposed upon me by your very presence. Having established that, let’s forge ahead. Besides, what historian worth his salt would deny himself this kind of opportunity?”

Despite the lingering aroma of stale liquor, Peter liked this man immensely. His harsh words blended with a self-deprecating humor. He may have been surrounded by success all his life, but Jeremy Deane took none of it seriously.

In short order, they reached the top of the steps. What Peter saw took his breath away. Directly in front of him was the largest swimming pool he’d ever seen. Finely crafted marble statues of Greek gods and goddesses were evenly placed around it. The pool was surrounded on three sides by the faded pink stucco of an elegant Spanish style mansion.

Jeremy laughed off Peter’s obvious admiration.

“You’ve seen one millionaire’s cottage, you’ve seen them all.”

They entered the middle section of the house which appeared to be an indoor courtyard. To the right was an enormous sunken living room. To the left was an equally large, fashionably decorated dining room. Over the solid oak table hung an elaborate, yet tasteful, crystal chandelier.

Beyond that, Peter could only imagine. At that very moment, an ancient male servant shuffled into the courtyard from somewhere beyond the living room.

“Master Jeremy,” came the gravelly old voice, “you made no mention of a guest for lunch. Hilda will be unprepared.”

“Oh, Hilda be damned! Tell the old witch to shake the cobwebs from her brain and be creative. I want my good friend here to experience that renowned Deane hospitality.”

The old man smiled in spite of himself, and shuffled off again through the living room.

“Albert,” Jeremy called after him, “is His Highness awake?”

“Master Jeremy,” the old man shook his head in rebuke. “You should show more respect, you know.”

He turned to walk away, perhaps forgetting the question. All that could be heard was a mumbled, “Not a bit like Master Jonathan.”

Jeremy laughed. “As if that’s going to insult me. Certainly not the first or last unfavorable comparison to dear brother Jon. Come on, let’s satisfy your peaked curiosity.”

Peter followed as Jeremy turned a corner at the end of the living room and walked down a tiled corridor. The farther they went along the hallway, the darker it became. At last, they reached an open door. Without bothering to knock, Jeremy walked right in.

The heavy curtains were drawn tightly over the windows. It took some moments for Peter's eyes to adjust to the darkness. When they finally did, his eyes fell upon a figure in a wheelchair, his back facing the intruders. The shriveled up old man in a tattered, velvet bathrobe made no sound, no movement. He sat in one direction, his expressionless face staring at a photograph in a gold frame. Even in the dark, Peter knew the face in the photo was the timeless beauty of Jennifer Deane. Jeremy's mother. He also knew something else. He mind raced a mile a minute as he thought, *Oh my God, this is Walter Deane!!*

CHAPTER TEN

"Father," said Jeremy, "please forgive this intrusion, but I wanted you to meet a very good friend of mine by the name of" Jeremy stopped and looked helplessly at his very good friend.

"Peter. Peter Gregory."

"Ah. Father, I'd like to introduce you to my very good friend, Peter Gregory. He's here to steal the silver and ravage the cook. Actually, Peter is a bit of a Hollywood archeologist. He's interested in famous old relics," continued Jeremy, "and, quite frankly, I can't think of an older fossil than you."

Peter was dismayed at the obvious lack of respect, even though it was tinged with Jeremy's own ideas of humor.

"Don't worry, Peter. The old man is as deaf as he is dumb. He can't see you. He can't hear you. He probably can't even smell you. He stays alive by some inner resource the finest medical minds can't begin to fathom."

He wheeled the chair back to face the photograph. As they departed, Jeremy glanced back over his shoulder.

"Probably live to a thousand, the old roach. Must have been kind to his mother. Isn't that what they say? Hope that's not true. I should have been dead long ago."

"You were just a boy when she died," Peter said in a hushed, reverent voice.

"True enough, but over the years I've been exceptionally *unkind* to her sainted memory." Jeremy paused as if to relieve his mouth of a foul taste. "Nasty piece of work, really. A regular slut."

Peter tried covering his shock with a light response.

"Are you always so frank with strangers? Even those strangers who are very good friends?"

Jeremy's laugh was infectious. He crossed the living room to a well stocked bar. He filled a quarter of a glass with ice, the rest with scotch. Then, with Peter trailing like a faithful dog, he headed outside to the poolside table.

Lunch was being served. A platter containing thick slices of cold ham sat between a basket of hot, homemade rolls and a bowl of fresh, garden salad. A pitcher of iced tea was placed nearest the guest, while a bottle of scotch sat ready for the host.

As if no break in conversation occurred, Jeremy continued.

"Legends are powerful stories, but seldom ring true. Mr. and Mrs. Walter Addison Deane, living the life of luxury either here at the beach or down in the Hills. Fame, fortune, success. He gives her a brilliant career and two Oscars. She gives him the envious stares of strangers and two children. An amazingly happy life shared by amazingly happy people." Jeremy

took a hefty swallow from his glass. “And in her spare time, she beds every man she can wrap her legs around.”

Peter had little time to register the embarrassment he felt. A third person had been standing silently in the background but could contain his silence no longer.

“If that were true, little brother, we could at least say you came by your lifestyle honestly.”

Jeremy looked up, disgusted if not surprised.

“My, my. What a banner day this is for you, Peter. You are indeed fortunate. Allow me to introduce the real master of this mausoleum. My big brother, Jonathan.”

Peter stood up and extended a hand that hung empty in the air. He then sat back down and stared at his ham.

Jonathan glared at Peter.

“Nothing personal. I don’t like you. If you’re a friend of Jeremy’s, that’s reason enough.”

Jonathan turned his glowering expression on Jeremy. A conversation ensued which took little notice of the third-party guest.

“Your two weeks with Father were up a week ago. Why the hell are you still here?”

“And in your absence, brother dearest, who’d have looked after the old man? Albert? Hilda?”

“Hilda and Albert are the most faithful and responsible of retainers.”

“Albert is two hundred and can barely walk, see or hear. Hilda doesn’t know if there’s life beyond the kitchen. I’ll bet in sixty years, she’s never seen the rest of the house.”

“That’s enough!” shouted Jonathan. “How dare you criticize people who have given their lives to this house and this family! And in case you don’t remember, they were the ones who came running when we had a problem.”

“Well, of course they did. They were paid to. We sure couldn’t depend on Father and Mother!”

The two voices grew progressively louder.

“Father was a busy man. He had obligations. Mother chose her own road.”

“And that excuses them?”

“No. There’s no excuse for what Mother did.”

“They both had two children they ignored!”

Jonathan threw up his hands in desperation.

“I give up! I cannot, and will not, try to reason with a common drunk!!”

In less time than it takes to say *movie star*, Jeremy jumped to his feet, grabbed Jonathan’s lapels, and thrust him into the pool.

Jeremy stood watching his brother splash and flounder. All curses were lost in the water occasionally swallowed by Jonathan.

Peter remained surprisingly calm through the building fracas. With an embroidered, linen napkin, he dried off his face and clothes, made wet by Jonathan’s sudden immersion. Peter rose from his chair and walked to the edge of the pool. He tapped Jeremy on the shoulder, who turned and seemed astonished by Peter’s presence.

“Perhaps,” Peter said, “this would be a good time for me to leave. Thanks a lot for lunch.”

Jeremy smiled a warm and gracious smile. He took Peter’s hand.

“Oh, no problem. I’m glad you could join us. Let’s do it again soon.”

And with that, Peter walked to the gate and began the long descent down the stone steps, shaking his head the entire way down.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Peter made a hasty retreat to the tranquility of the beach house, but did not remain there long. He paced up and down the living room for only a few moments before deciding on his next course of action.

Piecing together a fifty year old puzzle would be difficult enough without some of the pieces being slightly misshapen. If the Deane brothers were any indication of what to expect, the road ahead could be paved with nuts.

He might not have known much, but Peter *did* know he would meet no one else by accident. A carefully prepared plan was in order. But in what direction should he go? What he needed was a link. Someone who had connections to all the disjointed puzzle pieces. Someone like ... but that was unlikely. By now, she was probably dead, although Peter had assumed the same about Walter Deane. If by some chance she was among the living, perhaps she still had a wit or two left.

Off to the car he went, his mind and Mustang set on Hollywood.

The best laid plans. His mind was intent on driving to Zachary's office at Century Cinema. His heart kept returning to Gardens of Peace.

The cemetery was not on his way to the studio. It was, in fact, considerably out of the way. It didn't matter. He needed to return there, needed to find out if what he had experienced was real, or if he had (as was much more realistic) lost his mind.

Peter smiled to himself. Zachary was expecting him shortly. Should he by some chance have another ghostly encounter, he had best keep his mind clear and his body upright. Zachary would find little humor in a return trip to the hospital. Peter found this possibility amusing, although not entirely sure why.

Once again, he drove through the spectacular entrance of Gardens of Peace. Once again, he drove along the winding lanes which led to her crypt. He looked around in all directions to assure himself that he was alone. Then he got out of the car and, as quietly as he could tread, walked to the site of her grave.

Clouds swirled above in an overcast sky that was minutes away from raining. A sharp, sudden wind swept through the air, whistling through the swaying willow trees. Peter, standing rigidly straight, could actually feel the color drain from his face. Abruptly, the wind ceased, replaced by an eerie silence. The sky grew darker and Peter grew sick to his stomach.

This was a bad idea, he thought, and decided to return, rapidly, to his car. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a figure standing a few feet away. He turned to face the figure. His nerves were raw but steady.

"I knew you'd be back," she said.

"You knew more than *I* did," Peter managed to whisper.

"No, you also knew you'd be back. You had to come back."

Without speaking and with time standing still, they stared at each other, searching each other's eyes for the comfort they both sought.

"Why?" Peter looked imploringly into her beautiful face. "Why me?"

“I know who you are. You’re the writer, Peter Gregory. You’re here to write a movie about my life. And my death. I’m here to help you.”

“How can you help me? Can you tell me how you died? Did you kill yourself? Were you murdered?”

“I can tell you, certainly, but I won’t. That’s not the kind of help I mean.”

“But if you know ...”

“If I tell you, how would you explain it? *Jennifer’s ghost told me so*. I don’t think that would sell. Not even in Hollywood.”

Peter ignored the absurdity of the situation. To him, this apparition was very much alive. The living, breathing embodiment of a long held sacred myth.

“I know more about you,” she continued. “I know your feelings for me are strong and go far beyond those of an average fan. And because of those feelings, I believe you are the best one, perhaps the only one, who’ll be able to find the truth.”

“The truth. Zachary wants the truth, too.”

“Does he? That surprises me.”

“Why?”

She laughed. “The younger Mr. Max is no different than the older one. Men in those positions never want the truth unless they have an ulterior motive.”

“No. You don’t know Zachary. He’s a man of integrity.”

“You’ve learned that in such a short time?” she asked in amusement. “Peter, listen to me. Don’t trust anyone. Don’t even trust me. The only one you should believe in is yourself. What you find, what you discover. That will be the real truth.”

“You sound like you’d deliberately lead me astray. Why should you?”

“Peter, I, more than anyone, know the value of adoration and how fragile it is. It sustained me throughout those turbulent times. I feared losing it then, and I fear the risk of losing it now.”

The eyes looking into his were filled with sorrow. She moved closer to him, so close he could hear her non-existent heartbeat. Peter wanted to wrap his arms around her and hold her tightly against him. He wanted to comfort her, relieve her sadness. But he knew if he touched her, she would disappear. Possibly forever. He backed away.

“Jennifer, I’m already lost and I’ve hardly begun. How will I know if I’m heading in the right direction?”

“First instincts are usually best. Follow your original plan and you’ll be following the right road. And remember this, Peter. I’ll always be with you.”

A sudden wind snapped a lifeless branch from the willow tree. He turned as the branch struck the tombstone behind him, then turned back quickly toward Jennifer. In that brief instant, she was gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Situations alter lives.

Just before his meeting with Zachary Max, Peter strongly felt his life would be changed forever. That feeling had now become fact. At his most inspired, creative best, however, Peter could not have imagined the extent of those changes or the events which would cause them.

Peter Gregory was a man with a mission. He was no longer merely a screenwriter employed by a studio. He was no longer working this assignment because of an intense,

obsessive interest. By powers he could not begin to comprehend, the ghost of Jennifer Deane had sought him out personally and, somehow, she found him. Explanations, if there were any, would have to wait.

This was more than a job being done for the artistic ego of Zachary Max or for Peter Gregory's own satisfaction. This was a sacred trust placed in his charge by a spirit beyond the grave. Heady stuff, but it was a task he would diligently and steadfastly pursue.

"Viola Plumb?" Zachary asked in surprise. "Oh, God, she's got to be dead by now."

You said the same thing about Walter Deane, is what Peter wanted to say. But he hadn't quite gotten around to sharing that information with Zachary yet. "If she's still alive," he said instead, "she'd be in her eighties. And that doesn't necessarily mean she's dead or even senile."

"Yeah, I suppose. Let me think. Hey, Julie!" Zachary yelled out the open office door. "If I needed to find a retired gossip columnist, where would I look?"

Whatever her instinctive reaction would have been to this bellowed appeal, no one would ever know. Julie was nothing if not discreet, particularly in her opinion of the allegedly great Zachary Max. Without bothering to respond, she set in motion the means for obtaining an answer.

Peter arrived at Zachary's office only slightly behind schedule. Zachary listened attentively as Peter finally described his adventure at *Casa Deane*. His adventure at Gardens of Peace was excluded from the narrative.

"Well, if Walter Deane is still alive, I guess Viola could be as well. Viola Plumb," Zachary repeated the name. "Now there's a name from the past."

"You knew her, then?"

"Oh, God, Peter. Who didn't know her? And who didn't trust her? That slimy, witch of a woman! She was in everybody's business and knew more about this town than the town wanted known."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't that her job?"

"It was her job to report on movies and stars. Not to destroy people's lives with any dirty piece of gossip she could dig up. Or make up for that matter. God, why do you want to see *her*?"

"I don't understand the Deane brothers. I want to know why Jeremy hates his parents. I want to know why Jonathan defends them. And I want to know why Walter Deane, a human vegetable, sits in a darkened room, staring at a photograph of the woman who repeatedly cheated on him."

"Oh," the sarcasm dripped from Zachary's tongue. "Is that all you want?"

Peter ignored the mocking tone of voice.

"Zachary, you were around when Jennifer was alive. What kind of woman was she?"

"Well, I may have been around, Peter, but you have to understand. I was a younger man, not so much in years but in position and status. In spite of my father and his connections, I really belonged to the newer breed of Hollywood. As much as I loved him, I tried to keep my distance. Didn't want to be accused of riding on his coattails. I mostly hung out with the industry idealists. The ones who were out to change what kind of movies were made and how they were made. We just didn't mix with the establishment."

"So you didn't actually know her?"

"People like Jennifer Deane I knew mainly through my father. She was only a few years older than me, but we were just traveling in different circles. She was floating around the top. I was hacking around the bottom. Same with most of the big names back then. We knew *of* them,

but seldom got to know them. I'll say this, though. Whenever our paths did cross, she certainly treated me with the utmost respect. Although I'm sure that stemmed from her relationship with my father. She really admired him. Thought he was quite a genius."

Peter thought back to his trips to the cemetery. Jacob Max was only briefly mentioned but Peter didn't get the impression that admiration was a way to describe what Jennifer felt. Add one more question to the list for Viola Plumb.

As if reading his thoughts, Julie reappeared. A small piece of white paper with an address and phone number on it was thrown onto the center of Zachary's desk.

"Hey. How did you know I was looking for *her*?" he quizzed Julie. "I thought my question was a general one about scandalmongers."

"It's a gift," replied Julie. "And I eavesdrop at doors."

"Here you are," Zachary handed the paper to Peter as he gave the departing figure of Julie a dirty look. "But if you're going there, you'd better string garlic around your neck. Carry a cross and a wooden stake, too. That vampire might be old, but I'll bet she's still sucking the life out of us mere mortals."

Peter didn't smile at the image. *The way things are going*, he thought, *I wouldn't be the least bit surprised.*

Peter completely abandoned his earlier resolve to meet no one else by chance. He made no phone call to request an invitation. From what Zachary said about the infamous Miss Plumb, he was afraid he'd be refused. For the second time today, he found himself outside of a house he desperately wanted to enter. Ideas for gaining access eluded him. He looked up at the clouds and closed his eyes. *Okay Jennifer*, he thought, *you said you'd help. So do something!*"

"Can I help you, sonny?"

Jumping out of his skin was becoming something Peter did well and often. He turned around and looked down in the smiling, wrinkled face of an elderly woman who was obviously Viola Plumb. The advancing years had done little to diminish the sharp, chiseled features he remembered from old magazines. She was chuckling, apparently amused by his reaction.

"Did I scare you? Good. What the hell are you doing skulking around here?"

"I wasn't skulking. I was ..."

"Snooping? Not much to snoop. Who are you and what do you want?"

"My name is Peter Gregory and I ..."

"Gregory? Oh, yeah, you're that writer."

"You've heard of me?"

"Hell, sonny, everybody in town's heard of you. You're the one who passed out in the graveyard."

Peter blushed. The old lady kept chuckling.

"I didn't think anybody knew that."

"Oh, hell, *everybody* knows. Don't you read the papers? Okay, I know who *you* are. What do you want?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh, do you? About what?"

"I'm writing a screenplay about Jennifer Deane and ..."

"I know," she waived an impatient hand. "I told you. Everybody knows. Pretty funny, you keeling over her tombstone."

"Yeah. Funny."

“I’ll bet little Max loved that!” The chuckle became an outright guffaw.

Viola looked up at a still threatening sky. She motioned for Peter to follow her.

“All right,” she said, “I’ll talk to you. But you’re not worth getting wet. Come inside. It’s almost tea time. You can join me.” Viola laughed heartily. She paused halfway up the front steps. “No, that’s okay. I can manage,” she said sarcastically.” For the first time, Peter noticed she was carrying two bags of groceries. He tried to correct his faux pas by offering to help. She immediately turned her back on him and, somehow, with both arms full, managed to unlock and open the door. Contrite, he followed her into the house.

Viola disappeared into what Peter assumed was the kitchen. He looked around the living room. It was crammed full of memorabilia from a bygone era, the Golden Age of Hollywood. The mantelpiece overflowed with autographed pictures of the film world’s biggest stars, each boasting loving, and insincere, tributes.

Viola came back into the room. Her hands were again full. One held two glass tumblers, the other a bottle of whiskey. Peter looked at her in surprise.

“If you were expecting chamomile, sonny, you were sadly mistaken. This here is the only *tea* that’ll touch these lips.”

She poured a generous amount into each glass. Peter was more at home with beer and wine but was afraid to refuse the glass being offered. Her opinion of him was already at the low end of the scale. He would not further his cause if he now looked like a wimp. He took a dignified sip. She took a hearty swallow.

Viola dropped her small frame into a well worn sofa. She nodded at him to take the seat directly across from her. It was on purpose. He knew that. It was, quite possibly, the most uncomfortable chair ever made.

She lit a cigarette and blew the exhaled smoke right into his face. He didn’t blink. He knew he was being tested. It was a test he refused to fail.

“Okay,” she said between inhaling smoke and gulping down whiskey. “You wanted to talk. So talk.”

Peter tried to find a comfortable position in that miserable chair. He gave up the attempt as hopeless.

“Yes, I do want to talk. I want you to tell me all you know about the Deanes.”

“In twenty-five words or less? Or can I expound at length as I see fit?”

He started to respond, then realized her questions were rhetorical. She’d say any damned thing she pleased. Much to his surprise, he liked that. Stranger still, he began to like her. A witch she may be, but she was also a gutsy old broad who’d been around a long time. Longevity alone deserved respect.

Viola must have sensed his change of heart. She pointed toward an overstuffed recliner. “If you’re gonna pick my brain about the Deanes, you might as well relax. That’s the best seat in the house. Just don’t get too comfortable and fall asleep in the middle of my fascinating reminiscences.”

Peter stretched out in the chair.

“I’ll try my best to stay awake.”

Viola looked him straight in the eyes with a venomous stare that, no doubt, had unnerved many a star in earlier days. If Peter, himself, was unnerved, it didn’t show. This lack of reaction produced from Viola a laugh so loud, it bounced off the living room walls. She refilled her glass, took a manly swallow, and slapped her tiny, withered thigh.

“Okay, sonny. Let’s get to work.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I knew Walter first, of course,” Viola began. “He’d been in the business for twenty years before Jennifer came along. Had quite a reputation for perfection. A genuinely nice man, too. Don’t see that much here in the glitter dome.”

“Most of Walter’s pictures were grade A. Every now and again, though, he’d throw in one of those artsy-fartsy films that everybody praised but no one understood. Used to drive Jacob crazy! He couldn’t understand why anybody would waste their time on something that wouldn’t make money. All hail the almighty dollar!! I think Walter only got away with those off the wall flicks because the bulk of his work was so successful at the box office. As long as Jacob got his blockbusters, he’d let Walter experiment once in a while. They didn’t bring the studio any business, but they didn’t hurt it either. Added a bit of culture to its reputation.”

“But I think when Walter started tutoring Jennifer, Jacob got a little nervous. He knew what kind of box office potential she had. He also knew how easily swayed she could be. Walter nearly had her convinced she was better than the films she was making.”

“But she was, wasn’t she?” asked Peter.

“She was a good actress, but she wasn’t great. Walter’s vision was clouded by the beauty. He’d deny it all his life, but that was the simple truth. He believed she was something she wasn’t just because he adored her.”

“Then he really did love her.”

“I didn’t say that, did I? I said he adored her. You can’t be *that* naive! They’re not the same thing at all. He worshipped her as some untouchable thing, a creature to be admired but just beyond his reach.”

Peter twinged with embarrassment. He understood that quite well. Best to move on and quickly.

“Well, he had to have touched her, at least twice. There’s the children.”

“Oh, yeah. The Terrible Twosome. God, what a couple of pissant brats!”

“I got that impression.”

“You met them? Lucky you!”

“Actually, I rather liked Jeremy.” Peter smiled at the memory. “I didn’t really get a chance to know Jonathan.”

“If you liked Jeremy, then you didn’t get a chance to know him either. Oh, he was okay back then, as far as little kids go. Certainly better than Jonathan. That one was a little monster from the get go. Probably started out that way in the womb.”

“Okay, so Jonathan and Jeremy are rotten human beings. You said yourself that Walter was a nice man. How did he get such terrible children? Are you saying it was all Jennifer’s fault?”

Try as he might, Peter couldn’t hide his resentment at this suggestion. Viola, an unmatched pro at reading people, noticed it immediately.

“Testy, testy, Mr. Screenwriter. Defending a dead woman’s honor? How noble!”

“Well, she certainly can’t defend herself!” Peter reeked with irritability.

“Oh. I’m beginning to see. You’re more than a writer. You’re a devoted fan. Another poor soul caught in the web of Jennifer’s charms. Now it all makes sense. No wonder you took a nosedive at her grave. What happened? You see her ghost?”

It was a good thing Viola laughed as hard as she did. She was too preoccupied with her own sense of humor to detect Peter's panic. For a moment, all he could think of was running out the door, getting in his car, and going back home.

The shrewd eyes of a seasoned reporter are trained to miss nothing, be it a change in expression or a slight intake of breath. Viola was no exception to this seasoning rule. She crushed out her cigarette, nearly missing the ashtray. Her frail, aged body quivered with excitement. She sat straight up and stared deeply into Peter's glazed eyes.

"You've seen her, haven't you?"

Peter returned her stare, his mouth forming words his voice couldn't speak.

"You have! I knew it!!"

"Know what?" he said hoarsely. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. I'm old, not stupid. You've seen Jennifer's ghost. She's finally appeared to somebody else."

It took a few moments before the impact of Viola's words registered on the still dumbstruck Peter. His wits soon returned, but his head began to ache and his stomach churned.

"Somebody else," he said simply. Finally, it set in. "Somebody else!" he repeated louder. "She's appeared to somebody else. You? Have you seen her?"

He was practically screaming now.

"Steady, young man. You best get a grip. Here, have another shot of this."

She refilled his glass. Peter drank the entire glass of whiskey in one swig.

"No," Viola spoke soothingly, "I'm the last person she'd honor, if you'd call it that. No love lost, you understand? No, I don't suppose you do. At any rate, I know who has and I believe it. Just like I believe you."

Peter was doubtful.

"If you never saw her yourself, how can you believe in her?"

"You'd be amazed how much faith can be put into other people. Particularly, if they're people you care about."

"You surprise me, Viola. I didn't think you cared very much for Jennifer."

"I wasn't talking about Jennifer, you idiot! I was talking about Walter. Yes, that's right. Go ahead and look stunned. At one time, this brittle bag of bones had the hots for that peculiar little man and ..."

"Walter Deane saw his wife?" Peter interrupted, his face flushed. "He told you about it?"

"No. I guessed. God, you're stupid! Of course, he told me. I can't read minds, you know. Anyway ..."

"But when? How long ago? If I ask him, do you think he'll talk about it?"

"You can ask until the cows come you, you jackass! His brains are scrambled, remember? You'd get a better response from that god-awful chair."

Peter waited for her to continue, but she said nothing.

"Well," he finally said. "What's the story?"

"Oh. I'm sorry," she said with mock surprise. "Were you talking to me? I thought you might want to interrupt me again. Finished now? Shall I go on?"

Appropriately rebuked, Peter nodded his head and patiently waited for Viola to explain. To ensure the rebuke had been properly understood, she took her time returning to the subject. She emptied the bottle into her glass, lit another cigarette, took a long, deliberate drag, crossed her scrawny legs and sat back in the sofa. Peter wanted to reach across the room and slap

the old crow, but he restrained himself. Satisfied that Peter was sufficiently annoyed, Viola began where she'd left off.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – The Past

With no particular direction in mind, Walter Deane drove aimlessly for hours. Again and again, he passed the same houses on the same streets, hoping the familiar sights would ease his troubled mind. The repetition wasn't helping. He needed comfort quickly and only one place could fill such an urgent need.

Down the winding roads he traveled until he found himself at the front gate of Plumb House. A pre-dawn mist shrouded the valley and added to Walter's anxiety. His fingers trembled as he pushed the button which would magically gain his admittance. After several, unnaturally long seconds, the gate swung back and Walter drove his car through the opening.

The house up ahead was as black as the night until a light from the porch shattered the darkness. Walter's eyes could barely focus on the image that suddenly emerged from the front door.

Shaking her head, Viola viewed his appearance with pitying eyes. She was torn between feeling sorry for him and being outraged at his lack of consideration. No phone call alerted her to his arrival. Now, as so many times before, he just showed up. *Honestly*, she thought, *men just assume an affair puts you at their beck and call.*

But her anger was short lived. As he dragged himself closer to her, Viola became immediately aware of his obvious emotional distress. She rushed toward him, afraid he'd collapse before reaching the porch.

Once inside, Viola settled Walter into the nearest chair. She ran to the bar and filled a glass with brandy which he somehow managed to swallow. Viola became more alarmed as she studied his ashen and lifeless features. At regular intervals, Walter's body shook uncontrollably, and not once since his arrival had he spoken a word. She wasn't sure if he even could.

Viola's initial impression was that he'd had a stroke or heart attack. Certainly, all the outward signs pointed that way. The longer she stood there staring at him, the more concerned she became. And still, no words passed between them.

"I'm calling an ambulance," she said at last. With an air of determination, she turned and reached for the phone.

"No." The word was strangled in Walter's throat, yet it was said with a firmness that surprised her. "No doctors," he wheezed between gasps for breath.

"Don't be stupid, Walter. If you want to die, that's your business. But you sure as hell can't die here."

"I'm not going to die," he paused and stared out the window. "Though I feel like I'm already dead."

He looked at Viola who was still holding the receiver. Whatever message his eyes were trying to convey only caused a deeper fear to spread through her veins. Despite her foreboding, she dropped the receiver back into its cradle and put her now empty hands on Walter's shaking shoulders.

"I'm not in control of this situation and you know how I hate having no control," she said quietly. "But Walter, honey, you've got me scared to death. If you're not sick, what the hell's wrong with you?"

"I've seen her, Viola," Walter struggled with the words. "I spoke to her and she spoke to me."

If he expected these few, sparse words to clear up her confusion, he was sadly mistaken. Viola's blank expression was proof of that.

Walter slipped away from beneath her hands and began pacing back and forth. Viola's nerves were at the breaking point, but she was determined to remain outwardly calm. Silent seconds elapsed into mute minutes. Viola was ready to scream at him when he suddenly spoke again.

"Jennifer. I've seen Jennifer."

"Jennifer? Jennifer who?"

Walter looked up at her sharply and the pain in his eyes made her instantly aware of the woman's surname.

"Deane? Jennifer Deane? You saw your wife??"

"And spoke with her."

Viola shook her head violently as if to shake loose the cobwebs which impaired her hearing.

"Walter, what in God's name are you talking about?" It wasn't a question. It was a shouted demand.

"I told you!" he shouted back. "I saw and talked to Jennifer! What don't you understand?"

"What don't I ...?" Her voice trailed away and her head started shaking again. When she finally spoke, it was in an amazingly gentle voice.

"You're right, Walter. I don't understand. I don't understand how you could carry on a conversation with a dead woman. Maybe you could explain it to me."

"How? I can't even explain it to myself!"

"Okay. Okay, honey. Settle down. Tell me everything from the beginning. Here, let me get you another drink."

"I don't want another drink! God, I don't even want to be alive!"

Walter started sobbing and Viola was hopelessly unable to soothe his frayed nerves. Nothing she said or did would be enough to console him. He sat down, he got up, then repeated the process several times. He finally settled down on the sofa. With tears streaming down his face, he tried to tell his tale amidst his anguished sobs.

"I went to the cemetery today. I always do on Tuesdays." He nodded at Viola for confirmation, which she immediately gave by returning the nod. "I put fresh flowers in the vase and tore away some weeds. I stood there for a few minutes just staring at her tombstone. I was sad, Viola. Incredibly sad. In spite of everything, I still love her, you know?"

Viola knew. She knew it now as well as she did all those years ago when the then very much alive Jennifer Deane had first betrayed her husband, which led the ever faithful Walter to Viola's arms and bed for emotionless, comfortable sex. The number of their beddings had been countless. Yet Viola knew that each time he took her, in his heart he was always taking Jennifer. She didn't care and she never complained. She began to look forward to their moments of passion. In the end, Viola discovered she needed them more than Walter did.

She had wandered too far in the past. Walter was talking about something important and Viola had missed most of it. She could only hope he would talk long enough for her to pick up the pieces she had unintentionally dropped.

"... and I was dumbfounded, Viola. All I could do was stare at her. Oh, God, she was still so beautiful. I walked toward her and she backed away. Understand, I still thought I was

dreaming. But then, the most incredible thing happened. That sweet, childlike voice floated through the air on a breeze and at the end came one word. ‘Walter.’

“I nearly passed out, Viola. I was stunned. She looked at me with those incredible violet eyes, and again she said my name. I stood there motionless, afraid if I moved she would disappear. So from where I stood, I called out to her. I said, ‘Jennifer, my love. What are you doing here?’” He paused, tired from the narrative and exhausted by the day.

“Then what happened? Don’t stop now!”

“She said only one word more. ‘Why?’ And then she vanished.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – The Present

The cloudy, starless sky hung like a black velvet curtain against the water’s edge. If the moon existed, it was somewhere else. No lunar reflection glimmered and danced on the ocean before him.

Peter had been sitting on the balcony for hours, staring into the darkness. At home in the East, he had often visited the beach at night to find relief from the burdens of his talent. Even here, during the most difficult time of his life, he’d found comfort in the ocean’s rolling waves, peace in its majesty. Tonight, however, he found nothing. Yet, still he continued to sit and stare.

It was a full day which produced nothing more than confusion. Turmoil was something Peter had in abundance. Order and method were beyond his grasp.

Where was he in this story he was writing? What had he accomplished and what could he expect? Questions! He shook his head. Too many questions to answer and too many questions yet to be formed.

What made it more difficult was Jennifer, both the actress and the apparition. While Peter was flattered being sought out by her ghost, he’d have been more content being ignored. The spirit world was an unfamiliar one and, as far as he was concerned, should have stayed that way. Maybe he should pack up the Mustang and silently steal away.

But again, he was struck by duty. And that ticked him off most. Duty to whom? A dead woman? Her dysfunctional family? To Zachary Max, a man he barely knew? No, Peter reasoned. His only duty was to himself and the first item on his agenda was to get the hell home.

So, of course, he remained in his chair on the balcony, staring at the ocean. Peter knew that beyond any other duty to which he might be bound, truth took first priority. With nothing to support his theory, he simply did not believe Jennifer Deane had killed herself. Fifty year old evidence was what he needed and fifty year old evidence was what he determined to find. It was too late to begin the search now. His quest would commence in the morning.

In the office of Robert Krenshaw, Peter sipped stale, lukewarm coffee from a leaky paper cup. His early morning call to Zachary had been less than well received, but the amazing Mr. Max had come through again. In response to the request, he arranged for Peter to meet with this fairly insignificant homicide detective. Those at the top of police hierarchy seldom did favors for movie people unless compensation was involved. Zachary offered little and gave less. Krenshaw, merely in need of something to do, gladly agreed to the meeting. Even more surprising, he agreed to provide the files.

But policemen were even less trustworthy than filmmakers, so Peter’s excitement remained in check. He was not disturbed when Krenshaw returned with a solitary, slender folder.

His eyes focused on the file for only a fraction of a second, but even a minor detective was trained to take notice.

“I’m sure you were expecting a great deal more,” said Krenshaw, “but I’m afraid this is all we’ve got. Like I told your boss, the case was closed as a suicide. And since so much time has passed, and since so much space is needed, we never keep more than the essentials on any solved matter.”

Peter had trouble getting around the word *boss*. To take the time to enlighten this guardian of public safety would be completely pointless. He merely smiled and took charge of the folder.

Its contents were, indeed, limited in nature. There were the police and autopsy reports. There was also the judge’s ruling, which he’d never actually seen but was identical to stories he’d read. Only one item unsettled him. A black and white photograph of Jennifer at the time her body was discovered. On the floor beside a sofa, her body lay crumpled like a sack of dirty laundry. On the side of her face and surrounding her head was the dark gray photographic image of her blood. Thank God color photography had not been the norm fifty years ago. As it was, Peter could barely keep his stomach below his throat.

He quickly turned back to the police report in an effort to discourage his body from doing what it desperately wanted to do. His eyes scanned the sheet without reading it. Soon, the waves of nausea abated and Peter was confident he could open his mouth with only words coming out.

“Thank you, Detective Krenshaw. You were right,” he said, handing back the folder. “The pickings are slim.”

Krenshaw nodded, looking intently at the file.

“And that surprises me. You know, Mr. Gregory, between you and me, I can’t believe such a high profile case would be reduced to such bare bones.”

Was it Peter’s imagination, or was Krenshaw trying to tell him something? These days, fiction and fact were intertwined.

“Well, as you said, Detective Krenshaw, the case was closed.”

“Oh, I know. But still ...” The thought went unfinished.

“I don’t suppose anyone around here goes back that far, do they?”

“I doubt it very much. The big boys who might have been around at the time are either retired or dead. Problem is, the stuff we have left doesn’t mention anybody except the officer who signed the report.”

Peter tried to recall the name he’d only just read. All his mind could conjure up was the photograph. Fortunately, Krenshaw read the name from the report before Peter’s memory became too graphic.

“Burns. Detective Thaddeus Burns. Quite a hotshot in his day. Retired about ten years ago. Still alive, I’m pretty sure. Lives down in San Diego, I think.”

Peter hoped Krenshaw would go a little further. He wasn’t disappointed.

“If you really want the first hand scoop, you should talk to Burns. I could probably get his number for you. Want me to?”

No, thought Peter. *I’d rather spend the day looking for it myself.*

“That would be great, Detective Krenshaw. If it’s not too much trouble. I’d really appreciate it.”

“See what I can do. Stay put. I’ll be back in a minute.

The minute was closer to a half hour, but the wait was well worth it. When Krenshaw came back, he had the address and phone number of retired LAPD Detective, Thaddeus Burns.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

On his drive to San Diego, Peter had plenty of time to arrange his thoughts. The Mustang sat bumper to bumper in a freeway traffic jam that Southern Californians have nightmares about.

It would be another full day. After his lunchtime meeting with Thaddeus Burns, the Mighty Magician Max had conjured up another feat Peter had previously thought impossible. This afternoon, he would get a chance to walk through the bungalow where Jennifer Deane had lived and died. The excitement he felt from that alone made the interminable drive to San Diego bearable. Before he knew it, he'd reached his exit, followed the directions and arrived at his destination: a quiet, tree lined street in a suburban retirement community.

Prior to this trip to California, Peter had a preconceived notion of retirement communities and those who lived there. Although he was fifty, that didn't qualify him as being old. He thought of himself as slightly seasoned, with decades before he need worry about being like *them*. One of *them* was certainly Walter Deane, a crippled old man in body and mind. Viola Plumb was nothing like *them*. She rattled the foundation of everything Peter believed about the aging process. But today, Thaddeus Burns would take that foundation and destroy it completely.

When the front door of the red brick rancher opened, Peter thought he was at the wrong house. Before him stood a giant of a man, not only in height but in weight. Any initial illusions about fat were quickly dispelled by the muscles bulging beneath the short sleeved shirt.

"Mr. Gregory? Come in," said a robust voice. "I'm Thad Burns. Welcome to our home."

He shook Peter's hand with a bear like grip. Peter bit his lip to hide the pain, but his wince gave him away.

"Sorry about that, Mr. Gregory. Hope I didn't hurt you."

Thaddeus gave Peter's back a good natured slap as he led him inside, the force of which nearly jettied him across the room. Once inside and steady on his feet, Peter was struck by the comfortable surroundings. The furnishings were modest but tasteful and gave the appearance of a successful life.

Coming toward him from another room was a beautiful, older lady whom he guessed to be only slightly younger than Viola. Any similarity ended there. She was full figured without being fat, dressed in a colorful, summer frock, and she exuded class from head to toe. Smiling sweetly, she came to Peter and extended her hand. Unconsciously, he took a slight step backwards, which produced from Thaddeus a hearty laugh.

"Not to worry, Mr. Gregory. Thelma here's not half as strong as I am."

"Oh, Thad, leave the poor boy alone. Why, you're as slight as the wind, Mr. Gregory. What you need is a good, home cooked meal. And when was the last time you had one? That's what I'd like to know."

Peter assumed the question was rhetorical. Even if not, it made little difference. He had no time to answer before he was whisked away into the dining room where a feast awaited him. The table overflowed with homemade fried chicken, homemade coleslaw, homemade mashed potatoes and homemade rolls. He could tell the corn on the cob was fresh (he wouldn't have been surprised if she grew it in the backyard) and was dripping with sweet, creamy butter.

"Have as much as you like, Mr. Gregory," said his charming hostess. "But leave enough room for dessert. We have apple pie with ice cream. I've made them both myself, you know."

Peter smiled. Of course she did.

"Do you have lunch like this every day?"

"Oh, no," said Thaddeus. "She's just showing off for the company."

He gave his wife a playful jab in the ribs. She countered with a not-so-playful slap on the wrist.

“You’ll have to forgive my husband. After all those years on the force, he’s forgotten how to act with civilized people.”

Thaddeus ignored the mild rebuke and filled his plate to just beyond capacity. Peter joined in his dining companion’s enthusiasm, realizing it had, indeed, been a long time since he’d had a decent meal. He also realized how much he needed one. The conversation was light and predictable with each one enjoying to the fullest the food and each other.

After two heaping servings of pie piled high with a mound of ice cream, Thelma suggested coffee in the living room. Thaddeus bounced out of his chair with the grace and energy of a man half his age. After fruitlessly offering to help clear the table, he motioned to Peter to join him in the other room.

Thaddeus reached up to the mantelpiece and retrieved two cigars from the antique humidor. He handed one to Peter who graciously accepted and the two sat quietly smoking until Thelma served the coffee. Peter expected her to discreetly excuse herself from the room and the conversation. He was, therefore, quite surprised when she settled herself on the sofa next to her husband. He was even more surprised when it was she who first brought up the subject of his visit.

“So you’re writing a movie about Jennifer Deane. That’s been done before, hasn’t it?”

“Well, a few years back there was a network mini-series, but, quite frankly, I thought it was more fiction than fact.”

“Not too well received, as I recall,” she said. “I believe the ratings were terrible. The sponsors never got back their investment. It caused quite a stir at the network and, of course, the studio was blamed for botching the project. The writing was terrible and the facts, as you say, were just not there.”

Peter stared at her open-mouthed. His confusion was so obvious that Thaddeus couldn’t help laughing.

“I guess your research is lacking some. I’m the one you expected to have the entire lowdown, but Thelma’s a much better source. She used to work in that crazy business. Better still, for you anyway, she used to work at Pinnacle Pictures. She was Walter Deane’s secretary.”

“Oh, Thad, now look what you’ve done. That poor boy’s choking on his cigar. Honestly, Thad, you’ll never grow up. Are you okay, Mr. Gregory? Let me get you some water.”

The glass of water was gratefully accepted and in a few moments, the color returned to Peter’s face. This time, Thaddeus looked genuinely contrite and he apologized profusely to his guest.

“I’m really sorry. I guess I should have told you on the phone. It’s just that I thought ...”

“You thought it would be funny, you overgrown baby. You’ve always been such a child. How the police department ever functioned with you in charge is beyond me.”

“Okay. Okay. I said I was sorry. You sure you’re all right, Mr. Gregory?”

Peter nodded.

“I’m fine. Really. It was just a bit of a shock, that’s all. I’ve had quite a few of them since I started this script. You’d think I’d be immune by now.” He turned his attention to Mrs. Burns. “So you actually worked for Walter? That must have been exciting.”

“It had its moments, I admit. You couldn’t avoid being caught up in the glamour, not with people like the Deanes. The premiers. The parties. Always bumping into celebrities.”

“That was part of Jennifer’s problem, though,” said Thaddeus with a twinkle in his eye.

“Oh, shut up,” his wife glared at him.

“What was part of the problem?” asked Peter.

“Well.” Thaddeus started to mumble something, knowing he’d be reprimanded once again.

“Oh, go ahead,” Thelma said. “Say whatever daft thing you’re dying to say.”

Thaddeus leaned closer to Peter with an air of conspiracy in his voice.

“Well, the way I understand it, part of Jennifer’s problem was she spent way too much time bumping into celebrities. Male celebrities, if you know what I mean.”

“Thaddeus!”

“Honey,” he said innocently. “You said I could say it.”

“But I didn’t expect even *you* could be that crude.” She paused. “But I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Not after all these years.”

“You mean she had a lot of affairs? That’s hardly a secret, Mrs. Burns,” said Peter, smiling at the innocence that time had not diminished. “It’s a matter of record she had a pretty active social life.”

Thelma liked the proper manners of this young man. His respectable ways made her less guarded in her conversation.

“She was never really a happy woman. She loved Walter, make no mistake. But in a comfortable way, like the fit of a well worn pair of shoes. Walter was safe, but he was also boring. Jennifer was a woman who craved excitement. Unfortunately, the only excitement she ever found was in the arms of other men.”

“But she always went back to Walter.”

“More important, Mr. Gregory. Walter always took her back.”

A long, drawn out growl emanated from the silent policeman. Both heads turned in his direction.

“As you can see, Mr. Gregory, we’re treading on dangerous ground. This is probably the only thing Thad and I don’t agree on.”

“You don’t believe he loved her?” Peter asked Thaddeus.

The response was firm and quick.

“I’m not so sure he didn’t kill her!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A chill began at the bottom of Peter’s spine and traveled with alarming speed to the base of his neck. Finally. Someone who shared his theories. Things were beginning to mesh. But he knew he needed to proceed with caution. He wanted the thoughts to be Burns’ alone and would be careful not to influence him with his own presumptions.

“That’s a pretty bold statement, given the record. After all, the case was solved.”

“The case was *closed*, Mr. Gregory. Closed and solved are not necessarily the same things.”

“Are you implying you believe it was murder, not suicide?”

“Are you implying you believe otherwise? Don’t take me for a chump just because I’m old. I don’t for a minute think you believe she killed herself. If you did, you’d go about your business and write your damned story. But you’ve come to see me, haven’t you? Why? Because you want the gory details of the suicide scene? Hell, you can get that from any old newspaper and the files you’ve already seen. No. You came to see me because you also believe it was murder and you’re hoping for corroboration. Am I close, Mr. Gregory?”

“Dead on the money, so to speak.” Peter couldn’t hide his embarrassment. “Look. I’m sorry,” he started to apologize, but Thaddeus waved the thought away with his beefy hand.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” said Thaddeus. His tone was less accusing. The tenseness of the moment passed. He smiled warmly at Thelma.

“At last, honey. Someone who openly admits what I’ve been saying for fifty years.”

“Openly?” asked Peter.

“That was Hollywood, remember?” said Thelma. “Land of Make Believe. If the ending doesn’t suit you, simply rewrite it.”

“True enough. I do that plenty myself. But in this case, who would want it rewritten? And why?”

Thaddeus got up to get himself another cigar. Peter politely declined the offer of seconds.

“If I knew for certain the answers to those questions, you’d have no story to write. I can only speculate. And as you can imagine, speculation is *not* accepted police procedure.”

“It is in the investigative process. At least, that’s where it starts.”

“But there’s no starting point here, Mr. Gregory. The case was closed.”

“Understood. But you clearly don’t believe it was suicide. In fact, you said you thought Walter Deane killed her.”

“Hogwash!” from Mrs. Burns. “If you’re looking for suspects, the list is miles long.”

Thaddeus laughed.

“Seems to me, honey, we’ve had this discussion before. What do they call it? *Déjà vu*?”

“Who cares what they call it? And as I recall, it wasn’t a discussion. It was a downright, heated argument.”

“Why are you so sure it wasn’t Walter?” Peter asked her.

“Walter Deane was a good and decent man. He loved his wife. He constantly forgave her infidelities.”

“Maybe so. But there are limits on decency. He himself had infidelities that needed forgiving, what with his affair with Viola Plumb.”

Throughout this entire business, Peter had been on the receiving end of surprises. He was surprisingly self-satisfied to now be the giver. Both Thelma and Thaddeus stared at him in amazement.

“And how do you know that?” asked a visibly shaken Thelma.

“From the best possible source. From Viola herself.”

“God!” roared Thaddeus in amusement. “Another relic lives on!”

“Hush. It’s not funny. What purpose could there be for telling you, a complete stranger, something that private? That wicked, old woman must have lost her mind.”

Peter didn’t like seeing Thelma so upset, but he knew very well he couldn’t explain the reason for Viola’s confession. These were two practical, down to earth people whose lives would not be enriched by the appearance of a ghost. Luckily for him, Thaddeus didn’t share his wife’s sense of moral outrage.

“It’s a long time past, dear. You said it before. That was Hollywood. Sure, it’s a land of fairy tales, but it’s also a land of gossip, innuendo and unavoidable brutal facts. And as far as I’m concerned, more brutal than confessing a secret tryst is getting away with murder.”

“So you’re convinced it was Walter,” Peter stated what he thought was obvious.

“Well, I’d like to believe it, Mr. Gregory. He’s my suspect of choice. But if the truth be known, I’ve no more reason to suspect him than anyone else on Thelma’s list. No hard and fast

facts. No circumstantial evidence. Just a lot of years' worth of professional intuition. Can't go to court on that, can you?"

"So if suicide's wrong and it *is* murder, who would cover it up and why?"

"The district attorney and the inquest judge are the only ones who could have covered it up. Nobody else would have the power or authority needed to make it stick. As to *why*, it usually comes down to the same thing: money."

"You mean some sort of pay off?"

"Possibly. Let's not forget that the L.A. judicial system had a mile high history of crooked behavior. Which, simply put, means you can't rule out blackmail."

The three of them sat silently sorting out their own thoughts. Peter's eyes were transfixed on the swinging pendulum of a clock on the mantelpiece. Suddenly, his eyes focused on the time.

"Oh my God," he jumped from his chair. "I've got to run back to Hollywood. I've got an appointment to go through Jennifer's house."

"The mansion in the Hills, or the place where she died?" asked Thaddeus.

"The place where she died."

A glimmer from his bygone youth reached across the face of Thaddeus Burns. Thelma retrieved his jacket and handed it to him before he asked the question.

"You wouldn't care for a little company, would you? I promise I'll stay out of the way."

Peter heaved a sigh of relief.

"I was afraid you wouldn't ask. I'd be delighted for you to join me. And please, Mr. Burns, feel free to get in the way all you like."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

For Peter, the drive back to Hollywood was entertaining and informative. Thaddeus had been at the heart of every police related, Hollywood scandal since Hollywood hit the Golden Age. His stories were filled with an insider's knowledge and seasoned with a delicate mixture of fact and gossip. There were murders and suicides galore in this tragic community. Some were solved to satisfaction, some merely forgotten. Yet, to Thaddeus, the case which caused him the greatest anguish was the unresolved matter of Jennifer Deane.

As they approached the street where she lived her last days, conversation dwindled and the car grew eerily quiet. When Peter pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine, neither one made an effort to get out of the car. They sat there in silence, frozen both by time and their own emotions. Finally, they exited the car at the same time, almost as if on a prearranged cue.

Peter raised his eyebrows in mild surprise as he looked at the house around him.

"I'll be damned," he said aloud.

"What's the matter?" asked Thaddeus.

"I've read every book and article ever written about Jennifer Deane. I've always had the impression she spent the end of her life in squalor." He waived his arm across the surrounding area. "This is hardly an impoverished neighborhood."

"Remember one thing, if nothing else. What you've learned up to now is fiction. Studio executives. Publicity people. They all had a hand in preserving the sacred myth and creating the supreme legend. Poverty makes for a much better story. No. This is surely not a slum. It's not the grandeur of Beverly Hills, mind you. It's what you call understated respectability."

As they walked toward the house, Peter noticed something else.

“It’s incredible. The house and grounds are in mint condition. As though someone still lived here. I was given to understand that the place has been vacant for five decades. Another piece of fiction?”

“No. That’s true enough. This place, like the mansion in the Hills, belongs to the Deane estate. They’ve contracted with gardeners and housekeepers to keep it in its original condition. Part of the Jennifer Deane legacy. Downright spooky, if you ask me.”

Spooky. If he only knew. An unexplainable, yet familiar, chill began to take hold of his body. *Oh, no*, he thought to himself. *Not here. Not now.*

Thaddeus slapped him on the back and, of course, he jumped. Consumed by his own thoughts, Thaddeus didn’t notice.

“Say. How are you going to get in?”

“What? Oh. I have a key. Zachary Max made arrangements with ...” He stopped, obviously perplexed. “That’s funny. I don’t know who he made the arrangements with.”

“Doesn’t really matter, does it? Come on. Are you going in or not?”

Peter stood at the door with the key in the lock, but was unable to turn the key.

“What’s wrong?” Thaddeus asked. “Is the key stuck?”

“Uh, yeah. It must be.”

The key wasn’t stuck. Peter’s hands couldn’t move. In fact, none of him could move. Thaddeus took control of the situation by taking control of the key. With one, swift turn, the door was unlocked and Thaddeus pushed it open.

“After you, Mr. Gregory,” he motioned for Peter to enter.

Peter summoned every ounce of energy he possessed to get his body to obey his commands. Now inside, he felt a bit more relaxed. Fear had given way to curiosity.

Both men moved gingerly about the silent shrine, with Peter taking particular caution not to awaken the past. Thaddeus stood staring at the living room and its furnishings.

“I take back what I said earlier,” he said. “They’ve restored this place a good bit. This sure isn’t the scene I walked in on that day.”

Peter reverently sat down on a chair once occupied by his movie star idol.

“What exactly did you see that day?”

Thaddeus stared at spot on the floor no more than two feet from where Peter sat.

“There,” he said solemnly. “The first thing I noticed when I entered the house. Sprawled out on her stomach was the most beautiful woman in the world, the back of her head covered with blood.”

Peter closed his eyes as Thaddeus continued.

“I knew, of course, she was dead before I got assigned the case. The police frequencies were jammed with reports from one cop to another. We barely had time to get our team together before the place was buzzing with the press. It took almost the entire force to keep those newshounds at bay. I never understood how they got here so fast.

“Anyway, like I said, I knew she was dead but when I got inside and saw her, I just couldn’t believe it. I’m no wimp, I assure you, but the sight made me sick to my stomach. The gun had been held at such close range that little was left of the back of her skull. Tissue and brain matter were everywhere.

“Look,” he pointed to a faded pink mark on the white fabric arm of Peter’s chair. While Peter realized in horror what the stain had been, Thaddeus found similar, small stains on the sofa and carpet.

Thaddeus knelt on the floor looking around in bewilderment. Suddenly, the clouds of confusion cleared away.

“I get it now. That’s what’s wrong. That sofa wasn’t there. It was more like where you’re sitting. That chair and another were over here.”

He slid the sofa back slightly and revealed another, larger stain on the light, gold carpeting.

At this, Peter knew he would lose his lunch. He jumped from the chair, mumbled, “I need some air,” and found his way through the house to the kitchen door. Once outside in the backyard, Peter did, indeed, forfeit the meal he’d so hungrily eaten. And it was here, in the solitude of a well ordered garden, that Peter’s previous fear was confirmed.

His stricken body staggered over to a chaise lounge on which he collapsed, shaded from the sun by a giant oak tree. His head was spinning in tempo with his still churning stomach. Even with his eyes closed and his thoughts elsewhere, Peter could feel her presence. When he opened his eyes, he was not surprised to find her kneeling over him.

“Are you okay?” she whispered in that breathy voice.

“Me? I’m just fine,” he snapped, unable to disguise, much less understand, his anger. He sat up in the lounge and stared intently at the ghostly apparition.

“You know, Jennifer,” he continued angrily, “everyone I’ve met so far thinks I’m either an interloper or an idiot. And, quite frankly, I’m not so sure they’re wrong. What’s more, pretty soon I can add another to the list of people who think I’m crazy.” He nodded his head in the direction of the house.

“Don’t worry. He can’t see me,” she said.

“No, but he can see *me!* And you know what else he’ll see? He’ll see someone he thought reasonably intelligent talking to thin air. I’ve got to tell you, Jennifer, if I haven’t lost my mind yet, I will shortly. Why don’t you tell me, Jennifer? Just tell me who killed you. Then let me write my screenplay and let me go home. Hell. Maybe I don’t even want to write the damn story anymore.”

Jennifer’s eyes never left Peter’s. His searching gaze made him even more uncomfortable.

“So. You want to quit? Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you weren’t the best choice.”

“But why choose me in the first place? I know. I know. You can’t tell me.”

“No. I can’t. If you don’t find the reason yourself, then the reason won’t matter.”

She turned her head to hide the tears, but Peter saw them anyway. He had felt like an intruder. He had felt like a lunatic. And now, he felt like a heel. He never meant to make her cry.

He tried to apologize by comforting her. He put his arm around her shoulder and leaned toward her to kiss her cheek. Before he could, she pulled away from him and stood up.

“No,” she said. “It isn’t right. I can’t let you do that.”

Peter, rather than being annoyed, was amused.

“I’d ask you why,” he smiled, “but I’m sure you wouldn’t tell me.”

She returned the smile and shook her head.

Peter was frustrated. There were many things he wanted to say, but none would provoke an adequate response. He settled for a hasty retreat.

“I should go back inside. If Burns hasn’t noticed me, I’m one lucky fellow. I’m not about to push that luck.” As an afterthought, he added, “I’ll be seeing you.”

He walked rapidly away and, without turning back, entered the house through the back door. This time, he disappeared first.

Peter walked back to the living room prepared to defend, if not justify, his apparent insanity. If Thaddeus had noticed his peculiar behavior, he kept it to himself. In fact, he hadn't even seen Peter come into the room. His mind, his thoughts, and his unanswered questions were in a place five decades away.

CHAPTER NINETEEN – The Past

The two, young Homicide Detectives, Thaddeus Burns and Roland Howard, stood on the patio looking down the driveway. An unbelievable crowd had gathered, an unpleasant mix of the press, the neighbors, and the morbidly curious.

“Ever seen anything like it, Thad? It's more of a circus than Barnum & Bailey. Geez! Where'd they come from?”

“Where they came from ain't my question, Rollie. I want to know how they got here so fast.”

“A leak in the Department, maybe? More likely somebody monitoring a police band, though. Don't you think?”

“Monitoring a radio or a departmental leak would never get this many people here in such a short period of time. Hell, this place was a zoo before you and I got here. Doesn't that strike you as odd?”

“Not really, Thad. After all, we've got a major movie star, a glamorous sex symbol, dead in her own home. By her own hand! That's bound to draw a crowd.”

Thaddeus turned to Rollie in such a way that his back faced the mob at the driveway's end.

“What makes you so sure it's suicide, Rollie? You got any facts to back that up?”

Rollie was surprised by his partner's questions.

“I thought Doc Carpenter made that perfectly clear. The range of firing, the powder burns on her hand, the angle of the wound. What more do you want? The fingerprint results?”

“Fingerprints don't mean zip! It doesn't take a master criminal to figure out how to fake them. All you have to do is wrap the hand around the gun and press the fingers on the right places.”

“Why are you so hot to make this a murder? This could be the easiest case we've ever solved and we could walk away happy men. But you want to turn this into some kind of conspiracy. Why can't you leave well enough alone? In half an hour we could be on the golf course. Like we planned before the call came in.”

“Hey, that's a point. Who made that call?”

“I think I'm getting a headache.”

“I'm serious, Rollie. You know who made that call?”

“How would I know, Thad? I didn't take it, did I? We pay other people to do that.”

“We don't pay anybody! The people pay for it. People like Jennifer Deane pay for it, and they also pay for us to do our jobs. Thoroughly, efficiently and accurately!”

Thaddeus could not hide his indignation. The color of his face deepened in direct proportion to the rising octave of his voice.

“Okay, Thad. Calm down. I'll find out where the call came from. But don't get your hopes up. You could be facing a dead end.”

Thaddeus Burns looked at the house where the body still lay.

“No deader an end than she faced.”

Inside proved no less a circus atmosphere than out, the only difference being that in here the parade was official. This was, of course, no ordinary investigation, and the number of people pouring through the house was much higher than those attending a more commonplace inquiry.

Thaddeus had been called to the phone, so his partner was left with the arduous task of restoring order to the havoc surrounding him. When Thaddeus returned, Rollie could tell by his expression the call had not been a good one.

“Let me guess,” Rollie said, “That was the Chief?”

“In all his glorious splendor. *Wrap it up, Thad. And wrap it up quickly.*” Thaddeus mocked his superior’s voice. “He wants this case closed by the end of the day.”

Now it was Rollie’s turn to be suspicious.

“The end of the day?” he asked dumbfounded. “How the hell do we do that? What’s the big rush?”

“If I knew that, I’d be the Chief. And if I was the Chief, I’d be sitting on my duff smoking overpriced cigars, not standing here looking stupid. Well, if he wants a rush job, he’ll get his damn rush job. That guy over there,” he nodded toward the stairs. “Who is he and what’s he doing here?”

“You know, Thad, for a Hollywood cop, you sure are Hollywood ignorant. That’s Jacob Max, the head of Pinnacle Pictures.”

“Swell. He has a name,” Thaddeus said testily. “Now see if you can justify your paycheck and find out why he’s here!”

Rollie knew from experience that Thaddeus Burns had a bug up his butt and withdrew from his presence immediately. As he headed for the stairs, he could hear his partner barking commands at the unsuspecting masses huddled around him. Rollie was glad to be out of firing range.

Crouching at the bottom of the steps was the obviously shaken figure of the most powerful man in Hollywood.

Rollie extended his hand to the movie mogul.

“Mr. Max. I’m Detective Roland Howard. If you’re up to it, I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Certainly. Certainly.” Jacob nodded his head and spoke in barely audible tones. “I’m sure you’re most curious as to why I’m here.”

Rollie smiled.

“Let’s just say it crossed my mind.”

Beads of perspiration were clearly visible on Jacob’s forehead. They could not be explained away due to the heat. There wasn’t any. It was nerves that produced them and Rollie wanted to know the cause of that nervousness.

“You see, I knew Mrs. Dean was under quite a strain lately, what with her contract having recently been cancelled. I stopped by this morning to see how she was holding up.”

“That was a very decent thing to do, Mr. Max, considering it was you who fired her in the first place.”

Jacob Max may have had the look of a caged beast, but it was the tongue of a serpent that lashed out at the detective.

“I’m not entirely responsible for that, Detective Howard. I follow the dictates of my Board of Directors. It was they who decided to let her go. I merely did their bidding.”

Jacob looked defiantly at the young policeman. Pompous fool, thought Rollie. He knew perfectly well who had the power at Pinnacle Pictures and it was certainly not the Board of Directors. Fine. If he wants to play games, then hardball it would be.

“See that guy over there, Mr. Max?” Rollie pointed in the direction of Thaddeus. “He’s in charge of this mess and he’s in a very bad mood today. Sudden deaths upset him. And suspicious deaths make his downright crazy.”

“Suspicious?” Jacob interrupted. “She killed herself. What’s suspicious about that?”

“Ah, well. You see, that’s where it gets tricky, Mr. Max. There’s usually a reason for someone being that desperate. And if, somehow, we stumble on a good enough reason, we might just find ourselves also stumbling on what we like to call an accessory after the fact. Maybe even find a little bit of criminal intent. Changes the picture entirely, don’t you think?”

Rollie was bluffing. He’d never seen anyone charged with a criminal offense in connection to a suicide. But he was sure this was a fact to which Jacob Max was totally ignorant. Judging by the fear which had suddenly crept into his eyes, Rollie was dead right. It was time to bring in the big guns and no bigger gun could be found in all of Southern California than Thaddeus Burns. It was merely a coincidence that Thaddeus chose this moment to walk over to them, but the timing was impeccable. Rollie would certainly use it to his best advantage.

“Is there a problem here, Detective Howard?” came the deep, brusque voice.

“No problem here, Detective Burns. Mr. Max was just about to explain the reasons for his being in this particular house at this particular time.”

Thaddeus growled.

“Fine,” he said abruptly. “While he’s at it, have him tell you in what particular manner he entered the house.”

“Why, with a key, of course, sir,” Jacob responded with touch of sarcasm in his voice. “Or did you think I broke in?”

Thaddeus glared at his new found adversary.

“In case you didn’t know it, Mr. Max, this is a police investigation. And if you choose not to cooperate in a civilized fashion, I would be neglectful of my duties if I didn’t charge you with obstructing justice. So unless you’d like to spend a little time in a locked cell, I suggest that you answer any future questions with a less sharp voice. I trust I’ve made myself clear?”

“Yes, Detective. I’m terribly sorry,” said the suddenly repentant Jacob Max. “It’s the strain from all this, I assure you.”

Humility and Jacob did not mix well. His attempt at contrition failed miserably. Thaddeus would have loved an opportunity to grill this beastly little man, but other matters demanded his immediate attention. He left the movie mogul in Rollie’s capable hands.

Rollie did not immediately resume his questioning. He allowed for the imposing figure of Thaddeus Burns to retreat into the distance. Once again, his judgment served him well. Although he was obviously insincere, Jacob was equally unnerved and jumped at every question thrown his way.

“Something puzzles me, Mr. Max. For what purpose would Mrs. Deane entrust you with a key?”

“That’s not at all peculiar, Detective. I have keys to most of my employees’ homes.”

“No doubt, I’m sure. But Mrs. Deane was no longer an employee, was she?”

“That’s true, but I hadn’t had the opportunity to return it to her,” he hesitated a moment, “until today, of course.”

“Oh. So that’s why you came? You intended to return the key?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“So, of course, you were under the assumption she was still alive when you came here.”

“Yes.”

“So, if you thought she was still alive, why did you let yourself in?”

“Because she didn’t answer when I rang the bell.”

“I see.” Rollie paused. “She didn’t answer the doorbell, so you let yourself in. It didn’t occur to you that she might have gone out?”

“Well, you see ...”

“Mr. Max, do your other employees allow you such liberties with their homes? Are you given free rein to come and go as you please? The people in your care are a trusting lot, aren’t they?”

“Trust is not an issue, Detective. Are you implying that I entered Mrs. Deane’s home for some nefarious purpose?”

“A woman is dead under conditions not entirely in line with suicide. If she is dead by means other than her own, I can’t think of anything more nefarious.”

The semblance of control had left Jacob Max. The beads of perspiration returned.

“If you’re suggesting I had anything to do with this, you’re very much mistaken! I didn’t kill Jennifer Deane!”

“I never said you did.”

Rollie turned on his heel and began to walk away. He glanced back over his shoulder at the trembling figure behind him.

“Stay in town and stay available, Mr. Max. I’ll be talking to you again. Soon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

The house of chaos had become uncannily quiet. The body was removed to the morgue. With its departure also went the police photographers, the coroner’s team and various underlings, all returning to their offices to sort out their findings. Alone in the otherwise empty house were the detectives in charge, Burns and Howard, left to sort through their thoughts.

Once their colleagues left the premises, Thaddeus and Rollie, in silent agreement, headed to the kitchen and sat down at the table. Neither one wanted to stay in the living room where the remains of the crime were still very much in evidence. Blood and gore held no fascination for these two, seasoned detectives. Cause was much more important than effect.

Rollie rifled through the refrigerator, searching for something to quench his thirst. At least this investigation proved fruitful. He took out two bottles of ice cold beer and handed one to his grateful partner.

“So what do you think?” asked Thaddeus after a long, satisfying sip from the bottle. “Did Jacob Max kill Jennifer Deane?”

“If I knew that,” Rollie echoed his partner, “I’d be the Chief.”

“If you *were* the Chief, would you expect a resolution by the end of the day?”

“Doesn’t matter, Thad. If we don’t give him one, he’ll give it to himself. I have a feeling a final report was prepared long before we got here this morning.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Only one thing pushes the Chief that hard. Hollywood politics. I’m telling you, Thad, I bet the word’s already out that it’s a suicide. Signed, sealed, delivered.”

“So why send us here in the first place?”

“Decoration, my good man. Here’s the department doing its job. Whether we want a real answer or not, we have to pretend we do.”

“I guess you’re right. It’s all a damned show,” Thad said wearily, rubbing his temples with his beefy fingers. “Just one more question, though, Rollie.”

“Shoot, partner.”

“Do you think Jacob Max killed Jennifer Deane?”

“I don’t know,” Rollie shook his head as he stared at the golden liquid before he took a drink. “I’d like to think he did. He’s a nasty bit of goods. Thinks he has all the answers without knowing the questions. That’s always suspicious. He’s got more than two faces. Probably a dozen. You can see that in his eyes, his face, his manner.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t make him a killer. It just makes him a hypocrite. A natural Hollywood Big Deal. And from what I gather from your conversation with him, he’s a pretty proficient liar.”

“Oh, no question, Thad. He was certainly lying about why he was here.”

“And about why he let himself in. If he didn’t kill her, he damned well knew she was dead.”

“And that’s the bigger mystery. If it was suicide, how did he know? And how did he get here so fast?”

“Which is a pretty strong argument against suicide. If he’s not the murderer, then he knows who the murderer is.”

“So what’s his game? Covering up? For whom? What would a successful man like Jacob Max gain by covering up someone else’s crime? That doesn’t make any sense. Which, unfortunately, brings us back to suicide.”

“Not necessarily. A little knowledge about something like murder could be extremely profitable.”

“Blackmail? Jacob Max?”

“Well, we already know he’s no saint. Who’s to say he’s above blackmail? Hell. Under the right circumstances, who’s to say anyone is?”

“No. It doesn’t fit, Thad.”

Rollie wasn’t buying this theory, but Thaddeus was a determined salesman.

“Think a minute, Rollie. Blackmail doesn’t necessarily mean money. Max is a big shot, right? Supposing one of those dear, little lambs tries to go astray. The right kind of secret would make those people beholden to dear Mr. Max. Indefinitely. Maybe no money changes hands, but it’s still blackmail. And a damn fine reason for trying to cover up something as ugly as murder.”

“Don’t you think you’re stretching a bit?”

“Maybe. But I’m sure of one thing. There’s more to this business than we see on the surface. Do you think it’s suicide, Rollie? Do you think Jennifer Deane killed herself?”

Rollie didn’t need to respond. Both he and Thaddeus knew his answer. However, before he could confirm what he and his partner knew, the phone rang.

“Saved by the bell,” said a smiling Rollie.

“Come on,” Thaddeus said, “let’s get back to headquarters.”

“Aren’t you going to answer it?”

“What for? You know very well who it is. Let the old man think we got lost or something. Give him something to worry about.”

“I may not know what happened in this house, but I do know one thing. That grizzled, old goat doesn’t give beans about you and me. Particularly *you*.”

“Then why would I want to talk to him any sooner than I have to? Let’s go get some lunch before we head back. We could grab a hot dog or sandwich somewhere.”

“Hell, if we’re going to get into trouble for being late, we might as well make it worthwhile.”

“Good idea. I ain’t been to The Brown Derby in ages.”

Throughout this playful banter, the ringing of the telephone persisted in the background. It continued for a full ten minutes after the detectives left.

The smell of garlic filled Homicide Chief Pomeroy’s office and mixed with the lingering aroma of a high priced wine. Pomeroy was not amused.

“I hope I’m not interfering with your lives by asking you in here this afternoon. I so like my men to be happy. You two are happy, aren’t you?”

No humor attached itself to these scathing remarks. Pomeroy was angry.

“We were hungry,” Thaddeus said unmoved.

Pomeroy let it slide. He knew these two men were the best detectives he had. He also knew they would hate what he was about to say. And, in turn, they would hate him. But since they already did, not much would be lost.

“Okay, gentlemen. Let’s get to it. While I was waiting for your return, I had plenty of time to go over the reports your colleagues handed in. And now, I’ve seen yours. And yours isn’t complete. You didn’t indicate the manner of death.”

“The manner of death,” Thaddeus said, “has not been determined.”

“Not established by whom? The preliminary report of the initial officers on the scene matches the report of the coroner. Both state plainly the death resulted from suicide. You have a problem with that, I take it?”

“I have a problem making that determination with no proper investigation.”

“There’s nothing to investigate. Suicides are funny that way. They leave very little to the imagination. I told you before. I want this thing settled quickly.”

“Sir,” Rollie spoke up for the first time. “What’s the rush? Give us a little more time and maybe even *we’ll* believe it’s suicide.”

“There isn’t going to be any more time. I’ve got the press hounding me, not to mention the family. Everybody wants to know. Even City Hall wants a definitive answer.”

“City Hall?” the two detectives said in unison.

“Yes. City Hall. This is a movie town and Jennifer Deane is one of its best known citizens. The sooner this is wrapped up, the happier everyone will be. Including me. Now fill in the manner of death and sign the damn thing.”

Thaddeus stood up and walked away from Pomeroy’s desk. He shook his head in bewilderment as well as refusal.

“I don’t have enough to go on to believe it was suicide. And I won’t put my signature on something I don’t believe in.”

Pomeroy knew this man well enough to know he would stick to his guns no matter the consequence. But Chief Pomeroy had no options. By now, the whole world knew that the name of the detective in charge of this case was Thaddeus Burns. It was imperative that he sign the report.

“Look, Thad, I understand your dilemma. And I respect and admire your principles. But this is one time ideals mean nothing. If you won’t fill in the manner of death, then I demand that you at least sign the form.”

“Demand?” said Thaddeus, astonished.

“Or else,” continued Pomeroy, “I’ll demand your resignation.”

Rollie and Thaddeus were shocked. Never before had anything like this happened. No case, no matter what the political connections, had ever been forced to such a hasty conclusion with such uncompromising threats.

“You can’t be serious, Chief,” Thaddeus said. “You expect me to resign?”

“I’m not expecting it, Thad. I’m commanding it. You’ve got a young wife with a baby on the way. You’re going to need a bigger place to live when the baby is born. You won’t get one on the salary you’ll be making from the kind of job you’ll wind up with when you’ve left the force. So it seems to me, you’ve got two possible courses of action. You can continue to stand up for your principles, or you can provide a decent future for your family. Doesn’t sound like much of a choice to me.”

“No,” said Thaddeus, his spirit crushed. “It doesn’t.”

“Look, Thad, I’m giving you an out. I’m not asking you to sign something you disagree with. You’ve no problem with the facts stated in the report. All you’re going to sign is your acknowledgment of those facts. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“So after I sign it, you’ll fill in the manner of death. Isn’t that convenient?”

Thaddeus tried to maintain his determination, but the ground gave way beneath him. Pomeroy knew he had won. Detective Thaddeus Burns leaned over his superior’s desk, grabbed a pen and signed the report. Without any further words, he and his partner abruptly left Chief Pomeroy’s office, walked down the long corridor and out the front door.

They walked in silence to Rollie’s car and, without discussion, headed for the nearest tavern. Only after they’d finished their second straight whiskeys did Rollie dare to speak.

“You didn’t have a choice.”

Thaddeus couldn’t look at his partner and friend. No amount of liquor could numb the pain of his shame.

“Tell that to my conscience. Tell that to Jennifer Deane.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – The Present

It was a quiet ride back to San Diego. Each man was a prisoner of his mind. Thaddeus held captive by the past, Peter a hostage to the present. Unbeknownst to Peter, Thaddeus wallowed in the murky waters of a fate he could not control. Peter concentrated on the fate of the woman whose spirit invaded his every thought and directed his every action.

Thaddeus debated about telling his companion the truth about those terrible days, but his pride had not diminished with the passing years. Peter himself was almost tempted to share his own secrets, but common sense assured him the results of such a confession would be folly. He would not risk losing the respect of the only person he had met for whom such a thing truly mattered. Thaddeus, a man long trained in the schooling of personal emotions, sensed this. His dilemma in confessing the truth of his part in the Jennifer Deane drama became less of a quandary and more of a necessity. So, swallowing his self-esteem, he broke the silence and spilled his story, fact upon painful fact.

Peter listened spellbound to the detective’s narration. It was a credit to his driving ability that the car remained on the road and out of harm’s way. It was a credit to himself that he held his tongue still and did not interrupt with the questions burning in his brain. Only when Thaddeus had completed his story did Peter venture to speak.

“So the official report is a forgery.”

“With respect to my signature, no. With respect to the facts as we saw them, again, no.”

“But as to the cause of death, it is.”

“Strictly speaking, the answer is also no.”

“But there was no evidence of suicide.”

“And there was no evidence of murder, either.”

“But you, yourself, don’t believe that.”

Thaddeus shifted his bulk in the Mustang’s narrow seat.

“What I believe doesn’t change anything, Mr. Gregory. The record will stand as it is without proof. And after fifty years, what kind of proof can exist? No, I’m afraid that the truth has long been dead and buried. Quite possibly, along with the perpetrator.”

“Jacob Max? You think he killed her, don’t you?”

“He’s certainly near the top of my list. But he’s not the only one. There’s always Walter Deane.”

“Yes, but he’s still alive. You said *dead and buried*. That wouldn’t apply to him.”

“Not physically, of course. But from everything I’ve read or been told, he’s pretty much gone in the brain department. He’s no more alive than Jennifer. There’s no key to unlock his mental prison. Whatever he knows will remain buried in the depths of his mind.”

Thaddeus paused as the car pulled up in front of his house.

“I’m sorry,” he turned to Peter, “I guess I haven’t been much help to you today. But I’m grateful for the chance to see that house again. Even if it did stir up a lot of unanswered questions. I wish I could have been more useful.”

“To the contrary, Mr. Burns. You’ve helped me quite a bit. At least now I’m certain that Jennifer Deane didn’t kill herself.”

“And how does that help you if you don’t have her killer?”

“I guess I’ll just have to find him.”

Although Peter spoke confidently to Thaddeus, his inner self lacked the optimism he recently displayed. The truth was he had no genuine confidence at all. He wasn’t even sure of his last statement to Thaddeus in referring to the killer as *him*. There was nothing to prove it wasn’t a *her*. The reality was, he was no further along in his investigation than when he first began and, certainly, no closer to the truth.

But now he at least had a beginning. He had a detective from the scene who didn’t believe the suicide either. And that was something. On this tiny bit of information, he had a place to begin. The question was, where to go next? Unfortunately, that question had no immediate answer. So back to his apartment at the Hollywood Palms. To continue his research or to retreat from it, Peter wasn’t sure. But it was a place to go.

It had been a long day and Peter was reminded by the hollow feeling in his stomach how he’d been relieved of his lunch and how hungry he’d become. He was also well aware of how empty his refrigerator was and, although it was very late, he was fortunate to find a grocery store still open around the corner from the Palms. Loading up the passenger seat with two full bags of unnecessary and nutrition less junk food, he headed home.

It is a phenomenon of nature that the telephone only rings when you’re unable to answer it, and thus was the predicament in which Peter found himself. Struggling with his key and his groceries, Peter could hear the persistent ringing from outside the door. As would be appropriate, it promptly stopped as soon as he reached it. He stared momentarily at the silent phone, grunted, then made his way to the kitchen where he feasted on pretzels, potato chips and cheese doodles,

which he washed down with a cherry cola. Having satisfied the pains in his stomach, he headed for the bedroom and, exhausted, collapsed on the bed. Here he satisfied the pain in his head. His desire for rest overtook him quickly and in seconds, fully dressed, he fell asleep.

He was sitting atop a beautiful, chestnut stallion. As he held tightly to the reins, the magnificent creature ran rapidly across a massive plain. It didn't matter in which direction they rode, they were surrounded by nothing. At breakneck speed, the horse would turn left, then right, but always they faced a vast, empty space. Where they were heading, Peter didn't know. He was devoid of emotion. All he could feel was the wind in his face. All he could see was a barren wasteland. He heard nothing more than the ground giving way beneath the stallion's hooves. And then, in the distance, he heard it. The faint, out of place ringing of a faraway bell. He shook his head to clear his senses, but still the bell continued to ring. He turned his head to follow the sound and, in doing so, failed to see the approaching fallen tree. His horse had not and jumped gracefully, yet powerfully, over the hazard. In the process, its unprepared rider flew off and hit the ground hard. On all fours, he shook himself like a wet dog, trying to shake away the pain burning his knees. His eyes could not adjust to the darkness in which he suddenly found himself. When at last his confusion cleared, he realized where he was. On the bedroom floor.

And that faraway, distant bell? The telephone, of course. And by the time Peter recognized the source of the ringing, the phone had once again become still.

"Blast!" he said in a voice loud enough to wake the entire apartment complex. He rose from the hardwood floor like a phoenix out of the ashes, stood in the darkened bedroom and stared into the surrounding blackness. Suddenly, he became acutely aware of the soreness in his legs from his fall out of bed. He sat down on the mattress to relieve his aching body. He eased himself backwards until his head found the soft comfort of the pillow. Then he closed his eyes.

The hours passed by slowly. Although his eyes remained closed, his mind remained alert. He had missed two telephone calls placed at unusual hours and, convinced of another yet to come, he patiently awaited the third. When at last it came, he was prepared and grabbed for the receiver before the first ring was complete.

"Hello!" he nearly screamed into the hard piece of plastic.

The line remained quiet and Peter yelled "Hello!" again.

"Yes. This is Mr. Gregory, is it not?"

The disembodied voice which came crackling through the wire unnerved an already neurotic Mr. Gregory. It was barely audible and so lacking in strength Peter could not distinguish male or female. Only one characteristic was obvious. The voice was old.

"Mr. Gregory? Are you there?" the faded, ancient sound impatiently asked.

"Yes. I'm sorry. This is Peter Gregory," he stumbled over his words. "Who are you?"

"Doesn't matter, my boy. Not important. What *is* important is what you're doing. And you've got to stop."

"Stop what? What are you talking about?"

"This business of Jennifer Deane," the voice stopped as though this, by itself, was explanation enough.

Peter waited for more, but nothing came.

"Hello," he said, "are you still there?"

"Yes."

“What about Jennifer Deane? What business should I stop?” he prompted.

The age weary voice grew irritable.

“Your snooping around, asking questions. Too many questions. Questions bring answers. Answers bring pain. The dear woman’s dead. We’ve suffered so much. It’s all got to stop.”

This long narrative had its effect on the old, unknown person. The hoarse, whistling sounds coming through the phone made clear what a strain it was under. Peter could almost picture the tears he believed must be falling down this person’s face. He wanted to comfort the caller and, more importantly, for the caller to remain on the line.

“Please,” he whispered gently, “tell me who you are. How can I help you? I just want to help.”

“No, no, no!” the caller’s panic rose to fever pitch. “Just stop! Stop what you’re doing! No good, you see. Nothing good.”

Before Peter could speak again, he heard a click, then the unmistakable hum of a disconnected call.

He sat on the edge of the bed, gripping the receiver and staring blankly into space in a still unlit room. For the second time that morning, he said, “Blast!” this time with none of his earlier force. This time, the word caught in his throat and nearly choked him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The pink strips of dawn peeked through the slats of the vertical blinds and danced merrily on the bedroom walls. Peter, awake since the mysterious phone call, stared at the sight, mesmerized by the changes of color from pink to orange to yellow. When the hypnotic dance was over, the room was filled with the warm glow of daylight. Reluctantly, Peter stirred from the safety of his blankets to the uncertainty of a newborn day.

He walked to the bathroom on cautious feet and entered the shower stall with trepidation. His every nerve was raw and fear was his constant companion. Only when the pulsating rhythm of ice cold water cascaded down the length of his body did he feel himself relax. The more the icy drops pounded against him, the more in control he became. He dried himself off, slipped into his robe and walked to the kitchen.

The table contained the remains of last night’s junk food frenzy. He cleared away the opened, half eaten bags of greasy delights, then began preparing a real meal. He started the coffee, fried some bacon, scrambled some eggs and toasted an English muffin. He filled his mug with the steaming, freshly brewed coffee and sat it down next to his plate. Knife and fork at the ready, he plunged enthusiastically into his breakfast banquet.

Although never a Boy Scout, he should have nonetheless become fairly well acquainted with the phrase “Be Prepared.” He was not. When the bell first rang, he spit out a mouthful of eggs and leapt toward the phone on the kitchen wall. He stared at the telephone in temporary confusion as, once again, he heard a bell ring. This time, the ring was loud and long. This time, he realized it was the doorbell.

He opened the door with such force that it nearly came off its hinges. Whatever ghostly apparition he expected to find did not materialize. Instead, he found himself face-to-face with the smiling, smoking figure of Zachary Max.

The smoke from the cigar clenched in his teeth swirled around Zachary’s head and gave him an unearthly appearance. At first, a chill ran down Peter’s spine and he found himself unable to speak. Then a quick, hearty laugh erupted from within him and his fear-frozen features melted into grateful recognition.

“You look disappointed,” his friend said cheerily. “Expecting someone else?”

“Oh, these days, you never know,” Peter said, guiding his guest to the kitchen and offering a cup of coffee. “I seem to be making more enemies than friends.”

Zachary accepted the coffee and sat himself down at the table, indicating by a wave of his hand for Peter to finish his breakfast.

“Sorry to intrude on you so early, but a producer’s day begins at first light. We don’t have the luxury of relaxing the morning away.”

“Relaxing?” Peter began in protest, when a piece of the muffin lodged in his throat and he began to cough uncontrollably. He grabbed his coffee and took a long swallow of the now, fortunately, lukewarm liquid.

Zachary jumped up and had begun to slap Peter on the back when the crisis passed. Sitting back down, he eyed his friend warily.

“You okay?” he asked with concern.

“Yeah. I’m fine. It’s just that I wouldn’t use the word *relax* to describe the last few hours.”

Then he began the narration of what had transpired since he arrived back home from San Diego, clearly avoiding his trip to Jennifer’s house. For obvious reasons, he wanted to delete any reference to his conversation with Jennifer Deane. Out of a sense of loyalty to Zachary, he wanted to leave out the proposed possibility of the elder Max being a murder.

The abbreviated version of events was enough to spark Zachary’s interest.

“And you’ve no idea who it was? Nobody you’ve met so far?”

“Hard to say, Zachary. All I can tell you it was old and scratchy.”

“Old and scratchy,” Zachary repeated. “Could have been Viola Plumb. Is that possible?”

“Could have been,” Peter said doubtfully. “But what would be her point?”

“To scare you off the scent. Maybe she knows more than she pretends. More than she wants discovered. And maybe you’re getting too close to whatever it is.”

“That’s the problem, Zachary. I’m not close to anything. I’ve met a lot of people with a lot of theories.”

Too late, he realized he’d made a mistake. Zachary lit up the end of his cigar.

“What theories?”

“Well, the only one I’ve really heard,” Peter diplomatically lied, “is the possibility of Walter Deane.”

“Ah. The scorned husband. After the butler, it’s always the spouse who did it. Won’t make for much of a story, but ...”

Peter interrupted.

“But if it’s the truth, that’s enough. That’s what you want, isn’t it Zachary? The truth?”

Zachary took a long, deep puff on his cigar. He stared intently across the table into the eyes of Peter Gregory, who found the hesitation perplexing. With nothing concrete to make him think so, Peter had a feeling that the thoughts in Zachary’s mind would not be the same words to come out of his mouth.

“Of course,” he smiled. “Of course I want the truth. That’s what this movie is all about. So get back to work and get this mystery solved. Which reminds me, I nearly forgot why I came. Thought it might help you to visit Jenniwa House in Beverly Hills.”

“Jenniwa House?”

“Jennifer and Walter. Jenniwa. Cute, huh?” he chuckled sarcastically. “Anyway, I brought you a key to the mansion.”

He handed Peter his gift, then stood up, preparing to leave. Then reaching into his pocket, he turned back to the table.

“I’m becoming a senile, old man. Something else I almost forgot. Here’s an open pass to the studio. With this little baby, you can enter any place, any time you want. Hope it comes in handy. When you get there, if you need anything, just call my extension. If I can’t get it for you, I’m sure my efficiency expert, Julie, can. Keep in touch.”

Handing over the pass, Zachary reached down and grabbed a broken piece of bacon, walked out of the kitchen, and let himself out the front door.

Peter looked at the key and the pass he held in his hand. He placed them gently down on the table. For the umpteenth time in twenty-four hours, all he could do was stare into space.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The breakfast so painstakingly prepared was dumped into the trashcan and the dishes dumped into the sink.

Peter headed for the bedroom to get dressed. Remembering he hadn’t yet shaved, he went into the bathroom to correct the oversight, then back to the bedroom where a sweater, jeans, socks and shoes were hastily thrown on his body.

He went back to the kitchen and, picking up the key and studio pass, stuffed them into his pocket. He bent over to remove the full bag from the trashcan to take to the dumpster and prepared to leave the apartment when he eye caught sight of the telephone on the wall. He debated the issue for several moments, then came to a decision. Dropping the bag to the floor, he reached in his back pocket for his wallet. He dug around in the collection of bits and pieces of paper until he found what he was looking for.

Tentatively, he grabbed the receiver. With a sense of determination, he punched down the numbers. He held his ear close to the earpiece to get the maximum effect from the voice he expected to hear. As the phone continued to ring, he became disappointed, afraid the party he was trying to reach wasn’t home. After the tenth ring, when Peter was ready to give up, a voice came across the line.

“Hello. What do you want, whoever you are?” the voice came loud and clear. It may have been old, but it was definitely not the feeble voice he heard early this morning.

“Anybody there? Speak up, dammit!”

Peter couldn’t help smiling.

“Yes, ma’am. Miss Plumb. Viola. It’s Peter. Peter Gregory.”

“Gregory? Oh, yeah. You always dial numbers then don’t talk? Nice hobby.”

The color of embarrassment rose in his cheeks, the image perceived by the unseen, former columnist.

“Okay, so now you look stupid. And so early in the morning! What else have you planned for the day?”

“Well, you see,” Peter stumbled over his words. He couldn’t understand why this woman so unnerved him. “I was hoping,” he continued, “that if you had some free time, maybe I could stop by and talk to you later.”

“Oh, you were hoping that, were you? Well, let me check my schedule. Let’s see. There’s breakfast with the Governor. Then for lunch, the President’s flying into town and, if I can ditch him early enough, I’ve been invited to go sailing with the Queen of England.”

The pink in Peter’s cheeks had turned crimson. His good humor had changed, too.

“Look, if you don’t want to see me, just say so.”

Viola's chuckle turned into full-scale laughter.

"You are the testiest young man I've ever met. Life getting you down, handsome?"

No response.

"All right. Since you obviously can't stay away from my gorgeous, Madonna-like persona, you might as well come over. But make it after 2:00. I've got a life, you know."

She hung up.

He would kowtow to the old crow later, of course. He needed her too much to not. In the meantime, however, he swore a steady stream of vile oaths into a dead phone line.

He marked the location of Jenniwa House on his dog-eared Hollywood map. And with all good intentions, that is the direction in which he intended to go. But he needed to see Jennifer and, although there was a good possibility she'd show up at the mansion, he felt more sure of her being at the cemetery.

It's not that far out of the way, he explained to himself.

No, another part of him responded with sarcasm, *only the other side of town*.

"God, help me!" Peter then said out loud. "Now, I'm quarreling with myself!"

During this one sided conversation, he turned the Mustang around and headed toward Gardens of Peace.

Twice he had been here before. Both times, the weather had been drab and dreary. Today, the sun was shining and the air was warm and dry.

It was an unhappy fact that the souls here at rest had been long forgotten by their family and friends. On this, his third visit, the grounds were as empty as before. Not a mourner in sight.

He walked slowly to Jennifer's grave, inspecting the names on the headstones surrounding the path which led to her. They were names familiar to anyone with a knowledge of Hollywood history. At one time, the biggest names in the budding, silent industry were brought to this place to be revered and respected. Now they were left to rest and rot unremembered.

Peter was overcome by pity for these dead movie masters. He reproached himself for his obsession with one grave only when so many other great names were equally worthy of his reverence.

Had he become so jaded by the myth of Jennifer Deane that he'd grown blind to the importance of these other legends? It was true that most of his own artistic achievements had been in the New York theatre on Broadway. But it was also true that his love of the movies far outweighed his love for the stage. There was a magic on the screen the theater could never capture.

Peter surprised himself. A maturity of thought he had never possessed overtook him. Still valiantly believing in the nobility of his cause, he was also repulsed by his priorities. There was more to the story of Jennifer Deane than Jennifer Deane herself. There were hundreds of names he'd yet to know, perhaps never would, who had laid the foundation to the star's legend. And there were names he knew too well. There was Jacob Max, a producing pioneer, and Walter Deane, an undisputed genius. Names held sacred in the motion picture community. Names he now sought to bring down in disgrace.

It was then that the purpose of his mission changed. It was no longer the centerpiece of his investigation to establish murder or suicide. Jennifer hadn't killed herself. Of that he was certain. No. The issue now was to remove the stain of guilt that attached itself to these cinematic

demigods. His mission was to find the guilty party and bring him or her to justice, even if only posthumously. And by doing so, he would not only avenge the spirit of Jennifer Deane, he would bring rest to all other innocent souls.

Peter looked up at the cloudless sky, then shifted his gaze to a tree limb where two squirrels were engaged in spirited play. He sighed deeply. Before reaching the grave of his beloved movie idol, he turned on his heels and returned to his car.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The most difficult thing about traveling in Beverly Hills had to be the roads. Time after time, you traveled down winding slabs of asphalt that twisted and turned into someone's driveway when you thought you were still on the main drag.

After the fourth such incident, Peter kept a close eye on his rearview mirror, convinced that any moment an overzealous, neighborhood cop, alerted by an irate homeowner, would appear and haul him away. But the road behind him remained empty.

The problem now facing him was that he was almost at the end of what the map termed "Beverly Hills." He reached the boundary of opulence and excess and yet he still hadn't located the house. He wanted to pull over and examine his map, but stopping in this particular area was a luxury only afforded to tour buses and then, only briefly. His best bet was to turn the Mustang around and go back down the hill.

Having made it back to where he started, he found a safe place to park the car. He also found something he'd been looking for since he first got to the neighborhood. A phone booth. Always behind in technology, he had yet to get a cell phone.

He jumped out of the car and headed for the phone. He deposited what he thought was an exorbitant amount of money and dialed a number from memory.

"Zachary Max," came the crisp, clear voice.

"It's me. Peter," he said.

"Peter. You here at the studio? Need some help with something?"

"No. I'm not at the studio. But I do need some help. I'm trying to find Jenniwa House and I keep getting lost."

Zachary laughed.

"I'm not surprised. The house sits at the end of a street called Sunset Drive. It's an easy street to miss. Looks like a driveway."

Of course it did, thought Peter. The one driveway he missed was probably the one he should have pulled into.

"Thanks. I think I know where I went wrong."

"Okay. Good luck! See you at the studio later?" Zachary asked.

"Yeah. I'll be there."

It's amazing how easy a thing is to find when you know where to look for it.

He retraced his steps to what appeared to be the entrance to another off limits estate. He stopped the car only long enough to peer through the leaves of a fully blossomed tree. Well hidden though it was, he found the sign. Sunset Drive. And onto it he turned.

The mansion in question was obviously on the very last street of what was officially Beverly Hills. The estates up here were all well protected by huge brick walls which ran the

length of both sides of the street. The road didn't go on much farther. A dead end was clearly in sight.

Finally, he spotted the entrance and slowly pulled the Mustang into the driveway. He stopped the car to look at the remains of what must have been a security gate. The only parts of it left were the huge, rusted hinges on which it once stood. Even from this distance, he could tell that the grounds themselves were meticulously kept. Why the gate should be missing puzzled Peter but not enough to keep him from continuing his journey.

When at last he reached it, the house before him took his breath away. The closest thing he'd ever seen to match it was Tara in *Gone With the Wind*, and Tara actually paled in comparison. He got out of the car and continued to stare at it in amazed appreciation.

For not the first time in his life, Peter was confused about what to do next. Should he look around first or just go right inside? The thought of that scared him a little. Despite the frequency of her appearances, and in spite of the fact that only recently he had intended to seek her out, he was apprehensive about the possibility of actually seeing her.

But, at least for Peter, fear often gave way to a lack of common sense. He took out his key and opened the front door.

If he was impressed by the outside of this building, he was spellbound by its interior. The circular staircase seemed to rise miles above him. The white marble floor glistened with such intensity, it nearly blinded him. The exquisite pieces of furniture visible in this splendid foyer were clearly antiques of the finest quality.

He walked across the hallway on a flawless oriental rug, the cost of which Peter dared not imagine. He passed through an open doorway which led into what must have been a sitting room. Again, this was filled with priceless antiques, all lit up through a floor to ceiling window which stretched the length of the room. In the middle of this massive window were two French doors which opened up onto a patio, and from that patio ran a stone path which led to a walled in ledge overlooking the mansion's backyard.

From here, Peter looked appreciatively over the well kept lawn and gardens that surrounded the pink marbled swimming pool. Beneath that, on yet another, lower level, stood the bright green, white chalked tennis court.

Peter's gaze returned to the swimming area, then traveled away from the pool toward the back of the house. Here his eyes fell upon an outdoor dining area with the whitest of wicker furniture and, off to the side, an enormous, bricked barbecue. He walked down the stone steps to the swimming pool and turned to face the house. If the outside could display such unabashed splendor, he couldn't imagine what other treasures lie hidden within the mansion itself.

He bypassed the French doors and walked beside an immense flower bed until he reached another set of doors. All nerve and no brain, Peter reached for the handle and prepared to go back inside. It didn't occur to him to wonder why this door was unlocked. He hadn't come out this way. If he had taken the time to consider this question, he may have been able to avoid the blow from the heavy object which came crashing down on his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Throbbing. And no ordinary throbbing at that. An unrelenting pounding within his brain. Like a battering ram striking one side of his head, then viciously assaulting the other. Peter expected any moment his skull would explode, sending bone fragments flying around him. Instead, his head continued to throb in unceasing, unforgiving intervals.

No less unforgiving was the expression of his attacker, now looming over him in a menacing manner. No mercy showed through the hardened features of Jonathan Deane. No apology was apparent on his face. The eyes were blank and bore a striking resemblance to a shark before the final onslaught of a battle with only one possible victor.

Consumed by a steady pain and a growing anxiety, Peter had not noticed his surroundings. He was at first unaware he'd been brought back into the house and was presently lying on a Queen Anne sofa. When he slowly began to realize his whereabouts, he gave little thought to how he got there. Despite the countless experiences which had forced him to face fear in these last several weeks, a new kind of terror now gripped his soul. Nothing he had yet encountered prepared him for the threatening demeanor of the man standing over him.

Jonathan Deane was a shrewd man and was well aware of the effect he was having on his victim. His decision to remain a figure of menace was a well calculated one and showed him not only smart but excessively cruel. As Peter slowly recovered some of his senses, Jonathan stood defiant and silent.

With determined and painful effort, Peter raised himself on his elbow and, now aware of his location, slowly shook his head to clear away the cobwebs of confusion. Even this gentle undertaking proved too much for his aching head. The arm on which his body rested gave way, causing him to fall back on the sofa in a prone position.

It was no easy endeavor for this injured man to speak. Peter found the task of forming his words as painfully difficult as speaking them. Several times, a sentence formed on his lips only to have the intended message disappear inside a fog.

Jonathan took great delight in watching the man struggle back to life. Indeed, for him, it was nearly as pleasurable as striking the blow.

Through aching eyes, Peter looked at the hard face and sadistic grin of his assailant. He recalled the vivid description applied to him by Viola Plumb. *That one was a little monster from the beginning.* An adequate definition of the beast before him.

Peter had little doubt that Jonathan was more than able, and perhaps even willing, to bring about the conclusion of Peter Gregory. Weak as he was, he knew his only chance for survival was to display a show of strength. No mean feat for a weakened warrior, but one he knew somehow he must accomplish. Once again raising himself on his elbow, he stared intently into Jonathan's eyes and spoke in a steady voice.

"Could I trouble you for a glass of water?"

Of all the things Peter could and should have said, Jonathan was taken aback by this simple request. This was obviously not what he expected. And, somehow, this simple sentence softened the bitter antagonist. His face relaxed a bit from its hardness, his voice a bit less sharp than it otherwise would have been.

"I suppose you could use an aspirin as well."

"No, thanks," replied Peter. "I'm allergic to aspirin. I wouldn't want to make myself sick."

Jonathan shook his head.

"I can't make you out, Gregory. I had you pegged as a sniveling, little wimp. You're more of a man than I thought."

"Thanks for the praise, Mr. Deane. Coming from you, that means more than you can imagine."

Jonathan disappeared to fetch the glass of water. When he returned, Peter held the glass in two shaking hands and slowly sipped the tasteless liquid. The entire experience proved to be an exercise in undisguised agony.

“I suppose getting a doctor would be out of the question,” he said to Jonathan.

“A doctor!” Jonathan laughed sarcastically. “You’re damn lucky I don’t call the cops!”

“The cops?” Peter shouted in indignant disbelief. “You smash my brain in and you’re going to call the police? Whose side do you think they’d take?”

“Whose indeed! You are a trespasser and I was protecting my property. We’re not in your backwater Baltimore, Mr. Gregory. In case you’ve forgotten, we’re in Beverly Hills.”

“Oh, yes,” Peter smiled. “Beverly Hills. Where the rich and famous are above the law ... no matter what the crime.”

The relaxed features of Jonathan’s face hardened once again.

“If you’ve a point to make, Mr. Gregory, I suggest you make it cautiously. You’re in no position to make unfounded speculations.”

Peter rose from the sofa and stood defiantly on unsteady legs.

“And if I were you, Mr. Deane, I’d be careful about making threats. Your kind may think you’re immune to obeying the law. You may very well be right. But given the proper circumstances, I can be equally lawless. And, rest assured, Mr. Deane, I wouldn’t think twice about repaying your most recent kindness.”

Time had created a different Peter Gregory. One that confused Jonathan Deane nearly as much as it did Peter Gregory. But if he, himself, was surprised by this sudden display of bravado, Peter kept it to himself. All Jonathan saw was a ruthless determination, dangerous enough to match his own.

The combatants’ anger hung in the air like the famed L.A. smog. Thick and impassible. When Jonathan broke the temporary tension of silence, his words were sharp but quiet.

“What are you trying to do, Gregory?”

Peter replied with uncharacteristic confidence.

“I’m just trying to figure things out. Tell me, Mr. Deane. Have you always had such a violent temper? Were you as vicious a child as you are an adult? Let’s see. Fifty years ago, you were probably eight years old. Could you have ever been so mad at your mother that your demonic, youthful mind could have driven you to murder?”

The force of the blow Peter almost received could have sent him flying through the French doors and all the way back to Hollywood. Instead, the arm raised in fury hung loose in the air.

“You think I killed my mother?”

“I think after what I’ve seen today, you’ve certainly got the potential.”

“Let me tell you something, Gregory. If that bitch were alive today, not only could I, I *would* kill her. But that’s now. It took years for me to understand how deeply I hated her. Unfortunately, when I was a child, I hadn’t fully developed the loathing for her I’m so proud of today.”

“Unfortunately? You sound disappointed that you didn’t kill her. If you didn’t ...”

“I don’t owe explanations to anyone, particularly not to a third-rate playwright. Whoever killed her did all of us a favor. So if you’re looking for help in solving this so-called crime, you won’t get it from me. For me, it wasn’t a felony. It was a blessing.”

Peter smiled.

“Thank you, Mr. Deane.”

“For what?” growled Jonathan.”

“For being the first member of your family to admit it wasn’t suicide.”

Jonathan chuckled without any inflection of humor.

“Not only aren’t you a wimp, you’re not completely stupid either. Bravo, Mr. Gregory. Okay. It’s no family secret. Everybody knows she was murdered. So what?”

“So why and how did something like that get covered up? Why did the police agree to keep the lid on?”

“How would I know? Like you said, I was only eight years old.”

“Your father was a rich and powerful man, wasn’t he?”

The fury returned full force into every fiber of Jonathan’s being.

“If you ever even try to implicate my father in this sordid affair, I guarantee you’ll be sorry. My father was a man of unwavering principles, regardless of the slime he came in contact with. If you’re looking for someone to hang in this two-bit story of yours, Walter Deane isn’t your man. To my everlasting chagrin, he continued loving that whore long after she died.”

Peter was pensive in the ensuing moments of silence. When at last he spoke, he chose his words carefully.

“All right. Let’s assume your father is innocent. If he is, it’s certainly contrary to public opinion. Anyone who believes Jennifer was murdered has Walter Deane near or at the top of the guilty list.”

“So?”

“So, if you’re so concerned about preserving the myth of this man, maybe you could cooperate a little bit more.”

“In what way?”

“By telling me a few things. Like, for instance, why you hate your mother so much.”

“You’re the investigator, Gregory. Investigate.”

With that, Jonathan turned away from Peter and headed for the hallway, his obvious intention to leave the house.

“Wait a minute. Where are you going?”

“As far away from you as possible.”

“You’re going to let me stay here?”

“Mr. Gregory, I don’t give a damn what you do as long as you don’t do anything to discredit my father. Stay here as long as you like. But after you’re gone, I’ll be back. And if anything is missing from this house, I’ll have you arrested so fast, you won’t see it coming. You said my father was rich and powerful. Well, that legacy has been passed down to me. I can arrange for the rest of your life to be spent behind bars. And, trust me, that would give me infinite pleasure.”

No further words were spoken. Peter stood in the sitting room as the front door slammed with such force that artistic masterpieces tilted on the walls and priceless antiques rattled on the tables.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Peter took advantage of Jonathan’s recent departure to further explore the mansion. His wanderings were somewhat slow in nature, given his head still pounded from the attack. He briefly thought about what type of object could have inflicted such pain but dismissed the question because it obviously didn’t matter. Pain was pain. At this point, the identified *who* was much more important than the unidentified *what*.

More important still was the *why*. Remote as it was, the possibility existed that Jonathan had mistaken Peter for a prowler. And, as Jonathan pointed out, the police would no doubt be willing to accept that as fact. Truth would not be an issue. It was likely that the real reason would remain forever unexplained.

Peter resumed his exploration of Jenniwa House. He glanced at the staircase, winding its way toward the second floor. Daring to venture upstairs, he nonetheless tread cautiously. The bedrooms were there. Rooms in which a spirit could thrive on the pleasant and painful memories they secretly possessed. An ideal place for another ghostly visitation.

By now, Peter should have become accustomed to the recurring apparition. In reality, they were no surprise appearances. Admit it or not, for the most part, he often hoped she would appear. Of course, those times were different. Then he had a specific purpose in wanting to see her. No such purpose existed now, which is exactly why she would probably appear.

But as Peter continued searching through the rooms, Jennifer Deane did not reveal her ghostly presence. The only things he found were more priceless antiques and costly bric-a-brac. Not finding what he wasn't sure he sought, he headed back down to the first floor and began to search for an entrance to the basement. Eventually, he found it, located behind a formidable, intricately carved, oak door.

The atmosphere down these stairs was much less pretentious than the rooms on the two floors above. Sturdy wooden beams flanked a spacious sitting area where the furniture was quality leather and obviously comfortable and well worn. A bar ran the length of one wall, equipped with a stained glass mirror to its rear and old fashioned beer kegs sitting atop the counter's smooth surface.

A rustic, brick fireplace lined another wall. And yet another wall contained the entertainment center, at its core being the largest television screen Peter had ever seen.

He walked over to the television and opened the drawers beneath it. Of the twelve drawers at its base, eleven contained prerecorded video cassettes, a collection worth thousands of dollars. Not surprisingly, the twelfth drawer was devoted to the films of Jennifer Deane.

Peter was well acquainted with all the titles. They were movies he had seen dozens of times. The scenes and dialogue were as much a part of his existence as the air he breathed. So small wonder he was startled by a handwritten label on a cassette box bearing a title with which he was unfamiliar. The label read, *Journey's End*.

He picked up the box and stared at it, although there was not much to look at. The handwriting was small and precise, giving the title only. No date, no cast of characters, no synopsis of the story. He was perplexed at its being in a drawer that was otherwise devoted to Jennifer's work. As Peter contemplated this unusual issue, he felt the overwhelming presence of his ghostly friend. He didn't turn around. He didn't need to.

"What's this?" he asked without facing her.

"Something you've never seen," came the small voice.

"And something I've never heard of, either. Whose movie is this?"

"It's my last movie, or, at least, the parts which were filmed before I died."

"No. That can't be right. Your last movie was *All That Glitters*."

"I wasn't the brightest person alive," Jennifer said hotly, "but I think I'd remember my last film."

The color rose in Peter's cheeks, much like it did during any conversation with Viola Plumb.

“I didn’t mean to imply ...” he stumbled over his words. “Oh, never mind. It’s just that I’ve read so much about you, I thought I’d read everything. But I’ve never seen the slightest mention of this film. How could a Jennifer Deane movie, even an unfinished one, escape public notice?”

“The power of the studio, Peter. They could, and they did, cover up anything they didn’t want known. And believe me, they covered up things very well.”

“So when was it made? Or rather, when were you filming it?”

“About three months after *All That Glitters*. Production didn’t go all that smoothly. The script was rewritten a dozen times, usually after the scenes had already been shot. That made a tense situation worse, and Justin Davies,” she smiled at the warm memory, “my incredibly handsome leading man, and I were never sure where we were in the story.”

“Justin Davies. You’ve been linked with him in more than a professional way. Any chance that’s true?” He couldn’t help adding, “Any chance you’d tell me if it were?”

“You’ve become quite cynical since we first met. All right. I had an affair with Justin. Which of his leading ladies didn’t?”

“I’m not interested in his other leading ladies. I’m only interested in you. How long did the affair go on?”

“Ask him, if it’s so important to you,” she said sharply.

Peter turned around to face her. His eyes betrayed his rising anger.

“Look, Jennifer. You’ve put me in one helluva spot. You won’t tell me how you died. You want me to find out for myself. Then when I ask you a question, you get all riled up. Well, I’m sorry the questions make you uncomfortable. If you prefer, I’ll go talk to Davies myself. Maybe I should just talk to all your old lovers. Do you have an actor’s directory handy? I’ll just start with *A* and work my way through to *Z*.”

“Your cheap insinuations won’t hurt me, if that’s your intention. Sorry, but I stopped having feelings a long time ago. I guess there are some benefits to being dead.”

“Sure. When things get tough for you, all you have to do is disappear. Me? I’m stuck here. Stuck with all the dead ends, all the lies and, should I even bother to mention, all the possibilities of getting myself killed!”

This last sentence was yelled loud enough to produce two effects. One, Jennifer’s demeanor became one of acute contrition. Two, his head was seconds away from exploding. He felt himself getting dizzy and eased his body down into the nearest chair.

Jennifer walked slowly toward him and knelt next to the chair where he sat. With her delicate hand, she gently stroked his head, careful not to press too hard on the injured area.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I sometimes forget the strain you’re under. I wish I could ease your burden.” She paused, her gaze focused on a distant place. “I wish you’d never gotten involved.”

“A nice sentiment, Jennifer, but it’s way too late now. I’m involved up to my eyeballs. As you can see, I’m becoming a bit unpopular. Any idea why Jonathan beamed me?”

“Protecting his father, no doubt.”

Peter suddenly became alert and leaned over closer to Jennifer’s face.

“Does Walter need protecting?”

“We all need protecting, Peter. And before you get mad again, I’m sure Jonathan believes his father needs protection. Quite possibly, he thinks Walter murdered me.”

“And is that a viable assessment?”

Jennifer didn't respond. She merely stared into Peter's eyes. And Peter couldn't help smiling.

"It was worth a try," he winked.

Jennifer smiled back.

"But you knew it would be pointless."

"Yeah. But I used to be a gambler. I always liked the long shots. Someday, the law of averages will catch up with me and get me a big payoff."

Jennifer relaxed her knees and sat on the floor.

"You should feel quite at home in Hollywood. Life's a bigger gamble here than in Vegas. Out there, you only lose money. Here, you lose your soul."

"You can't blame the city for your lack of good judgment."

Jennifer laughed.

"Rather diplomatically stated. I must say, I like that better than *lack of moral decency*. You're right. I had a good many affairs. Some were intense, but all left me empty. For what it's worth, I always went back to my husband."

"And Walter?" Peter innocently asked. "Was he always faithful to you?"

"In mind, certainly. In body, he occasionally wandered off, but never any farther than Viola Plumb. In the end, you see, he always returned to his wife."

"So, despite a few character flaws, you two crazy, mixed up kids were nuts about each other and hopelessly in love."

Sarcasm dripped from his virtuous face. Jennifer ignored it.

"Walter loved me more than I had the right to be loved. As for me? Well, Peter, I thought you knew. I wasn't capable of loving anyone other than Jennifer Deane."

She stood up and took the video still clutched in Peter's hands. She walked over to the entertainment center and put the cartridge in the VCR.

"Here. Watch the last glory days of my brilliant career. See if you think they had the right to destroy me."

She walked slowly back to his chair, smiled, then moved behind him. Instinctively, he knew the exact moment she disappeared.

He watched the film once, rewound it, and watched it again. There was no mistaking the Deane style and her quality of acting. There was nothing in these bits and pieces of an incomplete story to imply the actress was washed up. She was as beautiful as in her first picture. And she exuded the incredible sex appeal that she brought to every picture since.

But something was not quite right. From where he sat, she appeared tired and, at certain angles, she seemed puffy. On the third viewing, he held the remote control and, at various spots in the movie, hit the pause button. Then he walked to the television and got as close as he could to the screen. He nearly passed out when he made his discovery. Jennifer Deane had been pregnant.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Peter wanted to study this film further and at his own leisure. But he well remembered Jonathan's admonition and was afraid that even a missing video might put his life in jeopardy.

Fortunately, the entertainment center contained a sophisticated duplicating system that was not entirely beyond Peter's limited mechanical abilities. The only problem was finding a

blank tape on which to make the copy. Leaving the house to go shopping was out of the question. Jonathan was probably lurking outside, waiting for Peter's departure and would never allow him back in the house. Whatever he was going to do, he needed to do now.

He searched the drawers and cabinets diligently and, finally, the gods seemed to smile on him. There was an open package of blank videotapes at the back of the cabinet next to the television. He reached into his wallet and took out a twenty dollar bill which he put in place of the tape he would use. Let Jonathan call the police about that. No blank tape was worth twenty bucks.

The duplicating process went smoothly and quickly. He replaced the original in its proper location and tucked the copy in the inside pocket of his leather jacket. The jacket was bulky and the tape well concealed. Before he left the basement, he double checked to make sure nothing was left out of place. Satisfied that all was in order, he bounded up the stairs and went out the front door.

His assumption about Jonathan was an accurate one. He spotted Jonathan's car parked at the end of the driveway. Without acknowledging his presence, Peter got in the Mustang and began the scenic drive to the estate's exit. As he passed Jonathan's car, a feeling of mischief overtook him. He slowed down, turned to face Jonathan, smiled charmingly and waved. Then he stepped on the gas, burned rubber and pulled onto the street.

Peter glanced at his watch. It was still too early to see the one person he desperately wanted to see. Viola would be the best confirmation of his latest supposition. However, Viola made it clear she wouldn't be available until later that afternoon. His options for passing time were limited. An idea suddenly struck him, forcing his mind, and his car, to focus in an alternate direction.

Back on the highway, the car sped along toward Century Cinema. If Jennifer had been pregnant at this stage of her career, the archives would surely indicate that fact. Certainly, Jacob Max would have known, which meant Zachary would have, too. If the baby had been Walter's, the world would have known. Since the world didn't know, then the baby's daddy was *Mr. X*. And who exactly might that be? Justin Davies, for one. The thought made Peter's stomach churn, although why he wasn't sure. And if that thought made him queasy, the list of other leading men now under consideration as possible murderers made him downright nauseous. *Don't go there*. Peter stopped his mental meanderings. The question of paternity was best left for Viola.

Flashing his pass, and feeling somewhat important, he pulled into the studio parking lot and walked to the nearest phone. From memory, he dialed Zachary's extension.

"Yeah," came a gruff voice.

"Having a bad day, buddy?" Peter asked.

"What? Oh! That you, Peter? Where are you? Here at the studio or still stuck in the Hills?"

"I'm safe in the studio's bosom," Peter laughed. "I eventually found my way around those winding lanes of Million Dollar Land. It must have something to do with all those estates. That kind of wealth confuses me." Another laugh from Peter. Silence from Zachary. "Right now, I want you to tell me where on this acreage I can find the studio archives. I need to look up something."

"The archives of Pinnacle Pictures?"

"Well, the Century Cinema wouldn't do me much good, would they?" Uncontrolled sarcasm had again been surprisingly ignored by Zachary Max.

“Look for Building 86.”

“86? Where’s that?”

“At the other end of Sunset Boulevard. Actually, not very far from the direction you just came.”

“Perfect,” Peter said, slightly irritated. “Do I need a special pass or will this one work?”

“You don’t need a pass. Nobody else will be there. Nobody’s ever there. All you need is a key. I’m on my way to a shoot, but I’ll leave it with Julie. You can return the mansion key when you pick up the one for the warehouse.”

“Okay. But we need to get together, Zachary. I have some questions for you. Any chance you’ll be around later?”

“Not until very late. We’re doing night scenes at Malibu and those things can take forever. I may not be back here until after 11:00.”

“11:00? Don’t you ever go home?”

“These days, this is my home. I’ve been supervising three different pictures and late at night is the only quiet time I have to do paperwork. What about you? You having any problems?”

“Not exactly. I’m still in the discovery zone. Maybe we should talk when I have more information.”

“You’re being rather mysterious. You getting somewhere? Know who killed her?”

“I’m getting somewhere, all right. But I don’t think it’s near the killer. Just call this a side trip.”

“Peter,” the producer grumbled, “we don’t have time for little excursions. If what you’re doing doesn’t relate to the story, I’d rather you drop it.”

Peter was defensive.

“It *does* relate to the story. And it might prove a motive for the murder, even if it doesn’t point to a murderer.”

Zachary still wasn’t convinced.

“I just don’t want you wasting precious time. Look. You’re right. We really need to talk about this. I’ll clear a spot on my calendar for tomorrow afternoon. Bring me what you’ve written so far.”

As Peter hung up the phone, he realized how much trouble he was in. There was nothing to bring to tomorrow’s meeting. He had yet to write a single word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Zachary might feel better about Peter’s lack of progress if he knew about Jennifer’s pregnancy. Oddly, Peter was reluctant to mention it.

For one thing, at the moment, he was only guessing. Zachary wouldn’t buy it without proof and Zachary wasn’t paying him to manufacture rumors. He was paying him to establish facts. More to the point, Peter was being paid to write, and if he hadn’t been so caught up in this baby business, he’d have felt guilty about the work he hadn’t done.

But Peter was becoming confident enough to reason away the guilt. A script needed a story and a story needed a plot. Although his assigned story had a definite beginning and an even more definite ending, it had no substantial middle. Until now, he had enough possible motives to fill the Hollywood Bowl. At last, he had something tangible. A baby out of wedlock to a married woman might well prove to be the foundation of this crime. Of course, the list of suspects would increase dramatically, but he’d deal with that later.

Because Peter was Peter, his confidence proved it was not made of stone. As he got closer to Building 86, his old, wary and confused self began to take control.

It's all just speculation, he told himself. If you can't prove she was pregnant, you're back to square one. And what do you tell Zachary? How can you explain a nonexistent screenplay? Simple. You can't. You buy every bag of coffee in Southern California and stay up all night writing an outline for an unwritten script.

Tempted as he was, he didn't turn the car around and head back to Baltimore. He continued driving on course, searching for the Pinnacle warehouse, determined to find something, anything, to substantiate his claim.

He found it (the building, that is). The biggest and ugliest building in the City of Los Angeles, perhaps even in the entire state.

The fence around the property was rusted and, in many places, links were missing. Unlike Jenniwa House, there was a gate, also rusted, which hung precariously on broken hinges.

There was a parking lot, where cracks in the asphalt provided unrecognizable plant life to grow with reckless abandon.

Building 86 rose to the heavens on cement blocks of either olive or pea green. There were bars on the windows of the first and second floors. The glass in the windows above were either cracked and held together with tape or else completely missing. Grass and weeds sprung up in haphazard fashion from the base of the concrete monster, which seemed to offer no apologies for its forlorn appearance. Instead, it made a statement. Today's Hollywood had no respect for its past.

But Peter Gregory was not a product of today's Hollywood. He approached the front door with profound piety. Unlocking the latch, he carefully turned the doorknob which remained in his hand as the door swung open. So much for sacred ground. He threw the doorknob over his shoulder and went inside the warehouse.

He looked around to see himself surrounded by an endless maze of dented and decaying file cabinets. No doubt the floors above looked much the same. Too late, Peter realized he'd forgotten to ask where within this monstrosity he would find the files he sought.

"I never cease to be amazed by my stupidity," he said out loud.

"Then yer life must be a constant source of amazement!"

Peter jumped in true, blue Peter Gregory fashion and turned to face the gravelly voice of a pasty faced, gnome like creature with a twinkle in his one, roving, bloodshot eye.

"Did I scare ya, young fella? Well, that's what ya get when ya talks to yerself."

Peter was beyond surprises of the supernatural variety, and he had little doubt that the creature before him was an afterlife neighbor of Jennifer Deane. At least that's what his appearance belied. The possibility of this gargoyle being a flesh and blood being seemed a remote one, at best.

"Should I ask who you are?" Peter haltingly inquired.

"Better I should be asking who *you* are, young fella."

When no response was forthcoming, the creature shuffled closer to Peter who, of course, backed away.

"I be asking yer a question, boy. Speak up. Cat got yer tongue? Or does ya only talk to yerself?"

A chuckle erupted from the strange, little man that was nearly as ugly as its owner. *Be brave*, Peter told himself. *What could this thing do to you? On second thought, don't dwell on it.*

"My name is Peter Gregory and I'm a writer doing research. I'm looking for a file."

“Oh, it’s a file ya be wanting, is it? Well, take yer pick. We’s got plenty of ‘em to choose from?”

Again that chuckle, like fingernails on a chalkboard. The hairs on Peter’s neck stood straight out, but he tried to make himself sound tough.

“I’ve answered your question. Now you can answer mine. Who are you?”

“Well. Ain’t ya’s got the nerve? You’s trespassing here on private-like property and ya’s wants to know who I am?”

There was no chuckle this time, only a menacing look from that wandering eye. But Peter was determined not to cave in until it was absolutely necessary. Of course, by his calculations, that could be any time now.

“You’ve got some explaining to do,” his voice a cross between John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. “Zachary Max assured me I’d find this place deserted.”

“Mr. Max, ya says,” the voice held a graveled respect. “Yer should have said so in the first place. He’s a good man, is Mr. Max.”

“A prince among men,” Peter said without feeling. “So who exactly are *you*?”

“Forgive me, sir. Ya canst be too careful these days. My name is Grover Felch.

Of course it is, thought Peter. *What else would it be?*

“And Mr. Felch, what exactly are you doing here?”

“It’s Mr. Max I credit with my being here. He gives me the job of looking after the place. It’s a job I be taking very seriously.”

“But Mr. Max said ...”

The eye of this most unusual being gave Peter its interpretation of a wink.

“Mr. Max, he maybe forgets about me sometimes. I’m an easy sort of fellow to forget.”

That would not have been Peter’s assessment of Grover Felch, but he let the point go, without any response.

“You’re the security guard, I take it?”

“Yessir, that would be me. I be keeping all sorts of them ruffian types away from these here premises. But I also be the caretaker, don’t ya know. I done all the repairs around here.”

And quite a job you do, Peter thought as he looked around the dilapidated and decaying ruins. *Oh well,* he mused, *necessity breeds strange bedfellows.*

“I suppose you’re quite familiar with this place?”

“Oh, yessir. I be knowing more about here than I be knowing me own home.”

“Then maybe you can help me. Mr. Max wasn’t clear about where I could find what I need.”

“Oh, yer just tell me whats it be yer needing,” Mr. Felch interrupted, “and I be more than able to find it for yer.”

Peter smiled. There was something likeable about this grotesque little fellow.

“Good. Then let me tell you what I need. I’m doing research on Jennifer Deane.”

Again, his words were left hanging in the air, as Grover Felch took off, in his half limping gait, down one hallway and around the next, up one flight of stairs and around another corner. His speed was so unexpected, Peter could barely keep up.

“Here yer be, here yer be!” Mr. Felch roared excitedly. “Them there’s the files ya be wanting.”

Peter stood before the cabinet drawer marked, “*Deane, Jennifer.*” Here was the ultimate moment of truth. He nervously pulled open the drawer and he and his companion stared into the

black void of its emptiness. The moment of truth had been less of a shock to him than it had been to Grover Felch.

“I don’t understand. No siree, I surely do not. That there drawer should be chock full of stuff on Miss Deane. I canst begin to tell ya how surprised this here makes me!”

“Funny,” Peter said quietly, “I’m not surprised at all.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A common bond creates friendship, even among the most mismatched. Peter walked to his car with the shuffling, little feet of Grover Felch close behind. Before getting into the Mustang, Peter placed a twenty dollar bill into the trembling palm of Mr. Felch.

“Oh no, sir. Ya shouldn’t be doing so,” his eye kept close to the ground. “I didn’t do a thing for yer here. Worst of all, I be letting down Mr. Max. Oh, what will he be saying when he learns of this terrible thing? My job will be a goner. That would be fer sure.”

“Don’t worry about it, Grover,” Peter tapped his arm gently. He won’t hear about it from me. And I doubt if he’ll hear it from anyone else.”

“But them files, Mr. Gregory! They couldn’t have gotten up by themselves and runned away. Somebody had to be taking ‘em. Oh, if only I knew who it were who done it, I’d fix ‘em real good, Mr. Gregory.”

“It’s not worth it, Grover. They’re just bits of paper. Besides, by the time I’m finished, I’ll find out who took them and that’s more important than the papers themselves.”

With that, Peter said goodbye to the unconvinced Grover Felch. Grover, who returned the farewell, turned his misted eye and his craggy face to the wind.

All things considered, this would not go down in his personal history as Peter’s favorite day.

Last night, he received a nerve shattering telephone call from a threatening, unknown caller. He’d been the victim of Viola Plumb’s verbal abuse. He’d been assaulted by the son of his favorite actress. Then he’d discovered that the same actress had been pregnant by someone who was probably not her husband. He’d been sent to a deserted warehouse only to find, in a terrifying moment, that it wasn’t so deserted after all. After which, he discovered that the only written documentation to prove what he believed no longer existed or, at least, didn’t exist for him. And now, as if all of this wasn’t bad enough, he would be late for his appointment with Viola, which would produce her second assault of the day.

He looked fondly back on quieter times. Times back home in Baltimore, where his peculiar quirks about fame and fortune kept him isolated from the world at large. There was comfort in being an eccentric and he longed for the womb of his solitude.

Those days were gone. Events within his control had thrust him beyond the days of his past. It was not the ghostly visions nor the web of mystery surrounding them that had closed the door to his former self. It was his own acceptance of Zachary’s offer that cut him off from his previous life. Never again could he walk away from any challenge put before him. Never again would his pathway be marked by his own pen. He’d discovered the uncompromising truth that living was a joint effort, not to be undertaken either physically alone or in mental isolation.

He found little comfort in this unexpected revelation. Only polite resignation.

As he expected, his car pulled into her driveway nearly thirty minutes late. Walking to the front door, he braced himself for the torrent of abuse which would surely come his way. The door flew open, apparently by magic, as no one stood there to greet him. He cautiously opened the storm door and sheepishly entered the lion's domain.

She was hidden in an overstuffed chair with its back toward him, the only evidence of her being there a cloud of blue smoke which floated to the ceiling. He stood behind her for an eternity in silence, broken only by the insistent ticking of a clock he couldn't find. She had truly missed her calling. Her sense of the dramatic rivaled that of any star on the silver screen.

Unable to bear the tension any longer, Peter walked around her chair and knelt at her feet. "I have no apology fit for the crime."

His eyes remained lowered out of respect for the royally miffed.

"Get up off the floor, you jackass. You'll wear a hole in my carpet with your bony knees."

Majesty granted her errant knight permission to sit in her presence.

"No man with a brain ever stood up Viola Plumb."

"As I'm sitting before you, it can hardly be said that I've stood you up."

"Careful, young man. I'm not in the mood."

"Oh. Sorry. Bad lunch with the President? Didn't ask your opinion on the state of the nation? Shocking!"

"I'm amazed at your constant lack of intelligence."

"Funny. I was saying nearly the same thing only a few hours ago. Ever hear of a guy named Grover Felch?"

"Felchie?" she asked with genuine affection. "Haven't thought of him in a thousand years! Where did you hear the name?"

"From his own lips. I met him at the Pinnacles warehouse."

"He's still alive?" she gasped, unable to fathom the likelihood of another living soul as old as herself retaining the ability to speak.

"I know. It's remarkable, isn't it? Not only can he make sentences, sort of, he's an employed man."

"Employed to do what? By whom?"

"The *whom* is Zachary Max. The *what* is anybody's guess. He's apparently some kind of custodian."

"More likely an indentured servant."

"Well, he's a happy indentured servant. Or at least he was until today."

And with that, Peter sprang into his recounting of the archive fiasco.

Viola listened with rapt attention. When his narrative was complete, she lit another cigarette and took her time collecting her thoughts.

"Not a bad, little story, and very well told. But what would really make it interesting is if you told me what you left out."

"Left out?" Peter was confused. *What is she talking about?*

"Tell me, pea brain, what it was you were expecting to find?"

"I thought I told you."

"You thought wrong."

Good Lord in Heaven, this woman infuriates me, Peter screamed inside his head, and out loud, "Is it possible that sometime in your life you ever made a mistake?"

"No."

Peter jumped from his seat, grabbed the arms of Viola's chair, and thrust his face as near to hers as was humanly possible.

"I thought she was pregnant!" he shouted at close range. "I was looking for proof!"

"What an idiot you are!" she yelled back. "Did you honestly think the studio would leave a bombshell like that out in the open for the whole world to find?"

Another sentence with a high decibel level was about to lunge from his mouth when he caught it, shoved it back down his throat, and stepped away from her chair.

"You're not surprised," he said in quiet triumph. "You knew she was pregnant."

Viola Plumb was tiny, old and withered. And Peter was certain she could rip his heart out with one, spindly finger. Instead, she laughed.

"You're good, young man," she stood to applaud him. "You are truly good."

"You're not mad?" he asked uncertainly.

"About what? About you finally using that mush between your ears to think with? No. I'm not mad. I hate to admit it, but I'm impressed. What made you figure it out?"

"I was looking at a copy of *Journey's End* when I ..."

"At what?" she interrupted, her face betraying her genuine surprise. "Where did you see that?"

"At Jenniwa House. I was down in the family room looking through the video library when I ..."

"Jenniwa House? How the hell did a copy wind up there?"

"I don't know. See. I was looking through the video library when ..."

"That doesn't make any sense. There were only three prints of that film made. One Walter kept. One Jacob kept. The other one, the studio destroyed."

"Oh, so what? It doesn't matter. So you see, I was looking through the video library ..."

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter?" she roared. "Of course it matters! Walter took his copy out to my Colorado ranch and locked it away in the vault. I was there when he did it. And that vault's never been opened because nobody, not even Walter, knew the combination. The only one who knows is me and I never told anyone!"

"Okay. Walter locked his copy away. Fine. Now, as I was saying, I was looking through the video ..."

"And while I may not know what Jacob did with his print, I find it hard to believe he had a copy made and, on a silly whim, dropped it off in the basement of Jenniwa House!"

"Are you finished, Viola? Can I go on now? I was looking through the ..."

This time, Peter stopped on his own, without interruption by Viola. He stared into her uncomprehending face with his own, uncomprehending eyes.

"Maybe the studio didn't really destroy it," he stammered.

Viola's laugh was without merriment and her tone unusually absent of emotion.

"They set fire to it the day she died. She was obviously a scandal ridden woman. Yet a dead Jennifer Deane could sell millions of tickets on re-release. But remember, Peter, these days are long past. This was a time when even the most ghoulishly curious had limitations on their moral boundaries. At this stage in her life, with so many other ugly rumors surrounding her, a pregnant Jennifer Deane would have netted the studio nothing."

"But no one knew she was pregnant. After the abortion, she resumed a normal life and no one was the wiser."

"What do you mean *abortion*?"

"What do you mean what do I mean?"

“You’re getting thick again, sonny. What abortion are you referring to?”

“Jennifer’s abortion! Why are you confusing me?”

“You’re confusing yourself. Jennifer Deane never had an abortion.”

Peter paused and gathered his thoughts.

“Oh. I see what you’re getting at. She miscarried.”

“The only thing miscarried was your brain at birth. For someone who claims such an intimate knowledge of his movie star idol, you are woefully ignorant. Do you remember Jennifer’s disappearance for five months?”

“She didn’t disappear. She took an extended vacation to South America.”

“Okay, class. Now take out your arithmetic books. She was about four months pregnant when she made *Journey’s End*. Then she disappeared for an additional five months. How many months does that equal?”

“Nine,” Peter snapped with irritation.

“Nine. That’s correct, boys and girls. Now. Pay very close attention. Does the term *nine months* have any special significance to the story we’ve been discussing?”

Peter’s eyes grew wide, his palms damp, and his mouth dry.

“Oh my God!” he whimpered. “She had the baby!”

“Class dismissed!”

CHAPTER THIRTY – The Past

Two small children sat huddled together in the darkness of the stairway landing, listening to the loud and angry voices of their parents below. Jeremy clutched his teddy bear, tears streaming down his little face. Jonathan, the oldest, refused to cry, his features displaying a hardness of spirit not belonging in one so young. The words they were hearing no child should hear, much less understand. But Jonathan was an intelligent child, and he understood the emotions behind them if not the full extent of their meaning.

The living room downstairs, in which these children had spent many, carefree hours, now resembled a battlefield, their parents now casualties of war.

Walter’s body shook uncontrollably, his haggard face drained of color.

Like her youngest son, tears cascaded down Jennifer’s face. Tears of anger more than sorrow. Yet anger was not hers to own. It belonged to her husband, and rightfully so. It was she who deserved the full force of his wrath since it was she who carried another man’s child, regardless of the circumstances. But actresses seldom live in reality. Stars never do.

She wanted to tell Walter everything. She wanted him to know the truth. But with her reputation a daily headline in the newspapers, she doubted if he would believe her. Although Jennifer had always been a victim of men’s desires, nothing before had gone this far. Yet her stubborn streak from stardom would not allow her to act like a victim. Instead, she found herself going on the offensive in an attempt to retain control.

Walter paced furiously back and forth across the living room, pausing only to pick up an object and hurl it to the floor. The momentary silences between them only heightened the fires of his rage.

“I don’t understand it, Jennifer! I just don’t understand it!”

“What’s there to understand? I’ve had affairs before. For that matter, so have you!”

“But I’ve never made another woman pregnant, have I?”

“I doubt if Viola is capable of getting pregnant.”

“You’re comparing yourself to Viola? How dare you! What she and I have is special. It means something. What you do, any dog in heat does! And just like a dog, you don’t care who it is, so long as it’s a body!”

Jennifer began to speak, when Walter cut her off.

“And remember, dear wife, if it weren’t for your flagrant and repeated infidelities, I’d have never gone to her in the first place. So if I’ve been unfaithful, it’s your fault, not mine and, certainly, not Viola’s.”

“Tell me, Walter, what’s really making you so mad? Is it because I’ve slept around, or is it because I got pregnant? Are you mad because your limited manly powers have been equaled? That your private domain has been penetrated? And successfully?”

This was more than Walter could take. He slapped her so hard, she fell to the floor. His next words were quietly spoken, but full of foreboding.

“You’ll get an abortion. You’ll get rid of that thing. And you’ll get out of my life.”

Jennifer laughed, her voice filled with viperous scorn.

“Out of your life? Could you stand that, Walter? Could you bear to be without me? Without your precious prize? I don’t think so, Walter.”

She rose to her feet.

“You’re not man enough to walk away from me and not man enough to let me go. You’d come crawling back on hands and knees, begging me to give you what I eagerly give away to any man. I’ll keep this baby, Walter. You’ll watch it growing inside me every day. It’ll be a constant reminder that I don’t belong to you, that I’m not one of your awards. That I wasn’t given to you as a reward for your artistic genius, and that the only reason I’m here is because I choose to be. And through it all, you’ll never leave me or throw me out. You haven’t got the guts.”

Walter knew he couldn’t argue with her because she was right. He couldn’t let go of her. In spite of anything she did, he was obsessed with her. He had to pretend she was his because, like some alcohol-sodden bum on the street, he had an addiction. He needed her. But he didn’t need her baby and he wouldn’t live with it.

“If you want to carry this baby, that’s up to you. But you won’t give birth to it here, not in this town. You may not care how you soil my name, but you won’t be willing to risk your career. And this will kill it.”

“That’s very understanding of you, Walter. And that’s fine with me. We’ll go away. Out of the country.”

“And after you’ve made whatever point you think you’re making, you can push your cherished acting skills to their ultimate limits. You can pretend it never happened because you’ll never bring it back home. I won’t have it in this house. I won’t have it near my sons.”

Jennifer cocked her head in mocking fashion as Walter walked over to the mahogany desk, sliding open one of its drawers.

“Do you think this is a negotiation for one of your projects?” she asked. “Do you think you can dictate the terms?”

He slowly ran his fingers over the barrel of a pistol she couldn’t see from where she stood, but it was clearly visible to the two young boys hiding on the landing.

“Maybe I can’t,” he said, “but maybe I can.”

He said it with such passion, that Jennifer refrained from responding. Besides, there was nothing else to say. To her, the argument was over. And Walter knew that, in *her* mind, she’d been triumphant. In *his* mind, though, so had he.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE – The Present

Peter was reaching the end of a day for which the word *exhaustion* had been redefined. And he knew, as he drew near his apartment, that although his body would be anxious for the rest it craved, his mind would not so easily succumb.

How much junk can be crammed in the brain before it explodes? he pondered. His tired legs labored up the stairs which seemed to grow in number with each weary step. At last, he reached the threshold of his sanctuary. Once inside, he shuffled over to the sofa where he collapsed in a heap.

As a writer, his natural expertise was with the written word. Today, the spoken word had been thrown at him with such ferocity that he momentarily resolved to never speak again. Perhaps under normal circumstances, any length of time spent in the presence of Viola Plumb would produce a similar result. But these circumstances being anything but normal, made the extent of his anguish that much more pronounced.

He rubbed his temples to relieve his pounding headache, but no amount of pressure would release the echoing remains of recent conversations. He could close his eyes, yet still he could see Viola sitting in front of him. Worse, over and over his mind replayed the terrible tale she told. It was more than just a story to Peter. It was the total and absolute eroding of a treasured myth. Jennifer Deane was no longer the goddess he could blindly worship. She was more like a tarnished idol.

It was not that he believed she was a saint. He knew her failings well and was always able to make allowances for her shortcomings. In many cases, the allowances were justifiable. That was all different now. Today, he discovered that he'd spent too many years attributing virtues that never existed to an image that was merely mortal. Jennifer Deane was simply a human being, and not a very good one at that.

His disappointment was unbearable. He fought back tears he couldn't explain, then fought even harder to stem the stream of thoughts which flowed through his mind. In the end, the heat of battle took its toll. He fell asleep.

Sleep provided welcome relief, but Peter awoke the next morning in no better spirits. He went through the motions of showering, shaving and dressing. He felt little enthusiasm for a morning meal. Coffee, black and strong, would be the only sustenance he would allow himself.

He tried to remember when he quit smoking, why he quit smoking, and if now wasn't the perfect time to start smoking again. Perhaps rediscovering the pleasures of the evil nicotine would be a good way to spend the time until his afternoon meeting with Zachary. He had no intentions of doing much else. Not going anywhere. Not seeing anybody. Certainly, not talking to anyone.

It was this last thought which, no doubt, prompted the telephone to ring. And ring. And ring.

Peter stared at the piece of plastic which so desperately sought his attention.

If you pick it up now, he thought, *it will just be a problem. Maybe one you haven't even thought of yet. Let it ring.*

And then it stopped. Peter basked in the glory of temporary triumph over the phone. Temporary because it started to ring again.

Peter continued sipping his coffee as the ringing telephone began again to pierce the still air.

“Oh, damn,” he said as he grabbed the receiver.

“Hello,” he hollered to the unknown caller. The caller responded by saying nothing.

“Hello! Anybody there?” His voice went up in levels of volume and irritation. Again, nothing.

He slammed down the receiver and went to pour himself another cup of coffee. Of course, the phone rang again. He picked it up and, this time, it was his turn to say nothing.

“Mr. Gregory,” finally came the weakened, old voice Peter remembered from the other night. “Is this Mr. Gregory?”

“Yes it is. And who the hell are you?”

Silence.

“If you’re calling me,” Peter continued, “you must have a reason. If you do, start talking now. If you don’t, I’ll rip this phone off the wall and throw it over the balcony!”

“You’ll not use that tone with me, young man. There’s no cause to be rude.”

Peter laughed. Everything in his life had been turned upside down. Things he always believed in were no longer valid. Things he always doubted were now fact. And the elderly caller on the other end of the line was only concerned with proper manners.

“Mr. Gregory? Are you still there?”

“I’m here. I’m here.” His quiet tone reflected slightly more repentance than he felt. “I’m sorry I snapped at you, but you have to understand. It’s been a bad couple of days.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. Gregory. I truly am. But you recall, I asked you to desist from your endless questions. I told you no good would come of it.”

“And not much has, that’s for sure. To tell you the truth, I wish I *had* listened to you. Actually, I wish I’d never gotten involved.”

“Then one good thing has come out of all this. I’m glad you’ve come to your senses. You can now get on with your life and leave us to ours.”

“Well, there’s just one problem with that, sir. I meant what I said. I *wish* I wasn’t involved. I don’t like what I’ve learned and I’m not crazy about the people I’ve met. I’d be a much happier man back home surrounded by the lunatics I’m used to. But you see, a funny thing happened. In spite of all the ugly knowledge I’ve gained, and all the lovely innocence I’ve lost, I can’t go home until I found out one more thing.”

“And what would that be, Mr. Gregory?”

“Who killed your wife, Mr. Deane.”

It was the proverbial shot in the dark. By now, Peter had become quite adept at making ludicrous assumptions, but this was by far the most absurd. He had seen what was left of Walter Deane. The broken, twisted, rotting shell of a former celluloid giant. A man whose mind was less stable than a pile of dust in a windstorm. A skeletal creature who had died many years ago but had never been buried. And this was how he identified his caller? Peter was an idiot.

Or was he? The telephone line went dead.

Peter stared at the phone for a very long time, afraid it would ring again and afraid it wouldn’t. The latter fear won out. The normally annoying object lay uncomfortably quiet.

A course of action was called for. But what, how and where presented Peter with yet another mystery. He gathered his thoughts as best he could while taking another hit of caffeine.

There was no need to prove Walter Deane was a fully functioning being. Of that much, Peter was convinced. But this only posed new questions. Why would he present himself as a

mindless invalid? Did his sons know? If they did, why would they pretend otherwise? If they didn't, why not? And then there was the question that intrigued him the most. Did Viola know?

In Viola Plumb's tiny, withered person, Peter found all the human characteristics he despised. She was excessively abrasive. She was arrogant, rude and vile. She was repeatedly aggravating and relentlessly frustrating. And for some reason Sigmund Freud wouldn't comprehend, he liked her. And even more unbelievable, he trusted her. And that simple fact made it clear to him that Viola was unaware of Walter's true condition.

But by answering one question, he created another. Viola and Walter were more than friends, more than confidants. They had shared a bed. Apparently, more than once and over a long period of time. What would cause Walter to isolate himself so completely from a woman for whom he genuinely cared?

And what, thought Peter as he drank down his coffee, does any of this have to do with Jennifer's death?

Another good question. He walked over to the living room window, opened up the sliding glass door, and stepped out onto the balcony. For a few moments, he let his mind go blank as he strained to see the view through the infamous L.A. smog. His vision was as cloudy as his thoughts. In minutes, his brief respite from mental ping pong was over. He leaned against the railing and stared into the polluted mist. There had to be something, somewhere, that connected all the information he had so far gathered. He racked his brain to find the pieces that would put this puzzle together. It was a fruitless exercise.

All this time wasted, he thought. I've got nothing.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

That Peter had nothing was, of course, not completely true. He was closer to the reason for Jennifer's death, which was paramount to the entire investigation. Somewhere in the birth of the baby, Peter would find the actual motive, and that should bring him right to the killer. *Should* was not *would*, however, and Peter kept that ugly reality uppermost in his mind.

In this state of desperation, Peter found himself driving through the gates of Century Cinema. His hopelessness was momentarily replaced by a mild superiority as he flashed his pass to the guard, who then waived him through with unquestioned access to the magic kingdom. Long at odds with his Broadway celebrity, Peter smiled as he came to grips with one of his deeply held secrets. The lamb was a bona fide ham.

Still smiling, he parked the Mustang, then strolled leisurely along the studio lanes, surprisingly active so early in the day. To Peter, a man whose world came alive with the spirit of darkness, thought any activity before dusk was a peculiar thing. Until now, of course. These days, any time in a twenty-four hour period was capable of producing peculiar things.

Presently, he arrived in the unattended office of Zachary Max. The dutiful Miss Julie was not sitting at her desk to forbid him entrance to the inner sanctum. In fact, Zachary's door was slightly ajar, bidding him a cautious welcome.

For a few, fleeting moments, Peter checked with his conscience about the propriety of such an action. When those moments passed, Peter walked in.

He tiptoed around on cat like feet, feeling a bit like a criminal embarking on some illegal activity. Which is exactly the impression he gave Zachary, who had silently snuck up behind him.

"What the hell are you doing?" Zachary bellowed at the intruder, whose heart lodged in his throat, preventing an immediate response.

Zachary, either angry, annoyed or both, threw his briefcase on the desk and turned to face Peter with eyes blazing.

“I asked you a question, dammit! What the hell’s going on?”

Peter composed himself more rapidly than he had a right to, and responded in a cool, detached manner.

“Don’t blow a gasket. We have a meeting, remember?”

“In five hours we have a meeting.” Zachary would not be placated.

“I’m early.”

“Early enough to come sneaking around. Looking for what? What the hell did you expect to find in here?”

“A place to sit down.”

The muscles of anger in Zachary’s face released themselves into an insincere smile. Peter was more than a little uncomfortable, but refused to let it show. His interrogator’s voice was less threatening now, but far from friendly.

“Sorry I lost my temper, but you looked like a prowler. What *were* you looking for?”

“The murder weapon,” Peter laughed breezily. “Get a grip, Zachary. The tension is getting to all of us. I wasn’t looking for anything. I was ... well ... I was just looking.”

“And you found what?”

“Myself embarrassed by my employer.”

Finally, a laugh that was genuine.

“Okay. I give up. You’re a real piece of work, Peter Gregory.”

“It’s the life I lead. It makes me unique.”

Zachary stared intently at his employee.

“I’ll say one thing this business has done for you. It’s made you more aggressive. Less of a wimp. A few weeks ago, you’d have never stood up to me like that.”

“Not much intimidates me anymore, I’ll give you that. I’m not so sure that’s a good thing.”

“How can it be bad? The world’s a cruel place, Peter. And, sometimes, only the cruel can survive.”

Peter sat on the sofa and stretched out his legs. His mind was on a different time and place.

“Then those people are wrong who say the world has changed. It was equally cruel fifty years ago. And so were its people.”

“I take it,” Zachary blew smoke from a freshly lit cigar, “that the investigation proceeds down an unexpected path. Or have you always been given to sudden bursts of profundity?”

“Unexpected is an understatement. Did you know Jennifer Deane was pregnant?”

“Yes, she was pregnant twice. I’ve met them both. So have you. Where’s the surprise there?”

“She was pregnant when she did her last film.”

Zachary laughed.

“I was there when she made *All That Glitters*. And, believe me, in those skimpy outfits, that babe was definitely not pregnant.”

“I don’t mean *All That Glitters*. I mean *Journey’s End*.”

Zachary choked on his smoke. The room became so quiet that Peter could hear the cigar burn and the ashes fall to the floor. What he could barely hear was the voice of Zachary Max.

“And how did you learn about that?” he mumbled, eyes fixed on an unseen object.

“From a private viewing.”

“Impossible.” His voice didn’t change, his eyes didn’t move. “My father secured all those prints and destroyed them.”

“Or thought he did.”

“Well, well, well. I shouldn’t be surprised, I guess. If anybody could get their filthy paws on that movie, it would be Viola Plumb.”

“Viola?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Peter, don’t defend that heartless, piece of slime. She’s been saving it all these years for just the right moment to trash us. That witch should have died years ago.”

“Trash who?”

“The Maxes. The family name. My father’s reputation in the industry.”

“Zachary,” Peter asked quietly, “how can a fifty year old movie ruin your family?”

“Because the world doesn’t know about it. Because the world only knows what we wanted them to know. That Jennifer Deane was a washed up has-been. No more glamour. No more talent. Finished. My father swore to that line to the end of his life.”

“And *Journey’s End* would prove what? That your father was a liar? What Hollywood mogul wasn’t?”

Zachary finally turned to face Peter.

“It could be used to point blame at my father. It could be used to say he helped kill her career.”

“It’s been fifty years, Zachary. Name me one person who cares about the way her career crumbled?”

“You do.”

Zachary’s menacing, glassy-eyed gaze bore a hole through Peter’s soul. Most of the hairs on Peter’s neck stood out straight. Those that didn’t were covered with sweat. Once again, though, his strength was in his unnatural calm.

“I don’t care who killed her career. I care who killed *her*. And if I didn’t misunderstand our very first discussion, so do you. Isn’t that what you want me to prove?”

“I couldn’t care less who killed that slut. She was a worthless human being who deserved to die. What I wanted you to prove was that it wasn’t my father. But now, I don’t want you to prove anything. I don’t want you to write anything. I don’t want you investigating anything. The project’s been shelved. You’re fired. Get out.”

Peter got up off the sofa and headed for the door. He could feel Zachary’s eyes still focused on his retreating figure. Common sense should have told him to say nothing and keep moving. Common sense, if he had any, abandoned him. He stopped, faced Zachary and returned the penetrating gaze.

“Very noble, Zachary. All that protecting dad’s cinematic reputation crap. What are you really protecting?”

Zachary Max said nothing. Peter Gregory walked out the door, walked out of the building, and drove at a feverish pace off of the lot.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Zachary angrily watched the retreating figure. *How dare that upstart try to get the best of me and my family.* His anger suddenly dissolved into alarm. Peter knew something he shouldn’t have known. Countless hours of precise calculations had blown up in smoke. And it was all because of that stupid film.

He had spent so many years trying to preserve the truths he and his father had created. He believed they had covered every base, leaving nothing to chance. No one was supposed to find out.

Now, that was all over. Peter had somehow gotten hold of the one thing that would destroy the Max name and everything it stood for. But Peter couldn't have just found that movie all by himself. He didn't just stumble upon it by accident. Someone must have directed him to it. *But there wasn't a film to find, Zachary reasoned. All the copies were destroyed.*

His mind swirled in a dozen directions at once. Maybe he didn't find the film. Maybe there were photos from it lying around somewhere. Maybe Jacob and Zachary Max weren't as careful as they thought they were.

Zachary couldn't imagine they were found at Jenniwa House. Walter was a foolish man, but not so foolish as to provide proof of his wife's indiscretions. At that point in time, Jennifer was still alive. For some reason, Walter loved her. And that's why nothing would have made him keep those photographs where they could ever be found.

Zachary thought long and hard. His head was beginning to ache from the struggle to remember. His mind was also starting to unravel, but Zachary wasn't really aware of it.

Where had Peter been today besides Jenniwa House? Where was he before he came to the studio?

Finally, his mind grabbed hold of a memory. He had been to the warehouse. The Pinnacle Pictures warehouse. He must have discovered them there. That old bastard must have found them for him.

Peter broke several laws speeding back to the Hollywood Palms. He knew his unlimited stay there at Century Cinema's expense would shortly be terminated. He grabbed his belongings, threw them in the Mustang, turned the key in the ignition, and sat there. Going nowhere. He had nowhere to stay and he had nowhere to go. Eventually, he would need a place to sleep. At the moment, this did not seem like a priority.

Although he no longer had an employer, he still had a job to do. On his own quest for the Holy Grail, Peter was determined to find both the man and the motive behind the death of Jennifer Deane.

And he might just have found his man. All available signs were pointing to Jacob Max. Well, maybe not *all* of them, but certainly Zachary's behavior led in that direction. He was protecting more than his father's reputation as a filmmaker, and Peter had the sneaking suspicion he'd go to any lengths to do so. It was then he realized where his next destination was and with what urgency he needed to reach it. Once again breaking the law, he turned the car around and sped off toward the home of Viola Plumb.

Zachary seemed to believe it was Viola who had opened up the can of worms called *Journey's End*. He also believed, rationally or irrationally, that Viola would use it to destroy the House of Max. Even to Peter's less than sound mind, such a motion was ridiculous. To whom would she go? Decades had passed since her glory days in the gossip game. Granted, the scandalmongers of today still had no clue to the meaning of integrity, but neither did they have any respect for the pioneers of their questionable craft. In the world of yellow journalism, Viola Plumb was no revered icon. Still, Peter was convinced this obvious truth would escape the reasoning abilities of Zachary Max.

This brought Peter to what was, by far, the ultimate absurdity in his entire adventure. He was off to save the life of Viola Plumb.

From the Hollywood Palms, he made it to her house in record breaking time. Had he been a policeman, he could have given himself at least ten tickets for speeding, reckless endangerment and red light running. He was, however, not a cop. He was now Peter the Hero. He leapt out of his car, ran up the steps to her house, and pounded furiously on the front door.

His efforts were to no avail. No one opened the door and no one responded to his repeated shouts of her name. She was in there, he thought, lying dead on the rug. Her skull was crushed in by the golden image of Oscar, once bestowed on the great Jacob Max. Panic gripped him and he ran from window to window trying to gain entry. Again, no success. The aged window frames were stuck tight in their sills. He bolted across the front of her house and ran the length of her driveway. Suddenly, he stopped, frozen by the realization that her car wasn't there. She wasn't home. An equally good explanation for an unanswered door.

Yes. He felt stupid. No. It didn't bother him. If she wasn't home, she was safe and that was the only thing that mattered. Of course, whether or not he ever chose to divulge the full extent of his recent activities to the old bag was a different matter entirely. Rather an unsung hero than a ridiculed fool.

A hastily scribbled note was written and shoved beneath her front door. As he raced back to the Mustang, he realized that she might not see it. *She's not young. Her eyes aren't that good. She'll probably miss the damn thing when she opens the door.*

But he had to take a chance. There was nobody else to trust.

He ran back to the Mustang, jumped inside and started the ignition. Stepping on the gas, he pulled out of the driveway. He drove without thinking, making random turns in a race against time to an unknown destination. Peter gripped the wheel with an unpleasant mixture of determination and fear.

Concentrate. Concentrate.

He needed to somehow prove that Jacob Max had fathered Jennifer's last child. But who would know that? Viola might, but she was temporarily misplaced. Zachary would, but to ask that question in this phase of their relationship was to sign his own death warrant. Obviously, Jennifer knew, but at the moment, Peter had little interest in summoning up the spirit of the dead.

And then, by some unforeseen magic, a tiny germ of an idea began sprouting in his overworked brain. He shook his head.

What an incredibly stupid idea!

But, as Peter conceded to himself, it was not his first stupid idea and, more likely than not, it would not be his last.

He slammed on the brakes, bringing the Mustang to a screeching halt. He quickly came back to reality (or as close as he could possibly come), then spun his car around and headed off in the direction of the ocean. Off in the direction of impossibilities. Off in the direction of *Casa Deane*.

The ocean highway was darker than he remembered from his stay at Zachary's beach house. The sun had disappeared rather suddenly and the eerie blackness of night enveloped both the car and his psyche.

The darkness only served to magnify Peter's already overextended imagination. Swaying palm trees lurched toward his car like bloodthirsty, mythical beasts. One by one, he passed the monstrous creatures, the flow of their demonic eyes flickering in his rearview mirror. Oddly, as the distance grew between Peter and his demons, the fire of those hollow, yellow eyes

intensified. In a split second, sanity overtook him, as did the knowledge that those eyes of fire were the rapidly approaching headlights of a vehicle speeding up behind him.

Peter stepped on the gas, but reality had returned too late. Within seconds, his pursuer had rammed his vehicle into the Mustang so hard that Peter momentarily lost control of the car. It was long enough. The convertible careened off the road, rolled over a few times, then finally crashed into a rock at the bottom of the cliff. The force of the impact had shredded the seatbelt and the driver was thrown from the car after hitting the first tree. He, too, rolled down the hill, where his crumpled body came to rest a few feet away from his beloved automobile.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Viola's ancient station wagon tore into her driveway. She opened the door and ran up to the house faster than a woman her age should be expected to run. He breathing labored, she struggled with shaking hands to get the front door open. Her mind could only focus on getting inside and reaching the telephone. Her sensible shoes had kicked Peter's note across the floor of the living room. She gave it a cursory glance, but ignored it long enough to grab the receiver. Before she could dial a number, her eyes turned back toward the note. Dropping the receiver, she went over to the folded paper and opened it.

Viola. Your life might be in danger. Zachary thinks you gave me a copy of Journey's End. He thinks it somehow points to his father as Jennifer's killer. You need to be protected. Call Thaddeus Burns (310-555-6750). I know he'll keep you safe. Don't freak out by this, Viola, but Walter can talk. I've spoken to him on the phone. I'll explain all to you later. Just make sure you call Thaddeus right away. Peter.

Viola reread the note, then read it again. She found herself sitting on the sofa but was unaware of when she sat down. She stared at the note for several more minutes. Then she got up, walked to the phone and dialed the number of Thaddeus Burns.

Either Thaddeus broke every speed record known to man, or Viola had been sitting in a trance since she called him. Both were probably correct.

When the detective arrived, she showed him Peter's note. His eyes grew wide at the revelation about Walter. He turned his head to face Viola.

"You didn't know he could talk?"

Viola, who had been unnaturally pensive for the last hour, began returning to her normal self.

"If I knew, don't you think I'd have mentioned it to Peter?"

"Maybe it was part of a plan to protect him. You and Walter Deane have a history."

"History, my ass! I haven't seen him in over twenty years. His sons returned my letters and didn't return my calls. So, no, Mr. Hot Shot Detective. I didn't know he could talk."

She got up from the sofa and walked over to the bar. She grabbed a glass and filled it with bourbon. After taking a big swallow, she picked up a cigarette and tried to light it. Her hands were still shaking and the matches wouldn't stay lit. Thaddeus moved toward her and took a lighter out of his pocket. Viola gratefully accepted his help and took a long drag on the cigarette.

Her mind shifted gears quickly.

"Oh, my God! I forgot!"

"Forgot what?"

“Forgot why I came running in the house. Earlier today, Peter told me about his trip to the Pinnacle Pictures warehouse. He told me about meeting a caretaker named Grover Felch. I used to know him in the old days, when he used to work for Jacob on the lot. So, I thought I’d take a ride out there and say hello to him.”

“And did you say hello?”

“I didn’t get a chance to. He was dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes, dead. I’m sure you’ve heard the term before.”

Before Thaddeus could forget he was a gentleman, Viola continued.

“His chest was covered in blood. I think he may have been shot.”

“Did you call the police?”

“Tried to call from there. The phone line was dead. Ran out to my car and came back here.”

“Why didn’t you stop along the way?”

“Hey! I’m old!. I panicked. I need to call them now.”

She turned to grab the phone, but Thaddeus beat her to it.

“I’ll call them. You sit. Smoke. Drink. Whatever, you like. Just get yourself together. You’re going to have a lot of questions to answer.”

“I have a lot of questions to ask,” said Viola.

Thaddeus called police headquarters. He was in luck. One of the guys he had once mentored, Charlie McNabb, was the senior officer on duty. He explained the situation and tried to minimize the direct involvement of Viola Plumb. Instead, he forced Charlie’s attention to focus on Zachary Max. He explained the research Peter was doing, what drew Viola to the warehouse, and then read the note Peter wrote to her.

“Zachary Max,” Charlie said the name, his voice a mixture of awe and resignation. “He’s a pretty big deal in the city. Won’t be easy to pin this on him without some solid evidence. Hope he left some behind.”

Thaddeus laughed.

“You guys got it easy today. If you believe what you see on television, you can wrap this up in fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah,” replied Charlie. “Just a few photographs, a couple of blood tests and we’ll have it all. Motive, murder weapon and murderer.”

They shared another laugh and then Thaddeus got serious.

“You want me to bring Miss Plumb downtown?”

Viola shot him a glance that was meant to set him on fire. Thaddeus ignored it. Charlie was silent. He’d never met the woman, but he remembered the old guys talking about her back in the day.

“No,” he finally said, completely overlooking proper procedure. “I’ll use what you’ve given me as a written statement. We’ll get her to sign it later. I’ll have enough on my hands working around all the political crap these Hollywood types dish out.”

“Fair enough,” said Thaddeus. “I don’t blame you a bit.”

Both detectives laughed again. Viola didn’t. She didn’t know the joke they were sharing and didn’t want to.

Thaddeus hung up the phone and looked at Viola. A few agonizing moments passed before he spoke.

“Okay. They’ll take care of it. If they need you for anything else, they’ll let you know. The question for us now is what’s happened to Peter? Any ideas?”

Viola thought. It was hard to figure out what went on in that man’s head. But as she continued to think, an uncomfortable idea was brewing in her mind.

“You don’t suppose that fool is trying to find Zachary? He thinks I’m in danger. Could he be trying to track him down?”

“I doubt it,” said Thaddeus. “He just left him. Why would he go back?”

They both looked at the note that was sitting open on the coffee table.

“Maybe,” Viola said slowly, “he’s going out to *Casa Deane*. Maybe he wants to talk to Walter.”

“I can’t imagine what he thinks Deane can tell him. But I guess it’s possible. Perhaps I should take a ride out there.”

Thaddeus started for the door. Viola was right behind him.

“Where are you going?” he looked down at the withered, old figure behind him. He was at least twice her height and over three times her weight.

“I’m going with you. You’re not going to cheat me out of a chance to talk to Walter. Not after all these years.”

“This is strictly police business.”

“And you’re not a policeman anymore. You’re retired. So I have just as much right to go as you do.”

Thaddeus started to argue with her. He knew it was an argument he wouldn’t win. Not without the unpleasantness he was sure would follow.

“All right. You can come along. But I’m sure it’s a mistake.”

“Ha! You were a cop. I’m sure you made plenty of them in your time.”

Rather than slap handcuffs on her, or better yet, hold a gun to her head, he held the door open for her and led her to his car.

They didn’t speak to each other for the miles they had driven. The road leading to *Casa Deane* was a narrow one, the far side dropping off suddenly to the ocean below. The road was also pitch black. The twists and turns required Thaddeus to give his full attention to his driving. It gave them both an excuse not to talk.

The silence was broken when they saw the lights ahead, piercing through the darkness.

“What the hell is that?” Viola asked, eyes glued to the scene ahead.

“Looks like a lot of cop cars, a fire engine and an ambulance. With this road the way it is, I’m sure they have plenty of accidents out here.”

His car slowed down as they got closer to the group of emergency vehicles. His natural police curiosity got the better of him. He stopped the car and got out walking as close as he could to the unfolding drama. He didn’t realize Viola had followed him.

He introduced himself to a man that appeared to be in charge. It was the second time he’d been lucky today. Captain Edward Donnelly had also been a mentee of Thaddeus before he retired.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, they got down to the matter at hand.

“You must see this stuff all the time, Eddie. I guess this kind of accident happens a lot. With these winding roads, it wouldn’t take much to veer off the road, especially in the dark.”

“We get our fair share, that’s for sure,” said the Captain. “But this wasn’t any accident.”

Thaddeus looked perplexed.

“How can you tell?” he asked.

“Look here.” Eddie walked over to where all the vehicle headlights were directed to the road. “See these?” he pointed to a set of tire tracks barely visible in the forced lighting.

Thaddeus saw a set of tracks that veered back and forth a little bit, then disappeared over the cliff.

“That’s what I suspected. A car ran off the road.”

“Yeah,” said Eddie, “but over there is another set of tracks. Looks like the car they belong to came to a sudden stop. Then it backed up, turned around and went back the way it came. I have a feeling that car forced the other one off the road.”

Thaddeus looked up and down the road, but there was no other car to be seen.

“Where *is* the other car?”

“I have no idea. When we got here, the only thing we saw were the flames coming from the one down there,” he motioned over the cliff. “Whoever the other one belonged to didn’t hang around long enough to wait for us.”

“Then how did you get here?”

“One of the people living a ways up the road heard a crash and saw the fire. Called 911 right away.”

“Hmm,” was all Thaddeus could say before the night air was shattered by a piercing scream.

“Burns!” yelled Viola in her loudest possible voice. It was shrill, intense and terrified.

“What?” he yelled back as he quickly ran over to where she stood. To him, her outburst had been an unnecessary interruption.

“Look! Look at that car! It’s a Mustang. Burns, that could be Peter’s Mustang!”

Thaddeus stood stock still as he watched the tow truck pull up the wreckage. There was enough of it left to be familiar.

“Eddie!” now Thaddeus yelled at the top of his lungs. “Where’s the driver of this car? Was he alive?”

Before Eddie could answer, Thaddeus and Viola were running to the ambulance. The driver was anxious to get the patient to the hospital, but Eddie signaled him to wait. Eddie went to the back of the vehicle and opened the door. Lying on a cot, his face bloodied, his bones broken, was the unconscious body of Peter Gregory.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Viola and Thaddeus had been staring through the glass window to his room in Intensive Care for hours. Wires too numerous to count were attached to Peter’s body and ran back to the machines that were keeping him alive. A bandage covered his head and thick, plaster casts covered his arms and legs.

Thaddeus wandered off to get them both some coffee. What he really wanted was a good, stiff drink and he was pretty sure Viola could use the same. But this was a hospital and the best they could do was the coffee.

When he came back from his mission, he walked slowly up to Viola. He looked at the woman standing there and was surprised to see that, for the first time since he met her, she looked her age. She was somewhere in her eighties and every one of those years was etched in her face as she stared in silence at the person she called a young man. That man, Peter Gregory, was fifty. Not old, by any stretch of the imagination, but a mere boy to someone like Viola. The

aggravation and annoyance she wore with pride melted away. She was scared for his well being. So was Thaddeus.

He handed her the coffee and she took it with trembling hands. He looked at her tear stained face and gently smiled.

“You know,” he said to her, “nothing’s going to change for a while. We should probably leave.”

“He’s right, Miss Plumb,” came the soothing voice of Dr. Mooring. He had walked up behind them without either one noticing. “There’s nothing to do but wait. And you both look like you could use some sleep.”

“Sleep?” spoke the fragile voice. Viola turned to face the doctor. “How much sleep do you think I’ll get worrying about him?”

“Probably not much,” Mooring replied. “But you need to at least try. Come back in a few hours, if you need to. A little rest can go a long way.”

Thaddeus agreed. “We need to go away for a bit. If anything changes, good or bad,” he avoided direct eye contact with both of them, “you can call me on my cell phone.” He gave the doctor his number.

“I promise, Mr. Burns. I’ll call you with regular updates.”

“Thank you,” Viola said.

Uncharacteristically, she let Thaddeus take her arm and gently guide her away from the window and down the hall to the elevator bank. As they waited for the elevator to come, Viola, still holding the paper cup in her quivering right hand, suddenly dumped it in the trashcan.

“Swill,” she said, making a face. “For what they have the nerve to charge a person around here, you’d think they could serve coffee that didn’t taste like crap.”

Thaddeus smiled. She was back. And she would be okay.

The cool, fresh air beyond the hospital’s entrance revitalized them both. They had quite a long walk to the car and conversation between them flowed freely. Viola’s quiet and reflective demeanor disappeared. Instead, her voice was angry.

“What the hell is going on, Burns?” she began.

Not needing an explanation for what she was referring to, Thaddeus responded.

“I think it’s pretty clear who ran Peter off the road. It had to be Zachary Max. My guess is that Zachary also killed your friend, Mr. Felch.”

Viola nodded in agreement. Even without an official report saying so, they both believed Zachary was the perpetrator of both crimes.

“But these are two things I can’t reconcile,” she said. “I know why he went after Peter. He thinks Peter found out something that incriminates his father. But Felchie? I loved the man dearly, but he didn’t have a brain in his head. He was a simple caretaker. He didn’t know any of the dirt.”

“That might be true, but I doubt Zachary believes it. Right now, the only thing he’s concerned about is protecting his father’s reputation. It’s just hard to believe that reputation is worth killing for fifty years after the fact.”

“Oh, come on, Burns. You’ve been around Hollywood a long time. You know all the scandals and where all the bodies are buried ... so to speak.” She paused, somewhat embarrassed by her words. She got over it quickly.

“Reputations are everything here, whether fifty years old or a hundred. Hell, it isn’t just Jacob he’d be worried about. The Maxes go all the way back to the silents. Zachary’s

grandfather, Eli Max, was one of the first people out here making movies. Back with D.W. Griffith, Mack Sennett and the rest of them. In his day, he was probably a bigger deal than Jacob. Certainly, a bigger deal than Zachary.”

“But that was then. This is now.”

“Doesn’t matter. People like the Maxes have a deep seeded opinion of their place in the world. They always thought they were better than everybody else. Did you know that Eli Max was originally buried over in Gardens of Peace? Well, after Jacob died, Zachary didn’t think the cemetery was grand enough for his family, so he found another place more appropriate to bury him. He then had his grandfather dug up and moved over to Sunset Hills with Jacob and the rest of the Maxes. He had a huge monument erected. The damn thing’s so big and so centrally located, from wherever you are in the cemetery, you can see the name, *Max*. There’s no way to get away from it.”

“Well, I have to admit, I didn’t know that,” said Thaddeus.

“That’s because you aren’t me. I know everything, fact and fiction. You just know facts.”

“Okay. Here’s some facts for you. Peter Gregory is in the hospital. Grover Felch is dead. Zachary is nowhere to be found. While we can assume he committed two crimes today, we can’t prove it. We also can’t prove that his father killed Jennifer Deane. And we can’t prove that Jacob got Jennifer pregnant. In short, Miss Plumb, we’re not in a position to prove anything. The only one who might have some degree of proof is unconscious in the hospital.”

Viola was thoughtful. “I wonder,” her phrase hung loose in the air.

“About what?”

Viola grabbed Thaddeus’ big, beefy arm.

“What if Zachary was headed out to Walter’s place? What if he thinks Walter gave me the copy of *Journey’s End*? Good God, Burns, Walter could be next on his list!”

Thaddeus tried to calm her down.

“I don’t think so. If Captain Donnelly was right, Zachary’s car was headed in that direction, but turned around after he forced Peter off the road.”

“Maybe he came back.”

“With all those policemen at the scene. I doubt that, Miss Plumb. It wouldn’t make any sense.”

But Thaddeus wasn’t so sure and Viola didn’t believe it at all. They both picked up their pace getting back to the parked car. Then, in unspoken agreement, once they got to his car, they got in and steadily made their way back to the accident scene and, beyond that, to *Casa Deane*.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Viola knocked violently at the door, yelling louder than Thaddeus thought possible. Between her incessant rapping and yelling, she repeatedly pressed the doorbell.

“Albert! Hilda! Open this door! It’s Viola Plumb. Do you hear me! Open the damn door! Now!!!”

None too gently, Thaddeus pushed her out of the way.

“This is Detective Thaddeus Burns, Los Angeles Police,” he said in a loud, authoritarian voice. “Open the door, or I’ll force my way in!”

Viola looked at Thaddeus with newfound respect. She also looked at the door when she heard someone inside begin to unlock it.

“Not bad,” she said quietly to Thaddeus. “Especially for someone who isn’t a real cop.”

“I’m a real cop. I’m just retired. But they don’t know that,” he whispered back at her. “And one thing a cop always remembers is how to sound like one.”

The door creaked open, but only by a narrow slit. It was all Thaddeus needed. He shoved the door open and pushed his way past a surprised Albert and a cowering Hilda. What he didn’t know was if these reactions were due to his entrance or that of Viola.

Viola knew her way around the house and, not surprisingly from her prior relationship to its owner, headed down the hallway to the master bedroom. Without bothering to knock, she threw open the closed door. With Thaddeus close on her heels, they both saw the old man in the wheelchair spin himself around to face his visitors. He looked Viola straight in the eyes.

“Viola,” he said simply, “it’s so wonderful to see you again.”

“You bastard!” she screamed, venom dripping from her words and her eyes. But not for long. In a fraction of an instant, her rage subsided, her features relaxed and her voice was calm. The swiftness of the changes caught Thaddeus off guard. It didn’t seem to faze Walter at all.

“Walter Deane,” she said quietly. “Walter Addison Deane. I can’t believe I’m standing here. I can’t believe we’re this close after all these years.” Then a little more forcefully, she added, “And I sure as hell can’t believe you’re talking to me!”

“I’m sure it’s a bit of a shock to you. How did you find out?”

“Peter Gregory told me. I didn’t believe it at first.”

“Peter Gregory,” mused Walter. “How would he know?”

“I guess you calling him was a dead give away,” Viola snarled.

“I’ve never called Peter Gregory. In fact, I haven’t called anybody in decades.”

Viola was clearly perplexed, her brain feverishly trying to sort out the pieces to this puzzle.

“Well, she stammered, “many unbelievable things seem to be happening. What’s one more?”

Walter smiled and, so Thaddeus thought, giggled. Not an unpleasant sound, but a little out of place for a man his age.

“I hate to break up this reunion,” the former detective said, “but there’s been a lot going on, Mr. Deane. And some of it requires some information from you.”

“I’ll be glad to help in any way I can. Let’s go back to the living room where you can be more comfortable. Could I have my housekeeper get you some coffee?”

“I’d much rather have a shot of whiskey,” Viola chimed in.

“I’m not actually on duty,” said a grateful Thaddeus Burns, “so scotch would be great. Just a little water, please.”

The threesome made their way back down the hall to the living room. Drinks were prepared and served. Thaddeus made his way to a brown, leather chair, gingerly depositing his bulk into its overstuffed comfort. Viola sat at the far end of a loveseat, where Walter wheeled himself next to her.

“If everyone’s comfortable, I’m sure you have lots of questions.” He said it to the room, but his eyes never left Viola.

“Oh, you bet I have questions,” Viola said. “How about this one? Why have you let me think you were a dying, old vegetable who couldn’t speak or think clearly for the past two decades?”

Again, that peculiar giggle.

“Viola, my dear. I am so sorry. At the time, I thought it was in your best interest to think I was making a steady decline into the valley of death.”

“And that helped me *how*? Did you forget how much I loved you? Did all our years together mean nothing to you?”

“They meant everything to me, my dear. You were the second most important person in my life. We shared a great many days together.” His eyes twinkled ever so slightly. “And, of course, a good many nights.”

If it was possible, Viola seemed to blush. But this did little to diminish the hurt in her eyes or her voice.

“Yes, we did. We had a truly special relationship. How can you explain the lies?”

“They weren’t lies, my dear. Just untruths. Viola, I’m confined to this wheelchair. My legs aren’t strong enough to walk. In so many ways, I’m not the man I was, and I could never be the same man for you.”

Viola nearly went ballistic.

“Are you talking about *sex*, Walter? Are you saying you couldn’t perform your manly duty anymore? Good Lord, you old fool! Is that what our relationship was all about? The bedroom?”

There were not many times when Thaddeus Burns was embarrassed. In fact, most of his personal enjoyment came from lighthearted attempts to embarrass others. Just ask his wife, Thelma. But sitting in on a conversation of so personal a nature was wrong on so many levels. He needed to change the direction they were heading and he needed to change it fast.

“Mr. Deane. Miss Plumb. I hate to interrupt, but there are some things that need to be addressed and rather quickly, I’m afraid. There is a very real possibility that your life is in danger.”

“*My* life?” Walter looked perplexed. “I can’t imagine why you would think that.”

Viola, having temporarily regained her pride, remembered why she was there.

“Zachary Max has lost his mind,” she said bluntly.

Thaddeus shook his head. He should have come alone. A warning look he sent in Viola’s direction went unnoticed. In spite of the case building against Zachary, Thaddeus still had some reservations about Walter Deane’s innocence. It certainly appeared that Walter didn’t have the physical capability of killing Felch or attempting to kill Peter. He would prefer, however, for Viola to keep her personal prejudice to herself.

“Mr. Deane,” he began, “May I ask you a very personal question?”

“Of course, Detective Burns. At my age, there are few secrets to keep hidden.”

“There are not many ways to phrase a question like this. I suppose the best way is to just come out with it. Did your wife have a baby out of wedlock?”

The old eyes were now filled with sadness when only a second ago they had been filled with laughter.

“Yes,” said Walter. “She had gotten pregnant during the course of one of her affairs.”

“Do you know who the father was?”

Viola shifted uncomfortably. She wanted the answer as much as Thaddeus did, but the look on her former lover’s face made her cringe with guilt.

“Maybe this isn’t the best time,” she said.

Thaddeus looked at her. By the intensity of his stare he made it clear that there would never be a *best* time.

“Time is something we don’t have, Miss Plumb. One man is dead. Another one has been critically injured. Whatever the reason, we need answers before someone else is seriously harmed.”

He turned again to Walter.

“And I can’t emphasize enough, Mr. Deane, that the next person who could be killed might well be you. It might even be Miss Plumb. So I ask you again, Mr. Deane? Do you know who fathered the child?”

When he spoke, Walter did so quietly, his voice showing the same sadness expressed in his eyes.

“I always had suspicions, Detective. I just never had any proof. It wasn’t as though Jennifer ever planned to tell me. She enjoyed the secrecy of it. She loved holding it over my head. We were going through a very rough time, you understand. I knew her affairs were not a direct result of those rough times. They were just part of who she was. I could never change that, no matter how much I loved her. And you need to know one thing above all else. I truly loved that woman. I always did . . . and I always will.”

“I understand that, Mr. Deane. But that doesn’t answer my question. You say you had suspicions. What were they? Who were the people you suspected?”

Before Walter had a chance to form an answer to the detective’s questions, Viola interjected her own.

“Was it Justin Davies? He was in some of her movies. And he was quite a looker, as I remember.”

Walter giggled again.

“Not likely, Viola. Jennifer and Justin spent a lot of time together. They liked each other’s company. But in spite of the speculations of the press,” he wagged a finger in her face, “Justin wouldn’t have gotten her pregnant. Justin was much more fond of little boys.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Viola. “That’s a new one on me! Wonder how I missed that?”

Thaddeus tried to get his question in, but, again, Viola beat him to it.

“Was it one of the boys? Do you think Jonathan or Jeremy killed her?”

Thaddeus shifted his eyes to meet Viola’s. He wanted to tell her to shut up. But he wanted an answer to this question, too. Walter let little time elapse before he provided the answer.

“No,” he replied.

“No, what?” Viola shot back. “No, they didn’t kill her? Or no, you don’t *think* they did?”

“No, period. Jonathan and Jeremy were very young boys when their mother died. They adored her. The hatred they convey today built up over time, through things they read and heard. They can say and think what they want to now, but they never expressed those feelings as children. That is one fact I stand firmly behind, without the slightest reservation.”

Thaddeus stared into space. His mind was working the case. If neither Walter nor his sons committed the murder, then who did? Where was the common thread in all of this mess? It all came back to motive. Jennifer was a revolving door in the romance department. She had a string of suitors a mile long. But affairs, alone, didn’t necessarily lead to murder.

The baby provided the biggest motive. In those Hollywood days of moral sensitivity, producing an illicit child was a career killer. Someone needed power and money to cover up something like that. Jacob Max certainly had both. He had been at Jennifer’s home when the police arrived. He looked guilty as hell during his questioning. His answers were less than forthcoming. Still, Thaddeus reasoned, Jacob Max was an old man when the murder was committed. As history would prove, his years ahead would find his position as a movie mogul gradually diminish. Max had to know back then what was coming down the road in the industry.

To risk what little authority he had left was pointless. He was also an old man when the baby was conceived. If they *were* having an affair, it was most unlikely he could father a child.

So if you rule out her husband and sons, her innumerable lovers and her boss, who was left as the murderer of Jennifer Deane? Is it possible that the same man who murdered Grover Felch and tried to kill Peter was the same man who killed Jennifer? Is it possible that the man who claimed he was trying to protect his father's reputation was trying to protect his own?

His mind slowly started forming an idea. But before he could mentally elaborate on it and present the idea to Walter and Viola, his mind jumped back to the present. He glanced at his watch. He hadn't heard back from Dr. Mooring, and several hours had passed. He'd better try calling him. Just as soon as he grabbed the cell phone from his pocket, it started to ring.

Viola and Walter continued their conversation in progressively louder tones as Thaddeus tried to hear what the caller was trying to tell him. He waived his hand in the air hoping to quiet them down.

"What?" he said to the caller. "What did you just say? Oh, God Almighty! I'll be right there!"

His companions looked at Thaddeus, a thousand questions in their eyes.

"That was Eddie. Captain Donnelly. Someone with a gun entered the hospital and is threatening to kill everyone on the floor."

"Which hospital? Who's the gunman? Is anyone hurt?" Viola asked, fear creeping into her voice.

"The hospital where Peter is. Eddie doesn't have all the details, but there are some people dead or seriously wounded. Eddie's in transit and wants me to meet him there. I've got to go."

Thaddeus was quickly out of the chair and headed for the front door.

"Not by yourself, you're not!" Viola jumped up faster than he did.

"Oh, no!" said Thaddeus, spinning around to face her. "You're not going anywhere. I'm not putting you in jeopardy. You'll be safer if you stay here."

She followed him as he ran out of the house, both reaching his car at the same time. She had the passenger door open before she spoke.

"I would be if I stayed here. But that's not going to happen because I'm going with you."

Thaddeus didn't have time for a fight. He opened his door and yelled over the roof as he got in.

"Suit yourself. But stay out of the way and, for God's sake, keep quiet!"

Fat chance, thought Viola, as the car squealed out of the driveway and sped at breakneck speed on its way to the hospital.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The hospital floor was closed to newcomers. Patients lay helpless in their beds, their visitors held hostage by the erupting gunfire. There was no time to evacuate them all to safety. With little time to react, the staff, too, were prisoners of the gunman.

Police sirens could be heard in the distance, growing louder with each agonizing second that passed. But fear overrode any sense of possible rescue. Two nurses had already been killed by the initial shots. Their lifeless bodies were crumpled on the floor in an ever widening pool of their own blood. Dr. Mooring slumped against a wall, pain ravaging his body after the bullet entered. He wasn't dead, but as a physician, he knew the life was slowly seeping out of him.

Peter was slowly regaining consciousness when the gunfire began. The shots he heard weren't nearly as piercing as the screams coming in violent bursts from every area beyond his

room. The cobwebs in his brain made it difficult to identify the source of the obvious panic. But as the fog began to clear, his eyes focused on a revolver pointed directly at him. The gun temporarily obscured the menacing figure holding it. It wasn't until the man spoke that Peter realized the extent of the danger he faced.

"You should be dead," Zachary said. "You should have died when that car rolled down the hill."

Peter's reactions were severely impaired by his injuries and the painkillers. Even in his fragile condition, he knew he needed to make some attempt to prolong what appeared to be inevitable.

"Why?" he weakly asked Zachary. "Why would you do this just to protect your father?"

"My father has nothing to do with this!" Zachary spat out the words. "He was a stupid, old man who understood nothing. He didn't understand how his days were numbered in the movie industry. He didn't understand that men like me were taking control of the business, fully prepared to push the elderly remains of a by-gone era onto the streets. He didn't understand that sex was just sex, not some great, big moral problem that needed to be contained. And he sure as hell never understood me."

"I don't follow what you're saying. He understood enough to kill Jennifer Deane."

An ominous sound came from deep within Zachary's throat. His eyes glazed over with pure hatred. The face looking at him now filled Peter with unadulterated terror.

"So, you think you have it all figured out? You think you're some brilliant crime solver?" Again, that maniacal laugh.

Forgetting for a moment that his life depended on the man standing over him, Peter couldn't help the sarcastic tone in his voice.

"I don't think that at all. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what your father did."

"My father!" Zachary yelled. "A lifetime in his shadow! No recognition of my own greatness. Forever buried beneath the crowning achievements of Jacob Max! Well, I have a few spectacular achievements of my own."

"Nobody says you don't," Peter spoke quietly. "You have the respect of your entire community. You can't let your father's crime blemish your own reputation."

"My reputation? You think I engineered all this to save myself from my father's deed? You think I'm that stupid?"

Zachary began pacing back and forth across the room. He swung his pistol around in the air, as if to emphasize each word he spoke.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT – The Past

Zachary stood in the room, motionless and unfeeling. He stared at the floor. His eyes took in the scene, but emotions escaped him.

He hadn't heard the incessant ringing of the doorbell. He hadn't heard the repeated rapping at the door. And when the key turned in the lock and the door was opened, he hadn't heard his father's footsteps coming toward him.

"Oh, my God," his father whispered. "Zachary? What happened? What have you done?"

Zachary turned away from the inert form at his feet. He stared at his father's face. But while Jacob's eyes were filled with fear and foreboding, Zachary's were filled with loathing. And something more, thought Jacob. They were like the black, lifeless eyes of a shark.

"I asked you a question, Zachary. "What happened?"

“What do you want me to say, father? Do you want the truth or some fabricated lie? Maybe something from the script of one of your ridiculous movies?”

Jacob was too startled by the scene to take in exactly what Zachary had said.

On the floor, not more than three feet away from him, lay the obviously dead body of Jennifer Deane. In his son’s hand was a revolver.

His stomach started churning as he took it all in. Blood already saturated the carpet beneath her. The room reeked of smoke from the fired weapon. The air in the room held the pungent aroma of death.

“Oh, my God,” Jacob repeated. “What did you do?”

Zachary kept looking at Jennifer’s body. Then he did the one and only thing that could make his father sicker. He laughed.

“You stupid, old fool,” Zachary finally said. “It should be fairly obvious. I killed the bitch.”

“Zachary,” his father spoke between sobs that suddenly overcame him. “Why would you do this? What did she do to deserve being murdered?”

“She kept the damned baby.”

Jacob was startled by this simple statement. It didn’t make any sense to him. Yet the fear his son instilled in him made it difficult to ask any more questions.

Zachary didn’t notice his father’s discomfort. He continued talking as if what he’d done was the most logical thing he could have done.

“She had to die. She would have told someone. Hell, she may have blabbed about it.”

“I don’t understand ...”

“Shut up! Of course, you don’t understand. The world thinks you’re so talented and brilliant. But you’re nothing. Nothing but a stupid old man.”

Jacob stared at him, not comprehending what was being said. He could not get the grisly image of the bloody actress out of his head.

Zachary suddenly grabbed Jacob by the collar of his jacket. He forced Jacob’s face down toward the body.

“You see her? Take a good look! This is the whore I slept with. This is the slut I got pregnant. She didn’t think about what this could do to me. I told her to get an abortion, but she refused. Said she wanted to keep the damn baby. She could have ruined me. She *wanted* to ruin me. Me! More of a man than she’d ever been with before. She said I raped her. Said I forced her into bed and tore her clothes off. All against her will, she said. What a liar! She wanted me. She wanted everything I had to give and when we finished, she begged for it again.”

“You raped her?” Jacob couldn’t keep the disgust out of his voice. “You raped her, then you murdered her?”

“She was going to the press! She was going to tell her fabricated story to those stupid reporters. I wasn’t going to let that happen. She had no right.”

“Had no right? You had no right to do what you did. You had no right to kill her!”

Zachary just laughed.

“I’m amused by your righteous indignation. You were the one afraid of scandals, father. You were trying to kill her career. Now you don’t have to. I took care of it.”

“Oh, you took care of it all right. And this scandal will be bigger than anything Jennifer could have made. You’ll be locked up for the rest of your life. And for the rest of mine, I’ll bear the shame of what you’ve done. You’ll have to call the police. You’ll have to confess.”

“Oh, no,” Zachary smiled. “I’m not doing any such thing. If you want to face your useless colleagues and hold on to whatever is left of your pitiful career, you’ll make this go away.”

“How?”

“Hey! You’re the great fixer, aren’t you? You’re a big deal. Isn’t that what you’re always telling me? You kept all your stars safe. You kept their indiscretions and vices out of the public eye. You can’t do the same thing for your own son? You don’t want me to think you’ve fallen so far in the industry to suddenly be a hapless nobody.”

“I can’t fix this, Zachary. I won’t.”

Zachary walked right up to Jacob, their faces touching.

“You *will* fix this. You’ll make it go away. If you don’t, not only will your precious family name wither up and die just like Jennifer, but I swear I’ll kill you, too.”

Jacob knew this was no empty threat. He only had to look at Jennifer’s body to know that.

“Get out of here,” he told Zachary. “Go out the back door. Don’t touch anything but the doorknob. Go down to the beach house and stay there. Is that Jennifer’s gun?”

Zachary nodded.

“Okay. I’ll take care of this mess. And when I’ve cleaned it up, I don’t want to see you or hear from you again. As far as I’m concerned, I have no son anymore.”

“Gee, pop. You’ve hurt my feelings,” Zachary laughed. Then he grew serious, his smile twisting into a cruel grin.

“Listen to me, old man. You won’t hide me away or keep me out of your life. Any sign of something wrong between us and those nosy gossipmongers will start sniffing around. We’re going to be the happy, loving family we’ve always pretended to be. Anything changes that, you’re a dead man.”

Jacob nodded. Zachary headed for the back door. When the door closed behind him, Jacob began the cleaning up process. He wiped off fingerprints, placed the gun in Jennifer’s hand, and staged the suicide scene. He then called the police. From that moment forward, Jacob Max’s life continued its steady, downward spiral to into death.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE – The Present

The tires of his car screeched to a halt. Thaddeus jumped out and strode through the police line like he owned the place. His steps were deliberate and fraught with purpose. He scanned the crowd of uniformed officers at the scene until he spotted Captain Edward Donnelly.

“Eddie!” the former detective shouted. “What’s going on?”

Eddie turned quickly at the barked command. His face bore the smile of a tired colleague. He issued some orders to his team, then headed toward Thaddeus.

“Thad, what are you doing here?” He paused for an instant as he noticed the wiry, old woman approaching fast on Thaddeus’ heels. “Oh, man, what’s *she* doing here?”

“What do you think I’m doing here?” Viola blurted out before Thaddeus turned to look down at her. His eyes told her to be quiet. Normally, she would have responded with some caustic comment, but events were far from normal.

“Ignore her,” said Thaddeus. “What’s going on in there?”

“Ignore ...” The rest of Viola’s comment froze forever beneath the icy, cold glare of the former detective.

Eddie brushed off the old woman by focusing his full attention on Thaddeus.

“Thad, I have a feeling you know more about this than I do. What have you heard?”

“Only what you told me on the phone. I listened to the news radio folks on the way here, but their information is sketchier than yours.”

“Well, what we know isn’t much. We know there’s a gunman in there. Only a handful of people managed to get off the floor and, honestly, I’m not sure how they got out alive. One of the guys who got out, an orderly I think, said a guy about seventy years old, charged through the Intensive Care Unit carrying a gun. When the duty nurse jumped up from her desk, he shot her. Another nurse and a doctor tried to intervene, but then they got shot. Someone on the inside told us the two nurses were dead, but they weren’t sure about the doctor.”

“Who’s the gunman?”

“Don’t know. You have any thoughts?”

“It could be Zachary Max.”

“The producer?” Eddie whistled. “That’s an interesting theory. Got anything to back that up?”

“One or two suppositions. Nothing solid. Where’s this guy now?”

“I’m not positive, but there’s nothing to suggest he left Intensive Care. Our source thought he was holed up in somebody’s room, but doesn’t know whose.”

“Crap,” was all Thaddeus could say.

“You know it. I can’t get my people in there because headquarters is sending in a SWAT team. Think they’re better suited to deal with the situation.”

“You don’t think so?” asked Thaddeus.

“Not my call, Thad. But between you and me, I’m afraid once they’re in there, all hell will break loose. I’d rather take a few men up the backstairs and try and take him out that way.”

“Take him out?” Viola asked tentatively.

“Yeah,” Eddie addressed them both. “Not much chance of this perp coming out alive, regardless of who goes in.” Eddie looked directly at Thaddeus. “And, whatever the outcome, more people may get hurt.”

Viola’s thoughts were all over the place. She paced back and forth like a caged lion, fighting the fear that gripped her heart. Fear that Peter was in danger. At first, she found herself staring into space. To force herself into clearing her head, she began looking at the cars in the parking lot. One car in particular grabbed her attention. A silver Rolls Royce with personalized plates. *Why do people need to do that? I guess it’s just a way to get attention.* A closer look at the plates made her gasp.

“Burns!” she yelled. “You were right! Look at the plates,” she screamed at the top of her lungs, pointing a boney finger at the Rolls.

Thaddeus and Eddie both turned to the car.

“MAX 12B,” Eddie read the tag.

Thaddeus looked at Viola, then faced back toward Eddie. His worst fears were confirmed.

“Eddie. Your perp? It’s got to be Zachary Max. And I think Peter Gregory’s in serious trouble.”

“Is?” replied Eddie, before he ran back to his officers. “You mean if he’s not already dead.”

Those words hung suspended in the thick, Los Angeles fog.

The medication had long ago worn off, but Peter was oblivious to any pain. What Zachary just told him numbed his body from head to toe.

As if finally glad to get the story out in the open, Zachary continued his tale.

“When I saw the first rushes from *Journey’s End*, it was obvious she was pregnant. I knew the scandal sheets would have a field day with the news. It wouldn’t take them long to find out that the baby wasn’t Walter’s. Somebody in the press was bound to find out it was mine. I called her several times. Told her she had to get an abortion. But she refused.”

His breathing was irregular. He continued to sweat in buckets. It almost appeared as though Zachary wasn’t even in the room. He was there in the past, five decades ago.

“Weeks went by,” he went on. “I wanted her to drop out of the movie. Told her she had to quit. Nothing. Each time I brought it up, she laughed at me. Accused me of trying to kill her career to save mine.

“I tried to get her off the picture by going through my father. But he wouldn’t have any part of it. Told me she was still a huge draw. I said she was washed up in the business. That he’d just be wasting his money trying to make his stupid picture.

“Something happened, though. I don’t know what. One day, she didn’t show up for work. Said she was sick. She may have been. Never came out and said it, but it was probably some kind of pregnant related thing. Next thing I heard, she was down in South America. I guess that’s where she had the baby.

“My father had to fire her from the picture. She just disappeared and he didn’t know why. Tried to find out something from Walter, but got nothing more than a door slammed in his face.

“One day, a friend of mine says he saw her. Seems she was living in the Hollywood house. I was afraid one of those newspaper people would track her down and drag the story out of her. So, I went to the house to talk to her. I hadn’t been sleeping very well so I got there early in the morning, four, maybe five, o’clock. I was actually pretty surprised that she was awake, although it was clear she’d been drinking.

“She didn’t want to let me in, but I forced my way past her. I went over the whole damn thing again, about the press finding out and how a lot of careers would be ruined. She laughed. Said I was too late. Told me in a few hours, she was meeting with a reporter to spill the whole, ugly thing. I yelled at her, told her what a mistake it was. She just laughed at me again. Said she didn’t care anymore. She wanted some peace.

“She was just moving into the house. Packing boxes were everywhere. On top of one of them, I saw a gun. She had her back to me. I grabbed a pillow and put it over the barrel. When she turned around, she started to squeal, but I was too quick for her. I told her, ‘here’s your peace’ and I pulled the trigger.”

Zachary stopped at these final words. The narrative had taken nearly all his remaining energy. He’d been trapped by the past for fifty years. Now, he was trying to find a way out. Another problem needing resolution. And he would. The same way he’d disposed of her.

Peter was acutely aware of the danger. There was no mistaking his visitor’s intentions. Peter would soon be as dead as the people in the hall. As dead as Jennifer Deane.

Looking at him through demented eyes was Zachary Max. Sweat dripped from every pore, as evidenced by the perspiration rolling down his face and soaking his shirt. He was no longer pacing the room. He stood in place like a mannequin clutching his revolver close to his chest, occasionally pointing it in Peter’s direction.

Without regard for his own mortality, Peter forced himself up on one elbow. His own eyes were filled with an odd mixture of hatred and pity.

“You killed Jennifer. You forced her to have sex with you, you fathered her child, and you killed her. You had your father cover up the crime. And because of what you did, you hastened your own father’s death.”

The suddenness of Peter talking brought Zachary back to the present. For a moment, he looked almost normal.

“Good to see the drugs haven’t dulled your senses,” Zachary laughed. “Glad you were able to follow me.”

“You bastard,” Peter spat out the words.

Zachary laughed again.

“What’s the matter, Gregory? Mad that I led you on a merry chase?”

The gun in Zachary’s hand pointed directly at Peter’s face.

“Go ahead and kill me. You might as well do it now. You know you’re going to do it anyway.”

Zachary let the gun slip to his side.

“I have to kill you. You weren’t supposed to figure it out.”

“I didn’t figure it out. I thought the killer was your father.”

“But you’d have come to the truth soon enough. I wanted you to think it was Walter. I did everything I could to make you believe that. Hell, I thought I had you sold on that when I faked his voice in those phone calls.”

“You?”

“Yeah. Pretty clever, huh? You were very nearly convinced Walter killed his wife. If that idiot Felch hadn’t given you the photographs from *Journey’s End*, you’d have been sure of it.”

“Photographs? Felch didn’t give me any photos. I found the film at Jenniwa House.”

“Jenniwa House? How did it get there? Damn. Guess I shouldn’t have killed the little freak.”

Peter’s head began to spin. How many people had Zachary killed to protect his secret? Was Viola still alive? Had he killed her, too? And maybe even Walter?

“Zachary,” Peter tried to reason. “You’re in a lot of trouble. And there’s no way you won’t go to jail. But don’t hurt anybody else. Turn yourself in.”

“That’s my boy,” said Zachary smiling. “A chip off the old block. Looking to save your own skin, even when the odds are so small.”

It took a few minutes for these last words to register. Even when they did, Peter wasn’t sure he exactly understood the meaning.

Zachary picked up on the confusion immediately.

“You don’t get it, do you? You’re adopted, Gregory. Your parents weren’t rich. Ever wonder where that massive inheritance of yours came from?”

Peter gulped. Then he could barely breathe. Rockets started exploding in his head.

“What are you saying?” He thought he knew, but he didn’t want to believe it. Couldn’t even face the possibility.

“When Jennifer put the baby up for adoption, she wanted to make sure she provided for his future. She made arrangements with the agency to keep track of him. If something should happen to her,” and here Zachary grinned, “her entire estate went directly to her son.”

“And how do you know that?” Peter asked incredulously.

“Because after I killed her, I followed up with the adoption agency. I told them I was the father of Jennifer’s baby and I wanted to make sure he was well taken care of.”

“That wouldn’t have happened. Adoption records are sealed.”

“If you never learn anything else, then learn this: money fixes everything.”

But Peter wasn't listening. He mind was stuck in one spot. Jennifer Deane, the woman he'd worshipped for as long as he could remember, was his mother. And this man, so deeply immersed in evil, was his father. He knew Zachary was still talking. But what about, he couldn't say.

Eddie Donnelly ran back to his team. Before he'd even reached them, he shouted, “We're going in!”

One officer yelled back, “But the SWAT guys aren't here yet!”

“Then you can wait for them!” Eddie yelled back. “I'm going in!”

With that, every member of his unit ran into the hospital. With all the confusion, nobody noticed the team being followed inside by a giant, retired detective and a fragile-looking, elderly woman.

Once gathered inside, Eddie and his officers created a hastily improvised plan. There would be no spectacular rescue attempt. They would merely run up the rear steps to Intensive Care and, as quietly as they could, corner Zachary, force him to release his weapon, shoot him if he didn't, kill him if necessary.

“As plans go,” Viola whispered none too quietly, “it's not much of one.

Seeing her and Thaddeus for the first time, Eddie didn't hide his displeasure.

“Come up with a better one or shut up.”

Before she could come up with a sarcastic retort, Eddie turned his back on her, looking directly at Thaddeus.

“If you want to come with us, you can. You have a weapon?”

“Don't carry one anymore.”

Eddie reached in his coat for the second gun he always carried.

“You have one now.”

“What about me?” Viola nearly whined.

Eddie looked pensive for the few seconds he had before plunging into action. Then he spoke again to Thaddeus.

“If she causes a problem, you can shoot her.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Thaddeus bounded up the stairs, two at a time. He kept his mind on other things, not wanting to focus on the twinges of pain in his aging knees. True, he was in his seventies. *Early seventies*, he smiled to himself. Although it had been years since he was on active duty, he could still taste the exhilarating thrill of the chase.

More surprising was the valiant way Viola kept up with him. Her breathing, in fact, was less labored than his own. *What kind of woman is this*, he wondered. Then he noticed she was talking. Nonstop. Perhaps since they started up the steps. *What kind of woman? A noisy one.*

“What are you chattering about?”

“This is a stupid plan. Hell, it's not even a plan. It's some half-baked idea by some half-baked detective. He should have waited for the SWAT team. They'd handle this better than that silly group of pea brains. Of all the stupid ideas! A handful of cops trying to deal with a crazed lunatic like Zachary Max. He's killed I don't know how many people and they're just going to waltz in there and ...”

“Good Lord, woman! Be quiet!”

“I won’t be quiet! Peter might already be dead. And if these morons let Max escape, he’ll go after Walter and who knows who else. I ...”

Thaddeus stopped in his tracks and looked down at the woman following him. Two steps ahead of her, he looked even taller than he was.

“If you don’t shut up, I’m going to take Eddie’s advice.”

“Advice? What advice?”

Thaddeus paused before replying, but only for an instant.

“Never mind. Let’s just get up there and see if we can help. But for heaven’s sake, woman, just stop talking!”

Peter tried hard to keep from slipping into unconsciousness. Despite his valiant efforts, the well-lit room was fading into darkness. Only the story he’d just been told kept him from falling into the abyss.

Zachary was losing his grip, as well. Years of maintaining his secrets became years wasted. The floodgates protecting his hidden life broke open in a fury. His hold on reality grew weak. Covered by sweat escaping every pore, his eyes darted back and forth, and his legs became unstable. The strong, self-assured strides he had taken around the room earlier were now little more than shuffles.

“It’s time to get this over with,” he mumbled. “It’s time to do what I came here for.”

In the few moments between his charging up the steps and stopping to yell at Viola, Thaddeus didn’t notice that Eddie Donnelly and his officers left the stairwell at the floor below the Intensive Care Unit to approach it from the other side.

So he was rather surprised to open the door and find himself less than thirty feet away from the room where Zachary Max held Peter Gregory a prisoner. And more surprised, still, that he was the only representative of the law.

Thaddeus slipped back into the stairway, quietly closing the door. A rather harsh expletive slipped from his lips.

“What?” Viola asked, a little too loudly.

“Shush,” he said without looking at her. “We’re in trouble, here. We’re right outside Peter’s room and there’s no backup yet.”

“I told you ...” she started to say, but stopped when Thaddeus took out the revolver he’d placed in the pocket of his jacket.

Making sure it was loaded and ready for action, Thaddeus gripped the gun with a steady hand and fierce determination.

“Burns, I think you’d better wait for the others.”

“We don’t have that kind of time. I don’t even know where they are. You didn’t see Zachary flailing that gun of his around. If he doesn’t shoot somebody on purpose, he could kill somebody by accident.”

“Then I don’t think we should take the chance of becoming another statistic.”

A quiet laugh escaped from Thaddeus. Then his face grew serious.

“*We* aren’t becoming a statistic because *we* aren’t going in. *You* are staying put. And this is *not* negotiable!”

Viola said nothing. No sarcastic retort, no disagreement, no nothing. She simply nodded her head in resigned assent.

Slowly, Thaddeus turned the handle. Taking what he assumed might be his last breath, he slid out the door and noiselessly crept behind the closest desk.

He saw the carnage left behind in Zachary's wake. Two women Thaddeus assumed were nurses lay in pools of their own blood. He recognized Dr. Mooring, but couldn't determine if he was dead or alive. Blood seemed to be everywhere.

Careful not to give himself away, he raised his head slightly over the top of the desk to look at the unfolding scene in Peter's room. Even from this distance, he could tell that Zachary's mind was all but gone. His years on the force taught him how to smell disaster approaching, and this one was coming fast.

And where the hell is Eddie?

But the answer no longer mattered. Zachary raised his gun and pointed it directly at Peter.

Silently, on cat-like feet, Thaddeus stealthily crept toward the room's open doorway. The years since his retirement melted away. His thoughts were only on the mission and bringing it to a resolution. Drawing on every, inner resource he could muster, he raised himself to his full, massive height, and leveled his gaze and his gun on Zachary.

"Drop your weapon, Max!" he said calmly. "Drop it or I'll shoot."

Peter lay there in a state of shock, staring and disbelieving. Not because of Thaddeus, though. He had no doubts in the older man's superior abilities. No, what confounded him in this twisted turn of events was the figure creeping along behind him. Bravely staring down the barrel of Zachary's gun from behind the relative safety of the detective's back was none other than Viola Plumb.

Zachary spun around, staring wildly at these sudden intruders. As Zachary's eyes darted in Viola's direction, Thaddeus suddenly became aware of her presence, but he dared not take his eyes off his prey.

"Put the gun down! Now!" Thaddeus demanded.

Zachary didn't answer. The torment that hung on his face turned into hatred, and his demeanor changed from panicked to demented.

"Congratulations, Detective," he sneered. "It only took you fifty years to figure this out."

His demonic laugh filled the air. But it was clear that his few, remaining shreds of sanity were all but gone.

"Okay. You win," Zachary said without conviction. "I'll be right with you. I just have one more thing to do."

Then he turned to face Peter. He walked up closer to him pointed the gun in his face.

Before any of them could react, Donnelly and what appeared to be the entire L.A. police force charged down the hallway. High speed, precision rifles on their shoulders, they lined up behind Thaddeus, who still stood in the doorway, eyes and revolver pointed at Zachary.

A muted cry worked its way out of Zachary's throat. At first, barely audible, within seconds it became a shrill and paralyzing, blood-curdling scream.

He bent over and looked down into Peter's face. There was no remorse in his eyes, not even a hint of the caged animal he'd become.

"Zachary," Peter whispered in a small, tired voice, inaudible to the others. "Zachary, please. You can't make things worse. They're as bad as they can get. Nobody can save you now. Do what you have to. What you think is the right thing to do."

Zachary's face no longer held contempt. It held fear. He nodded his head at Peter. He could hear behind him the police squad with their high-tech weapons poised for the kill.

He straightened his body, pointing his gun directly at Peter's head. Then, he turned slightly toward the doorway. In an instant too quick to be measured in time, he turned the gun on himself, put the barrel in his mouth, and pulled the trigger.

Fragments of bone and brain matter covered everyone and everything. The only one to escape the flying debris had been Viola. Just seconds before the gun fired, she did something totally out of character. She fainted.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

It could best be described as a paradox. Nothing about the situation seemed normal, and yet everything about it was.

Two, aging lovers were reunited after decades of separation. Two, equally old servants bustled around the dining room as though time had been suspended. Soon, another elderly couple would be joining them. One man, a youth to this group at the lowly, half-century mark, quietly took it all in. Age was, apparently, only a factor if allowed to become one.

Smiles lit up the room. Smiles of love rekindled. Smiles of one's purpose renewed. Even the younger man found himself caught up in the joy that permeated the air.

The event which brought all these people together was a celebration of Peter Gregory's recovery. He had been in the hospital for over a month. As his wounds and bones began to heal, he'd taken part in countless, painful hours of physical therapy. In the beginning, when the pain was at its worst, he was unsure if he would ever walk again. Now, he could manage to get around with only the aid of a cane. Viola said it made him look dashing, a comment which caused Walter to giggle unashamedly.

Walter Deane spared no expense on this feast. The finest meats, the freshest produce, and the most flavorful wines took up every spare inch in the kitchen. Somehow, they would still need to find room for the desserts promised by Thelma Burns.

Hilda was truly the busy bee, buzzing from the kitchen to the dining room and back again. Albert made sure no glass remained empty for more than a minute. And all this flurry of activity by these septuagenarians, octogenarians and possible nonagenarians made Peter feel hopeful as he pondered the possibilities ahead of him. Fifty years was nothing in this crowd.

Viola, Walter and Peter sat in the living room, awaiting the Burns' arrival. After Albert saw to their liquid needs, he retired to the dining room and kitchen to assist Hilda in any way she directed.

The atmosphere was subdued. The manic energy expended just a few, short months ago transformed itself into subtle comfort. Flames gracefully danced across the wood in the fireplace. Small talk had taken up much of time since Peter arrived. Now, as Peter positioned himself comfortably in the best chair available (at Viola's insistence, no less), the chitchat moved on to more recent events.

"Before our other guests arrive, I wanted to ask you a question, Peter," Walter asked quietly. Then he smiled. "I think you know what it is."

Peter had been waiting for the conversation to turn in this direction. He appreciated Walter's discretion in not bringing it up in front of Thaddeus and Thelma Burns.

"It's about her ghost, I'm sure." Until this very moment, Peter wasn't sure how he felt about the subject.

“Yes,” replied Walter, “it’s about Jennifer’s ghost. You know, there were times over the years I thought I was crazy. I’m sure Viola thought I was crazy, too.”

“My thinking you were crazy had nothing to do with the ghost,” said Viola with an odd mixture of love and sarcasm in her voice.

“Touché, my dear. I should have expected that from you,” Walter gave her a wink, which caused her to blush like a school girl. Then he turned his attention back to Peter. “Would it be too painful for you to recount her visits to you?”

Peter shook his head to indicate there would be no problem. He then described to Walter, in as much detail as he could remember, each appearance Jennifer made to him. In the retelling, he was surprised that what had been frightening, frustrating, and infuriating now only filled him with pity. The terror of her ghostly presence melted away. Now, it mostly made him sad.

“You were lucky, Peter. I only saw her that once,” Walter sighed. “I always thought there would be more visits. I went back to the cemetery day after day, but she never came back. I guess she had no reason to.”

“I certainly didn’t see a reason at the time. Only now, after everything I’ve learned, is her reasoning clear. She needed to point me in the right direction so I could discover the truth for her sake and mine. As for me being lucky, you tell me. My mother was murdered and my father was the murderer. I think I could have gone on forever not knowing those things.”

“But you’d never have a complete picture of yourself,” said Viola softly. “Now, you understand your obsession and can move on.”

“I think it will be some time before I can move on. This was a lot to digest. Especially the part where I was almost murdered.”

Before they could delve into this any further, the doorbell rang. Albert made a surprisingly hasty dash to the front. After escorting Detective and Mrs. Burns to the living room, he took Thelma’s two homemade desserts, a beautifully delicate, chocolate mocha cake and mouth-watering, cinnamon apple tart, into the kitchen.

The giant figure of Thaddeus Burns was still impressive. As was the delicate figure of his devoted wife, Thelma.

“You look good, Peter,” Thaddeus reached down to pat him gently on the shoulder. Then he stood straight up. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever called you by your first name before.”

Everybody laughed.

“Well,” said Viola, “I think with all that’s happened, we can dispense with formalities.”

“Indeed,” chimed in Walter. “Welcome to my home, Thaddeus.” He wheeled himself over to Thelma, who bent over and placed a loving kiss on his wrinkled cheek. “And you, my dear, are every bit as charming as you were when you worked for me. How many years ago?”

“Thank you so much, Walter,” Thelma smiled warmly. “But, if you don’t mind, I think I won’t answer that.”

Viola poked her boney elbow into Walter’s side. “What’s the matter with you? You never talk about age with a woman.”

“I didn’t ask her age,” Walter said, “I was asking how many years had passed.”

“Same thing, you old fool.”

Walter shrugged his shoulders. “I guess you’re never too old to learn about women.”

Thaddeus grinned. “Let me know what you learn. I’m not too smart in that area, either.”

At that point, Albert had entered the living room. With a severe look on his face, he addressed both Walter and Thaddeus.

“Alas, even *I* know little about the female gender. But what I *do* know is that Hilda will be splitting at the seams if you don’t hurry and seat yourselves at the table. Dinner is served.”
Light-hearted laughter followed the group as it headed toward the dining room.

The conversation and wine flowed freely. Everyone present had a warm, comfortable feeling. They talked about the case, the people involved, the facts they knew and their unsubstantiated theories.

“It’s hard to believe how crazy this guy was,” said Thaddeus. “It’s bad enough he killed Jennifer. But half a century later, he’s still killing people to cover it up. He nearly got you, Peter. He murdered two nurses. Probably thought he’d killed the doctor. And Grover Felch. Murdered him, like all the others, out of fear.”

At the mention of this last name, Viola tried in vain to control herself. In spite of her best efforts to stop them, a few tears insisted on rolling down her cheeks.

“Any word about Dr. Mooring?” Walter asked Thaddeus.

“As a matter of fact, he was discharged from the hospital yesterday. He’ll spend a little time off to recuperate more fully, then it’s back to work.”

“He’s a good man,” said Peter. “I didn’t appreciate him much the first time I met him. But I understand he was responsible for getting as many people as he could off the floor before he got shot.”

“Yeah, yeah. Heck of a guy.” Viola interjected. She was not interested in exchanging platitudes about the good doctor. “Back to Grover. Why did he have to die? He didn’t know anything.”

They had already discussed this over dinner. But Thaddeus could see that the image of the dead, little man still haunted her. Thaddeus chose his words carefully before he spoke.

“Like I said, it was all about fear. Zachary had reached the stage of extreme paranoia. Everybody was a threat. He thought Felch was another enemy. Someone else who stood in the way of his safety.”

“Poor Felchie,” Viola spoke the name reverently.

“And by that time,” Peter reflected, “Zachary was so far gone, he would have believed anything. He wasted all those years trying to cover his tracks. The truth came out anyway . . .”

“And it destroyed him,” Walter finished the sentence.

“So, Detective,” Walter continued, a twinkle in his eyes, “are you surprised I’m not the murderer?”

“You want the truth? Yes. I’m surprised. In my experience, the husband is always the first suspect . . . and usually for a very good reason. You have to admit, you had a laundry list of reasons to kill her.”

“Thad!” Thelma admonished him. “You could be a bit more discreet!”

“He brought it up, Thelma. Remember?”

Walter laughed, causing everyone at the table to join in.

“I’m a very, old man, Thelma. I stopped being sensitive decades ago. You’re right about the long list, Thaddeus. Jennifer brought a certain amount of, shall we say, drama to our lives. During her lifetime and afterward. I’m afraid our boys never forgave her for cutting them out of her will.”

“So they knew about me?” Peter asked.

“They knew you’d been born and that you’d gotten her entire estate. They never knew *who* you were, though.”

“Well,” Viola said sarcastically. “It’s not like they’ll be living in the poor house. You’ve got more than enough money of your own.”

“I’ve been a fortunate man, that is true. My career paid me well. My investments paid even better. Jennifer knew all about my financial position, even way back then. She knew our sons would be very well off.” He looked directly at Peter. “Her biggest concern was about you. She wanted you to be well taken care of. She wanted you to have the same financial freedom as she knew our boys would have. And they’re not the evil creatures you make them out to be, Viola. They kept the secret of my health and ability to speak for years. They did it so people would leave me alone and stop asking me questions. I love them for that loyalty.”

Viola only grunted.

“I never really thought about it, growing up,” Peter said. “But looking back, it seems that everything I wanted as a kid, I got. My parents were teachers. They, themselves, lived pretty simple lives. But where all the money came from that they spent on me never once crossed my mind.”

“So,” Viola said with a grin, “you were dimwitted even as a child.”

“It certainly looks that way,” Peter responded, a grin on his face as well.

“Do your sons know who I am now? That I’m Jennifer’s son?” he asked Walter.

“Yes. I told them a few weeks ago. Although Jeremy was better than Jonathan, neither one of them took it very well. You’re a reminder of a time in their lives they’d rather not remember.”

“Yeah,” said Viola, reaching for the glass Albert had just refilled. “I wouldn’t hold your breath for a dinner invitation from them. But they’re not happy about me, either. Not that I give a good crap.”

Again, the room erupted in laughter.

When Albert offered to pour more wine for her, Thelma put her hand over the glass.

“None for us,” she said, tilting her head toward Thaddeus. “We need to be heading home. It’s a long drive for us. I need him to have his wits about him.”

Thaddeus and Thelma rose from their chairs, preparing to leave. Thaddeus looked at Walter, a question burning in his eyes.

“Is there something else you want to know?” Walter asked.

“Yes, there is,” Thaddeus said. “After everything that happened, after everything she did to you, do you still love her?”

Walter didn’t need to ponder the question for long.

“Jennifer was an extraordinary woman. She was beautiful and talented. Unfortunately, she believed the myths the newspapers created. She believed she needed to have more in her life than just a husband and children. She came to see herself as the Goddess they wrote about. Whatever drove her to her infidelities, she always came back to us. On some level, she loved us deeply. She just didn’t always remember how to express it. So, yes, I do still love her. As much as I did at the beginning.”

Viola stared at the table. She couldn’t bring herself to look at Walter. She knew what he said was true. She knew she could never be Jennifer Deane.

Walter, however, could read her mind. “But this woman,” he said pointing at her, “is the best thing that ever happened to me. She brought love to me on a whole, new plane. She taught me the power of a stable relationship. She taught me what two people could really mean to each other. I loved Jennifer. But I *adore* this woman.”

Her eyes lit up her entire face, her smile removed every wrinkle. And she was utterly speechless.

The power of their love filled the room. Thaddeus squeezed Thelma's hand. In the kitchen, Hilda threw her arms around Albert and gave him a big hug.

Peter was pensive. He thought about his broken marriages and his relationships that floundered and failed. But he couldn't stop himself from smiling as he watched Viola and Walter. *Look at those people. If they can find renewed happiness and love at their age, there's hope for me yet! Maybe that's something else I should work on.*

He jolted back to the present when Thaddeus shook his hand.

"Good to see you again, my friend. Glad you're looking so healthy. Keep in touch and let us know what you're up to."

"And remember," Thelma said after giving him a hug and a kiss, "you are *always* welcome for dinner." And then, as if reading Peter's mind, she added, "You know, Thad, we must know lots of available women who would love to share a meal with Peter."

"Oh, Lord, help us!" laughed Thaddeus. "And you, too, Peter. She'll have you married by year's end!"

And with that, they put on their coats, said their goodbyes, and walked out the door.

The threesome watched Thaddeus and Thelma pull out of the driveway. They stayed in the courtyard waving at them long after their car went through the front gate and turned onto the main road. Each stood quietly, absorbed in their own thoughts.

Peter was the first to break the spell.

"I'd better be going, too."

"What's next, Peter," Walter asked. "Will you be blazing the trail back to Baltimore? I imagine you can't get back home soon enough."

"Actually," Peter said, "I'm not going back home. This morning, I bought a house."

"Where?" Viola couldn't hide her surprise. Or her pleasure. She'd grown very fond of Peter. He felt like a son to her. But, of course, she could never let him know that.

"Somewhere near here?" asked Walter.

Peter looked behind him at the mammoth mansion.

"No," he replied laughing. "I'm rich, Walter. Just not *that* rich. The house is farther down the coast from here, but still easily accessible to Hollywood."

"Why on earth do you want to be close to Hollywood?" Viola said. "I would think you've had enough of us crazy movie people."

Peter smiled at Viola.

"I'm staying here to write a book," he said simply.

"About Jennifer?"

"Well, yes, I'm going to write *that* book. Definitely. I'm talking about another book, though. Maybe a series of books."

"About what?" Walter asked with genuine interest.

"Whenever I went to Gardens of Peace, I marveled at the number of people buried there."

"It's the oldest cemetery in the area," Viola said. "It's the last home for countless pioneers of the movie industry."

"Exactly," said Peter, warming to his subject. "They're the people who created this business. Directors, producers, actors and writers. Nearly all of them forgotten. People like Edward Dickenson Henley and Randolph Merriweather."

“Oh, my God,” said Viola. “Those are names from another age!” She turned to Walter. “You knew them pretty well, didn’t you Walter?”

“Oh my, yes I did,” he said. “I was a third-string assistant under Ed Henley. Pretty much, just a gopher. And Randolph Merriweather? He gave me my first real job as an assistant director. What was the name of that picture?” Walter scrunched up his forehead trying to recall. “Oh, now I remember. *The Colorado Kid*. Wasn’t much of a job, though.”

“Wasn’t much of a picture,” Viola said, and she and Peter laughed.

Walter laughed as well.

“Too true. But back then, we weren’t thinking about making cinema classics. We were just playing with the new medium, seeing what it could do and what we could do with it. You’re right, Peter, too many of those master craftsmen have been forgotten.”

“And what I hope to do,” Peter said, “is to bring them back to life. To help people remember who went before to pave the way for today’s movie makers.”

“An ambitious project, Peter,” said Viola, a hint of admiration in her voice. “But something like that needs a lot of research. You need to find people who know this town backward and forward. People who understand this town. And you’ll need to find people who can tell you all about those pioneers because they actually *knew* them.”

“You volunteering?” he asked this new, and unexpected, collaborator.

“Why not?” she said excitedly. “I’m as good as anybody.”

Peter smiled.

“When can you start?”

“How about tomorrow? I’ve got lots of stories,” she said.

“Oh, yes, Peter,” chimed in Walter with pride. “Viola knows more about Hollywood than anyone I know.”

“I’ve no doubt,” Peter said as he buttoned his jacket. He paused long enough to plant a soft kiss on Viola’s cheek, before heading toward his rental car. “But not tomorrow. How about the day after? Tomorrow, I’m going to be busy.”

“Busy? Doing what?” Viola asked incredulously.

Peter turned to look Viola straight in the eyes. “Well,” he said, “First, I’m having breakfast with the Governor, then lunch with the President, and then I’m sailing with the Queen.” When he reached the car, he opened up the door, but paused to look back at the happy, elderly couple. He winked at Viola. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

He stopped his car by the front the gate, stepping out to quickly purchase a small bouquet of flowers from a sidewalk vendor. After a blissfully restful sleep, Peter rose early, grabbed a light breakfast, then went for a drive. There was never any doubt in his mind about where he’d be going.

He parked his car in the big lot at the main entrance, choosing this time to walk to the grave. Almost as an afterthought, he laid his cane on the passenger seat. In spite of the early heat, he felt the need to walk unaided, his legs yearning to be exercised.

His eyes guided him along the winding pathway through endless tombstones. He lingered over some of the stones, jotting down names in a notebook he took from his pocket. There were names with which he was very familiar, but Peter found himself more drawn to those he knew little, if anything, about. The coming years would change that. Over time, he would come to know the stories of those souls beyond the chiseled inscriptions. And he would make sure others

knew them, too. His dedication to this task would be a labor of love. For those buried here. For the industry that brought him to life. For the woman he came to visit.

Approaching her final resting place, Peter felt no misgivings, no terror of the unknown gripping his heart. He was surprisingly at peace. He stared at her stone for a few moments, his thoughts on nothing more than her name. A slight pain traveling down his thigh brought him out of his quiet contemplation. He gently laid the flowers at her stone, then walked over to the bench to sit down and rest his leg.

Peter's eyes remained fixed on her tombstone. Some part of him expected her to appear, perhaps to thank him for solving the mystery. But as time slowly crept by, he realized that nothing supernatural was going to happen. He sat back on the bench, stretching his legs. The pain had subsided.

Returning his gaze to the stone, Peter spoke quietly.

"I guess my job is complete. I've done what you wanted me to do. I exposed your killer and I proved Walter was innocent." Here, he paused. "You've been preparing me for this since I was a kid. You crept into my mind. Made me a huge fan. Gave me this gift and love of words that made me the perfect choice to write Zachary's movie. You knew what you were doing.

"I learned a lot about myself through all of this. The kind of man I am and the kind I'd like to be. At fifty, I wouldn't think my mother could teach me anything new. Guess I was wrong. Guess you never stop learning.

"Thanks, mother. Thanks for making sure I grew up safe and secure. Thanks for letting me learn so much. I may not like some of the things I've learned. I might not even like *you*. But I'll always love you. Nothing more to say, I guess." He put his hands in his pockets, a slight grin forming on his face. "Well, maybe one more thing. Rest in peace, Jennifer Deane."

Peter stood up from the bench. He looked up at the willow tree that stood so proud and tall in the sky, its branches reaching out to protect her grave. The branches suddenly began to sway, gently at first, and then stronger. He looked around at the other trees in the cemetery. No sudden wind affected them. They stood firm and quiet. The willow tree was the only one moving.

He smiled at the tree. He turned and smiled at the headstone. Then he walked away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Schoeffield is the Managing Editor of *The Poetry Hut*, a quarterly, online poetry magazine. In addition, she administers two weekly poetry prompt blogs, *The Magnified Muse* and *A Muse Fuse*, as well as a blog featuring her haiku poetry, called *Haiku Harbor*. She recently completed her first collection of poetry, *A Walk and Imagine*, and is in the process of compiling her second collection, *And Autumn Remembers*.

Tarnished Idols is Susan's first novel and her first Silver Screen Murder Mystery. She is currently working on the second book in that series, *Reel Madness*.

Susan lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with her long-time partner, Lynda, their two dogs (Simon and Tucker) and two cats (Pogo and Pawley). When she and Lynda can get away, they like to breathe the clear mountain air of the Shenandoah Mountains in Virginia or enjoy the ocean's majesty at any beach.

Susan hopes you have enjoyed *Tarnished Idols*. She would love to hear from you! Please share your thoughts about this book with her at me@susanschoeffield.com.