

THE JOY OF MURDER

A DAIYU WU MYSTERY

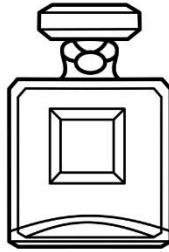


GLORIA
OLIVER



THE JOY OF MURDER

A Daiyu Wu Mystery



Gloria Oliver



GLORIA OLIVER



Copyright © 2022 Gloria Oliver

The JOY of Murder

A Daiyu Wu Mystery - Book 2

All rights reserved.

Dimension Palace Publishing



ISBN: 978-1-957230-08-5 (Hardback)

ISBN: 978-1-957230-03-0 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-957230-05-4 (Electronic/Epub)

ISBN: 978-1-957230-04-7 (Kindle/Multiple Formats)

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. The reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Title Page Fonts Grado Gradoo NF and Ricks American NF by
Nick Curtis

Book Cover for the JOY of Murder © Charles Bernard

Story editing by Serenity Editing Services

Parfume Icon by Olena Panasovska from NounProject.com

Cat Icon by Dong Ik Seo from NounProject.com

DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to Carole Nelson Douglas. Miss Huxleigh and Midnight Louie will always be near and dear to my heart. You were taken from us too soon. ghn

ALSO BY GLORIA OLIVER

Standalone Novels

Alien Redemption (SF)
Cross-eyed Dragon Troubles (YA Fantasy)
In the Service of Samurai (YA Fantasy))
Inner Demons (Urban Fantasy)
Jewel of the Gods (Fantasy)
The Price of Mercy (Fantasy)
Vassal of El (Fantasy)
Willing Sacrifice (YA Fantasy)

Daiyu Wu Mystery Series

Black Jade (Book 1)
Jacques - Prequel Short Story
The JOY of Murder (Book 2)
Romeo's Revenge - Short Story

Novelettes

Charity and Sacrifice

Has Short Stories in the following Anthologies:

Tales From a Lone Star
A Lone Star in the Sky
Ladies of Trade Town
A Time To ... Volume 2
Ripple Effect
The Four Bubbas of the Apocalypse
Houston: We've Got Bubbas
The Best of the Bubbas of the Apocalypse
Flush Fiction

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page	i
Copyright Page	ii
Dedication	iii
Also by Gloria Oliver	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
What's Gone On Before	vii
The JOY of Murder	1
Chapter 5	20
Chapter 10	47
Chapter 15	70
Chapter 20	96
Chapter 25	123
Chapter 30	150
Chapter 35	177
Chapter 40	208
Chapter 45	237
Romeo's Revenge - excerpt	249
Subscribe and Choose Your Gift!	251
Other Works by Gloria Oliver	252
About the Author	261

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A big thanks to my newsletter subscribers for their help in choosing the cover concept. You guys are the best! 🤗

Uber kudos to my awesome editor, Elayne Morgan, who went way above and beyond when she didn't have to. You rock!

WHAT'S GONE ON BEFORE

1930 Dallas, TX—Daiyu Wu is the only child of Tye and Lien Wu. She is Chinese and blind—not a good combination during what the press has dubbed the menace of 'the Yellow Terror.' Laying low is a matter of survival. Yet when Dai realizes someone has dumped an old-fashioned green dress at the family laundry in an attempt to hide or destroy evidence, she feels it is her duty to investigate, especially when she discovers the police aren't even aware a murder has taken place.

During the investigation, Dai meets Truman Pierce, a wealthy Dallasite playboy. Jacques Haskin, Dai's constant companion, takes an instant dislike to the man, especially when Pierce lavished his attention on Dai and started calling her 'China Doll' as a term of endearment. She also becomes acquainted with Dr. Aiden Campbell, a pathologist working with the Justice of the Peace in the city of Dallas. Opposites in appearance, the two women's similarities—high intelligence and inquisitive natures—make them fast friends.

With the help, of Aiden, Truman, and Jacques, Dai uncovers Laura Cooper's killer and brings them to justice. Prince Razor, Dai's canine bodyguard and furry ladykiller, even enters the fray when the murderer turns violent after being exposed. Jacques is thrilled when the case is over, and hopes they never again endanger the family by involving themselves in such serious business. Unfortunately for Jacques' nerves, fate has other plans.

CHAPTER 1



"Jacques, do give Mrs. Lark my heartfelt thanks next time you see her, won't you? She's a veritable treasure." Dai, my sister in all but blood, sat curled up on the living room's curved, deep green couch, the morning sunshine glinting off her straight, black, shoulder-length hair. Her fingertips moved rapidly across the pages of a *Reader's Digest* magazine published in Braille.

"I'll do that." I couldn't help but smile. Dai had picked up the skill of scanning Braille a while back, but the amount of printed matter in that format was lacking, especially for adults. Mrs. Lark, the head librarian at the Dallas Library, had learned of the American Publishing House's efforts with Reader's Digest. Since 1928, they'd worked to get their publications reissued in Braille, so those blinded during the Great War would have something to stimulate their minds on their own terms. The library had started collecting the publication for their patrons and made sure to let me know.

Dai being able to 'read' alone, rather than requiring her

parents or me to recite the contents aloud for her benefit, gave her a new type of independence. I was happy for her, even as somewhere deep inside, I mourned the lessening of my duties. It was absurd, of course, but the feeling was there all the same.

"What are you reading?" I asked her.

"An article called 'Aladdins of the Test Tubes' by William Pickett Helm. It's a bit fanciful, but it's nice to see chemists getting some attention. I just wish he'd actually mentioned some formulae in the piece." She shrugged. "Oh well. Something is better than nothing."

Her satisfied smile belied her words.

Dozing beside her, Prince Razor, our Scottish terrier and Pomeranian mix companion, suddenly sat up, both ears lifting. Dai's heart-shaped face also tilted slightly. "Jacques, an automobile just parked on the street in front of our house. I think we're about to have a visitor."

Dai might be blind, but without visual distractions, her hearing was quite keen. Still, visitors to the Wu household were rare, especially at this time of day. Luckily, life had pretty much returned to normal after the Laura Cooper incident had been closed, for the most part anyway—so there should be nothing to worry about.

Dai's friendship with Dr. Aiden Campbell had blossomed since then, which enriched both their lives, even if, at times, the technical science banter left me scratching my head. Unfortunately, 'he who wasn't worth talking about' had *not* disappeared from our lives as I'd hoped. But, pressure from his family and self-appointed girlfriend had kept meetings between him and Dai to a minimum—and the dreaded dinner delayed—much to Dai's father's relief as well as mine. Truman Pierce was trouble—Trouble with a capital T.

Setting down my dog-eared copy of *Gulliver's Travels*, I rose and prepared to answer the door if indeed we were about to receive a visitor. The sound of the doorbell was quickly followed by a loud rapping—which seemed rather desperate or rude. My initial guess that the caller might be a salesman was shunted aside, as one would never call on a prospective

customer with such impudence.

My quick opening of the door caught our unexpected visitor off-guard, but I was even more shocked to see who was there. The popinjay was back.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Pierce said, relief flushing over his rich-bad-boy features. "I wasn't sure you'd be home. Is Dai available?"

I gave him my most displeased frown. "You should have *called*. You can't just show up at a young lady's house whenever you please."

"There wasn't time, Jacques. This is *important*."

My usual retort of "It's Jacques, not Jackie" rose in my throat, but I clamped my mouth shut before it could escape. This might very well have been the first time the upstart used my *actual* name, and I was so startled I didn't even resist as he wiggled his way inside.

"I'm in the living room, Truman." Dai's voice hooked him like a fish, and he headed straight there, leaving his fedora on the table in the foyer as he went.

I quickly closed the front door and followed behind him, wondering what in the world could have brought him to our entrance in such a rush.

"China Doll, I need your help." Truman kneeled before her, looking much like a vassal, asking his liege for a boon. His gray summer jacket added to the knight's illusion. "I know it's a lot to ask, but without you, I fear a huge miscarriage of justice is about to be committed."

Dai's brows rose, her head tilting to the side. "I take it something unexpected has occurred?"

I moved to Dai's side, not having the faintest idea what this could be about. If the popinjay were trying to pull some sort of trick, I'd make sure he regretted it.

Pierce bowed his head. "There's been a murder. An object found at the scene pointed the police to a suspect."

"So why the theatrics?" I demanded. "It sounds like law enforcement has things well in hand."

Keeping his face hidden, Pierce hesitated a moment before

GLORIA OLIVER

answering. "They've arrested my mother for the crime."

CHAPTER 2



To say I was flabbergasted by the popinjay's pronouncement would be an understatement. Mrs. Pierce hadn't left a good impression the one time we had crossed paths, but to believe she would commit murder...? Pierce's urgency now made perfect sense, but why drag Dai into this? What in the world did he think she could do about it?

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Truman," Dai said. "What can I do to help?"

Pierce finally raised his head. His face looked haggard, but his blue eyes shone with hope. "I know it's a lot to ask, but would you speak to her? Would you look into this, see if you can find clues leading to the real perpetrator?"

"Hold on a minute, *you*." I shoved my arm between him and Dai, not liking where this was going. "Why the heck are you trying to drag Dai into this? Don't you have fancy lawyers and inquiry agents to help? Surely all your money will get you anything you need, no matter how lavish."

Pierce looked away, not meeting my gaze. "It's... complicated."

Dai uncurled from her place on the couch to put her feet on the floor, smoothing her red pleated skirt as she did so. Partially dislodged, Prince hopped down, tongue lolling to the side while he kept a close eye on our unexpected visitor.

"I'm sorry, Truman," Dai said. "But if you want my help"—Prince let out a soft half-bark—"our help, you'll need to explain. The more information we have, the better we can deal with the situation."

Pierce gave a long sigh, then rose off the floor to sit on the living room's second couch. "It's my father." He sighed again. "The timing couldn't have been worse." Red splotches dotted his cheeks, destroying his rich, handsome-boy image, a true sign of his distress.

I glanced at Dai, growing more confused by the moment. Her expression was serene and exuded calm, like the black jade she was named after. "Anything you say here will be kept in the strictest confidence. We're quite adept at keeping secrets."

A trace of a grin came and went on the Pierce's face. I knew how much he loved flashing his perfect smile around, so this was yet another indication of the depths of his misery. I was less and less inclined to get involved in this. I hadn't thought much of his mother, and from Pierce's hesitation, I had a feeling I wouldn't like the father much either.

"He's in the middle of some sensitive land-deal negotiations out in East Texas," Pierce said. "Now that the second oil boom at Spindletop is over, he and some colleagues have been searching for new areas to purchase, trying to take advantage of the growing economic downturn."

I frowned. It sounded like they were out there profiting from others' bad luck during the current recession. Agricultural prices had plummeted since last year, and many families struggled to survive with less than before. People thus afflicted could become 'marks' to less scrupulous businessmen.

And from the way Pierce kept his gaze focused on the carpet, I was positive he knew it, too.

"Until the deals are complete," he said, "my father can't afford any adverse publicity."

I didn't remember seeing a murder mentioned in the *Dallas Morning News* that morning, but perhaps the arrest had happened too late to be included in the early edition. Still, it was sure to be splattered all over the front page when the news got out—or was it? I recalled that Linda Carmichael's father was involved with at least one Dallas newspaper. As Pierce's self-appointed girlfriend, she'd tried to take a photograph of Dai at Pierce's shindig at the Dallas Country Club, intending to plaster her likeness amidst allegations of the Yellow Terror trying to sway Pierce into all manner of imagined evil deeds. If she'd gotten away with it, it could have proved disastrous for the Wus. Did Pierce's father have sufficient influence with the Carmichaels to get the story suppressed?

Dai frowned. "Keeping it out of the papers wouldn't be enough, though," she said. "The arrest will be a matter of public record."

Pierce sighed again. "It was recorded under her maiden name—Crawford."

I wasn't sure whether to be incensed or appalled. Did his father wield that much influence in the city? And what about his poor wife? "Was it listed as a homicide or a murder?"

Pierce frowned. "What's the difference?" he asked. "Aren't they the same thing?"

"Not under the eyes of the law, they're not," I said. Mrs. Lark had found a copy of the 1928 Texas Statutes at Dai's request, and learned more about the law than I would have cared to ever know.

"If the death is considered to be excusable, negligent, or justified it won't be deemed a capital felony, and she can be released on bail while awaiting trial. But if the homicide is judged to be a murder, it then becomes a capital crime, and posting bail won't be an option." Then I had an even more sobering thought. "If your father is keeping his name out of it by not using his lawyers, who will defend her? Does she have money of her own to hire an attorney?"

With each question, the popinjay seemed to shrink where he sat. It gave me no comfort whatsoever.

"I'm working on that," he said. "I just need to be circumspect about it." He looked at me imploringly, not something I would have ever thought possible.

"We cannot help you. We just *can't*," I said. Dai needed to stay as far away from this as humanly possible. I felt terrible about Pierce's mother, but I had my own people to protect. The way his family was going about this left a sour taste in my mouth, and if I was honest about it, a dash of dread as well.

"Jacques! It's too soon to say that." Dai sounded annoyed.

Better that she be angry with me than have the family exposed unnecessarily. I would have been more adamant about keeping away from Pierce if I'd had an inkling of the power his father appeared to possess.

"No. I'm sorry, Dai, but it *isn't*," I retorted, springing to my feet. "What if Mr. Pierce gets annoyed at us for sticking our noses where they don't belong? If he can manipulate data on public records and control what news is shown in the papers, what might he do to you—to the family—if he turns on us?"

To my surprise, Pierce laughed. The sound was devoid of humor. "If it doesn't interfere directly with his goals, he won't deign to notice anything we do."

The flat tone and blank expression did more to stall my objections than anything else the popinjay might have said. Dai reached out for my sleeve and tugged on it until I sat back down. Reading between the lines, Pierce's words opened up all manner of questions. It definitely seemed to indicate the Pierce home was more than likely *not* a wealthy paradise.

"Please—all I ask is that you speak to her to get her side of things so we... so *I* can figure out what to do next." Pierce's misery covered his face, tears glinting in his eyes. The fact that he willingly let us see this told of the depths of his despair. "I don't want her to think she's been abandoned."

It made me ashamed to have thought of withholding our aid, but it didn't make the potential dangers any less frightening.

"Truman, you were there for me when I needed your help," Dai said softly. "Laura Cooper's murderer would not have been

THE JOY OF MURDER

caught without you. So visiting your mother is the least I can do. Where is she?"

Pierce's relief was palpable. "They took her to the Dallas County Criminal Courts Building." The top five stories of the structure housed the county jail.

I gritted my teeth and held my tongue, knowing that what Dai said was true. But after this 'favor' was over, I vowed, so too would be our involvement. Sadly, fate had something else in mind.

CHAPTER 3



"China Doll—Dai, I will be forever grateful for this." Pierce rose and kneeled before her again. "You have no idea how much this means to me. I know my mother didn't make the best impression when you first met, yet you're still willing to help me despite that. I am in your debt."

That was a total understatement. First, the woman had tried to imply Dai's blindness and country of origin made her less than desirable and completely beneath the Pierce family line. She then added insult to injury by suggesting that Dai's mother's charity work was motivated by guilt rather than altruism. Lien's inner dragon promptly put her back in her place and educated her on several of her misconceptions.

A dimpled smile came and went on Dai's face; clearly she also recalled the encounter. "Perhaps this will lead to a 'mending of the fences,' as they say." She half-turned in my direction. "Jacques, do get Truman the information for contacting the Thompson and Knight Law Firm."

I made an acknowledging sound, not trusting myself to speak civilly.

Dai turned back toward the popinjay. "They've been quite discreet with our financial dealings and other law-related matters, so they might be an excellent source of assistance. I believe they have extensive experience with criminal law."

"*Thank you,*" Pierce said, his relief at Dai's willingness to visit his mother and try to help obvious as he bounced back to his usual carefree self. "Father normally deals with Jackson Walker, so using a different law firm sounds ideal. Even *I've* heard of Thompson and Knight's good reputation."

"Approaching them via a proxy might be your best option," Dai added. "That way, they won't connect you with the client."

That seemed a bit extreme to me, but better safe than sorry.

To my surprise, Pierce appeared taken aback by the suggestion. After a long moment of silence, during which he appeared to take some form of internal inventory, he asked, "Might this, too, be something you would undertake on my behalf?"

Now it was my turn to be shocked. Why ask us? Was there no one in his own circles he could trust? Surely, there had to be *someone*.

"Jacques sometimes drops papers off there for Father," Dai said. "He should be able to retain a lawyer for you."

"Dai!"

She turned once more in my direction, brow raised high. "Is there a problem with that, Jacques? Do you not agree this would be the simplest solution? Once counsel is retained, whoever is assigned to the case could come with us to the jail and be present when we speak to Mrs. Pierce."

Laying at her feet, Prince put his paws over his face. I would get no help from that quarter. "Don't we then run the risk of *our* family being associated with the problem?"

Dai grinned. "But I'll only be there to support you as you visit a friend in trouble. So there shouldn't be an issue, don't you agree?"

Pierce barked a laugh, then clamped a hand over his mouth to hold back any further hilarity at my expense. As well he should, since this was *his fault*, and I'd have enjoyed nothing

better at that moment than belting him one. Every time this man entered our lives, it was like letting loose a tornado. "If you say so, Dai."

She pursed her lips at me but made no comment about my reply. "Truman, if you can gather the retainer, then we'll move forward. I'm not acquainted with their fees, so erring on the side of caution would probably be best. Bring cash, so the involved parties are harder to trace."

"You are *devilishly* devious, China Doll," Pierce said. "As if I needed more reasons to like you." The annoying, full-toothed, bright smile was out in force. "I've got some dough on me, but I'll get more from the bank. I should be back in an hour."

He took Dai's hand and kissed it before rising to his feet. "Thank you for helping me."

She shook her head. "It's what friends do." Dai stood up as well. "By the time you return, we'll have booked an appointment at Thompson and Knight, and we will proceed from there. A couple of other telephone calls might also be in order."

Much more chipper than when he had first come in, Pierce swept into the foyer to retrieve his hat and left.

My mood had dived in the opposite direction, and I doubted it would get better anytime soon. Taking a long, deep breath, I turned toward my companion. "This isn't wise, Dai."

"So you'd have me turn my back on a person in need? Desert a friend in trouble?"

I held back a moan of despair. She'd neatly pushed me into a corner, and I could see no way around it. If I said she shouldn't help, I would be implying she'd made a mistake when she first reached out to me when *I* had needed assistance all those years ago. "This is not the same."

"Isn't it?" Dai tilted her head to the side. "You worry too much, Jacques."

"Sometimes I don't think you worry *enough*, Dai."

"That's because I have you to do it for me." She flashed me a smile. "Besides, until we know what we're truly dealing with, we can't begin to calculate whether or not there will be

THE JOY OF MURDER

anything to fret about. Don't you agree?"

It sounded reasonable, but I knew better. The last time I'd heard that excited spark in her voice, she'd clamped onto the challenge and hadn't let go, regardless of the possible consequences. The popinjay had thrown us into another 'adventure.' I just hoped we wouldn't come to regret it more than I already did.

CHAPTER 4



Setting up a consultation with Thompson and Knight proved unproblematic, since the Wus were long-time clients. Pierce returned as promised, and I opened the door only long enough to take an unmarked envelope and send him on his way. I admit to feeling a bit of glee at the surprised expression on his face as I told him we had to get going, so I couldn't allow him inside or we'd miss our appointment.

"Really, Jacques, in all our time together, I never thought you could be so discourteous," Dai said, coming down the stairs from her room. "Letting Truman come in for a few minutes wouldn't have made us late."

I refused to feel guilty about it, but I didn't want to argue, so I said nothing.

"Why do you dislike him so?" Dai looked perplexed, but utterly adorable in a new charcoal day suit. While no lace was in evidence, the folds of the jacket and sleeves were scalloped, adding a lace-like look. Ever since the dragon, Dai's mother, had realized Dai might have a serious suitor, she'd started ordering more adult clothes for her. Much to her father's

chagrin. "It's not like you."

How could I explain?

"Surely it's not just because he calls you 'Jackie'?" she asked.

Damn the man! Even when he wasn't here, he caused me no end of trouble. "What I don't like is *why* he calls me that. He knows my name yet refuses to use it, despite my repeated requests to the contrary. And no, it's not only that."

"What else, then?" From her stubborn expression, it was clear she wasn't going to let this go. "Now that you know him better. I would have thought some of your previous suspicions would have resolved themselves."

I shook my head. "Not everything can be analyzed and dissected until it makes sense, Dai," I replied. "There's just something about him. Plus, he's always causing trouble. Everything is a *joke* to him."

"He comes off that way, I admit, but in the end, I'd have to disagree."

It seemed he'd pulled the wool over her eyes, precisely as I'd feared. "Prince Razor doesn't like him, either."

She laughed. "Is that so, Prince? Do you dislike Truman as well?"

The mutt made some non-committal canine noises, then skittered off toward the kitchen. *Coward.*

"Maybe if you and he spent some time alone together," Dai said, "you could come to see what I see."

The thought of wasting hours in the popinjay's company soured my stomach—but, it might also be a way to gather more proof against him. While there was always an infinitesimal chance I could be wrong, I very much doubted it. "If you think that would be best."

She grinned in my general direction, as if reading my thoughts. The hackles rose on my neck, warning me she would soon be working up a plan to throw the two of us together. I wasn't looking forward to it.

Before we headed out, I rang White Laundry, the Wus family's business, so Mrs. Zhang could inform Dai's parents if they called there searching for her. A brief note left on the

kitchen table ensured they would get the message at either spot. After our last escapade, the less we gave her parents to question, the better.

"I'm sorry, Prince," Dai said. "But you'll need to stay home today."

Puppy-dog eyes and a soft whine made sure we understood what he thought of the idea and that he was nobly giving us a chance to change our minds before his feelings were irreparably hurt. I knew how to fix this and wasted no time putting a treat in his food bowl.

He was distracted by the snack, and all was forgiven, if not forgotten—the spoiled mutt. His curved tail wagged madly as he happily gobbled up the bribe.

I tucked Dai in the back of the Ford Model A Town Sedan and drove us to downtown Dallas.

The Thompson and Knight offices were on the eighteenth floor of the Republic Bank Building, built in 1925 by Charles D. Hill. The famous architect was responsible for several of Dallas' downtown structures as well as numerous mansions on Swiss Avenue. Gazing at his handiwork, it was easy to see why he had been hired for such important work.

Three-story-tall columns flanked the building's main entrance, the pillars and walls done in an off-white. With broad ledges, more columns, and lavish cornices every few floors, looking at the twenty-floor structure was like gazing at several Greek temples, one piled atop the other. Capping this fantastical imagery was an elegantly sculpted stone rotunda crowned by a domed copula. You could easily believe a Greek god might decide to watch over the city from such a spot.

Having been here before, I parked the Ford and guided Dai to the elevators, which would deposit us on the eighteenth floor. The entry to the Thompson and Knight law offices was as lavish as the building's external façade. Dark wood paneling with elaborate crown molding encased the reception room, imbuing it with a feeling of stability and strength, as one might reasonably expect from a successful forty-year-old company.

"Welcome to Thompson and Knight." The well-dressed

receptionist stood as we came in. "How may we help you, today?"

"My name is Jacques Haskin, and I have an appointment with Mr. Maginnis."

The well-dressed receptionist gave us a professional yet hospitable smile before looking at her datebook. "Yes, of course. If you'll leave your hat and gloves here, I will hang them up for you. Then I'll show you to the conference room and let him know you're here."

A door to the right of her desk opened into a hallway decorated with the same wood paneling as the reception area. She showed us into the first open entryway on the left. "Would either of you like a cup of coffee or perhaps some iced tea?"

Dai shook her head, and I then answered for the both of us. "We're fine. Thank you so much."

With a nod and a second smile, she withdrew, closing the door behind her. I led Dai to the square table and got her settled. I sat to Dai's left, leaving the head of the table for the lawyer. Sadly, the conference room wasn't situated near the outside of the structure, so I couldn't glimpse even a hint of the view from this height. Even though she couldn't see it, I could have described it to Dai. The Regency Bank Building was amongst the tallest in downtown, and offered a sight we'd seldom have a chance to look at.

After only a few minutes, there was a soft knock at the conference room door. It was opened by a man in a well-tailored and conservative blue suit. He had light brown hair and brown eyes on a young baby-like face, but his round spectacles and thin mustache curtailed the impression of boyish youth into something more mature. With a countenance like that, I was sure people tended to underestimate or overlook him. Especially as a lawyer, anything he could do to look older would be a must.

"Good morning. I'm Leo Maginnis. Pleased to meet you."

Shorter than me by a couple of inches, he still had a respectable, solid handshake. "Jacques Haskin." We quickly exchanged cards. "Thank you for agreeing to see us at such

short notice. Miss Wu and I greatly appreciate it."

"Ma'am, it's a pleasure." He gave a half-bow in Dai's direction. "Many thanks for your continued patronage of Thompson and Knight."

Dai turned in her chair to give him a friendly smile. "My family has always been grateful for your firm's efforts. I hope we will continue to do business for years to come."

The international connections the law firm had been able to solidify after the Wus first approached them—through intermediaries in Europe—meant both sides had benefited from working together. The key partners made sure any new additions to the organization were open-minded about various racial subjects to avoid any conflicts if they needed to work on the Wu account or other overseas clients.

Maginnis returned the smile, then took a seat at the table. "So, what may we do for you today?"

"As I mentioned on the phone," I said, "a delicate issue has come up regarding an acquaintance of mine. The lady in question requires legal advice on a criminal matter. I'd like to hire the firm on her behalf and meet with her as soon as possible." I reached into my jacket, removed the heavy envelope Pierce had given me, and set it on the table. "I've brought what I hope is a sufficient retainer. If you require additional funds, please let me know."

To his credit, Mr. Maginnis never even glanced at the packet, let alone the hefty sum inside. "What details do you have on the case?" He opened a drawer at his end of the table and pulled out a yellow legal pad, a pencil, and a folder with my name already printed on it.

"Sadly, not many at the moment. I know my friend has been arrested and is currently being held in the county jail. The police believe her to be involved in a murder because of something found at the scene, but I have no specific information. We thought it prudent to engage counsel before visiting her or trying to get more details."

Maginnis nodded and wrote a line or two on his pad. "And the friend's name?" he asked.

THE JOY OF MURDER

"Grace Crawford." I watched to see if Maginnis would react to the name, but saw nothing, not even a twitch of his brow in recognition. It was a good sign.

CHAPTER 5



When Maginnis finally looked at the envelope containing the retainer, both of his eyebrows rose. They went even higher when he opened it and inspected the contents. "This is much more than we're likely to require, Mr. Haskin."

If a top law firm felt there was too much cash there, I might faint if I were to count it. As usual, it appeared the Pierce had overdone things. It made me wonder if he honestly had no understanding whatsoever of money and what items typically cost. "Would you be able to hold on to it here? In the company safe, perhaps?"

Maginnis nodded. "Of course. I'll have Miss Clark write up a receipt. I'll be but a minute."

As the lawyer left the room with the dough, I spotted Dai hiding an impish grin. Surely she didn't take this as one of Pierce's 'good qualities.'

"As usual, Pierce did more than was necessary," I said.

"Come on, Jacques." Dai shook her head. "I doubt he's thinking straight at the moment. He's worried about his mother."

"I suppose." I rubbed the back of my neck, the muscles feeling stiff. "Would you consider waiting here and letting me go alone to the High Five to meet 'my friend'? I'm not sure visiting the county jail is an appropriate activity for a young lady."

Dai laughed. "Please, Jacques, don't even *dare* suggest going without me," she said. "When else will I get a chance like this? I wonder if they'd consider giving us a tour."

Thankfully, Maginnis' return saved me from having to give an opinion on that last suggestion.

He handed me a receipt for the cash he'd placed into the firm's safe, and I took a peek. I almost choked at the figure noted there. I'd expected a large amount, but not this. Pierce had put *five thousand dollars* in our care. That would cover the cost of twenty Model A Fords! No wonder the lawyer's eyebrows had risen when he handled the envelope. This wasn't the way to keep things quiet. But I had no one to blame but myself. I should have checked the contents when I'd had the chance. There was no telling where the lawyer thought we had come up with that kind of money. He didn't ask, which was good, because I couldn't have fabricated a plausible answer without raising even more questions.

"Thank you, Mr. Maginnis. Your discretion is much appreciated," I said.

"Don't mention it, Mr. Haskin." He nodded at us both. "Miss Clark is calling ahead, so we'll be expected at the county jail. A car will be waiting for us downstairs whenever you're ready."

Dai flashed him a smile. "Most excellent. Thank you, sir." She stood, and I followed suit.

Retrieving our hats and gloves, we took the elevator down to the building's underground garage. A roomy Adler Standard 8 15/70 waited there, and Maginnis took the wheel, leaving Dai and me to ride in style in the back. It was a novel experience for me, as I was usually the one doing the driving. Before long, we arrived at the northeast corner of Main and Houston Street, and the unusual building housing the Dallas County Jail and

Criminal Courts.

Looking at the exterior of the eleven-story structure, one would never have guessed it housed a prison. Completed in 1915, the building had a red granite base, and the ground floor was a white rusticated buff stone. Everything above it was done in red velvet brick with buff granite trimmings, in a Renaissance Revival style. Above the main entryway, the scales of justice were embossed on the gorgeous ornamentation just below the chiseled words 'Dallas County Criminal Courts.' Making the architecture appear even more unusual was that right above the chiseled words, the remaining floors formed a 'U shape,' leaving the middle area open halfway to the back.

Maginnis led us inside the building, seemingly quite familiar with its layout. Signage proclaimed the basement held county records, with the ground floor housing the sheriff's and criminal court system administration offices. The second and third floors were for courtrooms and jury rooms, with others housing a hospital, operating rooms, a barber shop and jailer's quarters. This left the remaining stories—the High Five—for the jail. An underground tunnel connected the structure to the Old Red Courthouse across the street.

We checked in through the sheriff's office and were assigned an escort. Mr. Maginnis spent a couple of minutes speaking to an officer before being handed a folder, presumably with details on the charges leveled against Mrs. Pierce. Then we took a private, police-manned elevator to the first of the High Five floors. Fortunately, some small rooms were set aside for client and lawyer meetings, so we didn't have to enter the jail proper—for which I was more grateful than I could say. There were certain things the dragon would never forgive, and taking Dai into the midst of jailed criminals probably topped the list.

Everything around us was an off-white cream color. The decorations, plants, and wood paneling that made the previous floors hospitable were not in evidence here. Instead, the place was stark and drab, offering nothing to distract the eye. The meeting room was just as dreary, with a table which had been

bolted to the floor and chairs in the same color. Our escort motioned us inside, pulled a grill door closed, locked it, then shut a second door over it to give us privacy.

I guided Dai to one of the two seats on our side of the table, Maginnis taking the other.

Another set of grilled and heavy doors opened, and Mrs. Pierce was herded in by a matron. Once Mrs. Pierce was seated, the matron cuffed her wrist then placed the other cuff through a metal hoop on her side of the table. Her new 'bracelet' was a far cry from the pearls, diamonds, and platinum she'd worn to try to overwhelm us in the contrived trap of that distasteful morning over a month ago.

Only then did the hard-faced matron look in our direction. "Press the buzzer when you're finished, and I'll come get her." Not waiting for a reply, she left the room. Throughout, Mrs. Pierce had kept her head down, her gaze on the floor.

Her sandy blonde hair and coiffured waves were no longer perfect but disheveled, as if whipped about by strong winds from different directions. Her dark navy day dress with its white rounded shawl collar and short puff sleeves was rumpled. When she finally raised her head, her face looked haggard. Her mascara had run a little and her lipstick had worn away, making her seem like something out of a 1920s silent horror film. The image became even more pronounced when she peered at us and her eyes consequently opened wide in shock. "You! What are *you* doing here?"

"Truman sent us, ma'am," I said.

Rather than look reassured, she seemed more confused than ever. "What do you want?"

Dai answered this latest query. "*Miss Cranford*, we've brought a solicitor for you. We also came to get details on what you've been accused of, so we may start our inquiries. Mr. Maginnis is a reputable lawyer with Thompson and Knight. I can assure you we are here to help."

"My name—"

Dai cut her off. "Truman explained there are some delicate business dealings which have caused certain options to be

unavailable at present. So he asked if we would intercede on your behalf."

Mrs. Pierce's pencil-thin brows drew together as she stared at each of us in turn. From her continued silence, I was sure she knew exactly who had made such twisted circumstances necessary.

Maginnis slid a business card across to her. "Have they shared the particulars of your arrest with you, Miss Crawford?"

The longer she peered at his card, the more color returned to her cheeks. "Only that I am suspected of murder, which is ludicrous, and I told them so. They wouldn't even tell me whom I've supposedly killed."

Maginnis nodded, seemingly unsurprised by this. "Have you been questioned yet?"

"Only for basic information," she said. "Nothing about the crime. How long will I need to stay here?" The last came out in a strangled squeak.

Rather than answer her question, he opened his briefcase, taking out the same pad and pencil he'd used during our meeting. He then opened the folder he'd been given downstairs. "Are you acquainted with an Isabel Fuentes? Her full name was Isabel Helena Fuentes Garcia."

He took a photo out of the file and set it on the table. The woman was older, probably close to sixty years old, with black-gray hair arranged in a conservative bun. Her round face had lines near the eyes and mouth, and she wore a pleasant expression, if a tad serious.

Mrs. Pierce frowned. "Yes, I believe I've met her once or twice because of charity work, but that's all." She blinked several times, as if trying to connect the dots. "Is this who was murdered?"

"Yes," Maginnis said. "Sometime last night at her home. While there's no formal autopsy report available yet, the cause of death is currently assumed to be blunt force trauma to the head."

"But why have *I* been arrested?" Mrs. Pierce asked. "I had nothing to do with this."

THE JOY OF MURDER

He pulled a drawing from the file and set it next to the picture of the deceased. The sketch and accompanying description detailed an emerald, white gold, and diamond dangle earring. With its cut swirls and pasiley-shaped forms near the bottom, it was obviously a one-of-a-kind item. "Do you recognize this?"

Mrs. Pierce frowned again, looking more confused than before. "Yes, of course I do. I used to have a pair that looked just like that."

CHAPTER 6



"But what does a lost earring have to do with *anything*?" Though Mrs. Pierce appeared not to understand, her paling cheeks and widening eyes told a different story.

Maginnis tapped the drawing, his gaze intently studying her face. "It was found at the scene of the crime, Miss Crawford. It's the reason you were arrested."

Mrs. Pierce sat back as if he'd slapped her. "I lost that years ago. And how would they know I ever owned it in the first place?"

That was an excellent question. From Dai's frown, I knew she thought the same. With the murder so fresh, there was no way the police could have tracked down the owner of the earring so quickly. Going from jewelry store to jewelry store would have taken hours, if not days. She might be wearing them in pictures taken at one of the Dallas social soirees, but those, too, would take a lot of time to sift through. Something wasn't right here—no wonder the popinjay was concerned.

Maginnis made several notations. "Can you tell me about your whereabouts last night, Miss Crawford?" he asked gently.

"I was at home. I retired around ten in the evening." She tried to put her hands together, only to be brought up short by the handcuff on her left wrist. "I woke close to seven this morning, as I usually do, and prepared for the day. I was about to leave for a luncheon when the police arrived at my door and dragged me to this ghastly place." She rubbed her arm with her free hand as if feeling a sudden chill.

"So you slept the night through?" Maginnis asked.

"Yes. I took a Veronal to ensure I got a good night's sleep," she said. "I suffer the occasional bout of insomnia, and it'd already been a long week."

"Is there anyone who can corroborate that information?" he asked.

"I'm sure I've mentioned it to my doctor. He gave me a prescription years ago, but I've not needed it. The pharmacist never asked for it. And I may have also mentioned it to a friend or two." Mrs. Pierce hesitated. "The maid and butler had gone home for the evening, so there was no one in the house when I went to bed, if that's what you're truly asking."

Maginnis made some more notes. His line of questioning must mirror Dai's as she sat silently, rather than asking questions of her own.

"When can I leave here? What do I need to do?" Mrs. Pierce was making a valiant effort at remaining calm, but she was fraying at the edges. Even in her worst nightmares, I doubted she had ever thought to end up in such a place as this.

Maginnis sent me a look before focusing entirely on Mrs. Pierce. "Madam, this isn't easy to say, but for the moment, there is nothing I can do to secure your release. Currently, the crime is being categorized as a murder rather than a homicide. Since murder is a capital felony, there will be no option for bail. The district attorney's office may decide to downgrade the charge, which would then give us the possibility of bail. Or they may not file charges at all, but only if they don't have sufficient evidence to prosecute. There's no decision on file yet, but I will do my best to follow up with them as soon as we're done here."

Mrs. Pierce didn't look reassured in the least. I didn't blame

her. "If—if they file murder charges, how long will I be in here?" she asked.

"The arraignment should happen fairly quickly. After that, they have sixty days to bring the case to trial."

The color rushed out of Mrs. Pierce's face. I dashed around to her side of the table in case she fainted, to keep her from sliding to the floor or accidentally hitting her head. My presence seemed to bolster her strength, and she managed to keep herself upright.

I hovered, wanting to be sure she wouldn't relapse. "Ma'am, are you all right?"

"How you must be *enjoying* yourselves," Mrs. Pierce said with some rancor. "To see me reduced to such a state." She sat ramrod straight and struggled to straighten her dress. I could almost feel her reaching deep inside to wrap herself in some of the same entitled and cold certainty she'd displayed for us on our first meeting, like armor.

"There is nothing to enjoy about this situation, *Miss Cranford*," Dai stated. "Murder is a serious business, not a stage for petty revenge. Do you seriously believe Truman would have asked for our help if that was the type of people we were? Did you learn nothing from our previous encounter?"

Dai's clipped tones seemed to give Mrs. Pierce something else to hold on to, letting her rally behind a shield of annoyance, allowing her to push back the fear and panic. I returned to my post near Dai's chair.

"I suppose you might deserve the benefit of the doubt, Miss Wu," Mrs. Pierce said. "At least for now."

"How *magnanimous* of you." Dai gave her a half-smile, but there was nothing pleasant about it. Mrs. Pierce's comments must have cut more deeply than I would have expected. "If you will give us a list of items you require for your stay, Mr. Maginnis will check which of those we can bring to make your unavoidable stay here more bearable."

I watched in amazement as tears rose unbidden to Mrs. Pierce's eyes, several emotions flipping like slides across her features. "That... that would be very kind of you. Thank you."

Dai nodded, but said nothing else.

"Can you think of anyone who might want to implicate you in Mrs. Fuentes' death, Miss Crawford?" Maginnis asked.

"No, of course not," she said. "I don't fraternize with those people, and my exposure to them is quite limited." She made the concept of spending time with the Tejano or Mexican population in Dallas sound as desirable as changing dirty diapers. The Pierces left little to like about them at all.

"I see." Maginnis made more notations on his notepad. "I think I have everything I need, for now, Miss Crawford." He tore a page from the tablet and slid it over the table to her with his pencil. "If you would make a list of items you require, we can get that started."

Reading her list upside down as she wrote it, I was surprised to see that the things she wanted were, for the most part, actual necessities—clothes, underwear, a hairbrush, makeup. Any jewelry she had been wearing when the police picked her up would have been taken and stored, so asking for more would be foolish—plus having any valuables in these environs would inevitably invite trouble.

Maginnis took the list when she was done, retrieved his pencil, then stood. He folded the paper and stored it in a vest pocket before gathering everything else and putting it in his briefcase. "I'll visit you again when I have more information for you, which should be later today, or tomorrow morning at the latest."

Dai stood as well, so I took her hand and placed it on my arm.

Mrs. Pierce's blue eyes widened in panic, but although her face lost its color again, she said nothing. Maginnis rang the buzzer to summon the matron.

CHAPTER 7



All three of us were silent as we left the meeting room and took the monitored elevator back to the first floor. Maginnis conferred again with one of the deputies and returned the borrowed file. No words were exchanged between us until we were safely ensconced in the Adler.

"Mr. Maginnis, there are a few additional facts we need to disclose to you within the purview of attorney-client privilege," Dai said. "I'm sure you noticed certain oddities during the meeting?"

The lawyer half-turned in the front seat to face us. "Yes, you could say that. Please go on."

"Crawford is the client's maiden name," Dai told him. "She is, in fact, married. Her husband somehow arranged to get the paperwork changed. Her actual name is Mrs. Bernard Pierce."

The lawyer frowned but didn't interrupt.

"It was her son who reached out to us and asked if we would look into this matter and obtain representation for her."

"I see," Maginnis said. "Something to do, perhaps, with the 'delicate business dealings' you mentioned upstairs?"

Dai smiled. "I had a feeling you were no fool, Mr. Maginnis. Yes, at least that is my understanding. I apologize for not disclosing this earlier. But I wanted you to meet her and make your own conclusions without muddying the waters beforehand."

He opened his briefcase and swiftly made note of Mrs. Pierce's current married status and name. "I appreciate that," he said. "I have a feeling this case is much more complex than it seems at first glance."

"Yes, I totally agree," Dai said. "The fact that they could identify her as the owner of the earring so quickly is incredibly odd."

Maginnis nodded. "I mentioned this to the deputy. Though it wasn't disclosed in the folder prepared for my use, it appears that a newspaper article with an accompanying photograph was found at the scene, and that is what led to the quick identification."

"Why would they have omitted that from the information they gave you?" I asked.

"The arrest report hasn't been completed yet. Plus, some particulars are not required to be part of 'discovery' until the official arraignment," he said.

"How convenient to have not only an item supposedly left behind by the killer but something to point directly to their identity as well." Dai shook her head. "Something is not right here."

"I agree, and I plan to request as much information as possible," Maginnis said. "Still, since the deceased is Mexican, we should be prepared for the wheels of justice to turn slowly."

Dai sighed. "Sadly, it isn't only the Chinese who are discriminated against here in the Land of Freedom." She sounded sad. "The Jim Crow laws may have been meant to be used against the freed slaves after the Civil War, but the unfair legislation has ended up being enforced on other skin colors aside from black. None of these rules have ever made any sense to me. People are people."

"Something I gather Mrs. Pierce doesn't believe," Maginnis

said. Despite his boyish face, his eyes spoke of hard-won wisdom.

I nodded. "This is only hearsay, but it is my understanding she belonged to the Ladies of the Invisible Empire before the deep-seated corruption of the KKK's leadership was exposed, and the whole organization fell apart in disillusionment. We've both caught glimpses of her beliefs regarding other races."

I'd been both awed and horrified as a child when I learned that if I ever chose to turn on the Wus, any lie I told would be immediately believed based solely on my white skin, notwithstanding the fact they were affluent, owned property, and ran a successful business, while I was just an orphan without a penny to my name. Despite the Klan's collapse, a lot of the beliefs it exploited or had planted on its membership were still alive and well.

With all the transformations being brought on by scientific discoveries and technical advancements and the cultural influx from immigrants escaping the ravages of the World War, the Klan had given many a sense of belonging to something special—a feeling that they were part of a group that would help them keep the changes happening all around them at bay. It offered a means of making connections and friendships with like-minded white Protestant Americans, weaving solidarity and worth through public concerts, parades, picnics, baseball teams, and even beautiful-baby contests.

"This makes her a very convenient patsy for whoever did the deed," Dai said. "While I may disagree with her views, Mrs. Pierce is not stupid. I can't imagine that she'd not only leave an earring behind but also a society page article showing herself wearing them."

We were silent for a moment, then Dai asked, "Where did Mrs. Fuentes live?"

Maginnis consulted his notes. "Just on the outskirts of Little Mexico, from what I understand. Some call it *El Barrio*, which from my understanding, means the neighborhood."

Dai's expression brightened. "District One. I can't believe our luck! If Aiden wasn't assigned to do the autopsy, she'll

surely know who was. Also, since this is a known murder, there will be photographs of the scene. Will they allow you to see those, Mr. Maginnis? Would we, and by we—I mean Jacques—be able to view them with you?"

"I'm sure something could be arranged, but is that a matter you want to expose yourselves to?" the lawyer asked. "Though not as gruesome as being at the location, the pictures are still rather disturbing. There's no reason to put yourself through that if it's not necessary." His pointed look made it clear he knew what he was talking about.

I swallowed hard. "If Mrs. Fuentes' race is going to delay the due process, it would be unfair not to do what we can to hurry it along. I'm not sure how Mrs. Pierce will fare in an extended stay at the High Five. Especially if she's not guilty."

Dai nodded. "Truman might also be tempted to do something foolish."

I was surprised to hear her say so, but I agreed with the sentiment one hundred percent. Who knew what the popinjay might do if he got desperate? The fact his hands were tied thanks to his father would likely make him more reckless than he was already.

"Should we meet you at your offices tomorrow, Mr. Maginnis, and compare notes?" Dai asked.

He nodded. "Would ten in the morning be acceptable?"

"Yes, thank you," Dai said. "If you'll give Mrs. Pierce's list to Jacques, we will gather what she's requested and bring it with us for our meeting—or he can drop them off later today, if you think you will visit her before then."

The lawyer pulled the folded note from his vest pocket and handed it over to me. "If you deliver them today, I can have them sent over to her this evening, even if I don't meet with her," Maginnis said. "It should provide some small comfort to her. But please make a thorough inventory of what you bring. Things have been known to go missing there."

I nodded, thinking the suggestion prudent. Other female inmates or even workers at the High Five may not have come across the high quality in even the most basic of things owned

by Mrs. Pierce. Temptation and envy might drive them to filch a thing or two—the less ostentatious the items we picked up for her were, the better.

Plans made, Maginnis drove us back to the Republic Bank Building and our waiting Ford.

CHAPTER 8



"Jacques, I need to apologize," Dai said.

Glancing back using the peep mirror, I noticed her hands were clasped tightly on her lap, and a contrite expression adorned her face.

"Whatever for?" Dai apologizing to *me*? That was rare. Nothing came immediately to mind as to what she might have to ask for forgiveness for.

"In the interview room, when Mrs. Pierce accused me of enjoying her current predicament," Dai said. "She wasn't entirely wrong."

I sighed with relief. "That's nothing to be sorry about," I said. "Not after what she put us through. It's only natural."

Dai shook her head. "No, it was petty. It... it surprised me, and I didn't like it. I thought I was better than that."

"It simply makes you human," I said. "The same as the rest of us."

"I still don't like it." Her contrite expression changed into a pout.

I struggled not to laugh. Only Dai would take issue with

having normal feelings. We all have darker sides; she just hadn't had an opportunity to see hers before. "Even so, I adore you all the same. "

The pout transformed to an playful grin. "I could do something about that, I'm sure."

There *were* certain aspects of our sinister natures that Dai embraced much too readily—but at least her mood had improved.

We returned home in short order. As I parked the Ford under the covered area behind the house, Prince started bouncing up and down to ensure I noticed him. The moment I turned the engine off, he rushed to the side of the automobile by Dai's door, his curled tail wagging wildly.

Dai held her hand out, palm down, once I'd helped her out of the car, and he dashed forward to place his dark furry head beneath it. Dai lavished some much-craved attention on the mutt. He couldn't have been happier.

Unlike most shrubs at this time of year, our eight-foot rose-of-Sharon hedges were in bloom. Their soft pink blossoms showered the area with color, and their sweet, delicate fragrance permeated the air.

The day was growing hot, so I refilled Prince's water bowl while he was occupied with his mistress. Rosa's bicycle was not in evidence, and it looked like we had also beat Mrs. Wu back to the house. The two women tended to spend a lot of time together and worked in the same charity groups. So my note sat untouched on the kitchen table. I'd have to amend it depending on what steps we decided to take that afternoon.

Dai and a much happier Prince followed me inside.

"Any preferences for lunch?" I asked.

Dai shrugged. "Anything will do as long as it's quick. We have a lot to do this afternoon." She walked unaided into the kitchen, well acquainted with the placement of all the objects in the entire house. "We need to contact Truman or his butler to start gathering the items Mrs. Pierce requested. I also want to telephone Aiden and verify if she's the one assigned to Mrs. Fuentes' autopsy and, if not, to see if she can get a hold of a

copy of their report for us. I'm a little concerned about Mr. Maginnis' assertion that matters may move slowly due to her race. It's disconcerting that someone robbed of their life should be less important just because of how they are perceived by society."

"I agree." I opened the refrigerator to see what leftovers I might cobble together for our meal. "Yet figuring out how to change those attitudes, especially when the truth seems so obvious, is rather perplexing."

Dai sighed. "I doubt even making everyone blind for a day would make a difference."

I was sure she was right, but letting people get a taste of what she dealt with every single day might illuminate things for some. I knew it had done so for me. Not long after I'd joined the household, my curiosity had led me to create a makeshift blindfold, and I wore it for several hours. It had been quite disconcerting. I inadvertently broke a vase, which had earned me the wrath of the dragon—though once Dai explained what I'd been trying to do, it won me a certain amount of unexpected goodwill from both of her parents.

Sandwiches and cut fruit met the 'quick' requirement, and after cleaning up, we made our way toward Mr. Wu's office on the other side of the house to avail ourselves of the telephone. As I passed by the front door, I could see a golden blob through the stained-glass window. It appeared someone might be parked before the house on the street. Curious, I unlocked the entry door and opened it just a sliver to get a better look outside.

There was a 1928 Rolls Royce Phantom sitting at our curb. It was yellow, of all things, which coincidentally matched the color of our two-story prairie-style house. The vehicle's convertible top was on, and I could just catch a glimpse of a slumped figure in the driver's seat.

"Is someone out there, Jacques?" Dai asked.

I had more than an inkling of who it might be. Had the idiot not gone after I'd closed the door in his face? "Yes. I don't think Pierce ever left."

The fool had even returned to his automobile rather than wait on our cooler porch. Another hour and he would bake in the metallic contraption like a roast in the oven. I could almost see the newspaper headline: *Spoiled rich boy found dead after being cooked inside his car; Yellow Peril family implicated.*

"You'd best go and bring him in then," Dai said. "I'll fix him a glass of something cold to drink."

"I can do that once I get him."

Dai raised an eyebrow. "Don't be silly, Jacques. This will be faster."

I disliked the idea of her going to such trouble for Pierce, but nevertheless I held my tongue and stepped outside. Prince pranced beside me, eagerly sniffing the air. With the four-foot wall and eight-foot rose-of-Sharon shrubs, our neighbors shouldn't have detected the automobile on the street. I didn't dare speculate what they might make of such an expensive car sitting before our house for a few hours.

Nearing the Phantom, I saw that it was indeed Pierce half-slumped in the driver's seat, his fedora slid forward to hide most of his face from the sun. I tried hard not to be impressed by the automobile's beautiful lines, the matching spoked wheels, and the dark wood dashboard. The popinjay had at least had the sense to remove his jacket, which sat neatly folded beside him. He appeared utterly oblivious to everything.

"*Pierre!*"

He jerked in his seat, knocking his hat to the floorboard. He stared wildly around for a moment before finally noticing me on the car's opposite side. "Did something happen?"

What little glee I'd felt at shocking him awake changed to guilt at the panicked concern lacing his voice. I guess it wasn't only Dai who could be petty and then feel ashamed. If not for his current problems, though, I wouldn't have regretted it at all. Perhaps I embraced my darker side more than I should.

"No, you fool. Things are advancing as planned," I said. "So what are you doing out here in this heat, anyway? Do you realize it's a pure accident we even noticed you were out here? You could have at least had the common sense to wait on the

covered porch." *Or just gone straight home and not been here at all.* But I figured it would be bad form to mention that.

"I didn't know when you'd be back, and I didn't want to miss you in case you needed anything," he said. "You left so quickly we didn't arrange when to meet again."

I frowned with irritation, despite the fact that he wasn't wrong. But hanging out here in the hopes we might notice him was foolish. He could have just called the house to see if anyone answered rather than stay and bake in the relentless Texas sun. "Come inside and cool down a bit." I waved him toward the house. "We have a list of items your mother's requested that you can get for us."

Pierce grabbed his hat and jacket. His face looked a little flushed, and there were dark sweat stains at his armpits. He'd definitely been out here longer than was prudent. The lack of a breeze would have made the interior feel like an oven, even with the windows down.

Prince lifted a leg over the Phantom's rear tire and marked it as his, then pranced back toward the porch, his secret mission accomplished. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or chastise him. Fortunately, Pierce never noticed.

"How is Mother? Is she all right?" he asked. His blue eyes dripped with concern.

It was hard not to take pity on him. "She's hanging on," I said. "The lawyer met with her, and we've given him the particulars of why she's listed under her maiden name rather than her married one."

I steered him up the walkway. "You need to brace yourself, however. Though Mr. Maginnis is doing everything he can to move things along, your mother may remain incarcerated for several weeks."

"*Weeks?*" Pierce tripped, and I had no choice but to reach out for him lest he fall flat on his face. He appeared even more flushed than before, the shock of my statement seeming to have impacted him more than I'd anticipated.

"I'm sure it won't come to that," I said. I knew nothing of the kind, but Pierce looked to be in dire need of some

reassurance, even a false one.

Thankfully, we'd reached the porch by this time, and I ushered him into the relative coolness of the house. We found Dai waiting for us in the foyer, a tall glass of iced tea in one hand and a wet hand towel in the other. Prince sat beside her, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth.

"China Doll, you're a *lifesaver*." Truman took both offered items after I freed him from his jacket and hat. Then he gulped down the drink and wiped his face and neck with the hand towel. By the time he finished, he seemed more like his usual self.

"Would you like more tea, Truman?" Dai asked.

He looked away before throwing a glance my way. "Is there a washroom I could use by any chance?"

I raised a brow. Did the popinjay think Dai wasn't aware of bodily functions? "You can use mine. I'll show you where it is."

"I'll wait for the two of you in Father's study." Dai's dimples were in evidence, showing her amusement at Pierce's careful wording. Maybe in his household, saying 'restroom' or 'bathroom' was considered offensive.

I led the way to the kitchen, appropriating the glass and hand towel from him. "If you'll go through that door, the bathroom is at the other end."

"Thanks, Jackie."

I almost decided not to get him more tea for the comment, but didn't want to be accused of being a poor host. If he'd been out there since this morning, he'd probably had nothing to eat either. So I fished out several gingersnap cookies from the cookie jar and put them on a small plate.

When Pierce returned, he had a pensive look on his face.

"Is something amiss?" I asked.

He appeared startled, as if he'd forgotten I was out here. "Oh, no, nothing's wrong." He shook his head. "You... you said that was your room?"

His disbelieving tone set my teeth on edge. "Yes, it is." I managed to keep the irritation from my voice—mostly. "Why? Is there something wrong with it?"

THE JOY OF MURDER

At least he had the decency to look abashed. "No, not at all. It's very cozy."

I translated that to mean 'incredibly small.' I was sure his closet was probably bigger than my entire room. The idiot was doubtless in shock, wondering how anyone could live in such a cramped space. *Spoiled brat*. If not for his troubles, I'd have been sorely tempted to throw him out the back door on his ear. "Hurry up and eat. Dai is waiting for us."

CHAPTER 9



Pierce drank his tea and ate his cookies, while I glowered at him throughout. He must have felt some modicum of guilt, as he surprised me by putting his dirty dishes in the sink.

"I didn't meant to offend you. If I did, I apologize," he said.

"Size isn't everything. Despite what you may have been told." I didn't give him a chance to reply, heading off instead to Tye's office, where Dai waited for us.

I tried to let go of my irritation, but it hung on tight. The popinjay was the last person I wanted to be judging me and mine. Next time—not that there would ever *be* one—he could just bake outside all day.

"Jacques?" Dai's face turned in my direction, a slight frown creasing her brow. Even Prince let out a questioning mumble.

Taking a deep, slow breath, I pushed my ire down deep. "Should I call Dr. Campbell?"

"I've already taken care of that." Dai grinned. "Sorry, I got impatient. The switchboard operator was quite helpful." Her grin grew. "Aiden got the case. Her preliminary review indicates Mrs. Fuentes died from a penetrating traumatic head

injury."

Pierce frowned. "What does that mean, exactly?" he asked.

I was the one who answered. "It means she was hit on the head hard enough to poke a hole in her skull and that it killed her." Our education on all things morbid had grown by leaps and bounds thanks to Dai's budding friendship with Aiden. Whether or not this was a good thing remained to be seen—and that the dragon must never learn of it went without saying.

Pierce paled a bit. "How gruesome."

He'd get no argument from me on that sentiment. It also meant Mrs. Fuentes' death was unlikely to have been accidental—although the fact that Mrs. Pierce was being framed was already pointing us in that direction.

"Murder is always a terrible business," Dai said, shaking her head. "Aiden promised to give us more information later. I made her aware of our involvement in the matter, and that we're working with the defense attorney."

"Does this help us prove my mother's innocence?" Pierce asked.

"No, not yet," She replied. "But the more information we have, the better the chance we'll find what we need to do so. And, Truman, although we will do everything we can, it is still going to take time."

"It's all just so *wacky*." He flopped into a nearby chair, his expression troubled. "You said there was a list of things Mother wanted?"

"Yes, some basic necessities to make her stay more tolerable," Dai said.

"It would be best if they're not fancy. It could lead to problems otherwise," I added. From the deeply puzzled expression on the popinjay's face, I could tell he hadn't the slightest idea what I meant. Perhaps it would be better not to enlighten him and make him more upset.

"Truman, why don't we go with you?" Dai suggested. "That way, Jacques can make sure your choices will be suitable."

I muffled a groan. The last thing I wanted was for us to spend more time with the man. However, I knew why she

proposed it; if it was left up to Pierce, who knew what inappropriate things he might send?

"I'm already putting you to so much trouble, China Doll, I'd hate to impose on you further," Pierce said.

At least the cad had enough of a brain to realize it.

"We don't mind, do we, Jacques?" Dai answered. The dimples were back. Was this her way of forcing me to spend time with him to give me a chance to see his better qualities? *Oh, bother.*

"No." I forced the rest of it out of my mouth. "Of course not."

Truman stood. "The Phantom only has the one seat, but we might fit if you don't mind squeezing in together."

Not on my watch, he wasn't! As if I'd let the two of them get that close. "*No*, we will be taking the *Ford*," I said. "It has plenty of room for the *four* of us." Prince had to come. I needed him as an extra pair of eyes to make sure Pierce behaved himself. He barked once in agreement.

Pierce took a step back, raising his hands. "Jeez, Jackie. It was just a suggestion."

I sent him a daggered glare to make certain he understood I didn't appreciate those types of ideas.

A soft yet poignant sigh made me glance in Dai's direction. "Honestly, Jacques," Dai said as she stood. "There's no need to be unpleasant."

My ears burned at the soft admonition—yet another item to add to the popinjay's ever-growing list of offenses.

Giving a slight nod in Pierce's direction, I left the room before I was tempted to give in to my ire and deck him one. It flustered me to no end that he seemed to be able to get a rise out of me without even trying. If, heaven forbid, Dai ever decided to get serious about the man, I didn't have the slightest idea how I would keep myself calm around him. He rubbed me the wrong way even when he *wasn't* doing it on purpose. Assuming, of course, that was ever actually the case.

The whispers I heard behind me didn't improve my mood at all, but I still went through the motions of getting Dai's hat,

gloves, clutch, and her teashade glasses, then moved on to the kitchen to grab my own things. By the time I made it out the back door to the Ford, I'd cooled my temper enough that I could shove it out of sight and lock the door behind it.

I opened the back door of the Model A for when Dai caught up and considered opening the front passenger door to give Pierce a hint. However, I discarded the thought almost immediately, not wanting to do anything else to annoy her further.

As I'd expected, the popinjay helped Dai into the car, then went around to get in the back seat. Ever on duty, Prince quickly jumped inside to shove between them. I'd have to slip the mutt an extra treat with his dinner tonight.

The drive to Highland Park was uneventful, each of us mired in our own thoughts. Finally, I pulled into the Pierces' impressive circular driveway and parked the Ford beneath the covered entrance. Pierce bounced out of the car before I could and rushed to open Dai's door. I took a deep breath to try to center myself and pretended it didn't bother me—not even when he kept hold of her hand and led her inside the house.

Prince's nails made clipped noises on the foyer's marble floor as he followed the pair inside, with me bringing up the rear. The butler materialized out of nowhere, his somber face still as unreadable as when we'd first met. Yet the unwelcoming expression he'd worn at our first meeting weeks before had melted into something more neutral.

"Welcome home, Mr. Pierce," the butler said. I was surprised to see his gaze soften, showing an actual fondness for his employer's son.

"Thank you, Trevor." Pierce even seemed to reciprocate the older man's feelings. How odd and unexpected. Not that it made any difference. "I want to introduce you to some friends of mine," Pierce said. "This is Miss Daiyu Wu and her companion, Jacques Haskin. And last but not least, Prince Razor."

Prince gave an acknowledging bark, then sat on his haunches and extended a paw. The butler's brow rose, but his

expression didn't frost over as I had expected it to, neither at Dai nor Prince.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am, sirs."

My estimation of the man rose. I wondered if he was so accepting purely because Pierce introduced us as friends or because of the way the dragon had deflected the ambush orchestrated by Mrs. Pierce and Linda Carmichael when we all first met.

I had just started to think this errand might proceed without incident or unpleasantness when I was irrevocably proven wrong.

"What is *she* doing here?!" Linda stood in the entryway to the sitting room, pointing a shaking finger straight at Dai.

CHAPTER 10



Carmichael stomped over toward us, her finger pointed at Dai as if it were a musket. Her pencil-thin eyebrows formed an angry V. "You—you, *strumpet*! You troublemaker! Get out of this house!"

"Linda, that's *enough*." Though Pierce didn't raise his voice to the levels of our assailant, it was still sufficient to make her stutter and come to a stop. He placed himself between the two women.

Trevor gathered up our hats, gloves, and jackets and disappeared with them as if he'd never been there. I didn't blame the man for scrambling to safety. I only wished we could have done so as well.

"Truman, why would you bring her here? You know how I feel about her. Are you *trying* to hurt me?" Linda asked, the glint of gathering tears shining in her eyes.

I took Dai's hand and placed it at my elbow in case we needed to make a hasty retreat.

Rather than answer Carmichael's query, the popinjay lobbed one of his own. "Linda, why are you here?"

"Why? *Why?*" She appeared shocked by the question. "You know perfectly well why!" She stomped her foot on the marble floor, her face filling with splotchy bits of red visible even through her makeup. "Your father told Daddy you realized your error and wanted to spend more time with me. That you were finally interested in setting a *date for our wedding!*"

Pierce's face turned a little green. I didn't blame him—the notion of being married to someone like Carmichael would make me feel sick as well. "Linda, I have no idea what in blazes you're talking about," Pierce said.

Carmichael opened her mouth to speak, and he held up his hand to stop her. Miraculously, she remained silent, though it obviously cost her a lot of effort to do so. If she'd been wearing a flapper's frock instead of a pink V-neck day dress with puffed sleeves, the beads would have been clanking together madly as if she were in the middle of dancing the Charleston.

Pierce took a deep breath, all his attention centered on Linda. "Mother was arrested this morning. She's been accused of murder," he said.

The young woman's face raced through several expressions: from shock to incredulity to anger and back again. "Truman, this better not be some kind of joke. You're having me on, aren't you? Well, it isn't funny," Carmichael declared with a displeased pout.

"No, I am not 'having you on.' Even I have limits on what can be made fun of," Pierce said. I personally had doubts that was actually true.

Carmichael's face once more tore through several emotions. I was starting to get the idea she wasn't quick on the uptake. It might just explain part of Pierce's fascination with Dai, especially if other women in his circles were like Carmichael, but I would keep that to myself.

"Truman, what does that have to do with us setting a date? Or this conniving yellow minx, for that matter?" she asked.

No, not quick on the uptake indeed.

The ensuing sigh from Pierce seemed to reverberate through the place. "Linda, please, why don't you and I go into

the sitting room, and I will explain everything to you, all right?"

Her face lit up at the prospect of being alone with him until she realized that would enable Dai, Prince, and me to do as we liked in the house. "Truman! You can't just leave them here unsupervised. Who knows what might go missing?"

I took a menacing step forward at the insult, but Dai pulled me back, her hand still at my elbow. Glancing at her face, I saw she looked more amused than upset by these baseless accusations. I didn't feel anywhere near the same. To my surprise, neither did the popinjay.

"You know what, Linda? I'm really getting sick and tired of you being rude to *my guests*," Pierce said. "My mother is in trouble, and unlike you, Daiyu is here to try to help her. So go home, and don't you dare come back until you're willing to behave. I've had about all I'm going to take from you at the moment. I have more important things to do than wallow in your *fantasies*."

Carmichael opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again, making her look like a fish struggling to breathe. Pierce didn't give her any time to rally; he steered her bodily straight for the front entrance. Once more, Trevor seemed to appear from nowhere, Linda's hat and purse in his hands. He slipped her articles into her arms as Pierce swung open the door and corralled her out. It was truly impressive. I got the impression this wasn't the first occasion this had been the result of one of her visits.

"No, no, no, no!" The young woman looked desperate, yet still managed to send hateful glares in our direction, as if blaming us for the entire ordeal. "Truman, don't you do this! I love—"

Pierce slammed the door closed on her declaration, then hung his head as if dealing with Linda had sapped all his remaining strength.

"Sir, should I prepare some refreshments?" Trevor asked, his whole manner denying anything untoward had just occurred. It made me wonder how long he'd had to deal with scenes like this for him to so easily act as if it never happened.

For the second time that day, I got the sense that the Pierce household was not the paradise one might assume it to be.

"Excellent idea, Trevor. Thank you." The popinjay rallied and turned back around to face us.

"Is she going to be all right out there?" Dai asked. "It's the middle of the afternoon."

Pierce plastered a smile on his face. "The Carmichaels only live a few houses down. She'll be fine."

She raised an eyebrow. "But will *you*? It seems your father may have made certain promises on your behalf in order to keep your family's name out of the newspapers."

Now that she mentioned it, I recalled how Carmichael had tried to have a picture snapped of Dai during Truman's party at the Dallas Country Club the first time we crossed paths. She'd known the cameraman by name, and from the way he was cowed by her, one could surmise she or her father were associated with a newspaper. It made the near-miss all the more disconcerting. Plus, Carmichael contrived multiple schemes to get the Wu family in trouble after that night. I dreaded what she might decide to cook up this time.

"That's a worry for another day," Pierce said. "Right now, my mother is all that matters."

It was good to see he gave some affairs the seriousness they were due.

CHAPTER 11



Pierce steered us to the sitting room to wait for the offered refreshments. Unlike our first visit, the area looked as one would expect—a comfortable-looking couch, with matching settee and chairs in gold cloth and trimmed in wood. Side tables of the same material as the trim, a square coffee table, and other accent tables were strategically placed to allow visitors to relax and put their drinks or snacks within easy reach. With the addition of tasteful oil paintings and broad-leafed plants, it was a welcoming space—the total opposite of how it had seemed during the ambush.

I led Dai to the couch and sat beside her, squashing any ideas the popinjay might have about claiming the spot for himself. Prince ducked under the coffee table. Pierce sat down across from us, his expression more relaxed than moments before.

We'd just settled ourselves down when Trevor returned. He set a large dish of sliced cheeses, olives, and crackers in the center of the coffee table. Coasters and napkins matching the gold cloth patterns of the couch and chairs soon followed. The

butler left, but quickly reappeared with filled iced tea glasses and a pitcher for refills in tow.

"You said Mother made a list?" Pierce asked.

I pulled the folded paper from my vest pocket. "Yes, just some basic necessities."

"Trevor, would you have time to get these together?" He sent a questioning glance to the butler.

"Of course, sir." He held out a white-gloved hand for the note.

"Plain items only, please," I told him. "If she has nothing suitable, I'll make a stop at a department store if you can add her sizes to the list."

Trevor's answer was an acknowledging nod, and an amused twinkle in his eyes as he took the paper and left us.

"Has Trevor been with the family long?" Dai asked.

I placed a couple of pieces of cheese on a napkin and set them on the coffee table before her. Then, taking her hand, I guided her to it, so she could partake when she was ready. Only then did I grab a few for myself.

"Almost as long as I have," Truman replied. "Sixteen years or so."

"He seems quite capable," I said. Perhaps I could learn a thing or two from him about managing a household. But not when Pierce was around; I had a feeling I wouldn't hear the end of it if he found out. He already teased me enough as it was.

The popinjay nodded. "Trevor is a good egg. I owe him a lot."

"Truman, do you think you're up to my asking you a few questions?" Dai asked. "The more information I'm able to gather, the better."

"Ask away." He sat forward almost eagerly. "Whatever I can do to help, China Doll."

She nibbled on a piece of cheese as if gathering her thoughts before starting. "Does your mother have any enemies?"

Pierce frowned, his expression clearly stating he never thought about such a thing before. "None that I know of."

"Would she ever have had occasion to go to Little Mexico?"

Now he looked confused. "Little Mexico? Where's that?"

"Some know it as El Barrio. It's in the same area as Pike Park," Dai said.

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so. But to be honest, I'm not that acquainted with how she spends her time or where she goes."

She nodded, tucking the data away. "Have you ever heard your mother talk about a Mrs. Fuentes?"

"No." Pierce's expression grew troubled. "I'm not being a lot of help with this, am I?"

Dai gave him a soft smile. "Sometimes, a lack of information can also be informative," she said. "I have one last question—and this one is for both you *and* Trevor."

The butler appeared in the archway leading to the dining room, a small suitcase in hand. I'd expected him to take a lot longer to gather his mistress's belongings than this. Could he have been thinking ahead of what her needs might be once he'd heard of the arrest?

As quiet as the butler was, he'd have to try harder to go unnoticed by Dai. But his silence made me wonder if he made it a habit to listen in on the family's affairs. If so, he was likely to be a better source of information than Pierce. I'd need to make a point to discuss it with her later.

"How may I be of service, ma'am?" The butler gave no indication of surprise at having been caught lurking.

Dai's small smile came and went. "Are either of you acquainted with a pair of earrings owned by Mrs. Pierce? Jacques will give you a description of the ones we're looking for."

Retrieving the small notebook I always kept on my person, I looked up the information. "They would be dangle earrings made of white gold and inset with emeralds and diamonds. An elaborate set with paisley patterns and swirls—a one-of-a-kind item."

"Sorry, they don't sound familiar," Pierce admitted. "I can't say I pay a lot of attention to jewelry."

Dai expectantly turned her regard in the butler's direction. He did not disappoint.

"Indeed, madam owned a pair that matches your description. Unfortunately, however, one was lost and never recovered. The maid and I searched the house for it on more than one occasion without result. Mrs. Pierce was quite distraught at the loss."

"Do you know if she kept the other one?" Dai asked.

Trevor nodded. "Yes, ma'am, I believe the second of the pair is still in madam's jewelry box."

"Would you mind checking, please? I am sure the police will be interested in seeing it. Do you recall when she lost the earring?"

"A handful of years ago, if I recollect correctly, ma'am."

She looked pleased. "Would you be willing to give a statement to that effect to Mrs. Pierce's defense attorney? Hopefully, he won't need to use it, but we want all the weapons we can get in our arsenal."

The butler placed the small suitcase beside the coffee table. "Yes, ma'am. It shouldn't prove a problem." He handed me the list back. I noticed he'd written in the number of articles for each entry. The man was incredibly efficient.

"Thank you, Trevor. I'm sure Mother will appreciate your efforts on her behalf," Pierce said.

It was nice to see the popinjay had the grace to acknowledge the efforts of the 'help,' though Trevor was most likely an exception rather than the norm. With a poker face as inscrutable as the butler's, however, I wondered how the rest of the family treated the man.

Dai stood, and I followed suit. "Truman, Trevor, we're very grateful for your kind hospitality, but we must take our leave." She turned toward Pierce. "Should we drop you off so you can retrieve your car after a quick stop downtown?"

She made it sound innocuous, probably for the butler's benefit. If he were grilled about it later by Linda, he wouldn't need to lie about his master going off to the home of the Yellow Peril. Personally, I wished she hadn't brought the topic

THE JOY OF MURDER

up at all. He could have forgotten about it in his current state, and we could have made a clean getaway and not been subjected to any more of his company.

Pierce flashed her a smile. "That would be swell, China Doll. Many thanks."

I took charge of the suitcase, trying to emulate the butler and keeping my expression as blank as possible. Dai grabbed a last piece of cheese and held it out for Prince when he came out from beneath the coffee table.

Trevor had already disappeared to retrieve our things and met us by the door. As we stepped out into the fiery Texas afternoon, we discovered a most distressful surprise. The back passenger tire of the Ford had been punctured, and the side panel scratched from end to end.

CHAPTER 12



"What's wrong?" Dai asked. "Why have we stopped?"

I took a deep breath, hoping it would help me keep my tone level. "The back tire is flat. I'll need to replace it with the spare before we can be on our way."

Prince sniffed the tire, barked once, then got on the runner to sniff the scratched panel. He gave a second bark, then ran off toward the bushes. Pierce had yet to say anything, his entire focus on the car. I suppose that meant I wasn't the only one trying to rein in his temper.

"Jacques? Truman? What aren't you telling me?" Dai asked. "You know I'll find out eventually, so you might as well tell me now."

Prince let out another soft bark from amidst the bushes, then came out with something in his mouth. He dropped the implement at Dai's feet. It was an icepick.

I pulled out my handkerchief and wrapped the item in it to keep any fingerprints intact. Hopefully, this would be the extent of Linda Carmichael's revenge, but I wouldn't bet on it.

"What's *wrong* with her?" Pierce was shaking where he

stood. "She's always been a little loopy, but this makes her downright certifiable!"

Dai yanked on my jacket sleeve, reminding me I still hadn't answered her question. "It appears that Linda used an icepick to puncture the Ford's tire and then scratch up the side of the car." This earned me a raised brow and troubled pout.

"China Doll, I will pay for all the repairs. Please don't worry on that account," Pierce said. "I honestly never imagined she'd do something like this." He shook his head, his confusion plain for anyone to see. "Let me get you back inside, out of the heat, while we get the tire changed."

"You really should have a long talk with her, Truman," Dai softly admonished. "She's obviously being told different things by different people. You should make your thoughts on the matter clear."

The popinjay winced. "I need to, yes. You're absolutely right. The whole mess is just complicated."

I'd had my fill of this. "Then *uncomplicate* it! If she's willing to destroy property, what else might she decide to try?" Thinking of the possibilities was bound to give me nightmares. The more frustrated she got, the more outlandish her attempts might become.

Pierce wouldn't look at either of us. Instead, he removed his hat and coat, then rolled up his sleeves. "Please, just go back inside. I'll get the tire changed."

Frowning, I did as he asked, but only long enough to get Dai settled in the sitting room, for Prince to keep watch over her. Trevor appeared, keeping his curiosity well hidden, and I left it to her to fill him in. Though the popinjay had volunteered to change the flat on his own, I had no faith in his abilities at manual labor. It would be a total debacle to have the wheel fall off on our way home.

I found Pierce searching the inside of the car for the tire iron and lug wrench. Rolling my eyes, I moved over to the attached trunk in the Ford's rear to get what we needed. He still wouldn't meet my gaze as I came around with the tools to unhook the spare tire from its niche in the driver's side,

between the front tire and the door.

We worked in silence, which was fine by me. I had no interest in listening to any excuses Pierce might come up with. I'd made my feelings quite clear the last time Linda had graced us with her imaginative spite.

Despite the Ford being under the covered driveway by the entrance, the midafternoon heat was unrelenting. It made the air shimmer over the parts of the drive not protected from the sun.

I wiped my sweating forehead on my sleeve, my handkerchief still wrapped around the ice pick. We saw no sign of Carmichael in the interim, for which I was grateful. I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop myself from grabbing her, bending her over my knee, and giving her bottom a few hard whacks. Finally, after tightening the punctured tire in the holder and putting the tools back in the trunk, we made our way to the blessed coolness of the house's interior.

The butler materialized before us, bearing a couple of damp towels and a tray holding glasses of fresh iced tea.

"Thank you, Trevor," Pierce said. I nodded my agreement, not having energy for anything else. "Get the details for my favorite mechanic when you have a moment, would you?"

Dai must have filled him in as I'd expected, because the butler withdrew a folded note from his vest pocket and offered it to me. "I've already informed them of the work needing to be done."

"Much appreciated," I said. The man's efficiency was awe-inspiring.

"Sir, Mr. Haskin looks to be about your same size, so I have taken the liberty of setting out two sets of fresh undershirts and white dress shirts in your bedroom," the butler said.

My estimations of the man rose another notch.

"Come on, Jackie. My room is upstairs." Pierce set his glass back on the tray, then bounded toward the artfully curved staircase.

I thanked Trevor again and followed my host at a more sedate pace.

The glamor downstairs continued to the second story—spotless marble floors, thick carpet runners, embedded Grecian columns to either side of each embossed door. Pierce turned to the right and led me to an open doorway. Stepping inside his bedroom, I could see why mine had seemed so 'cozy.' His bedroom was bigger than the Wus' living room! It was so large his double bed didn't crowd the space in any way.

The bed's foot and headboard were made of dark wood with gold inlays, and it was made up with a thick bedspread in navy blue and gold. A matching plush chair and couch were set at an angle close to a broad, arched window looking into the home's meticulously groomed backyard. A mirrored dresser, two armoires, and a chest of drawers, as well as bedside tables, filled the space, but it didn't feel crowded. An open doorway led to a lavish bathroom in gold and white. I was definitely noticing a pattern in the household's décor.

The whole thing looked more like a showpiece than a room anyone actually lived in. Aside from a fancy comb and cufflinks in a dish on the dresser, there were no personal objects in evidence.

"Here you are, Jackie. You can go first." The popinjay grabbed a set of shirts off the bed and handed them over, then pointed toward the bathroom's open door.

Not sure how long Pierce might be likely to take if he went before me, I took him up on the offer. Trevor had a good eye; his assumption that Pierce and I were of a similar size proved correct. I tried not to be annoyed by the fact that I had anything in common with the man. The undershirt was well-tailored, not something bought at a store. I expected the shirt to be much the same, but was still shocked at the soft and liquid feel of the fabric as it ran over my skin. The top was made of silk, not cotton, as I had assumed. Why in the world would they allow me to borrow such a thing? A subtle apology for our first encounter and Carmichael's uncouth behavior, perhaps?

I left the opulent bathroom, feeling more refreshed than when I had entered.

"That was quick," Pierce said, and stood up from where

he'd been lounging by the window.

I shrugged. "Thanks for the loan. I'll get it back to you tomorrow."

He flashed me a grin. "No hurry. Meet you downstairs?" He grabbed the second set of shirts to head to the bathroom.

"Wait." I'd just realized I'd been given an opportunity to give voice to my suspicions. "Why are you stringing Miss Charmichael along?" I asked.

Pierce made a face. "I'm *not*. I told you it's complicated."

"Of course it is." I wasn't sure why I'd even bothered believing he might give me a straight answer while Dai wasn't in hearing distance. I turned to go.

"Look, I've never actually asked her to marry me. It's just something she got in her head when we were kids and our parents encouraged it." Pierce sounded both frustrated and sad. "You've seen how she is. I've told her before and she just won't believe me. My father insists it's in everyone's best interests just to let her believe what she wants."

That seemed a rather strange request. But it begged the question on why he put up with it. There had to be more to it.

He shrugged. "Complicated."

"I see." Perhaps it was best not to know. I left before I was tempted to ask anything else.

I found Dai where I'd left her, comfortably seated in the living room. "Pierce should join us presently. Apologies for the delay."

She shook her head. "There's nothing to apologize for. None of us foresaw Linda's actions." She threw me a dimpled smile. "And it gave me a chance to speak to Trevor privately. A most interesting man."

I sat down next to her. "How so?"

Her dimples grew more pronounced. "He joined the French Foreign Legion at the beginning of the Great War."

An interesting man, indeed. Though the Great War began in 1914, America had remained neutral until April 1917. For him to go so far as to enlist in the French Foreign Legion that early said a lot about his character. It made me wonder if the

THE JOY OF MURDER

Pierce family had any real idea about the character of the man who served them.

Dai lowered her voice. "He also mentioned that upon being made aware of Mrs. Pierce's arrest, he sent the maid to purchase more mundane articles for her. I think she's likely to be shocked when she sees them, so we need to warn Maginnis. Though in the end, I do believe it will make her stay at the High Five less troublesome." She grinned. "I expect Trevor would give you a good run for your money."

I nodded, not doubting it in the least. Talent like his might be wasted here. It made me wonder why he stayed. Not that it was any of my business.

Pierce finally breezed in while still adjusting his cufflinks, all evidence of his previous labors dissolved away like a bad dream upon waking. We were able to get underway at last.

CHAPTER 13



Since we were running behind, I grudgingly left Pierce and Dai in the car, hoping Prince's presence would prove enough of an incentive for the man to behave himself. Up in the Thompson and Knight offices, a quick look at the suitcase's contents proved Trevor's competence yet again. Though still of excellent quality, the items inside were made of cotton in a plain style. Silk and too many frills might cause all manner of unwanted trouble with the other inmates. Even the case, well-constructed and quite sturdy, appeared ordinary.

I double-checked the inventory on the list to be thorough, and passed on Dai's advice about the contents potentially surprising Mrs. Pierce. Maginnis took everything in stride, and even carried out his own inspection.

Sadly, despite the requests already filed, the arrest report had yet to be completed, therefore, the district attorney had not yet decided whether to charge her.

The ride back to the Wu household was somber and quiet.

As I slipped the Ford into the carport, I spotted Rosa's bicycle resting in its usual spot. Though she didn't live in El

Barrio, she might still prove to be an excellent source of information on the deceased—as long as the dragon wasn't home as well.

I couldn't think of a good reason to force Pierce to go around the house to get to his automobile, so unfortunately I had to invite him inside. I hoped Rosa wouldn't be too curious about the unusual intrusion.

"¡*Bien venidos!*" Rosa turned toward us with a bright smile. From the scent wafting in the air and the large pot on the stove, I was pretty sure we were having *sopa de elote* tonight, a tasty corn chowder.

Rosa's deep brown eyes widened as she caught sight of our guest. "Mr. Pierce! What a pleasant surprise."

"It's a pleasure seeing you again, Mrs. Vega." The popinjay gave her an acknowledging nod. I tried not to be impressed by the fact he'd actually remembered her name.

"It's good to see you three spending time together," Rosa said. "Will you be joining us for dinner?" Her eyes shone.

My worst nightmare was materializing before my very eyes. "He's very busy. I doubt he has time to stay."

"I would be honored. If you're sure it's not an imposition...?" Pierce flashed her a smile and sent a wink my way. "I was going to follow Jackie to the repair shop, then give him a ride home. So, dinner would be grand."

The insufferable cad! Of course he'd take advantage of the situation. Dai gave a soft chuckle beside me. Prince was sniffing at the air with his eyes closed, so I would get no help from the canine quarter either.

"¡*Maravilloso!* I'll make sure to add an extra place at the table." Rosa looked like, she might burst if she got any more excited. She glanced at the kitchen clock. "But if you have an errand to run, you should do so right away. I expect Lien and Tye to be home in about an hour."

I was positive the dragon would be thrilled at the developments, but Dai's father would be devastated, and I had no way to warn him. Maybe I could dissuade Pierce on the return trip. "Yes, we should be going if we want to make it

back in time."

Dai stepped forward. "Rosa, before they go, I have a question to ask you." At least she didn't say she was coming with us. It would have put all three of us squished together in the popinjay's Phantom, which I would not allow under any circumstances.

"A question for me?" She looked intrigued.

"Might you happen to know a Mrs. Isabel Fuentes? Her full name is Isabel Helena Fuentes Garcia."

Rosa's brows rose in surprise. "Yes, I do. I met her several years ago when I first came to Dallas." Her dark eyes turned sad; Rosa had lost her son and husband in the Cristero War. A conflict brought about by the Mexican president as he aggressively attempted to remove the influence the Catholic Church had over the faithful. Rosa had left all she knew to come to Dallas to start anew.

"She's very well regarded," she continued, "and I've heard she does a lot for those who live in El Barrio," Rosa said. "How did you hear about her?"

Dai lowered her head. "I overheard someone say she had died. If she was somebody you were acquainted with, I thought you'd want to know."

"*Gracias, mi preciosa*. I'll light a candle for her." Rosa frowned. "This is a big tragedy for the community there."

I didn't know much about Little Mexico at all, but I had a feeling we would be looking deeper into it before long.

First things first, however.

"Pierce and I will be back as soon as we can," I said. "But don't hold dinner for us if we run late. We'll make do once we return."

I grabbed him by the arm and hustled him toward the front of the house and the door.

He was laughing by the time I got him outside. "Jackie, you are such a gas!"

"It's *Jacques*, damn you." His use of the stupid name irritated me less than the fact that I was letting him get to me, but I had no idea how to stop it. "I'll meet you at the repair shop."

THE JOY OF MURDER

"Sure thing, Jackie Jacques!"

I closed the door behind him, then leaned my forehead against it and took several deep breaths, trying to clamp down my burning ire at this new incarnation of the irritating nickname.

"You make it easy for him. You realize that, right?" Dai's voice held barely repressed amusement. Of course she'd heard the idiot. Damn the man.

I forced myself to turn around and face her. "I don't see why he has to find it so amusing."

"It's because he likes you," she said.

I couldn't help the ensuing shudder. That was the last thing I needed. "I'd best get moving. If your father gets home before we do, please warn him about our guest."

"Where's the fun in that?" Dai laughed.

I prayed the popinjay's ways weren't contagious. "He's going to be in shock as it is."

"Oh, all right," she said. "I'll alert him. I promise."

Feeling slightly reassured, I headed for the back of the house. Prince eagerly followed me outside, his gaze hopeful. I went ahead and served him his supper early. "Don't complain if you get hungry later."

An eager bark assured me it would not be a problem, but I knew better. He'd ply his wiles on the women of the household, who, unlike me, denied him nothing.

Then I had no choice but to get underway.

CHAPTER 14



Pierce's repair shop of choice was the Day & Night Garage. Their byline was 'We Never Sleep.' From the name alone, it didn't surprise me this was his favored spot.

As promised, Trevor had called ahead, and the owner, Frank Esmond, was waiting for us when we arrived. The three-bay building was well maintained, the men's green uniforms crisp and clean. He greeted both of us warmly, as if we'd known each other for years.

"Just leave her in our care, Mr. Haskin," Esmond said. "We'll have her looking good as new in a couple of days. We'll call you when she's ready."

I should have expected that the repairs wouldn't happen in less than a day, but it still caught me by surprise. There was no way the Wus would miss the automobile's absence. Questions would be asked. "Thank you, Mr. Esmond."

Something of my dilemma must have shown on my face because Pierce jabbed me lightly with his elbow and said, "We need her back as soon as you can manage, Frank. There's a bonus for you and the guys if you pull it off."

The owner gave a hearty laugh. "You always give us a challenge, Truman. I'll see what we can do."

Despite the garage owner's amused assurance, I knew I'd do best not to count on it. If the Wus noticed the Ford's absence, I'd need to come up with a ready excuse. Telling them that Carmichael was back on the warpath would create no end of trouble. Having to put up with Pierce for dinner would already tax the household's tranquility more than enough.

The only positive note of the day was the opportunity to ride in the Rolls Royce Phantom convertible. I slipped inside, immediately noticing the more comfortable seat of the larger automobile. The six-cylinder engine roared, more powerful than the Ford's smaller motor. After several seconds, the engine quieted down into a steady cacophony of moving pistons. Pierce flashed me a wide smile and put the car in gear.

It was rather novel for me to be driven about, especially in such a fine machine. With the windows partially rolled down, it was quite pleasurable.

I should have known it wouldn't last.

"So, Jackie, give me the scoop on Dai's family. Any taboo subjects?" Pierce asked.

After a moment's consideration, I realized it might be in the family's best interests to go ahead and tackle his question. "There are a few," I said. "First, it would behoove you not to mention any real details about how the two of you met. Or mentioning how we stuck our noses where her parents believe their sheltered, innocent daughter does not belong. Dai is precious to all of us. But they are especially protective of her."

"So the blind daughter wants her parents kept in the dark?" Pierce laughed.

"There's nothing amusing about it," I said. "Your mere existence has placed the family at odds with each other. So the less chaos you cause, the better." The cad needed to take this seriously. I just didn't know how to force him in that direction, aside from physically pounding it into him, which would inevitably backfire on me.

Pierce's expression turned surprisingly serious. "What do

you mean by that, exactly? How did I put the Wus at odds?"

I sighed, not sure if explaining this would make things better or worse. "The thought of Dai having a man in her life has created some strain between her parents."

"Aren't you also 'a man in her life'?" He threw me a sideways glance.

"I'm her brother, part of the family. I have no designs on her virtue, unlike others I could name." I stared pointedly at him. I didn't want him to hold any doubts as to whom I meant.

The cad had the audacity to laugh. "You are such a *gas*!"

I noticed he made no effort to deny my accusation.

"Anything else I should know?" he prompted.

"Mrs. Vega may seem to be a servant, but never treat her as such," I said. "She's as much a part of the family as I am, and she eats with us. Regardless of where we hail from, we're all equal. So, if you've picked up any of your family's beliefs, it would be in your best interest to remember that. Any offenses will *not* be taken lightly." While I might like nothing better than for the popinjay to embarrass himself in front of the others, it wouldn't be fair to subject them to his blunders and risk them getting their feelings hurt. Perhaps his asking about any possible taboos was a proper move, after all.

Not that I would ever tell him that.

Pierce nodded. "Good to know. Thanks."

He said nothing else, so I found myself curious about how closely his beliefs mirrored his mother's. His friendly manner with Trevor wasn't an accurate gauge, given that the butler was white. His pursuit of Dai might have been nothing more than him reaching for the exotic, not actually thinking of her as an equal. His solicitous attitude after his mother's ambush might also not have been entirely pure.

Thankfully, he asked no more questions.

Since the Ford was at the shop, I had Pierce park the Phantom in the back, placing it out of view of our neighbors. The family's second automobile was already parked there, warning me that Lien and Tye were home. I truly hoped Dai had forewarned her father of Pierce's impending presence at

THE JOY OF MURDER

dinner. With any luck, they hadn't waited for us—but I knew the chances of that were slim.

I steeled myself as I led the way inside.

CHAPTER 15



The kitchen was packed, the entire household—except for Tye—ensconced there except for Tye, and lying in wait for our arrival. At a glance, I could tell they'd all spruced up for dinner with our guest—even Prince, who was wearing a bowtie, of all things. They hadn't gone quite so far as to don decked-out evening dresses, but they came close. Rosa and Lien wore dark, muted colors of russet and burgundy, making Dai's long, sheer net lilac gown almost glow in comparison. No trace of bows or lace was in sight to imply she was anything but a grown young woman.

The dragon's face flushed with elation. "Mr. Pierce, it is lovely to have you here. I'm so glad you're finally able to join us for dinner." She gave him a pleased smile. "Do come to the dining room after you've refreshed yourself after the drive. Our meals are rather casual. I hope that's all right?"

I could feel Pierce's answering neon smile beside me. "Perfectly delightful, Mrs. Wu. Thank you for having me."

The dragon's sharp attention turned in my direction. "Jacques, would you mind letting Mr. Wu know when you're both ready? He's catching up on some paperwork in his study." The bright gleam in her eyes told me she was well aware he was hiding there, and that I was to drag him to his fate—bodily, if necessary.

"Yes, of course."

Within a couple of minutes, Pierce and I were put back to rights. I had him tag along when I went to retrieve Dai's father, figuring a private introduction might make things easier for Tye. The study door was closed, so I knocked before going in.

Tye was bent over his desk, his attention stubbornly fixed on the papers before him. Before I could say anything, the popinjay pushed past me.

"Mr. Wu, it is such an honor to finally meet you," Pierce said. "My name is Truman Pierce." He bowed low.

Tye was left with no alternative but to respond or risk appearing rude, which as the head of the household, he could not afford. "Mr. Pierce, welcome to my humble home." He stood and gave our unwanted guest a half bow in return. I noticed that he, too, had dressed up a bit for the occasion, thought I doubted it had been by choice.

Pierce straightened and flashed one of his dazzling smiles. "Thank you so much for having me, sir. I apologize that I've not been able to come before now."

In response, Dai's father mumbled something neither of us could hear. Then he gave a small cough and said more clearly. "Yes, but here you are at last." His accent was more pronounced than usual, a sure sign of his distress at having to finally meet the man possibly vying for his daughter's affections. Still, he held out his hand for Pierce to shake.

"I was very impressed by your White Laundry," Pierce said. "Your success does you great credit, sir."

The smooth-tongued devil—as if he'd seen anything but the stairs and conference room the one time he visited! But Pierce

would have to do better than that to get in Tye's good graces. Dai's father had been flattered and wooed by experts back in China, and hadn't fallen for their tricks. The popinjay had much to learn.

"Shall we head off to dinner?" I asked. "The ladies are waiting."

Tye gave a barely perceptible nod, his eyes veiled behind his glasses. The three of us made our way to the dining room.

A mauve tablecloth had been placed on the walnut dining table. Walnut-colored placemats nestled the fine porcelain plates—the ones the family used only on special occasions. This was the first time we'd had an outside guest for dinner.

Tye indicated Pierce should sit to his left, giving him the place of honor as our guest. Dai sat on his right, across from Pierce. I settled in next to Dai, and Rosa sat across from me, with Lien seated at the table's other end. Prince perched beside Dai's chair, his senses primed for any tidbits that might come his way.

Rosa served the *sopa de elote*, side dishes of buttered bread, and sliced avocados already adorning the table.

I wasn't worried about Pierce's table manners, but I had concerns about his American palate and how diverse it might or might not be. I watched him take a tentative spoonful. A smile grew on his face. "Mrs. Vega, this is delicious!"

That was a given, but it was good to see her efforts appreciated. Rosa blushed like a schoolgirl.

To my surprise, Pierce proved an able dinner companion, keeping the conversation light and steering clear of any explosive topics. Dai chimed in on occasion. Tye followed everything they said back and forth as if he were a judge watching a tennis match, and loath to miss anything happening between them. Pierce drew Lien and Rosa into different parts of the conversation, showing he possessed some well-honed social skills.

The popinjay added weight to his prior statement about the *sopa de elote* by asking for a second bowl. He even imitated our habit of adding a pinch of salt to the avocado and dipping the

buttered bread in the chowder.

Dai's father seemed to relax bit by bit as Pierce failed to grow to demonic size, grab his daughter by the waist, give a mighty leap, and disappear with her into the night.

Once everyone had their fill, Rosa returned to the kitchen to bring out dessert. It was a *pastel de tres leches* with strawberries—a sponge-like cake soaked in a mixture of three kinds of milk. It was a favorite for parties and celebrations in the Mexican States. Since the milk mixture had to soak in for at least an hour after the cake was made, she couldn't have whipped it up after we left. Was there something to celebrate I didn't know about? Or had our note made her expect a possible guest? If not, it was a marvelous coincidence. Tye always enjoyed this dessert a lot, so this would take away a little of the sting of Dai having a gentleman caller at dinner.

"Mrs. Vega, your food is truly delicious. Thank you so much for inviting me." Pierce flashed her a smile.

From the bit of color I saw rising again in Rosa's cheeks, it appeared Pierce had utterly won her over, despite the behavior of his relatives. That was the last thing we needed, but I couldn't see a way to derail it. So I opted for a second piece of cake to drown my irritation with.

"Jacques, Rosa mentioned you had to take the Ford to the shop?" Lien asked.

I choked on my bite of cake. I had forgotten all about that. But as I reached for a glass of water, Dai answered for me.

"We had the misfortune of going past a construction site," Dai said. "We picked up a flat tire, and the side panel got scratched."

I almost gagged again as Pierce jumped in. "It was my fault they went by there, so I'll be paying for the damage. Until they get the car back, though, I'm more than happy to drive them around to anywhere they might need to go."

The opportunist—had he no *shame*? "We're much too far out of your way to impose," I said. "A taxicab will serve our needs nicely." I wish I'd thought of that sooner.

Tye surprised me by also joining the fray. "We do have

another car. Jacques can drive me to the laundry and then use it for whatever is needed."

"*Qinai de*, it would be impolite of us not to accept his offer, don't you think?" Lien asked. The dragon's eyes were flashing. "He admitted his part in the situation, so shouldn't we give him the chance to make amends?"

Despite the comments being phrased as questions, they were anything but. The relaxed atmosphere that had slowly grown during dinner was quickly evaporating—opposing pressures building from both ends of the table. From the moment the popinjay had entered our lives, he'd done nothing but disrupt the family's equilibrium.

Pierce stood. "Forgive me, but it's later than I thought, and I need to head back," he said. "Thank you for your marvelous hospitality."

I stood as well. "I'll see you out."

Prince shot out of the dining room ahead of us, clearly sensing the maelstrom that was developing and wanting nothing to do with it. Only Dai's and Rosa's presence had kept the pot from boiling over. With any luck, Pierce's departure would keep things from escalating further.

As I handed Pierce his hat and opened the kitchen's back door, he sent me a sheepish look.

"You weren't kidding about them being at odds with each other, were you?"

How could he have believed I wasn't serious about this? "No. I was not 'kidding,' as you put it. So I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't make matters worse with any more suggestions."

Pierce sighed deeply. "I swear that was not my intention at all. Causing trouble for Dai is the last thing I want."

Yet somehow he seemed to do nothing *but* that. Still, I held my tongue.

"Do call me and let me know if I can do anything at all—or if you have updates on my mother, please?"

I nodded, reminding myself again there were bigger problems to take care of.

CHAPTER 16



I left the back door open long enough to make sure Pierce went on his way and for Prince to do his doggie business. When I closed it, it was to find Rosa returning to the kitchen with a stack of plates and a troubled look on her face.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. They switched to Mandarin." She put the dishes in the sink and turned on the water. "Dai is still there, so they won't talk about things openly or get too out of hand, but..." She shook her head again.

In their attempts to insulate their daughter, I was sure they wouldn't directly broach what was bothering them. With any luck, the black jade she'd been named after would help ground them and keep them calm.

Just then, Dai's unhappy voice echoed all the way back to the kitchen. "Honestly! I can't believe you two. It was only *dinner!*"

Rosa and I rushed to the kitchen entrance in time to see Dai huff out of the dining room and stomp loudly upstairs. Rarely had I seen her this upset, and the fact that she let her parents

know about it spoke volumes. So much for the calming effects of black jade.

As the door to her bedroom slammed shut, both Lien and Tye also came out sporting identical shocked expressions and stared blinking up the stairs.

"I'll check on her," I said. The two of them glanced at each other, then nodded at me to go ahead. I felt their concerned stares follow me all the way up. Prince rushed to beat me upstairs.

Unlike the house's first floor, which was as American as any other, the living space on the second showcased their origin country of China. At the top of the stairs, the circular entry, or moon gate, heralded the boundaries of the family's inner sanctum, a place of safety and peace. The walls here were white, imitating the walls surrounding old-fashioned Chinese homes. In addition, some well-placed potted plants created the illusion of a private garden—making it a traditional residence in spirit, despite being nestled on the second floor of a prairie-style home.

I bowed before the red cherry wood table at one end of the hall, paying my respects to the Wus' ancestors before strolling down to Dai's room. Knocking on the door, I waited for a couple of seconds, then opened it. "Dai? It's Jacques."

I spotted her in her Chinese canopy bed, stretched on her stomach, her face buried in one of her pillows and kicking softly with her feet.

"Dai, are you all right?" This wasn't like her.

She went limp on the bed and turned toward me. "I'm fine. Just a little frustrated. It's all so silly!"

Prince jumped up on the raised bed and licked Dai's cheek. She scratched him behind the ear and gave a soft sigh. "It was only *dinner*. Bad enough they tried to make a huge production of it, but then to argue about Truman while trying to hide it at the same time? How ridiculous! As if we didn't have more serious matters to worry about." She punched her pillow for emphasis.

"That may be so, but they don't know that," I said. "And to

them, this *is* a big deal. You're their only child, after all."

Dai sighed, her fingers rubbing Prince's belly as he wriggled with pleasure on his back. "Still, they hardly ever argue, and they were losing their tempers over nothing."

It was strange that while she could 'see' so many things, understanding what drove her parents on this was beyond her. "Well, if it's any consolation, you made them forget all about it when you stormed out. They looked pretty disturbed by it."

A hint of dimples came and went. "Good. Serves them right." Her expression became troubled, as if questioning her own words. "I'll make sure to apologize to them later."

"Maybe turning in early wouldn't be a bad idea?" I suggested. "The day has been full of shocks and rampant emotion. I'm exhausted. So you're doubtless not faring much better." Dealing with the popinjay even briefly sapped me of energy, plus he'd been with us for hours. Add in his mother's problem, visiting the county jail, and encountering Carmichael, and I was running on fumes.

She nodded. "You're probably right. Tomorrow is going to be another full day."

I wasn't looking forward to it. From the way Dai doubled her efforts in rubbing Prince's belly, however, she most likely felt the total opposite.

"See you in the morning, Jacques."

"Goodnight." I took my leave of her and returned downstairs.

Her parents were still waiting where I'd left them, the worry etched on their faces as prominently as before.

"All is well," I said.

Their relief at the news was immediate, their expressions clearing somewhat. "This was so unlike her," Lien said.

Tye nodded emphatically. "I agree."

They both stared pointedly at me, expecting some sort of explanation. I needed to handle this as carefully as if I were walking on eggshells. "It hasn't escaped her that ever since she became acquainted with Truman, it's put something of a strain on your relationship."

Dai's parents glanced at one another, then looked away.

I took a deep breath before pushing on. "But I assure you, that is all they are at the moment—just *friends*." There was no need for me to mention that I was sure Pierce would love for them to become more than that. Things were complicated enough as they stood.

Tye looked even more relieved, but the dragon's expression appeared mixed.

"As her brother, it is your duty to let us know if you notice any changes," she said. "We don't want to jinx this for her inadvertently, but we need to remain informed." Her stern gaze promised there'd be hell to pay if I didn't.

"Of course." I retreated to the safety of the kitchen before they came up with any more questions or requests.

Rosa was still there and had already started cleaning the dishes. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Everything's fine." I took off my dinner jacket and rolled up the sleeves of Truman's silk shirt to keep it out of the dishwasher. "Thank you for starting those."

"My pleasure." She leaned toward me and lowered her voice. "I was too curious to leave."

I gave a soft chuckle, not at all surprised by this. "Hopefully, we won't have to go through this again any time soon."

"At least not until we've had Dr. Campbell over as well," Rosa said.

While I was not averse to having the doctor as a dinner guest, I didn't understand why she'd brought it up—and I especially wondered why she'd smiled at me as she said it. Unfortunately, before I could work up the gumption to ask what that was about, Rosa took her leave.

CHAPTER 17



My alarm brought me awake, and I rose to get ready for the day. I'd learned my lesson from our last 'adventure' and locked my door when I turned in for the night in case Dai woke earlier than was her habit. Waking to find her in my room—and running the risk of the dragon discovering her and jumping to conclusions—was more than I wanted to face first thing in the morning.

As I soon discovered, my decision to take precautions turned out to be a good idea. I found Dai already sitting at the kitchen table when I came out. She sent a small pout my way.

"You locked your door," she said. "Really, Jacques, was that truly necessary?" Prince gave a soft bark as if seconding the question. The scamp.

"Yes, and you know exactly why," I said.

The pout changed to a devilish grin. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course not." I resisted rolling my eyes and put the kettle on the stove. "You could have slept in this morning. I would

have taken them to the office and then come back for you. Our appointment with Maginnis isn't until ten."

She shrugged. "I went to bed early. Besides, it's a waste of time and resources for you to drive back and forth if there's no genuine need for it."

I couldn't argue with her logic. While the *congee* heated on the stove, I served the mutt his breakfast and let him do his business. By the time I finished frying some crullers, the rest of the family had joined us for the morning meal.

"Good morning, *Mǔqín*. Good morning, *Fùqín*," Dai said and gave them a big smile.

Her parents' surprise at seeing her already up and dressed for the day went unstated as they took their seats. Though this had happened before during the time of the Laura Cooper case, Dai usually slept in as long as we'd let her, not typically rising on her own. Since Tye and Lien still knew nothing about that affair or our fresh troubles, they were surely stumped about what might be causing it. "Good morning."

Dai stood up and bowed toward them. "I wanted to apologize to you for my disrespectful behavior last night. I hope I didn't cause you too much distress." It was something of a masterstroke from Dai. By apologizing, she'd implied that was the reason for why she was up early—though, in truth, it had little to do with that.

"Daiyu, it was our fault, not yours," her mother said quickly. "I'm sorry if we inadvertently made things difficult for your friend."

She shook her head. "I'm sure everything is fine. But I'll ask for forgiveness on your behalf next time I see him, if you like." A small, impish smile came and left her face.

Both parents dropped the subject then and there—a wise decision on their part.

Once we finished breakfast, everyone got ready, and the family piled into the second Ford to head to White Laundry. It'd been a while since we had all ridden together, so the drive felt a little nostalgic. It did a lot to equalize the disrupted family energies.

THE JOY OF MURDER

The Dallas-Oak Cliff viaduct spanned the Trinity River, directly connecting Oak Cliff to Dallas and making the drive from one to the other a lot faster than before. It had once been touted as the longest concrete bridge in the world. When viewed from afar, its beautiful supporting arches were indeed a sight to behold.

When we arrived at the laundry, I double-checked what time we needed to return to pick up Dai's parents later in the day. Before getting back on the road again, I took a few minutes to fill out a ticket to get the popinjay's silk shirt laundered. The sooner I returned it to him, the better, but cleaning it first was the priority.

"We have a little time before our meeting with Maginnis," Dai said, once more safely tucked away in the Ford's backseat with Prince lolling at her side. "Do you think we might squeeze in a quick visit with Aiden at the hospital? I've something I've been meaning to give her, and this might be my best chance before we get too embroiled in the present matter. Maybe she can even come with us to see Maginnis."

It wasn't a bad idea, but I wondered what it could be that Dai wanted to give her. She'd not mentioned having anything for her before. "I believe so. The hospital is close to the Thompson and Knight offices, so we should have time for a quick stop."

Parking before the now familiar E-shaped white building, I helped Dai out of the car and cracked the windows for Prince. Though he typically accompanied us to most places, the hospital with its myriad smells might prove too tempting to our curious canine. Although we did sneak him in as extra muscle at the culmination of the Laura Cooper situation, I didn't want to inadvertently get Aiden in trouble with Dr. Stewart, the hospital's chief of staff and resident bully.

When we arrived, Dai put on her dark teashade glasses, which served to hide both her nationality and her blindness.

I contacted Aiden using the courtesy phone at reception, and she agreed to meet us down at the morgue. We waited for her in the tiny office area that separated the morgue's entrance

and the actual room where the bodies were kept and the autopsies took place. Mist escaped from the bottom of the double doors as if warning those who might venture within that they would be entering the underworld and should think twice before daring to intrude.

When Aiden entered and caught sight of us, her rugged face transformed as a broad smile graced her features at catching sight of us. "Good morning."

"Good morning," Dai said. My own greeting was not far behind. "Thank you for seeing us."

"I'm always happy to see you, both of you." Her cheeks were now brushed with a bit of pink.

"Any updates on Mrs. Fuentes?" Dai asked.

Aiden nodded. "I finished my inspection late yesterday. Let me get the paperwork." She walked over to a couple of file cabinets set against the wall. "Mrs. Fuente's death was most definitely not an accident. The amount of force required to cause the wound is greater than what you'd see if she simply fell and hit her head." She brought the papers over and placed them on the desk. "The head injury appears to have been caused by a heavy object with a cornered edge."

She pulled an x-ray from the file and held it up toward the light for me to look at. The area of damage looked like a dropped plate; the bone cracked in a spiderweb pattern with a triangular hole in the center. "With the resulting intracranial hemorrhage and pressure, and the membrane ruptures, she died soon after the attack."

What a ghastly way to die. But it brought up another question. "Is it all right for us to be looking at this?"

"I checked with Constable Higgins yesterday," Aiden said, her face serious. "As long as you're supervised and don't leave with any of the original paperwork, there are no legal statutes to prevent others from seeing the information." Her expression turned sheepish. "I've never had anyone ask before, so I wanted to be sure it was okay."

"That was quite sensible of you," Dai said. "Thank you for looking into it. Though I hadn't expected we would ever need

to look at such things, it's good to know where we stand, especially now that it's become necessary.

"Did you discover any anomalies at all?"

Aiden frowned. "Her bloodwork was clean, and I didn't find any other injuries. Lividity shows she was on her back after the incident, though from the location and angle of the head trauma, I would expect her to have fallen face-down. So there's a high likelihood the body was moved not long after death. I haven't seen the crime scene photos yet to make sure everything matches."

Dai tilted her head to the side. "That reminds me—would you like to come with us to the Thompson and Knight offices? Mr. Maginnis should have copies of the photographs by now and, hopefully, also a copy of the police report. I'd love to get your insights."

"Since it pertains to the case, it should be all right," Aiden said. "I can bring him a duplicate of the report for his files. But I'll need to get my things."

"Speaking of that"—Dai's impish smile was back—"I have a gift for you."

Aiden looked startled. "For me?"

"I meant to offer them to you sooner." Dai opened her clutch. I was rather curious about what she was going to give Aiden and why she'd not had me get it for her.

She removed an envelope and held it out for the doctor to take.

"It's not much," Dai said. "Just some photos my father took when we got home from Truman's party. I thought you might like a copy of some of them. There's one with me and Jacques, one with just me, and one with only him."

I sneaked a peek as Aiden took them out of the envelope. Dai looked resplendent in her red silk *cheongsam* with its black lace overlay. It left no doubts whatsoever as to her nationality—Dai's subtle attempt to shock the young Dallas elites in the popinjay's quickly-put together soiree at the Dallas Country Club. Pierce had set it up at Dai's request to give us a chance to question the suspects in Laura Cooper's murder. It

was also the night our troubles with Carmichael had begun. That had been one chaos-filled evening.

Photographing Dai was one of her father's few passions, and he'd gone through multiple rolls to capture her likeness. It had been Dai who'd demanded her father take a picture of me alone. I hadn't thought it necessary, but she'd insisted. Since she was blind, I wasn't sure what good it would do her. Was giving a copy to Dr. Campbell her aim all along? I had to admit, I didn't look terrible in the double-breasted black dinner jacket and bow tie, but why Dai thought Aiden might want a duplicate was beyond me. Yet the doctor seemed to study it overlong. How odd.

"I do wish we'd thought of having your photograph taken, Aiden," Dai said. "By Jacques' description of your dress, it was lovely. A photo would have made for a nice keepsake, especially since you mentioned this was your first time at such an event."

Aiden glanced away, her cheeks coloring a deep crimson. "Well, my sisters..." She swallowed hard, then tried again: "My sisters took pictures before I left." The doctor's entire face turned red at the admission. "If you... if you really want a copy, I can probably get you one."

Her ice-blue gaze darted between me and Dai, as if checking to make sure we weren't offended at the suggestion. Whyever would she think such a thing? "We'd be honored to have it," I said.

"Well stated, Jacques!" Dai grinned with evident pleasure.

Aiden stared at the floor, her face turning even redder, something I would not have thought possible. "I, um, I'll see what I can do. I'll meet you outside."

Before we could say anything else, she rushed out the door.

"Did you happen to notice if Aiden lingered over any photo in particular?" Dai asked in a teasing tone.

I had, but what difference did that make? "Not really." The lie slipped out before I could stop myself, and my knee-jerk response confused me more than her actual question.

"Well, if she gets a copy, you'll keep it for me, won't you?"

THE JOY OF MURDER

"I suppose I could do that," I answered. It almost seemed as if she'd asked for the photograph for me. But whatever for? Still, it would make a delightful addition to my album. I doubted I'd have occasion to see Aiden that dolled up again anytime soon.

CHAPTER 18



Returning to our car, we found Aiden had already beaten us there and was tickling Prince behind the ear by sticking her fingers through the partially opened windows. A bit of red still filled her cheeks, and she didn't look at us directly as we all settled inside the Ford.

We made good time to the Thompson and Knight offices and were soon seated in the same conference room we'd met at before.

"Good morning, Mr. Maginnis," Dai said. "Let me introduce you to Dr. Aiden Campbell. She's the pathologist assigned to the case. I thought she might be able to provide some invaluable insight." She half-turned toward the doctor. "Aiden, this is Leo Maginnis; he's in charge of Mrs. Pierce's defense."

"A pleasure, Dr. Campbell," the lawyer said. Though he was the same height as Aiden, her greater girth and larger hands made him seem almost child-sized when they shook hands.

"I brought a copy of the autopsy report for your files." She handed over a labeled file folder.

"Thank you. I appreciate that." He added the paperwork to his growing stack. "Feel free to sit wherever you like."

I settled Dai in the seat closest to Maginnis, and Prince jumped up on her lap to better view the proceedings. After pulling out a chair for Dr. Campbell, I took the chair on the other side of the table.

The lawyer remained standing. "I've spoken to the DA's office. They plan to charge 'Miss Crawford' later this afternoon. Only after it's official will they schedule the arraignment."

Though I'd expected they would, it was still a shock to hear it. I didn't even *like* the woman and it hit hard; how much worse would it be for Pierce when we told him?

"I pushed, so I was able to get copies of the crime scene photos early." He opened a folder and set four large photographs on the table.

Having steeled myself for some rather grisly images, I was astonished to find they were quite the opposite. Mrs. Fuentes' body lay on a striped rectangular floor rug. Her hands were placed one on top of the other and a rosary was wrapped around one of them, as if she were in the midst of prayer or resting. Her dress was on straight and looked clean. Her eyes were closed. If someone didn't know any better, they might think the pictures had been taken when she was sleeping.

The earring implicating Mrs. Pierce lay near Mrs. Fuentes' feet. Another photograph showed the newspaper article with its telltale picture sitting in a corner, as if blown there by a breeze.

I quickly filled Dai in on what I saw.

"The body was definitely moved," Aiden said. She leaned over the photographs as if afraid of missing something. "There's no blood anywhere that I can see, and head wounds are notorious bleeders."

Dai tilted her head slightly. "From Jacques' description, it seems someone went to some trouble to remove the appearance of the violence done to Mrs. Fuentes. The question then becomes whether the scene was staged as an attempt to

rectify an error, as an apology for what happened, or just as a means to confuse the police and point blame in Mrs. Pierce's direction."

Maginnis nodded. "I've made a note to ask if they've searched for the actual location of the murder. If it was nearby, law enforcement should be able to locate it. But if she was killed some distance away and was then brought back to her house, they might not find it at all."

"Even so, it can be proven that she wasn't murdered in her home and the body was tampered with—that should give weight to the assertion that Mrs. Pierce is being set up," Dai mused. "That said, however, why would the district attorney decide to go ahead and charge her?"

That was an excellent question. We all turned to Maginnis for an answer.

"I admit, I was quite surprised they went through with it as well," he answered. "Once we've entered a plea of 'not guilty' at the arraignment, I will file a motion to dismiss due to lack of evidence. Assuming they haven't found anything else, I doubt the case will go to trial. But the judge doesn't need to rule on the proposal for up to two weeks." He shook his head. "I don't see what benefit is being gained by charging her at all."

Dai frowned. "Time perhaps?" She scratched Prince under the chin. His curved tail wagged in rapture.

"But time for what?" I asked.

"That *is* the question, isn't it?" Dai said, her frown growing more pronounced. "Aiden, will the body be released today?"

"Yes, it should be," she said. "All the paperwork is complete. It's my understanding Mrs. Fuentes has no living relatives, so the priest of the local church requested custody of it."



We left the law office with Maginnis' assurances that he'd let us know how Mrs. Pierce was faring, and pass on any other information supplied to him. Dropping Aiden back at the hospital, we promised to keep her in the loop on developments. We rode home in silence. Dai was deep in her thoughts, and I was mired with dread as to what I needed to do next. I wasn't looking forward to making that call at all.

Once the Ford was safely tucked away behind the house, I opened Dai's door to help her from the car. Prince bounced out of the car and rushed toward the grass to do his business and verify no new smells had invaded his territory. Dai exited the vehicle with a lot less exuberance than Prince. She squeezed my hand as she came out.

"I can be the one to make the call, you know, Jacques," she said. "It doesn't have to be you."

Warmth for her filled my heart to overflowing. I squeezed her hand in return. "No. It'll be better if it comes from me. Less of a chance he'll embarrass himself."

"If you're sure..."

"I am." I took a deep breath, letting the sweet scent of the rose-of-Sharon blossoms ease my inner self.

Prince strutted back to us, his domain deemed secure. We stepped inside.

Leaving Dai and the mutt to their own devices, I moved to the front of the house and checked outside to be sure Pierce wasn't out there repeating his error of the day before. Finding the curb empty, I then made my way to Tye's study to call and update the popinjay on the latest developments.

"Pierce residence, may I help you?" Trevor's even voice tickled my ear.

"Greetings, Trevor," I said. "Is Truman available?"

As the butler hesitated, I thought I heard raised voices in the background. They were too indistinct to make anything out, though.

"I'm sorry to say he is occupied at the moment and can't be disturbed," he said. "If it concerns Mrs. Pierce, I am more than happy to pass the message along or have him call you when

he's available."

My gut reaction was to ask to have him telephone me once he was free. But then it occurred to me the butler might be as concerned as to his employer's status as her son—I would have been. "Let him know that the DA's office plans to charge Mrs. Pierce this afternoon. There should be an arraignment scheduled after that, to occur in two or three days' time." I quickly passed on the other details. As I spoke, the angry voices in the background continued rising in volume. I was terribly curious as to what that was about, but it would have been egregiously rude to inquire about it.

"Thank you for the update, Mr. Haskin," Trevor said. "I will let him know as soon as I am able. Good day." The butler hung up before I could say anything else.

I placed the receiver back in its cradle and turned around, only to spot Dai standing in the doorway. "How did it go?" she asked.

"I didn't get to talk to him, but I left the information with Trevor." I almost said nothing more, but I knew sooner or later Dai would find out anyway. "I think there was an altercation in progress at the Pierce household."

"Altercation?" Dai's brow rose in surprise.

"I could hear yelling in the background." I would have assumed it to be Carmichael having another tantrum, except neither of the voices was female. "Perhaps Pierce's father returned home?"

"I see," Dai said. "Yes, I am sure Truman would have some choice words for him about how some of this occurred. But it might also be due to the way Truman treated Linda and her assertion about being told he was ready to set a wedding date."

I'd forgotten about that last bit of business. That Pierce had no interest in marrying Linda was crystal clear. Yet from her assertions, his father had communicated the popinjay's willingness to do so. The idea Mr. Pierce might use his son as some sort of bargaining chip for favors was a rather sobering thought.

CHAPTER 19



With no other pressing matters for the moment, I made us some lunch, then went about some of my household chores. Maginnis called around midafternoon to inform us Mrs. Pierce had been formally charged and the arraignment set for Monday.

"Is it me, or does it appear that each step keeps getting pushed out as far as they are legally able?" Dai asked. "If for some reason they don't grant Maginnis' motion to dismiss at the arraignment, I am fairly certain the trial won't be scheduled until the maximum of sixty days."

My stomach churned thinking about Mrs. Pierce being forced to stay at the High Five for two months, despite her being innocent. Moreover, when I'd asked about how she was faring during the call, Maginnis' answer had been non-committal. That alone spoke volumes.

Dai grew unusually restless and gravitated from room to room, Prince at her heels. I was putting away the dried dishes from lunch when Rosa arrived. She'd not yet fully come in before Dai popped into the room.

"*Buenas tardes*, everyone," Rosa said. She set down her bag and then untied the scarf holding her straw hat on her head. She used the hat to fan her flushed face. "It's *muy caliente* out there today."

I grabbed a glass and, after raiding the icebox, quickly served her some *agua fresca* to help cool her down.

"*Muchas gracias*, Jacques." She sat down at the kitchen table with a sigh.

"If you'd called, I would have come to pick you up," I said. Heat-stroke was a serious matter during the late summer months in Texas. It was bad enough Piece had stupidly left himself susceptible, but Rosa being affected would be much more tragic.

"Oh, I'm all right," she said. "But, yes, if it's this hot tomorrow, I may take you up on that. There are no clouds today, so that didn't help matters."

"Maybe you should lie down for a bit?" Dai suggested. Prince licked Rosa's hand.

She laughed. "I'm fine, *mi amor*. Don't worry about me. I'll be good as new in a minute or two." Her cheeks looked less flushed already, so she was probably right.

"I'll help you with dinner," I volunteered, "at least until I need to leave to pick up the Wus."

She flashed me a smile. "I'd already decided we needed some easy and cool recipes for today, but I may take you up on that. One thing you can do for me, though, is to bring in the small watermelon I left in the bicycle's basket. One of the dishes we're having tonight is watermelon gazpacho."

That sounded amazing. If there was one thing you could say about the Wu household, it was that they served a wide diversity of foods for their table—recipes from all over the world. Lien and Rosa truly enjoyed cooking new things. I looked forward to seeing what else she planned for tonight's fare.

I returned from retrieving said watermelon, and expected to find the two women chatting. However, I found Rosa staring at Dai with a surprised expression instead.

"*Preciosa*, I wouldn't mind, but I am not sure Lien would approve." She took Dai's hand between her own.

"Death is something that will come to all of us eventually," Dai said. "And I am an adult and capable of making my own decisions. Plus, Mother doesn't have to know."

I set the watermelon in the sink, watching the two of them out of the corner of my eye. I had a feeling I knew what this was about, and didn't want to get in the middle of it. Our friend frowned, her expression troubled.

"Rosa, I need to be there," Dai insisted. "And it would make things a lot easier if you came with us. But I won't tell you why, so you don't have to lie to Mother if she finds out about it. You'll be able to say I badgered you into it, but that you have no idea why I wanted to be there. She's well aware of how stubborn I can be when I put my mind to it." Dai gave her an mischievous grin.

Yes, we were *all* quite aware of that. However, the apple didn't fall far from the tree—like mother, like daughter. Both were veritable forces of nature that could not be denied. I truly hoped whatever she was arranging wouldn't get back to Lien. Rosa might plead ignorance, but the dragon would accept no such excuse from me.

"Oh, all right," Rosa said. "As if I could ever say no to you." She flashed her a smile.

"I do appreciate it." Dai squeezed Rosa's hand. "Jacques should be back from taking my parents to their destinations tomorrow by around nine. So if you would meet us here by then, we can make it to the vigil while it's still relatively cool."



I helped start what preparations I could for dinner before departing to pick up the Wus at the laundry. As well as the watermelon gazpacho, Rosa concocted a green salad with

lettuce, spinach, radishes, and garbanzo beans covered with a simple vinaigrette. There was also an olive macaroni salad and a tofu salad with sesame dressing. Tonight, we would travel the world without ever leaving the dining room table.

The rest of the evening passed amicably enough, the family gathering in the living room to listen to several popular radio programs. I joined them there once I'd taken care of the dishes.

There was still no mention of the murder on the front page of the *Dallas Morning News* or the *Dallas Times Herald*. I finally located a small article about it in one of the back pages, but aside from naming the victim, it said little else.

As everyone prepared to turn in for the night, I realized we'd never heard from Pierce either in person or by telephone. After his frantic worry over the last two days, I found the silence a little disturbing. Hopefully, nothing untoward had come from the raised voices I overheard that afternoon.

CHAPTER 20



El Barrio, also known as Little Mexico, was the largest of six areas in Dallas that were populated mainly by Spanish-speaking people. It had previously been a Jewish community, but as those residents became more affluent and settled in other sections of the city—along with laws put in effect to dissuade certain types of businesses from taking over—it had become a home to many of those fleeing the Mexican Revolution.

"The community here is strong. They keep our traditions alive and well," Rosa said. "But it's very crowded. Most don't get a choice on where they can go live here in the city—so you may be a little surprised when you see it." She sighed. "We have so much we could contribute to Dallas, but they make it so difficult for us to do so."

Once we passed Pike Park, the surrounding area became more impoverished. Paved roads turned to packed dirt streets. Electric and telephone poles shrank in frequency. The homes grew smaller and more crowded, every spot of open land taken up by houses or shacks, with some better built than others. From what Rosa told us, most of the houses were rented rather

than owned, so those living in them had no real way to improve them.

We passed by Our Lady of Guadalupe Church on Harwood, a wooden structure with a steeple housing a belfry. The vigil would not be held there, despite the priest having taken charge of the corpse, but at Mrs. Fuente's home. The police were apparently done with their investigations there.

Once the two days of the wake were over, the body would be moved to the church for the Mass, then transported to the burial site for the final ceremony and interment. Visitors would pay their respects for nine days after the internment to pray for Mrs. Fuentes to have a safe journey to her new life in Heaven.

Mrs. Fuentes' home sat on the outskirts of Little Mexico, north of Akard street, in one of the more prosperous parts of the neighborhood. Unlike most others, she owned her white, two-story house. It contained several small porches and balconies. A picket fence surrounded the property, but the house like most of the others, had only enough of a yard for a large plant or three. Despite the fact that it was a workday, all manner of people filled the verandas, and came in and out the home's front door in a steady stream.

I parked the Ford next to the picket fence entrance, most of the visitors having come on foot. We'd all dressed in black to pay our respects, with Dai wearing one of the dragon's veiled hats to hide her nationality. The teashade glasses obscured she was blind, and a pair of lace gloves hid the color of her skin. We figured having me, a *blanco*, there would be enough of a surprise for the gathered mourners without adding in a *china*.

As we might have need of his canine faculties, Prince came with us, a solemn dark collar around his neck for the occasion. We also brought several containers of food to add to what other visitors would contribute to the vigil.

A priest wearing a traditional black cassock stood by the entrance to the home, greeting everyone who arrived and thanking those who were leaving for paying their respects. "*Bienvenidos*." His eyes opened a bit wider at seeing me, but he made no comment. "Señora Fuentes Garcia is in the living

room. We're celebrating the señora's life in the *comedor*, I mean the dining room. All the food goes in the kitchen." His English only hinted at an accent, which was surprising, as Rosa had informed us that most of those in El Barrio spoke little to no English.

"*Gracias, padre.*"

While the outside of the house did little to proclaim the nationality of its occupant, the interior of Mrs. Fuentes' home spoke of it wherever you looked. The dark wood of the thick, sturdy furniture was intricately carved with flowers and leaves—a sign of the deceased's high status back in Mexico. Beautiful oil paintings hung from the walls, their frames as elaborate as the furniture. Some were of lush landscapes in the Mexican States, while others showed flamenco dancers in their distinctive red dresses or flashily dressed men in the middle of a bullfight.

I got startled looks as we made our way through, but Rosa's presence kept anyone from asking questions. For the first time, I personally experienced what Dai was so familiar with: people staring and whispering about me as I passed by, pointing out my alienness. It was most unnerving.

The kitchen's counters and tables were laden with food—mostly simple fare, like tortillas, but there was enough of it to serve a small army. Prince's nose was working non-stop as the scents of the food wove around us.

The dining area was crowded, a giant carved table taking prominence, watched over by a sizeable ironrod chandelier hung in the ceiling. The room rang with conversation and occasionally even laughter; older men played dominoes, and children chased each other about the place. Prince happily joined them, much to their delight.

The living room, however, was the dark to the dining area's light—yin and yang.

Heavy drapes had been drawn over the windows, steeping the chamber in twilight. The room's furniture had been moved around, making a long table and the open casket the center of attention. The table held photos, a sizeable oil painting of the

señora, and knick-knacks from Mrs. Fuentes' life. Watching over the body was a large, ornate crucifix. The nailed form of Jesus Christ stared down upon her with a mixed expression of sadness and joy.

On the right sat an *altarcito*, a little altar to Our Lady of Guadalupe. An elegant frame held a vibrant oil painting of the Virgin Mary, her head partially bowed and hands clasped in prayer. Flowers and candles adorned the altar, along with small figurines of the virgin.

"I believe she belonged to a *sociedad*," Rosa whispered. "She was incredibly devout." The *sociedades* were groups of pious women whose home worship revolved around Our Lady of Guadalupe—the name given to the Virgin Mary after she appeared multiple times at the Hill of Tepeyac in Mexico back in the 1500s. For most, participation in a *sociedad* ended only at death.

In the open casket, the señora was dressed in a black lace dress, her torso surrounded by white lilies, chrysanthemums, daisies, and white roses. A touch of rouge colored her cheeks, and her hands were arranged much as they had been in the crime scene photographs, including an expensive ivory rosary. A light chill ran down my back at the sight. From the pictures Maginnis had shown us, I knew her body currently lay in the same room, in almost the exact same spot, where the killer had placed her.

Dai tilted her head slightly as we stood there. "What an interesting fragrance," she said, keeping her voice low.

I quickly whispered to her the types of flowers in the casket. Dai tilted her head in the opposite direction while taking a deep breath.

"This is none of those, except maybe the roses. There's jasmine and even tuberose," she said. "It's a very intense and luscious perfume. Curious."

How she could separate the different kinds of smells was beyond me. Even seeing the blossoms didn't help me isolate their scents. To distinguish an actual perfume mixed in with the natural fragrance of the flowers was a feat indeed. And the

fact she'd drawn my attention to it meant there was something about it she hadn't expected. Unfortunately, this wasn't the place to ask her about it.

There was a buzz of conversation in the dining room and kitchen, but the living area was quiet, the murmur of prayers and gentle weeping declaring the solemnity of the occasion. People from all walks of life gathered there, from laborers to the more affluent, *mestizos* and *Tejanos*.

I took a long look at the items assembled in remembrance of the deceased, knowing Dai would want details once we left. A frayed album showed photographs of the señora's early history. There were pictures of a large *hacienda* with acres of cultivated land. A lavish mansion in the city was the festively decorated site of her *quinceañera*—a celebration of her 15th birthday, marking her ascent from child to woman—and she glowed with delight.

Wedding photos showed her as a radiant bride in white. She wore a *peineta* in her hair, a high comb that held her white *mantilla*. The lace veil would cover her face, shoulders, and hair, and was worn as a means to glorify God.

Invitations to both events were tucked between the pages.

There were only a few more photographs in the album, one showing the married couple a few years later and another at the funeral for Mr. Fuentes. The señora didn't look much older than in her wedding pictures, but her cheerful glow was muted. The next photograph showed her many years later and had been taken inside a church. Ten women surrounded her, all wearing *mantillas*, all looking strangely determined and united.

I drew Rosa's attention to it. "Might this be her *sociedad*?" I asked.

Rosa stared at their faces for a moment. "No, this is a *brigada*, I'm sure of it. There's such fire in their eyes. It reminds me of when I signed up."

The Mexican Revolution had been caused by the lengthy violation of the ideals and principles of the Mexican Constitution of 1857. The stealing of land, harsh conditions forced on the majority of the citizens, plus the thirty-four-year

dictatorship by Porfirio Díaz had pushed the Mexican people to the brink. The Cristero War, however, originated from the increased and violent application of existing anticlerical articles that had been added to the new constitution.

The articles' primary function were to curb Catholic influence in the country's politics.

But in 1926, President Calles tried to take the people's religion from them by implementing harsher penalties and greater enforcement of the articles throughout the country.

In Mexico and the United States, Hispanic women banded together to form the Feminine Brigade of St. Joan of Arc to raise funds; feed, shelter, and care for wounded rebels; and smuggle guns and ammunition for the cause. At its peak, the Brigade had close to twenty-five thousand members, but they worked in small groups and kept their identities secret to hinder retribution if any were caught. The Cristero War had ended just last year.

Rosa gently touched the picture. "We took vows of secrecy and faith. We became *guerrilleras de Cristo*, soldiers of Christ." Her voice turned sad. "We wanted to do our part to save our beliefs and our souls."

She had lost both her husband and son, who had been a priest, to the conflict, one of the main reasons she'd left Jalisco over three years ago and came to Dallas. Dai placed her hand on Rosa's arm. "You were all very courageous."

Rosa shook her head. "It was our honor to help where we could. Though I wish I'd been able to do more from here."

I asked her nothing else, but made note of the other few items on the table as we returned to the dining room.

CHAPTER 21



Prince barked a greeting when we came into the room and rushed to join us, a gaggle of young children following behind him. The mutt looked to have been expanding his reach of conquests to a younger generation. Hopefully, I wouldn't have to do battle to extricate him from their midst—or block them from climbing into the Ford with us when we got ready to leave.

Unlike most American kids, Hispanic children weren't shielded from the concept of death, but were aware of it as a natural part of living. They came to the wakes with their parents to pay their respects and listen to stories about the deceased's life—much the same as they did on the first of November for *Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead, when families gathered at the graves of loved ones to celebrate them.

A couple of older women walked in from the kitchen,

reddened eyes showing they'd already spent time in the living room. Rosa approached them and said a few words, then hugged each in turn. She asked a question I couldn't quite make out, and the two women started talking animatedly. The Spanish terms flew so fast I had no hope of catching most of them, despite being decently fluent in the language. However, I did hear the words *señora*, *brigada*, and *sociedad* go past, so I was sure there would be some information worth hearing come out of the conversation.

With Dai in tow, I moved closer to the dining table to watch a serious, rather thin, twelve-year-old play dominoes with a hunched elderly man. I had never played it myself, but it looked to be a logic and match game. A line split the distinctive rectangular tiles into two squares, and each one had a number of dots ranging from one to six, or blank. The highest set of doubles from either player started the round, and then you matched the number of dots with one of your own with the same number. The player to lay down all his pieces first won. From what the old man told the boy, I gathered the game had many variations—like the card game of poker.

I noticed Dai's focus shift through the room as she slowly turned her head, giving the impression she was looking at people. But it was actually her ears doing the work, focusing on different areas of the noisy chamber. Her compact form, veiled hat, and lace gloves drew attention, but no one approached us. From the sidelong glances thrown in my direction and the way people averted their eyes when my gaze crossed theirs, I had a feeling it was my presence that kept them at bay.

Dai tapped at the inside of my elbow to draw my attention. I leaned over so she could whisper in my ear. "Do you think there's a chance we might be able to sneak upstairs and take a peek at Mrs. Fuentes' bedroom?"

Everyone seemed too aware of our existence, even if they acted like we weren't there. Going to the second floor to peek into the deceased's boudoir would not only be rude, but it might get us lynched once we came back down. "No. Sorry."

"Oh well, I had to ask." She sounded disappointed, but not surprised.

"Why would you want to, anyway?" I asked.

"I wanted to see if she owned any perfumes, but there are other ways to find that out," Dai said. "Plus, whether she does or doesn't, it might not be pertinent. I am groping in the dark, as it were."

We stayed close to an hour, and still more people came to pay their respects. Mrs. Fuentes may not have had blood relations here, but she definitely had a family. It was clear she had touched a lot of lives. Their belief that she had been murdered in her home added an undercurrent of shock and disbelief to everything. I got the feeling everyone had thought she'd be guiding them for many more years to come.

The priest was still manning the door as we made our way outside. An exhausted Prince lay nestled in Dai's arms, his new friends luckily too tired to follow.

"Thank you for coming today," he said. "Might I ask how you knew the señora?"

His English was quite good, which led me to wonder if he'd learned it at seminary or here. Rosa had explained that in the last decade, the Daughters of Charity had opened first a small kindergarten and medical clinic, then more recently a larger school named St. Ann's. There all the children of the neighborhood could go to learn to read and write and adults could avail themselves of English classes. Once the new school was open, the sisters had converted the original building into a small convent so they could remain nearby and better help and teach the community. Unlike most nuns, these sisters weren't tied to a lifelong vow to Christ, but a yearly one. They were also unique for the cornettes they wore, a type of wimple composed of white, starched cloth, folded into a distinct shape which gave it the appearance of having wings.

I hadn't noticed it when we'd first arrived, but one of the priest's cassock sleeves was emptier than the other, no hand showing past the bottom.

Rosa answered for the group. "I knew her from some

charity work we were both involved in. I'm Rosa Natalia Vega Ramirez. My friends were nice enough to drive me here since I don't live nearby."

"That was very kind of you, Mr...?"

"Haskin. Jacques Haskin." Out of habit, I extended my right hand, then realized my mistake. "Sorry, I—"

"All is well, Mr. Haskin. It's an old injury," he said, giving me a small smile. "I'm Father Ignacio. Pleased to meet you. And the young lady?"

"Daiyu Wu, Padre," Dai said. "And this is Prince." She held the mutt a little higher. The mutt half waved a paw in the priest's direction.

"Nice to meet you both." He hid his surprise at Dai's name well. "It was kind of you to come."

She set Prince down. "It looks like Señora Fuentes impacted a lot of people."

"She was indispensable, and did everything she could for the community." The priest crossed himself with his left hand, a sign of respect for the dead woman. "The señora had a will of iron and could be a little unbending, but those same qualities are what made her exceptional. Her loss is a great blow to El Barrio."

"And it's an even bigger tragedy that someone felt the need to kill her," Dai said.

Father Ignacio took a shocked step back, crossing himself again. "You are not wrong, Señorita Wu. The entire congregation is praying for that misguided person's soul."

Dai nodded. "I'm aware that anything said during confession is sacred," she said. "But if the murderer makes themselves known to you, I hope you'll encourage them to turn themselves in to the police." Her tone was polite, even if the words weren't. "An innocent woman has been charged with this horrible crime. It would be much more damaging to the killer's soul if she were to be executed for it."

"*Madre de Dios*." Rosa crossed herself, eyes widening. It was hard to tell if it was due to the arrest of an innocent woman or how much Dai appeared to know about the details of the

THE JOY OF MURDER

murder itself.

The color drained from the priest's face. "I hadn't heard anyone was arrested. How do you know she is innocent?"

Dai didn't shy away from the question. "Because, Father, the señora was not killed in her home. Her body was brought back here after her death, and some convenient evidence was left around for the police to find. Plus, in such a tight-knit community, a person who didn't *belong* would have been noticed and remembered. Yet no one inside mentioned seeing anyone like that."

CHAPTER 22



"That was rather harsh, Dai," I said, glancing back at my charge using the Ford's peep mirror. We had quickly taken our leave after Dai's exchange with the priest.

"But necessary all the same, Jacques." Dai removed her veiled hat. "They needed to know the murderer is still out there. Until we understand why Mrs. Fuentes was killed, others may be in danger."

Prince lay on Dai's lap, dead to the world. The children must have run him ragged, but I was certain that he had enjoyed himself immensely. It wasn't often he had so many people to play with.

"What are you two up to?" Rosa asked, wringing her hands. "How do you know the things you said? Lien is going to *kill* me."

I winced, only too familiar with the sentiment. If there was one thing Dai's parents strived for, it was keeping their daughter ignorant of the ugliness in the world. A dire fate awaited anyone foolish enough to expose her to such matters. But as determined and desperate as they were to keep the worst

from her, Dai was even more resolute in finding out about it.

"Rosa, I truly am sorry about this," Dai said. "I never intended to make things difficult for you, and I wouldn't have involved you if it weren't vitally important. You saw how the community reacted to our presence; I doubt any of them would feel comfortable talking to Jacques or myself, especially about something as serious as this."

"*Ay, Dios mío*, what am I going to do with you two? This is *crazy*." Rosa took a lace fan out of her purse and fanned her heated face. "Why are you even involved in this?"

Like her namesake, black jade, Dai faced her, becoming a source of calm and confidence. "A friend asked for my help, and so I'm helping."

"*Preciosa*, I know you are capable of many extraordinary things, but looking into a murder?" Tears gathered in Rosa's eyes. "Is this something you should be doing?"

My sentiments exactly, but a battle I'd already lost. Perhaps Rosa would do better at dissuading her than I had.

Dai gave her a gentle, love-filled smile. "Did you ask yourself that when you joined the *brigada*? Or did you leap in with both eyes open, ready to do whatever you had to, regardless of the consequences, to try to make things right?"

Rosa looked away, wiping at her eyes. "This... this isn't the same..."

"Not as big in scale, perhaps, but no less important," Dai said. "I would be remiss if I turned my back on it, especially when I can do something to help."

"Your parents will be so angry," Rosa said. I spotted her looking my way in the peep mirror.

Dai shook her head. "Only if they find out. And I don't plan on telling them, do you? The three of us have a lot of experience at keeping secrets."

But the dragon was excellent at ferreting such things out. It was a miracle she'd never caught on the last time Dai decided to investigate. I wasn't sure we'd be so lucky a second time. Rosa's dubious expression told me she thought much the same.

Dai flashed one of her dimpled smiles, as if looking forward

to the challenge.

"So, Rosa, were you able to learn anything about Mrs. Fuentes?" Dai asked.

In the peep mirror, I saw our friend cross herself before replying. "Some," Rosa said. "She came here with other refugees during the revolution, so she's been a part of El Barrio for close to twenty years. She was the leader of both her *brigada* and her *sociedad*." She relaxed a little as if the seamless change in topic were a relief.

"Her family were direct descendants of the original *conquistadores* from Spain that defeated the Aztecs. They held a lot of influence for several generations before some poor management and terrible harvests depleted the family's fortune. By the time of the revolution, though, the rest of the family were all gone. So, she took what she had left and came to Texas."

Rosa closed her fan and tapped the end of it against her lips, her gaze on the ceiling of the Ford as if working to recall what else she'd learned.

"She rallied against the Ku Klux Klan when they targeted the Catholic Church in the early twenties. The KKK said that Catholicism was against democracy, which is absurd!" Rosa's expression showed her disgust at the concept. "I'm just glad that nonsense was gone by the time I moved here. It was bad enough living through the persecution of the Church in Jalisco."

The timing of the KKK's and President Calle's enforced opposition to the Catholic Church seemed a bit too coincidental. Might the Klan's increasing influence in the United States, have encouraged the events which triggered the Cristero War? It was a frightening thought.

It also revealed another possible antagonistic connection between the murdered woman and Mrs. Pierce: she had once belonged to the women's branch of the KKK.

"They admitted Señora Fuentes was rather old-fashioned about certain things," Rosa said. "She was dead set against Señora Maria Luna starting a tortilla-making company, as

running a business was not something women did. Eventually, though, when she saw it was working and how it helped El Barrio's ladies by giving them paying jobs, she became one of its strongest supporters."

"So she didn't have trouble with anyone?" Dai asked.

Rosa laughed. "They all loved her dearly, but it seems she had problems with *everyone* at one time or another. They called her El Barrio's *Yaya*, Little Mexico's Grandma, because she meddled in everyone's business and doled out advice whether or not they wanted it. But she helped more than hindered, and they understood she spoke from the heart. Most of the kids called her *abuela* like you would your real grandmother. Her opinion carried a lot of weight with the community."

"I see," Dai said. "Did anyone mention being interviewed by the police?"

Rosa made a face. "No. Not that they would talk to them anyway. Most of the people in law enforcement only know a few words in Spanish, if any, and to be honest, most of them assume we're illiterate and not worth talking to in the first place." She shook her head. "Doctors, lawyers, professors, businessmen—all sorts of people have come to Dallas, but if they came without money or property, they aren't allowed to do any of those things here. But even those who do don't often get to work at the same jobs as in Mexico."

It was a shame. Who knew what innovations in medicine, art, cuisine, or science could come about if these fields weren't closed to everyone migrating here from abroad? Xenophobia was alive and well in the twentieth century, and the United States was the worse for it.

"Rosa, would you consider going back tonight or tomorrow?" Dai asked. "See if anyone else has more to say about the señora?" She tilted her head slightly. "I also think we should attend the Requiem Mass and the funeral, so if you could find out the details of when they will be held, that would be very helpful."

I grimaced, wondering how we were supposed to get away with all this. Sure, we needed information, but showing up at

the church and then the internment would be like placing a marquee over our heads, proclaiming we didn't belong there and were up to mischief. Rosa going alone would attract a lot less attention. I couldn't fathom what Dai hoped to accomplish by having us there.

From Rosa's horrified expression, I could see she was thinking along similar lines, but then a huge smile settled on her face.

"Oh! If you come, you'll have to wear a *mantilla*," Rosa said. "You would look so *adorable*! ¡*Como un ángel*! I wonder if your father would let me borrow his camera?"

Curse the power of cuteness. It now became clear I would have no help in talking Dai out of this latest insanity. We were doomed.

CHAPTER 23



"Won't this draw unwanted attention to us?" I was still wrestling with Dai's plan to attend the Requiem Mass and funeral for Mrs. Fuentes. I dropped Rosa off at her house and would be picking her up later to shop for ingredients for dinner, so she'd be safe from the afternoon's searing heat.

Dai had already grilled me on everything I saw or heard at the señora's home, painting her unique mental pictures of the place and people involved. I prepared a quick lunch while she used her cognitive skills to dissect and align all we'd learned so far.

"Perhaps," she said. "But we have so little to go on at the moment, it's the best course of action. Making Señora Fuentes' acquaintances uncomfortable with our presence may force the guilty party into a mistake so that they make themselves known." She flashed me a playful smile. "Besides, this will be a wonderful learning experience for us."

Attending a funeral surrounded by mourners didn't sound all that 'wonderful' to me. And I was positive it was not on the dragon's list of things she ever wanted her daughter to be

exposed to.

"Even if by some miracle we figure out who the killer is, how are we going to prove it?" I asked.

Dai laughed. "One thing at a time, Jacques," she said. "We can fret about that once we've narrowed the field."

I fervently hoped we'd not have to worry about it ever, but wasn't about to say so. That would only make her more determined.

The sound of the doorbell echoed into the kitchen. Prince rushed toward the front of the house, a snack and nap having done much to put him to rights. I followed at a more sedate pace, not needing to guess at who was there. I had honestly thought we'd have heard from him long before now.

"Pierce." I hesitated only a moment before stepping out of the way so he could come in. It would be best not to have a repeat of the other day. The last thing I wanted was for Dai to have to play nursemaid to the man.

"Hello, Jacques." The popinjay stepped inside, removing his fedora.

I tried not to look shocked at this second use of my actual name. He wore a blue suit without any flamboyant colors—another surprise.

"Sorry I didn't return your call or telephone ahead before showing up here," Pierce said. "It's been a wet blanket kind of day."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I closed the door instead.

"Afternoon, Truman." Dai walked into the foyer, a welcoming half-smile on her lips. Prince gave a soft bark, not wanting to be left out.

"China Doll!" Pierce's entire face seemed to brighten at the sight of her. He swooped in to take her hand and kissed it. Prince sat between them, as expected—but, tongue lolling, he looked quite pleased when Pierce patted him on the head. The traitor. He'd do well to remember who served his dinner.

Dai tilted her head, her smile faltering. "Truman, did something happen to you?"

To my astonishment, I saw Pierce wince at the question. He dropped her hand and took a step back. Had the world been turned upside down, and no one told me? This many surprises back to back were distressing.

"No. Everything is swell, I promise."

Dai took a step forward, and to my utter disbelief, Pierce took a matching step back. He looked as stunned as I felt, if not for the same reasons. He was clearly trying to hide something—but if he thought she would drop it, he was in for a rude awakening.

"Then why do I smell Covermark?" she asked. "You're also wearing more cologne than usual."

I hadn't noticed anything unusual about him—aside from his using my actual name and the muted colors—but I must have missed something due to my befuddlement caused by the former two items.

"China Doll, it's nothing," the popinjay insisted. "A minor mishap."

Now that I was looking at him closely, the left side of his face did seem slightly discolored. He was wearing makeup. But why? Then I recalled the argument I'd overheard on the telephone the day before. "Someone punched you!"

My inadvertently blurted statement seemed to echo in the air. My cheeks grew warm, the tips of my ears on fire. On any other day, the fact that someone had hit Pierce wouldn't have appalled or even bothered me. I'd always known, it was only a matter of time before somebody tried to put him in his place—I'd been tempted often enough myself. But this had probably taken place at his home, and that set an entirely different face on it.

"Truman, what happened?" Dai was frowning. "Is this somehow related to the murder?"

Pierce sighed. "Please, it's *nothing*. There are more important things that need taking care of."

A flash of intense irritation singed my nerves. Dai did not give her concern or friendship to just anyone.

"Yet you felt the need hide it," she accused. "So much so,

you even used cologne to try to bury the scent of the concealer. From the forethought on how to deal with it and the multiple attempts to imply it is of little consequence, I can only surmise this has happened before?" The underlying dead certainty in Dai's voice was like a bucket of ice water dumped into my suddenly fevered brain.

Pierce opened his mouth, but she raised a hand before he could speak. "Your life is your business, Truman," she said. "As your friend, I won't press you to tell me the details, but please don't pretend it's nothing. Violence is *never* nothing."

"I... you're right, of course," Pierce said, giving Dai a half-bow. "My heartfelt apologies."

"It's fine. No harm done." She waved the apology away with a smile. "I assume this means your father has returned home, then?"

I choked. While Dai may have appeared to let the topic drop, it seemed to me she had only decided on a different angle of attack. She could run rings around him if she chose to. He had no idea what he might be in for if she set her mind to it. I should know.

For once, Pierce was speechless, his shock at her words leaving him dumbfounded. I doubted he knew I'd heard their raised voices when I called. I'd assumed it meant Pierce's father had returned. Now it appeared that his father was most likely the source of the violence. I'd had my fill of bullies in my youth, so my tolerance for them was low. No one deserved that kind of treatment, not even Truman Pierce.

"And might I also assume he still has no interest in aiding his wife?" Dai asked.

I'd seen Pierce look at her with some measure of admiration previously, but now the bar had been raised much higher. However, the glow only lasted a moment before he was dragged down once more by the situation itself. "Yes, to both questions. I demanded an explanation, but he refused to give one."

"I'm so sorry, Truman."

Pierce shrugged. "He's always been like that. So I'm used to

it."

I wondered if he was speaking only of his father's refusal to state his reasons, or if it included the violence he inflicted on his son.

"By the way, Jackie, your Ford is ready," he said. "Told you Frank would get it done."

I should have known his use of my real name wouldn't last. "Right. Thanks." It proved incredibly difficult to keep my tone civil.

"I can drive you if you like," Pierce offered.

"No, that's quite all right, thank you," I replied. I'd already spent more time alone with the man than I had ever wanted to. "Now that I know where it is, I'll just take the streetcar downtown."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"We're about to have another visitor," Dai said calmly. "I never knew we were so popular."

I turned toward the front entrance just as the doorbell rang. If it were a salesman, I'd get rid of them posthaste. I had no plans to leave Pierce alone with Dai without direct supervision for any longer than necessary.

But the person on the other side of the door was someone I would never have expected.

CHAPTER 24



"Miss Carmichael?" My question came out with an embarrassing squeak.

The tall blonde, her hair styled in the popular waves presently en vogue, stood ramrod straight at the door, wearing a white wraparound dress with pastel flowers in blue and light purple. A white tilt hat with a pastel blue ribbon, a matching handbag, and gloves completed the ensemble. She would have looked quite fetching had it not been for the scowl marring her face.

"I know he's here, so don't even try to deny it," she said with a haughty sniff, her words clipped. "Move aside, or I'll start calling on your neighbors and telling them everything I know about who lives here."

After having seen her chaotic behavior on previous occasions, I didn't doubt her threat for a moment. I kept my

expression pleasant, though I felt anything but. "Won't you come in?"

She clumped inside in a huff.

To my surprise, both Dai and Pierce had disappeared from the foyer. Even Prince was gone. I'd been abandoned—perhaps even offered as a sacrifice to appease the smoking volcano. "May I take your things?"

I got a dagger-filled glare for my trouble. "I won't be staying long enough for that. Now, where is Truman?"

Making a guess, I gestured for her to precede me into the living room. As she stiffly made her way there, I saw her trying to look everywhere at once. It made me think of the light of a lighthouse sweeping along the coast—except that, instead of warning others of potential danger, she was looking for things to find fault with. She would be sorely disappointed, as every chamber on the first floor was as American as apple pie. I was sure she'd expected a smoky opium den of some sort—not that I believed she had the faintest idea what one of those looked like.

Dai sat primly on the deep green and wood couch across from the windows, with Prince on her lap. Pierce had made the correct choice of sitting on the second sofa, thus placing the oval walnut table between them and dispelling any possible hints of impropriety. He even stood as she entered, displaying proper manners and no indication of ire or surprise at seeing her there. Dai must have informed him who our visitor was the moment she heard me say her name. Those ears of hers came in very handy at times.

"Miss Carmichael, how lovely to see you." Dai's welcome was covered in layers of honey. She faced the interloper without her tea glasses, showing Linda her blind silver-white eyes.

The wondrous sight brought Carmichael up short. "Oh!"

Pierce stepped toward her. "Linda, you didn't mention you'd be coming to visit Miss Wu."

Between Dai's eyes and Pierce acting as if her being there was in no way alarming, it took our unwanted guest a few

seconds to find her voice. "As if I'd ever do such a thing willingly. I'm only here because *you* are. I followed you in a taxi when you left after our date." She raised her chin high as if she were a hero who'd vanquished an army to come here for his sake alone.

"I'm glad you're here, whatever the reason," Dai said. "Won't you take a seat?"

Three shocked pairs of eyes turned in her direction, including my own. Dai was up to something—but what, I had no idea. If it went wrong, a punctured tire might become the least of our problems.

The pencil-thin brows were once more making a *V* on Carmichael's face, but this time in confusion rather than ire. However, it didn't last long. "I—I don't think I should," she said. "You won't be able to manipulate me like you do Truman. I see right through your schemes, you *yellow menace*!"

Dai gave her the softest of smiles, and I got the sense I was watching a small child stand before a stampeding herd, about to be trampled.

And Carmichael was the infant.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Dai said. "I'd so hoped your expertise might provide some much-needed help to Mrs. Pierce in her time of need." Her voice dripped with regret. "Such a pity."

Carmichael's scrunched face looked even more confused than before. "What are you talking about? Truman, what is she saying? Is this some kind of *spell*? Is it her eyes?"

Pierce took her elbow and pulled her gently toward the couch. Carmichael sat down as if in a fog, appearing not entirely aware of her own movements. Pierce settled beside her, keeping hold of her arm, just in case. I was sure he was as confused by Dai's words as I. Carmichael voiced the question in all our minds.

"What could *I* possibly be an expert about?" she asked. She indeed appeared baffled by such a concept. Not that I wasn't asking myself the same thing.

"Don't sell yourself short, Miss Carmichael," Dai said. "This

is the twentieth century. Women can be experts in a field of study the same as men."

"But I don't study anything!" Carmichael's expression hardened. "You're just trying to make fun of me. To make me look stupid in front of Truman. Well, I do *not* have to put up with this." She tried to rise indignantly to her feet, but Pierce's hold on her arm didn't permit it. "Truman, let go. I want to leave."

"So you won't even *try* to help my mother? Is that what you're saying, Linda?" Pierce asked her. "Miss Wu is doing it; can't *you*?"

"This is just a trap of hers." Carmichael threw a scathing glare in Dai's direction. "A blind woman can't help Grace, especially not a heathen like her. Only Daddy and your father can do that."

Pierce's expression turned cold. "My *father* has refused to do anything for her. Miss Wu is the only one even trying. I need you to try as well, or I won't bother speaking to you ever again."

Carmichael gasped as if he'd slapped her. She stopped struggling to rise and fell back onto the sofa like a rag doll. "No, please. I'll do it, I will. But, Truman, I don't know *anything*." Tears welled in her eyes. It was rather pitiable.

When Dai spoke, it was as if the last couple of minutes hadn't happened. "You're well versed with regards to perfumes, aren't you, Miss Carmichael? Which would you say are the most popular, the most expensive? And might you happen to know which is Mrs. Pierce's favorite?"

Carmichael blinked at her several times, as if Dai had spoken in Chinese. "Perfumes?"

"Yes," Dai said. "You're quite knowledgeable about them, aren't you? You've worn a different scent each time we've met."

Carmichael's eyes grew wide and round, and I wondered if Dai was overtaxing her limited brainpower. I wasn't sure we had any smelling salts to bring her back around if she shut down.

"How did you know that?" Carmichael asked with a slight tremor in her voice.

"I might be blind, Miss Carmichael, but there's nothing wrong with my nose." Dai touched the appendage with a finger as if to make sure the young woman got the point.

"Oh. Oh! I see. Uhm." She glanced away as if unable to concentrate while looking at Dai. "The most popular ones would be Chanel No. 5, Shalimar, and 'JOY,' by Jean Patou. Joy is the most expensive of the three, and worth every cent. I was over the moon when Daddy got me that one." Her eyes closed for a second. "Grace wears Chanel No. 5."

"Excellent, Miss Carmichael. And might you know something of Joy's main accords?" Dai asked.

"Yes!" Carmichael's eyes lit up. "The main accord is floral—the star floral—to be specific, which center around rose and jasmine. The top notes also include aldehyde, tuberose, peach, and ylan-ylan. While the middle notes contain woodland lily, orchid, and orris. The base notes are sandalwood, musk, and civet. It's a concentration of ten thousand six hundred flowers of jasmine and dozens of roses. It's intense—utterly luscious."

Dai nodded. "You see, you *are* an expert. And you've confirmed something I suspected. You've been quite invaluable. So, thank you."

"Invaluable? *Me?*" Carmichael's face turned noticeably scarlet, even through her makeup. I wondered if this was the first time anyone had complimented her on her knowledge rather than her looks or clothes.

She turned to face Pierce. "She's not lying to me, is she? Did I really help?" The longing in her voice and her expression was almost painful to behold. From what we knew, her father doted on her. But aside from the expectation that she look stylish and be well versed in all the social niceties she'd need for supporting a future husband, it appeared she'd rarely been asked for an opinion or information on matters considered important.

"Linda, she wouldn't have said so if it weren't true." Pierce flashed her one of his blinding smiles. "Thank you for helping."

Tears gathered at the corner of her eyes again, her hopeful expression turning blissful. If she didn't watch herself, her

mascara would soon be marking her face with black streaks. "I would do *anything* for you, Truman," she said. "Anything at all."

Pierce nodded at the comment, but made no reply. He rose to his feet instead. "We should probably take our leave," he said. "Thank you both for your hospitality and help." He half-turned and held his hand out to Carmichael. "Come on, Linda, let me take you home."

She appeared overjoyed at the suggestion. "We can talk about the arrangements some more. We'll need to book the venue as soon as possible to lock in the date." She sent a shy glance in Dai's direction. "I suppose I could send Miss Wu an invitation, if you want."

That was quite the concession from Carmichael—allowing the yellow menace a place at her wedding. It seemed Dai had scored some points today—and I wondered how long that would last. Pierce did not comment on this either, and just steered Carmichael out of the room to take their leave.

I felt somewhat torn. On the one hand, I would be glad if Pierce married—it would take him off the list as a prospective suitor for Dai's hand. On the other, I pitied him, as he clearly didn't want to marry Linda, but would most likely be forced to go through with it. I couldn't help but feel sorry for him, which in itself was something of a shock.

CHAPTER 25



Since Carmichael had, intentionally or otherwise, done me the favor of removing Pierce from the premises, I was able to leave not long after to pick up Rosa as promised.

Dai had gotten the information she wanted from Carmichael, but I hadn't been able to work out exactly how it was relevant or helpful. Hopefully, she would clue me in soon.

"Jacques, I really appreciate you driving me around," Rosa said. She sat in the front with me, the back reserved for the groceries. From the number of bags, she'd bought more than would be needed for our dinner.

"I'm happy to do it," I said. "I take it you plan on making more food for the vigil?"

She nodded. "I do. With the Father in charge, I'm sure any extra will be distributed to those who need it most in the community," she said. "Señora Fuentes lived in the best part of El Barrio. But there are plenty of people there who aren't doing anywhere near as well as she was. It pains my heart not to be able to do more for them."

With the financial situation growing more and more

desperate over the entire United States—and other parts of the world—even more individuals would need assistance. The future wasn't looking particularly bright.

"Jacques, is it wise for you and Dai to be doing what you're doing?" Rosa asked.

It was a question I asked myself daily of late. "Honestly? Probably not. But there's no one else. As Dai said, an innocent woman has been arrested for the crime, and nobody seems to be searching too hard to find the real culprit. I don't think she could live with herself if she was *able* to do something about it, but did nothing instead."

Rosa sighed. "She is twenty-one and therefore an adult, but I'm not sure Lien or Tye will ever think of her that way. You won't allow her to put herself in danger, will you?"

"Of course not. I would rather die than let anything happen to her." If not for her, my life would have turned out entirely different and a lot less blessed. I would repay that debt in any manner I could.

"*Mi amor*, you're such a good man," Rosa said. "The Wus are very fortunate to have you as part of the family."

I was the lucky one. At least until Lien found out what mischief I'd let Dai get into. If that ever happened, I'd be lucky to escape with my life.

"How is Dr. Campbell, by the way?" she asked.

The change in topic caught me off guard. "She's doing all right. We met with her yesterday."

"Still getting along?" Rosa's eyes shone brightly.

For some reason, it made me feel uncomfortable. "Yes, I believe so."

"Since we've had Mr. Pierce over for dinner," she said, "don't you think it's time to invite Dr. Campbell as well?"

That was a rather odd question. "I don't see why not, though Dai hasn't suggested it."

Rosa smiled. "You do know the invitation doesn't have to be from her. You're the doctor's friend, too, aren't you?"

"I suppose..." I honestly hadn't given it much consideration. And why push *me* to invite her to dinner and not

Dai?

"Just think about it," she said. "And find out what kind of food she likes. It might give Lien and me a chance to make something new."

It wasn't like I was opposed to the idea. It would be good for Aiden to socialize more. "She's rather shy," I said, "but if it's only supper with the family, she may be willing to join us. Although, if it turns into the same type of debacle as when Pierce was there, she may never come back again."

"That was a *disaster*," Rosa chuckled. "But I don't think it will happen again—especially with Dai getting so upset at them. They just forgot themselves for a bit."

But unlike Pierce, Aiden didn't lie or weasel past the truth when it suited her. If Lien or Tye asked her a direct question about how she and Dai had met, or what they tended to talk about, she might well let the cat out of the bag and get us all into a giant heap of trouble. But truth be told, I rather liked that about her. Despite the things she dealt with on a daily basis, she was an open, caring, and innocent person.

Promising I would give the idea more thought, I dropped Rosa and the family's second Ford off at the Wus, then headed on foot to the nearest streetcar stop. Even though Oak Cliff was on the other side of the Trinity River, the viaduct and the large number of streetcars making the trek made going downtown a breeze. With twenty miles of track in Oak Cliff alone, anyone living there could easily hop on board and take an interurban line over to Dallas proper. Then you would hop on an electric streetcar to wherever in the city you wanted to go. Most people in the area couldn't afford to own an automobile, so this was the easiest way for folks to get around.

Despite the sizzling heat of the afternoon, the ride downtown was pleasant. Since I wasn't driving, I took in my surroundings with wild abandon. I also paid attention to the other passengers, to make sure who I was keeping company with. As I'd learned during my short-lived foray into pick pocketing before meeting the Wus, the streetcars were lucrative targets for those with sticky fingers.

The Day & Night Garage appeared to be doing brisk business, all their open bays currently occupied. To my surprise, the owner recognized me immediately. "Mr. Haskin! Good to see you again," Esmond said. "Let's go take a look at her and make sure you're happy with the work." He waved me to follow him through the building and to a back lot where they kept the vehicles that were waiting for service or pickup.

Staring at the side panel of the Ford, I couldn't help but be impressed. Looking at it, you'd never know someone had taken an icepick to the automobile. Even running my hand over it, I couldn't tell there'd been any work done. "Superb job, Mr. Esmond," I said.

"So glad to hear you say so." The owner smiled. "My guys are top of the line. And that there Truman is a good egg, so we're happy to go the extra mile. Plus, he's quite generous."

My brow rose, but I made no comment. Hearing someone say something nice about Pierce was a bit of a jolt.

"Let me get the paperwork for you to sign, and we'll soon have you on your way," Esmond said. "We have a waiting area inside with some fans and air coolers running if you don't want to melt out here while you wait. It's a scorcher today."

"That it is. Thank you." Stepping from the direct sun into the interior of the building was a blessed relief. I was heading toward the waiting room when one of the mechanics waved me over in the hallway.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"No, nothing like that. I just want to talk to you for a second." He flashed me a lopsided grin, even as his eyes scanned the area, making sure nobody else was nearby. "If you're ever in need of some strong liquid refreshment, give this number a call. They'll fix you right up." He handed over a business card, nodded, then left.

I stared after him, not entirely certain what that had been about. Looking at the card, all it had on it was a local exchange number. Running over his words again in my mind, I realized I'd just been offered a way to buy contraband liquor.

CHAPTER 26



Driving to the laundry, all I could think about was the simple card hidden in my pocket. I couldn't fathom why I hadn't just thrown it away. It wasn't as if I ever planned to use it—not only was it illegal to purchase alcohol, I didn't typically drink anyway. Of course, I could turn it into the newly minted Bureau of Prohibition. The duties of the Treasury Department's Prohibition Unit had been handed over to the Justice Department due to the increasing violence. Still, I wasn't sure what good it would do.

Besides, the Day & Night Garage had done a marvelous job on the Ford; drawing attention to them for carrying on illegal liquor sales recruitment seemed an improper way to repay them. From the shifty way the mechanic had presented himself, I was reasonably certain Frank Esmond had no idea his repair shop clients were being scoped out as potential customers for illicit alcohol.

Despite Prohibition having been around for ten years now, it wasn't working as intended. The federal government was having a terrible time enforcing it, and criminal elements had

taken advantage of this. It was a lucrative new way to make money. They were more than willing to bribe officials and undermine the law. They even went so far as to use extreme violence to keep their illicit business going—the potential for profit blinded them to everything else.

At least here in Texas, the Texas Rangers were helping out, with Manuel Trazazas "Lonewolf" Gonzauillas doing more than his share to prevent the contraband from crossing the border.

Hard liquor wasn't the only type of alcoholic beverage affected by Prohibition. Even beer was illegal, and had been replaced by 'near beer'—malt beverages with little to no alcohol, but popular with those who wanted to at least *pretend* they were drinking. It supposedly tasted close to the real thing but offered none of the alcoholic side effects so many were seeking.

I put my thoughts about the card and Prohibition aside as I parked at White Laundry to pick up Dai's parents. They weren't quite ready to leave yet, so I busied myself straightening the break room on the second floor, then helping Mei Ling at the front with the mass of pickups that typically occurred around rush hour.

"The ball and chain isn't with you today?" Mei Ling asked between customers, throwing me a teasing smile. As usual, she wore bright colors in one of the modern American dress styles. A native Texan, only her skin and eyes gave evidence of her oriental origins. She was homegrown, so you could occasionally even detect a Texas twang when she grew excited.

"Dai's at home," I said. "I'm only here to pick up the Wus." Since they were close to the same age, I had hoped she and Dai might become friends. Unfortunately, Mei Ling's mother believed in the old superstitions and had made it clear she didn't want her daughter consorting with someone who seemed to possess supernatural abilities. The fact that Dai didn't let her blindness limit her life or her choices led many to suppose she couldn't possibly be a normal human, and should therefore not be consorted with.

It didn't bother Dai one way or the other, but it did me. Yet trying to force them to see reason would only make matters even more awkward and isolating for the handful of Chinese immigrants still left in the city, so nobody pressed the issue. As fellow countrymen and women, solidarity during these trying times would be the only way they'd survive.

It was their loss, as far as I was concerned.

"Is it true Daiyu's got a boyfriend now?" Mei Ling asked. "I heard the guy is loaded."

I hid an inward groan. Mei Ling was a nice girl—the only thing I didn't like about her was her needling curiosity and love of gossip. "He's just a friend, not someone of note."

Rather than discouraging her, this seemed to make her even more curious. "But he ate dinner at their house, isn't that right?"

How in the world had she found that out? The last thing Dai needed was more ammunition for the workers to shun her. "Why does it matter? It's no one else's business."

"You're such a meanie," she said, giving me a saucy pout. "I overheard Mr. Wu say he's super handsome and that his family has money. And if he's into the exotic, it means there's a chance I can catch him for myself. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

I stared at her in bewilderment. The idea had never crossed my mind. Would that actually work? Might another Asian beauty lure Pierce away from plying his attentions on Dai? Even as the notion occurred to me, I felt a stab of shame. If the popinjay were truly as bad as I kept trying to believe, it would be wrong of me to put someone else in his path. Mei Ling had been born in the States and was therefore a citizen, but most wouldn't care. They'd still consider her a foreigner. She had as much to lose as Dai if things went badly. And that didn't even take into consideration the damage that Carmichael would be likely to cause if she suspected somebody new had set their sights on her man.

But how could I dissuade her from this course without giving more fodder to the rumor mill?

"Mei Ling, the fellow already has a fiancée," I said. "He and

Dai are only friends, nothing more."

"If you say so." She sent me a skeptical look. "But feel free to introduce me to him anyway, okay?"

Luckily, a fresh wave of customers came in, and I was able to slip away without any more probing questions or bothersome suggestions. I grabbed the Pierce's laundered silk shirt on my way out. The Wus were also ready to go, so Mei Ling wouldn't get a chance to hunt me down when she was free. The fact that she'd been eavesdropping on Tye during a private conversation was concerning, but I wasn't sure what could be done about it. I'd have to mention it to Dai and see if she had any ideas.

For now, I was just happy to have escaped.

"Jacques, what were you and Dai up to today?" Lien asked from the back seat of the Ford once we were underway.

Or perhaps I'd only jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

CHAPTER 27



I somehow danced around the verbal minefield created by the dragon's question, and got her and Tye back safely to the house with my neck still intact. Prince greeted us at the door, jumping up and down beside me, demanding his dinner. For once, I heartily welcomed the distraction—which allowed me to avoid any more prickly questions for at least a minute or two.

"You're so lucky to be a dog, you know that?"

Prince gave a soft bark as if in agreement, then buried his face in the food bowl, his curled tail wagging. Fortunate, indeed.

I watched him eat despite the lingering heat of the day, feeling more tired than I had expected and not looking forward to the potential dangers waiting inside. Mostly, I worried about the heavy responsibility Dai had taken upon herself. Failure at her task could mean prison and even death for an innocent. As far as I could tell, everything we'd uncovered up to now only led to more questions. We were trying to put a puzzle together, with most of the pieces missing. What might it do to her if we couldn't figure it out?

Despite her extensive knowledge of many things, there were matters Dai had never experienced from an emotional angle. Emotions cared nothing for logic or facts.

A wet tongue scraping over my hand jolted me out of my reverie. Prince had finished eating and sat on his haunches, his head tilted to the side and tongue lolling. He gave a soft whine, still staring at me.

"All's well, mutt." I reached down and scratched behind his ear. "But thanks for the concern." If he sensed my worry, so would Dai, so I took a couple of deep breaths to steady my mind before opening the back door into the kitchen.

Prince shot past me, probably to take up his guard spot beneath the dinner table to snatch up anything trying to escape.

"Really, Jacques, it's much too hot for you to be staying outdoors this long," Dai said. My companion was sitting at the kitchen table, wearing a cute navy blue day dress with polka dots and puffed short sleeves. "I told Rosa I would wait for you. She's already got supper on the table."

Just how long had I been woolgathering outside? "Sorry. Give me a few moments to clean up." I dashed into my room to dry off the sweat I'd accumulated and change my shirt. I was buttoning it up on my way out when I found Dai barring the doorway.

"Did something happen while you were gone?" she asked me.

"Not especially." I stepped forward, planning to squeeze past her, but she raised her arms to either side, blocking the path entirely.

"You might as well spill it," Dai said. "I'm not moving until you do, and you know someone will come to see what's keeping us soon."

Why did I bother trying to keep anything from her? I sighed. "It would appear Mei Ling overheard your father mention Pierce. His supposed good looks and wealth, and the fact that he came to dinner."

Dai dropped her arms, a slight frown marring her heart-shaped face. "Well, that's unexpected." A grin quickly replaced

her scowl. "This will rile them all up for sure."

I didn't find it amusing. "I tried to dissuade her conclusions, but I'm not positive it worked. She's probably already told everyone at the laundry, and who knows how many others."

Dai shrugged and moved out of the doorway. "True. But there's not much we can do about it. It should be fun to see if they bring it up to Father. They're always so disapproving about everything. Ludicrous, really. As if I was something they ever needed to worry about."

If the workers dared approach Lien about it, there would be fireworks galore.

Dinner was lively as usual, but no dangerous topics were broached. I had just started to think we'd get through it unscathed when I was proven wrong.

"Did Jacques tell you about my idea yet, Dai?" Rosa asked. This grabbed everyone's attention.

Fortunately, I'd already swallowed my sip of water, or it might have ended up all over the table.

"No, I don't think so," Dai said. "What is it?"

Rosa gave her a big smile. "Well, I thought it would be nice if you or Jacques invited Dr. Campbell over to dinner."

Tye and Lien looked at us with surprised interest.

"That's a lovely idea! I should have thought of it myself. I'll make sure to ask her next time I talk to her." Dai flashed me a grin. I had no clue what that was about. Surely she grasped why it might not be wise to have Aiden over?

"I agree; it's a marvelous suggestion." Lien looked a lot more excited than the concept warranted. But, just as when Rosa had first brought it up in the Ford, I was positive I was missing something important in the conversation.

"Campbell is your female friend, isn't she, *nǚér*?" Tye asked.

"That's right, *Fùqīn*." An amused expression crossed Dai's face. "She's rather timid, but super smart. I'm sure you'll like her."

Tye's relief at not having to deal with another man vying for Dai's affections was almost palpable. "You should definitely invite her then. We'd be very pleased to meet her," he said.

As we finished dessert, I could swear Lien and Rosa kept sending furtive glances my way. Dai's little secretive smile did nothing to improve my nerves, either. I felt that even if I asked, none of them would tell me what this was truly about. It was rather worrying.

Fortunately for me, that was the last of the day's unwanted surprises.

Inversely, Friday was deceptively ordinary. Maginnis had nothing new to report. We didn't even hear from Pierce, which was a relief. Dai was restless, though she tried hard not to show it. She leaped to her feet from the living room couch the moment she heard the back door open late in the afternoon.

"Rosa's here," Dai said, then she hurried from the room, leaving Prince and me to follow in her wake.

Our friend was in the midst of taking off her hat when we all rushed in like an avalanche into the kitchen.

"¡Ay, *Dios mío!*" Rosa took a step back, her hand rising to her chest. "What is going on with the three of you? I'm an old woman, you know. You shouldn't shock me like that."

Prince gave a whine and laid on the floor, covering his snout with both paws in contrition. As well he should, since most of his bones were courtesy of Rosa's kindness.

"Sorry." Dai bowed her head. "It wasn't our intention to do that." I seconded the sentiments, but without the extra motions of apology. "Won't you forgive us?"

"*Preciosa*, of course I do," Rosa said. The mutt wasn't the only one who had her wrapped around their finger. "Why were you all in such a hurry to get in here, anyway?"

I saw Dai take a deep breath rather than blurt out what she wanted. "I assume you went to the vigil this morning?"

"Oh!" Rosa nodded slowly. "I did. The Father very much appreciated the extra food."

"And did you discover anything new?" Dai asked.

Rosa sat down. "Not really. But I did find out when the Mass will be held. It'll be Saturday at ten. Not everyone will have the day off, but it will allow a lot more people to come and pay their respects."

So the Mass and funeral were tomorrow. That was much too soon, as far as I was concerned. From Dai's excited expression, however, tomorrow couldn't arrive fast enough.

CHAPTER 28



After much discussion, it was decided Dai would bring up the subject of the funeral and her desire to attend to her parents during dinner. Every objection was countered—she was an adult, it would be an opportunity to meet different people, and she'd be experiencing new things related to Rosa's culture. When Rosa added that Dai would be doing her a favor by coming and how amazing she would look wearing a *mantilla* and possibly even a *peineta*, Tye no longer had any objections. His eyes shone at the prospect of taking pictures of Dai and how amazing she would look while wearing them. Lien held out a little longer, but eventually capitulated as well.

I was silent during the entire exchange, not wanting to attract attention and inadvertently put myself in the line of fire. The disastrous dinner with Pierce and the fact that Rosa made it appear the whole thing had been her idea thankfully kept the Lien from thinking I might somehow have prevented this. Not being in her sights guaranteed I would live another day.

Everyone got up early on Saturday. Rosa arrived at eight with gifts for the occasion. Not only had she found a black lace

mantilla for Dai, but she'd also stayed up late working her magic on a plain black dress. She'd added lace sleeves, lace at the neck, and lace gloves for Dai to wear. A quick makeshift bouquet of the pink rose-of-Sharon flowers from the yard completed the transformation, turning Dai into a mysterious Spanish angel, her silver-white eyes even more spectacular with her dressed all in black.

Tye's Zeiss Ikon Kolibri was put through its paces as he photographed Dai from all manner of angles and begged for poses. When the pictures were developed, I'd make sure to get a copy or two for myself. Under no circumstances would a duplicate of any of these be spared for Pierce. I was certain Tye would agree with that plan one hundred percent.

Rosa changed into a mature black dress and wore a simpler lace mantilla, so more pictures were taken with the two of them together. I was more than happy not to be included, but looked forward to obtaining copies of those photographs as well.

"Maybe we should come with you," Lien suggested, her eyes looking worried. "Strength in numbers, as they say."

Dai shook her head. "*Mŭqīn*, please. I'll be fine. It's not like I'm going to see the body or anything." I cringed at her choice of words, knowing she would have been happy to do exactly that, if she could somehow have managed it.

"It's the emotions I'm concerned about," Lien said with a sigh. "Grief can be overwhelming, even for those not directly affected."

"Yet it's also a normal part of life. I need to be prepared for it rather than be ambushed by it." She gave her mother a soft smile. "If it gets to be too much, I promise I will leave."

The dragon sent me a scathing glance that said I'd better not let it get as far as that. I nodded in acknowledgment.

"Prince, you can't come with us today, so look after *Mŭqīn* and *Fùqīn* for me," Dai said. The mutt's ears drooped with disappointment. While we were sure he would have behaved himself if we'd allowed him to come, the children at the service would be another matter altogether, so it was best to keep the temptations to a minimum.

Dai's parents watched with concerned faces from the kitchen door as I backed the Ford out into the alley and got underway. Prince sat between them, not looking any happier than they did, but for different reasons.

We made good time to El Barrio, and I was able to find a level section of Harwood Street to park the car. Though we were early, there were already several people entering the church. Dai had her dark teashade glasses in place by the time I came around to open her door. We ambled across the street, the uneven surface of the dirt road and loose rocks making it a treacherous crossing for Dai.

The wooden building had a tower in the front, housing the belfry up top and the entrance to the house of worship at the bottom. This led into the narthex and then the nave or main area of the church. A font of holy water waited just inside the doors; worshipers could bless themselves by dipping two fingers into the liquid and crossing themselves before moving to the nave. Rosa had explained the process before we arrived, so we could proceed without inconveniencing those coming inside behind us.

The three of us settled down on the farthest pew from the altar, allowing those who'd known Señora Fuentes to sit closer to the front. Father Ignacio wore black vestments and ornaments fitting the somber occasion.

Most of the service was in Latin, the Father's words flowing in a sing-song cadence over his flock. Two altar boys assisted the priest by bringing or taking things as needed so the flow of the Mass wouldn't be interrupted. As the grief of those present became louder, the youngsters also helped those unable to hear by kneeling and standing at the appropriate times, thus letting the worshippers know when to stand or sit as the congregation prayed for their lost member and praised the glory of God.

Though it was a solemn occasion, the Mass was a beautiful thing to behold, and I was glad we'd been able to experience it.

When the final blessing was given, Father Ignacio and the altar boys led the way out of the church for the short walk to the Catholic cemetery for those living in El Barrio. We

remained seated until most of the congregation passed, then followed at the rear. With Dai between Rosa and me, most of the startled or confused looks were reserved for me. It felt odd to be an exception rather than the rule. Something the Wus had lived with since coming to Dallas.

The cemetery was neat and clean, the graves marked with crosses, statues of the Virgin Mary, or small headstones.

Father Ignacio purified and blessed the gravesite, going through the Rite of Committal. Those around us mourned in earnest as the coffin was lowered into the ground. I could count on one hand whom I could expect to show up at my funeral. Yet there were a hundred people here, if not more, showing that the señora was more beloved than I realized. Even the priest's eyes shone with unshed tears, despite how many funerals he must have presided over.

Nevertheless, someone had overlooked how the community felt about her and had brought her to a terrible and violent end.

As Dai's eyes, I'd been monitoring the gathered mourners, looking for anything unusual. Per her instructions, we walked around the periphery of the crowd and stopped downwind, even though there wasn't much of a breeze.

As people dispersed once the funeral was over, I noticed a group of women gathering together by the grave. While they were older than in the photograph I'd seen at the señora's house, I was positive they were the ladies belonging to the *brigada*.

Some were still crying, while others hugged one another. If anyone knew if the señora had been having difficulties that might have led to her death, it would be them. With us in tow, Rosa approached them. The fact that she too had been part of a *brigada* gave her an excuse to speak to the group.

The ten women varied in age from mid-thirties to almost seventy. All were dressed conservatively, wearing little to no makeup. Though it hadn't been as clear in the photographs I'd seen, their skin tones varied from as light as mine to a middling brown.

"*Lo siento mucho*," Rosa said. "I know how hard it is to lose a fellow sister from the war."

The ten women first stared at Rosa, then at myself and Dai. Expressions ranged from confused to hostile. One of them stepped forward, speaking for the group in Spanish. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"My name is Rosa Natalia Vega Ramirez. My companions and I came to pay our respects to the señora."

"You're the ones who showed up at the vigil?" This came from another of the other ladies; her eyes were red and puffy from crying.

"That's right," Rosa said.

"Juana mentioned you," the second woman added. "Thank you for all the food you brought."

"I was happy to."

The first woman spoke directly to Rosa, ignoring Dai and me. "If you're here to pay your respects, why did you bring a *gringo* with you? He's surely not here to do the same."

"Valentina!" The ladies behind her looked alarmed. The term *gringo* was derogatory.

"Actually, I am," I said. They all stared, shocked to hear me speaking Spanish. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

Several lace fans snapped open to help hide the lower part of their faces, and their eyes were wide with astonishment. Surely hearing a white man chatting in Spanish wasn't that shocking?

"You're not a Spaniard or a *mestizo*. Your features are all wrong. So how do you know Spanish?" The oldest woman in the group threw out the question, her tone laced with genuine curiosity rather than rancor.

I gave her a warm smile. "I believe I have French and British ancestors, but don't know for sure. It was Señora Vega Ramirez who taught us the language. She's a wonderful teacher."

The one called Valentina raised a dark brow. "Us?"

Dai offered them a quick curtsy. "I've learned a few words." 'A few words', my ass. She spoke better Spanish than

I did. But I could see how it might be advantageous for her not to say so. They would talk about things they might not otherwise, thinking their listener wouldn't understand them.

They stared at her, taking in her short stature, the dark teashade glasses, and the features that did not fit any of the rest of us. I was fairly certain none of them had ever met a Chinese before. The Geary Act, which was used to extend the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, had made it extremely difficult for them to come to, much less stay, in this country.

"You were all part of the Feminine Brigade of St. Joan of Arc, like Señora Fuentes Garcia, weren't you?" Rosa asked. "I saw your photograph at the vigil."

"We all went through a lot together," one of them said. "We were in the same *sociedad*, so joining the brigade as a group seemed the right thing to do." They all nodded in agreement.

"We'll be having a special Mass and recitation of the rosary for Isabel as a *sociedad*," another said. "It's the least we could do to honor her devotion to the Lady. She kept us on course during the good times and the bad."

The youngest of the ladies lightly elbowed the one who spoke. "She was happiest bringing down God's retribution, more so than His blessings."

This made several of them cackle with unrestrained humor and even tears.

Harsh or not, she was definitely loved.

"It still doesn't make any sense," the oldest said. "How Isabel died, I mean. Why was that *bruja* even here? Isabel would never have invited her into her home."

All the ladies seemed to wilt at her words.

"Isabel is with God now," Valentina said, crossing herself. "At least there is some comfort in that."

Everyone nodded, tears rising anew in several pairs of eyes.

"We should head indoors," one of them suggested. "Gabriela should take a seat before her knees swell again."

The oldest of the ladies swatted at her with her fan. "I've been running rings around you for years, *mija*. If you need to sit, just say so! Don't blame it on me."

The mood lightened, and the group slowly made their way to the cemetery's entrance.

Father Ignacio had stayed by the gravesite as the men worked to fill in the hole. Now that the women had gone, he approached us. "Señora Vega Ramirez, Señor Haskin, Señorita Wu."

"It was a lovely service, Padre," Rosa said.

"Thank you. I see you met the *sociedad*."

"An interesting group of ladies," Dai said. "As I am sure you're already aware."

Father Ignacio gave a tired smile. "I am indeed. With Señora Fuentes Garcia at the lead, they were a force to be reckoned with when they set their mind on something."

"Who was the señora's right-hand man?" Dai asked.

The priest spread his arms wide and stepped forward to prompt us to move with him toward the cemetery's entrance. I tapped a code on Dai's hand where it sat at my elbow, so she'd know we would be moving.

"Gabriela held that role for many years," Father Ignacio said. "But once her health started to decline, Valentina took over—though depending on the project, some of the others have taken the mantle as well," he said.

Dai nodded. "So who do you think will lead them now?"

Father Ignacio was silent for almost a full minute, his expression unreadable. "I am not sure. While all the señoras in the *sociedad* are strong-willed enough to lead the group and continue Isabel's work, Valentina has the fewest familial obligations. But there are other factors I am certain will come into play."

That seemed an odd thing to say. "What do you mean, Padre?" I asked.

The priest looked away. "There are some unspoken rules among my people that, at times, sway decisions more than they should. Some believe that the more Spanish blood and the lighter the skin, the more deserving one is for certain opportunities."

His answer was a shock. "The fact she has a darker

complexion than some of the other señoras could keep her from being accepted as the new leader for the group?"

Father Ignacio nodded, staring at the ground. "We experience prejudice in the United States, but sadly it is much like what we do to our own people. Skin color, however, doesn't matter to God."

"Well said, Padre." Dai tilted her head. "I've always thought it ridiculous myself. Being blind and thus unable to judge individuals by the hue of their skin has invariably felt like a blessing. I prefer to judge people based on who they are, not where they came from or what they look like."

"*Que Dios te bendiga*, Señorita Wu," Father Ignacio said. "There is much wisdom in what you say."

"Thank you, Padre." Dai nodded in acknowledgement. "Have you decided when the special Mass for the *sociedad* will be held?"

Father Ignacio hesitated. This struck me as odd. Did the priest know more about what was going on than he wanted to admit?

Dai flashed him a small, disarming smile. "I swear to you I've no intention of disturbing the Mass or the rosary recitation. But I'd love to speak to the ladies afterward. We'd be happy to bring refreshments or whatever you think would be appropriate."

"Forgive me," Father Ignacio said. "It isn't that I believed you would do anything of the sort. We just get so few outsiders, your presence here might be misinterpreted. Especially if it became known you have ties with the woman arrested for the crime."

His words sounded like some kind of threat, but the sad tone of voice and the expression on his face suggested differently.

"I understand there's a modicum of risk involved, Padre," Dai said. "But it's vital we learn the truth about the señora's murder. She was such a prominent figure in the neighborhood that if the woman arrested is set free due to lack of evidence, the community's sorrow and anger might escalate into outrage

THE JOY OF MURDER

and make matters worse for everyone."

What she didn't mention, but we all understood, was the possibility of violence and the horrible repercussions that would cause. Between Prohibition, the growing economic depression, and the feelings of helplessness sweeping the country, any excuse would do for causing chaos and, heaven forbid, bloodshed.

CHAPTER 29



Father Ignacio informed us the special Mass would be held after the daily Mass that evening. We bid him farewell at the cemetery's entrance and made our way slowly back to the Ford. Some of the people standing by the church appeared to be waiting for the priest. Others seemed more interested in studying us from afar. Not all the stares were friendly. Most of those seemed to come from men who didn't look like they'd been present at the Requiem Mass or the funeral, but serving as sentries of some sort.

Word about the outsiders in El Barrio was making the rounds. The fact that Rosa was with us, and that I opened the car door to let her get inside, looked to confuse a few of them. After safely tucking the ladies within the Ford's protection, I slipped into the driver's side, only to stop as I noticed an object pinned to the dash. As I looked at it, a sense of *déjà vu* swept over me. The item before me was a plain business card with nothing on it but a local exchange telephone number.

"Is something wrong, Jacques?" Dai asked from the back.

Rosa removed her and Dai's *mantillas* and carefully folded them before putting them inside her purse.

"No, not wrong, just odd. This is the second business card I've seen with this particular telephone number." I started the Ford. "I'm pretty sure it's a way to order illegal libations."

"That *is* rather strange," Dai said. "Where did you find the first one?"

I put the car in gear and gently guided it onto the dirt road. "It was given to me by a mechanic at the garage. I don't believe the establishment's owner knows about it."

Dai pulled out her fan, and after a couple of passes, closed it and tapped it against her knee. "Wasn't the repair shop downtown?"

"Yes. So nowhere near this side of the city," I said. "Should I be worried that our automobile seems to imply I'm in the market for hooch?"

Rosa and Dai both laughed.

"I wouldn't think so," Dai said, a smile of amusement still on her face. "But it opens some unexpected possibilities."

"Possibilities?" I asked.

She nodded. "You never know what might be connected. So let's drive around El Barrio for a bit and see what we can see."

I waited for her to say more, but she didn't. What was I supposed to be looking for?

"*Preciosa*, did you discover what you needed to today?" Rosa asked. "Is that why you want to meet with the *sociedad* again?"

"Yes, for the most part, and yes," Dai said. "I'm a little closer to what I am searching for, but there are still a lot of puzzle pieces missing."

We were also under a time constraint. If somehow Maginnis' motion was denied, we needed proof of someone else's involvement, or we'd have to wait until the trial. If Dai's suspicions were correct, Mrs. Pierce could sit in the High Five for two more months before we could try to free her again.

Rosa nodded slowly. "So I'll need to come with you then."

"I'm sorry to keep involving you in this," Dai said. "But I

doubt we would be welcome without you."

"I understand, and I don't mind helping. I just hate keeping things from Lien. Are you sure we can't tell her what's going on?"

"Yes!" Dai and I answered at the same time. There wasn't any way the dragon would appreciate why we were doing this, no matter how many times we tried to explain it. If she found out, Dai might end up locked in her room for weeks. I would be excommunicated from the household forever, or worse.

"I suppose you're right," Rosa said with a chortle. "I doubt in her wildest dreams she ever pictured you as some sort of detective. She adores you, though. You're her treasure. It would break her heart if anything happened to you."

Dai sighed softly. "I know that. But I also have things that are important to me. Not telling Mother will save her from worrying unnecessarily."

"Plus, I'll make sure nothing happens to her," I said. I, too, wished Dai wouldn't dig into such matters, but since I doubted I could stop her, I'd do everything in my power to keep her safe.

The melancholy smile I spotted on Rosa's face as I glanced into the peep mirror told me what she did not say—that things didn't always go your way, no matter how hard you tried. I knew the truth of that myself, but it wouldn't sway me from doing all I could.

The drive around certain parts of El Barrio was rough, the unpaved streets growing rougher the closer we came to the train yards, where a lot of those living in El Barrio were employed. Old boxcars were used as homes for the workers, but those sheltered inside were without plumbing, running water, or electricity.

With the current economic depression, I couldn't help but fear how much worse things might become here. Dallas had so far staved off the growing financial downturn with the discovery of oil in East Texas, but there were no guarantees it wouldn't affect us as harshly as other parts of the state or the entire country.

"*Ay, que pobrecitos,*" Rosa said. "No one should be made to live like this."

I was sure this was not how they'd hoped to live after making the long trek here from Mexico, or even farther. Now that it had been pointed out to me, I noticed most of those in this part of town were darker-skinned than in other parts of the neighborhood.

All conversation died for the rest of our trip home.

Prince was pleased to see us, and I let him out to roam in the backyard. The plan was for us to have a quick lunch, then I would drive Rosa home. Dai had just come back down from changing into a yellow day dress when I spotted her motioning for me to join her rather than walk into the kitchen.

"Is something wrong?"

"No." She flashed me an mischievous smile. "But I didn't want to ask you this in front of Rosa."

That sounded ominous. What did she have in mind for us now?

"Jacques, might you be up for a visit to the library after you drop her off?" Dai asked. "I have a topic for Mrs. Lark to research for us."

"Yes, I suppose so," I said. "What do you wish for her to look into?" I pulled out the small notepad and pencil I kept with me at all times. Dai might have the memory of an elephant, but mine was somewhat more fallible.

"I'd like more information from articles having to do with the illegal import of alcohol from the southern parts of Texas and even Mexico. I'm particularly interested in finding out how successful the efforts of the Texas Rangers have been."

I wrote it all down. "You think this has something to do with the murder?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. I don't know enough yet," Dai said. "But the more information I have, the more likely I can figure it out."

Might there be a connection? I couldn't fathom it myself, but Dai's instincts were better than mine at finding links between unrelated things. I truly hoped it had nothing to do

with it—Prohibition-spurred violence was more than we'd be able to handle.

"Do you have the two business cards?" she asked. "I'd like to 'see' them for myself."

I removed the one I'd found on the Ford from my pocket and retrieved the other from my room's trashcan. Looking at them together, I concluded they were definitely the same. Curious as to what she might make of them, I handed them over.

Dai felt each card on the front and back and even carefully touched the edges. She also slowly passed her fingertips over the phone number after taking a sniff. "Hm. Cheap 12-point cardstock. The telephone number isn't embossed. Are the numbers in the same spot on the two of them? Might they be using an ink stamp?"

"You're right, they're not," I said. "Looking at them, I think it might well be a stamp of some sort and not printed."

It would be almost impossible to track the paper. The number stamp kits were also readily available, so we would not get far with that either. Still, the cards could prove relevant at some point, so I would keep them safely tucked away for now.

I took Rosa home a short while later, then placed my research request at the Carnegie Library with Mrs. Lark. By the time I returned to the house, I had two surprises waiting for me there.

CHAPTER 30



Prince greeted me with a bark and wag of his curved tail as I stepped into the kitchen by the back door. I scratched him behind the ear, and he then zoomed toward the front of the house. I followed at a more sedate pace after hanging up my hat and jacket.

As I left the kitchen, I became aware of two things: first, an enormous bouquet of red and yellow roses on the foyer's table; second, the whisper of female voices coming from the living room.

Whom the flowers were from was a certainty, even though the corresponding card was missing, probably pocketed by Dai in case the message was of the same provocative sort as on the previous occasion. Pierce had sent a similarly extravagant arrangement once before. With the mix of red and yellow, he might be trying to apologize for the debacles the family had suffered due to Miss Carmichael, or he could be hinting their friendship was becoming something more. While the first option might be considered proper, I disliked the second one—and knowing him, he almost certainly meant them both.

But how did the cad have the audacity to return here and bring Carmichael with him? He was a fool if he thought the goodwill from her last visit would stick around for long.

But as I made it to the living room's entrance, I realized it was Aiden who'd come calling. I felt both relieved and energized. The second feeling was a little puzzling, but I welcomed it all the same.

"Welcome home, Jacques," Dai said. I was sure she knew I had returned the moment I opened the back door, if not sooner—her hearing was keener than a bat's.

"Thanks." I turned toward our guest. "It's good to see you as always, Dr. Campbell." I sent an acknowledging nod her way.

She returned my greeting, a touch of color on her cheeks.

"Really, Jacques," Dai said in a disapproving tone. "Isn't it about time you started calling her Aiden rather than Dr. Campbell?"

I had used her given name before, but only once, while we were on the telephone—but doing so in each other's presence seemed presumptuous. "I wouldn't want to be disrespectful. She might not wish for me to be so familiar."

"Aren't we all friends?" Dai turned in her seat. "Aiden, would you be offended if Jacques called you by your first name?"

Aiden stared at her lap, her cheeks coloring a bit more. "No. I... I wouldn't be upset by that. It'd be fine," she said. "But only if he wants to." The last came out in a rush.

As if the popinjay's high-handed frivolity were contagious, I found myself bowing with a slight flair. "Then I would be most honored to do so, Aiden."

The doctor's face turned red and she kept her gaze glued to her lap, large hands clasped together as if to force herself to be still. It was adorable; she seemed like an innocent child trapped in a husky frame.

On the other hand, Dai's ensuing dimpled smile made her look like the cat who ate the canary. Surely getting me to call Aiden by her first name wasn't something to be *that* satisfied

about. What was she up to?

"By the way, Aiden, how would you feel about joining us here for lunch on Sunday?" Dai asked. "My parents would love to meet you—it would be a casual affair. Plus, it'd be a chance for you to try foods from my country." She half-turned her face in my direction. "I was thinking we could introduce Aiden to *dim sum*. We even have some dried chrysanthemum leaves Mother's been saving to make tea with."

The custom of *dim bulke*, or as some called it, *yum cha*, first originated in tea houses in China, and the *dim sum* dishes had served as snacks to complement the brews. Over time, the variety of morsels provided increased, eventually becoming a social occasion in its own right where people could sample teas and snacks over breakfast or lunch. All manner of items could be presented: dumplings, rolls, buns, cakes, meats, vegetables—almost anything—and the diversity within each type of food was amazing. Depending on what you had on hand, each session could be entirely different.

"That's a marvelous idea," I said. "But would we have time to gather everything for tomorrow? The following week would work better. Assuming Dr. Ca—I mean, *Aiden's* schedule permits it?"

Dai nodded. "You're right; that would be more appropriate. It'd give mother and Rosa more time to plan it. We can also move it to Saturday so as not to interfere with church services on Sunday. Aiden, what do you think?"

The doctor looked up, an eager expression on her face. "It—it sounds wonderful. If you're sure it wouldn't be too much trouble?"

I answered that one. "Not at all. We'd be happy to have you. Between Rosa, Dai, Lien, and me, we'll make quick work of the preparations."

She stared at Dai with a surprised look. "You cook?"

Dai laughed. "Not exactly. But I can stuff dumplings or roll egg rolls with the best of them. I'm also pretty handy at putting ingredients together. I probably *could* manage cooking on the stove, but certain overprotective parties won't let me try. It's

all very silly, really."

I shrugged for Aiden's benefit. Dai didn't enjoy having limits, and while I was sure she could cook if she put her mind to it, the rest of us preferred she not take the risk of getting burned or accidentally setting the kitchen on fire. Besides, cooking wasn't of genuine interest to her; if it was, we wouldn't have been able to stop her, as we'd learned when she decided to experiment with chemicals. The improvements she'd made to the cleaning solutions for the laundry couldn't be denied, but it had still been a battle to get her parents to capitulate—and even then it had been with the stipulation that she would not conduct any experiments without me being present.

"Jacques, do sit, won't you?" Dai asked. "Aiden was about to tell me the reason for her visit."

I was about to refuse, thinking I should grab our guest some refreshments, when I noticed some had already been placed on the coffee table. Whether they had been gathered by Dai or Aiden or both, there was no way to say. Still, I experienced a slight nudge of guilt at them having to go to the trouble due to my absence. I took a seat.

Aiden sat up a little straighter on the sofa. "Yes, about that. After some research, I think I've narrowed down what the implement used on Mrs. Fuentes might be."

Even Prince's ears rose to attention at the pronouncement.

"The weapon was most likely a pry bar," she said. "The kind employed for opening crates. The fracture patterns it left on the skull were rather unique."

"A pry bar. How interesting," Dai said. "That would seem to indicate the homicide occurred at a warehouse or a storage place of some sort."

While it was great information to have, I doubted it would help narrow down the actual murder site. "That still leaves an awful lot of locations where Mrs. Fuentes could have been killed," I said.

Dai nodded. "True, but it's one more puzzle piece than we had before, and it will eventually lead to others. I'm certain of it."

I didn't know where she found such confidence. It still felt like we were looking for a needle in a haystack.

"And," Aiden said, her voice dropping to almost a whisper, "there was one other thing." She gingerly reached into a pocket and brought out an envelope. She set it on the coffee table rather than hand it to either of us. "The copies of the photographs you wanted."

That explained why she'd come to visit us in person to inform us about the murder weapon instead of just telling us over the telephone. She'd gone out of her way to get the copies to us, which was quite considerate. "Thank you," I said.

Her cheeks blushed crimson.

I took the envelope and looked at the contents. There were several pictures inside. Aiden's sisters had taken good advantage of the rare opportunity of their sibling getting dolled up. The cream-dyed dress with embroidered pearls in a mixed flapper and ancient Greek style had been a flattering look for the doctor, making her appear more feminine than her usual attire. One photograph showed her standing, and another had her seated primly with her hands on her lap. A third was a portrait, for which she did not look the camera in the eye, and her cheeks were colored, which gave her an endearing shy appearance. Having grown fond of this expression the few times I'd seen it, I had to admit this photo was my favorite—though it was a pity it didn't capture the fullness of her captivating ice-blue eyes.

"You, um, you don't have to keep them all. I wouldn't be offended." Aiden's gaze was once more locked on her broad lap.

I realized I'd been staring at the photographs overly long. "No, we want them all," I said. "Thank you very much for bringing them. And please thank your sisters for taking them in the first place."

The doctor's entire face turned bright red. "Sure."

"Please thank them for me as well," Dai added.

A shy smile lighted on Aiden's lips for a moment. "I will," she said.

Unfortunately, the doctor left us not long after—but now that she'd accepted Dai's invitation for *dim sum*, I found myself looking forward to it. I'd have to keep on my toes to divert any potential disasters, but the prospect of seeing Aiden experimenting with—and hopefully enjoying—Chinese cuisine would be well worth it.

Only once I'd seen her off did I recall the other matter that had crowded into the afternoon. I was about to ask about it when I found Dai already holding out the missing bouquet card behind me.

"Jacques, read this out to me, won't you?" she asked. "No need for editing, please."

I took the tiny envelope, a trickle of dread making my fingers tingle. How scandalous would this message be? The last one had been far from safe. If I'd not been able to intercept it and deliver a cleaned-up version to Dai's parents, there would have been no end of trouble.

"Dear China Doll," I read out loud. "Please accept these with my sincerest apologies for the unexpected visitor the other day and my continued silence since. Yours always, Truman Pierce."

I rolled my eyes. While the body of the note was acceptable, his greeting and parting words were most definitely not. I hoped Dai wouldn't want to keep the card, for sooner or later, the dragon would come across it, and there was no telling whether Lien would be encouraged by it or horrified. I'd prefer not to find out, as neither would be beneficial, in my opinion.

Dai tilted her head slightly to the side. "I suspect both Linda and his father are keeping him quite busy, which is probably for the best. We have other battles to contend with."

I assumed she meant getting her parents to agree to her returning to El Barrio tonight, without asking a lot of questions—neither of which I was looking forward to.

CHAPTER 31



I shouldn't have worried, at least not about the first part. Hurried whispers between Dai and Rosa while Lien was in another room of the house set her plan in motion. Despite her previous doubts and objections, Rosa now seemed wholly invested in the investigation.

That Dai had a strategy didn't surprise me, but I felt like an idiot for not asking about it when I'd had the chance. It would have been better for my peace of mind to know the plan of attack.

"*Nǚér*, how were the mass and funeral?" Tye asked. The fact Dai appeared perfectly fine when they got home had reflected relief on both her parents' faces, but they hadn't brought the topic up until dinner was almost over.

"It was fascinating, *Fùqīn*," Dai said. "All the ceremonies were in Latin and very solemn. The hymns were quite interesting, too."

"So no problems arose?" Lien asked, first glancing my way, then Rosa's. We both shook our heads.

"We stayed at the back of the church and the gravesite,"

Rosa answered.

Dai gave them a quick smile. "We even got to practice our Spanish!"

Rosa nodded and added. "They both did very well. Everyone was quite impressed."

Lien and Tye sent proud looks our way.

"Oh, and we had a visitor this afternoon," Dai said, looking every bit as if the thought had just occurred to her rather than it being a step of a previously sketched attack plan. "My friend Aiden came by. We invited her to *dim sum* for lunch next Saturday. I hope that's all right."

Lien's eyes lit up, and so did Rosa's. I guess that hadn't been part of the quick, whispered conversation Dai'd had with Rosa earlier.

"That's wonderful! It'll be very nice to meet her." The dragon sent me a look I couldn't interpret. I suddenly felt uneasy.

"Jacques and I will help, of course," Dai said. "It'll be fun."

For a long moment, the entire family was in agreement and content, looking forward to the future.

Now that the stage was set, Dai pounced.

"*Mǔqīn*, Rosa is going to visit some of the ladies we met this morning after evening Mass tonight, and we'd like to go with her," Dai said. "It would be a great opportunity for us to practice more of our Spanish. Also, since Jacques would be driving, Rosa won't need to ride the streetcars at night. Would that be all right?"

Rosa jumped in before Lien could formulate an answer. "I promise we won't be out too late."

The dragon frowned. "You're not tired from going out this morning?" she asked. "You have been socializing a lot, and it can be unexpectedly exhausting."

"*Mǔqīn*, I'm fine," Dai said. "And I want to go."

Her mother studied the three of us for a moment. "Oh, all right. Since Rosa will be with you, I'm sure you won't get into any trouble."

I sincerely hoped not. I also prayed that roping Rosa into

Dai's mission wouldn't inadvertently ruin her friendship with Lien. When it came to Dai, the dragon could be pretty merciless. She might see Rosa's compliance in these shenanigans as an unforgivable betrayal, which would be a terrible shame. Yet another reason to hurry things along.

We were on the road within the hour, making a stop on the way to purchase staples, like bags of dried beans and rice that we could donate to the church or the ladies. The sun had already set by the time we reached El Barrio. Though the housing was crowded, it was harder to tell at night due to the lack of electricity in some parts of the neighborhood. The dirt roads also proved troublesome to navigate because of the absence of streetlights. Even with the headlights on, some of the potholes seemed to materialize out of nowhere. I slowed the Ford to a crawling pace.

There were lights on inside the church and across the street at the nunnery. The majority of the roads were deserted. I parked in front of the church to afford us the best view and so we wouldn't appear to be seeking to hide our presence. With one murder seemingly committed within the community in a person's home by an outsider, trying to remain unseen would most likely be taken badly.

Prince had accompanied us to serve as an extra bodyguard for Dai and to charm the ladies. The rascal possessed an uncanny gift for ingratiating himself to women, something I was certain would make the popinjay writhe with envy.

I was in the process of moving the staples out of the trunk and onto the Ford's hood when I noticed a spot of flame flare up a few buildings down. It lit up a craggy face for a moment before the match was put out—an obvious gesture to guarantee we knew someone was there. Whether as a warning or deterrent, it was difficult to say. So I just nodded in the man's direction and continued with my business.

Fortunately, we didn't have to wait long before the special mass was over, and the ten ladies came out from the church with Father Ignacio. Rosa, Dai, and Prince got out of the Ford, with Rosa approaching the departing women first.

"Señoras, Padre, sorry for the intrusion," Rosa said. All but the priest looked shocked to see us there. "We wanted to bring over some staples to donate in Señora Fuentes Garcia's name. A thank you for allowing us to spend time in your community."

At least two of the women's eyes shone with repressed tears at the gesture. Others seemed confused, but also pleased. The rest were hard to read.

"If you'd let me know where would be best," I asked, "I take them to wherever you need."

They appeared even more taken aback by my offer than they had at the unexpected donation. Father Ignacio smiled, seemingly as moved as the others. I couldn't quite grasp what was so unusual about my offering to help.

"If you'll hand me one, I will show you where we can take them," the priest said.

I shook my head. "I don't mind carrying them, Padre."

"I insist."

Nodding, I placed one of the smaller bags on his arm, ensuring he had a good grip before letting go. Despite missing half a limb, he used what he had left to balance the sack. I hefted two onto my shoulders and followed him around the side of the church toward the back. The priest had a small storage area just inside the church's rear entrance, and we set our burdens there. A couple more trips, and the donations were squared away.

"You and yours keep surprising me, Señor Haskin," Father Ignacio said softly on our way back. "Despite what brought you to us, your attitudes are not what we usually encounter."

I sent him a puzzled glance. "Surely carrying a few things for you is not that odd."

He touched me lightly on the arm. "When you're only thought capable of manual labor, it never occurs to others that they can lend a hand and do some of their own. Some would even find the concept offensive or beneath them."

"That type of thing has never made sense to me, sir," I said. "Daiyu might be blind and a foreigner, but she and her family opened my eyes wide a long time ago."

Laughter greeted our return as Prince wove his magic by doing cute tricks for the waiting ladies.

"¡*Que precioso!*" Gabriella, the oldest of the women, kneeled to lavish affections on the mutt. "He's so smart!"

Prince strutted in place, his curled tail wagging, as he ate up the praise.

"Padre, you have to watch this!" The women parted so Father Ignacio could join them. "He does tricks in English, Spanish, and even Chinese!"

I unobtrusively went around the Ford to move to Dai's side.

"It's too dark out here to see well," one of them said. "My house is only a block away. We can have some *café* and *polvorones* and introduce everyone properly. Then Señorita Wu can show us what else Prince can do."

Just about all of them looked excited at the idea. Never underestimate the innate power of a canine's charms.

I took Dai's hand and rested it on the inside of my elbow as the entire group of us, including Father Ignacio, walked down Harwood Street to our impromptu hostess' home.

CHAPTER 32



The house belonged to Señora Silvia. By the time we got there, all the women were insisting Dai and Rosa call them by their first names as if they'd known each other for years. The dwelling wasn't as grand as Mrs. Fuente's place, but it made up for that with a big porch filled with chairs.

Rosa and a couple of the others followed Silvia inside to prepare the coffee and grab small plates for the cookies. Father Ignacio managed the introductions, and I took my hat off and greeted each of the ladies. Most were quite flattered at the attention, and said a word or two in welcome. This would help Dai tie the names to the voices, and I planned to tap her arm in our secret code to tell her who the others were when they spoke during the course of conversation. As I'd noted before, their ages ranged from the mid-thirties to almost seventy. Most of them had moved here due to the revolution. However, they kept in contact with their extended families in the different states in Mexico, which was why they'd joined the *brigada* when the Catholic persecutions began so they could support the faithful still living there.

Silvia's two sons, their wives, and a small gaggle of children shared the home, and we kept our voices low so they wouldn't be disturbed, the little ones having just been put to bed. Now that we were considered chiefly harmless, the ladies opened up about their lives here, their families, and more. The dynamics of the group were complex, but a picture slowly formed. The elders—which included Maria, Silvia, and Gabriela—were given preference. They helped guide the conversations, but they also made sure everyone got a chance to speak. Juana and Leticia were the youngest—leaving Valentina, Alicia, Adriana, and Margarita somewhere in between.

The women came from different cities and states of Mexico, coming together and bonding once they'd established Dallas as their home. No story could be told in which Mrs. Fuentes hadn't somehow played a part. That the woman had lived only for El Barrio became ever more apparent.

When Rosa spoke of her own experiences, it was clear the others understood her feelings and travails intimately, as they closely resembled their own. But, despite that, not much was said about the *brigadas* themselves. Not enough trust had been established for those secrets to be freely shared, not even with someone who'd done the same—and *especially* not in the presence of outsiders.

To my surprise, Dai followed the example of the other women and doled out bits of information about her life. She even regaled them with the peculiar tale of how Prince had entered our lives. This endeared them both to the *sociedad* even more, as if such a thing was possible. The mutt had been lavished with tidbits and love from the minute we arrived. He was deep in his element and enjoying every second of it.

When my turn came, I was hesitant. It felt odd to speak about myself. The moment I mentioned I was an orphan, several of the ladies crossed themselves and a murmur or two of "*que pobrecito*" were heard. So I made sure they knew that despite my lack of blood relations, once I had joined the Wus I'd always had a family; that I enjoyed a home and friends who cared about me.

To my surprise, the revelation, seemed to win several of them over. They even asked me to say my name a couple of times so they could pronounce it correctly. This then led to a conversation about what the Spanish equivalent of my name might be—*Jacobo* and *Jaime* being the top contenders. Although the discussion got a little heated, there was no malice or anger in it, just a group of close friends poking fun at one another.

From my end, either *Jacobo* or *Jaime* were much preferable to the odious 'Jackie.'

Father Ignacio excused himself after a time, still needing to finish preparations for the early Sunday Mass. Then, in the quiet moments left in his wake, Dai struck.

"Jacques mentioned he saw lookouts in the street," Dai said. "Do you often have trouble with outsiders?"

A couple of the women looked confused, but the rest didn't seem surprised.

The oldest, Gabriela, took it upon herself to answer. "Nothing like what we used to. When the KKK was strong years ago, we'd run into problems now and then, especially during the weekends at night. Liquor might be banned in the *Estados Unidos*, but that hasn't stopped many from drinking, anyway.

"We are big enough at present that the *blancos* mostly leave us alone. But with Isabel being killed, we thought it would be prudent to place men to keep watch for potential dangers, like in the old days." Her voice wavered for a moment. "Someone struck at our *corazón*—we have to do what we can not to let it happen again."

"Still, why would anyone want Señora Fuentes dead?" Dai asked. Her tone sounded baffled, as if murder were an alien thing never seen on this planet before. She could be eerily scary sometimes.

Glances were traded left and right. Then, as the silence lengthened, Leticia rose to her feet. "I know you all are thinking it. It was that *blanca bruja*. I saw her picture on a newspaper clipping in Isabel's house when... when I found her."

Leticia's recollection of Mrs. Fuente's body seemed to

dampen Leticia's previous heat, and she sat back down as if having lost her strength.

"Yes, but *why* would she do it?" Valentina asked. Glances were traded again. "It's been years since they faced off against one another."

Dai straightened in her chair. "Faced off? What do you mean?"

Teresa leaned forward, her eyes alight. She seemed to be the gossipmonger of the bunch. "The *bruja* was a Maiden of the KKK. I heard she was the leader of a local group. One year, she organized multiple protests and recruitment rallies at Pike Park, the only park nearby for the kids and our big *fiestas*. Isabel and the *bruja* had several loud public confrontations." She chuckled. "It was a sight to see."

Having endured one of her orchestrated meetings ourselves, we were well aware Mrs. Pierce had questionable beliefs and did not verify her information before attacking—just the type of gullible person groups like the Klan loved to have in their ranks. If not for the indictment of their Grand Dragon, David Stephenson, for murder, and the leadership's tendency to steal funds from the Klan's coffers, there was no telling how much more damage they might have caused.

"But she would have had to find out where Isabel lived," Adriana chimed in. "It's not like anyone in El Barrio would have told the *bruja* that."

From the frowning, concerned faces now around me, it was apparent none of them liked to think of the alternative—that the murder had been instigated by the darkness inside one of their own.

CHAPTER 33



We left Silvia's house not long after that, the change in mood having soured the festivities.

Before we completed the trek back to our sanctuary, we dropped Rosa off at home. She didn't say much during the drive there. Dai had also been silent, absently stroking Prince's dark fur, her face turned toward the window, though she could see nothing of the world beyond it.

To me, it didn't feel like we'd made any progress, but perhaps she'd picked up on something I hadn't. I held my tongue until Rosa was gone, not wanting to involve her any further if I could avoid it. "Dai, a penny for your thoughts?"

She turned her face in the direction of my voice. "Sorry; there just has been little to say. But tying the voices to the individuals made it well worth going there tonight. And I did pick up a thing or two."

"Enough to push the case forward?" I asked.

Dai shook her head. "Sadly, no. So we'll need to come up with something else to try. Finding the actual murder site is crucial."

True as that might be, I was stymied on how exactly we could go about doing that.

"It's a pity tomorrow is Sunday," she said. "The county's Central Records Office won't be open."

I glanced at her in the peep mirror. "What are you hoping to find there?"

"Property documents to identify which warehouses are near or in El Barrio. The scene of the murder has probably been cleaned, but there are other ways to tell where it happened."

I pondered the question for a moment or two. "We may not need to see the records."

"Oh? How so?" When I glanced in the peep mirror again, her expression mirrored Prince's when about to get an unexpected treat.

"The business section of the Dallas City Directory," I said. "Unless the warehouse is purely private, there should be an entry there to solicit customers."

Dai laughed. "That's excellent, Jacques! Good thinking!"

"I'd like to believe you keep me around for more than just my exceptional looks."

She laughed again. "Come on, now; you have a myriad of useful talents. Plus, you're my partner in crime. I could never have achieved half the things I have without you."

I'd not been fishing for praise, but it warmed my heart to hear it, regardless.

As I parked the Ford in the back of the house, the kitchen door opened and the Wus came out to greet us. Rosa must have called them to let them know we were on our way.

"Welcome home, you two." Lien's expression was pleased, so whatever she had discussed with Rosa on the telephone hadn't alarmed her.

"*Mǔqīn, Fùqīn*, you didn't need to come out to meet us," Dai said. She held the still-sleeping Prince in her arms.

"*Nǚér*, we just enjoy looking at your lovely face," Tye said.

She gave him an indulgent smile. "With the millions of photos you've taken of me, I'd think you'd be sick of it by now."

"Daiyu, don't tease your father," the dragon admonished, shaking her head. "Photographs are nice, but nothing compares to seeing the genuine article."

Tye nodded enthusiastically as the two of them moved out of the way so we could come inside. It wasn't clear whether it was regarding the teasing comment, the one after, or both. Knowing him, I tended to believe it was the latter.

"Well, thank you both," Dai said, bowing her head. "Did you have a pleasant evening?"

"Yes, we did," Lien replied. "*The House of Magic* episode was quite interesting. I think you would have enjoyed it immensely."

Was this a soft admonishment for us having gone out tonight? If so, Dai ignored it. "I'm sure they'll replay it at some point, or you can tell me all about it at breakfast." She yawned. "It has been a rather busy day, and I'm ready for bed. Prince already beat me to it."

The mutt's ear twitched at the mention of his name, but otherwise was dead to the world.

"Good night then, *Nǚér*," the dragon said. "Pleasant dreams."

We all watched Dai leave the kitchen and head for the stairs. I took off my jacket and hung it up with my hat, hoping her parents would follow her. Over the years, they had become as fond of me as I had of them, but Dai would always be the priority. A sentiment I heartily agreed with.

"Did you enjoy yourselves? Everything went well?" the dragon asked quietly.

Thankfully, for once, I answer with a clear conscience. "Yes. The ladies of the *sociedad* seemed rather taken with her. And they loved Prince."

Lien sighed with relief. "It's wonderful she's taking an interest, but I can't help but worry." The fact the dragon would even admit to it spoke of the depths of her concern. "She cared nothing for socializing before, yet lately, it seems to be happening quite often."

"*Qínài de*, aren't you the one who is always reminding me

she's not a child anymore?" Tye said, touching her hand. "That she is a blooming flower, coming into her own?"

Lien blushed at her husband's words. I looked away, not used to seeing the dragon show any kind of weakness.

"Yes, she is," Lien said. "It's just hard to accept sometimes."

Her husband nodded. "I agree." He turned to me. "Thank you for bringing our daughter back safely, Jacques. Sleep well."

I bowed, uncertain on how to respond to that. It was my duty and honor. There was no need to thank me.

Once they, too, had retreated upstairs, I started work on a batch of *congee* that would last us a couple of days. While it cooked, I made my way to Tye's study. Grabbing the copy of the Dallas Telephone Directory he kept there, I checked to make sure the house was secure, then knuckled down to do a bit of research.



"It's about time you got up," Dai said.

I'd just opened my bedroom door to find her and Prince waiting for me in the kitchen.

"And was locking your door *really* necessary?" She sounded annoyed. Most likely, she'd planned to shock me into wakefulness in some manner or other—precisely the reason I'd taken precautions. I learned my lesson the last time Dai had been on the hunt. Usually a stubbornly late sleeper, the excitement of the chase tended to have the opposite effect on her.

"Yes, I'm sorry, but it absolutely was." I didn't explain further.

She gave me a pout. "You drain the fun out of life, Jacques. Prince and I were looking forward to waking you." The shameless mutt sat beside her, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, amused by the entire business.

"Did you want to exercise before or after breakfast?" I asked. We practiced tai chi most mornings, and she'd already dressed for it in loose-fitting clothes.

"After, if you don't mind," she said. "I'm more interested in what you found last night, and I'd like to hear about it before the others join us."

"All right, but let me start the kettle and *congee* first," I said. To my surprise, Dai had already filled the pot and placed it on the stove. She'd also brought out the usual pan for heating the rice porridge, and had even set out several ingredients for us to add to it once it was warm. "Just how long have you been up?"

"A while, I guess." She shrugged and sat down at the kitchen table. "I slept, I woke, I got up. There's business to attend to."

The wall clock declared it was only a few minutes after seven. She had gone to bed early and looked rested, so I could only assume she'd gotten enough sleep, but I would keep an eye on her to make sure. "Thanks for the help, by the way. You didn't have to."

She shrugged again. "There wasn't much else to do while I waited, so I figured I'd lend a hand. Despite the fact you locked me out." An adorable pout flashed by. "I even let Prince out to do his business."

The mutt gave a soft bark to confirm her words, then stared pointedly at me. Someone wanted his breakfast.

Once I got the mutt taken care of and everything else moving, I retrieved my notes.

"I found a few, but the Morgan Warehouse and Commercial Company fit best. It's on Houston Street and McKinney Avenue close to the Katy train yard," I said. Katy was the nickname for the MKT, Missouri-Texas-Kansas, rail line. "It's an enormous facility with several buildings, all of which are served by private switch tracks. If I recall correctly, the Morgan Warehouse took over the space once used by the Dallas Brewery and expanded it." Unfortunately, despite their boasts of "Dallas Beer has no equal," the brewery became one of the victims of Prohibition. Even their attempt to convert to

non-alcoholic beverages as the Grain Juice Company was to no avail.

"Their ad claims 'ample wharfage and trucking facilities, thus assuring no delays in receiving or distribution. Modern warehousing that includes cold, dry, and yard storage,'" I said, quoting the advertisement from memory.

Dai tapped her lips with a finger. "It definitely sounds like what we're looking for," she said. "Though it still seems a rather sizeable area to cover. Perhaps—" She stopped in mid-sentence, her head tilting slightly to the side. "We're going to have to discuss this later."

Her parents must be awake and on the way down to breakfast. So I tucked my notes away and got back to work.

CHAPTER 34



Due to the state's blue laws, most businesses were closed on Sundays, including White Laundry, the Wus' company. The day off was usually a quiet one for the family, and time we could all spend together.

And while Dai typically enjoyed having her parents at home, that wasn't the case today. The third time her foot started tapping impatiently on the floor, even Lien and Tye realized something was going on.

"Daiyu, what is with you today?" the dragon asked.

I resisted the urge to angle the newspaper I was reading to grab a peek at them.

"Sorry, *Mǔqín*, I'm just feeling a bit restless," Dai said. "Would it be all right for Jacques to take me on a drive after lunch?"

"I don't see why not," Lien said.

"Thank you. I'm sure it'll help a lot."

I somehow doubted the trip would be random. Plus, it would allow us to continue our previously interrupted

conversation.

Rosa arrived not long after, having attended early Mass. She and Lien took over the kitchen, planning something light for lunch, and also started preparations for supper that evening.

Dai quietly suffered through the two of them going over her clothes to decide what she should wear for our drive that afternoon. She didn't even ask them to exclude items with frills or other things that would bring out her 'cuteness,' knowing it would only take them longer to reach a consensus if she did.

When she finally escaped them, Dai was wearing a brown eyelet day dress with a white lace collar. It was sleeveless and cotton, which would be perfect for the hot Texas afternoon. Matching gloves, clutch, hat, and a double strand of pearls completed the outfit. It was a more adult appearance than they usually chose for her. Dai would be quite pleased when I told her. She didn't enjoy being dressed up like a doll, despite the fact it made her look adorable.

A truth I would once more keep to myself in order to live another day.

Once Prince was groomed and fitted with a matching collar, we carried out our escape.

Dai breathed a sigh of relief as I backed the Ford out into the alley. "If it were up to me, I would have just grabbed the first convenient article of clothing and got on with things," she said. "This incessant need to make me appear like something out of a fairy tale is such a waste of time. We could have been on our way over half an hour ago."

I grabbed a quick glance at her in the peep mirror. "But you know how much they enjoy it. And you'll be pleased to note they actually took your preferences to heart this time. Aside from the collar, there is no lace to be seen."

"That's... interesting."

I had expected her to be more excited about it than this. I wasn't sure what to make of the subdued reply. "How so?" I asked.

"Perhaps *Mūqīn* thinks my restlessness has to do with *someone*, and that I might be running off to meet with him."

It was a good thing we were stopped at a red traffic light, or I might have swerved into a tree. "You truly believe that?"

Dai shrugged. "Hard to say. But it's likely. Why else would they dress me as an adult without being badgered into it? After the debacle my parents made of his first dinner with us, *Mŭqīn* may have decided to allow things to run where they may without getting in the way. Trusting you not to let events get out of hand, of course." She grinned. "And Truman did send me flowers again, after all. Since she has no idea what we're up to, what else was she to think?"

I swallowed a groan. Even when he wasn't trying, Pierce continued to set things into disarray. That it worked to Dai's advantage meant she would not be dissuading the dragon of such a notion any time soon. But if she tried to milk it, it could end up backfiring. It wouldn't be a lovely sight, and I was the one most likely to be blamed for it.

Light laughter sprinkled over me from the back seat. "Jacques, don't worry," she said. "I promise to behave myself."

It was hard to tell if she meant this about the case, which I doubted, or on the fictional 'secret' date. "I'll believe it when I see it."

That only got more laughter sent my way.

Though she'd yet to say so, I set a course to the Morgan Warehouse complex; I was sure she wanted to get a 'look' at the place. Aside from possible security personnel, the site should be mostly deserted on Sundays. We could also check any other warehouses of note nearby, and see which had the easiest access to El Barrio itself.

It was one thing to read about the size of the facility—they boasted of one unit with 350,000 square feet of floor space, two units of 75,000 square feet, six of 100X100 feet, three stories of 30,000 square feet each, and a cold storage building of 350,000 cubic feet—but a whole other thing to actually see it. It was massive, spanning the equivalent of multiple city blocks. Following the road, I spotted an area beside two of their buildings with eight lanes of railroad tracks. The tracks looked long enough to hold engines pulling at least ten

boxcars.

There was a small parking lot next to the building that had replaced the original Dallas Brewery structure, so I maneuvered the Ford into a slot there. I took a minute or two to describe what I'd already seen to Dai. Prince's nose was plastered to the partially open window glass, sniffing madly at the strange smells filtering in from the outside.

"Between the railroad tracks and the rock-filled dirt roads for the trucks, it's much too treacherous for you to walk here," I said. Though she wouldn't like it, Dai would enjoy it even less if she fell and got a bloody knee, let alone having to explain to her overprotective parents how she'd gotten hurt in the first place.

I saw her frown for a moment in the peep mirror before her expression cleared. "I'll just stay here then, and you and Prince can investigate and report back."

Despite the fact the area looked deserted, the thought of leaving her here alone gnawed at my gut. "I don't think that's wise, Dai."

"Whyever not?" she asked. "You can roll the windows further down to let in more air, pull the drapes down, and then lock the doors. I'll be perfectly safe and out of view."

As usual, her logic was impeccable, but it still didn't make me feel right about this.

She sighed. "The sooner you get on with it, the faster you'll get done. I doubt we'll find a better chance to snoop around."

When I continued to say and do nothing, she reached for her clutch purse and removed two items from inside. The first was her war fan. It looked like an ordinary folding ladies' fan, but it used actual blades for the ribs so that Dai could use it for personal protection. The second was a brass dog whistle. "If anything untoward occurs, I will summon Prince back immediately. I'll be fine, Jacques."

I should have known she'd come prepared. "Okay, have it your way, but I'm still not thrilled about it."

She nodded in my direction. "Duly noted and appreciated. Now hurry up. It's too hot to dawdle." She snapped her fan

open to encourage a breeze.

I rolled the windows of the Ford down halfway, and lowered the back window covers. Meanwhile, Dai hooked a leash to Prince's collar, after which he bounced around the seat, more than willing to go on an adventure. I was barely able to grab hold of it as he shot out of the car the instant I opened the door. Keeping a good grip on the leash lest he yank it out of my hand, I locked the Ford's doors.

Prince was a bundle of energy, working his way back and forth, sniffing and cataloging all the new enticing smells threatening to overwhelm his doggie senses. Since the building with the small parking area looked clerical in nature, I took us to the rear of the second structure. Pebbles ground underfoot as I walked, the zone eerily quiet without the usual din of labor, trucks, and moving trains.

The third building was slightly smaller than the last, but was a story higher. Going around it, we reached the section I'd seen from the road with the eight sets of train tracks. Looking past that, I could see an open field with scraggly vegetation that extended to the street we'd driven to get here. At night, one could come and go on foot without being noticed. From the worn paths I spotted there, the field was probably used as a shortcut for the laborers coming from El Barrio. I estimated it was less than a ten-minute walk from the MKT Yard.

The afternoon had continued heating up, so my jacket was in the crook of my arm, and sweat moistened the rim of my hat.

Prince barked, sniffing heavily at one of the rolling doors facing the tracks. He'd found something that didn't belong. Unfortunately, the door was latched with a heavy padlock. I noted the location and followed the rails back toward the parking lot.

I'd barely stepped into the open space between the third and second building when a man in coveralls yelled out to me.

"Hey, buddy! What you doin' here?"

I stopped and waited for him to come closer before answering, tipping my hat in his direction. "Just taking the old

pooch for a walk. The parks get too crowded on Sundays, and I'm rather partial to trains. Getting to see one or two up close is a gas, but the yard looks a bit empty today."

The guy looked me up and down as if trying to decide what to make of me. Prince sat on his haunches and waved a paw at the man, but he didn't appear interested. The Morgan company logo and the name *Smitty* were sewn above a breast pocket.

"You a Prohi?" The man stared me up and down again.

That seemed an odd question. Most people wouldn't jump to the conclusion I might be a prohibition agent, not unless they were hiding something. But, fortunately for him, that wasn't why we were here. "Not the last time I checked. Do they come here a lot?"

From the grimace now plastered on his face, I could tell he realized his error. "Naw. I'm just joshing with you." He pasted on a contrite look. "That being said, this is still private property, so I need you to be on your way."

"Understood," I said. "It's much too hot to be at this long, anyway. Have a nice day." I tipped my hat at him again.

"Fry eggs on the concrete hot, that's for sure." He pulled out a red kerchief to wipe at his brow. I felt his gaze glued to me as we made our way back to the parking lot.

CHAPTER 35



"Dai, we're back." Though I knew she would have heard us returning, I wanted to make certain she realized it was us and not someone she'd have to worry about. I unlocked the Ford's doors, trying my best not to touch the metal. Any hints of clouds had disappeared, and the parking lot was uncovered, allowing the sun to bake everything it touched.

I used my jacket to move the handle and left the door open as a swath of heat rolled from the interior. Despite my previous measures, the interior of the Ford was uncomfortably hot. I unlocked and opened the back door, then stuck my head inside to make certain Dai was all right.

"Great timing, Jacques," she said. She'd removed her hat and gloves, and her face was looking a bit flushed as her war fan pushed the heated air around. "I'm not sure how much more of this I could stand."

I snapped the window cover up and rolled the glass down all the way, then rushed to do so to all the others as well. "I'm so sorry, Dai. It should cool down a bit as soon as I get us back on the road."

Even Prince hesitated in climbing aboard into the overheated interior. I kept some water in the trunk for him, but at the moment, it would be too hot for anyone to drink.

"It's my own fault," she said. "I was impatient, and I hadn't realized the dry heat would affect me so much differently than the muggy temperatures of the laundry."

I hissed when I touched the overheated steering wheel, the scorching metal burning me. Wrapping my handkerchief around it made it bearable to touch. "There's a drugstore not too far away from here. I'll get us something to cool down with."

"Whatever you think is best," she said. Prince licked the salty sweat from her neck.

I'd been a fool to have left her in the Ford. Pierce's brush with heatstroke should have been a warning sign against doing this in the first place.

Traffic was light, so I could generate something of a breeze as I drove. Within minutes, I reached the corner drugstore and slipped into a spot shaded by the building. Luckily, they were one of the few establishments not affected by the Blue Laws, though they were restricted in what items they could sell. I left Prince guarding Dai and rushed inside to pull a couple of cold Coca-Colas from the refrigerated dispenser. I then popped the caps with the opener embedded in their signature red machine. The store also featured a full soda fountain, so I was able to get some ice for Prince's water bowl.

We all drank greedily and luxuriated in the easing of our internal temperatures to more tolerable levels.

"That was lovely, Jacques," Dai said with a contented sigh. "I'm feeling much better." Prince gave a bark, adding his thanks, then dipped his head back into the bowl, which I'd set on the Ford's rear floorboard.

I swallowed the last bit of my drink, wishing I'd bought a couple more. As soon as the mutt was done, I put his dish back in the trunk and started us on our way home.

"Did you two find anything?" Dai asked.

I'd totally forgotten the reason we'd gotten ourselves into

trouble in the first place. "Yes. Prince reacted to a docking door on the third building. But it was locked, and we met a man not long after that who didn't seem too thrilled about us being there. He asked me if I was a Prohi."

"Did he now?" She looked excited at the news. "We need a closer look at that storage area."

"I'm pretty sure we wouldn't be welcome there," I said.

"We wouldn't, but we know someone who would be." The devilish little smile on her lips gave me a shot of unease. I had a feeling I knew exactly who she was talking about.

A couple of hours later, my suspicions were proved correct.

Dai got up from the couch in the living room and signaled for me to follow. She turned around at the doorway.

"*Fùqin*, I'm going to make a call. It should only take a few minutes."

Both her parents froze, one with dread and the other with excitement. Dai didn't wait for a reply, but made a beeline toward Tye's study. She had me close the doors the moment we were inside.

"You enjoy doing that to them way too much," I said.

"In the long run, it will be good for them." Dai shrugged, not looking the least repentant as she settled herself into the chair closest to her father's desk. "Call Truman for me, won't you?"

I wasn't entirely sure how winding them up was good for them, but didn't ask. I'd need all my energy for dealing with Pierce, assuming he was home and free to talk to us.

Unfortunately, luck was not on my side.

"Pierce residence."

I recognized the popinjay's voice, though it sounded more subdued than usual. "Dai would like to have a word. Are you available?"

His tone perked up. "Do fish swim? Do dogs bark?"

I assumed that was a 'yes,' then. "Hold on a moment." I handed the receiver and mouthpiece over to Dai. She turned the receiver, so I'd be able to pick up Pierce's part of the conversation.

"Good evening, Truman."

"China Doll, it's wonderful to hear from you. Did you get the flowers I sent?"

She smiled. "I did indeed. Thank you. Though how you managed to send them with Linda glued to your side must be quite a tale."

"Not really," he said. "It only took a tiny bit of subterfuge and a lot of Trevor's invaluable help." His voice lowered. "Has there been news?"

"Of a sort," Dai said. "To proceed any further, I'm going to need your assistance. Can you get away for a couple of hours tomorrow morning?"

"I should be able to finagle that." He sounded even more eager than before.

"Excellent. I'll give you the details once we see you. If you can be here around eight, that would be perfect. However, you might want to avoid using the Phantom. If Miss Carmichael were to see it parked outside my door, who knows what mischief she'd get up to?"

I heartily agreed with that—we might well find our house burned to the ground otherwise. Any goodwill generated by their last meeting would be completely erased if Linda caught him visiting Dai without her approval.

"Leave it to me. I wouldn't miss this for the world!" Though he wasn't there, the smile in his voice was almost as blinding as the real thing—the cad.

"See you then."

The satisfied grin on Dai's face as she handed me the telephone made me uneasy. I wasn't sure whether it was due to speaking with Pierce or the plans she was setting into motion, but it didn't matter. Neither gave me peace of mind.



True to his word, Pierce showed up at our door right before eight. Dai's parents had already left for the day, so no one would be the wiser. I didn't spot a vehicle on the street, so he must have been dropped off by a taxi. As immaculately as he was dressed, I couldn't picture him using public transportation to get here.

"Good morning!"

I had to quickly move out of the way, or the cad would have bowled right over me to rush inside. Someone was eager to start the day.

"Where's Dai?" Pierce removed his hat, slicking back his sandy blond hair. His double-breasted fresco suit was baby blue, offset by an off-white shirt and patterned navy blue tie. The fresco's loosely woven material made it a smart choice for the unrelenting Texas heat—not that I'd ever tell him that. He was insufferable enough as it was.

"Waiting for us in the kitchen, ready to go," I said.

He flashed me a grin and headed straight there. He was bowing over her outstretched hand by the time I got there.

"China Doll, you look wonderful, as always, and that outfit suits you," Pierce said. "Are we going to be up to some mischief this morning?"

She gave him a half-smile. "Possibly." Realizing this morning's pre-selected ensemble would be inadequate for the events she had planned, I'd helped Dai switch to the forest green dress with elbow-length sleeves and ruffles—the one she'd worn to the Adolphus for 'low table' tea with the Asquiths. It was not as adult-looking as her frock from the day before, the beret and leaf patterns giving the impression she was on the cusp of womanhood. That would serve us well for what was to come.

I was happy to see Prince sitting between the two of them, on guard against any of the popinjay's shenanigans. His tail was wagging, however.

"Have you set your wedding date yet?" she asked Pierce, donning her teashade glasses.

Even I was shocked at the question.

"China Doll, you wound me," he said. "While Mother is in such dire straits, there's no way I could settle on one. Not until this trouble is behind us."

To my still greater surprise, Dai laughed. "So that's how you're playing it," she said. "Nicely done."

He veritably preened at the praise. "But I didn't come through totally unscathed. I've had to promise to spend time with her whenever I am available. Father's *orders*." All the good humor fled his face.

"I'm sorry, Truman," she said. "I take it his business dealings haven't been finalized yet?"

He shook his head. "Not as far as I can tell. He's decided I don't need to know any details. But from his constant foul temper, it's obvious his plans are being meddled with by outside parties."

Dai's brow furrowed. "He's not taking that out on you, is he?"

Pierce barked a laugh devoid of humor. "That's the one consolation with having to spend more time with Linda. He has to maintain appearances, and I have more excuses to leave the house."

I was sure I wasn't the only one who noticed he had avoided answering the question.

"You can always say you're working on a potential business deal and hide out a while at White Laundry." To my shocked chagrin, *I* was the one making the suggestion. "I doubt anyone would think to look for you there."

Two sets of smiles flashed over me. I had to fight the urge to frown. They'd better not be thinking I was trying to encourage their friendship. Or that I cared about the Pierce in the least. I hated bullies—that was all there was to it.

"I'll keep that in reserve in case I need it," Pierce said. "Thank you for the offer."

I couldn't stop the frown this time. "Dai is hardly ever there, so it's not like you would be getting away with anything."

Before I knew it, the cad had thrown his arm around my shoulders and brought me in close. "You're the best, Jackie."

I pushed him off me. "We really should be going."

"Jacques is right, Truman," Dai said as she stood, a small smile still lingering on her face. "We should get moving. The sooner we do this, the better, especially as I had Jacques ring the company earlier to make an appointment."

Pierce's brow shot up. "An appointment?"

"Why, yes. Your business is incredibly interested in having a large shipment stored at the Morgan Warehouse—contingent upon inspecting the premises."

CHAPTER 36



On the drive to the warehouse complex, Dai quickly outlined what she needed from Pierce and her intended plan. The more she spoke, the bigger the grin grew on his face.

"This should be a total gas," he said. "You really think it will work?"

Dai shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

Traffic was heavy, so the trip took a bit longer than I'd expected, but we still made it on time for the meeting. My previous theory about the field and the paths I'd seen the day before panned out as I spotted several Mexican workers using them to get to the Morgan complex.

I slipped the Ford into a parking space in the same area as before, and made a show of being the perfect chauffeur for a wealthy client. Though the odds of anyone watching were slim, it wouldn't hurt to cover all the bases. Prince would be instrumental in this enterprise, so he too looked the part, craddled in Dai's arms with his fur brushed to a sheen.

Pierce led the group inside like a reigning monarch, with Dai and me behind him.

"Good morning, great people!" The popinjay swept his arms open as if to embrace the entire office or preparing to be showered with accolades. The old matron manning the receptionist's desk couldn't have looked more startled.

"Wel-welcome to the Morgan Warehouse and Commercial Company. How may I help you?"

"Dear lady, I believe I have an appointment this morning with..." He glanced our way. I chimed in. "Douglas Davies, sir."

Pierce turned his attention back to the receptionist. From her wide-eyed reaction, I was sure he'd just flashed her with that blinding smile of his. "Yes, Douglas Davies."

"I'll let him know you're here, Mr. ...?"

He leaned over the desk, flashing her another smile and pulling out a business card. "Pierce, Truman Pierce." He flicked the card so that it twirled, then landed on the desktop, pointing in the right direction just in front of her. Nice trick. I couldn't help but wonder how many hours he'd spent practicing it—the *ham*.

"I'll be but a moment," she said.

Despite the overdone theatrics, the matron blushed, sending a half-veiled glance his way before disappearing through the doorway next to her desk—ignoring the office intercom system sitting right by her. Though it was hard to believe, it looked like she'd fallen for all of Pierce's showiness and perhaps needed a moment to compose herself. I was tempted to make an internal wager on whether she'd come back with guards in tow to throw us out or with the man we had come to see.

To my slight disappointment, she soon returned with Davies. The receptionist surreptitiously stared at Pierce with what I could only call hungry, heavy-lidded eyes while introductions were made.

From the moment they shook hands, Pierce took over the conversation and then steered Davies outside to begin the tour. Dai put Prince down, holding onto his leash as we walked towards the second building of the complex, following a

walkway to a side door. Davies poured out facts about the square footage, the types of products they handled, and what kind of storage they were kept in, even as Pierce inundated him with a barrage of other questions.

All the bay doors had been raised to let in the cool morning air, while employees wearing Morgan jumpsuits used dollies and wheeled carts to move boxes which were being pulled off of cars and deposited near the bays by darker-skinned workers in drab clothes. The scents of wood, grease, and sweat mingled all around us in an invisible cloud.

The crates themselves were of varying sizes. Most were stamped with a city or region of origin, while others had mixed letter and number codes for identification.

We had neared the end of the building, where an open doorway led outside, when Dai set the second part of the plan in motion.

"Oh, no!" Dai plastered a horrified look on her face as Prince suddenly ran pell-mell out the door. A new expression we'd practiced before coming by. I'd emulated Carmichael and had Dai studied my face with her hands. "Truman darling, Prince has run off! I'd never forgive myself if anything horrible happened to him. You must *save* him!"

She was pouring it on a bit thick, following in the popinjay's footsteps. I had to resist the temptation to roll my eyes.

"Of course I will, dearest! Jackie, Davies, we need to rescue my darling's pooch at once!" His voice echoed so loudly that several of the workers stopped to watch.

I quickly escorted Dai to the doorway as she clung to my jacket like a distraught dilettante. Pierce sent Davies in one direction while he took another. With this distraction, I led her through the door on the other side and into the building we truly wanted to see.

The beehive of activity was less intense here than in the previous structure, with only some of the roll-up doors currently open. Dai continued her act as we crossed the aisles. A few sections were cut off by makeshift walls or curtains, and some of the items here looked like they'd not moved in a while.

An echoing bark let me know Prince had discovered what we were looking for.

We quickly walked in that direction. We found him in the far corner, splayed on his back, a paw across his eyes as if he were a damsel in distress. Was the popinjay's hamminess contagious?

"Oh, my poor frightened boy!" Dai swept him into her arms, and he covered her with doggie kisses. "Mommy's got you!"

I took a look around me while the theatrics continued. This section of the warehouse didn't appear much different from the others we'd seen, though the majority of the crates were stamped as originating from San Antonio. I didn't spot any dried blood or anything else that would immediately indicate a crime was committed there.

As in the initial building, there were racks screwed to the wall which held a number of tools, including pry-bars.

Unlike the first structure, the side door on the far end was closed, but we soon discovered it wasn't locked as Truman made his way in from the outside. "Darling! There you are," he said, rushing over to Dai's side. "I'm so glad to see you safe!"

To my horror, Dai's shock, and Prince's delight, Pierce swept the two of them into his arms. He planted a chaste kiss on her cheek, making her blush and my blood boil. How dare he take advantage of the situation! I could do nothing but glare daggers in his direction lest we be found out.

He set Dai back on her feet and let her go just before I lost the ability to hold myself in check. My darker side had already been looking for the most advantageous location to do the cad terminal harm.

I grabbed Prince from Dai's arms, the better to restrain myself from following through on any lingering deadly impulses. Pierce took her hand and placed it at his elbow before facing our guide. "Mr. Davies, I think I will have to postpone the rest of your highly informative tour. My darling is most fragile, and I must see to her at once."

Davies looked relieved at the announcement. "Uh, yeah,

THE JOY OF MURDER

sure. Do whatever you need. Just call the office to reschedule."
He gladly led us back toward the parking lot.

Less than five minutes later, we'd made our getaway.

CHAPTER 37



"That was epic!" Pierce laughed in obvious enjoyment.

I tightened my hold on the steering wheel until my fingers turned white, wishing it was his entitled neck instead. "Epic nothing. You took advantage, you *louse*!"

It hadn't escaped me that Dai's cheeks still seemed a bit flushed, and that she'd remained unnaturally quiet.

"Jackie, I was only following the plan, selling the lie." He had the temerity to look smug.

I was about to pull the Ford to the curve and have my fists give him a talking-to when I saw a flash of actual concern cross his face. "China Doll, did I take things too far? It was never my intention to trouble you."

Dai waved his worries away. "No," she said. "It just caught me off guard. You were very convincing."

Taking a deep breath, I forced my hands to relax. Pinpricks of discomfort chastised me for the rough treatment as the blood flow returned to my fingers.

"Did you find what you were looking for in there?" Pierce asked.

"Yes, indeed I did." She scratched Prince under the chin, and his eyes closed in doggie rapture. "Though they worked hard to clean up after themselves, the liquid bleach wasn't enough to stop him from finding the location of the murder."

I'd not paid attention to it at the time, but she was right. The faint tang of bleach had hung in the air in that corner of the warehouse. I'd dismissed it, assuming it was just part of the warehouse's cleaning routine.

Pierce frowned. "I didn't see anything out of the ordinary there," he said. "How do you know it happened there?"

"Because there were other smells aside from the bleach still lingering there—for example, the scents of blood and alcohol."

He gave an impressed whistle. "But how did Prince tell you what he found?"

"He didn't," she said. "Not directly. But once he found the spot, I could use my *own* heightened olfactory senses. You'd be surprised how much you can learn from smells."

Pierce looked both shocked and amazed. By this point, he should have known better—underestimating Dai was never a good tactic.

"So what do we do now? Do we call the police?" Pierce asked.

Dai shook her head. "You may not know this, but as a Chinese, I cannot give evidence or bear witness in court. Therefore, anything I claimed would be declared inadmissible even if the crime occurred in front of me. Furthermore, since I am blind, a woman, and a foreigner, I wouldn't even be given the benefit of the doubt by most people."

"This didn't stop you when you tracked down Laura Cooper's killer," he said.

Dai flashed him a dimpled smile. "Come now, Truman, I never said I wouldn't *do* something about it. I merely stated that I wouldn't be calling the police."

I couldn't stop a grin, darkly and a bit guiltily enjoying the popinjay's discomfort. Not that it lasted long. He flashed her one of those way-too-bright smiles. "Of course! Apologies. What's the plan then?"

"Hm. That will somewhat depend on how the motion to dismiss went. We should pay a visit to Thompson and Knight and get an update before deciding how to proceed," she said. "We can drop you off somewhere, or if you think you have the time, you can come with us."

Pierce looked at his watch. Checking mine, I saw it was almost ten. He looked momentarily lost in thought before finally making a decision. "If we can make a quick stop at a florist downtown, I'd like to come with you."

"Jacques, you heard the man," Dai said. "Off to the florist!"

Luckily, the Lang Floral and Nursery company had a store about a block away from the Republic Bank building. I found myself curious as to what excuse he'd offer the easily-ruffled Miss Carmichael, but not enough to ask.

Dai, however, did. Instead of answering out loud, he leaned over to whisper in her ear. Prince stuck his wet nose in the space between her ear and his lips, not wanting to be left out. Whatever Pierce told her, it elicited an unexpected giggle. The unmitigated cad!

Fuming, I drove us to the underground parking lot of the Republic Bank building. We'd drawn the shades in the back, so even if someone were on the lookout for our automobile, they wouldn't be able to discern we had someone else with us. I jumped out of the Ford as soon as I could, wanting to beat Pierce to Dai's door. I helped her out, then suddenly found her tugging at my ear to bring it close to her mouth.

"Jacques, stop pouting," she said. "He didn't do anything but whisper how much of a lark it would be to make you think he'd suggested something risqué to me. I've told you before, you're an easy tease. So I totally understand why he can't help himself."

Her words didn't make me feel better about Pierce in the least, but I kept my mouth shut.

The well-dressed receptionist we'd met before was manning the front desk. I was gratified to see that her demeanor did not change by a single degree when her gaze crossed the popinjay. It was heartening to note that not all women were susceptible

to the cad's charms.

"Is Mr. Maginnis in this morning, or is he still at court?" I asked her.

"He came back a few minutes ago," she said. "Let me check and see if he's available." She used the intercom telephone to ring his office, and was on the line for only a few moments before hanging up. "He'll be out in a moment to escort you to his office. I'll take care of your hats and gloves."

We'd barely handed the articles over when the door opened and Maginnis welcomed us inside. He led us down the same dark-paneled hallway but, rather than turning off into the conference room, continued on. We passed several offices until we reached one with his name on a plaque on the door.

It was a modest room containing a wide desk, a couple of upholstered guest chairs, and a bookshelf filled with law books, several of which were currently open and on his desk. Once we were all inside, he closed the office door. I guided Dai to one of the two chairs and stood beside it, leaving the second for Pierce. There was a chance he'd need it more than I would.

"I'm glad you're here," Maginnis said, his glasses glinting from the office lights. "We have things to discuss."

When he hesitated, Dai chimed in. "I take it a ruling on the motion to dismiss has been delayed?"

He nodded. "Yes. Despite the lack of actual evidence, the judge has deferred judgment on the motion until he's had more time to examine it." Though he looked perfectly calm, the tightness of his lips spoke loudly of his ire at the uncalled-for delaying tactics.

I sneaked a glance in Pierce's direction and noticed he'd gone pale. "And that could take as long as two weeks?" Pierce asked, his voice sounding small.

"I'm afraid so," Maginnis said. "Unless additional evidence is discovered that exonerates her without a shadow of a doubt, I can't press the judge any more than I have already for a speedy decision."

Pierce's hands knotted into fists. "Two weeks! Does she know?"

Maginnis nodded and added nothing more. I doubted Mrs. Pierce had taken the news well.

"On our end, we have made some discoveries," Dai said. "But they are far from solid enough to hurry Miss Crawford's release."

Maginnis leaned forward over his desk like a hound clamping onto a scent. "Do tell, Miss Wu."

"I think we've found the location where the murder took place, though the scene has been cleaned. I do believe, however, that if a thorough search is made there, they will find some evidence, regardless. Things that could not be taken care of quickly or without drawing unwanted attention." Dai scratched Prince behind the ear. "It's a pity the US hasn't yet embraced the use of dogs in their police force, as has been done in Germany and Belgium. Another wondrous resource left untapped here." The mutt raised his head to make it easier for her to scratch, half closing his eyes in pleasure.

Dai continued. "During the search, they may even find evidence of other illegal activity that might tie back to the reason for the murder itself."

"But, China Doll, you said you wouldn't call the cops," Pierce said. "So how do we get the authorities involved so they can investigate?"

Dai smiled. "The police aren't the only ones who can investigate cases in Texas, Truman. And while I might not be able to give testimony in a court of law, I am acquainted with a person or two in law enforcement who have seen evidence firsthand that I know what I'm talking about. They'll be the ones taking the information from an anonymous source and trying to get a warrant issued to look into the matter."

CHAPTER 38



It took me several moments to realize who Dai was referring to. It had to be Constable Higgins, the man she had intellectually manhandled when she first discovered someone might have left a murder weapon at White Laundry. It was through him we'd learned about Dr. Aiden Campbell and her work with the Justice of the Peace on suspicious deaths.

"Whom specifically are you talking about, Miss Wu?" Maginnis asked. "We need to tread carefully as to who is included in these matters, as it would appear we have unknown enemies making moves behind our backs."

"You've already met Dr. Campbell, one of the pathologists on hand for the Justice of District One," Dai said. "The other is Constable George Higgins. We've had occasion to work with him as well. He's more open-minded than most and truly committed to the job, not just someone looking to line his pockets."

Maginnis nodded, taking her at her word. "If you'll share his contact information, I will have Miss Charles call his office and

set up a meeting."

Dai tilted her head. "I realize this might sound odd, but we may be better served if Dr. Campbell arranges the meeting. She's been to your offices before and is a known colleague of the constable's, so no one would think anything of her asking him to meet."

Maginnis' thin brow rose at her words, but he presented no arguments against the change.

"It may seem a bit paranoid, I admit," she added, "But since, as you've said, we know nothing of what other players might be involved, some obfuscation in our dealings wouldn't be amiss."

"As you wish." The lawyer's eyes glittered behind his spectacles.

Though Dai couldn't see it, she looked to be well on her way to gaining another admirer.

I went down to the lobby and availed myself of a pay telephone to call Aiden at the hospital. I was in luck and needed to wait only a few minutes for her to be located. Keeping in mind the operator might be listening, I gave no details, only asking if she would contact our mutual friend George and have them meet us for lunch here.

Though my esteem of the doctor was already high, I must admit it rose a few more points as she took everything in stride and asked no unnecessary questions. My mission accomplished, I returned upstairs.

Maginnis then moved all parties to a conference room situated in the bowels of the law firm and placed an order for lunch to be delivered there.

Aiden and Higgins showed impeccable timing by reaching the offices just as the food arrived.

Introductions were quickly made, and while we ate, Dai filled them in on the particulars of what we believed we had found at the warehouse. "Constable, we hope that what we discovered would be sufficient to be used as an anonymous tip or information from a reliable informant so that a search warrant could be issued. If we can establish the actual location

of the murder, it would force the prosecution to admit that the scene where Mrs. Fuentes was found was staged, and have the evidence against Miss Crawford dismissed. Our aim is to secure her release sooner rather than later."

The constable finished chewing his bite of corned beef sandwich before speaking. "What judge is presiding the case?"

"Judge Orwell," Maginnis said.

"I've dealt with him before." Higgins made a face and put his sandwich back on the plate. A moment later, he flashed them a grin. "Judge Parker doesn't like him much, though, and we have enough to support taking a look-see, so he'll sign."

"There won't be any jurisdiction issues?" I asked.

"Naw," Higgins said, picking up his sandwich again. "A lot of duties and powers overlap between the police, the sheriff's department, and constables, so they can't say nothing if we decide to take a peek. Of course, we don't do it often, but it's happened before. Besides, overlapping powers also makes it easy for the departments to band together when needed."

"I'm sorry to be adding to your workload, Constable Higgins," Dai said, sneaking Prince a bite of her sandwich.

He waved her words away. "I don't like fishy business being carried out in my county, miss. Heck, if I could figure out a way, I'd deputize you and add you to the force."

"Why, constable, that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me." She smiled from ear to ear.

While I was happy for her, I was also grateful it would come to nothing, despite the fact that she would be amazing at it. Dallas just wasn't ready for such a thing, and there would be plenty of people out there who'd love to go out of their way to make someone like her fail.

"I'll type something up and run it to Judge Parker this afternoon," Higgins added. "With any luck, we can get the place looked over sometime today."

"I'd be happy to assist with the lab work," Aiden added.

"Thank you both," Dai said. "Meanwhile, Jacques and I will continue other lines of inquiry." She half-nodded in my direction. "I think we should check on what Mrs. Lark has been

able to find for us before making our way home."

"China Doll, how can I help?" Pierce looked almost desperate. Despite his contributions that very day, he acted as if everyone in the room would be participating in some measure to obtain his mother's release, except for him.

Dai took a sip of her iced tea as if to give herself time to consider his request. "Truman, you're juggling a lot already between Linda and your father." He opened his mouth to protest, but she held up her hand as if having anticipated his reaction. "Still, if you can, it would be helpful to know more about the activities your mother pursued or organized as a Maiden. Trevor might be a valuable resource for such information. Though it would be best if neither of your 'problem people' realized you're asking.

"It may also help if we found out what your father is working on and who would benefit from stopping him. This is not crucial, so please don't take any risks. It would just be nice to find out who's interfering in our efforts to get your mother freed."

The look of relieved adoration Pierce gave her was painful to see. "Leave it to me."

"Mr. Maginnis," she added, "it might not hurt for you to try to persuade her to open up to you on this subject as well."

"What do you hope to find?" he asked.

"I suspect the move to pin this on her was spur-of-the-moment rather than calculated," Dai said. "There were many women who were part of the Ladies of the Invisible Empire, not just Miss Crawford, yet the killer—or the killer's accomplice—kept the lost earring and a picture of her for several years. That alludes to a long-term, personal grudge of some kind. If we could figure out what the incident was, it could end up helping us in several ways."

"Understood," Maginnis said. "The current laws may not allow you to be deputized, Miss Wu, but a position as a law firm investigator would be well within your reach."

I felt the blood leave my face, making me momentarily dizzy. The idea someone might want to *hire* her to do this kind

of thing had never entered my head.

"That's quite flattering, Mr. Maginnis," Dai said. "I'll be sure to keep it in mind."

Aiden and Higgins left first, then a few minutes later Pierce, then us. The moment we were safely ensconced in the Ford, I blurted out what I'd been holding back.

"You're not *seriously* contemplating what Maginnis said, are you?" My question came out more harshly than I'd intended, but there was nothing to do about it now.

Rather than get annoyed, she laughed. "So *that's* what's got you all worked up. I may be blind, but I could still see the fumes rising from your ears."

"That's not an answer, Dai." I started the Ford.

"I don't have any immediate plans to do so, no," she said. "But it's nice to have options, don't you think? I can't mooch off of my parents forever."

I drove out of the underground parking lot faster than was prudent. "That's not what you're doing, and you know it!"

That earned me a raised brow. "Aren't I? Do you have a different meaning of the word that I don't know about?" I could tell from her tone she was not amused. But then, neither was I.

"All the work you do at the laundry mixing the chemicals more than covers your upkeep," I said.

She turned her face toward the covered window. "Everyone needs a hobby, something to stimulate their mind. While I would never consider working for the law firm full-time, taking on the occasional assignment could be doable. A way to make some money which I could spend on whatever I liked. Would you begrudge me that?"

I ground my teeth, not sure how to continue the argument without it escalating out of hand. I'd pointed out the danger of pursuing such matters more than once, and it never got me anywhere. And solving Laura Cooper's murder had given Dai a sense of accomplishment nothing else could match. I let the matter drop.

Instead, I drove us to the Carnegie Library. The squared-

off shape and giant columns made it look like something you might find in Rome. Oak Cliff also housed a branch library, but it catered more to community needs than research. And there was no one better at research than the incomparable Mrs. Lark.

After Dai's first visit to the library in person earlier in the year, we both agreed it'd be best if she waited in the Ford with Prince this time. While Dai had taken to Mrs. Lark immediately, Miss Kuster had put her foot in it, and the gawking of the library's visitors had made Dai feel extremely uncomfortable.

So, parking in the shade, I darted inside to see what tasty bits she had found for us. After donating to the library and giving the librarian a well-earned tip for doing the research, then promising Mrs. Lark I would offer Dai her greetings, I returned to the Ford with several handwritten sheets.

Dai wanted me to read the notes then and there, but I managed to hold her off until we got back to Oak Cliff. I made a quick stop at the Tote'm store at Edgefield and Twelfth. They previously only sold ice, but the retailer had expanded their offerings in the last few years and now carried milk, eggs, and other daily staples—but their recently installed Coca-Cola dispenser was my main reason for going there. The tall, colorful totem poles from Alaska made the stores hard to miss.

Armed with something cool and refreshing to drink, I drove us to one of the farther shores of Lake Cliff, where Prince could play to his heart's content, and Dai and I sit in the shade. It was here that I dived into the information Mrs. Lark had summarized for us.

"Enough stalling, Jacques," Dai said, her impatience finally getting the best of her. "What do her notes say?"

It as time to dive into Mrs. Lark's summarized research.

"The Texas Rangers have spent a lot of time intercepting bootleg liquor being brought up from Mexico by *tequileros*—so much so that shootouts became a relatively regular occurrence. The majority of the *tequileros*, though, are individuals running small enterprises. There are no prohibition laws currently in

the Mexican States.

"While the Rangers have also been discouraging any Texan bootleggers they come across, they don't appear to think of them in the same light as those crossing the border. There have been articles contending that anyone bringing alcohol across the border is doing so with the intent of poisoning and undermining Americans in an effort to destroy our country. This opinion is apparently being taken to heart by most of the Rangers, especially after years of dealing with the bandits and outlaws that came from the south during the Mexican Revolution and the Bandit Wars."

The bloodshed had been escalating at the border, and in several northern states in the United States where the mafia had grabbed a footing. The problems Prohibition had created were plenty, and there were no real, measurable benefits to be found. Texas had some of the strictest laws, and personal violations were considered a felony—which had been keeping the police and our court systems flooded with cases.

The looming depression sweeping our country and the number of poor Mexicans struggling to find any means of supporting themselves and their families only added to the problem.

I shook my head at the dark prospect and kept reading. "She notes that in the last four years, liquor smuggling across the border has become almost nonexistent." Dai raised a brow at that but said nothing, so I went on. "Local moonshiners became an alternative source for illegal alcohol. The homemade whiskey is cheap to make, and some had their operations set up a decade or more before Prohibition passed, so they also have a pre-existing customer base. They have fewer miles to travel, and they aren't considered enemies of the United States."

Mrs. Lark had included some basic facts and figures, and I read those out to her as well. Then I watched Prince prance around chasing a butterfly while Dai mentally digested the new information.

"Jacques, I know I've mentioned it before, but Mrs. Lark

truly is a treasure," Dai said.

"Her research was helpful?"

She nodded. "Without a doubt. Another piece of the puzzle is now in place." She swept her skirt for any errant leaves or blades of grass which might have decided to take residence and then stood.

I followed suit. "Care to share yet?"

She flashed me a playfull smile. "Do you remember how I sent you out to gather thrown-away bottles of liquor at the dump a year or two after you joined us?"

How could I forget? I'd seen my life rush before my eyes and I feared for my very existence, when the dragon caught us sniffing at the containers in the backyard. "Yes. I have a vague recollection of the event."

She gave me a quick pout. "How else was I to know what rum smelled or tasted like without finding some? 'Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum' was one of my favorite lines from *Treasure Island*. I had to find out what made it so popular with pirates. Plus, sniffing all those different bottles and discovering the wide variety of ingredients infused in them was one of the things that got me interested in chemistry in the first place. It was well worth Mother's ire and having to stay in my room for a week."

It had almost driven Dai mad with boredom. As for me, I'd gotten to learn all about the physical aspects of the sweaty business of laundering clothes. Rather than discourage Dai, however, it had only prompted her to be more circumspect regarding things she wanted to study. My badly chafed hands and her insistence on my telling her every detail of what it had been like to work at the laundry had seemed to prompt her to get involved, to want to improve matters for everyone. Sadly, despite her eventual success, it hadn't won her any goodwill with her countrymen and women who worked there. Their prejudices dug in too deep.

"How is that relevant?" I asked. "What am I missing?"

She tilted her head to the side. "Not all alcohol is the same. The difference between homemade whiskey and finely aged

THE JOY OF MURDER

cognac is huge indeed."

CHAPTER 39



I could get nothing else from her, so I let the pieces bounce around in my head as I drove us home. I started getting an inkling of the picture she was putting together, but nowhere did I see anything to help us better pinpoint or prove who the killer was.

We beat the others to the house, so we had time for Dai to freshen up; to allay suspicions of what we'd been up to that day, she changed into what her mother had laid out the night before while I rushed to catch up on my neglected chores. We were then left cooling our heels as we waited for further developments.

Yet some unexpected tidbits graced our ears once Rosa and Lien arrived from one of their charity functions before starting dinner. Mrs. Pierce's absence had been commented on during one of the meetings.

"Has something happened to her?" Dai asked, radiating curious ignorance. Luckily, she'd gone out of her way to keep Rosa from knowing who had been arrested for Mrs. Fuentes' murder.

"It seems she has a case of influenza," Lien said. "It came on suddenly, from what the others mentioned."

Rosa nodded. "The ladies discussed trying to bring over some soup or flowers, but the few who tried to visit her were turned away. Seems she's lost her voice as well, so they've not been able to talk to her on the telephone."

"With as many members as we have in the different organizations, it's rather surprising how much has been suddenly put on hold due to her absence," Lien said. "I knew she shouldered a lot of the day-to-day organizational burden, but for it to affect things this much..." Dai's mother shook her head.

Rosa shrugged. "It's not as if we haven't tried to take on more responsibilities before. Maybe we can approach her once she's better, so something like this doesn't happen again. Not that I expect she'll take us up on it." She rolled her eyes. The confrontation Carmichael had engineered with Mrs. Pierce had revealed a lot about her personality. "Though we might be lending aid to another group soon. Hopefully, one that will appreciate our efforts more. I was very impressed by what the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul have done. Helping them will help El Barrio and the other Spanish-speaking communities in Dallas, too." She looked away, her cheeks coloring. "I honestly hadn't realized how fortunate I've been compared to some of the others who've come here seeking a new life. So if there's more I could do..."

Lien touched her shoulder, trying to comfort her. Rosa must have been honest about the status of things at El Barrio for Lien to be moved to offering physical comfort. Unlike most Spanish-speaking people, overt physical or vocal demonstrations of affection were rare among the Chinese. They didn't feel any less passion than everyone else, but they seldom allowed it to show.

"As long as you leave time for yourself as well," Dai said softly. "It won't help anyone if you and Mother overstretch or make yourselves ill from doing too much."

The dragon sent a veiled but still pleased look at Dai.

"That's rather astute of you, daughter."

Dai shrugged. "Perhaps, though I will admit to a bit of selfishness in the statement. I want you both to be happy and healthy for many years to come."

Rosa let out a laugh, her usually bright personality coming back full force. She rushed over and gave Dai a quick hug that made her squeak in surprise. "*Preciosa*, you're so adorable! Thank you."

"I agree with Dai's sentiment," I said.

"You only want that so you can eat our desserts," Rosa said, wagging a finger my way.

"I won't deny there's some truth in what you say," I stated, feigning a hurt look. "But it's not the *only* reason."

Rosa came over and playfully pinched my cheek. Lien raised a brow in my direction, making no additional comments. Yet it was clear they couldn't have been more pleased. And I knew by the little smile playing around her lips that Dai was satisfied with the lightened mood.

What I was grateful for was that, although Rosa had discussed the poor conditions of El Barrio with Lien, she must have assured her we'd not exposed Dai to the details. I supposed learning to guard secrets as part of a *brigada* had given Rosa some valuable skills in subterfuge.

"If you speak to Truman, do ask him how she is faring," Lien said. "And tell him to enlighten us if there's anything we can do to help."

I was pretty sure her concern had more to do with giving her daughter reasons to communicate with her suitor than genuine curiosity over Mrs. Pierce's welfare. Or perhaps I was being uncharitable. It was disturbingly easy to think others had dark intentions rather than giving them the benefit of the doubt.

We were about to sit for supper when the telephone rang in Tye's study. I rushed off to answer it before anyone else was tempted to do so. "Wu residence."

"Good evening, Mr. Haskin. It's Leo Maginnis."

Did I detect a hint of excitement in his voice? "Evening, sir."

I take it there's news?"

"Yes, indeed. The paper was signed and is being acted upon as we speak."

"That's very good to hear," I said. Dai would be thrilled.

"Also, our mutual friend did not recall anything immediately, but promised to give it some thought. I'll ask again tomorrow." Rosa wasn't the only one practicing subterfuge this evening.

"Thank you for letting us know." I was going to leave it at that, but then felt obliged to ask, since Pierce couldn't, "How is she?"

"Better than earlier, thankfully. Giving her something to work on is helping." Maginnis hesitated for a moment. "There was a minor altercation during the midday meal, but nothing to worry over. The instigator was a new arrival and has now been moved elsewhere."

I frowned. Was this just happenstance, or an attempt by an outside party to threaten Bernard Pierce? It was frustrating not to know what was going on. Though I could see, I still felt blind. Perhaps the popinjay would have some luck snooping into his father's affairs.

"Thank you for the update," I said. "Have a good evening."

"Give Miss Wu my regards."

"Consider it done." I hung up the receiver, hoping nothing else untoward would come Mrs. Pierce's way. Being in jail would be hard enough to deal with without adding more fuel to the pyre.

I made sure to school my features before stepping into the dining room and taking my customary seat at the table.

"Who telephoned?" Lien asked.

My brain derailed. I had been too distracted by what Maginnis had reported to come up with a suitable excuse. Luckily, Dai was quicker on her mental feet.

"Was it Truman?"

"Ah, yes," I said gratefully. "I told him we were about to sit down for dinner, so he urged me not to disturb you." I looked over at Rosa and Lien. "I asked how Mrs. Pierce is doing, and

it seems she's better than she was earlier today. He asked that I thank you for your concern."

That appeared to satisfy everyone, and I could dig into my serving of *carne guisada* with abandon. From what I understood, the pot roast dish originated in Puerto Rico but had been copied with some minor alterations by other groups. All I knew was that it was delicious.

After dinner, I filled Dai in on the details. We heard from no one else that night.

CHAPTER 40



The next morning, Dai was once more waiting for me in the kitchen when I finally ventured from my room.

She scowled at me for a moment, looking just like the dragon. "You locked the door yet again, Jacques."

"Of course I did," I lobbed back. "Did you really think I would do otherwise? I wasn't born yesterday, you know."

She waved that aside, her scowl replaced by delight at a new thought. "I've decided what I want to learn to do next," she said. "Lock-picking. You should only require good ears and sensitive fingers for that, so it shouldn't be problematic. I wonder if bobby pins will do or if I'll need specialized tools?"

I stifled a groan. This was the last thing we needed. Who knew what kind of trouble this would open us up to? If I'd known it would lead to this, I never would have locked my door. I'd have to hope she forgot about this new idea before putting it into practice, but I knew from past experience, it was unlikely she would.

She rushed back upstairs to retrieve a few hairpins to train with, proof that my days of privacy were numbered.

"*Nǔér*, will you be coming by the laundry to develop the photographs from the other day?" Tye asked, after her parents came to join us for breakfast. "We also seem to be getting low on a couple of the cleaning compounds."

Dai didn't hesitate, though I was sure it was far from what she had hoped to do today. "Of course, *Fùqīn*. We'll come by as soon as we've finished here. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, thank you." He sent her a dotting smile.

So once we'd completed our morning tai chi and I had cleaned up in the kitchen, we headed to the laundry. No calls came in while we were at the house, so we had to assume there'd yet to be any new developments. I think Dai was glad about the work, as it gave her something to do besides waiting. I didn't mind it much either.

As usual, the Chinese workers didn't greet Dai as she walked past the vats, instead touching their gourd charms to ward away evil. I clung to the hope that one day they would finally see beyond their superstitions and accept her for who she was, but the more she grew—physically *and* mentally—the less that seemed likely.

Dai took care of mixing the cleaning solutions on the ground floor. The wide desk even had a spot to hold her teashade glasses, and a pillow underneath it gave Prince a place to relax while guarding her. I gathered the supplies she'd need for her work, then sat in my usual chair to peruse the early edition of the *Dallas Morning News*. Glancing at the headlines, I didn't see any sign of new developments.

A while later, Prince and I followed Dai down into her "lab," a small room in the laundry's cellar. It was here that she would process her father's rolls of film and conduct chemical experiments—Dai's *sanctum sanctorum*.

It occurred to me that Aiden might enjoy seeing it, much as Dai had loved exploring Aiden's workplace with her senses when they'd first met. Though the laundry's inescapable heat and high humidity might well put off the typical person, I doubted it would prove so for Dr. Campbell. I could almost envision the two running experiments together down here—

as long as Aiden wasn't claustrophobic. The large vats and numerous pipes crowding the space left little elbow room.

Once we finished out assigned tasks, we went up to the topmost floor of the laundry to freshen up before taking out leave. This part of the building, which housed offices, restrooms, and the employee break area/kitchen, was its own kind of haven: The Wus had installed electric fans downstairs and in Dai's lab, but up here, evaporative air coolers kept the temperatures at a more comfortable level.

"This is insufferable!" Dai smacked her fan against the Ford's backseat window as I prepared to get us underway.

At first, I thought she meant the peony-covered fabric and flowing lace of her day dress, but I soon realized she was speaking of something else altogether.

"There *has* to be a way for people to be able to contact each other without knowing their specific location," Dai said. "Twenty or more individuals could have called looking for us, but since we're not at home, we're none the wiser.

"Hmm. If we hired a butler, he could at least take a message. Better yet, Mr. Poulsen should contrive a means for his telegraphphone to record the call without someone having to pick up on the receiving end. Not that telegraphphones are even available here." She pouted.

I saw her point, but she'd forgotten one crucial thing. "If we had a butler or even a telegraphphone that could take a message, we'd only be making it easier to get caught."

Dai gave an unexpected laugh. "Touché, Jacques," she said. "Nicely done." Prince barked as if agreeing with her. "Why don't we have lunch at the Baylor Hospital cafeteria? If Aiden is there, we can discover what she's learned, and if not, we can still reach out to Maginnis and see if he's available. It will save us some time to stay on this side of the Trinity River."

I could find no fault in her logic, so I steered us in the direction of Junius Street.

I picked the most shaded spot I could locate, then made sure all the windows were partially rolled down and set up a water bowl for Prince. Unfortunately, canines were not

welcome inside.

A quick check at the hospital's front desk informed us that Aiden had gone home several hours before. Maginnis was also out. Then it occurred to me to call the constable, just in case. I hit paydirt.

"Constable Higgins, how can I help you?" The man sounded tired.

"It's Jacques Haskin, sir," I said. "Checking to see if there'd been any news."

"Ah!" His voice perked up. "Good to hear from you. Aiden tried calling this morning, but there was no answer at the house."

"We had to go to the laundry but are free now. Should we come to your office?" I asked. "We stopped at the hospital to determine if Dr. Campbell was still here and thought we'd eat at the cafeteria."

"Not where I would choose to fill my belly, but it'll do," Higgins said. "How about I meet you there?"

"Sounds good."

I relayed the news to Dai, and then we made our way to the lunchroom to grab a table. The place was almost full, doctors and nurses making up the majority of the occupants. Settling her into a corner table, I joined the food line, glancing in her direction often to make sure she remained unmolested.

It was a relief to get back to the table with our trays. Though I knew Dai could take care of herself, if necessary, I'd rather she not have to go through the trouble. We were halfway through our meal when Constable Higgins joined us with a tray of his own.

The constable still looked bleary-eyed. It must have been a long night.

"Thank you for joining us, constable," Dai said, daintily dabbing at her mouth with a napkin. "We've been dying for some news."

"I definitely got some of that." Higgins reached for the bottle of Tabasco sauce on the table and liberally sprinkled it on his chicken noodle soup. If that didn't give him some pep,

nothing would. "We picked up the signed warrant late in the day yesterday."

Dai nodded, encouraging him to go on. The constable quickly took a couple of spoonfuls of his broth before doing so.

"They were none too happy to have us there, but there wasn't much they could do about it." He grinned. "Went right to the spot you mentioned, brought in some extra lights, and moved some crates around. As you figured, they didn't get everything, though it seemed they tried mighty hard." He shoved in a couple of more spoonfuls, his eyes looking clearer. "We tipped the shelving carefully to the floor and had us a look underneath. Bingo!"

Dai and I both sat forward.

"Blood and alcohol had soaked into the slats. Some of the evidence was diluted or destroyed by bleach, but Aiden got good samples from where the boards joined the frame. The blood type matched Mrs. Fuentes'." He crumbled some saltine crackers into his soup. "As for the liquor, we opened every last crate stored on those shelves and the ones next to them. Most of it was legitimate, but a couple of crates had ceramics with other stuff nestled inside and heavily padded. Fancy tequilas, brandy, bourbon—most had Mexican labels, but some had overseas ones from Spain."

He grinned from ear to ear. "Somebody's going to be way unhappy that we found those. The boxes were marked as coming from San Antonio rather than Mexico, so whoever sent them has a system—and it's a pretty clever one. Prohibitioners are gonna be on this like ticks on a dog."

"Does Maginnis know?" I asked. "Will this help him get the case dismissed?"

"I should hope so. He seemed plumb excited about it this morning," Higgins said. "Saw plenty of shocked faces when I brought the papers over to share with the sheriff's office. Though if what you suspect is true, somebody's going to take a chewing somewhere." He didn't appear sorry about that at all. We weren't either.

"Thank you, constable, for looking into this," Dai said.

"Miss, if you ever get any more hints about anything untoward happening, you make sure to let me know. I will be more than happy to take a look-see." The constable appeared to mean every word.

She gave him a soft smile. "That means a lot. Thank you."

The pair of them were as pleased as two peas in a pod. I, on the other hand, was nowhere near as thrilled. The last thing we needed was someone encouraging Dai to peer into criminal and possibly dangerous matters.

CHAPTER 41



We returned home not long after that. I left a message at Thompson and Knight asking Maginnis to please call us at the house once he returned to the office.

"Hopefully what they uncovered at the warehouse will give Maginnis sufficient ammunition to get Mrs. Pierce released," Dai said. "Proving the murder is connected to illegal alcohol imports should do it, even if there seem to be several factions muddying the waters.

"If we want this to go entirely away, however, we'll need to deliver the actual murderer." She curled her legs up under her on the living room couch. "Truman's mother holds the key; if only she would bother to remember who she had an altercation with so we can narrow the suspect pool." She sighed. "You'd think recalling someone you had words with wouldn't be so difficult. She doesn't come across as the type to forgive and forget."

"With the way the Klan collapsed, she's probably tried very hard to forget all about her involvement with them," I said. "No one would like to recall they were hoodwinked. I'm sure

it was quite mortifying."

"I suppose." Dai sighed. "Finding out your leader was a murderer and a rapist, and that he and his fellows were robbing the members blind, would leave a rather bitter taste in your mouth." She tilted her head. "But surely, being incarcerated for murder is worse. Let's hope she's recalled what we need."

I couldn't argue with that, but I wasn't hopeful. Then again, Mrs. Pierce would have little to do except think while staying at the High Five, so perhaps I was wrong. "I guess we'll see."

The next couple of hours crawled by, the phone in Tye's study remaining ominously silent. So when the doorbell rang, I expected our visitor would be an jubilant Pierce, so I was quite surprised to see it wasn't him at all.

At first glance, I didn't recognize the older man who stood there wearing a walking hat and a light summer jacket. "May I help you?" I asked.

"Indeed, you may, Mr. Haskin," the man said. "Though I see you don't recognize me out of uniform."

My eyes grew wide, as I recognized the voice. "Trevor?"

He removed his hat and bowed his head. "At your service."

"Please, do come in." I moved out of the way, opening the door wider. "Dai's in the living room. Would you like something to drink?" I asked.

"Thank you, but no," he said. "I can't stay long." He followed me to the living room.

"Good afternoon, Trevor," Dai said, sitting prim and proper on the couch, with Prince sitting at attention by her legs.

"Good afternoon, miss." He bowed his head in her direction, then took a seat. I remained standing by the living room's entrance to better watch for Rosa's or the Wus' arrival and head them off if necessary.

"You have information for me?" Dai asked.

"I do," Trevor said. "Truman would have come himself, but as you know, he's been a bit tied up."

"I can only imagine." She flashed him a smile. He gave a small one in return.

"As to Mrs. Pierce's affairs during the early twenties, I regret to say there's no particular event that stands out from that time with regard to the people of El Barrio. While Madam was heavily involved with the women's group, most meetings were held in large venues and not at home," Trevor said. "I must admit, I tried to involve myself as little as possible in *those* affairs." The pained expression on his face clearly stated he didn't embrace his employer's beliefs. I was sure his time in the Foreign Legion had exposed him to all sorts of people. Perhaps some of those deemed undesirable by the Klan had saved his life or become dear friends.

"I do have more on the other matter, however," he said. "Mr. Pierce is currently waiting on several permits he has requested after purchasing mineral rights as well as land in East Texas. It would seem he circumvented some previous business associates in doing this, and they apparently didn't take that well. There have been several, shall we say, heated arguments when the young master has been away from home. A scandal could very well ruin the chances of closing those deals satisfactorily."

Trevor lowered his voice. "Now, this is pure conjecture on my part, Miss Wu, but from the conversations I've overheard, Mr. Pierce has made certain concessions to ease these tensions. Yet there seem to be other parties involved—not connected to his business—who are clouding the issue, so to speak."

"You don't say?" Dai looked fit to burst from excitement.

"Mr. Pierce and his cohorts seem very disturbed that the charges on Mrs. Pierce have yet to be dropped." Trevor leaned forward. "The judge's stubbornness on the matter has several of them quite confused, especially as the DA's office officially asked for a dismissal. The gentlemen believe someone else is greasing the palms of justice for their own ends."

Dai nodded. "With the discovery of contraband liquor in the Morgan warehouse, I believe that situation will resolve itself. There shouldn't be any further need to delay the investigation now that it's been found out."

I stared at her in astonishment, realizing she was right. As

long as the alcohol remained undiscovered, it had been advantageous for the smugglers as well as the murderer to have the police looking elsewhere. Mr. Pierce's troubles had helped to keep the investigation from progressing as well. But now that he had come to an understanding with his 'friends,' and the contraband and the murder site had been found, perhaps the inquiry would finally get back on track—assuming it wasn't just dumped in a corner to gather mold due to the victim's country of origin.

"Forgive me for not asking sooner, sir, but what is your family name?" I asked.

Trevor glanced at me, surprised. "It's Russell, sir. Though I believe we're well past the need for such formality on my account."

"Then we insist you treat us the same, please," Dai said. "Thank you, Trevor, for your invaluable assistance. I'm quite hopeful that when we hear from Mr. Maginnis again, he'll have good news for Truman."

"That would be most welcome." Trevor stood. "I need to get back, but if there's anything you desire, please don't hesitate to let me know. It's good to see the young master finally making worthy friends."

I kept my expression neutral and held my tongue as I accompanied him to the front door, since he'd paid us a compliment. But I could have done without the notion of him considering me Pierce's friend.

I'd no sooner closed the door than the telephone in Tye's study started ringing. I barely beat Dai there, Prince bouncing with enthusiasm at her heels.

"Wu residence."

"Mr. Haskin—" Maginnis' voice poured from the receiver, so I tilted it so she could hear. "Both objectives have now been achieved." He gave a soft chuckle. "The judge kept insisting he still had to review all the evidence, but when District Attorney Jones also started clamoring for the case's dismissal and said that he might need to order an investigation on the judge's continued stubbornness, Orwell finally capitulated. Miss

Crawford is being processed for release as we speak."

"That's marvelous news, Mr. Maginnis," Dai said. "Thank you for being so diligent with this."

"My pleasure, Miss Wu. I'm only sorry it took so long to get it accomplished," the lawyer said. "I'm hoping Jones goes ahead and looks into this, regardless." The last was said with relish. "As for the second matter, she finally came through. There aren't a lot of details, but hopefully, there'll be enough there to facilitate matters for you. Miss Charles is typing up the notes, and you should receive them by carrier in the next hour."

"Outstanding, Mr. Maginnis." Dai's dimpled smile looked almost predatory. "Will you be delivering her to her home once she's released, or do we need to make arrangements for her?"

"We'll be taking care of that," he said. "I'll escort her there personally. I'm rather curious to see the man who left her to fend for herself in such dire straits."

"I must admit to some curiosity about that as well," Dai said. "Though I doubt I'd like what I might find."

I knew I wouldn't. Mrs. Pierce might not be a saint, but no innocent person deserved to go through such an ordeal. I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep my opinions to myself if we met face to face. And I definitely didn't want Dai anywhere near Bernard Pierce—putting up with his son was more than enough for me.

CHAPTER 42



As promised, a courier arrived within the hour. I tipped the young man and sent him on his way, yet hesitated when it was time to return to the living room. Depending on what was inside, I knew Dai might make plans for some sort of meeting, much like she'd done on the Laura Cooper case. A confrontation that might end in violence.

"Jacques! Please don't dawdle!"

With a sigh, I forced my legs to move. There was no point in delaying the inevitable. "Maybe we should just hand this over to Constable Higgins. I'm sure he'd know what to do with the information."

"Come sit." Dai patted the couch cushion next to her. Prince was asleep at her feet. "It wouldn't do any good to give it to him until we learn what we've got. Now spill."

Sitting, I opened the envelope. Inside was a typewritten page and a handwritten note attached to it with a paperclip. The written message was brief.

"Thank you for your efforts," I read out loud. "She didn't bother to add your name, and didn't even have the decency to

sign it."

Dai laughed. "Greater deniability that way."

I couldn't fathom why she wasn't taking offense at this. "Ungrateful is what it is." I couldn't help but feel incensed on her behalf.

"She probably believes I would use it against her in some manner," Dai said. "Who knows what we might do if we had proof of her thanking one of the lesser races? It would presumably bring her no end of embarrassment." She shook her head. "What a horrible way to live."

"That makes her ungrateful and doubly rude for even thinking we'd do such a thing." The nerve of some people!

"Don't forget, we didn't do this for her, but for Truman," Dai said. "So it really doesn't matter what she thinks or does. Now quit stalling and read out the notes."

I put a cap on my ire and looked at the typed document. "It says here that Mrs. Pierce attended a large party hosted by H.E. Spalti at his mansion about five years ago. Over a hundred guests had been invited to dinner, so a lot of temporary help was brought in to handle the meal and to bring refreshments to the visitors once the banquet was over." I grimaced as I read ahead. "According to her, one of the servers had the effrontery to jostle Mrs. Pierce's hand as she reached for a glass of wine on her tray, spilling it on her velvet Coco Chanel dress. The servant didn't immediately apologize. Instead, she labored to lay the blame on another guest who had supposedly bumped into her from behind. Mrs. Pierce felt the need to show the woman her place by slapping her in the face." I grimaced again, able to picture this much too clearly. She was fortunate not to have tried that on Mrs. Wu.

"Rather than bring the servant to her senses, the slap only made her more belligerent, so Mrs. Pierce slapped her a second time. A couple of men had to grab the woman and throw her out after she dared to jump at Mrs. Pierce to do her violence in retaliation." I shook my head, unable to understand how Truman's mother could not only believe that it was acceptable to repeatedly strike someone, but be astounded when the poor

server tried to fight back. "She lost her earring that evening and had to leave the party early due to the damage to her dress."

Dai frowned. "Did she mention anything about what the woman looked like at all?"

"Not much," I said. "She was female, possibly in her mid-thirties at the time—a Mexican, one with a darker complexion rather than one of those 'with tainted mixed blood of the Spanish colonials and indigenous natives.' Her words, not mine." Since Dai had been focusing on the women belonging to the *sociedad*, I assumed she believed one of them was involved in the murder, even if I didn't yet know why. Out of the eleven women belonging to the *sociedad*, four or five were in the right age range. Three had darker skin than the rest.

She nodded slowly, her expression serious. "Exactly what I needed. Thank you, Jacques. And just in time, too. Rosa is here."

I tucked the items back into their envelope. Dai stood, bringing Prince awake.

"We need to act before the news of Mrs. Pierce's release gets to our quarry," she said. "I doubt she'll run, but others may well decide she's become too much of a liability."

That sent an icy shiver down my spine. Did she honestly believe the woman might be murdered? What could she possibly know that would be worth her life to keep it a secret? "There's no way we can do anything about it tonight," I said.

Her smile looked devious. "Leave that to me."

I didn't feel reassured in the least.

To my considerable surprise, Dai didn't mention any of our discoveries to Rosa, or even raise the topic of El Barrio at all. I'd assumed we'd need Rosa's help for whatever she had planned, but it was apparently not required. I was somewhat relieved by this; we'd already made her too much of an accomplice during this mess. It would grieve me to bring her trouble or put a strain on her friendship with Lien when all she'd ever been was kind to us.

But though Dai didn't mention up El Barrio, I caught Rosa throwing her and me a look or two, as if expecting the topic to

be brought up. After Mr. and Mrs. Wu arrived, the three of them went upstairs to freshen up for dinner, while I went outside to feed Prince. Rosa followed me.

"*Mijo*," she said, "any developments? About Dai helping her friend?"

I fetched Prince's kibble, not looking at her directly as I struggled with what to say. "I think she's about done with that." I truly hoped that was true. "Thank you for all your help."

"It brought back a lot of memories," Rosa said. "And I suppose having a little excitement is nice now and then."

I'd be quite satisfied not to have any drama in our lives at all. Something of that must have shown on my face as she took a peek at me and laughed.

"Oh, surely it's not as bad as all that?" Rosa's sunny nature was one of her finest qualities—a brightness that has been slightly dimmed by her violent loss of her loved ones, but never snuffed out.

"You're not the one having to deal with Lien's wrath," I said.

She came close and patted my cheek with affection. "She trusts you and your judgment. She may not always show it, but you're like a son to her. And Lien knows you'll try your best for Dai."

But I was certain it wouldn't make a difference then if she ever discovered anything about this murder investigation business. Sons have been barred from their family's before. "We'd best get back inside before they come out looking for us."

We left Prince to enjoy the rest of his dinner in peace.

I expected Dai to toss out some sort of ploy during supper and found my appetite somewhat curbed, waiting for it. But it didn't happen. Perhaps she'd decided against pushing forward tonight, but I didn't dare get my hopes up.

Dessert was a Jell-O mold with bits of cherries. As I ate my serving, I noticed Dai barely touched hers. This didn't go unnoticed by her parents.

"Daiyu, is there something wrong with your dessert? Are

you feeling unwell?" her mother asked.

"Everything is all right, *Mŭqīn*." Dai sighed, making her words ring untrue. "The Jell-O is fine. My tongue just seems to prefer something else, though." She left it at that and pushed the confection around on her plate.

Her parents and Rosa sent a questioning look in my direction, and all I could do was shrug. I couldn't tell if this was some kind of gambit or if she genuinely didn't want the Jell-O, which was out of character for her.

Dai's father sat forward, frowning. "*Nŭér*, is there another treat you would like better?" Tye asked.

"No. I'm fine." Another soft sigh followed a moment later.

I was almost sure it was a tactic of some sort, but not what part I was supposed to play in it. "I'd be happy to go out and get you whatever you want," I ventured.

"It'd be melted by the time you got back," Dai said. "It's only a silly craving. I'll live." She returned to pushing the Jell-O around.

We all stared at one another. Finally, Lien said, "If you want ice cream, you could just go with him. The fresh air might do you some good."

Dai grimaced. "Are you sure you don't mind, Jacques?" she asked.

"It's fine. You know I'd be happy to do it."

Once again, she'd finagled a way to get out of the house without arousing suspicions.

CHAPTER 43



"I'm not sure you should keep doing that kind of thing," I said, while backing the Ford out into the alleyway.

"What kind of thing?" Dai played with Prince's ears, a satisfied look on her face.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about—manipulating your family. Using their worry for you against them to get what you want." It wasn't clear to me why, but this latest maneuver had left a rather sour taste in my mouth.

She sent a frown in my direction. "If I don't appear to misbehave in some way occasionally, they might become even more worried about me."

My brow furrowed as I tried to poke holes in her statement. She wasn't wrong, but that fact didn't necessarily prove her right. "All I'm saying is that it's not fair to do this to them just because you can."

"Honestly, Jacques! This isn't some *lark*. It was simply the most expedient manner to get away with a minimum of fuss." She crossed her arms and turned her face toward the window.

"You make it sound like I'm some kind of evil puppetmaster."

That made for a disturbing image. "Sorry, it's not what I meant at all. I just..." I took a deep breath and tried anew. "Lying to them about what we're up to really bothers me, is all."

Dai let her arms drop. "I'm not thrilled about it either. But needs must." She shrugged. "After tonight, there won't be any reason to do it again."

I certainly hoped so. She might not be aware of it, but she thoroughly enjoyed finding ways around obstacles in her path and working on these death filled puzzles.

"I'm to drive to El Barrio, I presume?" I asked.

"Yes, please. We need to see Father Ignacio. I'm hoping to convince him to gather the *brigada* so we can finalize matters."

Though it was past seven, the sun had yet to set, but the temperature was slowly cooling down, making it a pleasant ride. If only we weren't headed toward something serious.

"Shouldn't we have the constable meet us there, or the police?" I asked.

Dai shook her head. "If the police or the constable show up, we won't get anywhere. The residents know who we are and won't be as intimidated by our presence. Plus, if the law arrives, there's also the possibility those helping the murderer will panic and take steps."

So law enforcement was out. I already didn't like the need for a confrontation—escalating matters, even less so.

I parked the Ford across the street from the church. By the time I'd made it around to open Dai's door, her teashade glasses were in place, and she'd removed her hat to don her lace *mantilla*. After setting Dai's hand at my elbow, I scooped up Prince and his leash. I had no idea how Father Ignacio would react to us bringing a dog into the sanctuary, but I was not leaving Dai's canine bodyguard behind when we had no idea if the evening might turn violent.

The church's double doors weren't locked, so we walked inside. It being a Tuesday, I expected the church to be empty, but it wasn't. Several women and a couple of older men were

sprinkled about the pews in contemplation or prayer. I settled Dai in the back row with Prince hiding beneath the bench seat, then went in search of Father Ignacio. If I couldn't find him in the church proper, I would go outside and around to the back and return through the rear entrance rather than cross the altar area.

As I passed the confessional, someone parted one of the curtains and came out. A few moments later, the second curtain was pushed open, and Father Ignacio exited. He spotted me right away and sent a small smile, though I could tell my presence puzzled him.

"Mr. Haskin, this is a surprise," the priest said. "Have you come for confession?"

"Padre—uh, no, not exactly. Dai is with me, and we need to talk to you. It concerns Señora Fuentes Garcia."

The priest looked more confused than before. "We can speak in my office." He followed me to where I'd left Dai and Prince, then had us accompany him through a semi-concealed doorway neat the altar, which led to the rooms hidden in the back.

The priest's office was small, just large enough for a desk, a couple of extra chairs, and one set of bookshelves. The faint scent of vanilla and wax permeated the place, making it warm and inviting. The walls were filled with images of Christ and the Virgin, as well as lush landscapes and charcoal drawings by the parish children.

"Señorita Wu, you have news?"

"I do, Padre," Dai said. "The woman arrested in connection with Señora Fuentes Garcia's murder has been proven innocent and is being set free."

Relief flashed across his face. "I am so glad to hear that. I'd been praying for her since you told me of her. Has the actual criminal been found?"

She tilted her head. "That's why we've come to see you," she said. "I am assuming no one has yet mentioned it during the confessional?"

The priest's expression grew troubled. "No. And not a soul

here would have done such a thing, Señorita Wu."

The light glittered off Dai's darklensed teashade glasses. "I'm afraid you're quite mistaken on that point, Padre." Her tone left no room for doubt. "Someone here gave in to the darkness."

Father Ignacio crossed himself—whether to ward himself from Dai's words or ask God for strength, it was hard to tell.

"The Seal of the Sacrament was created to protect the penitents," the priest said. "To make it safe for them to unburden their souls of sin and seek absolution, to further their relationship with God. So for someone to choose, purposely, *not* to cleanse their soul..." He crossed himself again.

"Don't forget, they also didn't hesitate to set up someone else for the crime, thus compounding their sins," Dai added. "A person like that will justify their ends by any means. She may even drag others along with her, convincing them to give in to their darker impulses, as she did."

Father Ignacio's eyes widened with sudden realization. "You know who it is."

"I do." She exuded an aura of calm and solidity greater than her small size and flesh, the same as her namesake, black jade. "And people need to see her for what she is, Padre. She needs to be saved from herself."

The priest stared at her in silence for a long, drawn-out moment, as if truly seeing her for the first time. "What do you require of me?"

"Summon Señora Fuentes' *sociedad* to the church."

CHAPTER 44



Father Ignacio asked no more questions and left the office immediately. Then, a couple of minutes later, there was a soft knock at the door. Opening it, I found one of the nuns of the Daughters of Charity standing there in a black habit, wearing the famous white cornettes that made them so easily distinguishable from other orders.

"Evening. Father Ignacio asked if I'd bring you something to drink while you waited for his return." She set a small wooden tray on the desk.

"Thank you, sister, that's very kind," I said. Of course, having a beverage was the last thing on my mind at the moment, but it was nevertheless nice that the priest thought of it.

"We're always happy to help." With a slight nod, the nun left us, closing the office door behind her.

"Maybe meeting the *sociedad* at the church is not the best of ideas?" I was loath to sit down again, but the tiny office didn't have enough room to encourage pacing. "Wouldn't Señora Fuentes' home be a better location?"

Dai shook her head. "It would call too much attention to meet there. But since we're still within the nine days of paying respects to the recently departed, her *sociedad* coming here won't seem all that unusual."

The better to keep those who'd assisted the murderer unaware, I supposed. Just how much danger might we be in?

Father Ignacio returned not long after. "Señorita Wu, all the señoras should be here soon. The sisters have been kind enough to ask those at the church to leave since we'll be having a special service for the *sociedad*."

"Thank you, Padre," Dai said, her tone gentle. "I realize this is difficult."

He nodded in acknowledgment and wouldn't look at her directly. "If you are right, it is my duty to do what I can to help her soul. Will you join me in prayer while we wait?"

We weren't Catholic, but it was the least we could do. Regardless of how this turned out, the community would need time to return to how it'd been, if that was possible, and a sizeable chunk of the burden would land on the priest's shoulders.

The three of us returned to the church proper, with Prince bringing up the rear. Four of the nuns sat on the pews closest to the front doors. Whether they remained to turn away anyone who didn't belong to the *sociedad* or in case of trouble, there was no way to guess.

Dai, Father Ignacio, and I held hands and bowed our heads in silent prayer. Prince imitated us, looking solemn.

The ladies of the *brigada* arrived in twos and threes. The priest welcomed them, then brought them to the front pews to sit. Most seemed pleased to see us again. But I was sure that wouldn't last.

"Señoras, thank you all for coming, and I apologize for the short notice," Father Ignacio said. He stood before them with the altar and the figure of Christ on the cross behind him. "But there's an important matter we must discuss."

The women shared confused glances. "Has something happened, Father?" Sylvia asked.

Dai rose to her feet. "I'll take it from here, Padre. Thank you." We traded positions with him, but Dai signaled Prince to stay under the pew rather than join us.

"The police have positive proof that Señora Fuentes was not murdered at her house, as it was first believed."

Gasps echoed in the church's open space.

"She was actually murdered at a warehouse, then brought home afterward, and false evidence planted to throw suspicion elsewhere," Dai said. "I'm sorry to have to tell you she was killed by someone in the community. "

"I don't believe you. I *won't* believe you!" This came from Leticia, one of the group's youngest members.

"Then you'll like what I have to say next even less." In her dark blue dress and black mantilla, her gloved hands clasped together in front of her as if holding an invisible sword, she looked like an avenging angel. "The murderer is a member of your *brigada*."

Those not in stunned shock quickly crossed themselves.

The oldest, Gabriela, rose shakily to her feet. "We made you welcome in our community. We brought you into our homes. Why would you say such things to us?"

As I had seen the dragon do, Dai seemed to grow larger as she stood calmly before them. "Because they are true, and you need to understand the truth. There is a serpent in your midst."

"Father, did you already know all this before you asked us to come here tonight?" Adriana stared at him. Tears glimmered in her eyes.

Along with Alicia, Margarita, Valentina, and possibly Teresa, she was within the age group we'd narrowed down from Mrs. Pierce's statement. Adriana, Valentina, and Alicia were the members of the group with the darkest skin tone.

"I did," Father Ignacio said, his expression apologetic and eyes sad. "A soul is in danger. I had no choice."

Valentina shot to her feet. "Why are we even listening to this *china*? What proof does she have? She could just be fishing, or trying to ruin the bonds we have forged through trials and sacrifice. Why should we let an outsider do that to us? She's

probably in league with *el diablo*."

All the women crossed themselves, eyes wide.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but no, I'm not in league with the devil," Dai said. "I just used my other senses and my mind." She removed her teashade glasses, giving them a different type of shock. It was one thing to know someone was blind, and with Dai, quite another to actually see it. I've always thought her white-silver eyes made her appear otherworldly.

Several of the women flinched, but I could tell some of the others saw her the way I did.

"The reason I didn't bring it up sooner was because we needed to find out where the señora really died and why she was slain in the first place," Dai told them. "I have that information now."

Maria kissed the cross on her rosary then looked around at her sisters in arms. "Perhaps we should hear what she found. I, for one, want to learn why Isabel was murdered."

There was a sprinkle of nods but also faces tinged with fear. The thought of being betrayed by someone that close to you had to be terrifying. Valentina sat down again, frowning. Teresa reached out to touch her arm, but Valentina pulled it away.

"During the time of the Cristero Wars," Dai said, "Señora Fuentes and the rest of you banded together into a *brigada*. As a group, you found ways to smuggle money, ammunition, and provisions to those fighting for your religious beliefs back home. You were united in your faith and your convictions.

"That war is over now. Yet matters here in El Barrio have remained much like before. The Americans see you as capable of only doing heavy labor or menial tasks, despite your achievements elsewhere. Moreover, what few improvements have been implemented in the neighborhood weren't enough to accommodate those already living here, let alone the new people still coming from the Mexican States and farther abroad."

Dai paused, letting the words sink in.

"Mexico is even now plagued with problems despite the

1929 agreement that ended the war. That's the reason so many tried smuggling alcohol into Texas—but the Texas Rangers made it too difficult and too costly a venture to pursue. Until someone realized there was a safer way to go about it. They could use the infrastructure set up by the *brigadas*."

The women turned to look at each other in disbelief, the concept obviously never having occurred to them.

"As a woman of faith, I am sure the murderer resisted the idea at first," Dai said. "Selling liquor here is against the law. But the person asking was a relative. And it would benefit both her, them, and many others for her to do this. It would give her money and security, perchance even bring in enough to let her help her community. So what would be the harm?"

The oldest ladies of the group scowled at this, and Gabriela shook her head, but some of the younger ones nodded slowly as they thought about it.

"So eventually, she shared with them what she knew. She became an intermediary and helped draft a person or two into the enterprise, forwarded correspondence, engineered introductions to businessmen here whom she'd learned certain things about during her work in wealthy homes."

I kept watching their faces, hoping to find a hint of the guilty party. I wanted to be ready. We were *not* going to have a repeat of what happened last time.

Dai continued. "Amazingly, money started coming in, but she didn't have a suitable explanation for how she got it, so she saved it instead. She knew Isabel would disapprove of what she was doing. Señora Fuentes would *never* believe it was right to lead others into sin for one's own benefit. That any good that came from it would be tainted in God's eyes."

Though she was blind, Dai turned her white-silver eyes on each of them as if she could see them clearly. "Somehow, Isabel got suspicious. Maybe she overheard something she shouldn't have; perhaps it was an impulse purchase, or a gift received from those involved that seemed out of place to her. What it was, we might never know. But she decided to find out what was going on. So she kept an eye on her. Then one night,

she saw her head from her house, much later than a proper lady should be going out, and elected to follow her.

"Imagine her surprise: She watched her sister *brigada* walk to the edge of El Barrio, then take the beaten path leading to the Morgan Warehouses by the railroad yard. The loading dock is open in the closest of the buildings. She spots a security guard, workers, and her friend. They all seem to be well acquainted. They even open a crate and check what's inside. That's when she realizes what's being done. But she bides her time and rushes in to confront the one responsible when she's momentarily alone."

Dai shook her head slowly. "No matter what she said, Señora Fuentes wouldn't see reason. She should know her place, and she should listen to her betters. Isabel threatened to denounce her publicly if she didn't cease this madness. How could she risk her soul and that of others for money? For liquor? She grabbed a bottle from the open crate and pitched it to the ground. In her fury, Isabel would not quit until it was all destroyed. Her sister *brigada* had to stop her. So she snatched the pry bar next to the crate and smashed it into the señora's skull and killed her."

Choruses of "*¡Ay, Dios mío!*" echoed in the church. Hands swiftly made the sign of the cross.

"I'm sure she regretted it the moment it happened, but what was done was done." Dai shook her head, slowly lowering it just a little as if wracked with grief at what had transpired. "Yet she couldn't let the body be found at the warehouse. It would give everything away. So they wrapped her up and carted her off, cleaning the scene so those who came to work in the morning would be none the wiser.

"Once they got Isabel home, the perpetrator cleaned her up and placed her close to her beloved *altarcito* to *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*. But she knew once Señora Fuentes was found, there would be an outcry in the community to find out who had done such a thing. So she needed to give them a scapegoat. And that's when she remembered an enemy to the neighborhood, to the faith, and herself from years before. So

she arranged a couple of items she'd kept all that time to put the blame on someone she considered evil and on whom she'd love to get revenge. If that person was convicted for the crime and killed, so much the better."

Two of the women covered their faces with their hands and began to weep softly. From the back, the nuns had begun a quiet prayer.

"¡*La china está loca!*"

"No, I'm not crazy," Dai said. "The truth has been there from the start if only one realized where to look. I knew the woman arrested was not guilty the moment I paid my respects to the señora."

"But how could you know that?" Juana asked. "You're blind."

"Yet that doesn't mean that I can't 'see,'" Dai answered. "The way the body was placed showed respect and regret. Something a hate-filled stranger would never have taken the time to do. Then there was the perfume."

A gasp rang out in the room, but I couldn't be sure who it was from.

"JOY,' by Jean Patou. The world's most *expensive* perfume," Dai said. "A bit of vanity, a way to remind herself what she could gain from the venture, perhaps? Señora Fuentes may have noticed its intoxicating scent, just like I did. And Isabel would have known, from more prosperous times, the difference between a cheap and high-priced fragrance."

"Dabbing it behind her ears as you helped prepare her for the wake was a final gesture of regret and gratitude for your years together. Isn't that right, Valentina?" Dai's tone was so matter-of-fact it gave me goosebumps.

All eyes turned to the *brigadas'* second-in-command. She fit all the criteria Dai had uncovered during the investigation. Valentina Pérez Guerra was in her early forties, had a darker skin tone, and was even widowed without children, allowing her freedom of movement. The others would know if she had ever taken jobs as a server or maid in affluent homes.

Valentina shot to her feet, glaring at her. "You lie. I don't

understand why you've singled me out like this, but you *lie*. I loved Isabel!"

I focused on the angry woman, ready to grab her if necessary.

"I am sure you did," Dai said, a tranquil sea to Valentina's tempest. "But it didn't stop you from killing her, all the same." With Jesus on the cross looming behind her at the altar, Dai's words resonated in such a way they couldn't be anything but true.

Valentina turned her back to her as if she could avoid what was happening by not seeing her. "You don't believe her, do you? I'm your *hermana en Cristo*."

None of them would look at her directly. "You've been secretive for a while, Valentina," Adriana said. "You'd even disappear every once in a while. We all noticed. We just figured you were courting in secret. Probably a *blanco*, rather than one of our own, so you were too embarrassed to tell us. But we thought you'd get there, eventually." She shook her head violently. "We never once imagined you were capable of *this*. Isabel trusted you!"

Valentina cringed as if her friend had slapped her. "No. It's not true. It's not true!"

"Do you swear it on the Virgin?" asked Gabriela. "Will you kiss the crucifix and state it is the truth before God?"

Valentina looked even more distressed than before. If she was lying and did as they asked, it would be sacrilege. There would be no forgiveness, if the truth later came out.

"*Please*, try to understand. You all know how she was. She wouldn't *listen*! My cousin Juan is just trying to help everyone. He's donated a lot to our hometown of Matamoros—he's helped the businesses and faithful there. He's doing good! Is it his fault some *blancos* are corrupt? Plus, who cares what they do to each other, as long as we take care of our own?"

Father Ignacio rose to his feet. "Valentina, that is not God's way. Until you confess your sins, He won't forgive you. He cannot help you."

She vehemently shook her head. "There's nothing wrong

with wanting money or working hard to make a better life for myself, for everyone here!"

"It is when you have to pay with a piece of your soul for your success and when you lead yourself and others into sin," Father Ignacio said. "When you rob another of their existence."

Valentina shook where she stood. "She *made* me do it! I didn't want to, but Isabel forced me! She always looked down on me because she came from a rich Spanish family. This was my chance, my opportunity to prove I was just as good. And she tried to steal it from me! What else could I do?"

Most of the women were now weeping openly.

"You foolish, foolish child," Gabriela said, tears running down her cheeks. "She'd chosen you as her successor. She made her wishes known to Silvia and me long ago. We were only waiting until the time of mourning was over to tell you."

"What? No, no—you're just trying to make me feel bad. She never did that." The color had left Valentina's face, her eyes horrified.

"What Gabriela said is correct." This came from Silvia. "She was hard on you because she wanted to be sure you would be properly prepared to lead us when the time arrived. She had such high hopes for you."

"No! It isn't true; it isn't true!" But Valentina's crumbling expression told us what she really believed. Her legs seemed to give out a moment later, and she fell to her knees. She clasped her hands in supplication, her eyes filling with tears. "Isabel, *perdóname. Virgen, ayudame. ¿Qué he hecho?*"

All the women stood and surrounded her, weeping as they experienced a second loss.

Prince came out of his hiding place and stood at Dai's side. I did the same.

"Jacques, we should go," Dai said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Placing her hand at my elbow and sending Father Ignacio a nod, we quietly made our way to the exit.

CHAPTER 45



Stepping outside the church was like having a weight lifted off my shoulders. There'd been no violence this time, which was a blessing.

We'd just reached the Ford when Prince gave a soft growl, and Dai switched her hand from my elbow to my sleeve, giving it a yank. Four men materialized out of the surrounding darkness.

I'd relaxed my guard too soon.

"*Buenas noches*, señores," I said. "Can we help you?" I kept the car at our backs and moved slightly forward to place myself between Dai and the men. Prince continued to growl softly at my back, prepared to go into attack mode.

"*Gringos* shouldn't stick their noses where they don't belong." The men made a loose circle on the side of the Ford where we stood, hemming us in but not coming too close. Behind me, I heard Dai slip out her Chinese war fan and open it, making herself ready, just in case.

"It would be in your best interest not to peer into our business any further, or there will be *consequences*." One of them

dropped a lit cigarette on the ground, then stomped on it violently to demonstrate the type of outcomes they were talking about.

To my horror, Dai stepped forward to stand beside me.

"Señores, we have no interest in your venture," she said, her voice calm, as if there were nothing untoward in their visit. "We were only working to prove the innocence of the woman your *jefe* tried to keep in jail, and expose the actual killer."

"*Chiquita*, that wasn't any of your business either," the gruff fellow added. "You need to learn not to stick your nose into matters that don't concern you."

The man made as if to reach for her, so I chopped at his arm with my hand. He pulled it back with a hiss. The fellow closest to me shot forward and punched me in the stomach before I could react. I bent over in pain, falling against the side of the Ford.

"Razor!"

Struggling to stand up despite the throbbing ache, I saw Prince leap at the offender's hand and chomp down on it. When the man screamed, Prince let go, bouncing back toward us, and started barking at the top of his lungs.

The rest of the men looked none too pleased by this, but didn't come any closer. The one who'd spoken before scowled at us, pulling a knife. "This is your only warning. Don't mess in Juan Guerra Cárdenas' business. If you ever step foot in El Barrio again, you'll regret it." He slashed at the air with his blade to emphasize his point.

Heads popped out of windows and doors down the street at the racket. "*¿Qué paso?*"

All four men turned away and disappeared in different directions. The one Prince had taken a bite of was cradling his hand, drops of blood falling on the pitted road as he sent a hate-filled glare the mutt's way. The moment they were out of sight, Prince stopped barking.

"Jacques, are you all right?" Dai sounded frantic, all her previous calm gone. She was reaching blindly in my general direction.

"I'm fine." I forced myself to straighten the rest of the way, and took hold of her hand. She held mine back in a vise grip.

Prince gave a soft whine, his dark eyes staring up at me. "Thanks for the help, mutt." I gingerly bent down to pat him on the head, my stomach muscles still unhappy at the rough treatment.

The church's doors swung open, sending a swath of light across the street. Father Ignacio rushed down the steps and crossed the road, a broom held in his fist like a sword. Two of the nuns followed behind him, their white cornettes making them look like Valkyries going into battle.

"Is everyone all right?" The priest lowered the broom, still looking around for someone to whack with it.

Dai squeezed my hand hard before turning toward our would-be rescuers. "I think we're fine, Padre. Though if one of the nuns could check Jacques over, I would greatly appreciate it."

"Dai, I'm okay," I said. "My pride and my stomach are a little sore, but that's all."

The same nun who'd brought us refreshments at Father Ignacio's office stepped forward. "Why don't you let *us* be the judge of that?" The expression on her face promised any arguments against it would be ignored, maybe even punished. I'd seen the look a time or two at my first orphanage and knew the futility of fighting against it. I sat on the Ford's runner so she could quickly take a peek.

"What happened?" Father Ignacio asked.

Dai's tranquil aura was back. "We met some gentlemen who didn't appreciate our looking into things and wanted to make sure we understood that."

The priest looked even more worried than before. "I am so sorry. This should never have occurred. The lookouts should have intervened."

I had a feeling our attackers *were* the posted lookouts. Valentina's relative appeared to have already recruited more than a handful of those who lived here.

We all turned as one toward the church as a scream tore the

quiet night. Prince shot like a bolt in the church's direction, followed by Father Ignacio and the nuns. I pulled down my shirt and vest, scooped up Dai in my arms, and rushed after them. After an initial sound of surprise, she clung to my neck as we careened across the street.

By the time I got us inside, all the women were talking at once, crossing themselves over and over. A motor backfired loudly somewhere outside.

"Señoras *cálmense*, *por favor*. What is going on?" Father Ignacio asked.

Leticia spoke, her eyes as wide as saucers. "It was Hector! He came in from the offices and grabbed Valentina. She said she didn't want to go, but he made her come with him, anyway. He pushed Silvia down when she tried to stop him and threatened the rest of us. It was awful!"

The old matron waved our worried glances away, sitting on a pew and already being looked after by one of the nuns. I set Dai down on the bench beside the older woman, then rushed with Father Ignacio to the clerical area of the church, Prince running ahead.

The back door I'd used to bring in supplies a few days ago stood open into the night. Prince found a *mantilla* on the ground, but there was no sign of anyone aside from that. The backfiring motor must have been a car waiting for them on the side street.

Despite that, Father Ignacio, Prince, and I ran around the area but saw no hints as to where they'd gone. My abdominal muscles cramped, not too happy at the additional harsh treatment.

"Padre, we should call the police," I said, struggling to catch my breath.

The priest threw me a sad look. "They would not search for her. They'd just use it as an excuse to cause us trouble. It's happened before."

A flash of anger burned through me. Not at the fact that he wouldn't contact law enforcement, but rather at the thought that the people here had been abused enough by those sworn

to protect them, they didn't want to risk calling for help.

"I'll organize a search for her and Hector as soon as the sun comes up," Father Ignacio said. "And now that I know there is evil hiding here, I can do my part to ferret it out."

I truly hoped he could. Though if Valentina and tonight's troubles were any indication, he had a long and difficult fight ahead of him. The fact the smugglers would drag an unwilling woman from a church declared they'd be willing to cross whatever lines were necessary to achieve their ends. Whoever was in charge stateside or even her cousin in Mexico must have worried about what she might say if arrested by the police and took steps. I could only pray there wouldn't be another body found by morning.

CHAPTER 46



"Are you positive you're all right to drive, Jacques?" Dai asked as I gingerly took the driver's seat in the Ford.

"Yes, quite sure." Looking in the peep mirror, I noticed an unusually perturbed expression on her face, as if she didn't fully dare to believe me. "It's sore at the moment," I said, "but I'm certain I'll be right as rain by morning."

She nodded, though I couldn't see any actual change in her features. "If you start feeling worse at all, please pull to the side of the road. Promise me you'll do that."

Irrational as it was, I felt guilty for making her worry. "I promise."

Her expression finally lightened a little. Prince gave a soft whine and settled on her lap, then raised his head to lick her cheeks. Dai hugged him close, burying her face in his fluffy fur.

Feeling slightly better, I got us underway. I cast a last glance at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, knowing it was unlikely I'd ever see it again. The front doors still stood open, the light spilling from the interior like a knife cutting through the darkness, offering hope. When we left them, Father Ignacio,

the nuns, and the ladies of the *brigada* were deep in prayer. I hoped they would make it through this and not let the blackness that had tainted Valentina's soul infect theirs.

Working the pedals on the car pulled a little on my abused abdomen, but not enough to keep me from driving us back to the house. After the unexpected turn of the evening, the only thing I wanted was to get Dai home, where she'd be safe.

When I finally parked the Ford in the Wus' carport, I sighed with heartfelt relief. But I knew we weren't quite done yet. There was one more obstacle to overcome before the night was over.

"Let me give us a onceover before we go inside." I helped Dai out of the automobile. She no longer looked pale, and her expression had cleared. These observations made me feel better, despite my abdomen's renewed complaints. "Prince, I'll need to inspect you as well."

He tilted his dark head, tongue lolling out, and sat for inspection. There was no blood on his muzzle or teeth, and a quick comb through put him back to rights. At my nod, he rushed off to do his business and rejoin us when he was through.

Rosa's bicycle was no longer here, so she'd already left for the night. Nevertheless, I'd need to make sure to give her a much abbreviated and edited version of the truth, so she knew Dai was through with the affair.

I helped Dai straighten her clothes, comb her hair, and put her hat back on. She'd removed the *mantilla* sometime during the drive and hidden it in her purse. Then I dusted off my jacket and pants before we made our way inside. I was somewhat surprised but relieved that the Wus hadn't come out to greet us when we arrived.

I soon found out there was a reason for that.

"We have guests," Dai said. My brow rose, wondering who would call so late on a Tuesday.

Prince's nose sniffed at the air, and then he skittered across the kitchen toward the front part of the house.

"Daiyu, Jacques, won't you join us in the living room?" Lien

called out.

I took Dai's things, and moving slowly, set them on the kitchen table, and hung up my hat and coat. Dai was already on her way, not bothering to give me a hint of who our guest or guests might be.

As I spotted a new bouquet next to those Pierce had sent earlier, a sense of dread filled me. These were all purple flowers—lavender, verbenas, and irises. Purple blooms typically signified accomplishments. My dismay rose as I realized why Dai hadn't given me a hint. She'd known I wouldn't be pleased about the identity of our guest. As if we needed any more unpleasantness this evening.

My dread and abused stomach slowed my pace to almost a crawl. By the time I made it to the living room, I'd fortified myself for what I would find there. True enough, our uninvited visitor was none other than Truman Pierce. There was an even larger arrangement of flowers on the sitting-room table.

"Jackie! Good to see you." The popinjay's smile was at maximum wattage. Though he'd had the sense to wear a plain brown suit rather than one of his more flamboyant ensembles, he still seemed much too bright.

I gave everyone in the room a general nod in greeting, even as I tried to gauge the mood. Lien appeared quite elated at the unexpected visitor, while Tye held a neutral expression. If Pierce had done something outlandish, like asking him permission to court his daughter, I was sure neutral is not how I would have found it. Lien's happiness also meant Pierce hadn't let slip any hints of our activities of late. Some of the tension eased from my shoulders.

"Jacques, Truman was just telling me how much better his mother is faring," Dai said. "Since we'd asked after her, he decided to bring us the wonderful news in person."

At least one good deed had been accomplished as intended. It helped take away a little of the sting of the unexpected twist in El Barrio. "That's great to hear."

Lien sent a sidelong glance in her husband's direction. "Dear, why don't we give the young ones a chance to chat in

private? It's time for us to turn in, in any case."

Tye turned jerkily to look at her, obviously struggling to keep his expression blank. "Is it that late already?" He managed to ask.

The dragon stood staring him full in the face. "It is."

He hesitated a moment longer, then rose to join her. He sent a beseeching glance my way. I nodded, having no intention of allowing anything untoward to happen between Dai and Pierce. I saw relief cross her father's features before he escorted his wife out of the room.

She tilted her head in that direction for almost a full minute before nodding with satisfaction. "We should be fine to speak freely now. They're both upstairs."

Pierce stood and bowed to her. "I owe you an incalculable debt, China Doll. Thank you for looking into this and getting mother released from the High Five."

"I'm just glad we were able to help, Truman," Dai said. "How is she?"

Pierce sat back down, his exuberant brightness finally dimming to tolerable levels. "Pleased to be home. She's not too keen about my father's desertion, however. He's currently in the doghouse. And though she won't admit it, I think she's a little traumatized. She refuses to say anything about her stay at the jail."

I wasn't the least bit surprised by the last. Burying unpleasantness out of sight seemed to be one of Mrs. Pierce's talents.

"Give her time," Dai said. "She might surprise you."

It was hard to tell if this was aimed at Pierce or me.

"You do realize your reason for not setting a wedding date is now off the table, don't you, Truman?" she asked, an impish smile playing on her lips.

"Don't remind me!" The cad put his hand over his heart, looking pained. "I honestly have no idea how to get out of this at the moment."

I kept my expression blank but did a happy jig in my head. It was unkind to feel this way, yet I couldn't help myself.

"You said your mother is unhappy about your father's maneuverings in this affair, didn't you? She might be willing to assist you, just to pay him back."

Pierce thought about it for a moment, then grinned. "You're divinely evil and wicked smart; you know that?"

Dai looked genuinely pleased. "Jacques may have mentioned something along that vein a time or two."

As if I'd ever say anything that crude to her. She was far from evil. Intelligent, yes, mischievous, definitely, but evil? That was going a bit too far. I glared my displeasure at him. He totally ignored it.

"Speaking of which," he said, the mirth slowly fading from his eyes. "Were you able to figure out who the murderer was?"

Dai nodded. "That was actually the easy part." She gave him a dimpled smile. "Proving it was much harder, but we got there in the end. Unfortunately, she was whisked off and is likely on her way to Mexico as we speak."

Truman's brows rose at that. "So she got away with it?"

"Not exactly." Dai's expression turned pensive. "Her community now knows what she's done. The ties she forged over the years are sundered. She'll no longer be able to hide from her guilt or what greed led her to do. She's also realized that she lost more than she ever imagined by what she did. So I wouldn't be surprised if she decided to enter a convent and do penance by serving God and his children for the rest of her life."

From the shock Valentina showed when she learned the señora had been adamant about her becoming the new leader of their *sociedad*, I too wouldn't be surprised if she made such a choice. Assuming she was still alive to do so.

CHAPTER 47



There were no news articles about unidentified corpses being found in the papers the following morning. But I knew that didn't necessarily mean Valentina hadn't been killed. Moreover, even if they'd discovered her body, it likely wouldn't be reported in the newspapers due to her nationality.

An early telephone call to Dr. Campbell revealed none had appeared in District One, and she promised to make discrete inquiries of the other districts.

Dai slept in, which didn't surprise me after the difficulties of the night before. Getting Pierce to leave so we might turn in for the day had also been something of a chore.

"We should meet with Mr. Maginnis today if we can," she said. She stirred her *congee* listlessly. Prince sat alert beside her chair, ready to punish any errant crumbs by adding them to his stomach. "Aiden and Constable Higgins could join us at his offices. That way, we'll have to tell the entire story only once." She gave a soft sigh.

"Is something bothering you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not particularly." Dai stirred her *congee*

some more. "I'm just trying to figure out what to do next."

The manner in which she said this made it sound ominous. "Surely you've had enough excitement to last you a while."

Her unseeing white-silver eyes pinned me where I sat. "I won't deny there's a certain thrill in the chase—in putting the puzzle together. But there's so much more to it than that." Her voice filled with solid iron conviction. "*Justice*, Jacques. If we apply ourselves, we can help bring justice to others. Assist their voices to be heard even when they've been silenced against their will."

A part of me resonated at her words, but my practical side clamped down on it—*hard*. The violence the night before was a testament that there were those willing to fight to keep the truth hidden. So, though I cared about bringing justice for others, I believed in keeping Dai and her family safe even more.

The genie might be out of the bottle, and fate could decide to work against me and throw more troubles our way, but I would be damned if I wouldn't try my hardest to evade and protect them, come what may.



THE END

If you enjoyed the **The JOY of Murder**, why not leave a **one or a two-sentence review**? I would appreciate the help!



Thank you so much!

Gloria Oliver
Unveiling the Fantastic
www.gloriaoliver.com

Scroll below for an excerpt of *Romeo's Revenge - A Daiyu Wu Mystery Short Story* coming out in Oct 2022. After that, take a look at *your choice of gifts* if you subscribe to the newsletter!

ROMEO'S REVENGE - A DAIYU WU MYSTERY SHORT



(Coming in Oct 2022)

All Hallows' Eve began pleasantly enough. The Wu family and I relaxed in the living room after supper, the windows open to let in the cool breeze of early evening. Not being buried in snow and raked by bone-chilling cold winds during this time of year was one advantage of living in Texas.

"One last thing, Dallas listeners." The smooth voice of David Bishop filled the Wu living room from the Art Deco-style radio. "Tonight is Halloween, and a Friday, so a plague of pranks is sure to manifest. Let's do our best to stay vigilant and not add to the mayhem. It's 1930, after all, folks. Be safe out there."

Dai's father, Tye, turned off the radio, shaking his head. "These antics have been growing worse every year." His English was impeccable, with only a hint of an accent. "Robert

will stay at the laundry tonight, just in case."

"Did something happen last year, *Fùqín*?" Dai turned her heart-shaped face in Mr. Wu's direction, her calculated expression one of ignorant innocence. Despite her parents' efforts to protect their blind daughter from the realities of the world, at twenty-one years old, there was little Dai wasn't aware of. Having lived on the streets as a child and being Dai's 'eyes,' I also knew more about the harsh truths out there than people might suspect.

Mr. and Mrs. Wu traded glances. "No, nothing serious. Just soap on the laundry's windows."

What her father left out were the obscenities the hoodlums had written on them afterward. Also, the fact that a block away, they'd thrown bricks through the glass of a storefront, costing the shop owner a pretty penny to get the windows replaced. Thousands of people had gathered downtown and caused all manner of mischief and property damage. Luckily, youths in suburbs like Oak Cliff got a lot less rambunctious on Samhain, but one never knew. I just didn't understand why anyone would enjoy causing wanton destruction this one night each year.

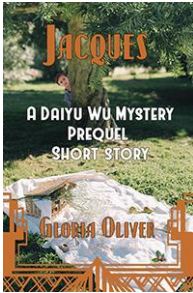
Dai's mother, Lien, glanced at me with a gloomy expression. "Jacques, please make sure all the doors and windows are locked before you turn in, won't you?" It appeared she was thinking similar thoughts to my own. Best to secure the house against possible shenanigans.

"Of course." Yet, as we'd soon discover, such precautions couldn't keep everyone in our suburb safe during All Hallows Eve.

GLORIA OLIVER

SUBSCRIBE AND CHOOSE YOUR GIFT!

That's right! Subscribe to my newsletter at www.gloriaoliver.com/subscribe/ and pick your gift from the following!



Cozy Historical



YA Fantasy



Fantasy



Science Fiction



Urban Fantasy

OTHER WORKS BY GLORIA OLIVER

COZY HISTORICAL MYSTERIES



Black Jade - A Daiyu Wu Mystery - Book 1

Could an old-fashioned ballgown be used to commit murder?

Daiyu Wu is aware that fear of the Yellow Terror has made her nationality a rare breed in the Lone Star State. Being Chinese and blind makes her doubly unique in 1930 Dallas. Despite these impediments, anyone who dismisses her for either fact does so at their peril.

One day, at her family-owned laundry business, Dai detects the scent of burned garlic. With the help of her companion, Jacques, the source is soon discovered. It is a green ballgown. The gown has money pinned inside it to pay for the cleaning, but oddly, it came with no address label to identify its owner. Her extensive knowledge leads Dai to believe someone has committed murder using arsenic. The perpetrator is trying to use White Laundry to hide the evidence. But no mention of foul play turns up in the newspapers, and there's not enough proof to convince the police there's been a crime.

Her curiosity and intellect stimulated like never before; Dai ignores the possible consequences and sets out to solve the mystery with the help of her canine companion, Prince Razor, and her confidant, Jacques Haskins. It's either that or let the killer get away with it — assuming a spoiled popinjay, his jealous self-appointed girlfriend, and Dai's overprotective

parents don't get in her way.



Jacques - A Daiyu Wu Mystery Prequel Short Story

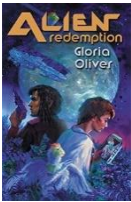
How many times can a boy lose his home?

When Jacques is transferred to the Buckners Orphans' Home in 1916 at the age of six, he hopes that he's finally found a place to belong. Unfortunately, he couldn't be more wrong.

Jacques' only choice is to run away to Dallas and live on the streets. He has no future, no guarantee he will even survive.

Then he stumbles on a once-in-a-lifetime chance to change everything—if he *dares* to take it.

SCIENCE FICTION



Alien Redemption

What if the savior was the one who needed saving?

All Claudia wanted to do was escape the mistakes of the past and start over. But when she answers an ad for a medical

THE JOY OF MURDER

officer on a merchant ship in the Fringes, the captain recognizes her and blackmails her into taking the job.

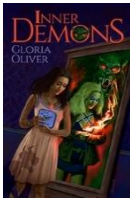
The Holiday's Captain Bennet is amoral and has a short fuse. Claudia steers clear of him as much as possible while trying to care for the crew he lashes out on. Then the rumors start that their latest mission is to a location Bennet won't even share with the pilot.

The secret coordinates take the ship and crew to an uncharted system in the Fringes. To a planet that holds intelligent life, and despite the odds, also a humanoid one.

Bennet plans to use these aliens to climb up the power ladder at the borders of the Dominion. Even if it means placing the Avians into brutal servitude for the rest of their lives.

Can Claudia stop the impending exploitation of this newly discovered sentient species all on her own? Or is there a worse fate than blackmail waiting for her if she tries?

FANTASY



Inner Demons

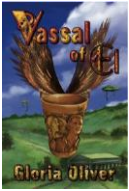
It took everything from her, except revenge!

One moment I am sitting down to a cup of tea; the next, I'm on a dark street with a set of headlights coming right at me.

Not only am I not where I'm supposed to be, but I have three months of missing time. In that period, I ruined my best friend's wedding, blackmailed my boss, turned my back on my family and heritage, and worse.

I'm sure I've lost my mind until I meet Jensen White, an ex-priest who proves to me I am not insane. He shows me I was possessed by a demon—one who used and discarded me like so much garbage.

Plus, it appears it did so with a purpose. So I'm tracking the thing to find out how and why it did this to me. Then I'll make the ones responsible pay!



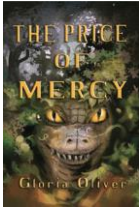
Vassal of El

Torn between two worlds, will he be able to save either of them?

Torren wanted nothing more than to forget his past and endure the life it had forced upon him. One small, begrudging act of kindness, however, embarks him on a path that will bring him face to face with everything he has so heartily attempted to avoid.

In so doing, events that seemed to have no bearing on his old life now appear to be tangled with it and his present.

Caught between the world of his birth and the one he currently lives in, will Torren be able to set aside his hate and guilt long enough to keep both from utter destruction?



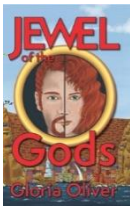
The Price of Mercy

Which is worse...the monster within or without?

Wooing a new patron at the emperor's ball had been Jarrin Lestrave's only hope after being discarded by the Baroness. He finds the perfect subject, but in the end, he doesn't follow through on his plans. Yet the next day he discovers he's been marked a traitor to the realm-for defiling the emperor's daughter. Something which he did not do.

The Twelve, the emperor's secret guard, are sent after him. And when they catch him, they do not kill him. A worse fate has been set aside for him. He is to lose his humanity and become enslaved to the empire for eternity.

Then he meets his accuser-Princess Yolandra. As he battles with his rising hatred and the invisible chains thrust upon him, he begins to see that all is not as it seems-his fate tied to the possible return of the madness which once before decimated the world around them.



Jewel of the Gods

Long Live the King! But will he?

When fate sends Red and his crewmates to the coveted port of Syrras, it is an opportunity he plans to take full advantage of. Unfortunately, his search for a little adventure hands him a lot more than he ever bargained for.

Changed by unknown magics into something other than himself, he's told a terrible secret. One he must now help protect, even as he is tasked to find those responsible. Failure will cost him his body, his way of life, everything that makes him who he is.

YOUNG ADULT



In the Service of Samurai

The choice: Serve the undead or become one of them.

Toshi never expected the strange visitor who one evening stepped foot inside his master's shop – a samurai smelling of the sea, with water dripping on the ground, and algae strung from his armor. For the first time in his life, Toshi discovers that monsters do roam the earth. And this one has been specifically looking for him.

Dragged from his home and all he has ever known, Toshi has no choice but to help the creatures who've taken him. Yet at every turn there are problems. And there are some who seek to terminate his life, for they've no wish to see his new master succeed in his assigned task.

But when they do find it, Toshi discovers his master's enemies have prepared for their eventual arrival, leaving him

the only one capable of recovering what has been lost. Can he do what even the undead cannot? Or will he fail and be forced to wander the world for eternity as one of them?



Cross-eyed Dragon Troubles

Talia didn't want to be apprenticed, not even to the prestigious Dragon Knight's Guild.

She's taken to the school by a cross-eyed dragon and his partner, Kel. A dizzying, madcap ride which leaves her less than eager to be a knight, but soon she finds out the guild needs many types of people. Running into the dragon and squire again and again, she comes to realize the unlikely pair are outsiders in their own school. They were participants in the dragon-human pairing ritual, but it didn't work quite as intended. They are also stubborn loners, determined to overcome the obstacles in their path and make a proper pair. Or are they?

As Talia's first year at the guild evolves, she must deal with the Administrator's quirks, her lessons, the growing mystery of Clarence and Kel, and somewhere in there, possibly decide what it is she wants for her future.



Willing Sacrifice

To save the world, she must die! Or must she?

For as long as she can remember, La'tiera has known her purpose, her destiny. As the Bearer of the Eye, she will wait until the appointed time then sacrifice herself to the demons so the lands will be safe.

Yet as the time approaches, she is snatched from her home by strangers and is told it is for her protection. These strangers tell her she is not to be a sacrifice but must fight to live in order for the world to be saved.

La'tiera will not be swayed, however, her duty clear. Despite their clever lies, she will follow through on her destiny and do what is required. Her every effort will be put to freeing herself from her kidnappers and meeting her fate as planned.

HORROR/ALTERNATE HISTORY



Charity and Sacrifice (Novelette)

Trapped in a loveless marriage, will Elizabeth's sacrifice to regain

Robert's attention be in vain?

All Elizabeth hoped to do was to rekindle the love in her marriage. Yet despite ignoring her social obligations and immersing herself in her husband's important work, somehow this only made things worse.

Her last hope is her unborn child — a source of unrequited love to fill the void inside her. But that too is taken from her. How? Why?

Her doctor avoids her. Her husband berates her. And there are whispers — whispers telling of things that cannot be.

Yet the more Elizabeth ignores the rumors, the more they press on her to seek the truth, so she concocts a plan to find it. To find it and hopefully exonerate both Robert and herself. To discover the reason she's lost all that's dear to her. And she will do it, even if she must venture into Whitechapel to do it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gloria Oliver lives in Texas making sure to stay away from rolling tumbleweeds while bowing to the never-ending wishes of her feline and canine masters.

“The JOY of Murder” is Gloria’s second cozy historical mystery novel and part of the Daiyu Wu Mystery series. This is also her tenth book to see publication. Her previous works have been fantasy, urban fantasy, science fiction, and young adult fantasy novels. Several contain romantic and mystery elements. Her short stories of speculative fiction can be found in all manner of anthologies, covering things from the fantastic and strange to a Bubba Apocalypse.

Gloria is a member in good standing of BroadUniverse though she has yet to make the list for Cat Slaves R Us.

For some free reads, sample chapters, appearance schedules and more information, please drop by and visit her at www.gloriaoliver.com

You can follow Gloria on:

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/GloriaOliver>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/people/Gloria-Oliver/743554244>

Newsletter/blog: <https://www.gloriaoliver.com/subscribe>

You can find even more places to connect at www.gloriaoliver.com