



Chapter 1

The half-naked woman had come from the penthouse— she just hadn't bothered to use the elevator. Instead, she stepped off the balcony eleven stories up. Her theatrics kept Detective Babcock from a quiet evening with a good book, a glass of wine and some very fine music. Detective Babcock didn't hold a grudge long, though. One look at the jumper made him regret that he hadn't arrived in time to stop her.

Beautiful even in death, the woman lay on the hot concrete as if it were her bed. One arm was crooked at an angle so that the delicate fingers of her right hand curled toward her head; the other lay straight, the hand open-palmed at her hip. On her right wrist was a diamond and sapphire bracelet. A matching earring had come off at impact and was caught in her dark hair. Her slim legs were curved together. Her feet were small and bare. Her head was turned in profile. Her eyes were closed. The wedding ring she wore made Horace Babcock feel just a little guilty for admiring her. She carried her age well so that it was difficult to tell exactly how—

"Crap. I think I felt a raindrop."

Babcock inclined his head. His eyes flickered toward Kurt Rippy, who was hunkered at the side of a pool of blood that haloed the jumper's head. It was the only sign that something traumatic had occurred here. It would be different when the coroner's people turned the body to take her away. When they cut off the yellow silk and lace teddy at the morgue and laid her face up, naked on a metal table, they would find half her head caved in, her ribs pulverized, her pelvis shattered. Her brain might fall out and that would be a sad sight, indeed. How glad Babcock was to see her this way.

Elegant.

Asleep.

An illusion.

Raising a hand toward the sky, he checked the weather. Even though the day was done it was still hot. He could see the thunderheads that had hovered over the San Bernardino Mountains for the last few days were now rolling toward Long Beach. Pity tonight would be wet when the other three hundred and sixty-four days of the year had been bone dry.

"Are you almost done?" Babcock asked, knowing the rain would wash away the blood and a thousand little pieces of grit and dust and things that Kurt needed to collect as a matter of course.

"Yeah. Not much to get here. I bagged her hands just in case, but she looks clean."

Detective Babcock bridled at the adjective. It was too pedestrian for her. Hardly poetic.

She was pristine.

She was beautiful.

She was privileged.

She was a lady who was either going to or coming from something important. She was going or coming alone because no one had run screaming from the penthouse distraught that she had checked out of this world in such a manner. The traffic on Ocean Boulevard had slowed but not stopped as the paramedics converged on the site, sirens frantically wailing until they determined they were too late to help. With a huge grunt, Kurt stood up and rolled his latex gloves off with a delicate snap.

"That's it for me. I'm going to let them bundle her before we all get wet. I hate when it's this hot and it rains. Reminds me of Chicago. I hate Chicago . . ."

He took a deep breath and stood over the woman for a minute as his train of thought jumped the tracks. His hands were crossed at his crotch, his head was bent, and his eyes were on the victim. He seemed to be praying and his reverence surprised and impressed Detective Babcock. Finally, Kurt drew another huge breath into his equally big body, flipped at the tie that lay on top of his stomach instead of over it and angled his head toward Babcock.

"How much you think a thing like that costs?"

"What thing?"

"That thing she's wearing?" Kurt wiggled a finger toward the body and Babcock closed his eyes. Lord, the indignity the dead suffered at the hands of the police.

"I believe that type of lingerie is quite expensive."

"Figures. Guess her old man could afford it. Now me? I think Kim would look real good in something like that, but with what I take home . . ."

A sigh was the only sign of Babcock's irritation as he moved away and left Kurt Rippy to lament the limitations of a cop's salary. Then it began to rain. Just as the last vestiges of blood were being diluted and drained into the cracks of the sizzling sidewalk, Detective Babcock walked across the circular drive, past the exquisitely lit fountain of the jumper's exclusive building, and went inside. There was still so much to do, not the least of which was to talk to one Mr. Jorgensen, the poor soul who had been making his way home just as the lady leapt. Old Mr. Jorgensen, surprised to find a scantily clad dead woman at his feet, made haste to leave the scene as soon as the emergency vehicles arrived. *He* probably couldn't offer much, but a formal statement was necessary and Babcock would take it.

He rode the elevator, breathing in the scent of *new*: new construction, new rugs, new fittings and fastenings. Babcock preferred the Villa Riviera a few buildings down. The scrolled facade, the peaked copper roof, the age of it intrigued him in a way *new* never could. He got out on the third floor and knocked on the second door on the left. He waited. And waited. Eventually, the door opened and Babcock looked down at the wizened man with the walker.

"Mr. Jorgensen? I'm Detective Horace Babcock." He held out his card. The old man snatched it.

"It's about time you got here," he complained and turned his back. The carpet swallowed the thumping of the walker but the acoustics of the spacious apartment were impeccable. Babcock heard the old man's every mumble and word. "I should be in bed by now but I can't sleep. Something like this is damn upsetting at my age. Have you told her husband? Bet you can't even find him to tell him. Goddamn pictures of him everywhere. Can't turn on the television without seeing him but is he ever home? No. Never home. Well, in and out. But not good enough for a woman like her. Nice. Quiet. Real pretty, that woman. So, have you told him yet?"

"Yes, sir. We have located her husband. He'll be here soon."

Deferentially slow, Babcock followed the old man but something in his voice seemed to amuse Mr. Jorgensen. The old man stopped just long enough to flash an impish smile over his shoulder.

"Bet he's got a load in his pants now, huh?" Mr. Jorgensen wiggled his eyebrows, chuckled and walked on, telling Babcock something he already knew. "Yep, it's a big, big mess for a man in his position."

[BUY PRIVILEGED WITNESS NOW!](#)

