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VANISHING POINT

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SHARON McCONE MYSTERIES

BY MARCIA MULLER

THE DANGEROUS HOUR
DEAD MIDNIGHT
LISTEN TO THE SILENCE
A WALK THROUGH THE FIRE
WHILE OTHER PEOPLE SLEEP
BOTH ENDS OF THE NIGHT
THE BROKEN PROMISE LAND
A WILD AND LONELY PLACE
TILL THE BUTCHERS CUT HIM DOWN
WOLF IN THE SHADOWS
PENNIES ON A DEAD WOMAN'S EYES
WHERE ECHOES LIVE
TROPHIES AND DEAD THINGS
THE SHAPE OF DREAD
THERE'S SOMETHING IN A SUNDAY
EYE OF THE STORM
THERE'S NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF
DOUBLE (*with Bill Pronzini*)
LEAVE A MESSAGE FOR WILLIE
GAMES TO KEEP THE DARK AWAY
THE CHESHIRE CAT'S EYE
ASK THE CARDS A QUESTION
EDWIN OF THE IRON SHOES

NONSERIES

CAPE PERDIDO
CYANIDE WELLS
POINT DECEPTION

For Alison Wilbur—
finally, one under your real name—
and
Larry Griffin—
your own big-girl thriller!

Special thanks to:

Melissa Meith, my expert on legal matters—and mothers!

Bette Lamb, extraordinary nurse, artist, and writer.

And, as always, Bill Pronzini:

Dammit, why are you always right?

VANISHING POINT

1. a point of disappearance, cessation, or extinction
2. (in the study of perspective in art) that point toward which receding parallel lines appear to converge

—*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd edition

Sunday

AUGUST 14

“My God, what’s going on down there?” I asked Hy.

He peered through the Cessna’s side window as I banked over Touchstone, our property on the cliffs above the sea in Mendocino County. “Hate to say it, but it looks like a party.”

“Oh, hell, I never should’ve called the office from Reno.”

It did indeed look like a party: tables dotted the terrace, their brightly colored cloths fluttering in the sea breeze; smoke billowed from the barbecue; a crowd of people stood on the mole-humped excuse for a lawn, staring up and waving at the plane.

“There’s Mick,” Hy said. “And Charlotte. And Ted.”

“Probably the instigators.” I banked again and began my approach to our dirt landing strip along the bluff’s top. “How on earth did they organize this in just a few days?”

“Well, your people’re nothing if not efficient.”

“Yours, too.” I pointed down at Gage Renshaw, one of Hy’s partners in the security firm of Renshaw and Kessell International. “He made it up from La Jolla in time.”

“Nice of him. And I see Hank, Anne-Marie, and Habiba. And Rae. But all these people kind of put a damper on the rest of the honeymoon.”

“Oh, Ripinsky, we’ve been honeymooning for years.”

“That’s a fact.”

I concentrated on making a smooth landing, then taxied toward the plane’s tiedown, where my nephew Mick Savage, his live-in love, Charlotte Keim, and several other friends had converged. When I stepped down, I was smothered in one hug after another, while Mick helped Hy attach the chains to the Cessna. The hugging and exclaiming continued as we started toward the house, and then I heard someone singing.

*“Tough lady thought she couldn’t be caught by the rhythm of the blues
Till she fell right hard for a flyin’ man who had nothin left to lose . . .”*

The voice belonged to my former brother-in-law, country music star Ricky Savage. The song, apparently, was one he’d written especially for Hy and me.

“So did you get married in a wedding chapel?” Hank Zahn, my former boss and closest male friend, asked.

“Plastic flowers and a rented veil?” This from his wife and law partner, Anne-Marie Altman.

“Were there Elvis impersonators?” The dark eyes of their daughter, Habiba Hamid, sparkled.

wickedly.

~~“You guys are thinking of Las Vegas,” I told them. “We spent the night in Reno, then drove to Carson City, the state capital, applied for a license, and were married that afternoon by a judge. It was nice. Private. Tasteful, even.”~~

Hank and Anne-Marie nodded approval, but Habiba looked disappointed. She was a teenager who probably would have delighted in the image of Hy and me rocking-and-rolling down the aisle.

“What, no ring?” Ted Smalley, my office manager, demanded.

“Neither of us likes to wear rings. Besides, we feel married enough as is.”

“Nobody can feel too married,” his partner, Neal Osborne, fingered the gold band that matched Ted’s. They’d exchanged them at a ceremony at San Francisco City Hall, during the brief period when the mayor had declared the clerk’s office open for the issuance of marriage licenses to gay couples.

“I guess not,” I said. “And you two are a good example for all of us.”

“Tell that to the governor.”

“He’ll be told, come next election. You’re married in the eyes of your friends, and someday you’ll be married in the eyes of the state.”

“Sure is nice to be working for an honest woman.” Charlotte Keim, my financial operative, punctuated the comment with a bawdy laugh.

My nephew Mick said, “I think that’s a hint. She wants to fly off to Reno like you did.”

“Flatter yourself, already!” Charlotte elbowed him in the ribs.

“One of these days I just might weaken and ask you.”

“One of these days I just might weaken and ask *you*.”

“Well?”

“Well?”

I smiled and left the happy couple to their half-serious standoff.

“So, McCone, you gonna tame him down?” Gage Renshaw, one of Hy’s partners, smiled slyly at me, dark hair blowing in the wind off the sea.

“No more than he’s going to tame *me* down.”

“Yeah, I guess that would take some doing.”

Gage never discussed personal things with me. I glanced at the champagne in his glass, wondering how many he’d had.

“In my experience,” he added, “a man gets married, he gets cautious, loses his edge. In our business, that makes for mistakes. And mistakes can be fatal.”

No, Gage wasn’t drunk; he was trying to send a message.

“I hear you,” I said, “but you’re talking to the wrong person.”

“Don’t think so. We’ve got a situation coming up that’s gonna require all our resources. See that your man’s ready for it.”

Nice wedding gift, Gage.

Hours later, clouds had gathered on the horizon, orange and pink and purple in the afterglow of the sunset. The others had retreated from the cliff-top platform to the house, presumably to raid the dessert table, but Rae Kelleher and I remained behind to take in what, to me, were the most spectacular moments of the sunsets here on the Mendocino Coast. Rae—my onetime assistant, close friend, and near-relative, having married Ricky after his divorce from my younger sister Charlene.

I said, “Nice song Ricky wrote. On short notice, too.”

She laughed. “He wrote it a year ago. He’s been waiting for the two of you to get married before I performed it.”

“Oh, and he really expected that would happen?”

“We all did—except for you.”

I sighed. Sometimes our friends and relatives know us better than we know ourselves.

“It’ll be on his next CD,” she added.

“Our little piece of immortality.”

“Well, we all want that, don’t we?”

Did we? It seemed to me that right now I had everything I’d ever wanted. Even if I hadn’t realized how much I’d wanted it until Hy turned the plane toward Reno a few days ago.

We sat silent for a moment. The surf boomed on the rocks in the cove below, eating at the steep cliffs. What was it the geologist who had inspected our land before we sited the house had said? Something about it possibly sliding into the sea if we intended to live there for more than a thousand years.

Right now I felt as if I could live forever.

Rae said, “What was it that tipped the scales in favor of marriage?”

“It just seemed right. Hy’s been wanting this for a long time, you know. But he had a good first marriage, even if Julie was very sick for years before she died. My history with men, on the other hand—”

“Right. No need to rehash that.” Rae looked down at her diamond-studded wedding ring. “Or rehash *my* checkered past. What a bunch of losers—including me, for getting involved with them. What did your mother say when you told her the news?”

“Which one?” I had two: the adoptive mother who’d raised me and the birth mother with whom I finally connected a couple of years ago.

“Both.”

“Well, Ma carried on as if I’d announced I’d won the Nobel Peace Prize; then she had me put Hy on the phone. To him she said, ‘Congratulations on joining our family.’ And then she laughed and added, ‘Well, considering the family, maybe congratulations aren’t in order.’”

“Oh my God. And Saskia?”

“More restrained. But she was pleased. She met Hy last summer when she was in town for a book association meeting, and they really hit it off.”

“You call Elwood?” Elwood Farmer, my birth father, an artist who lived on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana.

“Yes. He was . . . just Elwood.”

“Meaning he didn’t say much and now he’s thinking over the deeper meaning of it all.”

“Right.”

“Must be complicated, having all those relatives. Sometimes I’m glad I’ve got no family left.”

“What d’you mean? You’re a stepmother six times over.”

“That’s different.” She paused. “Shar, I need to talk to you about a potential case for the agency.”

I felt a stirring of unease. Ricky had been a notorious womanizer throughout his marriage to my sister. If that had started again, and Rae wanted me to investigate, I couldn't possibly take it on. Conflict of interest on too many levels.

"I'm asking for a friend of mine," she added. "It's something that really means a lot to her, and could be very lucrative for you."

I relaxed. "Tell me about it."

"Her name's Jennifer Aldin. She's a textile designer, works with a lot of the high-society decorators in the city. I got to know her through Ricky; her husband, Mark, is his financial manager."

"I thought Ricky managed his own money."

"No, Charlene always did that."

"Right." My younger sister hadn't finished high school because she was pregnant with Mick, but years later she'd gotten her GED and gone to college; now she possessed a PhD in finance and helped her new husband, international businessman Vic Christiansen, run his various enterprises.

"Anyway," Rae went on, "after Ricky and Charlene split and he established the new record label, he realized he was in over his head. I've got no talent whatsoever with money—you remember how my charge cards were always maxed out—so he went to Mark, who has a lot of clients in the entertainment industry. Mark keeps things on track, and makes us a small fortune from investments."

As if they needed more. Ricky made millions yearly, and Rae's career as a novelist was about to take off.

"So," I said, "Mark's wife is a friend of yours."

"Yes. At first it was one of those situations where the husbands get together over dinner for business reasons and the wives're supposed to make small talk. But neither Jen nor I is much good at polite chitchat; when we loosened up and started talking about things that really mattered, we discovered we had a lot in common. One of those things being a horror of artificial social situations. Now Mark and Ricky go sailing to talk business, and Jen and I do whatever pleases us."

I realized that I didn't know all that much about Rae's everyday life since she'd married and become a published author. We had lunch occasionally, talked on the phone every couple of weeks, and spent Christmas Eve together because that was when all six of Ricky and Charlene's kids gathered at the Seacliff-district house he and Rae shared. But I didn't really know how she spent her time, who her other friends were.

"What kinds of things do you and Jennifer do?" I asked.

"We take hikes." At my incredulous look, she grinned. "Yeah, I've hiked some of the toughest trails on Mount Tam. No more collapsing to rest every quarter mile."

"Better watch out—soon you'll be running the Bay to Breakers."

"I haven't reformed *that* much. Anyway, we also go antiquing, and to galleries, visit museums, and run up to the wine country and do some tasting."

"Sounds nice." And it made me feel wistful. I'd been so busy managing the agency—which was growing month by month—that I seldom saw most of my women friends. My male friends, too; I couldn't remember when I'd last spent time with Hank.

Hell, it was a wonder I'd found the time to get married!

"Okay," I added, "now tell me what Jennifer wants investigated."

Rae nibbled on a fingernail, looking out to sea. "It's a long shot, I think. Twenty-two years ago when Jennifer was ten, her mother, Laurel Greenwood, disappeared down in San Luis Obispo County. One of those cases where it looks like the person's either disappeared voluntarily or committed suicide, but everybody says, 'She never would have done that; it must be foul play.' And in this case

they may be right. There was no trouble in the Greenwood marriage. Laurel was content with her life as a good mother, as well as a successful businesswoman, and very involved in her community.”

“And no body was ever found.”

“No trace of her. Afterward, Jen’s father became very closed off, didn’t permit her or her sister to do so much as mention their mother’s name. Seven months ago, when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, Jen tried to talk with him about her mother, but he flat-out refused. He died two months later, and then Jen started obsessing about the disappearance. Finally she looked up the newspaper account of it. There was a big media flap for the first few days, then nothing. Almost as if someone had put a lid on the case.”

“This was handled by the SLO County Sheriff’s Department?”

“Right.”

“She talk to the investigating officers?”

“The guy in charge has died. The deputy she spoke with wasn’t very interested in helping her. Can’t blame him; it’s a cold case, and he’s got better things to do with his time.”

“So she came to you, since you used to be an investigator.”

“Actually, no. Mark got worried about her obsessing. She was losing weight, not sleeping or eating properly, not working well. So he decided he’d bankroll a full-scale investigation into her mother’s disappearance, and asked Ricky if he thought your agency would be right for the job. Of course, I said it would.”

“A full-scale investigation into a cold case?”

“The works. Mark’s willing to spend whatever it takes to give Jen peace of mind.”

“Sounds like he loves her a lot.”

“Yeah, he does.”

I asked, “So why didn’t Jennifer Aldin approach me directly? Why have you pave the way?”

“She only decided to go ahead with the investigation yesterday. Last night, the four of us were having dinner, and when I mentioned that Ricky and I were coming up here for the party, she asked me to speak with you. The thing is, she wants you to handle the case personally.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re the best there is.”

“According to . . . ?”

“Ricky and me. The man on the street. Oh, hell, Shar, will you take it on? Jen needs closure in order to get her life back on track.”

I considered. Late last month I’d wrapped up a case that had been very personal and had threatened my career, as well as the existence of the agency. After having my attention taken away from normal business affairs for two weeks, I’d been trying to make up for lost time, but managing our heavy caseload and the attendant paperwork threatened even now to overwhelm me. Still, Ted could pick up some of the slack in the paperwork department, and I had a couple of new operatives who were coming along fast. . . .

I was mentally shifting priorities and assignments as I said to Rae, “Okay. I’ll call Jennifer tomorrow, and maybe we can set something up for later in the week.”

“If I know her, she’ll want to see you soonest.”

“If so, I can fit her in on Tuesday afternoon. We’re flying down tomorrow night.”

“What, so soon? You and Hy aren’t taking any more time off?”

“Can’t. He’s due in La Jolla at RKI headquarters on Wednesday. Business is booming—the clients see terrorists behind every tree—and they’re hiring so many people that they need

restructure their training operations.”

~~And they've got a situation coming up. One that will require all their resources, according to Gage. I can't even ask Hy about it, because he'd be furious at Gage for mentioning it to me. For attempting to dictate the terms of our relationship. If RKI is in trouble, the last thing they need is dissension among the partners.~~

Rae said, “So marriage isn't going to change anything for you guys.”

“We don't expect it to.”

She grinned. “Wait and see.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Just wait and see.”

Tuesday

AUGUST 16

Jennifer and Mark Aldin lived down the Peninsula in Atherton, an old-money, quietly rich suburb some twenty-five miles south of the city. Red Hawk Lane had a country feel, narrow and overhung with big oak trees; a high tan stucco wall surrounded the Aldin property, and behind it sprawled a matching stucco house with a red tile roof. Sprinklers threw out lazy streams of water onto an improbably green, manicured lawn, the droplets glistening in the early afternoon sun.

A uniformed maid—Latina, with a thick accent—answered the door and showed me to a living room with a beamed ceiling and terra-cotta floors covered with jute area rugs. As she urged me with hand gestures to sit on one of a U-shaped grouping of mission-style sofas in front of a fireplace, she said, “Mrs. Aldin, she will be with you in a short time.”

“*Gracias*,” I replied.

A smile flickered across her lips. “*De nada*.”

California: the ultimate melting pot of this already diverse country. Some fluency in Spanish is almost a necessity here—indeed, Latinos are now the fastest-growing ethnic group in our population. For people in my profession, it also helps to understand some Chinese, Japanese, and Tagalog—well as a smattering of ghetto slang.

As I waited for Jennifer Aldin, I looked around the room. French doors opened onto a patio with a black-bottomed pool and a scattering of teak tables and lounge chairs. The air that filtered through the doors was faintly scented by chlorine and cape jasmine. Because of the walls’ thickness, the living room remained cool in the afternoon’s heat, and the white cushions of the spartan-looking sofa were surprisingly comfortable. I settled back and studied a framed piece of cloth that hung over the mantel—red, orange, black, and gold, woven in a complex, abstract pattern that might have been a replica of a fire in the hearth below. Jennifer Aldin’s work? If so, even to my untutored eye, she had a good deal of talent.

I heard footsteps behind me, turned, and then stood. The woman was as tall as I and slender to the point of being emaciated, clad in narrow-fitting white jeans and a matching tunic, her honey-colored hair hanging dull and stringy to her shoulders. Her eyes were deeply shadowed, her skin dry. The smile she gave me was wan, the nails of the long-fingered hand she extended me bitten down to the quick. Jennifer Aldin, I saw, had once been beautiful, but five months of obsessing over her mother’s disappearance had taken their toll.

“Sharon,” she said, “I’m Jennifer. Thank you for coming.”

In spite of her fragile appearance, Jennifer had a strong handshake, an open face with a scattering of freckles across her small nose, and direct blue eyes. A straightforward woman. I understood why she and Rae had become friends.

After the usual pleasantries—“Happy to try to help you; Rae speaks highly of your friendship”—we got settled on the sofas, a wide glass-topped table between us. Immediately the maid—Alicia, Jennifer called her—appeared with a tray containing a pitcher of lemonade and two glasses. After she served us and departed, I took out my voice-activated tape recorder and asked Jennifer if she’d mind if I kept a record of our conversation. She didn’t.

“I’ve come to this meeting better prepared than at most of my new-client consultations,” I said. “Rae has briefed me on your situation, and this morning I accessed the news reports of your mother’s disappearance. What we need to do now is discuss what you expect of me and my agency, as well as what we can reasonably hope to provide. I take it Rae’s told you she considers the investigation a long shot?”

Jennifer nodded. “She did say that. And I’ve reviewed every piece of information I could find about . . . that time, so I know how little there is to go on. But . . . Sharon, do you know what it’s like to lose a parent?”

“Yes, I do. My father—adoptive father, actually—died of a heart attack a couple of years ago.”

“And that was painful, I’m sure; I lost my own dad to cancer only a few months ago. But my mother . . . What would it have been like if your father had simply disappeared, if you never knew what had happened to him?”

“I can’t imagine.”

“Let me try to describe the experience. You’re ten years old. Your mother comes to your bedroom one night and together you read a chapter of the current book—in this case it was *The Wind in the Willows*—as she’s done nearly every night for as long as you can remember. She kisses you, reminding you she’s going to the coast to paint in the morning, and she’ll be back late, so you’re to mind your father and look out for Terry, your little sister. The next night she *is* late, but you go to sleep, sure you’ll see her in the morning. But in the morning she’s still not there. You go off to school, expecting she’ll be there when you return that afternoon.” Jennifer paused, took a deep breath. Her face had gone pale, and she’d laced her long fingers together and thrust her hands between her knees. After a moment she went on.

“When the school bus drops you and Terry off that afternoon, there’s a police car in front of the house. Lots of people are there: your dad, who’s never home that early; your mom’s best friend; the next-door neighbor lady; your Aunt Anna; two men in uniform. You keep asking what’s happened, but they won’t tell you anything, and Aunt Anna takes you and Terry to the kitchen for Coke and cookies. Aunt Anna’s upset, you can tell because she won’t look at you, and when you ask if something happened to Mom, all she says is, ‘She’ll be back soon.’ But you know she’s lying, and your throat seizes up so there’s no way you can eat a bite of those cookies or take a sip of the Coke.”

Jennifer’s voice had slipped into a higher pitch, and her eyes were focused rigidly on the clean, swept hearth. Going back in time, reliving the incident. I felt a prickling of concern for her, but didn’t interrupt.

“For two days it goes on like that,” she continued. “Dad stays at home, but he’s not paying much attention to you. Aunt Anna and Aunt Sally—Mom’s best friend—are there most of the time, too. You and Terry are confined to the house, they won’t even let you go to school. Terry’s scared—she’s only six—and she’s afraid to ask questions, so you do. ‘What’s happened to Mom?’ you say. ‘She’s away painting,’ they tell you. ‘She’ll be back soon.’ But you know she’s not away painting; in all the time she’s done that, she’s never been gone this long. And the postcard hasn’t come. When she goes someplace to paint, she always sends a postcard addressed to herself—no message, just a souvenir for

her collection. Besides, why were the police at the house that first day? Why do they keep coming back to talk with Dad? And why hasn't he gone to work?"

Jennifer shrank back against the sofa's cushions, crossing her arms, hands grasping her elbows. The singsong, childlike quality in her voice had become more pronounced. She shivered.

I remained still, sensing she was coming to a critical point in the narrative.

"Then, on the third morning, your dad's acting just like he used to before your mom disappeared. He's dressed for work, and has had Aunt Anna—who came over early—get you and Terry ready for school. But he's not really the same; he's too cheerful, and he's never cheerful in the morning. He even made oatmeal, and it's all gluey, but you choke it down to please him, because he's been so upset, and now he seems so sad under all those big smiles. When you're finished, he pushes back from the table and looks at you and Terry and says, 'I'm sorry, girls, but we have to get on with our lives. Your mother would have wanted it that way.'

"Terry starts to cry, and you ask, 'Why, Daddy? Is she dead?'

"And then his face changes—scrunches up, gets red and ugly. He says, 'Your mother is *not* dead. We don't know what happened to her, but she is not dead. You are never to suggest that again. *Never*. Someday you will understand why.'

"Terry stops crying and looks really scared, and you don't say a word because you know better. There's that tone in his voice that you've heard before when he's warned you not to do something. It's a tone that tells you he means what he's saying, and you obey. Besides, then his expression changes and he looks so sad that you're afraid if you say anything more, he'll start shaking and then maybe break into little pieces. And then you'll be all alone in the world, with nobody to love you—because Aunt Anna doesn't really like kids, and Aunt Sally and the neighbor lady have families of their own to look after. You'll be all alone, except for Terry, who is so little and needs such a lot of looking after. That's too much for a ten-year-old to bear, so you keep quiet, in order to save your dad and yourself.

"That night, after you've gone to bed, your dad lights a big bonfire in the backyard and throws all your mom's paintings into it. You run out, crying, and he holds you and tells you it's for the best, so you can all make a new life without missing her so badly. But after he's put you back in bed, you cry some more because you loved those paintings, especially the one of the old hotel where Mom told you she and Dad spent their honeymoon.

"Then, after a while, you realize your dad was right, because things do kind of get back to normal. You go to school and to your ballet lessons; for a while Aunt Anna fixes meals that are actually better than Mom's; then Dad learns to cook and do the laundry and takes you camping like he always did. When you mention your mom, he sounds kind of absentminded. 'She loves you,' he says at first. And then, 'She *loved* you.' Gradually you stop talking about her, and it goes on for years and years like that, but there's still this . . . *place* inside you where something's not right—"

"Darling?" a voice said from outside. "You okay?"

A man in tennis whites stood in the doorway. Medium height, thick gray hair, deep tan. Craggy face, nose that looked like it had been broken more than once; deep lines around his eyes and mouth. He moved quickly into the room, toward Jennifer.

"Oh, God." She put a hand to her pale face, leaned forward. "Mark, I didn't mean to—"

"It's all right, darling." He stepped between us, as if to hide her distress from me, put his arm around her.

After a bit, he straightened. Jennifer got up from the sofa, saying, "Excuse me for a minute," and hurried from the room.

Mark Aldin turned toward me, his rough features drawn into worried lines. Up close I saw that his

was much older than Jennifer—at least twenty years. Perhaps she was a trophy wife? The disparity of their ages and appearances would point to that.

“Sharon,” he said, “I’m Mark. I’ve heard good things about you from Rick and Rae. In the newspapers as well.”

I smiled wryly. “Don’t believe everything you read in the press.” I motioned toward the archway through which his wife had fled. “Is she going to be all right?”

“For now.” He sat down in the space she’d vacated. “Telling the story of her mother’s disappearance has a cathartic effect on her. She’ll feel better for days afterwards. Then the downward cycle begins.” He ran a hand over his forehead, pushed thick fingers through his hair.

“This has been going on since her father’s death?”

“Yes. Before that, she was matter-of-fact about her mother’s disappearance; it was something that had happened a long time ago. But once Roy Greenwood died . . . well, you’ve seen her relive the events.”

“Must be difficult for you.”

“I don’t care about me. But it’s wrecking Jen’s whole life. She spends hours in her studio out back, not working, just poring over old newspaper clippings and brooding about what happened. Her clients are angry with her for missing deadlines. Her friends—except for Rae—have drifted away. I’m afraid if she doesn’t have some closure on this soon, she won’t have much of a life to come back to.”

“I have to warn you: I may not be able to provide her with that closure. This is a very old, complex case.”

“I realize that, but I don’t know where else to turn.”

“Have you talked to Jennifer about getting professional help?”

“Of course I have. Psychotherapy is not something she wants to pursue. So . . .” He smiled, his skewed features transformed so he looked nearly handsome. “You’re the professional help, Sharon. What do we need to do to get this investigation under way?”

Driving back to the city with a contract signed by Jennifer and a large retainer check from Mark in my briefcase, I was glad that I’d boned up on the events surrounding Laurel Greenwood’s disappearance before I met with her daughter. The facts of the case were rendered dry and brittle by time, but hearing Jennifer speak of her experience in a voice that more resembled a bewildered ten-year-old’s than an adult’s had brought the events fully alive.

Twenty-two years ago, the Greenwoods had been living in Paso Robles—officially named El Paso de Robles, the Pass of the Oaks—a small town at the intersection of state highways 101 and 46, some two hundred miles south of San Francisco. The convergence of these major east-west and north-south routes makes Paso Robles a natural stopping place for travelers; I myself used to pull off there to get up while driving between UC Berkeley and my parents’ home in San Diego. About all I remembered of the place was an A&W drive-in where I occasionally stopped for a chili dog, and the Paso Robles Inn, an old-fashioned mission-style mineral-bath spa.

In December of 2003 a devastating earthquake—6.5 on the Richter scale—had shaken the town, killing two women and sending more than forty other people to area hospitals; a number of the old buildings were seriously damaged, and financial losses soared into the millions. I’d recently read somewhere that Paso Robles had recovered from the San Simeon quake and was undergoing fast growth; wineries had sprung up in the surrounding countryside and were becoming popular tourist

destinations. But back when the Greenwoods lived there, it was basically a little town where people led quiet, ordinary existences.

And up until June of 1983, the family's existence had been just that. Roy Greenwood, a native of nearby Atascadero, was an oral surgeon with offices in a medical-professional building a block off the main street. His wife, Laurel, whom he had met when they were undergraduates at San Jose State, was a graphic artist who owned a company specializing in greeting cards for children; she worked out of their home. The Greenwoods were comfortably off, but by no means rich, even by the standards of a country town; Roy's practice suffered because he extended liberal credit to patients who couldn't afford necessary dental work, and Laurel's greeting cards, while popular in stores as far north as Monterey and as far south as Santa Maria, turned only a small profit. Jennifer Greenwood and her younger sister, Terry, attended public school, where they were considered exceptionally bright and well adjusted. Both parents were active in the PTA and on various committees of St. John's Lutheran Church.

Laurel Greenwood had a ritual that provided a respite from her busy life as a wife, mother, and small business owner: every so often she would take a "mental health day" and travel to some location within an easy round-trip drive of Paso Robles, to paint landscapes. During each of these getaways she would select a postcard that she felt best represented the area and mail it to herself for inclusion in a collection she kept in a file box in her office. The collection, she would joke, would probably be the only legacy she'd leave her daughters, but at least they'd know where Mom had been.

An ordinary, uneventful, pleasant family life. Until June twenty-second, when it was forever altered.

Laurel had planned to paint seascapes at the coastal hamlet of Cayucos, some twenty-five miles southwest of Paso Robles. She was seen doing so at a coastal overlook north of town, and one man, Jacob Ziff, stopped to look at her work and chatted with her for a while. Later Ziff spotted her in the Sea Shack, a restaurant in the center of town; she was at a table on the oceanside deck, drinking wine with a long-haired man in biker's leathers. Ziff noted that the two left separately, the man walking north on the highway to a liquor store and Laurel getting into her beat-up Volkswagen bus and driving south. The bus later turned up at a waterfront park in Morro Bay, less than ten miles away. According to a pair of dogwalkers who saw Laurel arrive, she got out and walked toward the nearby shopping area. After that no one saw her—or would admit to seeing her—again.

Roy Greenwood wasn't aware that his wife didn't return that night. He'd had a busy day, including two difficult surgeries, and went to bed early. In the morning he wasn't overly concerned, occasionally if Laurel stayed away too late on one of her painting trips, she would take a motel room and drive back in the morning. But it did puzzle him that she hadn't called to tell him her plans, so he checked back at the house at noon. When he found she still wasn't there, he called the chief of police, Bruce Collingsworth, a good friend and tennis partner; Collingsworth alerted the highway patrol to be on the lookout for Laurel's van, and later sent officers to the Greenwood house to question Roy.

When the highway patrol located Laurel's bus in Morro Bay and she failed to return the second night, the search intensified; the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Department stepped in. Television and newspaper reportage prompted a rash of calls from people who claimed to have sighted Laurel, the most promising being those from Jacob Ziff, the staff at the Sea Shack, and the dogwalkers in Morro Bay. Descriptions of the biker she'd been seen with at the restaurant were broadcast, but they were vague at best, and he seemed to have vanished as completely as Laurel. What further alarmed Roy Greenwood was that no postcard from Cayucos appeared in his mailbox. Laurel had never failed to add to her collection before.

And then, suddenly, the case was back-burnered. Press inquiries were routinely referred to the sheriff's department's public information officer, who merely said they were pursuing "various leads." Roy Greenwood, who had been forthcoming with the media, declined to give interviews, citing the need to "return to normalcy for the sake of my little girls." A silence settled, and since the press does not feed on silence, interest in the case waned and finally disappeared entirely.

So what had happened to Laurel Greenwood? Kidnapping? There had been no attempt to collect ransom. Foul play or suicide? Quite possible. The bodies of many victims of violent crimes—both inflicted by others or themselves—are never found. Voluntary disappearance? Again, possible. Even though the families, friends, and associates of most missing persons insist that they would never desert them, a vast majority of disappearances are just that. Family, friends, and associates aren't always privy to an individual's true feelings and inclinations. Laurel Greenwood could have had a secret life apart from them, one she'd finally decided to disappear into—or one that had claimed her life.

And what about Roy Greenwood burning his wife's paintings so soon after her disappearance? What had prompted that? His desire for a return to normalcy, as reported in the press? His determination to make a new life for the three of them without, as he'd told Jennifer, missing her so badly?

Could have been either. People have their different ways of dealing with loss and grief.

Or it could have been something else entirely.

This case fascinated me. Both the what-happened and the why-it-happened. Tomorrow I'll assemble my staff in a meeting, reshuffle assignments, and get the investigation under way.

At nine-thirty that night I was reclining on my bed, watching Hy pack for his trip to La Jolla. Over dinner at a favorite Cajun restaurant, I'd told him what I could about the new case without violating client confidentiality, and now I was mulling over some of his comments and planning tomorrow morning's presentation to my staff.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, startling me.

I looked over to where he stood at the chest of drawers.

"I don't have any black socks," he added.

"You just bought some."

"Yeah, but they're either at the ranch or Touchstone. I'll have to buy more."

"Well, they're not exactly a rare commodity."

He shut the drawer that was designated as his and examined the contents of his duffel, then zipped it. "McCone, does it ever strike you as ridiculous, having your possessions travel around from place to place and never knowing where they're at?"

"Sometimes. I'm always running out of underwear at the ranch, and I've never driven up Touchstone without the trunk loaded with . . . well, stuff."

"Exactly—stuff. It goes back and forth, one place or the other, and when you want it, it's never where you are."

"It would be an expensive proposition to have enough of everything at each place."

"Exactly. Three places is too many for two people. We ought to get rid of one."

"We'd never give up Touchstone, especially after all we went through having the house built there. And we need a base here in the city."

“I was thinking of my ranch.”

“You love the ranch.” It was a hundred acres of sheep graze in the high desert of Mono County near Tufa Lake, on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada. Hy had inherited it decades ago from his stepfather.

“I do love it, but I’m hardly ever there. If it wasn’t for Ramon Perez, the place would’ve gone hell a long time ago.” He paused. “Ramon’s a good foreman, and he’s saved practically every penny I’ve ever paid him. When I was up there last month, he hinted he might want to buy the place.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Like I said, he only hinted. But if I did sell to him, I think I could work a deal where he’d let me come up and stay from time to time.”

“It wouldn’t be the same, though.”

He sat on the bed, put a hand on my ankle. “Things change, and sometimes it’s for the better. I was thinking if I did sell, we could use the money to buy a bigger place here in the city.”

“A bigger— You mean sell this house, too?”

“Well, it *is* a little small for two people to live on a near full-time basis.”

“But it’s . . . my *home*.”

“I know that, and it’s just a suggestion. Something to think about, is all. Now, how about we open that bottle of brandy that Mick and Charlotte gave us? Toast to us and our new beginnings.”

Damn, the man certainly could drop a bombshell and just walk away while the rubble was settling. But it was a conversation I’d just as soon walk away from anyway, so I smiled and said, “Why not?”

Later that night, though, as Hy slumbered peacefully beside me, I tossed and turned and fretted. When I’d first seen the little house on the tail end of Church Street out beyond where the J-line streetcar tracks stop, it had been a pathetically shabby structure. One of the city’s four thousand earthquake cottages—makeshift two- or three-room structures erected as emergency housing after the quake of ’06—it had been moved from its original location, expanded to five rooms, and raised up to accommodate a garage and laundry area beneath. I was able to buy it at a very low price because of the extensive work it needed to make it reasonably habitable, and I’d had the kitchen remodeled and later contracted for three new additions: a full bathroom to replace the cold cubicle on the back porch that contained the toilet and shower, a master bedroom, and a backyard deck. I loved the house, and I loved the close-knit neighborhood.

Where else in the city could I hire a teenaged girl who was a wannabe real estate mogul to twice daily administer insulin shots to my diabetic cat, and also tend to my other cat, plants, and mail during my frequent absences? Where else would I have a doctor across the street who paid house calls? Or another neighbor who frequently dropped off care packages of homemade bread and preserves? People here cared about one another, watched out for the security of one another’s homes. I supposed there were more enclaves like this in the city, but it might take years to find one, more years to develop those kinds of friendly ties.

No, I didn’t want to sell my home. But I could understand Hy’s rationale about it being too small. And, after all, he was willing to sell his equally beloved ranch. . . .

God, marriage was already changing things. Was this what Rae had hinted at when she’d said “Just wait and see”?

Wednesday

AUGUST 17

My staff members were milling around our conference room on the second floor of Pier 24 1/2, cups of coffee and muffins in hand. I set my briefcase on the round oak table and began taking files from the shelves. While I arranged them, I studied my investigative team.

Ted was clad in chinos and a vintage Hawaiian shirt, his latest fashion statement. His black goatee was trimmed very short because, he'd told me, it had begun to show more gray than the hair on his head. Beside him stood Kendra Williams, his latest candidate for the position of "paragon of the paper clips." Dozens of young men and women, all of them eager to become Ted's assistant, had been paraded before my eyes in the past few months, but none had worked out. So far Kendra, whom I met the previous afternoon, seemed the most promising. A tiny woman of twenty-five, with a chocolate-brown complexion and cornrows, she had greeted me cheerfully and hadn't so much as wince when a great crash echoed up from the floor of the pier—two deliverymen dropping a crate destined for the architectural firm off the opposite catwalk. An ability to remain calm in chaotic circumstances was often required here at the pier, and apparently Kendra possessed it.

God, I hoped she proved equal to the challenge of the job! I would need to rely heavily on Ted's efficiency in the days ahead, and it would be good if he also had someone competent to fall back on.

Mick, who headed our computer forensics department, was leaning against one of the bookcases that lined the room, talking with his new assistant, Derek Ford. While both were tall, the resemblance stopped there. My nephew's blond good looks came from the Scotch-Irish side of our family; Derek was a handsome, dark-haired Eurasian. Mick showed evidence of putting on weight, a consequence of his and Charlotte's fondness for trying whatever new restaurant came along; Derek was very lean and had told me he followed a strict vegan diet. Mick dressed casually, with little concern for style; Derek was a devotee of urban chic, a tattoo of linked scorpions encircling his neck. But the two men had instantly bonded over their fascination with the endless possibilities of computer technology. Together they were working on developing investigative tools that I failed to understand. Of course, I didn't understand the tools they now possessed, even though Mick would dismiss them as rudimentary. I did know that one day they'd be able to retrieve just about any piece of information I'd ask for. And they'd retrieve it within the bounds of the law. Or else.

Charlotte and Mick also shared a love of technology, but her expertise was in business and finance: give her a credit card number, and she'd run a subject to earth in no time; present her with evidence of corporate chicanery, and she'd build a case that would stand up in any court. She stood by the door with her new assistant, Patrick Neilan. Charlotte was telling him a joke, one that involved a lot of hand gestures and shaking of her brown curls. When she finished, Patrick blushed to the roots of his red hair before his wide mouth twitched and he snorted. Charlotte threw her head back and let f

one of her bawdy laughs. A risqué joke, no doubt about that.

Only two staff members had yet to put in an appearance: Julia Rafael and Craig Morland. I decided to call the meeting to order without them when they rushed in, practically knocking each other over. Julia, a tall Latina with haughty features, moving stiffly as a result of having been shot in the chest by a sniper last month, immediately looked mortified. She was a relatively new hire; minor faux pas that wouldn't have fazed the rest of us severely discomfited her, and it didn't help that during our last investigation she'd unwittingly become embroiled in a situation that had almost cost me my private investigator's license. Craig, who shared an office with her, sensed her discomfort, and threw his arm around her shoulders, leaning on her and miming great pain. After a moment Julia smiled wryly. Craig, in his running clothes, his longish brown hair tousled, barely resembled the tight-wound FBI field agent whom I'd met a few years before. Over the time he'd worked for me, I'd found him to be a surprisingly perceptive and sensitive man—just the kind of person Julia needed as a friend.

Once they got their coffee and muffins, I called, "Let's get settled, folks. We've got a lot of ground to cover."

For an hour I went over every case on the assignment sheet, finding out its exact status from the person who was handling it. Then I called a fifteen-minute break while I did some further reshuffling. Finally I was ready to get to the Laurel Greenwood disappearance. I'd had Ted make up packets containing all the background information on the case, as well as a transcript of my tape of yesterday's meeting with Jennifer Aldin. While they glanced through the packets, I summarized the situation.

"Normally," I concluded, "I wouldn't be briefing everyone on this. But the case is high pay and thus high priority; and it promises to be a difficult one. Any cop will tell you that if you don't solve a missing person case—no matter if it's foul play, kidnapping, or deliberate disappearance—within the first twenty-four hours, chances are you'll never solve it. And what we've got here is a twenty-two-year-old case. Nearly impossible."

"Not for *this* agency."

"I said *nearly*, Mick." I looked around the table. "I'm going to need to count on all of you. Those who aren't assigned to the investigation this morning will keep their individual caseloads, and pick up the slack from others. As the investigation progresses, it may be necessary to pull some people off and make reassignments. So you'll need to familiarize yourselves with the information in your packets, and of course, you'll be briefed on what's happening during our regularly scheduled conferences."

"You'll be in the field, Shar?" Craig asked.

"Yes. Ted'll be holding things together here in the office, and Kendra—you've all met Kendra, right?—she'll be holding *him* together."

"About time somebody did," Charlotte said.

"Wait till you turn in your next expense report," Ted warned her.

I said, "Okay—assignments. I'll be personally talking to everyone we can locate who is mentioned in the accounts of Laurel Greenwood's disappearance, as well as anyone else Jennifer Aldin suggests. Derek—you'll locate and background those people, starting immediately. I'd also appreciate it if you'd make yourself available to conduct spur-of-the-moment searches for me while I'm in the field."

Mick was frowning, hurt at being left out.

I said to him, "You—the genius, as Derek calls you—need to concentrate on running your department." There was a growing corporate demand for computer forensics—the science of recovering files that had been inadvertently or deliberately deleted. Mick had originally suggested v

offer the service to our existing clients, and once we'd announced it, the work had poured in, both from them and other companies they'd referred to us.

"Shar," he said, "I can handle both."

"Not and have a life, you can't. And I think Charlotte would agree that you having a life outside the agency is a good thing."

"Amen to that!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"Don't get excited," I told her. "You may end up being the one in your household who needs coddling and cosseting."

"Say what?"

"Needing TLC after a hard day at the office. You'll retain your caseload, but I may have to call on you if any tricky financial angles come up. Plus I'm temporarily taking Patrick away from you. Patrick," I added to Neilan, "you'll be assisting me full-time."

His eyes widened, and then his freckled face glowed with pleasure.

Patrick Neilan was my newest operative, and I suspected most of the staff regarded him as a sympathy hire. When I'd first encountered him—as a witness during last month's major investigation—I'd learned that he was also the subject of a search we had undertaken for his ex-wife the year before. My regret at the fact that the information we'd provided her had resulted in his financial downfall had prompted me to hire him temporarily, and he'd shown the potential to be a good investigator. Now that I'd hired him full-time, I wanted to give him the chance to prove himself to his coworkers.

I added, "Let's get back to work, everybody. Patrick and Derek—I want to see you in my office."

My office was at the far end of the pier, a large space with a high arching window overlooking the bay and the East Bay cities and hills. One side wall rose toward the roof, a strip of multipaned windows at its top letting in soft northern light; the other was an eight-foot-high partition with a door that opened onto the catwalk. The furnishings—desk and clients' chairs; file cabinets; armoire that served as a coat closet; easy chair beneath a schefflera plant, in which to do serious thinking—seemed dwarfed by their spacious surroundings. When we'd moved in, the rent set by the Port Commission had barely seemed affordable, even though it was low by waterfront standards because of the pier's unfortunate location under the western span of the Bay Bridge and next door to the SFFD fireboat station. But within a couple of years, we'd taken over all the upstairs space on the northern side and were handling the increased cost easily. We'd also become inured to the fire station's siren going off, as well as the roaring and clanking of traffic on the bridge's roadbed overhead.

I dumped my files on the desk, motioning for Patrick and Derek to be seated. Then I pulled a list from on top of the pile and handed it to my computer expert.

"These are the people we need to locate and background," I said. "Whatever information we have on them appears in your packet. E-mail the files to me, copy Patrick, and also print it out for Ted. Copy and distribute to everybody. Any questions?"

Derek studied the list. "You want me to search in the order you've got them listed?"

"Yes, but don't waste too much time on those that're difficult to locate, just move ahead."

"Will do." He stood.

"One more thing," I said. "Mick will want to help you. Don't let him. He's got enough to do."

Derek nodded and gave me a little salute as he left the office.

I turned to Patrick. “Okay, your function will be to coordinate things here in the office. I’ll be handling the messenger tapes and e-mailing reports back from the field for you to organize and study for patterns or leads that I may have missed. Any and all suggestions or theories will be welcome. As you saw last month, I’m not the sort of investigator who refuses to listen to input, so feel free to offer your two cents whenever. Right now”—I looked at my watch—“I think we should grab some lunch. Then I want you to come with me while I conduct a field interview with Jennifer Aldin’s sister, Terry Wyatt.”

Patrick stood, looking eager. He was thirty-four, twice a father, had a business degree from Golden Gate University, and had been an accountant before his job was eliminated and he’d been forced to turn to security work to make ends meet. His wife leaving him for another man, her frequent refusal to allow him to see their children, her garnishing of his small wages—all that should have left him a broken man. But Patrick had somehow maintained a balance, and now, as he began a new career, he exhibited both optimism and an almost childlike pleasure in life.

We walked down the Embarcadero and had burgers at Miranda’s, my favorite waterfront diner, then headed east over the Bay Bridge in the agency van, our destination Davis, the university town west of Sacramento. On the way I conducted an informal training session on the art of the field interview: how to structure it; when to press for answers; when to sit back and wait for the answers to come; what body language to watch for; what tones of voice, inflections, and hidden meanings to listen to.

“Even when a person has nothing to hide, there will be details they’ll deliberately omit or that will slip through the cracks,” I told him. “A bad memory, a rewriting of history, an aversion to a certain subject, or simply the idea that something isn’t important—they all can contribute to your getting an incomplete picture.”

“You say ‘picture,’ rather than ‘answers’ or ‘set of facts.’ What exactly do you mean?”

“What do the facts a given individual provides you with add up to? How do they relate to the facts others have given you? Do they agree? Contradict? Where do they fit within the framework of the investigation? What other avenues of investigation do they point to?”

Patrick shook his head. “Conducting and analyzing an interview’s more complicated than you thought. You study this in school?”

“Nope. I was a sociology major at Berkeley—which was interesting enough, but not very practical. Some of this stuff I learned from my first boss, the man whose investigator’s license I trained under. But most of it came from trial and error. A lot of error. When I started training people myself, I realized I’d have to articulate the process, or they’d make the same mistakes I did. That meant I had to do a lot of thinking about what it is I actually do, whereas before I was just winging it.”

“I’ll bet you could write a textbook.”

“I was asked to, after I gave a talk at a symposium last year, but it’s not going to happen. I spend too much time at my desk as it is.”

I took the central Davis exit and followed Terry Wyatt’s instructions to a quiet, tree-shaded block of Twelfth Street, lined with ranch-style homes that I judged to have been built in the 1950s. The uniform size of the lots indicated the area was an older subdivision, and all the houses probably had once been alike, but over the years they’d been remodeled and embellished with decorative touches so now no two looked the same. Terry Wyatt’s was the exception; its clean, simple lines were in the classic suburban style of fifty years ago.

As Patrick and I approached the front door, a dog began barking, and I heard the scrabbling of toenails on hardwood. Then a second canine voice joined in, and a woman called, “Augie, Freddie—stop that!”

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