

## The Scenic Overlook

A couple on vacation in Santa Fe, private detectives, enjoy their hike behind the Bishop's Lodge until they reach the summit of the mountain. There they witness an apparent murder on the back terrace of a home more than a half a mile below. The killer and victim appear too small to identify, but they can locate the Mediterranean-style villa where the crime occurred. By the time they get off the mountain, contact local authorities and investigate the scene, there is no evidence of the murder. (24 pages)

The concierge at the Bishop's Lodge said the effort would be worth it. That the one-and-a-half-hour trek up the blue trail would reward Rhett and me with a view unsurpassed in the Santa Fe area. He told us we'd have something to remember from our vacation. I think the concierge should have added that it would be something we would later wish we *could* forget.

Rhett was panting and so was I. Living in Houston at near sea level, we never appreciated the ample oxygen supply there. Now above 7,500 feet and hiking even higher, we felt out of shape. Jogging flat trails back home was not enough to prepare us for the rigors of high altitude exercise. The lodge, three miles north of downtown Santa Fe and just south of Tesuque, had three hiking trails marked by several small colored directional signs: the red, the yellow, and the toughest, the blue.

Rhett asked, "Toni, you havin' fun yet?" And he continued to pant.

I reminded him, "The scenic overlook is just up ahead. I'll let you know how much fun I'm having when we get there."

Two years ago, Rhett and I gave up our sane careers, his in marketing research and mine as a fitness club owner, and became licensed private detectives. Before then, by random chance, we'd become involved in solving crimes, had some success as amateur sleuths, and found a genuine passion for investigative work. By maintaining

equity interests in our previous businesses, we had a cushion of income to help pay the bills. At that time, we also decided to move in together, and the old saying that two can live as cheaply as one was true enough.

Because of our financial situation, we could be selective in the cases we accepted. We agreed that our detective work would only include murders or missing persons, and that we'd always work in concert with local police. We didn't have any interest in tailing unfaithful husbands so a woman could take her husband to the cleaners when she filed for divorce. We didn't want corporate work, trying to uncover embezzlers. We wanted to help people whose loved ones were victims, people who wanted justice, and people who needed closure for the tragedies that had occurred in their personal lives. We also vowed to work only one case at a time.

Rhett and I made a pact that at the conclusion of each case, we would take a week's vacation to reward ourselves, and to clear our minds. Last week we concluded a case where we were able to find, and return unharmed to his mother, an eleven-year old boy snatched from a playground in west Houston. The estranged father of the boy had done the kidnapping, had changed his name, and was living in Fort Davis in the desolate Big Bend area of Texas. It had taken Rhett and I five weeks to solve that one.

So now we were clearing our minds, and breathing hard. Moving through cedars and birch trees toward the peak of a mountain that wasn't even tall enough to merit having a name -- like Mount Santa Fe, or Dante's Peak. But now I could see through the forest that the tree tops were leveling off, signaling that our destination was near.

In a clearing at the summit we stopped to rest, and to take in the scenic overlook.

Pointing north, Rhett said, “Wow. See those mountains? According to the concierge they’re in Colorado.”

I looked, and then glanced to the west, and saw the magnificent desert below. Then I looked south and had a view of another mountain, which I was happy to note was not as tall as the one I’d just conquered. I agreed, “This really *is* a great view.”

Together, Rhett and I turned to the east. Below were smaller hills and mountains, and beyond were the ski areas in the higher mountains, some that exceeded 11,000 feet in elevation. Between those mountains and our vantage point were homes, scattered about the hillsides. We could see parts of the winding road that provided those homeowners access back to town.

I said, “Those are nice homes, especially that one,” and I pointed to a Mediterranean-style villa perched on the side of a hill, about three-fourths of a mile below. It had a green tile roof, and an enormous veranda in the back overhanging a wooded ravine. As I spoke, I could make out two people walking onto the veranda, a man dressed in dark clothing, and a blonde woman, dressed in red. That’s all I could tell, because their images from so far away were tiny.

Rhett agreed. “Probably worth several million. Maybe a movie star lives there. Supposedly a lot of them have places here.”

I turned away, and silently agreed that the concierge at the Bishop’s Lodge was right. The view was memorable.

Then Rhett scared me when he said, “Uh oh.”

I thought maybe a snake had been spotted. “What?”

“The blonde just slapped the man.”

I knew who he was talking about, and I fixed my eyes back on the veranda of the Mediterranean villa. As I did, I saw what Rhett had seen, as the tiny woman in red took her right arm back, and then delivered a second slap across the face of the tiny man.

Rhett said, "They must be married."

Being a woman, I wasn't amused, but that's just Rhett. I immediately tried to guess why the woman was justified in what she did. Did she just discover her husband was having an affair? Probably so.

Then as we both watched, Rhett repeated himself when he said, "Uh oh."

The tiny man on the veranda had grabbed the tiny blonde woman in red, and it appeared that he was holding her with both hands on her neck.

Rhett asked, "Toni, is he *strangling* her?"

The vision was terrifying. He *was* strangling her. I could see her arms flailing at him. They stumbled across the veranda toward the railing, and yet the tiny man's hands never left the tiny woman's neck.

I shouted, "Hey! Stop that! Stop!"

Rhett yelled louder than me, "Stop! Hey, Hey, Hey!"

Simultaneously, we realized that from that distance, and being high above the struggling couple, they couldn't hear us. We also realized that we may be witnessing a murder.

My eyes were riveted on the tiny couple, as they tripped and fell. The strangling was still in progress. Before we'd departed on our hike, I made the decision not to bring my cell phone. Now I regretted it. We were unable to even try anything that might prevent the ultimate fate of the tiny woman in red.

We watched as the woman stopped flailing her arms, and as her body went limp. We saw the man keep his hands on her neck for what seemed like another eternity, and then he stood.

Rhett obviously was feeling the same way I was. "It's too late."

A wave of nausea overtook me. I'd just seen someone murdered. A life ended. And I was just watching. I took a breath.

"We've got to notify the police," Rhett said. Then he added, "Let's go."

I couldn't take my eyes off the veranda three quarters of a mile below. I saw the man as he walked back into the house, leaving the tiny body motionless where he'd killed her.

Rhett said, "C'mon, Toni. We've got to get back to the lodge."

But I was thinking. The sick feeling I felt moments before had passed, and I was now feeling anger. I said, "One of us needs to stay here and keep watch. See what he does. Maybe he'll take off, and we need to know what kind of car he drives. Anything that might help to get that bastard."

Rhett knew he could outrun me in a footrace if the distance was short, but he believed if the distance was a mile or more, I would prevail. I jog at least five miles six days a week, while he jogs three times a week at most, and normally only three miles when he does. He agreed, "You're right, honey. I'll stay and watch. You go."

I said, "It'll take me thirty minutes going downhill. I'll call the police and go with them to the house. Probably take an hour in all to get there."

He nodded, "I'll stay here until I see you at the house."

I stepped to Rhett, gave him a hug, and said, "It's awful, isn't it?"

Rhett kissed my cheek, and nodded. Then he said, “Be careful. I know the trail is good, but we’re not used to this terrain. Don’t break anything on the way down.”

The terrain *was* different. In Houston, when I wanted to run hills, I’d go to overpasses, or the trails along Buffalo Bayou that offered hills no greater than twenty feet in height. But what lay ahead for me now was two miles, downhill, on a winding path, which in some places included loose rocks or tree roots, all capable of causing a stumble or ankle sprain. I began jogging at a conservative pace, keeping my eyes fixed on the trail, retracing the steps Rhett and I had just covered, following the little blue signs along the way.

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I identified myself as a licensed PI from Houston on vacation, who had witnessed what clearly appeared to be a murder, and asked that I be picked up at the Bishop’s Lodge. On the telephone, the Santa Fe police detective seemed unexcited, perhaps not believing me about what I’d seen. But he agreed to pick me up. He said he was familiar with the area east of the Bishop’s Lodge, and from my description, knew the home I’d described.

He arrived fifteen minutes after hanging up. I introduced myself, “I’m Toni Darnell. Thanks for coming.”

“I’m Detective Walt Dickson, Homicide.”

As we drove, I briefed him on what I knew.

“My boyfriend, Rhett Sanders, and I had just climbed the blue trail behind the lodge, and were at the top enjoying the view. He’s still up there watching.”

Dickson asked, “He a PI, too?”

“Yes, sir. We saw the woman slap the man twice, and then the man strangled her. They wrestled around, fell, and he never let go of her neck until she stopped moving.”

We drove the winding road through the mountains, and just as the detective had said, he knew where the Mediterranean-style villa was. He stopped in front.

He said, “There aren’t too many like this in Santa Fe. Ordinances usually make homebuilders keep that adobe look. But this guy has mega-bucks.”

I asked, “Do you know who lives here?”

The detective said, “Not personally.”

We got out of the car. I looked up, first trying to ascertain which mountain top I’d been on an hour before. Then I saw a tiny man waving both arms on top of the mountain on the right. Rhett.

I pointed and informed Detective Dickson, “There. Up there, waving. That’s Rhett.” I waved back.

The detective glanced up and gave a half-hearted wave of his own. Then he said, “You better stay here while I go inside.”

“Yes, sir.” I knew my place. This was his jurisdiction, and I’d done my job. I looked back up at Rhett, who was still watching. Worrying, I was sure. I added another wave.

Two minutes later, Walt Dickson returned to the car. He said, “Nobody answers the door bell. And I looked in the front windows and didn’t see anything. And there’s no access to the back veranda from the outside.”

I frowned, and said, “Maybe he left.” I pointed again to the scenic overlook, and added, “Rhett would know, but he doesn’t have his cell phone.”

The detective shook his head, and I suddenly became concerned that he didn't believe me about the murder. I asked, "You do believe me, don't you?"

Walt Dickson looked up at Rhett, and said, "Ma'am, that's a long way away. I'm sure you saw something, but really, how can you be sure what you saw from that distance?"

Now I had to control my anger, and in my most solemn tone said, "We're both PI's. We've *been* on murder cases. Both of us agreed that a woman was strangled. Detective, we know what we saw."

He took me seriously. "We'll wait awhile."

"What about a search warrant?" I was anxious to intensify this investigation.

The detective said, "It'll take a while."

I'd only been a private detective for a short time, but I'd become familiar with police procedures. "Call it in . . . I mean, can't you call it in? And say you have two responsible witnesses? You could have one of your men bring it out."

He knew I was right, and maybe he was beginning to believe the report of a murder. He telephoned his headquarters.

I looked up again. Rhett was still standing at the scenic overlook watching. I wondered why.

When the detective finished his call, I asked, "Who *does* live here?"

He replied, "A big time Hollywood agent. Bruce Richardson. Handles some of the biggest movie stars. From what I've heard, he supposedly has a bigger home than this one in Beverly Hills."

I was thinking about the blonde in the red dress. The dead blonde. I asked, “Is he married?”

“He’s had a few wives, but I think he’s single now. A playboy. We’ve had a few complaints about loud parties out here in the past. Evidently he’s a big entertainer.”

Just then, the detective’s cell phone rang. He answered, and mostly listened to the voice on the other end. After a minute, he spoke into his phone, “Got it. I can be there in ten minutes. I’ll take it.”

I sensed some urgency in Walt Dickson’s voice.

He started to walk toward his car and said, “I’ve got to go. Trouble in Tesuque. I can drop you at the Bishop’s Lodge.”

“What about the search warrant?”

He said, “I’ll call headquarters again. Someone else will do the search. There’ll be two officers here, probably in an hour or so. I really must go now.”

For some crazy reason, I said, “Go ahead. I’ll wait here.”

The detective was now behind the wheel. Before closing his car door, he said, “Suit yourself lady.” Then he added, “Don’t do *anything* until my men get here.”

I nodded, and said, “No problem. And thanks.”

He drove off, leaving me alone. I walked across the road from the Mediterranean-style villa, looked up toward Rhett and waved, and then sat on a large boulder under a tree. I was determined to participate in the search when the other policemen arrived with the warrant.

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Rhett was both confused and apprehensive. He'd correctly assumed that the man with Toni had been a policeman, but he didn't know why he drove away and left her there by herself.

After Toni started her jogging descent down the blue trail, he watched the man in black re-emerge on the veranda, and drag the lifeless body inside. Five minutes later, he saw a man walk out his front door, but this man was wearing a yellow shirt -- maybe a turtleneck. He disappeared briefly under a tree, and then he drove a beige colored car, a Mercedes Rhett guessed, from the front drive into his garage. He wondered if the man he saw on the veranda was the one in the car, that he had changed his shirt. He wondered if the beige car belonged to the tiny woman in red, the victim.

Fifteen minutes later, he saw the beige car leave the garage, and drive west on the road, and out of sight behind the hills. Rhett watched the house for another forty-five minutes, and noticed no one coming or going. Then he saw a navy blue SUV drive into the driveway of the house he'd been watching. He saw a man in a suit, and Toni get out. They looked so small, but he recognized Toni's dark hair, and the blue shorts and white T-shirt she'd put on before their hike up the blue trail. That's when he waved both arms, and received a wave back from his sweetheart, and one from the man in the suit.

He'd wished he could've told them both that the man in black now was wearing a yellow shirt, and had left the house. He wanted to tell them he was in a beige car, and had driven west. But he couldn't be heard from that far away.

Now he didn't know what to do. What was Toni doing there alone? He could continue to watch, but knew if something happened, he could do nothing from his location at the scenic overlook. He decided it was now time to descend the blue trail.

He knew it would take him at least an hour to get to where Toni was. As he slowly jogged downhill, keeping his eyes on the trail as Toni had done, not wanting to trip, sprain an ankle or worse, he said a silent prayer that Toni would be safe.

Twisting and turning down the winding road, Rhett considered what he had seen from the scenic overlook. First the murder. No doubt in either his or Toni's mind about that. Then he believed the murderer, the man in black, had gone through his victim's purse, found her car keys, and driven her car into his garage. Rhett was convinced the beige car belonged to the blonde haired woman in red.

It was typical Santa Fe summer weather. While the temperature was in the low eighties, and although he was exercising rigorously, Rhett noticed that his sweat was evaporating in the dry air before it could get his T-shirt damp. He liked Santa Fe, as much as Toni did. But he was angry the vacation, the week of rest and relaxation, had suddenly turned into something quite different.

Halfway down the blue trail, Rhett wondered whether the body of the woman in red had been placed in the beige car. It had taken the man fifteen minutes between the time he drove that car into his garage, and the time he drove away. By the time he was back at the Bishop's Lodge, Rhett was sure the murderer had taken the body, and the victim's car somewhere. *But where?*

The concierge provided Rhett a street map of the area, and together they determined where he should drive to reunite with Toni. The concierge said the house was only ten minutes away. As he got in his car, Rhett hoped that nothing had happened at the Mediterranean-style villa since he left the scenic overlook forty-five minutes ago -- an eternity as far as he was concerned -- and that nothing would happen in the next ten

minutes. Unfortunately, he didn't get what he hoped for, because when Rhett was nearing the end of his descent on the blue trail, and almost back at the Bishop's Lodge, a taxicab arrived at the house across the road where Toni had been waiting.

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I watched the cab arrive, and a man got out and paid the driver. I stood as the cab drove away and watched the man approach the front door. At the time, it didn't occur to me that the man I was looking at might be the same man Rhett and I had seen from the top of a nearby mountain, as he was wearing black slacks, and a yellow turtleneck. I did consider that he may have merely changed shirts, so I was cautious. I looked behind me and up the mountain, and didn't see Rhett. He was on his way. I wondered when my boyfriend would join me.

Before the man went inside, he stopped and turned around. He stared at me. I didn't know what to do, so I bent over and started re-tying my shoes.

The man shouted, "You lost?"

I decided to go for it. I shouted back, "Maybe so." I looked both ways, and then crossed the road, and tried to smile.

When I reached the driveway, I said, "I'm staying at the Bishop's Lodge, and went for some exercise. But now I'm not sure which way to go to get back. These roads are confusing." I realized that if the man I was addressing was the murderer, there would be no way for him to know he was talking to an eyewitness to the crime. At least that was my thinking.

The man seemed calm. He was giving me the once over, and I'm used to that. He took a step toward me and pointed down the road to his left, and said, "Just follow

that road. Take your first left. Keep going, and that road will get you back to the highway, which is also Bishop's Lodge Road. Then take a right."

Call me stupid. Or call me determined. But I had a plan, and asked, "How far is it to the Bishop's Lodge from here?" When I drove with Detective Dickson, I'd figure it was two or three miles.

The response was, "Almost three miles."

My plan might work. I said, "Damn," and tried to look discouraged.

The man asked, "Too far?"

I said, "I rubbed a blister on my foot. New shoes. Three miles is too far. I think I've already gone further than that."

The man didn't respond. I hoped he wouldn't. I sure didn't want him to offer me a ride to the Bishop's Lodge, because I wanted to see the inside of his home.

I asked, "Would it be okay if I used your telephone to call my boyfriend? He's there, and he could come pick me up."

The man was silent. Maybe he *was* the one. Was he thinking about his crime, wondering if there was anything inside his house that this woman standing in his driveway shouldn't see? Finally he said, "Sure, come on in."

The thought crossed my mind, that if this *was* the murderer who I'd just talked into giving me an invitation inside, then I must surely be insane. I smiled. It was another fake smile, but I'm good at that.

I said, "I'm Toni Darnell."

He responded, "I'm Bruce Richardson."

“Nice to meet you,” I lied. I don’t like lying, unless, of course, I’m talking to a possible murder suspect, and at that moment I wasn’t sure.

He opened the front door, stepped aside, and I went in, feeling uncomfortably like the fly that’d just been trapped by the spider. I hoped I’d do nothing to reveal my nervousness. My face sometimes turns red when I’m under stress.

Bruce Richardson said, “There’s a phone in the office you can use,” and he pointed to a room to the left of the entry.

As I moved toward the office, I noted the large living room in the villa, which was quite extravagant. Marble floors, expensive furniture, and Italian and French impressionist oil paintings on the walls. Very tasteful. My host followed me into the office.

“You know the number?” he asked.

“I’ll call his cell phone.” And I picked up the telephone, and dialed Rhett’s number, hoping he’d made it off the mountain, and that he had his phone with him. After three rings, it went to voice mail. I faked another smile, as Bruce Richardson went to the front window and looked out.

I spoke into the phone, “Honey, it’s me. I got a little lost, and need a ride. I’ve already walked over three miles, and I rubbed a big blister. I’m at . . .” I addressed Mr. Richardson, and asked, “Where am I?”

He gave me the address, and I finished the message to Rhett, giving him the directions, backwards from what Bruce had told me when we were outside. At the end of the message I added, “I’ll be waiting in front. It’s a big Mediterranean. About three miles from the lodge.”

When I hung up the telephone, I said, “He’ll get my page, and be here soon. Thanks again.” I caught my host checking out my legs, and then the rest of my body. *Men. Are they all that way?* I’d told him my boyfriend, who I was staying with, was on his way. *The answer is yes. Even murderers.*

Bruce asked, “Do you want some water, or anything?”

I really *did* want some water, and said, “If it’s not any trouble, that would be great. I’m not used to this climate, and do feel a bit dehydrated.”

Bruce Richardson smiled at me. I recalled what the detective had said about him. A playboy. He was right. And he *was* handsome, in a slick way. He led me through the main living area and into the massive kitchen that had a cooking island in the middle, where he retrieved a bottle of Evian from the refrigerator.

He said, “You’re right about the climate here, Toni. I’m from L.A. Split my time between there and here. When I’m here, I drink four bottles of water a day.” He gave me a wink, and grabbed a bottle of Evian for himself.

I took my bottle, uncapped it, and took a drink. “Thanks again.”

“No problem.” Then he said something that confused me. He said, “I just this minute arrived from L.A. I keep a car here year round. You want me to drive you back to Bishops Lodge?”

*If he “just this minute” arrived from L.A., then he’s not the murderer. I was disappointed. But, then again, he had no luggage. Maybe in addition to keeping a car in both places, Mr. Richardson also keeps enough clothing and everything else he needs in both places. I was unsure of who this man was. So who did Rhett and I see from the scenic overlook? Damn.*

I said, "No thanks. Rhett'll be here soon." I gave Richardson a smile and added, "You have a beautiful home here."

He said, "Thank you." He led me out of the kitchen into the main living room. I followed.

I was in my detective mode. If this man wasn't the murderer, then who was? I asked him, "Who lives here when you're in L.A.?"

He gave me a confused look and said, "What?"

"Well, I just assumed you had a caretaker or someone to watch over this place when you're away."

He shook his head, and said, "No. I have a very sophisticated alarm system."

*If not a caretaker then who?* I wondered who'd been here an hour earlier. The couple on the veranda. I persisted, "Do you have any guests staying here now?"

His mood changed. A moment before we were having a friendly chat. Suddenly he seemed annoyed by my questions. Bruce said, "No guests. And why are you interested in who's here or not? Are you casing my place for a robbery or something?" He wasn't smiling.

I had to make a decision. Was this the murderer or not? Could he have changed shirts, gone somewhere -- taken the body of the blonde woman dressed in red somewhere, ditched her and the car -- and then taken a cab back? Or was this man actually unaware that a couple had been in his house an hour and a half ago?

I played it safe. I forced a laugh and said, "No, I'm not casing your place. It's just my curiosity, that's all." I decided it would be smart to let the police take over. They'd be here soon, and hopefully Rhett *was* on his way. "Thanks again for letting me

use your phone, and for the water. I'd better go out front and wait for my boyfriend." The front door was only fifteen feet away.

But Bruce Richardson blocked my path to the front door. He put his hand up as if he were stopping traffic and said, "Not so fast. Did you see someone here? Is that why you asked about a caretaker or house guests?"

For the first time, I studied the man in front of me, trying to evaluate him as a potential opponent. He was large, six-foot two, and appeared to be physically fit. I'm only five-foot one, and had no weapons, except for my fists, and my legs if I needed to kick my way out. Was I looking at a man who had the strength to strangle a woman?

I said, "No." I felt my face flush. Clearly conveying that I was now nervous. *Damn.*

"You're lying." Bruce Richardson now appeared menacing, as he asked, "What did you see?"

"Nothing." I slowly backed away, glancing around to determine which way to run.

He repeated, louder this time, "What did you see, Toni?"

Before I could answer, Bruce Richardson had reached inside the drawer of a table next to the front door, and removed a revolver. He pointed it me.

"You're not going anywhere, honey."

I was no longer confused. I now knew the man Rhett and I saw on the veranda from the scenic overlook, *had* changed shirts, and was the same man holding the revolver.

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As Rhett was stopped at the highway, about to leave the Bishop's Lodge grounds, he heard sirens. He looked to his left and a fire truck with flashing lights was barreling down the road. He waited as it passed, and then saw that just behind the fire truck, a police car was following, also with its lights flashing. Behind that was a navy blue SUV, that looked a lot like the one Toni had been in when she arrived at the scene of the crime.

He couldn't help himself. Intuition was guiding his thinking. Instead of turning left onto the highway and going to the address provided by the concierge where Toni was waiting, he turned right and followed the sirens. A mile north of the lodge, the fire truck turned onto a dirt road, with the police car and SUV close behind. Rhett saw the smoke wafting above the cedars, as he turned onto the dirt road.

One hundred yards down the road, all of the vehicles had stopped. A second fire truck was already at the scene and three firemen were in the final stages of putting out a car fire. Rhett parked his car off the road, got out, and approached. As he did, he saw the car sitting nose down in a ditch, partially blackened, but not so much that he couldn't distinguish that the car was a beige-colored Mercedes. His heart was beating fast, as he joined the uniformed policeman and the man in the suit who were standing by watching helplessly.

The two men turned when Rhett asked, "Was there someone in the car?"

The uniformed policeman responded, "Yeah. We're too late."

Rhett asked, "A blonde? Wearing red?"

The man in the suit, stepped toward Rhett and asked, "Who are you?"

Rhett introduced himself, and very quickly ascertained that the man in the suit was Detective Walt Dickson, the man he'd seen with Toni at the villa.

Dickson said, "According to the license plates, we've got us a famous corpse in that car. A movie star."

Now he knew when he'd seen the man drive away from the villa in the beige car, that the body *was* inside, Rhett said, "She was murdered before the car was set on fire. Toni, my girlfriend, told you, right?"

The detective nodded. He said, "I left your girlfriend at Richardson's house. There'll be some cops there soon with a search warrant." Both he and Rhett were wondering where Bruce Richardson was at that moment. Dickson added, "I think you ought to go pick her up now. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Before Rhett could respond, his pager began beeping.

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I had to buy some time. The cavalry was coming, I hoped. I prayed. The police with a search warrant, and Rhett. They'd be here. I just hoped they'd get here before Mr. Richardson committed his second murder of the day.

A bad sign I've learned is when someone is pointing a gun at you and their hand is as steady as a rock. So it was sort of a good sign that Bruce Richardson's hand, the one holding the gun, was shaking just a little. He was not a cold-blooded, experienced killer.

I asked, "Why'd you kill her?"

His eyes revealed the surprise, as he said, "You saw! But how?" He believed he'd committed the perfect crime and thought he'd get away with it. That's what every criminal believes.

I wanted to make the answer to his question a long one. I began, "My boyfriend and I are on vacation. Oh, you know that already." I took a breath and spoke slowly.

“Anyway, we just happened to be on the top of the mountain overlooking your house. We took the blue trail. The concierge at the Bishop’s Lodge said the view was great at the top. We saw everything. We saw her slap you. And we saw what you did.”

All Bruce said was, “Damn.”

I learned from Rhett, if you want someone to talk, ask open-ended questions. Not yes-no questions. So I asked the man with the gun, “What was the fight about?”

By the way he talked, I could tell Bruce Richardson was not a hardened murderer. This was his first, and he hadn’t planned it. He just “lost it” when he was threatened on his veranda by the blonde woman in red. The victim was a young movie star. I’d seen several of her movies. Bruce was her agent. She also had a home in the Santa Fe area. I think he wanted me to understand why he did it. Why it wasn’t his fault.

He tried to explain his motive, “I’ve got a lot of clients. When they come to me, they’re getting acting gigs for a hundred thousand dollars if they’re lucky. I take my fifteen percent. But then I do my magic, and a couple of years later, they get offers for \$10 million, \$20 million deals. I made them what they are. And they still think I’m only worth a lousy fifteen percent?”

I nodded, and didn’t move. I wanted him to keep talking. I said, “It doesn’t sound fair to me,” hoping the murderer would believe I was sympathetic. But while I looked at him, very worried, I calculated that fifteen percent of \$20 million wasn’t bad. I concluded Bruce Richardson was a greedy bastard. Still, I was not about to tell him what I really thought. I added a question, “But why kill her?”

He began pacing, and he stopped pointing the gun at me, which I thought was wonderful. He answered, “Her damned accountant. He told her I was taking more than

my fair share.” In a louder voice he repeated. “My fair share? Hell, she was just another good looking girl from the Midwest. I made her what she was. My fair share? I made them all what they were. Hell she was going to go to the cops.”

I asked, “Were you lovers?”

Wrong question.

He stopped pacing, and raised his gun and pointed it me again. I thought he would shoot.

But he didn’t.

He said, “Once. A few years ago. Lasted a few months.”

Wanting to keep the conversation going for as long as necessary, I asked, “What happened?”

The man with the gun actually laughed. He said, “She thought she was better than me. Thought she should be seen with other movie stars, and not her agent.”

“That’s awful,” I said.

The forsaken agent said, “It was no big deal. Easy come, easy go.”

I hate men who say that, but was too scared to challenge the man I now disliked intensely. The hand holding the gun was still shaking. I knew he had no plan. I just hoped he wouldn’t get desperate.

I asked, “You didn’t *mean* to kill her, did you?”

The answer was what I expected, and what I’d heard before from other murderers, “No. I just got so *mad*.” He dropped his arm, and held the gun at his side.

Then the murderer came to a realization, raised the gun again and pointed it at me, and said, "I got rid of the body. Only you and your boyfriend know what happened. I'm sorry, I've got no choice."

I thought I was dead.

Bruce extended his arm, and took aim at my head.

"Wait!" It was now time to beg, or to say anything that would change his mind about what he wanted to do. "You're too late. I told the police, and they're on the way here now with a search warrant."

It was the truth, but Bruce wasn't buying it, and said, "You're lying."

"I swear. And what about my boyfriend? You gonna kill him, too?"

"If I have to."

I tried logic. "Listen to me, please. Right now you're guilty of committing a crime of passion. Like you said, you didn't mean to do it. But if you shoot me, then *that's* capital murder, and that's different. You'll never get out of jail."

By the look in his eye, I felt the man pointing the gun wasn't convinced.

Richardson asked, "You an attorney?"

I said, "Close enough."

And just then, the doorbell rang. *The cavalry, at last.*

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Rhett had listened to the telephone message from Toni, and sped to the villa. When he didn't see her waiting out front, like she said she would, he panicked. He knew she was still inside -- with the man who'd strangled a movie star, driven her car with the body inside to a secluded ravine, and set it on fire. He opened the glove compartment

and removed Toni's nine-millimeter Springfield. He considered calling Detective Dickson, but felt he couldn't wait. He had to act now.

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Bruce Richardson, with the gun still pointing at my head said, "Don't make a sound." And he backed up to the front door and opened it.

There was no one there.

I didn't know what to think. I prayed Bruce Richardson would step outside. If he did, maybe I could run somewhere. Out the back? Anywhere. I thought about the kitchen where my host had provided me with a bottle of water. It had a back door. A double French door. Yes. If I get a chance, that's the place to run.

My prayer was answered, as Bruce Richardson turned to me and said, "Don't move." And he stepped outside, concealing his gun behind his back. He looked to his right.

I bolted for the kitchen and didn't look back. I was waiting for the burning sensation a bullet makes when entering the body. I'd been shot before. In the right shoulder from behind. As I ran, I ducked my head, and hoped Richardson was not a marksman.

"I heard Richardson yell, "God Damn it, stop."

Then I heard the shot, just as I turned into the kitchen

I ran for the French doors, eyeing the lock. I'd have to unlock it fast.

Then I saw the man standing there on the other side of the door. Pointing a pistol at me.

It was Rhett.

He shouted, “Hit the floor!”

I heard Bruce Richardson’s footsteps running on the marble floor. It would be seconds. I did as ordered and dropped to the floor, scrambling behind the kitchen island.

Three shots. Glass shattered on top of me, from the French door.

And then the sound of a body, falling to the floor.

I peeked around the corner of the kitchen island, and saw the strangler. Motionless. On the floor just inside the kitchen door. Dead.

I stood, unlocked the French doors, and then gave Rhett the tightest hug I’d ever given him. It was all I had to offer at the time.

Rhett was shaking. He’d never shot anyone before.

I said, “Honey, next vacation let’s go to the beach.”