



Throbbing forced Daniel's eyes open, and he moaned. Voices and a bright light. He attempted to raise his hand to shield his face and winced. His right shoulder and arm were shrouded in gauze.

"Lights down?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

A woman turned and approached his bed. "Good. You're awake, Doctor O'Leary." As she strode across the room, her black ponytail shone in the fluorescent lighting. "I'm Detective Bernadette Santos."

The scent of lemons and fresh cotton reached his nose. The overhead lights went off, leaving the soft glow of those directly over the bed.

"You're at Pleasant Valley Hospital. It appears you were attacked. Do you remember anything?"

Daniel peered at her through half-open eyelids. He needed time to think. Thoughts moved across his mind like a movie in slow motion. He'd only been in town a day. He shook his head. A wave of nausea hit him.

He swallowed. "I remember ... pulling into the garage."

"That's it?" She stared at him.

Memories from the evening flooded back, but he refused to

reveal more than he needed to say. Not until he had time to process.

“Yes.” He closed his eyes.

“Do you know of anyone who might want to cause you harm?”

“No. Did the person break into my home?”

“Only if he or she locked the door when leaving.”

Daniel kept his eyes shut. Did his attacker know the real reason he was in Pleasant Valley?

“If you think of anything, contact me. I’ll leave my card on the bedside table.” Detective Santos softened her tone. “I’ll pray for your rapid recovery. Body ... and mind.”

Startled, he stared into her deep brown eyes. She meant it.

“Thank you.” The warmth of her voice lingered in his mind.

“One more thing.” She turned a few feet away from his bed. “You can pick up your gun at the station when you get out.” The door swung shut behind her.

His gun. He looked at the ceiling. He’d forgotten about that. Hopefully, the police hadn’t searched the house and found his backup.

Gritting his teeth, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. A wave of dizziness caused him to grab the bedrail. He conducted a self-examination. A nasty bump on the back of his head. Possible concussion, but he’d take his chances. Tenderness in his left ankle when rotated. His right forearm was the worst. No cast, so not broken, but pretty banged up. And his shoulder hurt too. A little unsteady, but he had work to do.

Why hadn’t he been killed? A warning?

He pushed the button to summon the nurse.

“Where do you think you’re going, Mr. O’Leary?” She marched across the room to peer at his monitor and blocked him from standing, her body straining the seams of her uniform.

“It’s Doctor O’Leary, and I’m checking myself out.” He glared at her. “Either remove my IV or I will.” He’d spotted gauze and tape by the sink. “And please bring me my clothes.”

She stiffened. “I’ll inform the doctor and be back to take care of your IV.” She jerked her head toward a narrow door in the corner of the room. “Your clothes are in a bag in the closet. The EMTs cut the right sleeve of your shirt when they dressed your shoulder.”

“Would you find me some scrubs, please? I’ll return them.” He managed a smile. Who knows? He might be working with her in the future.

“Certainly, Doctor.”

“Nurse, one more thing.”

She turned, her purple nails drumming a staccato rhythm on the door.

“Doctors can be terrible patients, and I, for one, owe you an apology.”

The woman regarded him with weary eyes. “Apology accepted.”

In a few minutes, a younger nurse appeared with blue scrubs and removed his IV. “We’re working on your paperwork, Doctor. It shouldn’t be too long.”

Fifteen minutes later, Daniel waited in a wheelchair for his cab, and another fifteen found him back at the townhouse.

He unlocked the front door, stepped to the alarm pad, and punched in the code. No one had entered his home. Including the police. Daniel breathed a sigh of relief.

The back bedroom had been configured into a small office. He slid his hand between the cushions on an overstuffed chair, and his fingers closed around the grip on his backup pistol. A Sig Sauer P238. He withdrew the gun, checked the magazine, and retraced his steps to the kitchen. His stomach growled, and he slapped a spoonful of peanut butter onto a piece of bread. Grabbing a diet soda, he sat at the small kitchenette by the window.

What *did* he remember? He drummed his fingers on the table.

A glint of red in the shadowy recesses of the hood? Maybe red hair?

Daniel flipped the porch's light switch a couple of times. Nothing happened. He stepped out, stuffing the gun into his waistband. A stepstool leaned nearby. He opened it and climbed the two steps. Dizziness assaulted him, but he needed answers. When he twisted the bulb in its socket, light shone on shards from the broken flowerpot scattered across the boards, dirt and trampled pieces of dead vegetation mixed in. His attacker had planned ahead. But why?

He combed through the debris for any possible clues. Nothing. Grabbing a broom, he swept everything into a black plastic bag and headed for the trashcans in the alley. The rain had stopped, but the air held the chill of early fall. The faint scent of logs burning in fireplaces triggered good memories from his childhood. Camping and hiking and—

A gate latch clicked across the passageway. Still on alert, Daniel closed the lid on his garbage can and slid into the inky black where his privacy fence met his garage. He was in no mood to socialize after the day he'd had.

A figure in an oversized hooded coat stepped through the gate, paused, and made the sign of the cross with a gloved right hand.

Daniel clenched his fists. His attacker stood less than twenty feet from him.

As if sensing another's presence, the hooded figure faced him. Daniel sprang from his hiding place and reached for his gun. The man bolted down the alley, arms and legs pumping. Ignoring the pain in his shoulder and ankle, Daniel ran after him.

Pools of light from the occasional streetlight spotlighted the man as he raced through the puddles. Shoes covered in muck, he slid and went down on one knee. A cry of pain.

Daniel surged forward, fighting against the ache in his leg. He couldn't afford a misstep.

The man regained his footing, and, with a glance over one shoulder, took off as if he were being chased by the devil himself.

“Stop. I just want to talk.” He couldn’t do this much longer. His injured ankle and shoulder demanded attention like a crying baby. He found it hard to concentrate. His run became more of a limp hop, his ankle threatening to give out on him any second.

At the cross street, the figure sprinted to a white sedan. Daniel ran into the empty street. He aimed his gun as the car squealed away from the curb in his direction. Bright lights bore down on him.

“Stop.”

The car’s not going to stop. *Move.*

He stood frozen in place.

Brakes shrieked as the mid-size vehicle fish-tailed to a halt, the bumper inches from Daniel’s knees. The engine clicked and sputtered in the quiet night, and Daniel stared at the obscure features within the hood.

Who was he, and what did he know? “Get out of the car. I just want to talk.”

With another screech of tires, the sedan reversed, did a one-eighty, and disappeared around the corner. Daniel ran a few yards before collapsing on the curb.

Too dark to note the license plate number.

Could the hooded figure be the man he’d been sent here to find? He hoped not.

Or all those months of hard work were for nothing.



HOODED FIGURES POPULATED HIS DREAMS, chasing him down dark tunnels and trying to run him over. Not the usual nighttime horrors, where he woke tangled in sheets and covered in sweat, but still. He yawned as he poured coffee into a travel mug. Aunt Rose expected him at her place of work this morning. He hit the house alarm button and headed for his car.

At a cross street, a white car passed in front of him. Right size and shape. Could that be the same car he saw last night? A glimpse of red hair in the driver's seat. He sped up and turned the corner. With no traffic, he slowed. Didn't want to spook the driver. Better to see where he went and confront him face to face. Daniel had a few questions for him. A stoplight ahead turned green. He needed a better look.

The white sedan turned right at the last second. Daniel gunned it. He rounded the corner and lifted his foot from the accelerator. The road stretched before him. Not a car in sight. Strip malls lined both sides of the street. He jerked his car into the first parking lot and rolled to a stop. White sedans riddled the area. He groaned and let his head drop to the steering wheel.

But then he saw a flash of red as someone emerged from a car at the far end. He drove closer, berating himself for buying such a distinctive car. He pulled down the aisle that gave him a view of the front of the white car. The person was standing next to it, fiddling with something. A woman. With magnificent fire-engine red hair. She glanced at him, turned, and rushed into a nearby store. Most likely to call the police about the man following her in the red Infiniti. Idiot.



SQUAWK. "LET ME OUT."

"Not yet, Lori Darling, I'm busy." Detective Bernadette Santos held a finger to her lips.

Squawk.

"*Amen.* One of these days, I'll learn to do my morning meditation in my bedroom." She sighed, laid her Bible aside, and opened the parrot's cage. Bernie pressed her hand against the shimmering green feathers of the bird's chest. "Step up."

The parrot jumped on her hand and climbed her arm to her shoulder. "Good morning, beautiful."

"Good morning to you too, Lori Darling." Bernie stroked the

bird's back. She liked having a pet again. Even if it was temporary. Parrots needed lots of interaction, and she wasn't home much. Eventually, she'd find a good home for Lori. One where the people could give her the attention she deserved.

Wonder if Daniel O'Leary was temporary? Bernie hadn't seen him around before last night, and there was something ... different about him. One of those guys who still manages to look good while lying in a hospital bed—a tangle of thick burnished copper hair above a square jaw and deep blue eyes—what she'd glimpsed of them. He barely looked at her. Was he in pain or hiding something?

“Since I've become a detective, I see hidden agendas everywhere.” She laughed and shared the remainder of her toast with Lori before putting her back in her cage. “The poor guy had just been mugged and was in the hospital, and I've got him cast as a spy in town to steal Pleasant Valley's most valuable secrets. As if we have any.” She tapped the cage. “See you later, sweet girl.”

“Later, baby.” Sunlight glistened off brilliant green feathers as Lori swung her head back and forth.

Ten minutes later, Bernie arrived at the police station. She pulled into a space with her name on it and clicked a picture of the sign. Her *familia* would be proud. It took her a year to make detective. Didn't seem that long ago since she sat in Madison Long's kitchen on guard duty with her detective manual in front of her.

She surveyed the building. A lot had changed in a year. Not only had she passed the exam, but the police department had moved to a bigger location where everything could be together on one floor, including the morgue. Pleasant Valley was growing, and they needed the space. She pushed through the doors to the precinct and slowed to a sedate walk. Her second day as a detective.

Was she up for the job? Many people believed in her, but did she believe in herself? She rubbed the medallion she kept in her

pants pocket at all times. A present from Madison when she made detective, the shiny piece of silver held her favorite Bible verse. *Cease striving and know that I am God.*

Bernie peered over her partner's shoulder at the computer screen.

"Morning, Detective Santos." Detective Jeannie Jansen raised her head.

"Good morning, Detective Jansen." Bernie stepped back.

"Jeannie will do. We're partners now." She grabbed her phone and her purse. "And, we have a murder case. Let's roll."

A murder on her second day as a detective. She took a deep breath and touched her pocket. "I'm ready."

"You might as well drive." Jeannie tossed her the keys. "I need to tell you about the case."

"Yes, ma'am—I mean, Jeannie." That would take some getting used to.

Jeannie charged from the room toward the parking lot.

"I prefer Bernie, but—" She ran to catch up.

Jeannie stopped at a tan Dodge Charger, settled into the passenger seat, and opened the file. "Here's the address."

Bernie scanned the paper. "I know where it is." A section of town behind the library. Exquisite homes with large oak trees over a century old. She adjusted the mirrors and clicked her seatbelt. "What's happened?"

"Middle-aged man, Philip Majors, found dead this morning in his home. Someone called 911."

"That name sounds familiar." Bernie wove through the shaded streets of Pleasant Valley. Where had she heard it before?

Despite the beauty of each home, Philip Major's residence shone like a diamond among lesser gems. Bernie passed the mob of police cars parked haphazardly at the curb and continued to the end of the block.

"What are you doing?" Jeannie peered over her shoulder. "You missed our crime scene."

"I'm getting a feel for the neighborhood."

“Excuse me. I forgot you’re one of those new ‘whole-istic’ policemen.” Jeannie put her fingertips to her temples.

“Very funny.” Bernie smiled and made a U-turn. In a way, Jeannie was right.

“Yeah, well, I’d like to see the body sometime this week.”

Bernie parked, but made no move to get out.

“Now what?”

“Nothing.” She gazed across the immaculate lawn. Mr. Major did a beautiful job restoring the elegant two-story Georgian house. Yet, something about it ...

Bernie followed Jeannie to the door and nodded at her fellow officers along the way. Not long ago, she would have been outside keeping nosy neighbors away or stringing crime scene tape. If it wasn’t for all the hard work it took, she’d pinch herself in amazement that this simple Latino girl from a poor family was now a detective on the Pleasant Valley Police Force.

They pulled disposable booties over their shoes and squirmed into nitrile gloves before entering the home.

“Wow.” Jeannie’s eyes widened. “I’d heard Major had redone the place, but I had no idea.” She wrinkled her nose. “What’s that smell? Sort of like rotten eggs.”

“Reminds me of something.” Bernie shook her head. “It’ll come to me.” She put her hands on her hips. Such beautiful woodwork and luxurious rugs. “Pretty grand. I wonder how he could afford all this on a dean’s salary?”

“We’ll need to check his financials. Good thinking.”

Bernie stood a little straighter. “Where’s the body?”

A nearby officer pointed toward the study.

Stepping inside, Bernie paused. Ahead two chairs faced a paneled wall with a fireplace. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases covered most of the other three walls.

“Who found him?” Bernie wandered to a drink cart and examined a sparkling cut-glass tumbler. Doubtful any fingerprints but Major’s.

Jeannie consulted notes handed to her by the first officer on

the scene. “The housekeeper. When she arrived this morning.” She strolled the perimeter of the room.

A thick-set middle-aged woman appeared in the doorway.

“Ma’am, are you the housekeeper?” Jeannie approached her.

“Not for this grand house.” The woman’s piercing gaze swept the room before focusing once more on Jeannie. “I’m the new coroner.” She shifted her case to her left hand and stuck out her right. “Name’s Rose O’Leary. And who might you be?”

“Detective Jeannie Jansen.” She grasped her hand. “This is Detective Bernadette Santos.”

Bernie flashed her a smile. O’Leary? Could she be related to Doctor Daniel O’Leary?

“Jansen. I’ve heard about you.” The corners of her lips turned up.

“What have you heard?” Jeannie snorted.

“Never get in a game of poker with Jansen—or something to that effect. Of course, I tend to draw my own conclusions about people,” Rose said. “Now, where’s my patient?”

Bernie had worked murder scenes before, but this one sent a chill up her spine. Dark oak-paneled walls swallowed the light from the fire and the few lamps in the room. Philip Major’s body lay crumpled in front of the fireplace. A large blood pool under his head stained his exquisite Aubusson rug beyond repair. And that smell.

Rose maneuvered herself to her knees, her shadow shifting across the man’s countenance. She flicked on her small flashlight.

“His skull’s been crushed.” She tilted her head toward a large rock a few feet away. “And there might be your murder weapon.” She bent closer. “Someone didn’t like the poor man. After the initial blow, there were several more.”

Finishing her examination, Rose removed her gloves and packed her bag. “I’ll do the autopsy as soon as I get back. Looks like he died where he fell. As for time of death, it’s been about forty-eight hours. I’ll try to get a more exact time but no guarantees.” She touched her nose. “I guess you’ve noticed the

lovely smell. I mean, the one not normally found around a dead body?"

They nodded.

"The rock used to kill him must have a high sulfur content." She shifted her bag and flexed her shoulders. "Others might call it brimstone—as in fire and brimstone."

Three pairs of eyes were drawn to the flames from the gas fire still crackling and sputtering before them.

Rose knelt by the hearth, her nose close to the floor.

"Where would you get a rock like that?" Jeannie said.

No response.

Jeannie glanced at Bernie and raised her eyebrows. "Doctor. I asked you a question."

"Help me up." Rose sat back on her heels and reached for Bernie's hand. Knees and back popping, she straightened. "I've changed my mind. I'm not sure the odor came from the rock. I believe the killer threw some sulfur into the flames before he or she left." She pointed to the fireplace. "Have your people check for residue. Of course, it could be both."

She fixed Jeannie with her gaze. "And the answer to your question is—I haven't the slightest idea." She grabbed her bag and headed for the door. "But I'll look into it. I'll let you know more after the autopsy."

"Can you put a rush on it, Doc?" Jeannie said.

"I make no promises. But I'll try." She paused in front of Bernie. "Oh, and I understand from my nephew that you're praying for him. God bless you. He can use all the prayers he can get. But what he really needs is a good woman in his life." She talked to the men picking up the body and left the house.

Bernie turned to see Jeannie staring at her. "Last night, at the hospital." She shrugged. "I told him I'd pray for him to feel better."

"Sounds like you may have put yourself in the running for Mrs. Doctor O'Leary." Jeannie grinned.

"Can we get back to work?" Bernie sighed.

“Yeah,” Jeannie said. “Our victim was the head of—”

“St. Martin’s Prep.” That’s where Bernie had heard the name. “Madison Long taught at his school.”

“Who has he disagreed with? Fired? What kid has he kicked out, etc.?”

“What do you think the sulfur means?” Bernie suppressed a shudder.

“No clue.” Jeannie clicked the remote, shutting off the gas fire.

Without the dancing flames, the room seemed even more foreboding. “I’ll get forensics over here to check out the fireplace.” Bernie slid her phone from her pocket.

After making additional notes and talking to the housekeeper, they left instructions with the officer guarding the property that no one be allowed on the scene unless cleared with Jeannie or Bernie. Outside, Bernie stopped in a patch of sunlight. The house may be beautiful, but the murder made it feel evil. A cloud passed over the sun, and she shivered involuntarily.

Jeannie’s phone dinged with a text. “It’s from Rose. She’s done a preliminary examination of our body and wants us to get over there ASAP. She’s found—”

“What?” Bernie frowned at her partner.

“The dead guy isn’t who we thought he was.”