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**Vintage** *SUPER*  
*ROMANCE*

# The Man Next Door

ELLEN JAMES

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### **Аннотация**

Ellen James writes with warmth, wit and style. I look forward to each new book.—Debbie MacomberMichael Turner is the man next door and he's got problems! He's an ex-cop turned P.I., who's pretending to be a writer. His partner—normally the most rational of women—is pretending she's pregnant. His eleven-year-old son—whom he loves—isn't pretending anything, but then, the boy's barely talking to him. His father—whom he loathes (no pretense here)—is back in town. And to top it all, he's becoming dangerously attracted to the woman next door, a woman he's been paid investigate, a woman who just might be pretending that she hasn't murdered her husband.

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## **“About the Bennett case —we have a problem.”**

Donna, his partner, stared at him. “Mike, I don’t like the sound of this. You didn’t kiss her again, did you?”

“Kiss her?” he muttered. “If only it was that simple.”

“Tell me that what I’m thinking isn’t true. For crying out loud, you can’t be involved with this woman! Do you realize how crazy that is?”

He’d asked himself the same question plenty of times since awaking that morning. “We’re not involved in the strictest sense of the word,” he said. “She told me to go to hell before breakfast.”

“There’s more, isn’t there?”

“She knows we’re investigating her.”

“Mike! You just blew the case.”

“Except for one thing. I don’t think Kim Bennett killed her husband.”

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ever since winning a national short—story contest when she was in high school, Ellen James has wanted a writing career. *The Man Next Door*, Ellen's fifth Superromance title, is actually her thirteenth romance novel, so Ellen obviously has her wish. Ellen and her husband, also a writer, share an interest in wildlife photography and American history.



# The Man Next Door

## Ellen James



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## *CHAPTER ONE*

SHE FELL IN LOVE the first moment she saw him. He had curly brown hair tumbling over his forehead, dark brown eyes and knobby knees. His hands were tucked into the pockets of oversize shorts, and his high—top sneakers engulfed his feet, giving him a gangly look. He appeared to be all of ten years old. The expression on his young face wavered between trepidation and defiance.

Kim was careful to keep her own expression deadpan. She stood on the lawn beside her living—room window, studying the shattered glass. She waited for the boy to speak, figuring that sooner or later he'd have to explain himself. Surely it had taken courage for him to approach her; most kids would have run into hiding after breaking the neighbor's window.

"The ball wasn't supposed to do that," he said at last, making an obvious effort to keep his voice gruff.

"I see," Kim said. "It just sort of flew over here...on its own."

He shuffled from one foot to the other. Now he looked gloomy, as if determined to face the inevitable however much he dreaded it. Yes, he did possess a certain courage.

Kim supposed she could lecture him, but somehow she didn't have the heart. He seemed vulnerable in his baggy shorts and too—big T—shirt, as if lost inside his own clothes. Yet he would probably hate anyone thinking he was vulnerable—that hint of

cocky defiance never quite left his face.

*I should have had a son like this.* The thought dismayed Kim, and she tried to battle the regret that swept over her. She reminded herself how impossible, how painful her marriage had become in the end. She ought to be grateful she and Stan had never had children. It would have been a disaster for everyone concerned.

But still the regret stayed with her, brought to life by this tousled—haired kid who'd broken her front window. She didn't want to feel like this, didn't want the inconvenient tenderness he seemed to inspire. She moved away from the window and picked up her garden shovel.

The boy watched her closely, as if he still expected a lecture and couldn't leave until it was over with.

"We only moved in two days ago," he said, perhaps hoping that would exonerate him.

Kim glanced across at the house next door. She knew she'd retreated inside herself these past few months...ever since Stan's death. She'd been only vaguely aware of new neighbors moving in. "I haven't met your mother yet," she said reluctantly.

The boy poked his toe at the ground. "My mom's not here. She's in England. I have to stay with my dad. But just for the summer."

From behind Kim, another voice spoke—a man's voice, deep and unfamiliar.

"Don't make it sound like a prison sentence, Andy."

The boy turned. “Dad,” he mumbled with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

Kim turned, too, and studied the child’s father. The family similarities were striking; this was the man the boy would become. He was tall, lean in a way that hinted at strong muscles. He had dark rumpled hair and brown eyes the color of toffee. But they weren’t soft eyes; there was a hardness to them, something that put Kim on guard.

“Michael Turner,” he said. “Your new neighbor. I believe you’ve already met my son.” He gave only the briefest of smiles, just enough to hint at a few attractive crinkles around his eyes. Laughter lines, perhaps? Except that he didn’t look like the kind of person who laughed readily.

Kim realized she was staring. But she didn’t smile back at him. These past few months, she’d lost the knack of smiling.

“Yes. Andy and I have met,” she said.

The boy’s gaze traveled guiltily toward the broken window. Michael Turner stepped over to inspect the damage.

“Guess you’d better explain, son,” he said calmly.

Andy’s young face grew belligerent. “You can *see* what happened,” he muttered. “What’s to explain?”

Michael Turner drew his brows together and regarded Andy. His face was as expressive as his son’s—Kim caught a glimpse of exasperation and puzzlement in his dark intent eyes. But she saw something else there. She saw the love. In that instant, she sensed that this was a man who cared very much for his son. In the

same instant, she realized that Michael and Andy Turner didn't know how to talk as father and son. They stood warily apart, as if unsure how to take the first step toward each other.

Kim gripped her shovel. Why did she feel such protectiveness toward a child she'd only just met? And why did she want to tell Michael Turner that he ought to exercise his laughter lines a little more?

Kim pushed the shovel into the ground, wishing she could get back to work and forget about the two Turner males who had intruded on her life. But they would not be ignored. They remained in her yard beside the broken window.

"Andy," Michael Turner said, "you have an apology to make."

Andy stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets. Again he managed to look both stubborn and unsure at the same time. He didn't say anything, glancing covertly at his father now and then. Michael Turner gazed back steadily at his son. In the end, the man won out over the boy. Andy grudgingly addressed Kim.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled.

Kim leaned on her shovel and considered the situation. After a moment she shook her head.

"Apology not accepted," she pronounced.

Both Turners stared at her. For this moment at least, they seemed united in their surprise at Kim's words. Then Michael Turner frowned.

"Son," he said, "I think you'd better run along home."

Andy hovered for a second or two. Kim suspected it had

become a habit with him not to obey his father right away—perhaps as a point of honor. But at last he began sidling across the yard. He seemed about to go sprinting off when he gave Kim a glance. She felt it more than ever—a quick unreasoning affinity with this boy. And, from the brightness in his eyes, she knew he felt it, too. Then he turned and finally did go sprinting off, his too—big sneakers thumping over the grass. He reached the house next door and promptly disappeared around the side.

Kim took a deep breath. What was wrong with her? The boy had a mother, whether or not she happened to be in England. Kim was just the neighbor lady. If she had any misguided maternal instincts, she ought to forget about them.

She gripped her shovel again, but it seemed she still had Michael Turner to deal with.

“So it wasn’t the best apology in the world,” he remarked. “But it *was* an apology.”

“Not good enough,” Kim said.

“I’ll repair the window.”

“Well, that’s the point,” she said. “Don’t you think Andy should be the one who does the repairing?”

Michael Turner looked thoughtful. “Are you telling me I’m too lenient with my son?”

Kim shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve barely set eyes on the two of you. I’m just telling you what my terms are.”

He examined her with disconcerting thoroughness. “So we’re negotiating,” he said.

“Something like that.” Kim paused. She didn’t like the way her gaze kept returning to this man, drawn by some enigmatic quality in him. He gave a disquieting impression of restrained power. “Andy mentioned that your. uh, wife is out of the country. Maybe he’s acting up because of that, who knows, but—”

“Ex—wife,” Michael Turner said impassively. “And yes, Andy isn’t too happy about being left with me for the summer. I think he made that pretty clear.”

Kim wondered irritably why she was poking into Michael Turner’s personal life. Against her will, she found herself studying him more carefully. She supposed you could call him handsome, what with his strong features, his dark eyes under dark brows. You could certainly call him virile. But surely that was another knack that Kim had lost somewhere along the way—the ability to appreciate a good—looking man. She didn’t think she’d be getting that one back anytime soon. All she felt right now was the dull, heavy emptiness that had become too familiar.

Kim glanced away from him. She focused on the bush she’d been trying to unearth when that ball had come flying into her yard. Digging her shovel into the ground, she stood on top of it, centering her weight. Just a little more, and maybe she’d finally get somewhere.

“You’re doing that all wrong,” Michael Turner said. “The way you’re tussling with that thing, you’re liable to hurt yourself.”

Kim wiped away a trickle of sweat with her gardening glove. “I can manage.”

“Perhaps. But the bush can’t.”

She glanced at him sharply, unable to detect any humor in his expression. “I don’t usually attack shrubs, if that’s what you’re thinking. But this is a special case.” She regarded the bush once more. It was an evergreen, limbs shorn naked except for three round tufts of greenery on top. The thing had always made Kim think of a spindly cheerleader waving pom—poms in the air.

Michael Turner studied the bush, too. “Sure is ugly.”

“Well, you understand then. It has to go.”

“Understand?” he said, with a tinge of impatience. “I understand that whoever trimmed it had a lousy eye and even worse execution.”

“My husband trimmed it,” she said in a stern tone that surprised even her. “Yet another reason why the damn thing’s got to go.”

Michael Turner continued to study the bush in a brooding manner. “It’s ugly all right, but what the hell. I’ll take it off your hands.”

“You can’t possibly want it,” she protested.

A flicker of dissatisfaction showed in his face, as if he’d had enough of both Kim and the bush yet a sense of duty impelled him to stay—perhaps because his son had broken her window.

“You’re right,” he said gruffly. “I don’t want it. But I’ll take it, anyway.”

Kim was intrigued in spite of herself. “I’ve heard of people taking home stray dogs, but stray shrubs?” She glanced across



at the rambling two—story house next door, impressive with its red—tile roof and carved balustrades—very upscale for all that it was a rental. The yard had long ago been turned into a neatly maintained rock-and-cactus garden. “You wouldn’t have a place to put it over there. The owner doesn’t like mess.”

He nodded. “I’d already guessed as much. When I signed the lease, she threatened a lawsuit if I spill anything on the carpets.”

Kim hesitated, but then she spoke. “The owner also happens to be my mother-in-law.”

“She mentioned that, too.”

Nobody could accuse Michael Turner of being loquacious. If he was curious about anything, he didn’t let on. Kim suddenly felt a discontent she couldn’t explain, and she jabbed her shovel into the ground again.

“For eight years, I’ve looked at this damn bush,” she muttered. “That’s about to change.”

He didn’t answer. With seemingly little effort, he managed to walk over to her and relieve her of the shovel. Kim felt a stirring of unease. Yes, there was an aura of power to this Michael Turner, as if he was accustomed to taking what he wanted.

She’d known, of course, that Sophie had been looking to rent the house next door. The last tenants had been a pleasant older couple, but they’d moved out more than a month ago. Her *new* neighbor, this Michael Turner, started digging around the shrub, every motion efficient and methodical. No show of brawn here; he was just getting the job done. Kim suspected he was the type

of person who'd always get the job done, whatever it happened to be. As he worked, his dark hair curled a little over his forehead. The way it refused to stay properly in place implied a certain unruliness.

Silently she cursed Sophie for renting to this man and his son. Of course, she'd been cursing her mother—inlaw for one reason or another these eight long years. Why should that change even now?

Kim felt a bitter sensation inside. She couldn't let herself think about Stan and all the rest of it. She couldn't let her anger out, that was for sure. Because if she ever started to let it out, who knew where she'd end up?

Meanwhile, this stranger was digging up a bush in her front yard.

"It was therapy," Kim said.

Michael Turner glanced at her, although he kept on working. It was remarkable how much progress he'd made in just a few minutes.

"Digging up the damn bush was therapeutic!"

He glanced at her again, his dark eyes unreadable. And then, silently, he handed the shovel back to her.

"Thanks for your help," she said.

He gave another faint smile. "Why say it if you don't mean it?"

"Something to do with being polite." She worked the shovel into the ground.

"Forget polite," he said. "You're not very good at it, anyway."

Kim wished she could start over with the man, maybe something on the line of “Hello, neighborgoodbye.” She dumped a shovelful of dirt beside her.

“Funny, but my mother-in-law has a similar complaint about me. Says I’m not nearly well mannered enough.”

“Do you listen to her?”

Once again Kim couldn’t detect any humor in his expression, just that hardness she’d already sensed. Michael Turner, a man of stony edges.

“Mr. Turner,” she said, “it’s been nice getting acquainted, but —”

“You’re pretending to be polite again.”

She’d scarcely met the man, but already he chafed at her nerves. It almost seemed as if he was doing it deliberately, to get a reaction from her. Kim wielded her shovel more forcefully.

“Not very many people rent in this neighborhood,” she said. “Everyone here likes to think of themselves as the silk—stocking type. Pride of ownership, the whole bit. Pretty snobbish, unfortunately—”

“Why don’t you come right out and ask what I’m doing here?” he suggested. The mildness in his tone sounded deceptive.

“Hey, nobody’s too sure I belong in this neighborhood,” Kim said. “I’ve lived here eight years, and they still don’t know whether to accept me or not. But that’s beside the point. I’m just saying you seem more like the home—owner type yourself.”

“Really.”

“Yes, really.” She was lying. For all that he was a father, Michael Turner didn’t look like the kind of person who would settle down behind a white picket fence. He had a watchfulness about him, like someone who always had to be on his guard, someone who perhaps wouldn’t stay in any one place for very long. Certain details about him she couldn’t seem to fit anywhere, such as that he was home in the middle of a weekday. Other men on this street worked long hours as lawyers or business executives to afford the life—style of the neighborhood.

“Okay,” Kim said, giving in with a sigh. “What *are* your credentials, Mr. Turner? What’s your. line of work?”

He paused just a second before answering. “I’m a writer.”

He didn’t look like a writer, Kim thought. It seemed too tame an occupation for him.

“What kind of writer?”

Again the slightest pause. “Mystery.”

That made sense, anyway. “Well,” Kim said inadequately. “Sounds.interesting. Not that I’m trying to be polite.”

He remained inscrutable. “As long as we’re swapping credentials, it’s your turn.”

Kim realized she’d forgotten to shovel, so she got to it again. “I don’t have any credentials—unless you count my marrying into the Bennett clan. Not that the *Bennetts* count that in my favor.” She didn’t want to talk anymore. She just wanted this wretched bush out of her life. She toiled away, exposing the roots. They looked stunted, shriveled, as if they hadn’t found

enough nourishment in the dry Arizona soil. Kim almost started to feel sorry for the bush, and that worried her. She'd always hated it—why change her mind now?

She was hoping Michael Turner would simply turn and walk away; surely she'd made it clear she wasn't one for cheery conversation. But he just stood there, observing her as if he couldn't believe this was how she handled a shovel. Kim was annoyed, yet she also felt something else—a skittering awareness along her spine. She didn't think she could ever relax around a person like Michael Turner. She certainly wasn't relaxing now.

The heat of the sun pressed down on her, and his gaze pressed on her, too. At last she stopped attacking the bush and stared back at him in exasperation.

“Let me guess,” she said. “You're going to remind me that I'm doing it all wrong.”

His expression was serious. “I just wondered if it was working—the therapy part.”

“No. It's not.” She jabbed the shovel into the ground and kicked it, stubbing her toe. She held in an expressive oath. So much for sneakers. Next time she worked in the yard, it had better be boots.

Michael Turner came over next to her, just as he had before, and took the shovel.

“Maybe it's time for a different tactic,” he said.

His nearness was disconcerting. Not that it lasted long, though. He moved a few steps away and resumed his own shoveling.

"I was doing just fine—" Kim began.

"I don't think so," he said. "I'd say you were digging at more than this bush. Something's obviously bothering you. Maybe you should figure out what it is before you really hurt yourself."

His confident attitude was irritating, but what could he possibly know about her? "I'm not trying to get out my aggressions, if that's what you think," she protested. "It's not like that at all."

"Something's got you riled up." He continued deepening the trench around the bush. Kim frowned at him, wondering why she felt the need to justify herself to this man. But then she just let him dig. She sat down on the low adobe wall that surrounded her yard, pulling off her gloves and smoothing the damp hair away from her face. Boots weren't the only equipment she needed. A gardening hat might be in order, the floppy straw variety. Kim was learning as she went along. After Stan, it was all learning.

Again the anger stirred inside her, unpredictable and treacherous. Taking another deep breath, she centered her gaze on Michael Turner. He seemed comfortable working, in spite of the heat. He'd rolled up his shirt sleeves, his arms the natural tan of someone who didn't fear the sun.

"Shouldn't you be off writing a scene or whatever?" she asked. "It'll keep."

She ran her hand over the rough surface of the wall. "What's it about? Your latest mystery, I mean."

He stopped shoveling for a minute, his dark eyes on Kim. "A

woman,” he said.

She wished his gaze wasn't so intent. “That's not saying much. What kind of woman? Who is she?” Michael studied Kim for a long moment. “She has brown hair. Not just brown—there's some blond mixed in. Gold—brown, I'd say. And blue eyes... very blue. She likes wearing T—shirts and khaki shorts.”

Kim stiffened. She didn't have to be a genius to realize Michael Turner had just described *her*. “Amusing,” she said after a short pause. “But now tell me what your heroine *really* looks like.”

“I did tell you.” He went back to shoveling.

Kim thought about the way he'd looked at her just now—so analytically, yet with a spice of masculine appreciation. There'd been something else in his gaze, too, something she couldn't define. It sent a disturbing ripple through her.

“You can't just do that,” she said.

“Do what?” He went on working imperturbably.

“You can't make your heroine look like. me.”

He glanced at her. “You make it sound as if you have a patent on gold—brown hair and blue eyes. And freckles.”

Immediately she felt self—conscious. “There aren't *that* many freckles.”

“What's wrong with freckles?” he asked in a reasonable tone.

Somehow they'd gotten offtrack here. “Mr. Turner, you must be a peculiar sort of author. You're writing about some woman, and you don't even know what she looks like.”

"I just described her. That should do." He sounded oddly grudging, as if he didn't want his heroine to give him too much trouble. By now he'd dug all the way around the bush. He began rocking it back and forth, chopping at the roots underneath with the tip of the shovel until eventually it came free of the ground. As he pulled it up, Kim saw the dirt clotted to the sickly roots.

"It needs to be put out of its misery," she said. "There's no point in trying to save it."

"Lost causes are my specialty," he remarked sourly.

The whole situation seemed absurd to Kim. She'd just wanted to get rid of the damn evergreen. Now, because of Michael Turner, she felt guilty, as if she hadn't given the bush a fair chance.

"Mr. Turner," she began, and then stopped herself. She didn't even know what she had to say to the man.

"Gardening *is* supposed to be therapeutic," he told her. "I don't think you have the hang of it yet, but if you need any tips... I'll be around." He started back toward his own yard, only to stop. "Don't worry about your window. I'll take care of it. *Andy* and I will take care of it," he revised. Then he did walk away, carrying the bush with him, its tufty green pom—poms wagging pathetically in the air.

Kim watched until Michael Turner disappeared around the back of his house, taking the same route Andy had earlier. When she could no longer see him, she surveyed the damage around her: the shattered front window, the gaping hole in her lawn.



She wished the two Turner males hadn't moved in next door. Of course Kim had wished for a lot of things lately—like a divorce, instead of a murdered husband. Not that wishing had done her any good.

She stared at that raw hole left in her once—neat yard. It made her feel regretful, but only for an instant.

Surely the time for regretting—and wishing—was past.

## *CHAPTER TWO*

MICHAEL SAT in his Jeep across from the public library. He took a sip from his Coke, but the ice in the cup had melted a long time ago. It was a hot, oppressive afternoon, nothing unusual for a Tucson summer. Idly he glanced at his watch again. Kim Bennett had been in the library for an hour and twenty—two minutes.

Michael considered what he knew about her so far: Kimberly Marie Lambert Bennett, born in Pinetop, Arizona. Her parents had owned a small restaurant, but her mother had died under questionable circumstances when Kim was twenty. Kim had moved to Tucson immediately afterward, taken a secretarial job at Bennett Investing, Inc., and married the boss three months later. Now, at twenty—nine, she was the very wealthy widow of Stanley Evan Bennett.

Those were only the dry, straightforward facts, of course. Michael had always been interested in the less tangible aspects of a case—the thoughts and emotions of a suspect. Those were hidden; you wouldn't find them on a computer data base or in a file on someone's desk. You had to speculate, use your imagination, ponder a little. And Michael had definitely been pondering Kim Bennett.

This morning he hadn't met her exactly the way he'd intended; your son's pitching a ball through the neighbor's window was one of those unforeseen events of parenthood. He'd had no

alternative but to follow Andy across the yard and introduce himself. Right away he'd been able to tell that something was bothering the widow Bennett. She'd handled that shovel as if she'd wanted to bury something, not merely dig up a bush. There'd been a haunted look in her eyes. He didn't need to be a detective to have seen that much.

But the questions still remained unanswered. What was it that made Kim Bennett look tormented? Sorrow, grief over a dead husband? Or was it guilt? Had she killed him, after all?

Michael shifted position, taking another sip of Coke. Wealthy widow...murderer...maybe both. Not to mention loyal patron of the local library. She'd been in there almost an hour and a half now.

Michael pictured her: sun—streaked hair, vivid blue eyes, dusting of freckles across her pretty nose. An attractive woman, Kim Bennett. Very attractive. Maybe even beautiful.

He reminded himself that she was just a case he was working on. He didn't need to get carried away. Maybe he really could do with more of a social life. Since the divorce, he hadn't dated a lot. Okay, make that no dating. He was out of practice with women, and maybe that was why Kim Bennett looked so good to him. He sure as hell hoped that was the only reason.

Just then his partner's van pulled up; she was right on schedule. After a moment Donna climbed out, moving slowly. Her blouse billowed over the bulge of her stomach, and she walked with that telltale waddle of a pregnant woman—as if her back ached and

her feet were made of stone. Opening the passenger door of the Jeep, she slid in beside him. She didn't say anything, just sat there for a second or two, her hands resting on the swell of her stomach. Then, with a grimace, she reached under her blouse, pulled out a small weighted pillow, alias baby, and tossed it into the back seat. Michael observed her gravely.

"So," he said, "still haven't told her, have you?"

Donna gave him a withering glance. "Does it look like I've told her?"

He didn't say anything. Donna let out an explosive sigh.

"What kind of idiot am I, anyway?" she muttered.

Again, silence was the only diplomatic answer. Donna gave another sigh, a heavy one.

"Think about it," she said. "Is this the act of a rational woman? Pretending to be pregnant for my blasted mother-in-law?"

Michael settled back in his seat. He'd been through this before.

"And for that matter," Donna said, "what kind of man did I marry? What kind of man, just out of the blue, tells his mother that his wife is expecting when she isn't?"

Michael almost felt sorry for Brad. The guy was going to pay for this one, big time.

"Okay, so she wants a grandkid. Is that any reason to *invent* one? Heck, why not just tell her I'm having triplets!"

Michael swirled the Coke in his cup. He sure could've used some more ice.

Donna groaned. "For crying out loud, I don't even know

how pregnant I'm supposed to be. Four months? Five months? Three?"

Michael thought it over. "I'd say that pillow is a good five months along."

Donna scowled at him. "Oh, I could throttle Brad! 'Mom, guess what, we're pregnant.' Hah. What's this 'e' stuff? I don't see Brad carrying a pillow around in his pants, do you?"

"No," Michael said solemnly, "I don't."

She rubbed her hands through her hair. "Just tell me. What kind of idiot am I to go along with this for even a minute? I'd really like to know."

Michael finished his Coke. Perhaps it was time for a real answer. "I'd say you were just trying to be nice—in the beginning, at least. Trying to spare the feelings of an aging woman who dreams about grandchildren. As for now, though... I'd say you have a husband who doesn't know how to stand up to his mother. And I'd say you're starting to get into this pregnancy thing, too. You already have the walk down—that's a good touch."

She stared at him. "You can't possibly think I'm enjoying myself."

Michael wished he could stretch out his legs more. Such were the hazards of a stakeout—sore butt and muscle cramps. "Maybe you're just trying it on for size," he told Donna. "Trying to figure out what it really would be like to have a kid."

She looked peeved. "That's ridiculous. Brad and I don't want

children. Not for a very long time, anyway.” Suddenly she didn’t seem to want to talk about it anymore. She snatched up Michael’s log sheet and scanned it.

“Exciting day, I see. Ms. Bennett went to the grocery store... the bagel shop. the drycleaners. My, sure signs of criminal activity. And now she’s at the library of all places. Scary, indeed. Should we call for backup?”

This was the Donna he knew best: sassy, sarcastic, outspoken. He settled more comfortably in his seat.

“You forget,” he said, “we no longer have backup. It’s just you and me.”

Donna plopped her feet on the dashboard. “I do forget sometimes,” she admitted. “You can’t be a cop for ten years and not have it ingrained. Sometimes I actually miss the uniform.”

Donna always had liked the uniform. Even after she’d made detective, she’d grumbled about having to give up her cap and her billy club.

Michael gazed across at the library. Maybe Kim Bennett liked to read. Or maybe she’d just wanted to get out of the heat. Either way, she’d been in there awhile.

“Sometimes it still seems strange,” Donna said. “You and me private investigators. Doesn’t it seem strange to you?”

The back of his shirt was damp, sticking to the upholstery. “It’s a job,” he said.

“We’re self—employed, anyway. And the money’s good. We make a whole lot more than we used to.”

“Can’t argue with that,” he said briefly. People were willing to pay exorbitant sums to have their husbands or business partners or employees tailed.

“You know, Mike, you never talk about the old days,” Donna remarked. “It’s very annoying. Who else am I going to reminisce with?”

“There’s no point in looking back,” he said after a moment.

“You *do* miss being a cop,” she persisted. “I wish you’d just admit it.”

He moved restlessly. This was Donna, too: always wanting to dredge up memories. But he’d left the police department because it was the only wise choice. Now it was up to him to make his new life work. He’d damn well make it work—and that meant leaving a whole lot behind.

“Okay, so you’re telling me to mind my own business,” Donna said imperturbably. “But someday you’ll have to talk about it. The good parts and the bad, too....”

“Give it a rest,” he said.

“And people think *I’m* touchy.” She swung her feet down from the dashboard and grabbed her pillow from the back seat. Clutching it to her, she glared at Michael. “Don’t say anything. Just don’t.”

He lifted his hands. “Not a word.”

Still glaring at him suspiciously, she opened the door of the Jeep. “It’s time for me to clock in. I’ll take over and do a wonderful job of following Ms. Bennett. Too bad she never goes

anywhere exciting.”

“Maybe she’ll surprise us,” Michael said. He had a feeling the lovely widow Bennett might be full of surprises.

Donna started to climb out, but then stopped. “Mike,” she said, “do you really think she did it? Do you think she killed her husband?”

Again a picture of Kim Bennett materialized in his mind—her blue eyes the color of shadow over sea, the reckless tumble of her hair about her shoulders. but, most of all, the haunted expression on her face.

“I don’t know,” he said at last, reluctantly. “I sure as hell don’t know.”

A SHORT TIME LATER Michael pulled up at the community center. It was an older building in downtown Tucson, adobe walls stuccoed a startling shade of lavender. The place wasn’t easy to miss, you could say that much for it. Built onto the side was the new brick gym funded by the Police Athletic League. It seemed an unlikely combination—lavender adobe and redbrick—but Michael had been right in the middle of those fund—raising efforts, and he liked the way the place had turned out: oddball, perhaps, but sturdy. Maybe he wouldn’t admit as much to Donna, but he’d missed being around here this past year.

He got out of his Jeep and walked along the border of palm trees until he reached the gym entrance. He hesitated for just a moment, then pushed the door open and went inside.

He saw Andy right off, sitting on the bleachers, in a huddle



with a couple of his friends from the old days. Andy seemed distracted, as if only pretending to listen to the other kids. As usual, he wore a vaguely tense expression. But why should an eleven-year-old look tense? It was a question that had been bothering Michael more and more lately. He wanted his son to be happy. carefree. Wasn't that what childhood was all about? Perhaps Michael's own long—ago childhood hadn't measured up, but that was all the more reason he wanted something good for his son.

When Andy glanced over and saw Michael, his expression changed. It went from tense to guarded—not much of an improvement. He slid away from the bleachers and crossed the gym. He moved at a normal pace, but somehow gave the impression he didn't want to be walking toward his father. Maybe it was the way he dragged his duffel bag along the floor.

“Hey, Dad,” he said when he reached Michael—not the most enthusiastic greeting a father had ever heard.

“How'd it go this afternoon?” Michael asked.

“It was okay. I guess.” Again, Andy spoke with all the enthusiasm of Daniel to the keeper of the lions. Michael had the urge to reach out his hand and rumple Andy's hair, the way he'd done when his son was younger. But he knew instinctively to stay the impulse.

“You guys get in some basketball?” he asked, instead.

“I suppose so. if you wanna call getting our butts kicked forty-four- zip playing basketball. The court was tied up, so we had to

play against four older kids. It really sucks, being short.”

His son, a cynic at age eleven? “Butts. sucks. Your mother would have my head if she heard you using language like that when I’m in charge.”

Andy looked embarrassed. “It’s not, like, a problem or anything. I was just, you know, talking. Besides, you talk a lot worse than I do.”

“So maybe we’ll make a deal,” Michael said reasonably. “I clean up my language, you do the same with yours.”

Andy didn’t seem particularly thrilled with the prospect, and he said nothing in reply. Still dragging his bag, he shuffled out the door of the gym.

Michael followed his son to the Jeep and watched him climb into the passenger seat. Then he went around and got into the driver’s side. Starting the engine, he glanced over at Andy.

“Fasten your seat belt, son.”

“This thing’s got air bags, doesn’t it, Dad?” Andy muttered. A second or two later he snapped the belt into place, but he managed to make it seem a gesture of defiance.

It hadn’t always been like this. There’d been a time, before the divorce, when Michael and Andy had shared a quiet, comfortable camaraderie. So much had changed since then—too much. Michael felt the grim edge of regret. For Andy’s sake, he would go back and do it over if he could. And he wouldn’t make the same damn mistakes.

Michael pulled out into the traffic. Andy leaned toward the

dashboard and turned on the radio. He switched from one frequency to another until he came to the “oldies” station. He cranked that one up on high and slumped back in his seat. Andy’s logic was all too apparent: find Dad’s favorite music, blast it through the speakers and hope it’d keep him occupied—anything to avoid the need for conversation.

Michael reached over and turned the music down. “How was it today, being back?”

“Nothing’s different,” Andy mumbled. “Doug’s still a jerk. Eric’s still a whiny ass.”

“We have a deal, remember?” Michael reminded him. “Watch the language. Besides, you always used to like Doug and Eric.”

“No, I didn’t. I just had to hang around with them because their dads were cops, too. But *you’re* not a cop anymore. So why do I have to go down to that sh—stupid community center?”

They’d reached a stoplight and Michael studied his son. He saw the belligerence in Andy’s expression, but also the uncertainty. Andy was probably wondering if he’d pushed it too far this time.

“I thought maybe you’d have fun,” Michael said.

“I’m not going again,” Andy muttered.

The light turned green and Michael pressed his foot on the gas. He’d hoped that Andy would enjoy seeing some of his old friends, but maybe that was unrealistic. Andy had started a new life when he’d moved across town with Jill. Another school, another neighborhood—those were big adjustments. And Michael knew

firsthand how difficult it was to try visiting a life you'd left behind. Whenever he dropped in at the station house, he felt like an outsider, even with guys who'd been his closest friends for years. Michael had taken to dropping in less and less.

"Maybe we'll join a pool," he said now. "Get in some swimming together."

"It's not like you have to entertain me or anything," Andy said in a low voice. "I can make do on my own."

"I've been looking forward to spending time with you," Michael answered. He paused, then went on, "Andy, I know things have been difficult. But now that you're spending the summer with me—"

"It's no big deal," Andy said quickly. "The only reason I'm staying with you is 'ause Mom had to go on that lousy trip. It's not like it's *supposed* to be this way."

Michael wished he knew the right words—ones that would convince Andy exactly how much this summer really did mean.

"Your mom wanted to take you along," he said at last. "I'm the guy who convinced her you should bunk with me, instead. It'll be a whole lot better than just seeing you on the weekends."

"Sure," Andy said. "I'd much rather stay in this crummy town than be at some castle in England. Who wouldn't?" Again the defiance mixed with uncertainty. But Andy had to know he'd pushed it too far this time. And where the hell had he learned that sarcasm?

Easy, Michael told himself. He realized his son was testing

him. The worst thing he could do right now was show anger. He and Andy would have to take this a little at a time, figuring things out as they went along. The answers just weren't readily apparent.

Michael grimaced to himself. When he'd been a police detective, he'd faced plenty of unanswered questions. It had taken a mix of imagination and careful procedure to chase down the answers. He supposed he used that same combination in his new work as a private investigator. But when it came to his son these days, Michael's imagination seemed to fail him, and he didn't know what procedures to use. He was damn well lost.

It had been almost a year since the divorce, a year of picking Andy up every three out of four Friday afternoons and delivering him back to Jill every three out of four Sunday evenings. An arrangement like that wasn't exactly conducive to father—son bonding. But then Jill, a graduate student in art history, had received a grant to study in England over the summer. She'd planned to take Andy with her, until Michael had suggested a different idea: Andy could live with him for the three months she'd be gone.

Jill, of course, had taken her time making a decision. But at last, with a great show of reluctance, she'd agreed to leave Andy in his sole care while she went off to England. Michael had taken her to the airport a couple of days ago, listening all the while to a litany of instructions. Jill had conveniently forgotten that during their marriage he'd been a capable enough father. It was only more recently that he seemed to have lost the parenting knack.

But here they were now, he and his son. Their time together had only just begun, and already the discomfort between them had grown. Not to mention that Andy had already made it clear he was going to be a smart ass.

Smart aleck, Michael amended. He'd made a deal with Andy, and he'd damn well—darn well—have to clean up his own language.

After a short while they turned into the secluded neighborhood where they'd be spending their summer. Lush orange trees lined the streets, and the large houses were built in quaint Southwestern style, with thick plastered walls, deep-set windows, bright shutters, here and there a *ramada*—a rustic wooden porch covered in vines. Inside, however, would be all the modern conveniences. The people who lived around here weren't the type to do without walk-in closets, Jacuzzis and sunken tubs.

Michael pulled up at the house he and Andy were sharing. It was much too big for the two of them. Too big, too plush, too everything.

“Well, here it is again,” he said, his jocular tone not quite coming off. “Home, temporary home.”

Andy glanced at the place skeptically. “Yeah, right. What'd ya do, Dad, rob the First National?”

Michael knew he had to be careful about what he said next. There was only so much he could tell Andy, but he disliked lying to his son.

"It's only for the summer," he said. "You know I don't live like this all the time." Involuntarily his gaze went next door. Kim Bennett hadn't returned yet. Without her Jaguar parked in its usual spot, he had a clear view of her house and could see the cardboard she'd taped up over the broken windowpane. Michael had already checked around, trying to locate someone who could deliver just the right glass. So far no luck.

Andy followed the direction of his gaze. "That lady lives all alone," he said.

Kim Bennett definitely seemed the solitary type. "Maybe she likes it that way," Michael said.

Andy didn't say anything for a long minute. The two of them just sat in the Jeep, sharing the same space but nothing more. The tension between them remained.

"What the hell are we doing here, anyway?" Andy muttered.

"Andy—"

"What the *heck* are we doing?" He managed to sound surlier than ever.

"I thought I already explained all that," Michael said. "I'm house—sitting for an acquaintance. Meanwhile, you and I might actually have a good time together once you take off the boxing gloves."

Andy didn't look convinced. He just looked suspicious. Michael wondered what Jill would say if she knew he and Andy were living next door to a murder suspect. On second thought, he knew exactly what Jill would say.

But Michael had realized that if he didn't see Andy for three whole months, the distance between them might become irrevocable. That was a chance he just couldn't take. If it meant... Andy getting a little too close to his work, that couldn't be helped. After all, one of the reasons Michael had quit the police department was so he could spend more time with his son.

"Andy," he said now, "it really can be a good summer. Just give me a break now and then, and I'll do the same for you. And. be careful, like we discussed."

"I know the routine," Andy muttered. "I'm not supposed to tell anybody you used to be a cop or that now you're a spy."

"Private investigator," Michael amended.

"Yeah, well, what does it matter, 'ause I can't tell anybody." Andy made it sound as if he wished his dad had an ordinary job, like an accountant or a salesman.

"Andy, I want you to be careful in other ways, too."

"Like what?" he asked, looking more skeptical than ever. Michael considered telling him the truth. Don't get too close to the pretty lady next door, because she may very well be a murderer. But for Andy's own protection, Michael couldn't go that far.

"Just stick close to me and do what I tell you without putting up a fight all the time."

Andy had that expression on his face again: willfulness, perversity and, underneath, an undeniable wariness. Why should any kid be wary around his own dad? That was what got to



Michael the most.

“You know,” he said quietly, “you could try at least a little, Andy. I’m not the bad guy here.”

Andy kept his mouth clamped shut. The belligerence didn’t leave him, but he truly was small for his age, and at this moment he looked much too fragileall spindly arms and legs, ears poking out beneath his curly hair, an undersize kid struggling to protect himself with a cheeky attitude he couldn’t quite pull off.

At last Michael could no longer resist. He reached out and placed his hand protectively on Andy’s shoulder.

“I’m on your side, son.”

Andy pulled away. He still didn’t say anything, just stared straight ahead with that stubborn tilt to his chin, but the message came through. At eleven years old, he didn’t want anything to do with his father.

## *CHAPTER THREE*

BEFORE SHE COULD LOSE her nerve, Kim walked right up to Michael Turner's front door. She rang the bell not once, but twice, as if to demonstrate her own courage. Unfortunately she didn't feel courageous. She just felt foolish.

No answer came—no Michael Turner appeared. Maybe it wasn't too late for Kim to change her mind, after all. She hovered on the porch, considering the possibility of dashing back to her own house. She'd actually started down the porch steps when she heard the door open behind her.

She turned around slowly. And there he was, leaning against the jamb, his pose relaxed yet still managing to convey a certain watchfulness. She'd met him only this morning, yet she found herself learning his features all over again. Her gaze lingered on the stern line of his brow, the firm set of his mouth, the dark hair curling over his forehead.

"Ms. Bennett," he said. "Let me guess. You want your bush back."

Kim flushed. "Of course not. Although I don't know why on earth you took it or what you're going to do with it."

Apparently he didn't care to enlighten her. He just stood there leaning in his doorway, observing her with subtle amusement. He didn't smile—nothing so overt as that—but still she had the uncomfortable suspicion he found her humorous.

She heartily regretted the impulse that had brought her over here. She knew she ought to make up some excuse or other and then return as quickly as possible to the safety of her house. But a contrary pride made her stay where she was. At last Michael stood aside from the door.

“Come in,” he said.

Kim hesitated only a second or two. If she was going to make a royal fool of herself, she might as well go all the way. She brushed past him, stepping inside the house.

Evening light spilled over the Mexican tiles of the entryway and burnished the oak floors of the living room beyond. Kim had been in the place a few times before, calling on the previous tenants. The furnishings were the same—sofa and wall hangings in desert hues of sage and sienna—but already Michael and Andy had managed to leave their own imprint: books scattered on the carved chest that served as a coffee table, a single shoe cast off by itself in a corner, a shirt dangling from a chair post. It seemed the two bachelors were settling in.

“Where’s Andy?” she asked.

Michael gave her a look of mock disappointment. “You only came to see my son?”

“Not exactly,” she said, feeling even more ridiculous about coming over here. What had gotten into her? Usually she was so much more self—assured. All those years of playing hostess at Stan’s dinner parties had at least taught her to pretend sophistication. Why was she unraveling now?

Michael spoke. "After supper, a few kids from the neighborhood came by and invited Andy for a game of kick—ball. Maybe he'll make some new friends."

Just as she had that morning, Kim sensed Michael's concern for his son. She heard it in his quiet tone and saw it in the troubled expression that crossed his face.

"Some nice kids live on this block," she said. "I'm sure Andy will do fine."

"Parenthood doesn't make you sure of anything," he answered.

"I guess I wouldn't know." Kim tried for a light tone and failed. "Stan and I—we never had children." Now her dead husband's name seemed to weight the air. It brought too many memories with it, such as the humiliating reason she and Stan hadn't become parents. Futilely Kim tried not to remember all the secret shame. The silence only grew heavier.

Michael Turner didn't make things any better. He didn't ask for explanations, didn't try to cover up the empty spots in the conversation. He stood there, regarding her silently. But that couldn't be a hint of compassion in his eyes—surely not.

"Do you know about Stan?" she asked, her throat tight. "About the way he died. When my mother—inlaw rented the house to you, she must have said something. She can't stop talking about him."

Michael didn't speak for a moment. Then he nodded, almost with reluctance. "Yes. She told me."

Maybe it was pity she saw in his expression. She couldn't

tolerate that, and she needed something—anything—to distract her. Operating on a hunch, she crossed the living room, found a button under one of the wall hangings and pressed it. Smoothly and soundlessly, a portion of the paneling opened up to reveal a bar, complete with pitchers, decanters, ice bucket and tongs. She glanced at Michael.

“I have one just like it,” she said. “Both these houses were built at the same time, and I always wondered. Well, the people who lived here before were a very sedate older couple. I couldn’t very well ask them if they were hiding liquor behind the wall.” Kim listened to herself, feeling more absurd than ever. “I’m trying to say that I don’t usually go snooping around the neighbor’s—”

“Don’t let me stop you,” Michael said. “Your mother-in-law said something about a bar, but I never did find it.” He stepped next to her and picked up a bottle of vermouth. “Care for a drink?”

“That’s not why I came,” she said.

“Have one, anyway.” He took ice from the small fridge, mixing vermouth and whiskey. Kim’s gaze lingered on him again. This evening he wore a polo shirt and jeans, and they subtly emphasized his lean yet powerful build. He finished the drinks and offered her one—a Manhattan. Automatically she reached out and took it from him. As she did so, her fingers brushed his. That accidental touch evoked a flicker of warmth inside her, like the quick flare of an ember before it died. Kim had to remind herself that she’d lost the talent for appreciating a good—looking

man. That wasn't going to change just because Michael Turner had moved in next door.

She held her drink without sipping it and examined the well—stocked bar—gin, scotch, sherry, tonic water, even a jar of stuffed olives.

“How very thoughtful of my mother-in-law,” she said. “She’s supplied you with everything. What did you do to get her approval?”

Michael was impassive. “Can’t say, but I refused to flatter her. Perhaps that did the trick.”

Kim shook her head. “I never flatter her and it gets me nowhere. Must be something else.” She paused. “Are you a friend of Sophie’s?”

Michael appeared to think this over. “Would it matter?” he asked as he sipped his drink.

“Sophie is particular about her tenants. She won’t rent to just anyone. Either you’d have to be her friend or come with damn good references.” Suddenly restless, Kim wandered to a window and gazed out at the courtyard, where a native garden flourished—asters, poppies, devil’s claw. But she couldn’t delay any longer.

“Mr. Turner,” she said, facing him, “let me get to the point. The reason I’m here is that...well, I need a date. For tomorrow night.” How ludicrous the words sounded once they were out. Michael looked slightly surprised at first, then intrigued. My, he did have an expressive face. She also saw that glimmer of amusement in his eyes again.

“No doubt you’re thinking it’s a very peculiar request,” she said stiffly. “I don’t even know you. I mean, I only met you this morning. Of course it seems peculiar.” She took a sip of her drink. It was inescapable: she really was making a colossal fool of herself.

“Have a seat,” he said in a solemn voice. “I’m all ears.”

She went to the sofa, sat down, then realized that wasn’t going to help at all. She stood up again.

“I need a date for a business function,” she said defensively. “Very well, a family function, too. The Bennetts always mix business and family. It’s a volatile combination, but I suppose that’s beside the point.”

Michael continued to look both interested and quietly amused. He sat down in an armchair across from her, appearing completely at ease. To remain standing would only put Kim at a disadvantage. She perched on the edge of the sofa again.

“Perhaps ‘ate’ is the wrong word,” she said. “What I need is...an escort.” That sounded even worse, and she hurried on, “It’s a tradition, in a way. At these Bennett affairs, you never show up alone. You gather your forces, so to speak. But you’re probably wondering why I don’t ask someone else. Some male friend. Nonetheless. I thought of you. I mean, you don’t seem the sort to be eyebrowed under the couch by a roomful of pompous, insufferable Bennetts. That was the deciding factor.”

Michael inclined his head. “I’ll take that as a compliment, I suppose. So I’m your last—ditch choice?”

She gazed back at him as resolutely as possible. “It’s just that...after eight years of marriage, I find I don’t have a whole lot of male friends.” Oh, Lord. As long as she was confessing humiliating details, why not to ahead and tell Michael Turner what a miserable travesty her marriage had been? Why spare herself? “Anyway,” she continued more forcefully, “the Bennetts thrive on despising each other—and everyone else. Family get—togethers aren’t exactly restful.”

He swirled his drink reflectively. “Sounds like this thing could be entertaining.”

Kim wondered if his answer qualified as a yes or a no. Either way, she’d disgraced herself enough for one evening. She set down her drink and rose from the sofa.

“I’ll understand if you want to pass. It’s very short notice, and it’s true that I hardly know you, and—”

“Tux?” he asked.

She frowned at him.

“Tux,” he repeated. “Do you want me in a tux?”

Kim felt an idiotic sense of relief. “Nothing quite so formal,” she said. “The Bennetts pretend to be casual. Mr. Turner—”

“If I’m going to be your date,” he interjected seriously, “don’t you think you’d better start calling me something else? Something less. formal.”

After a second or two she tried his name. “Michael.” It had an intimate sound to it, and she wished she could go back to calling him Mr. Turner. But unfortunately he was right. If they



were going to get through tomorrow evening with any aplomb, Michael it would have to be. "Eight o'clock," she said briskly. "And if you need a baby—sitter for Andy, I know someone."

"It's a good thing Andy didn't hear you say that. He hates that word—baby—sitter. He's much too old for baby—sitters. But I have a friend he can stay with."

"Well. Then it's settled." There didn't seem any more to say. Except one thing perhaps. "Thank you for doing this. I know the whole thing's rather awkward and silly, but—"

"Kim," he said. "Quit while you're ahead."

She gazed into his brown eyes just a trifle too long. But at least now she had the sense to keep her mouth shut. She left his house without saying another word.

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, Kim stared disgustedly at the contents of her dressing room. When you were a widow of only a few months, how did you dress for a date that wasn't a date? She wondered if any of the etiquette books covered this particular situation.

There'd been a time when she had actually accumulated etiquette manuals with naive enthusiasm. She'd been newly wed, overawed that she'd married into the wealthy Bennett clan. She'd wanted so much to make Stan proud of her—to make the whole family proud. That was before she'd really come to know Sophie or the rest of the Bennetts. Her etiquette books had been gathering dust for quite some time now.

But it was seven-forty-five, and Kim still hadn't decided

what she was going to wear for this evening's ordeal. She stood in the dressing room—all mirrors and strategic lighting designed to soften any reflection—and sorted through the gowns hanging against one wall. There were so many of them, in silk, tulle, velvet, brocade. All that entertaining in the past had required an extensive wardrobe. But these days Kim had given up entertaining—or being entertained. If she was showing up at the family enclave tonight, it was strictly as a stockholder in Bennett Industries. She'd do what was required, nothing more—on the arm of Michael Turner of course.

Kim rejected one dress after another. Too elegant, too fussy, too frivolous. Part of her heartily regretted that she'd ever gone over to Michael's house. The other part was grateful that he'd accepted her invitation. She scorned herself for being a coward, but she wasn't up to facing the Bennetts on her own. Not tonight, anyway.

Seven-fifty-two. She had all the clothes in the world and couldn't decide what to wear. At last Kim pulled a black dress from its hanger. She slipped into it and observed herself in the overabundance of mirrors. A low scooped neckline and slinky fit in satin and lace—widow's weeds with a vengeance. But it was too late to try anything else. Feeling out of sorts, Kim slid on a pearl bracelet, brushed her hair one more time and picked up her black pumps. She carried them with her as she started down the thickly carpeted stairs. But shouldn't she be wearing perfume?

She retraced her steps and examined the selection on top of

her dressing table. Here was every fragrance a woman could desire, yet once again she couldn't choose. She knew that whichever bottle she opened, it would remind her of Stan. Suddenly the very thought of perfume seemed too cloying, too oppressive. The scent of fresh soap and water would have to do. Besides, it wasn't as if she was trying to attract Michael Turner. This wasn't really a date.

She'd reminded herself of that a dozen times already. She reminded herself again as she went downstairs and moved through rooms that seemed silent and empty. It wasn't a date. She'd merely asked her nextdoor neighbor for a favor. He'd obliged. And that was that.

The doorbell rang. Suddenly flustered for reasons she couldn't explain, Kim peered at herself in the hallway mirror. She was no more reassured than she'd been upstairs, facing those myriad reflections of herself. This mirror told the same story: her expression was severe and unsmiling. It didn't go with the damn dress.

Too late now. The words echoed through her mind as she went to open the door. Michael stood on her porch just as she'd expected, but she wasn't prepared for how good he looked. He wore casual gray trousers and a linen jacket that was well tailored but ever so slightly rumpled. His dark hair curled over his forehead, slightly damp as if he'd just taken a shower. He gazed thoughtfully at Kim.

"I should have gone for the tux," he said.

She felt unaccountably warm with his gaze on her, but at last she managed a shrug. “Trust me, you look fine. I’m the only one who’ll be this dressed up tonight. This fancy. Don’t ask me why I’m doing it.”

He continued to observe her and she saw the subtle appreciation in his eyes. “Maybe you want the Bennetts to sit up and take notice.”

“They’ll take notice, all right,” she said. “And when they do—watch out.”

“Don’t let them get to you,” he murmured. “Because you look fine.”

Now Kim felt the color heating her cheeks. It had been a very long while since a man had gazed at her in just this way. She didn’t know how to react. Whatever she’d learned from her once—precious etiquette books seemed to have flown right out of her head. All she could do was stare back at Michael, that unfamiliar warmth suffusing her skin.

Belatedly she remembered that she was still holding her pumps. She bent to slip one of them on and then realized that might seem consciously provocative. Quickly she stuffed her feet into both shoes.

“They pinch,” she said. “I hate wearing them for very long.”

“It’s one of the things I’ve always wondered.” He smiled slightly. “Why do women wear uncomfortable shoes?”

“Because we have no sense at all. Well...I’m ready,” she added unnecessarily. “Shall we go?”

He escorted her down the walk. Even though he'd only come from next door, he'd driven over and parked behind her car—a considerate gesture. Perhaps this didn't officially count as a date, but Michael was observing the courtesies. Although his midnight—blue Jeep was a rugged vehicle, it looked freshly washed and waxed. He opened the door for her, waiting until she'd settled into the passenger seat before going to his own side. A few moments later he'd backed out of the drive and they were on their way down the street.

Kim searched for conversation and found none. It was Michael who spoke, glancing at her with that quiet amusement of his.

“I hope you have directions for me. Where are we headed?”

She felt foolish, apparently not an uncommon reaction when she was around Michael Turner. “To the Bennett family stronghold. my mother-in-law's very exclusive spread. Where else?”

## *CHAPTER FOUR*

MICHAEL FOLLOWED the instructions Kim gave him: left on Vernon, right on Solano, head toward the foothills. He had to admit he was curious. In spite of his dealings with Sophie Bennett, he'd never been to her spread. Apparently Sophie was careful that way—never let the hired help get too close. She was in for a surprise tonight.

As he drove, Michael glanced at Kim now and then. She sat staring ahead, only her profile revealed to him. It was an intriguing profile, all feminine strength. There was nothing weak about Kim. Take now, for instance. She was obviously tense, obviously not looking forward to this little family get—together of Sophie's. But she wasn't talking about it. She was just sitting there, staring boldly ahead, her face beautiful yet unsmiling. That dress she wore conveyed boldness, too. Hell, it conveyed more than that. It showed that Kim Bennett was womanly and desirable, regardless of the "don't mess with me" attitude.

Michael reminded himself to watch the road. Maybe Kim Bennett was wearing a sexy dress, but that didn't stop her from being a murder suspect. He was on the job tonight. He couldn't forget that.

They traveled in silence, and at last they turned along a secluded, winding street where the houses were hidden behind foliage and high walls. This neighborhood was even more

exclusive than Kim's. The people who lived here had gone beyond flaunting their wealth; they craved privacy more than anything else.

Sophie Bennett's two—story brick house, although large, was carefully unpretentious—no embellishments, no turrets or towers added for effect. Maybe that was supposed to be tasteful, but to Michael the place looked bland and impersonal, like a hotel. He parked on the drive behind a Rolls and a Jag, but he didn't get out right away. Kim didn't, either. She just went on sitting there, hands clenched tightly in her lap.

"Nice wheels," he said after a moment. "The Bennetts can't be all that bad."

She glanced over at him almost as if she'd forgotten his presence. "The Bennetts," she said with a hint of disdain. "They're nothing I can't handle. It's just that sometimes I'd rather not have to handle them. I can think of better things to do with my time."

"Such as?"

She didn't answer. "Well, we're here, so we might as well get on with it." She reached for the door handle, but Michael didn't want to go inside just yet. He couldn't explain why. He just knew he liked being alone here with Kim.

"If you could do anything you wanted right now, what would it be?" he asked.

She looked exasperated. "Mr. Turner—Michael, that is. You're choosing a very strange time to play twenty questions—"

Id;What would it be?" he asked again.

She slumped back against the seat. "This is ridiculous," she said, but she no longer made any move to leave the Jeep. After a silence, she spoke, her voice extra soft as if she was talking only to herself. "Perhaps I'd go for a hike in the mountains. And perhaps I'd just keep walking. For hours..."

He thought it over, choosing his next words carefully. "Did you do a lot of hiking when you lived in Pinetop?"

The effect was immediate. Kim twisted in her seat to face him. "How did you know—"

"Your mother-in-law isn't exactly closemouthed. Seems she finds you a fascinating subject." That was the truth. But Michael saw the way Kim tensed, the distrust in her expression.

"Sophie always *has* liked to bad—mouth me, especially to her friends. You never did make it clear. *Are* you her friend?"

Again he considered his words. And again he told the truth. "No. I'm not."

That did nothing to ease the doubt in Kim's expression. And Michael knew he'd deliberately made her skeptical of him. It hadn't been the professional thing to do—but that was the problem; he didn't feel professional when it came to Kim Bennett. He just felt impatient with his job. Deception, secretiveness—those weren't his style. He would've disliked being an undercover cop, and he'd always been smart enough to admit it. So why the hell was he working undercover now? Lovely, haunted Kim Bennett made him ask that question.



“As a matter of fact,” she said, an edge to her voice, “I did hike a lot when I was growing up. Most of the time by myself, but sometimes. sometimes my dad managed a day off and we went together. Sophie couldn’t have told you *that*. She’d never want to admit I have rosy childhood memories. It would make me seem too, normal.”

Kim had one thing right—her mother-in-law would probably never say anything favorable about her. Michael reviewed everything Sophie had told him about Kim and everything he’d been able to learn through his own investigation. Kim’s parents had owned their own small diner in Pinetop, Arizona, but for years they’d struggled on the verge of bankruptcy. It had been difficult for them to keep employees, and Kim herself had worked in the restaurant all through her teenage years. Michael was willing to wager that neither Kim nor her father had been able to take off many days for leisurely hikes.

“How many of them do you have?” he asked. “Rosy childhood memories, that is.”

Kim turned away so that once more all he could see was her unyielding profile. “Enough,” she said tersely. “I have enough of them.”

He wondered about that. He’d been doing a lot of wondering since meeting Kim yesterday. Having a case file on her was one thing. But actually sitting here next to her, sensing the vulnerability underneath her caustic demeanor, that was something else entirely.

He reminded himself that maybe she wasn't vulnerable at all. Maybe she was coldhearted, cold—blooded, and she'd actually killed her own husband. She certainly had motive: as a widow, she had become a very wealthy woman indeed.

Michael rubbed at a kink in his shoulder and silently cursed.

"You don't want to be here any more than I do," Kim said, glancing at him. "You look...disgusted."

"The Bennetts aren't anything I can't handle," he said, his tone only slightly mocking.

Now she gave him a challenging look. "Let's make this fair, Michael. What would *you* be doing right now, if you had the choice?"

Somehow that didn't take too much thinking. Michael's gaze dropped to her mouth. He noticed that her lips had a determined set, but he suspected they could be soft and inviting, too.

He saw the faint blush tingeing her cheeks, and that only made her dusting of freckles seem more appealing than ever. When he captured her gaze, she didn't look away. Almost against his will, he kept imagining what he'd like to be doing right now. It was a pretty safe bet she knew what he was thinking. Her flush deepened as she stared back at him. The atmosphere between them seemed to grow taut, suspenseful. Michael kept imagining.

"Stop," Kim murmured, her voice just a little unsteady. And then she turned, opening the door and sliding out of the Jeep. The moment was broken almost before it had begun.

Michael felt dissatisfied in a way he couldn't explain, but he

came round to escort Kim up the walk to the house. They reached the portico and Kim rang the bell decisively. She held herself stiffly, as if preparing to fend off some sort of assault. Who were these Bennetts that they could produce such a reaction in her? Michael gave in to another impulse he couldn't explain, and for just a second placed his hand on Kim's arm. She gave him a skeptical look, but maybe she accepted the unspoken support he was offering her. Now he just had to figure out why he was offering it.

A maid finally opened the door, ushering them into a rather cavernous living room. The few people standing about only emphasized the space. Michael saw the pride in Kim's expression, the unabashed tilt of her chin. No matter what she might be feeling inside, she knew how to disguise it with a haughtiness that was surely worthy of any Bennett.

From long experience, Michael knew how to assess a situation quickly. He did so now, observing that the people in the room were divided in two separate clusters; no easy mingling seemed to be taking place. Faces turned with covert interest, but no one made a move to come forward in greeting.

Sophie Bennett, however, materialized from another doorway and walked purposefully toward them. If she was displeased to see either Michael or Kim, she gave no sign. Then again, if she was pleased, she gave no indication of that, either. She was a plain woman, with resolute features, but clearly she knew how to work with her looks. Wisely avoiding frills of any kind, she

wore a simple yet sophisticated black dress. Although high of neck and long of sleeve, it discreetly emphasized the fact that, at sixty—odd years, Sophie had kept her figure. Her thick red hair waved artfully around her face. It seemed a natural shade, almost too natural, perhaps, as if Sophie Bennett watched vigilantly for gray hairs and obliterated them as soon as they appeared. And so, although she didn't possess beauty or any real charm, she had nonetheless cultivated a striking elegance that seemed to defy time.

"Kim." Sophie approached her daughter-in-law. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't come."

"Here I am," Kim said, still with that edge to her voice. "Of course you know Michael. your new tenant."

"Of course. How convenient that you could join us, Mr. Turner." She made the word "convenient" sound distasteful, as if he had done something underhand to get here. So far in his short acquaintance with Sophie Bennett, Michael had figured he could either be amused or irritated by her. Amusement took less effort.

"I hope you're finding the house satisfactory," she went on.

"It's adequate," he said, and Sophie's forehead creased a fraction. It probably wasn't good form to tell Sophie Bennett that something she'd provided was merely adequate. But Michael never had been one for good form. He caught Kim's eye and wondered if he saw a hint of approval.

"If anything is. unsatisfactory, I trust you will let me know immediately," Sophie said. Then she turned to Kim. "Will you

introduce Mr. Turner around, or shall I?" It sounded like a command, not a question.

"I'll do the honors," Kim answered. "He's my guest, after all."

Sophie stared hard at Kim, as if looking for signs of insurrection. Kim stared right back at her.

"Very well," Sophie said. "Make sure he meets everyone. Have a pleasant evening, Mr. Turner." And with that, Sophie turned and walked purposefully off again.

Kim watched her go. "You really must be on Sophie's good side," she said in a low voice to Michael. "She actually put out the welcome mat for you."

"That was the welcome mat?" he asked dryly. "She kept looking at me like I was last night's garbage moldering on the stoop."

Kim almost smiled. Almost, but not quite. "I guess you don't know Sophie very well. She wouldn't bother to play hostess if she didn't like you."

Sophie Bennett's idea of playing hostess was a little limited. She was throwing this party, or whatever the hell it was, and yet she seemed to have made no concessions to her guests: no music playing in the background, no drinks being served, no plates of hors d'oeuvres being handed around. Apparently Sophie didn't even find it necessary to be present in the room. She'd made that brief, regal appearance of hers, then simply gone off somewhere else.

"We might as well begin," Kim said. "Which of the two sets

of Bennetts do you want to tackle first?”

“Is that how they’re arranged—in matched sets? You make them sound like plates of dinnerware.”

She gave him a keen glance. “Actually the Bennetts do travel in sets—when they come to this house, at least. They know there’s safety in numbers. You’ll rarely find one of them alone—not while Sophie’s anywhere near.”

Sophie Bennett appeared to be a formidable woman, but did she really inspire such trepidation in her family? Perhaps Kim was simply exaggerating for reasons of her own. Michael already sensed that the undercurrents between Kim and her mother-in-law were murky and complex. Add the rest of the Bennett clan, and who knew what you’d end up with.

But Michael didn’t want to think about Bennetts right now. He was still distracted by Kim, by the way she looked tonight. The sun—streaked ripples of her hair falling to her shoulders, the warm creaminess of her skin, the shadowed blue of her eyes.

She gazed back at him, consternation flickering across her face. “You’re doing it again,” she whispered fiercely.

“Doing what?” He imagined reaching out to touch her. Kim Bennett was the kind of woman you wanted to touch.

“You know. You’re looking at me. that way.” Her fingers tightened around the small black bag she carried. But he went on looking at her. He couldn’t stop.

Her eyes seemed to darken as she went on gazing back at him. Now they were the color of blue just at sundown. Her lips had

parted slightly, as if she meant to catch her breath. He didn't take a step closer to her, didn't make a move toward her. He didn't need to, as long as they were together like this, alone in their own private corner of the room.

He heard Kim utter something under her breath, something he couldn't quite hear. Then she turned abruptly and walked away. He followed, his gaze lingering on her. The dress she wore was cut daringly low in back, revealing more creamy skin. And more freckles.

Lord. Was he to be undone by freckles? Michael reminded himself that he hadn't been out with a woman in a while—that was the problem. After fourteen years of marriage, he'd forgotten what it was like to be on a date. Except that Kim had made it very clear this *wasn't* a date. And that led him to another question. Why was he acting like a damn fool around her?

He didn't have any time to ponder the matter, because they'd reached the first Bennetts: a man and a woman who made room for Kim and Michael, but only with an air of reluctance. Kim was very businesslike.

"Diane, your mother wants you to meet her new tenant. Michael Turner."

She could have simply introduced him as her nextdoor neighbor, but instead, she'd brought Sophie into it. Michael wondered why that bothered him. Meanwhile, he shook hands with Diane Bennett. She was obviously Sophie's daughter. The family resemblance was striking: heavy reddish hair, intractable

features. But Diane at least was animated.

“So you’re Michael Turner,” she said with interest. “Mother told us all about you. She said she was interviewing tenants, and that it was very discouraging. She didn’t think she could find anyone trustworthy to rent the house. *Are you* trustworthy, Mr. Turner?” Diane asked, apparently in all seriousness.

He reflected on the question. If Kim knew the truth about him, she probably wouldn’t find him trustworthy by any definition. He caught her looking at him again, and he saw the doubt clouding her eyes. She was right to doubt him unfortunately.

Diane Bennett was veering off on a different tack. “You haven’t met Jack yet,” she said importantly. “Mr. Turner, this is my friend Jack Hutchinson.” She sounded as if she was announcing royalty, and gazed at Jack with reverence. He seemed a normal enough guy, balding on top, spreading around the middle but clearly doing his best to suck in his gut. He looked like the kind of person who’d be happier in a pair of roomy overalls than in the suit he wore.

“Anyway,” Diane went on, “Mother was saying maybe she just ought to sell that house next to Stan’s—next to *Kim’s*.” Diane corrected herself deliberately, with an oddly put—upon air. “Mother said it was very discouraging, after all the trouble she’s had with tenants—”

“The Harveys were a perfectly nice couple,” Kim interrupted with that edge to her voice Michael was starting to recognize. “They never gave Sophie any trouble at all.”



“Oh, well, the Harveys,” Diane said dismissively. “I wasn’t thinking about them. You know...it was the people before.”

“The Millers?” Kim asked in a skeptical tone. “They were nice, too.”

Diane Bennett was starting to look peeved. “The whole point is that Mother was getting very discouraged about having to rent the place again, and then Mr. Turner came along and solved Mother’s problems.”

They all studied him now, silently, as if contemplating the peculiar fact that someone had actually met Sophie Bennett’s standards. Diane had a particularly knowing expression on her face. How much had Sophie told her? Did she suspect the real reason Michael was “renting” a house next door to Kim?

Subterfuge, deception—definitely not his style. He tried to remind himself of all the reasons he’d become a private investigator: a chance to get away from bad memories, a chance to spend more time with his son, a chance to pick his own cases. The only problem was, he regretted this case more and more all the time. Especially when he looked into Kim Bennett’s eyes and saw the distrust there.

“If you’ll excuse us,” Kim said a bit forcefully, “I have to introduce Mr. Turner to the others.”

There was an awkward pause. “Nice to have met you, too,” Michael said to their pointed silence. He didn’t bother to keep the irony from his tone.

Kim was already headed toward the remaining set of Bennetts,

but Michael took her elbow and steered her outside, instead, onto a veranda. Night had fallen. The air still held the summer heat, but it was no longer oppressive. Michael preferred it to the artificially cool room they'd just left behind.

"We shouldn't be out here," Kim said.

"Do you think it will make them wonder about us?"

"They're wondering about you," she returned. "They've already made up their minds about me—they did that long ago. But you're someone new. They haven't figured you out yet."

He knew what she meant to say—that *she* hadn't figured him out yet. Too bad he couldn't help her with that.

"Let's just get it over with," she said impatiently. "You can meet the others, and hopefully Sophie will get on with this ridiculous thing." She turned back toward the room, but Michael clasped her hand to stop her.

"They can do without us for a few minutes."

Kim's fingers moved restlessly in his, and then she slipped her hand away. There was no porch light, and he could see only the outline of her face.

"There's no good reason for us to be here." He heard the uncertainty in her voice.

"You can give me your take on Diane and Jack."

"You've just met them. Isn't that enough?"

"I'm curious," he said.

"Why?" Now the uncertainty was gone, replaced by outright challenge. He wished he could read her expression. He also

wished he could tell her the truth, the reason he needed to know more about the Bennetts.

*Smart, he told himself. Confess everything to the woman who may very well have killed her husband.*

“Just curious,” he repeated.

Kim hesitated, then gave a shrug. “I’m no authority on the almighty Bennetts. I’m not allowed in the clique.”

“Maybe you don’t allow them in your clique.”

She seemed to consider this. “You think it’s my fault I’m not a cozy part of the family? Once upon a time. all I wanted was to belong.” Her words sounded brittle on the night air. “Anyway, what can I tell you that would possibly be of interest? Diane—she keeps talking about how she admires Jack, but she doesn’t even realize yet that she’s in love with him. She’d better figure it out soon, though, before Sophie ruins things again—and that’s really all I have to say.” She sounded chagrined, as if wishing she’d stopped earlier.

He thought over what she’d said, searching for anything that might be of use. Diane Bennett, for all her attempts at perkiness, was as peculiarly devoid of charisma as her mother. It was a strange lack, as if some essential gene had been left out of the family makeup.

“So you think she’s in love with Jack,” Michael said gravely.

“Anyone can see it—except Diane. And possibly Jack. For a physics professor, he can be remarkably dense. But do you really want to know about Diane Bennett’s love life?”

He couldn't honestly say that he did, but he knew any detail might be important. One thing was certain—he never would've pegged Jack Hutchinson for a physics professor.

"You make it sound like Sophie's botched things for Diane before."

"And you make it sound as if you're very interested in the Bennetts." Kim spoke coolly, but he sensed an anger in her. Somehow he'd touched a nerve.

"If you despise them so much, why did you come here tonight?" he asked.

She paced a few steps back and forth, as if she couldn't bear to stand still. "When Sophie convenes the family, you know you'd damn well better be there—to look out for your own interests, if nothing else. That's one thing I learned from Stan at least."

Stan. The dead husband. Kim had given Michael the perfect opening, but he took it reluctantly.

"I'm sorry about what happened," he said.

"That's right—you know all about it, don't you? Courtesy of Sophie."

Again he chose his words carefully. "I know your husband died in a car accident. No real evidence of foul play, but the autopsy showed a high level of blood alcohol, and he wasn't known to be a heavy drinker."

Kim had averted her face as he spoke. "My, Sophie was thorough in her briefing," she said in a caustic tone.

Sophie had indeed been forthcoming on the subject, but the

police report had provided all the pertinent details. Michael disliked what he had to ask next. He disliked a lot of things about his job lately. “Do you think it was murder, Kim?”

Standing there before him in the darkness, she was very silent. But then finally she spoke, her voice tight.

“Mr. Turner, you’re a damn sight too curious. About Stan, about the rest of the Bennetts...about everything. And I can’t help wondering why.”

He wanted her to wonder. It was the closest he could come to being straight with her. He felt an unreasonable urge to protect her—from what, he couldn’t have said.

“Yes,” she said at last, her voice so low he barely caught the word. “Yes,” she repeated a few seconds later. “I do think someone killed him. That was one of Stan’s few virtues—he hardly ever drank too much. So why that night?”

She sounded innocent—convincingly so. But a person could perfect the art of sounding innocent.

“Any idea who the culprit might be?” he asked, though still reluctant to pursue the subject.

She stared at him in the darkness. “Not that it’s any of your concern, but no, I don’t have a clue who might have killed my husband. Satisfied?”

The last thing he felt was satisfaction. But he’d already noted the tension in her every time she spoke about her dead husband—and then the way she grew silent. Michael wondered about Stan Bennett. Had the guy appreciated his beautiful wife?

“It was a mistake,” Kim said now. “I never should have asked you to come here with me. What was I thinking?”

“I should be here.” Once more he clasped her hand, drawing her near. He felt her stiffen. They gazed at each other, but even the light spilling from the room beyond didn’t chase the shadows from this secluded alcove. He couldn’t read Kim’s expression, knowing only the warmth of her fingers curled in his.

“You’re doing it again,” she said almost in a whisper. “You’re looking at me. that way.”

“It’s dark. How can you tell?” His own voice was low.

“I just can. And you have to stop.”

Michael forgot that he was supposed to be on the job tonight. He forgot about the Bennetts. He forgot everything but Kim’s loveliness. He brought her even nearer to him. Their bodies didn’t quite touch, yet still they gazed at each other in a darkness that both obscured and enticed. And then, at last, he bent his head to hers.

## CHAPTER FIVE

MICHAEL'S CHEEK brushed Kim's. Her skin was as soft as he'd imagined it would be, her scent alluringly feminine. But she stood motionless, self-contained in her silence. He wanted her response and he courted it, bringing his lips to the corner of her mouth. Did he feel her tremble or was it only his imagination?

She allowed no more, stepping away from him. He experienced an immediate sense of loss. He knew he didn't have any right to touch her, but that didn't stop the wanting.

"I can't," she said after a moment, the darkness still cloaking her. He didn't ask her what she meant, just waited for her to say the rest of it.

"I can't do *this*," she went on, a turbulence underneath her words. "It's all a mistake. Bringing you here and pretending everything is normal. In this house, of all places—" She broke off abruptly. Slipping past him, she went back inside.

He stood on the veranda another second or two. Maybe he thought if he stayed out here, she'd return to him. That was wishful thinking of course, the kind of thing he should have left behind a long time ago.

Finally he walked back into that lofty, oddly bare living room. There was minimal furniture scattered about, and he supposed it was the kind of place where architectural details were supposed to take precedence: exposed ceiling beams, high

arched windows, carved moldings. The overall effect was that of a drafty church with too few worshipers. The Bennetts remained in their separate little clusters, but again faces turned toward him in interest; Diane Bennett looked particularly alert. No doubt they were speculating about what he and Kim had been doing on the veranda. He couldn't say he cared.

Kim had taken up a position alone some distance from the others. She didn't do anything to minimize her solitary status, didn't pretend to be looking at the paintings on the walls, didn't indulge in any other ruse to appear occupied. She just stood there, back straight and chin up, holding her small black bag as if it were a weapon. She couldn't have made it clearer that she wished to go on being solitary. A reluctant admiration stirred in Michael. She might as well have been wearing a sign that read No Bennetts Allowed. But did the warning extend to him? He walked over to her. The stern expression on her face told him she still regretted inviting him.

"Lively party," he remarked. "When does the conga line start?"

His stab at humor obviously didn't impress her. "Sophie has her own way of doing things," she said. "I wish you had some way to entertain yourself, Michael."

"I'm entertained."

She gave him one of her skeptical looks. "I'm sure you'd much rather be home working on your novel."

"I'm a little stuck," he said. In a manner of speaking, that was



true.

"I've heard about writer's block. Is that your problem?" She glanced at her watch as if hoping he wouldn't answer.

"I'm having trouble with my storyline."

"Really." She didn't look sympathetic.

"My heroine won't open up much. She keeps everything bottled up inside. Anger. frustration...who knows what else. She's hard to get to know."

He saw the flush that made Kim's freckles so beguiling. She gazed back at him steadily. "Maybe you should write yourself another heroine."

"No. Sorry.won't do. This one's too intriguing."

"But you're not getting anywhere with her," Kim said.

"Not yet."

A flicker of some unnamable emotion showed in her eyes. But neither one of them had a chance to say anything more. Coming toward them was the second set of Bennetts: a fortyish couple, the man distinguished in bearing, the woman a pale blonde—too pale, maybe, her prettiness seeming almost bleached away.

"Hello, Kim," said the woman, smiling a little hesitantly. "I'm glad you came tonight. You know I hate it when I'm the only wife—" She stopped, looking flustered, but then rushed on. "I mean, I'm glad you came. You haven't been over to visit in so long, and the kids are always asking about you—after all, you're their favorite aunt...." Her voice trailed off uncomfortably.

"I miss seeing the kids, too," Kim said, although her tone was

guarded. “Norie, Thad, I’d like you to meet Michael Turner—”

“Mother’s new tenant,” finished the man, shaking hands solemnly with Michael. The family resemblance was once again unmistakable; it seemed that Sophie had imprinted herself irrevocably on each of her children. Thad Bennett, however, possessed a preoccupied manner, as if too many important concerns filled his mind.

“How’s the house?” he asked Michael.

“Fine.”

Apparently even this brief answer gave Thad Bennett something to ruminate on. He had the air of a man weighed down by the significance of his own thoughts. While he was busy thinking up his next approach, his wife, Norie, jumped in.

“How nice you could come tonight, Mr. Turner. These family gatherings can be so tedious. Sophie hardly ever allows any outsiders, and—” She stopped herself once more, looking dismayed. “I mean—”

“Don’t worry. I don’t mind being an outsider,” Michael said.

She gave him an embarrassed smile. “Believe it or not, Mr. Turner, I’m usually not such a blatherer. It’s just my mother-in-law’s proximity that. throws me off.”

“Norie,” said her husband on a warning note.

This, however, only seemed to inspire her. “Well, why try to hide it? *None* of us enjoys coming here, but we all put up a front. We ought to admit it for once.” She glanced at Kim for confirmation.

Kim shrugged. "You wouldn't be offending Sophie. She loves to keep everyone off balance."

"That's it exactly," said Norie. "She orchestrates these command performances and she won't tell anyone what they're about. It's very disconcerting."

"Norie," her husband said with exaggerated patience.

She glanced defiantly at him. "I don't see *you* standing up to her, do I?"

Kim looked beleaguered, as if she had been through scenes of this kind often before. Michael surmised that Norie and Thad Bennett were the type who had been married so long and quibbled so frequently they forgot to be restrained in the presence of other people.

"Well," Norie said, "who knows why Sophie's dragged us all out here tonight? I've been guessing, but I don't have a clue." When no one responded, she glanced at Kim. "Any ideas?" she asked brightly. She behaved as if it was her duty to keep the conversational ball rolling. Something about the woman seemed just a little off to Michael. One minute she gave the impression of being overly timid, the next she was on the verge of arguing with her husband—and the next she was forcing the conversation. She appeared to be trying on different roles, different attitudes, to see which one fit.

"Sophie will let us know soon enough what she wants," Kim said after another awkward pause.

"That's just it," Norie said, speaking too quickly. "Sophie

always *wants* something from us. Something that usually leaves bad feelings afterward. You'd think at least now and then she could invite us over to enjoy some family togetherness, nothing else."

"Norie," said her husband in a long—suffering tone, "I don't think Mr. Turner wants to know about our family squabbles."

"I'm sure he can speak for himself." Norie turned her attention fully on Michael. "Mr. Turner, we could use an objective opinion. Do you find us Bennetts dull. or interesting?"

The woman had taken on yet another pose. All of a sudden she appeared subtly provocative, but with a hint of anxiety underneath. She seemed to be asking for reassurance of some type—as if she wanted Michael to tell her she wasn't ordinary. In a way he supposed she was flirting with him. Her husband seemed to have the same impression, and he was beginning to look vaguely disturbed. As for Kim, she had arranged her features in a carefully neutral expression, and she seemed to find it necessary to check her watch again. Michael would have given a great deal to know what she was thinking at this moment.

"I'm just along for the ride tonight," he said finally.

Norie Bennett seemed disappointed. "That's a nonanswer, Mr. Turner. Very diplomatic, I'm sure, but I expected something more from you."

The woman had just met him—what could she have expected? But already she was glancing about discontentedly as if seeking another audience. She no longer seemed to care whether or

not the conversation kept going. And meanwhile, Thad Bennett seemed to retreat once more into the protection of his own ponderous thoughts.

Michael caught Kim's eye and smiled a little. She didn't smile back, although he saw that hint of turbulence in her gaze. Was she more disgusted with him or with the Bennetts? It was difficult to tell.

Just then Sophie appeared beside them—somewhat eerily, because she hadn't made any noise, seeming to materialize out of nowhere. She proceeded to commandeer the group.

“Thad, please go call Roger and find out what's holding him up. Kim, Norie, I'd appreciate your popping ping into the kitchen to reassure Yolanda about her soufflé. You know how she is when I have her try a new recipe. Go alóngo—I'll take care of Mr. Turner.” Sophie had deployed her troops. Thad Bennett went off toward the phone, and Norie hurried in the opposite direction. Only Kim refused to budge.

“Michael is my guest,” she said firmly. “I'll keep him entertained.”

“No doubt,” Sophie said with the slightest hint of irony. “But he also lives in one of my houses. I have a few matters I wish to discuss with him.”

Kim waited another second or two, studying Michael doubtfully. Perhaps she decided he could handle Sophie on his own, for she gave a shrug, turned and walked away. Michael watched her. As always she moved proudly, taking her time

crossing the large room, refusing to rush for anyone—even her mother-in-law.

“Mr. Turner,” said Sophie, “I hadn’t expected you here tonight. Nonetheless, I commend you for working so quickly with her.”

Michael didn’t care for Sophie Bennett’s so-called approval. She made it sound as if he’d done something slick to be here with Kim.

“Don’t rush to any conclusions,” he said.

She raised her eyebrows just a fraction. “Mr. Turner, however you choose to...get close to her is no concern of mine. Just so long as you learn what is necessary.”

Michael disliked this case more and more. He also disliked Sophie Bennett and her unsavory implications. If he was getting close to Kim Bennett, it was against all his better judgment.

“There’s a lot I need to find out,” he said grimly.

“No, Mr. Turner,” Sophie returned. “You need to find out only one thing. How she did it. How she...killed my son.” The words were stark, more so because they were spoken so dispassionately. Michael noted that she couldn’t even seem to say Kim’s name.

But Sophie couldn’t disguise the pain that flashed in her eyes for just a moment. That she had genuinely loved her dead son there could be no doubt. Michael had sensed as much from the first time he’d met her. But Sophie was tough. She’d already made it clear that no amount of pain or sorrow would get in the way of anything she intended to do.

“What if Kim didn’t kill your son?” he asked quietly. “What if it was someone else—or no one? What if it was just one too many and a winding road?”

This time she betrayed no emotion at all. She might have been a statue of mourning, her grief so deep that it had turned her face to stone.

“My son *was* murdered, Mr. Turner, and no one else had a motive to kill him,” she said with absolute control. “No one else profited by Stan’s death. Now, I hired you because you came highly recommended. I assume you will live up to my expectations.”

It seemed he was hearing a lot tonight about expectations. “I’ll do my job with an open mind,” he said. “That’s the way I work. Take it or leave it, Mrs. Bennett.”

Still she maintained that implacable control. “As I said, you came highly recommended. I see no reason to question your capabilities—yet.” With apparently nothing further to say to him, she left again. There always seemed a convenient doorway near at hand where Sophie Bennett could vanish.

Michael remained by himself, thinking that he could use a drink about now. Too bad there didn’t seem to be any in the offing. He scanned the place. Diane and Jack still huddled together, although Diane periodically craned her neck to get a look at Michael. Thad was off in a corner, using the phone. Kim and Norie were still in the kitchen, it seemed, reassuring Yolanda about her soufflé. At least that boded well for food.

The doorbell rang, the sound resonating through the lofty room, and everyone seemed to crane their necks in unison. The maid came through on her way to answer the door. A few seconds later she could be heard murmuring to someone in the foyer, and then came the sound of a man's easy laughter. Finally a man came striding into the living room. He was unmistakably another Bennett—solid head of hair, those seemingly invincible features. Yet this Bennett possessed what all the others in his family lacked: charisma. It showed as soon as he spoke.

"Sorry I'm late," he said carelessly to no one in particular. "You know how things go."

Thad stepped forward, looking displeased. "Roger, I was just calling your place. If you're going to keep us all waiting, the least you could do is—"

"You should have started without me," Roger Bennett said, his inflection making it clear no one ever started anything without him. He scanned the room, his attention focusing on Michael. He came over to shake hands.

"Say, you're new, aren't you?" He gave an engaging grin, the kind that was second nature to people who assumed they were welcome anywhere, by anyone.

"Michael Turner." "Of course—our new tenant. Glad to meet you," said Roger. "How's the place? Any problems?"

"Not so far." Throughout the evening, Michael had been referred to as "Sophie's tenant," but Roger spoke of him as "our tenant." A subtle distinction, perhaps, but it stirred Michael's



curiosity.

“Property management isn’t a family specialty, I’m afraid,” Roger went on. “We’ve held on to the house for sentimental reasons. Were you aware of that?”

It wasn’t the type of question worth answering. And Roger was already going on, obviously more interested in what he had to say than in any response of Michael’s.

“It was the first place my parents ever lived together.” Roger looked appropriately reflective. “They were so happy with it they bought the house next door, too, hoping to create a sort of family enclave. It didn’t work out that way unfortunately. My father died, and my mother couldn’t bear to live there with the memories. But she hung on to it, and Stan, at least, ended up living in the house next door. Poor unlucky Stan.” Roger sounded just a little smug, as if congratulating himself for not ending up like poor unlucky Stan. Then he glanced at Michael again.

“You’ll have to forgive us for being gloomy tonight. Stan’s accident only happened a few months ago. You know about that of course?”

Another question not worth answering.

“It hit all of us pretty hard,” Roger said. “Mother especially, although she doesn’t let on.” He looked wistful. “Stan was the youngest.”

Michael never lost the impression that Roger Bennett had taken center stage in the room and was perfectly comfortable there. He didn’t seem to be speaking so much about his dead

brother as about himself—the grieving but irrepressible survivor. And all the while, he conveyed that relaxed charm.

Michael never had been easily swayed by charm, and for now, he was reserving judgment on all the Bennetts. But this time it didn't surprise him when Sophie materialized suddenly.

“Roger,” she said in a chiding tone, “we’ve been waiting for you.”

“Good to see you, too, Mother.” He gave her a kiss on the cheek. Michael reflected that this was the first time he had seen any gesture of affection toward the Bennett matriarch. Sophie appeared merely to tolerate it. Maybe she wasn't easily swayed by charm, either.

“I want to get started,” she said. “Come along.” She headed out of the room, and everyone else fell in behind her. Michael wasn't sure the invitation included him, but he brought up the rear, anyway. He was on the lookout for Kim.

The procession led by Sophie ended up in a dining room with its own lofty ceiling. The vast polished table in the center was obviously a valuable antique. It had been laid with place settings and everyone gravitated toward a particular chair; Michael had the feeling that once you were assigned a seat by Sophie, you stuck to it. After a moment Kim and her sister-in-law, Norie, came into the room and took up their own posts. That left only a slight problem: no place setting had been laid for Michael.

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