

CHAPTER TWO
of
Up the Devil's Backbone

My Uncle Jonathon was right: Life can really suck the big watuka.

Somehow my five-foot-eleven-inch, one hundred sixty-three pound frame became as light as a feather. I materialized in the hall, slammed the door shut behind me and flew over to the walk-in cedar closet. Hanging on the wall inside were fire extinguishers for every occasion.

I grabbed one filled with dry chemical powder, shoved my feet into an ancient pair of Nikes, and shot back over to the door, just as the smoke alarm went off in the stairwell.

I had my hand on the doorknob when Red stumbled out of her room, eyes wide with apprehension – her too-big nightshirt slipping off one shoulder.

“There’s a fire,” I said to her, forcing myself to sound calm. “Go out on the porch until I get it under control.”

She sprinted past me without a word, and I yanked open the door to face the inferno.

It felt like a blast furnace. I let loose with the fire extinguisher and moved down the stairs one step at a time. The acrid smoke burned my eyes and made me cough and wheeze like an asthmatic – but the flames were going out.

I reached the side entrance and yanked open the door. A trail of fire led down the porch steps and out into the backyard. I quickly extinguished it and ran around to the

front of the house to check for more trouble. The faint smell of gasoline fumes still hung in the air.

Red was pacing back and forth on the second-story porch. When she spotted me on the front walk – illuminated by a streetlamp – she stopped and leaned over the decorative wooden railing.

“Everything okay now?” she asked, in a strained whisper.

Before I could answer, the stain-glassed door burst open and Noreen charged out of the house. She was sweeping her ammonia pistol back and forth through the air like Angie Dickinson in *Policewoman*.

Georgia was close behind, her silver curls in disarray. The ladies skidded to a halt in their fuzzy slippers at the top of the porch steps.

At that moment, the smoke alarm ceased its shrill ringing.

My landlady had a death grip on Jezebel. “Oh, sweet Lord above,” Georgia wailed. “Evan, thank God you’re all right. Where’s your little friend?”

“I’m up here Mrs. Mableton,” Red answered. “I’m okay.”

Georgia took a deep breath.

Noreen lowered her weapon. “I can’t believe the son-of-a-bitch nearly roasted us alive in our beds and we didn’t hear a goddamned thing.”

“Nor-*eeen!*” Georgia shook her head disapprovingly. “You should be thanking the Lord nobody’s hurt, instead of taking his name in vain.”

“Humph.” Noreen sat on a porch step and laid the water pistol in her lap. “God stopped listening to me a long time ago. He’s got other things on his mind nowadays, and I’m beginning to think he’s out to get one of us.”

I heard sirens in the distance. “You ladies call the fire department?”

“Of course we did, dear,” Georgia replied. “We knew you’d be too busy.”

Hector Ramirez pulled up in his little green Nova just as the firemen and arson investigators were leaving. The ladies were in the downstairs kitchen having breakfast: hot tea and blueberry scones were a necessity in any crisis.

By that time, I’d ditched my robe and thrown on a wrinkled San Diego State T-shirt and faded jeans.

Hector pulled a cherry-flavored blow-pop out of his mouth and stared at me as he crossed the backyard.

“What is it with you and pyromaniacs, Spanyer?”

“Just lucky I guess. They never succeed in killing me.”

The detective climbed the side steps, his snug-fitting gray suit practically squeaking, and stuck his head in to survey the damage. It was minimal, compared to the other two fires.

Of course, the first fire had had nothing to do with me. Three years ago, faulty wiring has started a blaze in the downstairs sewing room. I had spotted the flames from my third floor studio apartment next door and had ended up rescuing Georgia and her cat. My reward was a fancier abode and obscenely low rent.

Hector eased his short, wiry frame down the narrow steps and joined me in the yard. At the urging of his wife, Sheila, and their twin sons, he was trying to cut back on his smoking – hence the bubblegum filled lollipops.

“A break-in, gasoline as an accelerant – are you thinking what I’m thinking?” he asked.

“Paxton Leopold II’s attempt at revenge? He’s out of prison now – not that he would do the dirty deed himself.”

“I can’t believe Leopold would be stupid enough to let somebody use his son’s M.O.,” Hector said, running a hand over his already damp buzz cut. The man would never survive in the humid south.

“Probably didn’t. Could be a copycat with a bone to pick.”

“Pretty hefty sized bone.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think the creep really expected me to die. If he was a pro, he would have snuck upstairs and shot me.”

“Maybe he wants to torture you first,” Hector said cheerfully. He shoved the blow-pop back in his mouth.

A songbird in a nearby eucalyptus tree seemed to agree.

I blew out a sigh. “I don’t need any more complications right now. I’ve got Red.”

Pharmacist Meg Lazaro pushed back a lock of her chestnut-colored hair and studied me with hopeful brown eyes. “Is it Chandler?”

I shook my head and smiled. “Nope.”

And it wasn't Charles (like my father), or Cameron, or Carl. Meg had been trying to guess my first name for over two months.

She shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her lab coat and sighed.

It was a sad thing to admit, but this was the closest I'd come to flirting with a woman in a coon's age. Too bad she was engaged to a guy she referred to as "the invisible intern."

Meg was extremely attractive in a girl-next-door sort of way. Her grin was nothing short of adorable. She used it on me now, showing off her dimples.

"You don't look like a Chester."

"I'm not giving you any hints."

"I don't need any." Her voice had gotten husky. "One day I'll get it right – and then you'll owe me dinner."

The way I saw it, I couldn't lose at this game.

"Uh-huh." I reached up and grabbed the skinny white bag off the counter, which contained Georgia's cholesterol and high blood pressure medication, and headed for the revolving door. "See ya later."

Red and "Rhonda" were waiting for me right outside the Shumaker Pharmacy.

So what do you do when your house almost burns down, you can't remember who you are, and you're in need of a fun distraction?

You have lunch at the Rainbow Café.

Since the fire that morning, Red's eyes had taken on that confused, stormy look I had first seen on the Devil's Backbone Highway. She was probably thinking she'd made a mistake getting into my T-bird the day before.

"Hungry yet?" I glanced at her before starting the engine.

Red nodded. She was wearing a sunny yellow top and crisp blue jeans.

“I like your hair,” I said, referring to her French braid.

The compliment brought a wry smile to her face. “It was easy. Maybe that means I’m a beautician.”

“Maybe – but I doubt it.”

I pulled into the heavy stream of northbound traffic on 5th Avenue and we cruised along with the windows down and Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” blaring. The overcast skies had cleared, and now the sun shone down painfully bright. I retrieved my black Ray-Bans from their hiding place above the sun visor and slipped them on.

Ten minutes later, we were on the tree-lined streets of Hillcrest. The predominantly gay neighborhood had trendy restaurants, art galleries, antique shops and restored theatres.

I reached University Avenue and turned right. The Rainbow Café was located a block away on the left. We parked in a reserved lot behind the multi-colored Art Deco building and walked around front.

A neon rainbow framed its arched entranceway. Just inside, a marble cupid fountain splashed in front of a terraced cactus garden. Black and white framed photos of Bette Davis and Greta Garbo covered the pale pink walls, while hidden stereo speakers broadcast Frank Sinatra. The scent of garlic bread hung thick in the air.

Even on a Sunday afternoon, the joint was hopping. It was a popular hangout for both college kids and aging yuppies.

The smiling hostess seated us at a table for two near the front window and left us with gold lamé covered menus. The cuisine here was eclectic – and it was the only restaurant in the city that served an authentic southern meal.

I usually ordered chicken’n’dumplings, sweet potatoes and corn pudding.

“So, what do you recommend?” Red asked, from behind her shiny menu.

“Everything.”

“I’m really not sure what I like. Maybe you should order for me.”

“Hmm, you seem like you’d be the health food type. Grilled chicken and veggies?”

“Sounds boring.” Red laid her menu aside and looked around. “This place isn’t boring, though. I feel very comfortable here for some reason.”

“Funny you should say that. One Sunday a month, the owners, Terry and Renaldo, have Brunch in Your Pajamas Day. Everybody gets to come here wearing their pee-jays and slippers.”

Red giggled. “I’d love it.”

“Here comes Terry now.”

Terry Hagedorn’s dark brown mustache contrasted sharply with his platinum blond hair. His slim frame was clad in an electric blue silk shirt and black chinos – and he was carrying Ginger, a pampered, docile Yorkie. Fred was probably in the office with Renny.

Terry didn’t give a crap about the Health Department’s rules. Leaving Fred and Ginger at home all day was an option neither he nor Renny would ever consider: The couple – not the dogs – had separation anxiety.

Terry sauntered around the crowded, antique tables – stopping briefly along the way to schmooze with his other regulars – until he reached our side. “Well, hi there, blue eyes.

Long time no see.” He was originally from Atlanta, and his southern accent was even thicker than mine. “Who’s this pretty little thing here? Don’t tell me you finally got yourself a date. Renny and I were beginning to wonder about you.”

Red grinned at my embarrassment.

I included the beribboned Ginger in the introductions.

“Jude – I like that name.” Terry smiled at Red. “How long you going to be in town?”

Red looked at me with a silent plea for help.

“Um, at least a few more days,” I said. Terry believed she was from L.A.

“Well, Evan, you be sure and paint the town red before she goes home. It’s my favorite color. Y’all take care now.” Terry headed off towards the kitchen. “I have to find Carly. That silly girl is probably in the restroom primping in front of the mirror again.”

Carly was a blond, blue-eyed, nineteen-year-old waitress – and one of several aspiring actresses and singers that Renny had hired to do impromptu performances for the customers. There was only one rule: They had to stick to songs and movie scenes from the 30s and 40s.

A distracted Carly finally showed up to take our orders. I asked for the usual and Red decided to try a chicken fajita.

When our waitress skipped off, Red stared out the window at the parade of interesting characters passing by, and sighed. “I’m tired of not knowing...something...anything.” Red turned her head and met my sympathetic gaze. “Evan, do you think the fire had something to do with me?”

“No, I don’t see how.” It was my turn to sigh. “Listen, I was going to wait until tomorrow to suggest this, but maybe we should talk about it now.”

“What?”

“I think you should go back to Big Bear for a few days. You might see something around town, or on the Devil’s Backbone, that would trigger your memory.”

She shook her head. “You said you would help me.”

“And I will. I won’t let you go alone.”

I saw a little shudder run through her body, but then she looked at me and nodded.

“Okay. Let’s go up there first thing tomorrow morning.”

I agreed. That would give me time to make arrangements for Georgia and Noreen. They couldn’t be left alone either. And I had to get the ball rolling on the house repairs as well.

The decision we’d made seemed to improve Red’s mood. Like me, she finished her meal and had peach pie à la mode for dessert.

After Carly brought us the check, Red put down her spoon and groaned.

“I need to walk around a bit now,” she said. “I’ll meet you out front.”

She paused in the doorway as I walked by her to pay the bill. “Oh, thanks for dinner - again.”

I smiled at her before she went outside.

Cheerful Eve, the hostess, was also the cashier. I offered up a fifty, and when she handed me the change, I saw her look past me with an expression of concern.

“Sir, I think that man is bothering your girlfriend.”

I heard Red scream.