

UP THE DEVIL'S BACKBONE

(a C. Evan Spanyer Mystery)

by Justice Lane

CHAPTER ONE

I hit the hairpin curve pushing 40 mph in my '57 T-bird. Pine trees whizzed by me in a blur as I screeched around the bend – lightheaded and grinning – with Led Zeppelin assaulting my ears and a crisp mountain breeze stinging my face.

I was in heaven – for about seven seconds.

The redhead in the bloodstained wedding dress appeared out of nowhere.

I locked up the brakes on my convertible and skidded sideways. At the last possible moment, the lady took a step backwards and my car slid by her, its front bumper grazing her full white skirts. I turned out of the skid and jerked to a halt about fifty feet away.

For the first few seconds, the only thing I could feel was my heart trying to pound its way out of my chest. The rest of me felt numb.

I killed the engine and swung around to get a look at Red.

She was standing by the side of the road, staring at me with a dazed expression on her pale face. An ugly gash marred her forehead, and her square-necked lace bodice was streaked with dirt and blood. She looked like a broken china doll.

I got out of my car and approached her. “Are you all right?”

She didn’t answer – probably because it was a stupid question.

“What happened? Was there an accident?”

She removed a sprig of baby’s breath from her thick, tangled locks and looked up at me with a puzzled frown. Her eyes were the color of the Atlantic after a storm: a mixture of blue and gray and green. I could see fear swimming in them now.

She looked down at her soiled dress. “I don’t know.”

The petite young woman spoke so softly I could barely hear her, but I could tell she wasn’t lying.

“You mean you don’t remember?” I pictured the headlines: HERALD REPORTER RESCUES AMNESIAC BRIDE ON THE DEVIL’S BACKBONE HIGHWAY.

Her generous mouth trembled slightly. “My head hurts.”

“Uh, yeah – I should take you to the emergency room up in Big Bear.”

The wind blew a stray auburn curl into her eyes. She reached for it with a delicate hand, and I noticed her diamond-encrusted wedding ring.

Where was the groom? Cynical me wondered if he was responsible for the faint bruises around her neck.

The bride's worried gaze drifted back to me, and I smiled. "My name is Evan Spanyer." (Actually, Evan is my middle name. I never use my first.) "Can you tell me yours?"

She shook her head slowly. "You have a southern accent."

It sounded like an accusation.

"Grew up in Honeywell, North Carolina, but don't hold it against me. I live in San Diego now."

And that's where I was supposed to be headed – after ending my Memorial Day weekend getaway earlier than planned. So much for taking this treacherous little shortcut home – now I was stuck in the middle of a David Lynch film.

My eyes scanned the ditch by the road. "Maybe we should look around for a purse, find out who you are the easy way."

"I think I should sit down."

A wise course of action: To quote a classic rock song, she'd just turned a whiter shade of pale. The search could wait.

I took hold of Red's slender, lace-clad arm. Her satin tea-length skirts whispered all the way over to my car. I helped her into the passenger seat and trotted around to the other side.

When I started the engine, AC/DC's "Highway to Hell" came blasting out of the radio. We shot off our seats, and I grabbed at the knob, turning the volume way down.

I threw her a crooked smile. "Sorry about that."

Red didn't smile back. She pulled off her ruined satin pumps and sat with her legs folded beneath her.

“You cold?”

She nodded, and I took off my denim jacket and draped it around her shoulders.

“We’re in California?”

“That’s right. In the San Bernardino Mountains, to be precise.”

As I was talking, a dark blue Taurus with tinted windows whipped around the bend in front of us, heading uphill. The driver reduced his speed as he approached, passing us slowly.

A damaged bride in a flashy red convertible was bound to attract attention.

I put the car in gear and headed down the mountain. I wouldn’t be able to turn around safely until I reached Route 38.

Just follow Route 18 through the picturesque town of Big Bear and eventually you’ll find what you’re looking for. Pretty much everything is located on or just off the main strip. The heavy traffic, worse during holidays, slows you down so you can’t possibly zoom past a point of interest unaware.

We inched down the Boulevard in my built-for-speed sports car, with me hoping that Big Bear Medical Center’s emergency room would prove to be an unpopular spot for tourists that day.

Red was quiet the whole time, and I didn’t try to strike up a conversation. What could a person with amnesia chat about anyway?

On the way back up the mountain, I had slowed down and looked for signs of a wreck, thinking a car might have gone over the edge somewhere and lodged up against a tree.

No luck. And that only deepened the mystery.

The emergency room turned out to be a lonely place for a Saturday evening: No reckless skiers or extreme snowboarders piled up to the ceiling – it was too late in the season.

While an intern gave Red a good going over, I sat in the sterile-looking waiting room and flipped through a year old issue of Sports Illustrated. A deputy had been called in to question “the victim” before she was released – if she was released. Not that they would be getting much information out of her.

The somber-faced deputy arrived a half-hour behind us, and soon disappeared into an “Off Limits” section of the hospital.

I cooled my heels for another hour before a tall, matronly nurse approached my chair.

“Are you next of kin?”

For some reason she whispered the words, so I whispered back.

“No, I just found her. She has no memory.”

The nurse nodded like she’d known this all along. “You can come see her now. The doctor says she won’t have to be admitted.”

She led me back to an examining room that smelled like rubbing alcohol.

Red was sitting fully clothed on the table, sipping a glass of water. The cut on her forehead had been stitched up, and the skin around it had been stained with something orange.

The deputy was standing by the window with his arms folded, looking slightly bored.

Nurse Betty left the room and a young, blond man bounced through the door with a smile on his tanned face. He looked like he belonged on a surfboard.

“Hi, there. I’m Doctor Lucas.”

He shook my hand, and I noticed the Looney Tunes T-shirt he was wearing underneath his white lab coat.

“Well, we have an unusual case here,” he said, his smile fading. “There really is nothing else we can do for this unfortunate young woman, I’m afraid, except for prescribing an antibiotic. We’ve run all the tests we can run. The amnesia might have been brought on by a traumatic incident. I fully expect her memory to return, but it might take some time. Then again, she might wake up tomorrow morning and remember everything.”

I stared at Dr. Lucas. “Don’t you want to keep her overnight at least, for observation?”

He shrugged. “She has a slight concussion – probably fell and hit her head on a rock is what it looks like. As long as someone wakes her up every few hours tonight, to make sure she’s still coherent – except for her loss of memory, of course – then I see no reason why she can’t go home – or to a hotel.”

“I don’t want to stay here,” Red murmured, looking at me. “I want to go home with you.”

Yo and howdy. If only I were a cad.

I let out an uncomfortable sigh, and gestured towards the deputy. “That’s up to him. I’ve got to get back to San Diego tonight.” Not that I was happy about having to walk away from this bizarre situation – and a killer story to boot.

Deputy Henshaw came to life and cleared his throat. “Right now, the young lady is a victim, not a criminal. I can’t hold her here, but she’ll have to come down to the station so we can get fingerprints and photos to send out on the wire.” He pointed a long finger at me. “You – I need your contact information in case we find out who she is – and what happened to her.”

I put the black vinyl top up on my convertible and we cruised over to the “Blue Jean Baby Shop,” just down the street from the hospital. Red borrowed my credit card and picked out two pairs of Levis, a denim jacket, a couple of short-sleeved knit tops, and a pair of black loafers.

She remembered her favorite color was yellow – but perhaps that was something she hadn’t really forgotten.

We rustled up some carryout and then dropped by the Sheriff’s Department. Red changed clothes and we left her soiled dress there for safekeeping. If a real crime had been committed, the wedding gown could turn out to be evidence. Deputy Henshaw assured me that a thorough search would be conducted along the Devil’s Backbone Highway. If anything turned up, he was supposed to give me a holler.

Just as we stepped outside the Sheriff’s Office on Summit Boulevard, a dark blue Taurus passed us by. If the car hadn’t had tinted windows, I probably wouldn’t have noticed, since that particular make and model was everywhere these days.

The Taurus turned a corner, and I tried to shake off the uneasy feeling I had. Big Bear is a small town, I told myself. Stop being a damned reporter.

We headed back down the mountain the long way, and I took it easy around the curves this time, inhaling my turkey club.

Red nibbled on her chicken salad sandwich.

“I’m surprised you’re so willing to trust me after everything that’s happened to you,” I said.

“We don’t know what’s happened to me. Maybe I go for the tall, dark, psychotic types – maybe I married one. But you definitely aren’t psychotic. If you were planning on hurting me, you wouldn’t have taken me to a hospital.” She threw a glance in my direction. “Besides, you have a cute face and a kind voice.”

I was too preoccupied to blush. I was heading home early because I had enemies – thanks to my nosy profession – and I was worried about my wealthy eighty-six-year-old landlady.

Now I had a beautiful bride with no memory along for the ride.

What was I going to say to Mrs. Mableton?

She followed me home. Can I keep her?

Red abandoned her sandwich finally, and by the time we got to Highway 215, silent tears were coursing down her cheeks.

I didn’t know what to say, so I turned up the radio and tuned in a classic rock station.

We caught the tail end of “Smoke on the Water,” and then a ballad by the Beatles came on.

Just my luck.

Red seemed to relax, so I tried to listen to Paul McCartney sing “Hey, Jude” all the way through.

But the old symptoms quickly returned. Anxiety made my heart pound and my palms sweat. Nausea threatened to rid me of my dinner.

At least I made it halfway through the song before I lost control and tuned in an all 80s station.

Red gave me a curious look as I began “She-Bopping” along with Cyndi Lauper.

I ignored it.

We rolled into San Diego around 10:30 that night. I could have driven at my usual manic pace and arrived home a lot sooner, but the last thing I needed was another speeding ticket. Whenever cops read my personalized license plates – “SpydDymn” – their hackles go up and they’re all out for my blood, just waiting for me to slip up.

I exited Interstate 5 at First Avenue and turned left onto Market, heading into the heart of the Gaslamp Quarter. The walkways were swarming with tourists. I took a right at Tenth Avenue and hung a left onto Aramingo.

The street was only a block long – a little piece of Victorian history tucked away between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues.

I pulled into the driveway at 3319 and drove past the three-story house into the backyard, where a padlocked two-car garage stood leaning in front of a six-foot privacy fence.

Once inside, I parked the T-bird next to “Rhonda,” the white ’66 Corvair Monza that had once belonged to my late father. The car had been a high school graduation gift from my bachelor-mechanic uncle back in ’87, and I had driven her all the way to California that summer.

My army-green duffel bag was stashed in the convertible’s otherwise spotless trunk. I retrieved it and grabbed the plastic shopping bag out of Red’s hand as she walked by me.

“We have to go around to the side entrance,” I said. “My place is on the second floor.”

A cluttered attic room took up the whole third story.

The back porch light was on, but the rest of the house was dark. Mrs. Mableton was probably tucked away in her ancient four-poster.

Red followed me as I tiptoed down the brick walkway.

“This place is lovely,” she said, her voice low. “It’s not what I expected.”

“Yeah, it’s over a hundred years old – Greek Revival.”

The frame house was painted a sunny yellow with white trim. The façade was even more impressive. The stacked front porches gave the place a southern feel.

We climbed a short flight of steps up to the side porch and I unlocked the windowed door. It creaked open and I switched on a dim light.

My landlady’s Turkish Angora was waiting patiently for me on the stairwell’s middle landing. The white, blue-eyed cat was totally deaf, so I always wondered how she knew I was home.

“How sweet,” Red whispered. “Is she yours?”

“I think she wants to be. Her name’s Jezebel. I keep trying to convince her I’m a dog person, but I don’t have a dog to prove it.”

I heard a slight rustling noise at the bottom of the stairs.

“Evan, is that you?” Georgia Mableton peered up at me with anxious blue eyes. Her friend Noreen stood next to her, gripping her arm. The ladies had on noisy satin bathrobes and fuzzy slippers.

“It’s just me – and a friend.” I looked at Red and shrugged.

“Thank heavens. Noreen was thinking the worst, after all that’s been going on.”

“Me?” Noreen glared at her friend. “You nearly punctured my lung with that bony elbow of yours. I was sound asleep till then.”

“Are those water pistols you’re both holding down there?” I asked, trying to keep the peace.

Mrs. Mableton held up her yellow plastic gun so we could get a better look. “Filled with the strongest ammonia money can buy. It was Noreen’s idea.”

I grinned. Noreen Middendorf was a widowed ex-nun who loved her scotch and Winstons. The stout woman was as brash and extroverted as Georgia Mableton was quiet and refined.

“Did Detective Ramirez call you this morning?” Georgia asked me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, nodding. Hector was my best friend, and always kept an eye out for trouble around my place when I wasn’t around. “He told me you heard a prowler last night.”

“I keep telling Georgia that this place ought to have one of those new-fangled alarm systems,” Noreen said. “This is the fanciest house on the street.”

Mrs. Mableton shook her head. “You know good and well I’d never remember how to use the darn thing. It would be a complete waste of money.”

My landlady had a lot of money to spend. It was too bad I couldn’t waste some of it for her.

“Well,” Noreen replied, adjusting one of the jumbo-sized rollers in her light orange hair, “as long as Evan was around here, you wouldn’t have to worry about that.”

Georgia sighed. “Oh, shoot a button, Noreen – we’re being rude to Evan’s new friend.” She smiled at Red. “What’s your name, dear?”

I remained silent because I didn’t know how much the damsel in distress wanted me to reveal.

Red glanced at me before answering. “You can just call me...Jude.”

It was good to know the lady hadn’t lost her sense of humor in the face of adversity.

“Jude was in an accident,” I said. “She needs a place to stay for a few days, and I was hoping you wouldn’t mind.”

Georgia Mableton straightened her five-foot-one-inch frame. “Why, of course I don’t mind! What a thing to say.” She gave “Jude” a motherly look. “You poor child. You can stay here as long as you need to.”

Red looked like she was about to get all teary-eyed again, so I stepped around Jezebel – who had been busy adding a layer of long, white hair to the legs of my jeans – and took the hapless bride by the arm.

“Why don’t you go on up,” I said to her. “The door’s open and the hall light’s on. I’ll be right behind you.”

Red took the shopping bag away from me and directed a little wave down the stairs.

“Thank you, ladies,” she said.

“Goodnight, dear.” Mrs. Mableton waved back. “I hope you sleep well.”

Red (I just couldn’t think of her as “Jude”) disappeared up the stairs. Jezebel went back to rubbing against my legs.

“Mrs. Mableton, did you actually see someone prowling around here last night?”

“Well, something woke me up and I went to see what it was. I heard a noise at the back of the house, so I went into the kitchen.” She shuddered. “Someone was rattling the doorknob. I screamed and turned on the light and whoever it was ran off. Then I called the number you left me and reached Detective Ramirez at his home. He was over here lickety-split.”

Hector hadn’t found anything – and he was like a bloodhound crossed with an espresso.

“When Georgia told me what happened this morning, I insisted on spending the night,” Noreen said. “Just let that hoodlum come snooping around here again. He won’t be able to run away when I’m finished with him.”

Yeah, I almost felt sorry for the guy – unless he was one of Paxton Leopold’s hired thugs. The ruthless millionaire businessman had just been released from a minimum-security prison in upstate California, where he’d been “roughing it” on a perjury charge. My relentless investigations had uncovered the fact that the wrong man had been sent to prison for a string of deadly local arson fires. The real pyromaniac had been nineteen-year-old Paxton Leopold III – the businessman’s son.

During the kid's trial back in '99, I had to get used to living with death threats and vandalism. But I felt all the turmoil in my life had been worth it when the jury returned their verdict: guilty as sin. The outraged judge had sentenced Paxton Leopold III to life in prison.

Right afterwards, I had been awarded my own column at San Diego's relatively new "other" newspaper, the Herald. With tongue planted firmly in cheek, I had dubbed it "The S Files."

I've been stirring up trouble ever since, so maybe the prowler had nothing to do with Paxton Leopold II or III. Maybe I'd stepped on someone else's toes recently – or it could have been a random burglary attempt.

"Don't worry ladies, I'll keep one eye open all night. If he comes back, we'll all be ready for him." Besides, I was going to have to wake Red up every few hours anyway to make sure she hadn't taken a trip to La-La Land.

"Evan, I'm so glad you're home now, dear." Mrs. Mableton moved up the stairs. "And so is Jezebel, aren't you precious?" She scooped the cat up and carried her back down the steps. "Are you coming back to bed, Noreen?"

"In a minute. Since I'm up, I might as well have a smoke."

Noreen opened the side door and leaned against the jamb. She fished a pack of Winstons and a lighter out of the deep pockets of her robe and lit up a cigarette.

"I'm glad to see you've finally gotten over that ditzy ex-fiancée of yours," she said. "This one looks a little rough around the edges, but I bet she's a keeper."

Allison Ramsey was blond, gray-eyed and willowy. She looked like a model and acted like a tomboy – and was anything but ditzy. She could be a little unfocused sometimes, but that was part of her charm.

I guess our excessively long engagement should have been a clue. Allison was the restless type.

Actually, if she hadn't dumped me four years ago and moved to Honolulu to become a reporter for KITV, I might not have saved an innocent man's life, caught a killer and gotten my own column. A broken heart had turned me into a cynical workaholic.

Thanks, Allison.

I opened my bedroom closet and pulled out the oversized Betty Boop T-shirt my ex-fiancée had left behind. I kept forgetting to give it back to her.

My little office was across the hall. I leaned in and tossed the shirt onto the black futon in the corner, feeling glad that I'd made a half-assed attempt at cleaning the apartment before leaving on my trip.

The living room/kitchenette at the front of the house had once been a master suite. Thanks to me, the décor was now part southwestern, part Native American.

I walked into the room and found Red standing in front of the French doors holding a 7-Up.

She had asked for wine after taking a dose of antibiotic, but I'd been afraid to oblige the request because of her head injury.

"I love this second-story porch," she said, turning to face me. "If this were my place, I'd sleep out there."

“I do occasionally, when I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“At least you have a mind,” she said, sighing. “Mine’s half gone.”

I smiled. “Remember what the doctor said. You could wake up tomorrow and have your memory back.”

“That scares me too.”

She moved around the rectangular coffee table and sank onto the beige sectional.

“What if I find out my husband is dead? What if I killed him on our wedding day?”

Red touched the bruises on her throat. “What if he was trying to kill me?”

“Either way, you seem to be the winner.” I transferred a stack of Hot Rod Magazines from the recliner to the hardwood floor and sat across from her. “But I can’t imagine you hurting anybody that didn’t deserve it. Besides, you have a cute face and a kind voice.”

She gave a short laugh. “Okay, smarty pants. If you wake up dead tomorrow, it’s your own fault for trusting a stray.”

“You’re not a stray. You belong somewhere – and there are people who care about you, people who are trying to find you right now. I don’t doubt it for a second and neither should you.”

Uh-oh. There was that teary-eyed, trying-to-be-hopeful expression again.

“Look, it’s going to be a long night,” I said. “Maybe you should turn in. The bathroom’s at the end of the hall. You can wear the nightshirt that’s on the futon in my office.”

She gave me a thoughtful look. “What about you, Evan? The pictures on the bookshelf, are those people your family? Do you have a girlfriend?”

I immediately thought of the Paris café photo I kept in my Hanes drawer, and the 1-karat diamond ring stashed next to it. The picture had been taken on the night I'd proposed to Allison. One of our college friends had snapped us together under the Chez Renée sign.

"No girlfriend – I've been too busy being a journalist." I walked over to the bookshelf, which stood just to the right of the French doors. "My parents, and my sister, were killed in an accident when I was seven. My Cherokee grandmother raised me. She died two years ago."

"I'm sorry."

I handed Red a photo of Zetta Graystone Spanyer. It was still hard for me to believe she was really gone.

"Ah, I see it now." Red looked up at me. "You have her cheekbones, and her complexion. Lucky you."

"Yeah, lucky me. She was quite a character. My uncle thinks I have her stubborn streak."

"Every reporter has to have some stubbornness in them." Red handed back the photo and set her 7-Up can on the coffee table. "If the police don't find anything soon, will you help me?"

"Of course. I wouldn't be able to resist."

She got to her feet. "I was kind of counting on that."

I dragged myself out of bed for the second time around 4:00 A.M., threw on my black silk chili pepper robe, and trudged across the hall to check on Red. She was sleeping heavily and I hated to disturb her quiet slumber.

But I did.

“Hey, Jude” I said, touching her shoulder, “do you remember me? Do you remember what happened?”

She groaned. “Go away. I still have amnesia.”

Cool.

I left the office and had just stepped back into my bedroom when I smelled something I shouldn't have smelled.

I flipped on the hall light and ran to open the door at the top of the stairs.

The smell of gasoline was now overpowering.

I started down the damp, carpeted steps just as a whooshing sound reached my ears.

Flames shot up around the side entrance door and spread lightning quick up the oak staircase to where I was standing.

Déjà vu.