

CHAPTER THREE

Of

Up the Devil's Backbone

By Justice Lane

An elderly lady with three white poodles ambled into my path. I tripped over one of the dog leashes and went sprawling, landing half in and half out of the street. I felt like Charlie Chaplin – minus the cuteness factor.

“Oh, it’s all right, young man,” the old woman said, now cradling one of her pooches. “My babies are all okay.”

My elbow had landed in some pink, sticky goo – what I assumed was a well-masticated wad of bubblegum.

I struggled to my feet, my eyes scanning the sidewalk ahead. No sign of the stranger.

I’d never gotten a look at his face; he’d been cautious, and had obviously parked on a side street, hidden and away from the snarl of traffic.

Had he intended to kill Red right there on the sidewalk, in front of countless witnesses? It would have been hard to kidnap her without a car close by.

All these thoughts and questions banged around in my head – which had begun to ache – as I hurried back to The Rainbow Café.

When I walked in, I saw Terry standing next to Red at the bar, his arm around her shoulders. She was holding a glass of water, which she didn't seem to want. Her expression was calm and thoughtful.

“Sweetheart, you didn't let him get away, did you?”

I was a little out breath still, so I shrugged and gave Terry the palms up gesture.

Eve came out of the kitchen. “Should we call the police now?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I'll get in touch with my detective friend. He'll meet us at my place.”

Red spoke, finally, her voice quiet. “He called me Sondra.”

Terry looked puzzled. “Maybe he mistook you for someone else, that's all.”

Oh, the guy knew her all right. The plot had just gotten a few inches thicker.

A faint smoky smell still lingered in the house.

Hector Ramirez stood staring at the TV in Mrs. Mableton's parlor, sipping tea out of a dainty china cup. My landlady's Sunday afternoon Hearts game was well underway.

Noreen and two women from Georgia's Presbyterian church sat with her at a card table by the front windows.

Doris was a middle-aged flirt and a gabber who loved to dress in bright, polyester pantsuits. Althea, who was in her mid-70s, was a shy, heavysset woman who giggled a lot.

Hector turned to look at me as Red and I entered the parlor. He pointed at the television set.

Before he could get a word out, Georgia jumped up from the card table and ran to greet us.

“Evan, your little friend is all over the news! There’s been a murder and – ”

She broke off, and put a hand over her mouth.

Hector finished Georgia’s sentence. “We know Jude’s true identity. The news just broke.” He set his teacup on the walnut coffee table and gave Red a sympathetic look.

“Maybe you should sit down, Mrs. Martini.”

Red took his advice, ashen-faced, and I leaned over the back of her armchair.

“Humph, a stiff drink – that’s what she’s gonna need,” Noreen stated emphatically.

Althea let out a nervous twitter as Doris cut the deck of cards. Georgia had reclaimed her seat at the table.

Hector turned the volume up on the TV.

A pretty brunette stood in the driveway of a large, stone and timber A-frame on a wooded hillside. The caption below her on the TV screen said, “Martini Vacation Home.”

“Anthony Martini, the brother of Steve Martini, was taken into custody earlier today for questioning after the body of the family’s chauffeur was found in a car hidden in a shed on this property. Police were apparently tipped off by an anonymous caller. Anthony Martini has declared his innocence – and concern for his missing older brother, who now runs Chicago’s biggest crime family. Steve Martini was married just yesterday in Las Vegas to restaurant owner, Sondra West. The ceremony reportedly took place at The 1920s Chicagoland Hotel & Casino, which is owned by the Martini family.”

A wedding photo of the couple standing next to a towering white cake flashed onto the screen. Red – Sondra – was not smiling. Steve Martini’s handsome face wore a smug expression.

The reporter continued. “The bride and groom were en route to this vacation home when they disappeared. A search for the couple is currently underway. This is Lindsay Baker reporting live from Big Bear.”

Hector switched off the TV. “Evan, I just took a call from Deputy Henshaw right before you got here. He’s confirmed Sondra’s identity. She’s the missing bride from Chicago. Word’s going to go out on the wire soon.” He sighed. “Now, Mrs. Martini, I know this is a lot to take in, but I need you to tell me everything you can remember about the stranger who attacked you today.”

I gave Sondra’s shoulder a gentle squeeze.

She took a deep breath. “I’m not sure it was an attack, actually. He came up to me and said, ‘Sondra, we need to talk. Come with me now.’ He seemed surprised that I resisted.”

“Can you give me a description of the guy?”

“Tall, blond, good-looking.”

“Well-dressed,” I added.

“I’ve always thought *you* were a sharp dresser, Evan,” Doris said sweetly, smiling at me. “You look so much like that cute, dark-haired actor on that 70s emergency show. What was his name?”

Noreen grunted. “Doe, stop yapping and give up a card.”

“Detective Ramirez, how soon will I be going back to Chicago?” Sondra asked, her voice wavering with emotion – anxiety mixed with relief.

“That depends. You’ll probably have to be questioned again by the authorities in Big Bear. Wouldn’t you prefer to stay in California until your husband is found?”

“I don’t even remember my husband, Detective.” Sondra bowed her head. “Do you think he’s still alive?”

Hector hesitated before answering. “It doesn’t look good.”

“And if he’s dead, will I be a murder suspect as well?”

Another tough one.

“Look, Mrs. Martini, we still have a lot of unanswered questions. I hope I’m wrong about your husband, but he had a lot of enemies. We just have to wait and see how this thing plays out.”

Sondra nodded. “I understand.”

“RANDOLPH MANTOOTH!” Doris yelled triumphantly, as everyone around her jumped. “That’s the actor I was thinking of. Evan reminds me of Randolph Mantoath.”

The call from Chicago came for Sondra later that evening. It was her sister-in-law, Francesca Martini. Sondra was told she had no other family but her new in-laws.

Miss Martini was anxious for her to return home. She was devastated by her brother Tony’s arrest, and her oldest brother’s disappearance. She couldn’t leave her ailing father, Alfredo, to travel to California. She needed Sondra at home. Sondra would remember everything once she returned to the Martini estate.

How I hoped that was true.

Sondra would have to stop in Big Bear first. Hector would pull some strings to get the ordeal over with quickly – at least temporarily. Another trip back to California was likely.

“Evan, will you come back with me, please?” Sondra was sitting on my sectional, sipping a cup of decaf coffee. She brushed a dark curl out of her eyes – stormy eyes that were once again pleading for my help. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but my in-laws are just strangers to me right now. I don’t know who to trust – except for you.”

Marrying into a mobster’s family – what can you expect?

“You already know I’ll go. I’ll tell my editor I have an exclusive story. Agreed?”

I was rewarded with a nod and a tremulous smile.

Estelle Wallingford, the editor and owner of the San Diego Herald, would be thrilled right out of her Prada pumps.

My newspaper colleague, Mexico Jones, had a “little” brother, Tiffany, who worked for a construction crew and did handyman jobs in the evenings. I wasn’t sure how long I’d be out of town, so I arranged for him to stay in my apartment while repairing the smoke and fire damage.

I never asked how the gentle, black giant had gotten his name. I just enjoyed it.

My landlady fell in love with the quiet handyman right away. Noreen grudgingly approved of his presence.

I felt comfortable packing on that Monday morning. Hector was still investigating the arson incident, and he agreed to have an officer check in on Georgia during the day when Tiffany was away at work.

Sondra and I were winging our way towards Illinois by six o'clock that evening, after a brief, uneventful stop in Big Bear earlier in the afternoon. Another trip up the Devil's Backbone in Deputy Henshaw's patrol car failed to trigger her memory, and she had nothing new to report to the police – aside from her encounter with the blond stranger.

On the plane, Sondra gave me her miniscule bag of pretzel snacks. She was too nervous to eat.

When we began our descent towards O'Hare, I gazed out the window at the silvery Fox River below. It snaked innocently through the lush, green landscape and was spanned by several old-fashioned iron truss bridges – the kind one rarely ever sees on the west coast.

I swallowed hard, and prayed to God I'd never have to drive across any of them.