

# **Cat on the Money**

**by**

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The story comes between *Cat Spitting Mad* and *Cat Laughing Last* in the Joe Grey series.

No print edition of *Cat on the Money* exists. The pages have been formatted specifically for the PDF version, which can be downloaded from [www.joegrey.com](http://www.joegrey.com).

# Chapter One

The village of Molena Point lay cupped between sea and hills and blessed by sunshine, its cottages and shops shaded beneath ancient oaks. A perfect place for a cat—feline hunter or couch potato. Or for a cat of added, and more unusual, talents.

It was dawn, 6:02, when sirens screamed through the village. Above on the grassy hills, the gray tomcat pricked his ears and reared up. Watching the squad car far below, small as an ant, careen through the empty streets, immediately he left his kill, heading down as eagerly as any ambulance chaser. Village crime, to Joe Grey, was far more interesting than the remains of a dead rat.

6:20 a.m. Police Captain Max Harper stood among the ruffled curtains and potted ferns of Otter Pine Inn's tearoom preparing to photograph the corpse. The tearoom, with its wicker furniture, flowered wallpaper and fine crystal and china, was among the most charming settings in the village, a chamber used exclusively for formal afternoon tea, no other meal served there.

The body lay as if sleeping, a lovely, blond woman dressed in black leotards. She had no apparent wound. There was no sign of violence. She appeared to have died from a sudden massive heart attack but she was young for that, maybe thirty. Harper had smelled nothing on her breath to suggest certain drugs or poison. Her face was not flushed and there was no sign that she had struggled, as with some violent seizure. The coroner was on his way. Harper hadn't sent a detective on the case; the village was small, the inn's owner a close friend. Beyond the leaded windows, the morning was foggy and chill. The body had been discovered at 6:00, when janitors entered the tearoom to clean.

Harper was a tall man, thin, his lined face leathery from the sun, his brown eyes tired. He was not in uniform but dressed in faded jeans and sweat shirt. Among the chintz and delicate furniture, he felt awkward—as out of place as the big gray tomcat who appeared suddenly, shouldering in through the open door, his yellow eyes wide with interest. Harper wasn't pleased. "Get out of here, Joe Grey. We don't need cats contaminating the evidence."

Joe looked at Harper, amused. Licking the taste of rat from his whiskers, he considered the corpse, observing the body as intently as the captain had done. At first he thought the dead woman was Patty Rose herself, the inn's famous owner—big Hollywood name in the forties. But though she looked like Patty, she was far younger—a slim lady, her hair falling into short, honey colored waves, her pretty hands well cared for. He could smell the scent of brine, and her black shoes were wet as if from the sea, water puddling around her, into the carpet. Something black lay tangled under her tawny hair. A mask?

Yes, a black mask. He could make out its pointed ears and cat's face—a costume for the coming festival.

February was the only month when Molena Point's hotels had to work to keep their rooms full. The rest of the year, the village attracted wall-to-wall tourists. Early this year, some wag had thought to have a cat festival. Really a bit much, the tomcat thought, coupled with the usual jazz festival, art exhibits, wine tastings and little theater and with Otter Pine Inn's own competition.

Joe Grey sauntered closer, studying the young woman's face.

“Simms, get that cat out of here. That's Clyde Damen's cat. Why does he always turn up at a crime scene!”

The officer hurried in, reaching for Joe. Joe raised an armored paw. *You touch me, Simms, you'll be wanting the emergency ward*—but the tomcat said no word aloud.

Only four people knew Joe Grey's command of the English language, knew that he could out-argue any politician and out-shout an Irish cop, knew that the gray tomcat read the Molena Point *Gazette* over breakfast, and followed local channel news; only four people were privileged to converse with Joe Grey. Max Harper wasn't among them.

When Simms tried to throw his jacket over him, Joe ripped the sleeve, then lay down beneath the yellow police tape. Harper looked at the two of them. “I'll deal with him. Go find the Mannings—or Jim Manning. The third floor penthouse. If this is his wife, he'll need to ID her.”

The Mannings had been enjoying a luxurious two-week vacation, in the inn's bridal suite, first prize for Alice Manning in the Patty Rose look-alike contest. A week of pampering, gourmet meals, and daily sessions with photographers and PR people, the event affording maximum publicity for the inn, handled as only Patty Rose knew how to orchestrate. How shocking for their exciting holiday to end in this manner.

Slipping closer to the body, Joe Grey sniffed deeply, thinking to detect, with his superior feline nose, some substance that might have killed quickly, without violent reaction. Perhaps a trace of bitter almond?

But he could smell only sea brine and the waxy sweet scent of the dead woman's lipstick. When he looked around for a glass or cup that might have held a lethal drink, he saw Harper doing the same, checking behind flower pots and decorative cookie tins as he photographed the surround, the captain so intent on the evidence that he soon forgot the tomcat.

The lattice-fronted cupboards at one end of the tearoom were filled with fine crystal. If the woman had died from poison, each glass would have to be checked, as would the glasses in the far pantry. Joe wondered about those in the kitchen, where he could hear the clatter of breakfast preparations. Thinking of the tedious police work ahead, he was glad he wasn't human, glad he could run an investigation in his own way, without all the bells and whistles.

Certainly his methods worked—Joe Grey and his tabby lady had a nice string of successes, over a dozen murders and robberies solved; and they'd been responsible for just as many convictions, passing vital information to the law anonymously—evidence that, in many cases, no cop *could* have found.

Trotting beneath the wicker tables, he entered the tearoom's pantry where the fancy sandwiches and cakes were brought from the main kitchen. Sniffing along the cabinets, he started when, beyond the open window, a black shape leaped into an oak tree then out of sight. The scent of the huge black tomcat was unmistakable, stirring in Joe a rumbling growl—he hadn't expected to see that cat again, Azrael who could open any skylight or window, his paws as clever as those of a monkey; Azrael who could gain access to any shop then open the door from within for his human partner, the old man to strip the cash register and break open the safe before the pair vanished. And it wasn't only the tom's thieving ways that enraged Joe. The thought of that cat near his true love, beautiful tabby Dulcie, brought him to full alert.

Following Azrael's scent across the pantry and into the restaurant office, he smelled brine as well, around a carved screen that stood behind the desk. Leaping to the blotter, Joe pawed at the screen until he'd levered a panel back—revealing a wall safe.

It was closed and apparently locked. How like Patty Rose, he thought, amused, the image-conscious movie star, hiding her valuables behind a rosewood and ivory screen.

Nothing else in the room seemed amiss, the papers on the desk and books on the shelf neatly arranged. Pushing the screen back, he returned to the tearoom behind Harper's back and onto the window seat, slipping under its fancy cushions. Looking out from beneath a velvet pillow, warm and purring, he wondered why he hadn't smelled the tomcat's human partner, that thieving, wrinkled old man. Where was Greeley?

Across the room, the medical examiner, a thin, gray suited man, stood conferring with Captain Harper. He had pulled a sheet over the body. Beyond the tearoom door in the patio and garden, a crowd had gathered, held in check by yellow police tape and two officers. The onlookers were forced apart suddenly as a man came running, a handsome, tanned guy in denim shorts and T-shirt, shouting and pushing through. "Alice! Alice!"

Shouldering past Harper, he knelt beside the dead woman pulling the sheet away from her face, pulling her into his arms, shaking her, trying to wake her. "Alice!"

He froze, staring at her, staring up at Harper. "This isn't Alice!" He cradled the woman's face in his hands. "My God, she looks like Alice." Then he saw the black leotards. "Not Alice. Not her clothes!" He rose, grabbing Harper. "Where's my wife? Where's Alice?"

So, Joe thought, *their vacation wasn't such a disaster after all*. But what was going on, here? The death of movie star Patty Rose's look-alike wearing a cat costume, her feet briny from the sea. The inn's safe burglarized. And the untimely return of Azrael, a cat with the same unique talents as Joe himself, but those skills irreparably corrupted—disparate matters indeed pricking Joe Grey's curiosity, alerting every sly, sleuthing instinct.

## Chapter Two

Joe Grey sat hidden among the cushions of the window seat, his sleek fur blending with the velvet, his yellow eyes slitted in speculation as he peered out at the crowd that had gathered around the door of the tearoom. Locals and tourists, held back by yellow crime tape and by two uniformed officers, observed the pretty young victim and speculated on the cause of her death. She lay across the tiles, covered by a sheet that had been pulled back to reveal her familiar face and bright blond hair and the top of her black leotard. A man stood over her shouting at Police Captain Harper and ineffectually trying to shake Harper; a handsome young man, tanned, dressed in T-shirt and denim shorts.

“That woman isn’t Alice. Where’s Alice? That officer came to get me, said Alice was dead. Where is she? What’s happened to my wife! Where is Alice?”

Harper held him at arms length. “If this isn’t your wife, Manning, cool down. Get hold of yourself.”

Manning stared at Harper, anger and fear twisting his face.

“When did you last see your wife, Manning?”

“I was asleep when she left the room this morning. She likes to walk the beach early. She...” The young man straightened, staring past Harper as a blond woman dressed in khaki shirt and shorts entered the tearoom—short golden hair, a turned up nose and blue eyes—an exact double for the corpse.

She stared down at the dead woman, her eyes widening, and she went very pale. Her husband grabbed her, pulling her close. “They told me you were dead. I thought... Where were you?”

“Walking the beach, you knew that. Who... What happened?”

“We don’t know yet,” Harper said. “Mrs. Manning, would you join me in the pantry where we can talk? I’ll need to ask you some questions. Alone, please.”

She took Harper’s arm, leaning on him, looking back at the corpse and at her husband.

Joe Grey followed them, trotting swiftly beneath the tables, his short, docked

tail straight out behind him like a pointer tracking its prey.

Joe hadn't had much of a tail since he was a kitten, when a drunk stepped on his tail and broke it. He was rescued from the gutter by Clyde Damen, who had the hurt part removed. He'd hardly missed his tail, he was so glad to find a caring human. They'd been together ever since. Now, following Captain Harper, he paused only when he sensed another cat behind him.

He looked back at his tabby lady, her green eyes filled with questions.

"I heard the sirens," Dulcie said softly.

"Don't know what killed her," Joe said. "No mark on her. They don't know who she is, yet."

Otter Pine Inn, three days before, had hosted a bevy of look-alikes of the inn's owner, Patty Rose. Lovely ladies who could double for Patty as she had appeared in her old movies, made in the thirties and forties. The winner, Alice Manning, had received two luxurious weeks in the bridal suite, with her husband. An elegant second honeymoon, Alice had told the press.

After the contest, four of the finalists had remained in the village for vacations. And why not? They had paid for gas or plane tickets, so why not take advantage? The most vocal of the four was Gail Gantry, who had gotten the other three women to join her in a simple dance routine for the village cat festival. Two of them were would-be entertainers, and Gail had done some little theater. Joe and Dulcie thought that must be the kind of person who entered these contests, someone who wanted the exposure, wanted to further their career. The four ladies had sold their act to the cat festival committee, not for money, but for sponsorship by local shops in exchange for using their photographs in newspaper ads: four Patty Rose look-alikes, dressed in black leotards for their number as dancing cats.

*And now one of them is dead, Dulcie thought. It must have been terrifying for Alice Manning, to see the body of her double lying there.*

Slipping into the pantry, behind a serving cart, the cats listened to Harper question Alice Manning then question her husband, each separately.

The couple's answers matched—responses so bland and untutored that surely they were telling the truth. They did not know which young woman this was, who had been killed. They had not socialized with any of the finalists, or seen much of them after Alice won the contest, except for some photograph sessions. "We assumed," Alice told Harper, "that they all went home."

Harper did not point out that a person could hardly walk through the village without falling over one or the other of the look-alikes, whose faces appeared daily



in the *Molena Point Gazette*. The Mannings seemed hardly aware of this, as if the young couple had spent the last days in a little world totally their own.

When they'd gone, Harper sent an officer for the restaurant manager, a thin, dark-haired man with a high forehead and a neatly clipped goatee.

Harper examined the smaller man. "I'd like to see the restaurant safe, Mr. Demmons."

"The safe? Oh, my..." Demmons swallowed. "You think there was a burglary, too? Come this way, then. First, let me call Ms. Rose's secretary." He smiled up at Harper. "No one's notified Patty Rose yet. She likes to sleep late." Demmons picked up the pantry phone.

As he made his call, the cats slipped through the shadows to the manager's office. Leaping atop a carved armoire, they peered over, Dulcie studying the handsome room, the intricately carved desk and book shelves, the rich and fragile antique rug. "Lovely," she whispered. As the two men entered, they crouched lower.

Watching Demmons move the rosewood and ivory screen and spin the dial of the safe, Joe could feel Dulcie's heart pounding against him and her tail twitching. Her green eyes burned with interest, as predatory as any cop.

There had been nine burglaries in the seaside village in the past week, all in bars or exclusive shops, their safes or cash registers opened and emptied, and small, expensive items taken. The money stolen was some sixteen thousand dollars, but the merchandise was valued at far more. There were no marks on the safes, and no prints. The only sign of entry would be a second story window or a skylight, left undamaged but unlocked.

Peering into the safe, the manager looked sadly at Captain Harper. The interior loomed black and empty. Not so much as a dust speck.

Wiping at his goatee, Demmons opened the top drawer of the desk, retrieved a slip of paper, and handed it to Harper. "Four thousand, four hundred and nineteen dollars. That's the amount we locked up with last night, from the bar and restaurant. I..."

Voices rose from the tearoom, a woman's angry voice—and Patty Rose swept into the office, pulling an embroidered dressing gown around her, making the grand entrance. She stared at the safe. "One of the look-alikes stole? Came here for the contest, then stole from me?"

She looked at Harper. "But who killed her? And how did they get in?"

But as Harper tried to console her, Dulcie stiffened, staring beyond them to the window.

Behind Harper, a cat peered in. A big cat, black as soot.

“Azrael,” Dulcie breathed, so softly no human could hear. “It can’t be, he’s three thousand miles away, playing at voodoo in Central America.”

“Afraid not,” Joe said. “His scent is all over the safe.”

Dulcie’s ears went back, and her voice was a hiss. “That explains the thefts, the high windows left unlocked. Where’s his light-fingered partner?”

Last summer, the cats had watched Azrael and his human pal at their midnight work, Azrael opening a vulnerable window and slipping inside to unlock the shop door. They had watched the old man clean out cash registers, watched him drill a safe. It distressed them that one of their own kind, with their own special talents, had fallen to the level of a human thief.

For Joe Grey and Dulcie, their dual natures were a source of wonder. Their command of human speech, their human perceptions and understanding, coupled with their keen hearing and noses and night vision, and with their ability to get into small places, provided superior crime solving skills. They had the best of both worlds, and they put it to the best use they knew.

But those same talents, in ebony coated Azrael, added up to an underhanded feline crime spree.

And there he was outside the window, eyeing the empty safe with smug satisfaction.

“And I not only smelled Azrael around the safe,” Joe said, “I smelled brine. Same as on the corpse.”

“You’re saying Azrael killed that woman. Oh, I don’t think...”

“No. I’m saying she was in here. Or someone with the scent of the sea on them. The carpet wasn’t damp, and no smell there. Just around the safe. I don’t understand yet what happened.” He looked at Dulcie, his yellow eyes burning with challenge. “But we’ll find out.”

## Chapter Three

The evening paper lay on the front porch of the white Cape Cod cottage, blocking Joe Grey's cat door. Trotting up the steps, he glanced around to see if any neighbors were looking, then pawed the *Gazette* open to the front page, leaving damp paw marks across the newsprint.

### **ACTRESS DEAD IN TEAROOM, MONEY MISSING.**

Pretending to pat at a bug, Joe read quickly:

Little theater actress Frances Farrow, a resident of Phoenix, was found dead this morning in the tearoom of Otter Pine Inn, possibly from a heart attack. When officers searched the premises, they found over four thousand dollars missing from the safe. A connection has not been established. Miss Farrow did not work at Otter Pine Inn nor was she a guest. She was one of four women who remained in the village after competing as finalists in the Patty Rose look-alike contest. The only wound she sustained was a shallow abrasion and cut on the left side of the chest, where Miss Farrow apparently received a blow.

In rare cases, Coroner John Bern told reporters, a blow in that area can jolt the electrical circuit of nerves in the heart that control contractions, and the heart stops. In such an occurrence, called commotio cordis, there is no evidence of damage to the heart. Police...

Joe hadn't finished reading when Clyde's yellow antique roadster pulled into the carport. Joe's housemate swung out, took one look at his cat reading the paper on the front porch, and double-timed across the lawn, snatching the offending newsprint from under Joe in a blatant show of rudeness. "What are you doing reading in front of the neighbors!"

Hissing, Joe lightly clawed Clyde's hand.

"Stop it! Now look! Blood all over the cuff of my lab coat."

"One drop of blood. You already have grease on your sleeve."

There was no argument that Clyde, mentor to the village's most expensive im-

ported cars, was a fine master mechanic, but in Joe's opinion, that lab coat was a gross affectation.

"To say nothing," Clyde continued, "of muddy pawprints trashing the front page!" He stared at the headline, then at Joe.

"I see." He read quickly. "Some woman has a heart attack, and in your insane feline mind, you decide it's murder."

"She was thirty-some years old."

"It happens."

"Coroner doesn't think that's what happened," Joe said. "Thinks it could have been a blow to the chest. Finish reading. The coroner..."

Clyde read a few lines, then fixed Joe with a hard look. "The coroner says that kind of freak accident's possible, and the newspaper blows it all out of proportion. Why can't you...?"

"And what about the empty safe? You have a handy explanation for that? What was she doing in there? She had to have broken in." Glaring at Clyde, Joe pushed in through his cat door and leaped into his own tattered, overstuffed chair that no human wanted to touch. Curling up and closing his eyes, he ignored Clyde until he smelled dinner cooking. Then he beat it into the kitchen to sit on the table, watching Clyde make clam pasta.

"Put in plenty of clams, I need my protein."

"Why? So you can track down some supposed killer?"

"One of the contest finalists is dead. Four thousand dollars is missing from the inn's safe, and the winner of the contest and her husband were scared out of their wits by the event. And you think I'm paranoid? And all of it mixed up with this stupid cat festival."

"The festival has no connection to the look-alike contest or to..."

"It doesn't? The four losers got involved in the cat festival—for the publicity and the perks. That's a connection." Joe Grey twitched a whisker. "Apparently all wanting to hit it big in show biz—and maybe one of them wants to hit it big at the bank, without bothering with show biz."

The back door rattled, the dog door swung in, and old Rube, the black Lab, shouldered through followed by the three family cats, wanting their suppers. As Clyde set the clam sauce on the back of the stove and began to open cans, Rube looked up at Joe wagging and grinning. Joe patted his nose with a soft paw. The cats smiled at Joe but kept their distance. Ever since he'd discovered he could speak, they hadn't really trusted him.

Neither Joe nor Dulcie knew why they were different. There were cats like them mentioned in obscure passages of Irish history, and in Celtic myth. And they were not alone. Azrael had likely sprung from the same ancestry—a fact that did not please Joe Grey.

“He’s back,” he told Clyde. “The black tomcat. Lurking around the inn this morning before they took the body away.”

“Azrael? Come on. Greeley and that cat are in Panama. Some black cat wanders by, and you...”

“Dulcie saw him. And I smelled his stinking scent around the safe.”

Clyde stopped dishing dog food, to look at Joe.

“Ten safes emptied in the past week,” Joe reminded him.

“You think Azrael and Greeley did those?” Clyde set the animal’s food on the floor. Washing his hands, he drained the spaghetti and dished up their dinners. Joe leaped onto the table. But they ate not speaking, Clyde reading the front page, Joe slurping up pasta as he went over the facts, trying out possible scenarios.

*All five finalists had spent a weekend at Otter Pine Inn for the judging. Say the ladies were in and out of the dining room and tearoom, and passing the office. One of them figures there’s a safe there, maybe moves the screen and spots it. Or maybe sees the manager come out with a money tray for the restaurant.*

*She stays in the village after Alice wins the contest, gets involved in the cat festival gig—and hears about the other burglaries. Decides to ride on someone’s coat tails, use the festival as cover. Who knows what hidden talents those young women have besides song and dance? A little skill with the tumblers? She slips back into Otter Pine Inn to empty the safe.*

*But Greeley and Azrael are already there, the old man dumping the cash into a paper bag. What happens after that, Joe thought, is up for grabs. No one knows for sure, yet, how that woman died.*

Wrong, Joe thought. *Likely, by this time, the coroner has made a diagnosis, and Max Harper knows.* And the tomcat smiled. Tonight was poker night. Even if Harper was on a case, he usually managed a short break. Harper said a few hands of poker helped him sort things out.

And Joe was right. An hour later, Max Harper sat down at the table, looking tired. “If I never see another hotel employee, I’ll be happy.”

Clyde cut the cards. Joe Grey hopped onto the table and lay down out of the way.

Harper gave him a look, but said nothing. “Interviewing all day. Every one of

them afraid they might say something to get crosswise with Patty Rose, or get her in trouble. Hard to ease them into talking. And the cause of death is still vague.”

“Medical examiner came up with nothing?”

“She was wearing a flat silver pendant, under her leotard. It was dented, and marked with her blood. Apparently this caused the abrasion—a hard blow to the chest. A few internal blood vessels broken. You saw the paper—maybe commotio cordis, maybe not.”

Harper cut the cards and shoved them toward Clyde. “One of the gardeners, Larry Cruz, says he saw Alice Manning run out of the tearoom just before six this morning, before the janitors opened up. Says she hurried out, ran out of the inn into the street.”

“Strange behavior for the contest winner. You believe him?”

Harper shrugged. “I’ll take two cards. Cruz didn’t tell me he’s been dating one of the finalists, Gail Gantry, since she arrived. Patty Rose told me that.”

“Gail’s the one who organized that song and dance routine? Got them connected with the festival committee?”

“Right. Free publicity, free room at the Wanderer in return for using their photograph in the motel ads. She came around the station, asking for police support, which of course we wouldn’t give her.

“She’s hyper,” Harper said, tossing in a chip. “Very wound up. Doesn’t seem to be on drugs, just a go-getter. Pushy.”

Listening, Joe Grey wanted to be moving, checking out these ladies—and checking out the gardener. He lay raggedly purring, playing with a poker chip. Who knew what he might overhear from this Larry Cruz? People would say anything, in front of a simple cat.

## Chapter Four

The evening was cool as Joe Grey crossed the village, trotting through the shops' little front gardens and beneath the twisted oaks that shaded Molena Point's cottages. Heading for the Wanderer Motel where the three women were staying, he saw Police Captain Max Harper parked at the curb in one of the department's battered surveillance cars, dressed in civilian clothes, his western hat pulled down as if napping.

Keeping to the shadows, Joe slipped into the motel patio, rolling on the warm brick paving as casually as any village tomcat out for an evening's ramble. Then, padding into the bushes, he leaped to one windowsill and then the next, concealed by the flowering foliage, looking in beneath blinds and around curtains.

Where female voices came from a lighted room, he peered through a crack beside the drapes and through the open window, to see one of the look-alikes pulling on a sweater. All three pretty, blond contestants were there, in various stages of dress, all such striking doubles for movie star Patty Rose that he might have been watching three vintage movies running on adjacent screens.

The room was a mess, clothes dropped and flung on every surface, open suitcases on the floor. Of the three women, Gail Gantry was the most animated, flushed and outgoing—she looked, as Harper had said, like a go-getter. Dressed in jeans and a bra, she sat barefoot on one of the three beds, painting her toenails. “You’re wrong, Dorothy.” She glanced over at her virtual twin with the dark nail polish and thinner eyebrows. “I say, with Frances dead, Patty Rose won’t be part of the parade. Won’t have anything to do with us; we’re bad PR.”

Dorothy picked up a wadded towel and began to wipe her sandals. She wore gray tights and a gray sweatshirt. Her voice was harsher than Gail's. “Oh, she’ll be there. She’ll make the publicity work for her.”

The third look-alike, Beverly Barker, watched them from where she sat at the desk putting on makeup. She seemed the only one who wasn't a natural blonde—Joe could see the dark roots. She was dressed in a pale pink pants suit. “I don’t see how you two can act so offhand, with Frances dead. She was one of us—and she might have been murdered. I don’t see how you can go on with this cat festival, or even stay here.”

“We have to stay,” Gail said coldly. “Last thing the cops said—stay in the village. Anyway, it’s all good exposure.”

Beverly looked at Gail. “That’s so cold. And what if she was murdered?”

“That’s silly. How could she have been? You read the paper. Anyway, if you’re serious about being an entertainer...”

“We are entertainers,” Dorothy interrupted. “But this gig is a drag. And I don’t see it getting any better.”

“It isn’t a gig, yet,” Gail said. “And it won’t be, Dorothy, if you take that attitude.”

Dorothy tossed her towel into the corner, then rummaged in a suitcase balanced on the night stand just beneath the window where Joe Grey was crouched. He could see, beneath a silk slip among a clutter of what appeared to be bottles, the shape of a handgun. No other object he could think of would have that same configuration.

Well, but Frances Farrow hadn’t been shot. The police weren’t looking for a gun. And there was no law that prevented Dorothy from having one, if she wasn’t a felon—there was only a law against how she was storing it. After all, she had driven down alone from Seattle. Maybe the gun made her feel safer.

Or was Dorothy, too, involved in the thefts? Were there two sets of thieves at work, stealing from Molena Point’s small businesses, each hoping the other would be blamed for all the crimes?

Or maybe Greeley and the black tomcat had set up these women to look guilty? Azrael and that old man would stoop to any low deed.

Beverly smoothed the crease of her pants suit. “I think the cat festival is a sweet idea, with all the toy cats and cat-printed T-shirts in the windows, and the animal shelter bringing kitties to adopt. Just think of the cats that will find homes.”

“Right,” Dorothy said sourly. “Patty Rose isn’t going to turn down a cause like that, she’ll be right up there on the lead float, handing out kitty treats.”

The phone rang, and Gail picked up. “Yes?” Then her voice went soft. Turning away from her roommates, she laughed, and glanced at her watch. “Yes, that’s perfect. See you then. Me, too, honey.”

She hung up, looking smug, tested her toenail polish and slipped on her sandals. Snatching a blue sweatshirt from the open suitcase on the floor of the closet, she pulled it on. “You ladies ready for dinner? I’m having a nice, buttery lobster.”

“Why doesn’t your date buy you dinner?” Dorothy snapped. “That beach-bum too cheap to spring for a meal?”

“For your information, I don’t have a date.”



“Oh. I thought, the way you looked at your watch...”

“Tomorrow night,” Gail said. “If it’s any of your business. I’m hungry. You coming?”

And the three headed out the door like the best of friends, leaving Joe Grey alone on the windowsill, considering their empty room.

He was sorely tempted. Who knew what he’d find in there, besides possibly a handgun?

But who knew what he’d miss of the ladies’ various evening activities?

Abandoning his urge to claw the screen open, he galloped out through the garden and along the sidewalk, dodging the feet of wandering tourists, shying away from reaching hands and from little cries of, *Ooh, look at the beautiful cat. His coat is just like gray satin. Where do you suppose he’s going in such a hurry?*

When the three women turned in to the Shrimp Bowl, Joe swarmed up the trunk of an oak tree by the front window and settled among its branches, his color blending into the oak’s bark, only his white paws and nose visible. He’d barely gotten settled among the leaves when, across the street, Captain Harper’s surveillance car pulled up, out of sight of the cafe. Interesting, Joe thought, that Harper hadn’t turned this kind of duty over to one of his two detectives.

Watching the women order, he considered slipping inside. The restaurant tables were close together, the room crowded. Who would notice a swift shadow among a room full of feet? He was about to drop out of the tree when he saw, half a block away, a black cat leap across the rooftops and vanish among the peaks. Azrael?

Scanning the street, he did not see Azrael’s human partner. Maybe the tomcat was staking out a mark, meaning to return later with the old man. Joe was still looking for Greeley when he realized that the three women were having a heated argument.

They argued all through dinner. What a shame, when they should be enjoying the fine lobster and broiled salmon. They were barely finished eating when Gail and Dorothy rose, both tossing some money on the table.

They parted at the door, not speaking, swinging away in opposite directions, abandoning Beverly with the remains of her salmon and a hurt look. For roommates rehearsing a song and dance number together, these three didn’t get along too well.

Dropping from the tree, Joe followed Gail, gliding smoothly among the tourists’ hard shoes, a twitch of excitement biting at his belly—the adrenaline rush of the hunter. Glancing back, he watched Dorothy, too, wishing Dulcie were on her trail. But no, Dulcie had been stubbornly set on hanging around Otter Pine Inn to spy on

Alice Manning, a project about as productive, in Joe's opinion, as staking out an abandoned mouse hole.

Crossing the street behind Gail, he went up a pine tree to the roofs, his claws scabbling bark down onto tourists' heads. He didn't see Harper's car. He was trotting along the metal gutter above Gail, watching her saunter casually along below him when, from the corner of his eye, he saw a black tail and black haunches disappear through the window of a second floor office. Joe paused for only a moment.

There was only one reason for the black tomcat to enter a building at night from the rooftops. He pictured old Greeley waiting somewhere on the street, out of sight, hunched up in his wrinkled leather jacket, his lock picks and drill ready to rip off another Molena Point shop. Abandoning Gail, Joe Grey headed for the open window, his ears back, his claws ready to rout the two thieves.

## Chapter Five

Racing across a maze of village rooftops toward the window where the black tail had disappeared, Joe Grey slipped under the screen and paused, crouching on the sill. He was in the upstairs office of Charles, Ltd., Men's Clothier. Their logo shone at him from a stack of the store's printed boxes. Dropping to the desk, he scanned the cluttered room. He did not see Azrael.

Most of these second floor offices led down by a narrow stair to a back stock-room that opened to the shop. In some, in locked fire files or safes, the owner kept cash on hand.

Strange that he did not smell Azrael, smelled only the aroma of an elderly female cat. She sat on a shelf in the far corner watching him belligerently, her black tail switching—the fat black shop cat, sour-natured and reclusive, seldom venturing out of doors.

Was that the black tail he had followed, and not Azrael?

The old female hissed at him, leaped to the nearest desk and sprayed the wall, defiantly marking her territory. Now he could smell nothing else.

Jumping to the floor, Joe sniffed around the stairs. He could not detect the tomcat and he heard nothing from the store below, although when Azrael and old Greeley broke into a shop they weren't quiet—they argued in loud whispers, the old man as hard-headed as the black tomcat.

Padding down the stairs, he circled the shop, brushing against expensive wool suits and nosing behind counters. He could detect no scent of the pair; the stink of the old lady upstairs still filled his nostrils. He found nothing disturbed around the cash register, nothing out of place, no one in the storeroom. Angry at his mistake, he fled upstairs again and out the window to pad along the edge of the roofs, looking over them, wishing he hadn't lost Gail.

He searched for the look-alikes for some time, then headed again for their motel—passing Alice Manning, who stood below him in the shadows near the Shrimp Bowl. He guessed this was Alice, dressed in khaki shirt and skirt. Gail and Dorothy had been wearing jeans, Beverly a pants suit. Trying to sort out the four look-alikes was enough to give any cat fits. He could see, through the

restaurant window, that Beverly Barker had left. A waiter was clearing the table.

Making his way over tarpaper and shingles to the Wanderer, he dropped down into its patio just as the courthouse clock struck nine. The women's motel room was still dark, the window still open, and there was no sound—but someone had opened the drapery.

Quietly working the screen free with his claws, he took a good look around, then slipped inside.

The soft lights from the patio bathed the room, picking out the open, half-empty suitcases and scattered clothes. Still no sound, no movement. He could not sort one woman's scent from the other. Their mix of perfumes and lotions filled every space, making his nose burn.

In Gail's open suitcase, under her robe, lay a black cat mask, a black leotard, black, soft boots and a pair of black suede gloves, thin and pliable—and smelling of brine.

Digging deeper, he found only jeans and underwear. The bottom of the suitcase was fitted with a zippered pocket, locked with one of those little combination locks designed to secure luggage that could be easily slit open with any sharp instrument—but not with a cat's claws. It would take a lot of raking to tear that dense nylon. Dragging a paw across the pocket, he thought it might contain a few papers, certainly nothing thicker. He returned the clothes as neatly as he could, pawing everything back, and stood a moment looking at a jacket that hung over a chair by the door, studying its primitive, multi-colored designs. Latin American. How interesting.

But then, leaping to the dresser, nosing through a pile of papers, he unearthed a motel note pad where someone had written, *Festival rehearsal Wednesday, 7 p.m.*

This was Friday. Frances Farrow had died Thursday morning, the day after the rehearsal.

That night, after the three women rehearsed their number, had they gone somewhere for a late supper, maybe a few drinks? In the small hours, had Frances Farrow gone off alone, perhaps walked along the sea, getting her feet wet? Before dawn, alone, had she wandered into the patio of Otter Pine Inn? Maybe saw the tearoom door ajar and went inside—blundering into the burglary in progress?

And ended up dead.

Maybe she had grabbed for the thief, meaning to stop him or her, and the thief hit her—accidentally killed her?

Conjecture. All conjecture. Too many possibilities—as frustrating as hunting invisible mice in a glass house.

Returning to Gail's suitcase, he sniffed at the gloves again, at the scent of brine,

then retrieved a plastic bag from the wastebasket. Lifting each glove by its edge, he dropped them in.

He tossed the rest of the room as methodically as he could, going through suitcases and makeup bags. Standing beside Dorothy's suitcase, he pawed her silk slip aside to reveal a small automatic, with the clip in. Maybe a .22 or .25 caliber, a little, ladies' gun that would fit nicely into pocket or purse.

The brine-scented gloves were Gail's, the gun was Dorothy's. And then, standing in the sink pawing through a flowered cosmetic kit on the bathroom shelf, he found a small, zippered makeup bag that felt like it contained bullets. Attempting to slide the zipper, he got it on the fifth pull, nearly tearing out a claw.

Bullets. Soft nosed. Maybe .38s. Certainly a larger caliber than the automatic. He'd watched often enough when Max Harper and Clyde Damen cleaned their guns after going to the firing range to know the difference.

Well, there was no law against having bullets or a gun, even in California, if one followed the state's intricate rules. But two armed women? What did that add up to?

Or did Dorothy have two guns? He had, with the reek of perfume and hair spray numbing his nose, no notion whose cosmetic bag this was—he felt helpless. He had temporarily lost his most valuable skill.

Well, he hadn't really expected to find the stolen money from the inn—but he was disappointed that he didn't. Out of sorts, growling softly, he was fighting to open a drawer of the night stand when a click at the door sent him across the room and out the window, dragging the gloves in their plastic bag.

Crouching under the bushes, he could see nothing. He heard someone step inside, heard the door close. The windows remained dark. He could hear them moving around, pulling out drawers, apparently searching just as he had himself searched, by the soft light from the patio.

Leaving the plastic bag among the leaves and dirt, he eased up onto the sill again, trying to remain within the rhododendron bush, out of sight—looking in at Alice Manning. Same khaki skirt and shirt, same rope sandals. Where had she gotten a key?

But that would be easy enough. Stop in the motel office, say she'd lost hers. She looked exactly like the three occupants; who would know?

She knelt beside the open suitcase from which he had taken the gloves, her back to him, her tight khaki skirt hiked above her knees. Lifting out the leotard and boots and the cat mask, she removed the clothes beneath. He couldn't see what she was doing, with her back to him, but she worked at something for a few moments then he

heard the click of the lock and the zipper sliding. He couldn't tell whether she was putting something into the bag or taking something out. He heard a faint rustling, like paper. He was so interested he nearly pushed on inside to have a look. And why not? Just a little friendly session of pet the kitty.

Except, with Azrael mixed up in this gig, he wasn't sure who knew about the talents of certain cats. He could walk right into trouble.

And, was this really Alice Manning? He could detect no human scent at all, over the mélange of lotions and perfumes. Before he could move, she zipped up the compartment again. As the lock clicked, four blocks away the courthouse clock struck 9:30. Patiently, Joe waited for her to leave.

She didn't leave. She moved idly around the room as if preoccupied, glancing at the strewn clothes and into the open suitcases, but touching nothing else. When she turned toward the window Joe lost his nerve and dropped down again into the bushes, crouching beside the gloves, puzzled. She stood just above him, looking out, then slid the window closed. As she pulled the curtains, Joe took the evidence bag in his teeth—he hoped the gloves turned out to be evidence—and headed across the village for the back door of the Molena Point PD, looking, he supposed, like he was hauling a pair of dead rats all done up in plastic for the home freezer.

## Chapter Six

Joe Grey, carrying the plastic bag in his teeth, trotted through the patio's flower beds, heading for the Molena Point PD. If the police lab found fibers from the dead woman's leotard clinging to the gloves, Captain Harper would have his killer—accidental death, maybe. Or a clever murder? And even if murder couldn't be proved, Harper would likely have his thief.

The night was dark, the moon thin. Climbing a jasmine vine beside the Chinese restaurant, Joe made his way across the roofs hauling the bag like a mother cat dragging a large and unwieldy kitten. Crossing the streets on the branches of the twisted oaks, trying not to trip on his slick plastic burden, he was soon on the roof of the jail.

He backed down a tree, his claws in the bark, the bag dangling over his shoulder as if he were a homeless wanderer with a see-through pack. The police parking lot was well lighted, with the area walled on one side by the police station, on the other two sides by the jail and the courthouse; the fourth perimeter was open to the street. He crossed beneath the squad cars..

He was nearly to the steps, looking up at the heavy metal door of the station, when a car turned in—Captain Harper's surveillance car. Joe scutched into the shadows beside the steps, crouching over his burden. He didn't need Harper to find him here with vital evidence. Harper already had too many suspicions about the "phantom snitch."

The car door opened and the tap of Harper's boots approached across the concrete; Joe's heart was quivering like a cornered rat. Harper climbed the steps inches from his nose and unlocked the metal door. Before it could slam, Joe was through behind his heels, hauling the plastic bag, flinching when the door banged shut. As Harper moved quickly up the hall into the squad room, Joe fled for the nearest conference room dragging the bag—a demented retriever unwilling to let go.

He collapsed beneath a chair, panting. Sometimes the stress of such moments got to him. He could use a quick pick-me-up, just now. A ham sandwich or a nice fresh rat. Or some of George Jolly's imported gourmet treats. He was dreaming of Jolly's Deli, of smoked salmon and fine cheeses, when Harper came running down

the hall again, his boots thundering and three officers pounding behind him. Joe peered out as the back door banged open; they disappeared through it, and he heard three cars roar away.

Dragging the bag, he fled for the squad room where he could hear the police radio. Crouching under Harper's desk, he heard the dispatcher repeat her call. Commercial burglary at Charles, Ltd.

Had they been robbed before he, himself, entered? Or after he left? Or had Greeley and the black tomcat been in there after all, maybe hiding in one of the dressing rooms? That made him feel really stupid.

Harper and his men had left without sirens. Joe knew they'd patrol quietly for anyone fleeing the scene, then would enter the shop in silence.

Slipping up onto Harper's desk chair, he dropped the bagged gloves on the blotter, meaning to take off after the law. The big squad room was nearly empty, a couple of guys at their desks writing reports, the dispatcher behind her counter. He was about to make a dash for the front door, see if he could leap up unseen, push the release button on the wall and ease the door open, when he felt a draft coming from the back of the building.

There were no windows in the back, and he hadn't heard that door open. The only other door was to the courthouse, and it was kept locked at night. Dropping down to take a look, he heard a brushing sound in the hall. Crouched for fight or flight, he peered around the corner—and was face to face with Dulcie.

His tabby lady looked back at him, her green eyes wide with amusement. "I followed you. Come on, Joe, get out of the hall. The janitor will close the door in a minute, he'll see us."

They slipped back into the squad room, under Harper's desk. "Janitor's cleaning the courthouse," Dulcie said. "He propped the hall door open, into the station. He's not supposed to do that—if Harper knew, he'd get him fired. I got into the courthouse when he went out to put some buckets on the steps."

"Great security. So how did you find me?"

"I saw you from the tower; I was following Larry Cruz. He and Gail—I think it was Gail—went in that bar on the next street."

"I thought you were watching Alice Manning."

"I was on the roof beside their window. She and her husband had a cozy dinner for two, in their room, in front of the fire, then snuggled up watching an old movie. It was nice," she said, purring. "She wears pink satin pajamas."

"What time was that?"



“I got there about 8:30, left an hour later.”

“I saw Alice outside the Shrimp Bowl, about then—or did I? I thought it was Alice. Khaki skirt and blouse. Could you see her the whole time? Could she have gone out later?”

“She pulled the curtains about nine. I left at 9:30; the tower clock had just struck the half hour. I couldn’t see in any more, but the movie was still playing, I could hear it and could see the lights moving across the curtains. I guess she could have gone out.

“After she pulled the curtains, I was ready to give it up and drop off the roof, when I saw Larry Cruz standing across the street looking up, watching the Mannings’ windows. Dark clothes, standing in the shadows. I don’t know how long he’d been there. I guess he could see right in, before they pulled the drapes, it’s only the third floor, and they were right by the window. When he turned away, I followed him over the roofs.

“He stopped in the deli, got a sandwich, ate it walking around. He was all over the village. He met Gail near the courthouse, she was waiting for him—I guess it was Gail,” Dulcie said, her green eyes widening. “She was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. She gave him a package, he tucked it in his shirt, under his jacket, and they went in the bar.”

Joe said, “Charles, Ltd. was robbed tonight. I was in there, I thought I followed Azrael in, but I couldn’t smell him. It might have been the shop cat. Found no one downstairs, and nothing looked disturbed. No sign of Greeley.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange that we haven’t seen him?”

He sat looking at her. “You saw Alice in her room from 8:30 to 9:00. After that, you thought she was there. At 9:30 you left, and followed Larry. He meets Gail—you think it was Gail—about 10:00. They go in the bar.” Joe frowned, his ears back, his yellow eyes narrowing. “Say Larry has partnered up with Greeley, planning to lay the blame on Alice. Say he was watching Alice’s room to be sure there were no witnesses to where she was, when the burglary came down.”

“But...”

“I wonder if room service saw her when they delivered their dinner. They could testify she was there, not ripping off the men’s store.”

“Dinner was in paper bags,” Dulcie said. “Takeout Chinese. Smelled good.” She licked her whiskers. “Maybe they got tired of fancy hotel food. So there was no room service. Manning picked up their order himself, was coming in when I got there.”

Dulcie rolled over, her tabby stripes blending with the shadows. “And there’s something else. This afternoon, on the inn’s patio, I was waiting for Larry. I thought I might learn something, the way you said. He came in from his car, that red Acura, carrying a black duffel bag, like divers use for their wet suits and equipment, and he smelled of the sea. His shoes were sandy, and when I sniffed around his tires they smelled of little dead sea creatures and tar, and there was sand in the treads.”

“So, the guy’s a diver.”

“And the corpse’s feet were wet from the sea.”

“What are you saying? We should take up diving, slip on a couple of wet suits and...”

Dulcie pressed against him, warm and sleek and purring. “I think we should follow him next time he goes to dive. Who knows what we’ll find?”

## Chapter Seven

In Moreno's Grill, beneath the table in a shadowed corner booth, the two cats pressed as far away from the shoes of Joe Grey's human housemate, and of police chief Max Harper, as they could squeeze. The carpet smelled of stale French fries. It was the afternoon after the burglary at Charles, Ltd.

Harper and Clyde Damen liked to wind down at Moreno's after work, isolated in the far corner of the quiet bar where they could speak privately, no nosy idlers to overhear. Clyde was the only civilian with whom the police chief talked freely. The two men, having grown up together, were as close as brothers.

"Burglar alarm was disconnected," Harper said. "No one knew about the break-in until Chuck Connover went back to the store that night, some time before 10, to pick up some papers he'd meant to work on. He started to turn off the alarm, then saw that it was off. Found the cash register open and empty. Went on into the back room, which was foolish. Said he was relieved when he found the safe locked. He didn't open it until we got there, didn't know until then that it had been cleaned out. The burglary could have happened anywhere between 8, when he left the store, and 10. We found no prints."

"You pick up any fibers or hairs, or anything dropped?"

"The usual dust and lint, sent off to the lab. Found some hairs on the desk beside the safe—black animal hairs. Likely from Chuck's old cat, she's all over the shop."

Under the table, Joe and Dulcie looked at each other. Chuck Connover's old cat? Or Azrael? But bigger puzzles than the identity of a black cat filled their thoughts.

They had spent the early dawn on the rocky cliffs south of the village, watching Larry Cruz suit up beside the tailgate of his red Acura. Larry had met no one, and had hardly spoken to the other divers. Watching him pull on his flippers and back into the water, they could see him for a while through the clear blue swells before he vanished, where the sea went black along the cliffs. He came out an hour later, and did not have any fish or shellfish. But he seemed to have done nothing different than any of the other divers.

Above their heads, Harper said, "I don't like to lay this stuff on you, Clyde. You're the only one I'd tell how uneasy it makes me. I laugh about it, in the squad room."

“What stuff?”

“The phantom snitch is back. The messenger who leaves evidence in my car and at the back door of the station. Same guy who tipped us where the weapon was hidden that killed Samuel Beckwhite, and has been phoning me ever since. Same voice, same turns of speech.”

Beneath the table, Clyde shifted his feet with unease. “You told me it was a man and a woman. And that their information is reliable,” he said testily.

“A hundred percent,” Harper said. “But still they make me nervous. Last night, someone left a plastic bag on my desk, at about the time the commercial burglary report came in. Bag contained a pair of woman’s gloves. Black suede. Sent them to the lab this morning.”

The men were silent. Someone set down his glass. “I can’t discount these tips,” Harper said. “They’ve helped us in past cases. But they’re mighty hard to explain to the court—I’ve never seen these two, I have no information about them. Usually, I know my snitches.”

“The gloves had something to do with the burglary?” Clyde asked innocently. “Or maybe with the death of Frances Farrow? But you keep the station doors locked at night, keep that back door locked all the time. It would have to be one of your own people, to leave evidence there on your desk.”

“Don’t you think I asked!”

In the shadows, Dulcie’s green eyes shone with amusement. Clyde said nothing more, and soon, when Harper turned the conversation to his horses, Joe nudged Dulcie and they moved swiftly through the shadows beneath the tables, streaked past the bar and through the kitchen and out the screen door, into the narrow alley.

“There’s something I didn’t tell you,” Joe said, crouching beside the garbage cans. “Something that might explain why we haven’t seen old Greeley with the black tomcat. Come on.” And, ignoring the heady scent of raw fish and meat wrappers, he headed fast up Ocean Avenue, dodging around the feet of tourists.

“What? Where are we going?” Dulcie hissed, galloping beside him.

He didn’t answer, but lowered his head and ran, swerving down a side street—stopping suddenly when a black cat loomed out of the shadows, blocking their path.

Azrael, black as sin, his tail lashing, his amber eyes narrowed and cold. He drew himself taller, bowing his neck, looking down at Joe. “So, little gray kitty. You are still following me? Still playing detective? What, you poor creature, do you imagine I’ve done now?”

Joe Grey smiled, his yellow eyes assessing Azrael, his sleek gray coat rippling

over hard muscle. "I had no thought of following you, you pitiful mouser. Though I see you are still playing at your mindless games, stealing money that only your whiskey-sodden partner can make use of."

Azrael laughed. "Not any more. That old fake is long gone—this tomcat works alone."

"And where did you leave him?"

"Walking the streets of Panama, if it's any of your business. Rolling drunk. Maybe dead by now, mugged in some alley."

"And you stowed away on your own, back to the states," Joe said indulgently.

Azrael laughed. "I have my contacts. That was a nice take, by the way, from Charles, Ltd."

"No cat on this earth, you poor, worm-ridden beast, can manipulate the dial of a safe. No cat can turn that little wheel with the required precision."

But Joe wondered. If a cat could turn a doorknob, as Joe and Dulcie and Azrael all could do, what might Azrael have taught himself, with sufficient practice? Was the dial of a safe beyond a clever cat's talents? With a cat's keen hearing, could not the tumblers tell him all he needed to know?

Joe looked the tomcat over. "Who brought you back from Panama? What gullible human did you con into a plane ride?" Though if Joe's suspicion was right, the idea that had sent him hurrying from Moreno's Grill, Azrael's arrival was easily enough explained. "Who did you con into taking you aboard in a little wire cage? Or did you spend 12 hours in the luggage hold, freezing your sorry tail?"

The black tom leaped on Joe, all teeth and claws, the two raking each other in a whirlwind of hard, furry bodies, thumping against concrete and against the brick wall, a war of pent-up rage that ceased only when the third party threw her weight into the battle, slashing both toms and screaming at them until they broke apart to stare at her.

She stood between them, holding Azrael's gaze until the two toms moved far enough apart to formally end the battle. But she was shivering with fear. What she wanted to do was bolt. She'd always been afraid of Azrael, even when once, long ago, he had charmed her. His look at her now was deadly—an evil smile, the smile of a black shark heaving up from the darkest seas.

And then he turned and sauntered away, lashing his long black tail.

"Why did you do that?" Joe growled. "Why didn't you let me finish him? You made me look a fool."

"Not at all. You would have killed each other. Look at you. Your ear's torn,

blood running down your face—your shoulder torn. Although you sent him away with as much blood,” she said softly, licking his ravaged ear. She watched Azrael, a black speck far in the distance, disappearing down an alley.

“I think I know how he got here,” Joe said, “and who our burglar is.” He led Dulcie beneath the oak trees, in the gathering dusk, to her favorite shop.

Standing close together, rearing up on their hind paws, they looked into the show window at the feast of bright colors and intricate patterns. “Here’s the link,” Joe said, “between Azrael and one of the look-alikes—maybe the best connection we have yet to the death of Frances Farrow.”

## Chapter Eight

Dulcie reared up, looking into the brightly lighted display window, her tabby paws against the glass, her green eyes glowing; she never tired of the shop's imports, the brilliantly colored Guatemalan jackets and weavings, the San Blas appliqués, the painted Mexican figures. Close beside her, Joe Grey watched her tenderly, always moved by his lady's passion for the beautiful and exotic.

They had met the shop's owner, Ms. Sue Marble, at about the same time they met Azrael and old Greeley. The cats had been greatly amused when the lonely, white-haired lady and Greeley became an item and took off to Central America together, Sue on another buying trip, Greeley returning to his home—with Azrael in his carrier, of course. Sue knew nothing about the black cat's hidden talents.

Now the couple had been gone for nearly a year, and Azrael was back in the village with no sign of either Greeley or Sue—and the mysterious burglaries had resumed.

"That jacket in the window," Joe said, pawing at the glass. "The red one, woven with birds and animals. Where does that come from?"

"Ecuador, I think. Or maybe Peru. Why?"

"I saw one like it last night, when I tossed the motel room of the look-alikes."

"Maybe one of them bought, it here. They could..."

"It was worn, Dulcie. Faded, not new."

Dulcie sat down on the sidewalk, the concrete still warm from the vanished sun. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm wondering if one of those three women has been in South America."

She smiled, her whiskers twitching. "You're thinking one of them has been in Panama, and that's how Azrael got back?" She licked her paw. "That's reaching for it. What ever...?"

"There were cat hairs on the jacket. Black cat hairs."

"You are maddening. Why didn't you say so!"

Joe smiled.

"Could you smell his scent?"

“Not in that motel room. Enough perfume and lotions in there to deaden the nose of an elephant.”

“In Sue’s last letter to Wilma, she said she and Greeley were getting married. She said nothing about coming back. She seems very happy, making her buying trips out of Panama to Peru and Guatemala and shipping the purchases back here, to her shop manager.”

Dulcie frowned, her ears going flat. “She did say she wasn’t happy about Greeley’s cat, that he’d turned out to be a problem. Remember how, in the beginning, she called him a dear, handsome fellow! She thought he was so regal. Maybe Greeley and the tomcat were burglarizing shops in Panama, maybe she found out. Maybe she threw Azrael out of the house.”

“That wouldn’t explain how he got here. Greeley has no friends in the village to send Azrael to, only his sister. And Mavity hates that cat.”

“But maybe Greeley is here,” Dulcie said. “He’d be staying with Mavity. Let’s have a look.” And beneath the darkening evening sky, the cats headed for the marsh and Mavity’s little fishing shack. East three blocks through the village, and over seven to the marshy shore of the bay, then along through the cattails and sea grass, the mud cold beneath their paws and smelling of dead fish, to a long row of houses standing on mud-blackened stilts.

Scenting around the pilings and around the tires of Mavity’s old VW bug, they found no hint of Greeley. But the tomcat had definitely been there. His day-old aroma was on the steps, and on a rusty porch chair as if he might have slept there.

The kitchen window that Azrael had once used as a private door was tightly closed. A light burned within. Leaping to the sill, Joe could not smell Azrael along the edge of the window, could smell only the ham and beans that must have been Mavity’s supper. A single clean bowl stood in the drain basket, with one knife, fork and spoon. He could see Mavity, beyond the open kitchen; the small, elderly woman curled up on the couch with a book, a blanket over her feet and a stack of romances on the table beside her. He watched her for a moment, purring, then dropped down again to where Dulcie sat on the cold, damp ground among the tarred posts.

“No sign of Greeley,” Joe said. “If Azrael’s alone, maybe he sleeps here for a few hours—Mavity would never know.”

“Do you suppose he’s lonely? Comes here to feel at home?”

Joe Grey snorted. “More likely cold, after the heat of Panama. And looking to see if he can rip off Mavity in some way.”

As they headed back to the village, the first star gleamed above them. Trotting



through the darkening gardens, brushing among geraniums whose scent they would carry on their fur for hours, they were headed for Joe's house when they saw Larry Cruz's red car turning the corner toward Otter Pine Inn.

Quickly following him, they watched him park and saunter onto the patio. But when they trotted in past the stink of exhaust and hot rubber, he had vanished.

Beyond the mullioned windows of the tearoom, a soft light burned, and they could hear women's voices. Teatime was long past. Padding to the stained glass door, the cats listened.

"It's Patty Rose and Alice," Dulcie whispered, nosing at the slightly open door.

Slipping in behind the baker's rack with its potted ferns—where, so recently, Frances Farrow had lain dead—they watched the two women, sitting at a small wicker table with their drinks, deep in conversation. A generation apart, they looked more alike than most mothers and daughters, Alice blond and fresh and exactly as Patty had looked in her old movies. Patty was still a looker, too, her hair skillfully cut and colored, her figure still slim. Despite her wrinkles, Patty was still a beautiful woman.

"Then you hadn't seen Larry Cruz since you left Santa Monica?" Patty was saying.

"No. And I certainly didn't expect to see him here. That makes me so angry, that he'd follow me here."

"Maybe it wasn't you he followed. Had you thought about that? When you learned to dive from him, were all your lessons alone?"

"Yes. I didn't get very good. But ... that's how I became involved with him. So foolish. I can never make that up to my husband." Alice sighed. "I couldn't help but tell Jim. I don't keep secrets well," she said softly.

"Before you left Santa Monica, you never met Gail or saw her?"

Alice spilled her drink, grabbed some paper napkins and bent to wipe it up.

Patty Rose watched her with interest. "I know Santa Monica is only part of the LA sprawl, but you both lived near the beach. She must have been there for two or three months before you moved away. Strange that you or one of your friends weren't aware of a woman who looks exactly like you."

"You'd think so." Alice shook her head. "I never saw her, never heard of her."

"Did you ever suspect, when you were seeing Larry, that he was into any kind of trouble?"

The question seemed difficult for Alice. "No, but ... I'm not surprised, the way, after we broke up, that he kept bothering me, kept coming around, wouldn't leave

me alone. I asked the police what I could do, but they were busy and there wasn't much. Larry was one of the reasons we moved."

"Maybe he discovered Gail after you left. It's possible he followed *her* up here, pestering her the way he pestered you. The way he pestered me last year."

"As if he has some kind of fixation about the women in your old films?" Alice said, as if the idea had just occurred to her. "When I saw him with Gail, I thought, *good for her. Good riddance*. I never—I don't *think* I ever saw him with any of the others. But Patty, if he was such a bother to you, why did you hire him?"

"I didn't think he was dangerous. And I thought it was better to have him where I could see him. And I must confess, I hoped that when the contest rolled around, he might take up with one of the contestants. I never dreamed that it would end like this," Patty whispered. "In such an ugly way."

Patty drained her glass. "Will you lead the parade with me, Alice, in my car? I think it will take all of us together to help get over this nightmare."

Alice hesitated. "I'd rather not. I guess I'm more frightened of Larry ... more frightened by Frances's death than I knew."

Patty nodded. "If you change your mind..." She got up, pushing back her chair. Before she turned, the cats slipped out onto the patio and around the corner ... nearly under the feet of Larry Cruz where he stood hidden among the oleanders, against the wall of the tearoom. Listening. Scowling, as Alice walked away.

## Chapter Nine

Patty Rose's antique Rolls Royce led the parade, its top down, its white paint polished and gleaming, its brass fittings as bright as the afternoon sun that hung just above the sea. Patty, dressed in white satin, sat on the back of the front seat, looming above her liveried driver, smiling and waving. Dorothy Daniels had been right when she said Patty wouldn't miss being queen of the festival, wouldn't miss the publicity—though she wasn't throwing kitty treats.

On the warm, shingled roof high above the crowd, Joe Grey and Dulcie had the best seats in the village, their only competition a dozen scolding grackles—the dark, pushy birds sensibly keeping their distance from lethal claws. Behind Patty's Rolls Royce came the Molena Point high school marching band, then a team of mounted riders dressed in white Western wear. Then the lead float, done in many colors of crepe paper and carrying the three look-alikes clad in black cat costumes, their cat masks seeming to smile as they performed little dance steps—teasers for their act to come on the stage that had been set up at the edge of the beach. On their float behind the three blondes were two rows of kennel cages, each with a clean, pretty cat cozied down on a blanket. The animal shelter must have chosen their most laid-back charges. All the cats seemed comfortable, unperturbed by the noise and the crowd. The float's banners proclaimed:

**A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME WITHOUT KITTY.**

**SAVE A LIFE AND BRIGHTEN YOUR LIFE.**

Behind the float came more riders, then seven more antique cars, including the yellow Chevy roadster belonging to Joe Grey's housemate. Clyde Damen was all decked out in a clean white turtleneck and sport coat. Beside him rode his red-headed girlfriend, Charlie Getz. When she spotted the cats on the roof above, she waved to them with a secret smile.

Following Clyde and Charlie came another marching band, then three more floats carrying village children dressed in cat costumes. All along the length of Ocean Avenue, the shops were decorated with cat banners, cat flags and cat kites. Stuffed toy cats were featured in the windows among displays of women's wear, sweaters

embroidered with cats, and cat jewelry. Although many shops were closed for the occasion, they had provided handsome decorations.

The book store had an exhibit of cat books and a three-foot-tall Puss-in-boots made of crepe paper. One of the nicest women's stores was hosting a cat-princess puppet show. And on every corner, Molena Point Animal Shelter had placed adoption booths with comfortably caged cats and charming young attendants.

That aspect didn't charm Dulcie. "I hope people don't take kittens on a whim, like they would a toy, then not care for them."

"Do you always have to look for sand in the milk dish?"

"I don't always. But you've seen kittens... Oh, never mind." And she turned away crossly.

But Joe licked her ear. "They're handing out brochures, Dulcie. And the volunteers are talking to people who want to adopt—they're screening them and explaining the basics. Telling them what a little cat needs to be healthy and safe. I listened to one. She sounded like she knew what she was doing."

"I hope so," Dulcie said dourly. "I don't... Look. Is that Azrael slipping along the roof above the gift shop?"

They watched the black tom disappear within the shadows above the Mink Collar, a jewelry and leather boutique. At the same moment, on the sidewalk below them, Alice Manning came along behind the gathered onlookers; she was dressed in denim shorts and a white pullover. This had to be Alice; the other three were on the float.

But it was Azrael who held Joe and Dulcie's attention, who sent them racing across the roofs to the end of the block, dropping down to the balcony of the Mink Collar.

Pushing through the open window where Azrael had disappeared, where they could smell his scent, they explored the storage room then trotted down the stairs into the shop, searching beneath the display cases and in the cupboards—then followed his trail to a door that would open to the alley.

It was bolted from within, but a black cat hair clung to the metal. Nothing else in the store seemed to have been touched. The cash drawer beneath the computer was locked.

"Maybe he was casing the place for later," Joe said. "Maybe he saw us and left while we were crossing the street."

Dulcie said nothing, stood looking around, lashing her tail with irritation.

They returned to the roofs, silhouetted now against the sinking sun. Below them

the parade was ending, the floats gathering at the edge of the beach where the stage had been built and lights strung from poles. The three masked blondes sat on the edge of their float, bantering with the crowd. Some distance away, Alice Manning stood on the sand with her husband, the two of them eating hot dogs. Joe and Dulcie could see, beyond the parade route, several squad cars drifting along the quiet streets. They watched the performers gather, watched families spread out blankets on the sand in front of the stage, their backs to the setting sun and to the crowd that milled around behind them. Soon the entire shore was filled, people shouting the songs from *Cats* and cheering the black-cat dancers. Joe and Dulcie's ears rang with the lyrics.

When the look-alikes' numbers were finished, the three performers stepped down to mix with the audience. One of them headed for the outdoor ladies' room, carrying a black duffel bag that must have been tucked out of sight on the float.

"Probably went to change clothes," Dulcie said. "Those leotards look hot."

But she came out still dressed in skin-fitting black, still carrying the bag. The three women were separated now; as night fell and the jazz band began to play, they were hard to keep track of. Folks began to dance on the blacktop at edge of the beach, and one black-clad blonde moved away through the crowd toward a stand of cypress trees.

"Stay here, Dulcie. Watch the others." And Joe Grey was gone, following her.

The entertainment was long, with readings, more jazz numbers, and an announcement by a representative of Molena Point Animal Shelter that 27 cats and kittens had been adopted. Dulcie, watching for Joe, began to fidget. Soon she was pacing the shingles, her ears back, her tail twitching, staring away toward the cypress trees and the sea cliffs. It was during a jazz instrumental number that she heard a sharp *thunk* somewhere behind her, as if the branch of a tree had broken. Nervously she searched the beach and the line of tall cypress that loomed dark in the gathering night. No sign of Joe, no telltale white chest and paws gleaming in the darkness.

As the number ended and a jazz guitarist came on stage, Dulcie saw, five blocks away, two squad cars take off fast, moving south, their lights flashing but no sirens.

Crouched on the shingles, she felt her heart thunder. What had happened? And where was Joe Grey? A siren screamed down the street behind her, and she spun around to see a rescue vehicle careen across Ocean, turning toward the beach. She took off fast across the rooftops. Joe was out there, he had followed that woman exactly where the police were headed. Galloping across ancient mossy shingles and through a half-built second story addition between studs and sawhorses, racing over

the slick tile roofs of expensive oceanfront homes, she followed two more police cars to where the emergency vehicle had screamed to a stop.

A black-clad body lay on the sand, sleek in its tight suit, the face very pale. A perfect replay of the corpse at Otter Pine Inn.

Except this victim was a man.

Larry Cruz lay surrounded by police, the paramedics bending over him. His diving fins and mask, his hood and weights lay scattered across the sand. There was a bullet hole in his chest. The medics were doing their best to stop the bleeding and bring him back. As they worked on Larry, Max Harper's car arrived. Dulcie ducked down, watching the captain step out with Detective Juana Davis, and the familiar routine began. The yellow tape, officers urging people back out of the way. Davis with her camera, her dark, short hair falling over her cheek. Soon the coroner was there to do his chilling work. Dulcie hardly paid attention to the investigation, as she searched beyond the gathering crowd, looking through the darkness for a small speck out on the sand—and for the black-clad woman he had followed.

## Chapter Ten

On the rooftop of the oceanfront cottage, Dulcie was hardly visible, so well did her dark tabby coat blend in with the shingles. Nervously, she watched the police below her working the scene, the curious onlookers—and the black-clad corpse so reminiscent of the corpse in the tearoom.

The coroner knelt over Larry Cruz's body, studying the bullet hole through the dead man's diving suit and searching for additional wounds; although the single shot through Larry's heart must have killed him. Dr. Bern was a thin, button-nosed man; he served as both coroner and medical examiner for the Molena Point PD. She'd heard him say there was no indication of drowning, that the victim had not been hauled out of the sea dead and then shot.

Detective Juana Davis knelt beside him, fingerprinting the dry areas of Larry's diving mask and fins, and searching the pocket that had been built into his diving suit—an unusual addition, Dulcie thought. Davis found it empty. Dulcie puzzled only briefly over what it might have carried, but her thoughts were on Joe Grey. Shifting from paw to paw, she peered away into the night where Joe had disappeared, perhaps following the killer, and she could not be still.

Dropping from the roof to the top of a fence and then to the sand, she trotted through the forest of human legs and out toward the sea, doubling back and forth until she found a single line of shoe prints broken by a narrow row of pawprints, both tracks so fresh that the sand was still trickling in. Dulcie's own paws sank deep. The smell of iodine and dead sea creatures filled her nostrils. The double trail led straight for the rocky sea cliff, some quarter mile away. Hurrying, slogging through sand and increasingly worried for Joe, she arrived at the cliff, panting.

Joe's prints ended where the rocky cliff rose up. The human prints led along a narrow strip of sand between cliff and sea. No breakers surged tonight, only an oily churning as the tide rose.

Racing up the sharp promontory of jutting stone, Dulcie searched the dark escarpment, softly calling Joe's name. There was no answer, no sound but sea. The bleak stone hill was empty. Padding to the edge, she looked down on the black and

roiling sea and on the thin sliver of beach. A woman stood there, a black-clad figure, her face and hair as pale as a winter moon.

Quickly Dulcie doubled back, scenting along the rocks, cold with fear for Joe. But then at last she found his trail, descending the cliff along a four-inch-wide shelf, one of a dozen accordion-like ledges tilting toward the water—ridges that had likely formed eons past as the earth heaved up in some catastrophic quake. Padding down the narrow incline, Dulcie shivered, not from the cold.

She liked the sea from a distance, she loved listening to the ocean's pounding heartbeat, which always comforted her. But to venture upon the windy cliffs at night, with the water heaving close beneath her and the tide rising, was another matter.

*Where was Joe? Where was Joe Grey?*

Beneath her sweating paws she could feel the earth trembling, too, from the pounding of the swells that broke at last against the cliff and that seemed to surge within the cliff, a hollow surging like water crashing into a hidden cave. Yes, there was a cave, it could be seen from another neck of land when the tide was out. Now it would be mostly underwater. Descending the four-inch ledge, she stopped suddenly.

Joe Grey stood below her as if he had materialized from the rock itself, his white face looking up at her, white chest and paws gleaming in the night, his black eyes intense. They spoke no word. Joe turned to look below them.

Down on the beach, the woman was pulling on a black hood over her blond hair. They watched her position a diving mask.

Padding down the narrow ledge, Dulcie pressed against Joe, licking his face and purring. He gave her a whisker kiss and a soft purr. It was all right, when they were together. They watched the woman pull on fins, accompanied by a little ratcheting sound as she tightened the straps. She secured a pale stick to her leg, too, then backed down the sand into the sea. Diving beneath the oily dark water, she was gone, vanished among the swells.

They saw her once, a dark underwater shape hardly visible, moving beneath the cliff and in where the sea hushed hollowly—and suddenly Joe Grey, too, was gone, slipping back into the hole from which he had emerged.

Dulcie followed him through a crack in the stone, a six-inch-wide fissure, as if the cliff had split at some time or perhaps prehistoric tides had washed out a softer part of the rock. She didn't like creeping into the blackness between stone walls that pressed against her shoulders and zinged alarms through her whiskers. The floor of the hole was wet and slick, and as they pushed into the hollowness, the sea's surging



came louder. Then, abruptly, the right-hand wall ended and the narrow shelf fell away, straight down to the sea.

Dulcie's paws were sweating. She fixed on Joe's white feet moving away ahead of her, following him blindly until the ledge widened. Then suddenly below them a bright light moved beneath the dark, roiling water like the single fiery eye of a sea monster burning up at them.

Splash. The diver surfaced, her light exploding up, bathing the cliff as they fled away from the edge. Crouching against the wet stone wall, they kept their eyes slitted so as not to reflect the light back at her.

A black hand and arm reached up holding the pale stick, which had been lengthened. It had some kind of pincer at the end, maybe operated by a squeeze handle, Dulcie thought, like a stick for catching snakes, the kind used on TV nature programs. The woman dragged it along the shelf, feeling and poking and tapping, the stick reaching blindly toward them. They kept moving out of its way, backing deeper in—until Dulcie stumbled and nearly fell over something wet and slick.

A package lay on the wet stone shelf, a hard bundle as big as a book, wrapped in shiny black plastic. Joe slid his paw over it. "The money?" he said softly. "The stolen jewelry?"

Below them, the woman hung in the sea looking up, her light exploding the darkness. Could she see them? Crouched just out of the stick's reach, they dragged the package deeper into the tunnel.

The diver, growing impatient, began making little leaps out of the sea, so she could angle the stick higher. With every jump her light came higher, too.

Taking one end of the package in his mouth, Joe backed along the ledge toward the mouth of the tunnel, the stick hitting and scraping beside him. Dulcie carried the other end, the two of them forcing it into the tunnel, fighting to pull it through. The light followed them, but not the stick. Had she glimpsed them when she leaped up? The way seemed twice as far now, the hollow pounding twice as annoying. But at last they were out, dragging the bundle up the narrow ridge, trying to keep it from sliding over the side. It seemed forever until they got it atop the cliff and lay panting beside it, their hearts pounding, the sea wind prodding cold fingers into their wet fur. The night was very bright, after the black cave.

"I'm never moving again," Dulcie said.

"We'd better move, she'll be up here."

"Did she see us?"

Rising, Joe began to tear at the package, ripping the plastic until he could slip a paw in—and his soft cat laugh filled the night.

When he pulled out a paper bundle, beneath his white paw, held securely from the wind, was a stack of hundred dollar bills.

“She’s coming,” Dulcie hissed. A dislodged pebble rolled down the cliff, then the squinching sound of the woman’s wet diving suit. Shoving the packet beneath loose stones, the cats fought to claw rocks over it—stones too heavy to be moved easily by paw.

“She’ll have a gun,” Dulcie whispered. “Larry Cruz was murdered—shot.”

“I know,” Joe said. “I saw her kill him.”

Dulcie raised her head, looking at him; she felt very small, the two of them alone on the cliff in the night. Far away, down the beach, the whirling red light and police spotlights shone bright and safe. They were frantically digging and pushing at the package when the woman appeared above the edge of the cliff. She was coming straight for them, her fins and gloves dangling in her hand, her blond hair whipping across her face.

## Chapter Eleven

The night wind scoured across the black cliff, whipping at the cats, and the sea hushed and sucked below them as if it wanted to snatch them away. Quickly the dark figure approached, climbing. She had extinguished the light that was strapped to her forehead. Reaching the crest, she paused to strip off her hood and diving suit, packing them into the duffel bag with her fins. She gave no sign that she had seen them. They watched her remove, from the bag's zippered side pocket, a snub-nosed revolver. The starlight caught its gleam.

Wrapping the gun in a pale cloth and then in a piece of plastic, she took a small, folding shovel from the bag. She knelt almost where they had buried the black plastic package of hundred dollar bills, and began to move rocks aside. Clearing a space not a foot away from where the cats crouched among the rocks, she began to dig. They couldn't let her find the money and be off with it—they crouched, ready to spring at her, hardly breathing.

But she didn't find the package. When the hole was a foot deep, she laid the gun in and covered it, patting the earth down, then stood looking up the beach toward the police cars, toward the moving spotlights where she had shot Larry Cruz. The cats could not see her expression. She turned away at last, and they watched her descend the cliff and cross the sand, heading away from the murder scene, watched her enter the village well to the south, among the quiet cottages, disappearing in the shadows.

"Why didn't she throw the gun in the sea?" Dulcie said, pawing at where it was buried.

"Things wash back up. She'd have to go far out, maybe didn't want to take the time. Maybe she means to dig it up later." And Joe Grey smiled. "Max Harper will have it before she does."

"If we're quick, he will," Dulcie said, pawing sand from her whiskers. "I wonder what she thought happened to the money, when she couldn't find it? I thought sure she saw us."

Joe licked his own whiskers, spitting out grit. "She and Larry fought. Larry said she was holding back, said they were supposed to hide everything, the money, the jewelry, the credit card slips, and split it all later. She said she only held back enough

cash for expenses—she accused him of taking the money from her room. Larry said she was crazy. She shouted that he was double crossing her, and just like that she shot him. I didn't even see the gun. She must have had it in her hand all the time.

Joe Grey's eyes were sad. "Maybe she planned to kill him all along. Come on, Dulcie, let's get the money off this cliff. We can't leave it here."

"But who would find...?"

"Azrael. If he comes looking for her, if he catches our scent, he'll find it."

"You think *she's* his partner? But this evening, Azrael went into the Mink Collar just before she slipped away from the crowd and you followed her. She wouldn't have had time to go in and take anything. Anyway, he left the door locked."

"He could have opened it any time. That shop was closed all day. She could have sneaked in before the floats lined up, then Azrael could have gone back later, during the parade, and locked it from inside."

Pulling away stones with their claws, they freed the black plastic package and dragged it between them down the cliff and across the deep sand. They were both panting when they reached easier going beneath the cypress trees. The package was so heavy they were sure it contained more than paper money, though it couldn't hold all the small items that had vanished, the fine purses and billfolds and silver. Hurrying along over a mat of dry leaves, beneath drooping cypress branches, they headed for Joe's house. They stopped only once, near the murder scene, where the antique cars were parked.

Leaving Joe to guard the money, Dulcie slipped among the feet of the crowd and up into Clyde's open yellow roadster. Crouching on the floor, she punched in the message code on Clyde's cell phone. Her voice was soft. "Go home *now*, Clyde. We have the money. Please, hurry!"

Hitting *end call*, wondering if he would check his messages, she slipped up onto the back of the seat for a moment to watch the crowd.

She spotted Alice Manning, with her husband. Then a blonde in a black leotard. Then, some distance away, her twin. But no. There were three. One over by the hot dog stand—all three were there. The diver had returned. Talk about nerve.

She hurried back to Joe. "She's stashed her duffel somewhere and come back to mingle, as if she never left. They're so exactly alike! Who would know?"

Dragging the package through the dark streets for what seemed miles, they covered a distance that ordinarily would be a hop and a playful gallop. Reaching Joe's street at last, and his white Cape Cod cottage, they hauled their burden up the steps.

“This isn’t going to fit through your cat door.”

“Push, Dulcie. If we can get one edge under the flap...”

“It isn’t going to go, not even catty-corner.”

They got it stuck twice, then Joe ripped the plastic open.

“Hurry,” she said. “The whole neighborhood will see us, with the porch light on. Why did he leave the light on!”

Tearing with claws and teeth, they shoved one pack of hundred dollar bills through, then another, littering Clyde’s living room with enough cash to keep every cat in the village in caviar for the rest of its natural life. Beneath the money lay a dozen small plastic freezer bags filled with jewelry. Pushing it all through, they carried each bag and packet across the room, drooling some on the money, and stuffed them under the cushion of Joe Grey’s personal and ratty overstuffed chair—its cushions so lumpy that who could tell if there was a fortune crammed down atop the springs.

“Very nice,” purred a rasping voice behind them.

They spun, crouching, teeth bared, ears back.

“You two little kitties work very well together,” the black tom said. He stood in the dark dining room, his amber eyes mirroring light from the front window. “You’ve brought it all out from the cave for us. How thoughtful. Come have a look, my dear.”

A woman stepped from the kitchen, her blond hair tangled. She wore a blue sweater over her black leotard; she smelled strongly of the sea. Joe wondered where Rube was; he prayed they hadn’t hurt the old black Labrador. Normally Rube would be growling and barking. There was not a sound, and that worried Joe. Rube was growing frail, getting on in years.

The woman looked at Joe’s chair, where Azrael was clawing the cushion aside. “So, we have the contents of our package. Very nice.” She smiled coldly. “And these are the other two with your talents, old tomcat! How good of them to help us.” Striding across the room, she tossed the chair cushion away and began to scoop the money and jewelry into a canvas bag. Her voice was not Dorothy’s harsh tones, nor Beverly’s sweet ones.

Gail Gantry. Bending over Joe’s chair, filling the bag with money.

Crouching, Joe Grey leaped, clawing and biting her, unwilling to abandon what they had worked to retrieve. Azrael sprang at Joe—and Dulcie hit Azrael hard in an explosion of claws and teeth. Gail was in the middle, striking at cats and shouting when from the kitchen a black cyclone exploded barking and jumping at her.

Rube had her arm in his mouth. She jerked away, kicking him hard. Ducking

away, Rube turned on Azrael. As the black tom sprang to the top of the CD player, Gail plunged through the door running, clutching the bag. Azrael flew out with her, just ahead of Rube's teeth. The cats leaped to the back of Joe's chair, watching through the window as Gail roared away in a green compact and Azrael disappeared across the rooftops—and as Clyde's roadster shot around the corner, into the drive.

Clyde ran for the house. Bursting in, he looked at the handful of scattered hundred dollar bills that had spilled to the rug. He looked at Joe and Dulcie.

"Come on!" Joe shouted. "She has the money. She shot Larry Cruz...*Come on, Clyde!*"

## Chapter Twelve

*She'll head for Santa Monica*, Joe Grey thought as he leaped into Clyde's roadster and they took off after Gail's green compact. As he drove, Clyde snatched the phone from its cradle and punched in 911. Joe stood with his paws on the dash, watching Gail slip along ahead of them just at the 50-mile limit so not to attract attention, moving south down the coast highway among light traffic, with the stolen money and jewelry tucked safely beside her.

Clyde said, "You sure she shot Larry Cruz?"

"I saw her shoot him," Joe said patiently. "Dulcie and I followed her to the cliff. The money was hidden in that cave. She had to dive, to get in. She buried the gun on top the cliff.

"They're coming," Clyde snapped, looking in his rearview mirror. "Two black-and-whites. Get down, Joe! Now!"

Joe dropped to the seat beside Dulcie. Clyde could be so bossy. Clyde slowed as the squad cars passed them.

The officers were on Gail before they hit the sirens and started the red lights spinning. As they pulled her over, Clyde parked some way behind. She didn't resist, didn't try to outrun them as Joe had guessed she might. They watched her step out and assume the position, face to the car, hands on the roof. Watched as she was searched and handcuffed, and her car was searched. Apparently she had no other gun. She seemed very demure now, the picture of surprised innocence. For a second, Dulcie felt sorry for her; the little tabby had that pitying look in her green eyes until Joe nudged her. Then she straightened, watching with satisfaction as the blonde was locked into the back of a squad car—this woman who had killed Larry Cruz for no reason other than greed.

Police Captain Max Harper sat among the ruffled curtains and potted ferns of Otter Pine Inn's tearoom, dressed in full uniform, the thin, leathered man looking totally out of place surrounded by delicate white wicker and Patty Rose's fine china and fancy tea cakes—looking far more out of place than Joe Grey himself felt, cozied down on the window seat eating smoked salmon from a flowered plate. It took a certain polish, the tomcat thought, to make himself at

home in any surroundings, from garbage cans to silk cushions.

From atop the baker's rack, Dulcie watched, amused. Seeing Clyde and Max Harper at a fancy tea was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

But how could the two have refused? Patty Rose's requests were as imperative as a presidential summons—her purpose in this little gathering was to bid Alice and Jim Manning goodbye after their two week stay and to apologize for the ugly events surrounding the contest—not that she'd had any control over such matters.

Dorothy Daniels and Beverly Barker had been invited, but both women had gone home, deeply distressed by the shooting. Very likely, Joe thought, resolved never to be involved in another such contest. The way Joe had it worked out, Gail had been diving the morning of the tearoom break-in, because there had been another burglary just after the tryouts for the cat festival. He was guessing that Gail had gone, that morning before dawn, to stash the money. Or maybe she had waited on the beach while Larry dove.

*Assume that Frances Farrow was suspicious of Gail and had followed her down the beach, Joe thought, getting her own shoes wet. Frances follows her to the tearoom, sees Gail walk in through the unlocked door—which Azrael had seen to some time during the night.*

*Frances sees Gail open the safe, wearing her gloves with that smell of the sea. Gail takes the money, locks the safe, is leaving when Frances appears and confronts her. Gail tells her it's none of her business and to get out of the way. Frances refuses. Gail shoves her, hits her in a vital spot, denting the silver pendant and causing the unexpected reaction of commotio cordis—jolting the electrical circuit that controls her heart. Frances falls dead.*

*Gail is terrified. She gets out of there fast. But the black tomcat returns when the commotion begins in the morning, leering in through the window. He has no conscience, that one.*

It could have happened that way. But still Joe wondered about Alice Manning. While Gail and Azrael were robbing the village shops, passing the money to Larry to hide and maybe using Larry as lookout, did Alice know about their operation?

When the police recovered the money and jewelry that were hidden in the spare tire well of Gail's car, the count had been \$1,500 short of the money stolen—the same amount that was taken from Charles, Ltd. Likely that was what Gail hid in her suitcase as he watched through the motel window, thinking she was Alice—or had that been Alice?

Gail would have had to do some quick changing, doubling back to the motel



after she left the restaurant, then changing again after she stashed the money. But not impossible, he thought, given the time frame and the short distances.

The stolen crystal and leather items were still missing. The lab had found fibers from Frances Farrow's leotard on Gail's gloves that Joe had dropped on Harper's desk—had found just what Joe thought they'd find. However, the charge, in that death, could be no more than manslaughter.

But the gun that killed Larry Cruz, though Gail apparently handled it with gloves, showed one good print, on the end of the magazine, that was unmistakably Gail's. Now, Gail was safely locked up. Her human partner was dead.

But her feline accomplice had vanished. And of course, in Max Harper's version of the robberies, there was no black tomcat.

"Gail worked for a locksmith in San Diego," Harper said, sipping tea from the ridiculously small cup. "She was there five years, then worked a year for a security firm before she moved to Santa Monica, where she met Larry. Before that, she lived for a year in Panama. We're not certain what she was doing there, but likely that has no bearing on the case."

*Doesn't it*, Joe Grey thought, smiling.

"And you didn't get back all the money?" Jim Manning asked.

"No," Harper said. "But we have the murder weapon. It was buried out on the cliffs."

"That was lucky," Alice said. "How did you find it? Did you have a tip?"

Harper looked at her gently, and said nothing.

"And you caught Gail in her car, leaving town," Alice said. "That's good police work." She watched Harper expectantly, waiting for additional details.

Harper didn't offer any. What was it about Alice Manning, Joe wondered, that put Harper off? The captain turned to Patty. "You knew Larry had a fetish for you, Patty. For your movies, for your look-alikes, and for Patty Rose memorabilia. You saw his room after we searched it, the walls papered with your photographs and old movie bills."

Patty laughed. "Some of that stuff is worth some money today. He had a real collector's den. I knew he had a fixation about the old movies, but I didn't think too much about it."

"It didn't occur to you that he might be dangerous? Why did you hire him?"

Patty shrugged. "Alice asked me the same. I don't know. I didn't think he was dangerous, just a little strange. Harmless. I guess I liked the guy."

Joe and Dulcie exchanged an amused look. And it was not until that evening, as

the cats sat on the kitchen counter watching Clyde broil a steak, that the \$1,500 turned up.

They didn't hear a thing. The steak was sizzling and a CD was playing Dixieland. When Clyde went in the living room to change the record, he saw a white envelope lying on the rug inside Joe's cat door. A thick envelope that, when he opened it, contained a sheaf of fifty and hundred dollar bills.

Switching off the porch light, Clyde stepped outside. Neither he nor the cats saw anyone. There was no note in the envelope, only the money. There were no cat hairs stuck to the bills. Joe examined it for tooth marks but found only one tiny indentation in the corner—it could have been made by any sharp object. The scent of the envelope was such a mix of perfumes, lotions, hamburger, French fries, and *maybe* cat spit, that even Joe couldn't sort it out.

"So who left it?" Clyde said, laying the envelope on the coffee table and picking up the phone to call Harper.

"Likely we'll never know," Joe said. "Wonder why they brought it here?"

Clyde shrugged. "The shopkeepers will be happy to have it." He made the call, then returned to the kitchen to carve half the sirloin into rare, thin slices for Joe and Dulcie. He served them on the best china.