

Chapter 1 *A death in Santa Cruz*

Mark Latto stopped and looked up at the white-painted wooden house on West Cliff Drive. There are many houses like this along the coast of California, many houses like this in Santa Cruz. But this one was different: there was a police car parked on the road outside. A police car outside a house doesn't always mean there's trouble inside, but Latto felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Something wasn't right. He walked towards the front door. As he did so, it was opened by a mountain of a man, at least two metres tall, almost as wide as the door, and wearing the dark blue of the Santa Cruz Police.

'Yes?' asked the police officer in a slow American voice.

'I'm here to see Deborah Spencer,' began Latto. 'She's expecting me.'

'And who are you?'

'My name's Mark Latto. I'm a doctor. I've come over from Britain to see her.'

'Well, you'd better come in, Dr Latto,' said the police officer, stepping back from the door to let Latto in. 'I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you. Ms Spencer was found dead early this morning.'

'Oh no!' Latto put a hand up to his mouth. 'How terrible!'

'Yes,' continued the police officer, 'so I'm afraid you won't get to see her. However, a detective will be along here in a few minutes and he may want to have a talk with you.'

'Detective?' asked Latto. 'Are you saying ...?'

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‘I’m not saying anything, Dr Latto,’ said the police officer, looking Latto straight in the eye. ‘I’m just asking you to take a seat in that room.’ He nodded at an open door on the right. ‘Someone will be with you shortly.’

Latto found himself in a light airy sitting room, with a large window looking out over the sea. He put his sunglasses down on a small coffee table and looked out of the window. It was a lovely sunny March day. West Cliff Drive was busy with joggers and people walking their dogs. Further out he could see Santa Cruz Wharf beginning to open up for the day. A van was taking food and drink to one of the restaurants at the end of the wharf. A few men and women were fishing from the side. And although it was early in the year, there were one or two tourists walking along the wharf, looking into the shop windows.

Latto was tall with dark brown hair and blue eyes. He was wearing a light-coloured jacket and trousers and a light blue shirt. He turned and looked at himself in the mirror on the wall. Although he was in his early thirties, he looked older. It was probably tiredness, he thought. It was ten in the morning here in California, but his body was still on British time. He sat in a yellow armchair near the window and closed his eyes. Time passed.

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‘Dr Latto?’ said a voice.

Latto woke suddenly to see a short grey-haired man in his late fifties standing in front of him.

‘I’m Tony Martinez, a detective with the Santa Cruz Police,’ said the man, taking some paper from the inside pocket of his old brown jacket. He found a pen in a side pocket.

‘Hello, Detective Martinez,’ said Latto, starting to push himself up out of the chair.

Martinez stopped him by holding out a hand. ‘Don’t get up,’ he said. ‘I’ve just got a few questions for you.’

Latto sat uncomfortably on the front of the chair. Martinez took a seat on the sofa opposite. His grey trousers looked old. So did his shoes.

‘Officer Seymour tells me you’re British,’ said Martinez.

‘That’s right,’ replied Latto.

‘So how is it that you know Ms Spencer?’

Latto thought for a moment before answering.

‘I’m a doctor of western medicine and she’s, she was, a doctor of Chinese, or Asian, medicine. She had some ideas that I was very interested in. We emailed each other about them. And then I came out here to learn more and so that she could teach me how to use these ideas on my patients.’

‘So how well did you know her?’ asked Martinez.

‘Well, I met her once, a couple of years ago,’ replied Latto. ‘She was in London on holiday. We had dinner one evening. That’s the only time we actually met. The rest of the time we just emailed each other.’

‘And can you tell me what Ms Spencer was doing that interested you?’

Latto looked out of the window, deciding how to explain things to Martinez.

‘You know what Parkinson’s Disease is?’ asked Latto.

‘Sure. It’s an illness that old people get. They shake a lot.’

Latto smiled.

‘Actually it’s not just old people who get it. Some young people get it too.’

‘Oh! OK,’ said Martinez.

‘But you’re right about the shaking,’ continued Latto. ‘Sometimes the hands and arms shake, sometimes the legs, sometimes both. It can do other things to the body too. Some people who have Parkinson’s find it difficult to move parts of their body. Sometimes they can only move very slowly. Sometimes they find it difficult to move parts of their face. They can’t smile. A lot of different things can happen to the body.’

Martinez was watching Latto and listening carefully. ‘And what can you doctors do about it?’ he asked.

‘Well, western doctors can’t do much really,’ replied Latto. ‘But Deborah was trying a new way of helping people who have this disease.’

‘I see.’ Martinez wrote something on the paper and then looked across at Latto again.

‘When did you arrive in the States?’ Martinez asked.

‘Yesterday afternoon,’ replied Latto. ‘I got into San Francisco at about two o’clock and drove straight down here. Arrived about four thirty, five o’clock.’

‘How long are you staying?’ asked Martinez.

‘Well, I was planning to stay for a couple of weeks. Now – I don’t know.’

Martinez stood up.

‘Well, you can’t leave town just yet,’ he said. ‘Anyway, thanks, doc. That’s it. You’re free to go. On your way out tell Officer Seymour where you’re staying. Oh – and ask me if you do want to leave town.’ He took a card from the top pocket of his jacket and gave it to Latto. Latto stood up too.

‘Can I ask you a question?’ he asked.

Martinez nodded.

‘How did she die?’

‘We don’t know yet,’ said Martinez. ‘We’ll have to wait for the police scientists to have a look at her body.’

‘But why are you here? I mean, you’re a detective, aren’t you?’ asked Latto.

‘I’m just checking to make sure everything’s OK,’ said Martinez. ‘I mean, nobody’s broken into the house. Nobody’s been fighting in the house. She doesn’t seem to have taken her own life.’ Martinez put the paper away in his pocket. ‘It looks as if she just died. I’m sorry, but sometimes it happens. Well, you must know that. You’re a doctor.’

Latto thought about saying something, but decided not to. As a doctor, he knew that sometimes people did just die. A sudden heart problem or something like that. It happened, but it was unusual. And it was very unusual if the person was a healthy, happy forty-two-year-old woman, in a caring profession, and with everything to live for. For the second time that day he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.