

Chapter 5

Desert Rest Mortuary and Crematorium was located on Losee Road in the city of North Las Vegas. What most people think of as Las Vegas is really the sprawling Las Vegas Valley. The valley is essentially made up of the unincorporated towns of Paradise, Winchester and Enterprise, and the three cities of Las Vegas, North Las Vegas and Henderson.

Paradise, Winchester and Enterprise are centrally located in the valley and where you find McCarran International Airport, UNLV, and most of the world famous Las Vegas Strip. Having lived in Las Vegas before, Rick knew this but his immediate family was rather confused when they learned that The Strip wasn't actually part of the city of Las Vegas.

Desert Rest was within a North Las Vegas commercial zone. Rick felt it was safer to live as far away from the mortuary as possible and still be in Las Vegas. To get there, from their new home in the northwest valley, Rick and Alan drove the black Suburban east along the northern part of the 215 Beltway. The Beltway was a new addition to the Las Vegas highway system and ran between a ton of new housing construction and the Sheep Mountains to the north.

Alan stared out the window, amazed at the barren desert landscape they were traveling through. "What are those things?" he

pointed to some kind of dried-up bushes on the side of the road.

“Yucca plants,” Rick answered.

“They look like their dead.”

“Oh, they’ll bloom in the spring. That’s what grows in the Mojave Desert.”

“This is a lot different from New York,” Alan shook his head. “You can say that again,” Rick replied with a laugh.

“Feeling homesick yet?” Rick asked as he patted his son-in-law on the leg. “Yeah, a little. I’ve never been out of New York before. This is so different. Everything is brown. At least in New York we have parks and trees.”

“The desert has its own beauty. You’ll get used to it. Next weekend I’ll take everyone up to Mount Charleston. There’s even a ski resort up there.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“No, really. Las Vegas is around two-thousand feet above sea level. And the mountain gets up to about seven. We get quite a bit of snow up there in the winter. We might be able to see it from our house.”

“I never imagined this, that’s for sure.”

“Welcome to Las Vegas,” Rick smiled.

They took the freeway almost to the end, exited at Losee Road, and drove south through new residential construction before reaching the dreary industrial hub.

The mortuary was on a corner right between a 24-hour truck wash and a wholesale tire outlet. However, despite the industrial nature of the neighborhood, Desert Rest presented an almost park-like setting. Shade trees lined the curb, and a waist-high red brick wall, topped with a white decorative metal fence surrounded the property.

The business sign facing the street was low key and tasteful. The entrance to the visitor parking lot was, in fact, quite inviting with ornamental columns on either side. The main building, which could be seen from the street, was a two-story modern structure of non-denominational design. The grounds were landscaped with generously-watered grass bordering the parking area and several mature palm trees carefully arranged amongst the 300 or so parking spaces.

Rick had noticed another driveway at the northern edge of the grounds with a sign reading “Service Entrance” which led to the back of the property. As he and Alan weren’t known yet, he felt it would be a better move to enter through the front door.

The main parking lot was almost empty at 8:00 in the morning. Only three cars were parked close to the main entrance. Rick parked the black Suburban away from the other cars.

As he slowly exited the Suburban, Rick stood for a moment at the open car door. He carefully looked around and got the lay of the land. He had reason to be cautious; he didn’t know what to expect. Unconsciously he put his right hand on his belt where he kept his karambit knife hidden under his sport jacket.

When he was sure there was no immediate danger, he turned and nodded to Alan who was standing on his side of the SUV. They both closed their car doors and walked to the front of the Suburban. “Remember,” Rick said, “don’t believe a word the bastard says.” Alan gave him an understanding nod.

Alan and Rick walked through the parking lot and made their way to the double-door entry of the two-story building. As they reached the three granite steps leading to the front door they both stopped at the same time. Classical music was coming from a hidden speaker. Rick looked at Alan and nodded, “Nice touch.” Alan agreed.

When he and Alan walked through the front door of the mortuary they again paused. They couldn’t help but notice the strikingly beautiful receptionist who raised her head, pointedly looked them in the eyes, and greeted them with a solemn, “Hello, how may I help you?” in a deep throaty voice.

The nameplate on her desk read “Marja.” Rick recognized it as one of the common names within the ancient family lineage. She had a full head of gleaming black hair cascading around her shoulders, dark sultry eyes and a slightly upturned nose. Her dark blue blouse was tasteful but showed a little more than a hint of cleavage. Her demeanor was totally professional however, and her face displayed concern without a suggestion of a smile.

Based on her name, Rick assumed she was a family member but he wasn’t sure. He had been away from the Las Vegas clan for almost twenty years and didn’t recognize her. He knew most of his memories were vague at best. He had no way of

knowing if his visit had been announced. The only one he had contact with, and who knew he was coming, was Uncle Franda.

Before speaking he carefully looked around to make sure that there was no one else within earshot. Then he spoke in the family's ancient tongue, "*Kusine, morgena bonum. Rechnostava ego edirem. Min bir weg temf, amma saed eg der familka. Franda patruis esh buradayam gormik.*" [Good morning cousin. My name is Rechnostava. I am a member of the family but I have been away for a while. I am here to see my Uncle Franda.]

The receptionist was equally as cautious. She carefully eyed the two strange men, made sure there were no other outsiders around and took a moment to reply, "*Siz menim introgem, vestra waer ist deini?*" [If you don't mind my asking, who is your grandmother?]

"*Sofixta,*" "Rick answered using his grandmother's full name.

Marja's face warmed as she smiled, "*Sofi ist meine boyek vestra. Tus patruis Franda ist meine vater.*" [Sofi is my great-grandmother. My father is your uncle Franda.]

"*Bela ki, wirklich sunt kusine.*" [So we really are cousins.] They both grinned at the shared joke. Alan smiled as well. Like all family members he was fluent in the ancient language.

"*Marjarina ist noman, lakin omnes meni Marja,*" [My name is Marjarina, but everyone calls me Marja.]

"I am using the name Rick Stanton," he switched to

English. “And this is my son-in-law, Alan.”

Alan stepped forward and politely extended his hand as he said, “Nice to meet you.” Marja graciously took it. Not only was she stunning, he thought, but she has exceptionally strong hands – a very desirable quality. He looked forward to the family celebrations.

“Let me tell my father that you are here,” she said as she picked up the phone, “you wouldn’t want to surprise him.”

Rick glanced at Alan as he smirked more than smiled, then replied to Marja, “Oh no, we definitely wouldn’t want to do that.”