

CHAPTER ONE

Herman de Portola Bliss sat on a steeply sloping hillside, improving on nature. Well over six feet of Bliss hung over his easel, applying oils with lavish strokes. He felt like a vulture, one of his favorite birds, perched high above Carmel Bay Country Club, all-seeing, patient as the grave.

From the hill he could look across the seventh fairway to the very brink of the cliff that dropped to the ocean beyond. Mist hung in the sharp April air. Dew lay on the grass. The rocks and sky and wild surf demanded his attention in the early morning light, compelling him to capture it.

The picture taking shape on his canvas however sprang from a palette unknown to nature. Bold swirls of color

competed enthusiastically for attention, lifting the sea's rough beauty into the realm of statement and significance.

Bliss half heard the sound of many approaching feet crushing ice plants and snapping pine branches, but his art consumed the vast bulk of his consciousness. Crucial moments passed before the danger of his position struck him. Looking around in dismay, his hand worried at the week's growth of whiskers on his chin. He knew he sat on property protected by guards and wire fencing in addition to astronomical greens' fees and long waiting lists. He knew also he sat there uninvited.

A brigade of uniformed police officers and security personnel emerged from the trees on his left. To his relief the forces of law and order didn't look in his direction. They navigated a gully between his hill and the next. Crossing beneath his vantage point, they made their way toward a trio of golfers standing on the seventh green nearly a hundred yards away.

The men waiting there, dressed in the latest golfing fashion, had inspired Bliss to elevate the landscape in front of him to a higher plane. Their presence had cried out to him to paint the intrusion of man upon nature. So the natural rich greens, grays and blues of the scene before him mutated into puce, magenta, fuchsia, clashing with

Venetian red and yellow ochre, and dayglos of pink and lime, a transformation that filled Bliss with pride.

His sausage nose quivered, aggressive chin jutting further out. Someone had once called his hair, mud brown streaked with mouse gray, a garden gone to seed. The furrows of flesh that fifty-six years had carved into his face added to the image, but Bliss no longer minded. If he needed to nurture his love of beauty, he looked at his art, not in the mirror.

He watched as the official party reached the green. Soon after the first cold sunlight cleared the trees, and began nudging the previous night's fog away, the golfers, riding in two electric carts, had appeared at the seventh tee. There had been four of them then. Bliss, knowing little of the game, counted himself lucky that they lingered near the green while others, always in quartet, eventually came along, then passed them by.

One golfer had trotted off for a while. Bliss had wanted to duplicate the utterly unique shade of green of the man's shirt. Busily swirling colors on his palette, he looked up to catch a glimpse of the golfer trudging into the trees near where the police would later make their entrance. The correct mix of oils still eluded Bliss, so his subject's sudden absence caused the painter no end of consternation.

The golfer returned before Bliss went in search of him, to drag him by his neck back to his place in the grand composition.

Bliss knew little of the subtleties of golf, but he sensed something strange in the scene he painted. Up until this moment the strangeness failed to distract him from giving life to his vision. It took the appearance of the authorities, decked out in the crisp khaki uniforms of the Carmel, California Police Department, and escorted by the club's security men, to steal his concentration from his latest masterpiece.

He now watched with interest as the officers conferred with the trio of golfers in the distance. These three, with much shrugging and head-shaking, appeared to be describing an occurrence of more than usual significance. They pointed in the direction of the hole, then turned to wave their arms at a sand trap some twenty yards away.

Gulls cawed at one another in the pale blue morning sky. The air carried the unmistakable edge of salt and decomposing marine life. Bliss tried to ignore it all, concentrating on his favorite sense: sight.

The men below walked to the deep scar of the sand trap near the cliff's edge. Two of the uniformed police officers moved off in different directions, apparently looking for

something. Bliss felt pretty certain no one called them in to search for a lost ball. His interest rose.

Bliss rose with it to get a better look, shuffling forward, straining over his easel. All of a sudden he felt his right foot hook beneath a loop of root. He twisted to pull it free, weight shifting. Misjudging the force required by a factor of ten, he felt the root give way, severely over-balancing him.

He toppled into his easel. It, the paints, the stool, and Bliss, cartwheeled down the hillside in an avalanche of dust, loose earth and stone and paint. Dayglo pinks and limes splattered everywhere. Improving on nature.

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An insistent melody that Carmel Police Chief Dan Shepard had awakened with that morning teased around the edges of his mind. A phrase or two tantalized him, threatening to fade forever, a few stray bars, not enough to commit to paper yet. Whenever he concentrated, it came wafting back to him like the hint of a departed lover's perfume. He ran his fingers over his receding hair, cut close to the scalp, a style cultivated during his years as an M.P., pushing the snippet of melody aside.

Shepard looked across the green at the pin, its flag fluttering bravely in the offshore breeze, then down at the

sand trap beneath his feet. He listened to the story the three men before him had to tell, his pleasant face, a rich coffee color, creased with thought. Their story annoyed him like a stain on his uniform.

In his early forties, Shepard had worn a uniform of one kind or another most of his life from scouting to the army to law enforcement. He liked uniforms. They gave him a sense of order in a disorderly world. Wrinkles cut to the heart of him. Stains soiled his soul.

The sound of the avalanche made Shepard jump. On the far side of the fairway he could see a cloud of dust plummeting comet-like down a hill. The shapes tumbling within the dust exploded at the bottom. A scream of outrage rose from the cloud, immediately echoed by dozens of terrified seabirds.

"Charlie." Shepard turned to one of his officers. Charlie Revere, a young man with red hair, and a severe crop of freckles, moved to his side. "Invite whoever that is to join the party, if he hasn't broken his neck." He nodded to the shorter of his two men, an easy-going older officer named Stan Durbin, to go along.

The dust cloud began to clear, and Shepard could see a figure rising shakily to its feet in the center. His men reached the scene of the cataclysm. Shepard saw a stoop-

shouldered man wave imperiously at his scattered belongings. To Shepard's amazement his officers scurried to collect them all. They then followed behind the man like court retainers. When Shepard saw they were carrying artist paraphernalia, he realized with a jolt who the owner of it must be.

The man approached with a pigeon-toed, shambling gait. Most of the dust he'd picked up on his plunge down the hill still clung to him, little puffs rising from the tattered tennis shoes, soiled flannel shirt, and paint-stained, rumpled pants. One of the characters drawn by Charles Shultz sprang to mind: Pigpen come to life, but so ungracefully aged. Shepard had only held his job for a few short weeks, but he knew this must be Bliss stumbling toward him, grousing at the officers who struggled with easel, canvas, palette, brushes and assorted tubes of paints.

"Who are you?" Bliss demanded as he approached. "You the new Chief of Police?"

"Yes, sir," Shepard responded. "Dan Shepard."

"You're black," Bliss shot back, peering at him keenly from beneath impossibly bushy eyebrows.

"Yes, sir," Shepard continued politely, "I am."

"I have a heightened sense of color," Bliss snapped at him.

Shepard tried to figure if Bliss was joking, actually defining some artistic insight, or just being nasty. Stanley MacGregor, Chief of the Carmel Bay Company's security force, interrupted.

"Sir," he said. "This is private property. What were you doing up on that hill?"

Bliss brought his face around ninety degrees to glare at MacGregor.

"Stealing ball washers," Bliss snarled, looking him up and down. This didn't take long since MacGregor stood only somewhat over five feet four inches in height. Strategically built-up heels didn't help much, sunk as they were in the spongy grass.

Shepard saw Bliss take in the slicked back, razor-cut hair, starched cuffs, dark green blazer with its security logo and the light green trousers.

"What are you?" the artist asked in a pleasant voice. "Some sort of fascist leprechaun?"

Shepard decided Bliss certainly lived up to his advance press. Warned about the man by every official he'd met since arriving on the Monterey Peninsula, Shepard had taken the time to read the extensive file the Carmel Police maintained on him in preparation for their inevitable

meeting. Now, faced with the reality, he realized no amount of study would have been sufficient.

Shepard knew every law enforcement agency in the county had arrested Bliss on numerous misdemeanors such as trespassing, loitering, public nuisance, inciting to riot, even public indecency. Minor blemishes on the face of a world cratered by malignant evil maybe, but the list of complaints numbered close to four hundred. Surely Bliss held some kind of record for petty criminality.

The oddest thing about that distinctly odd file had struck Shepard as he leafed through it. Everyone who lodged a complaint against the man dropped it before the case reached a court of law.

Shepard could see MacGregor building a head of steam that could only inflame Bliss to new heights of disagreeableness. Noting the canvas carried by one of his officers, he had an inspiration.

"What is your name, sir?" Shepard asked Bliss with all the pleasantries he could muster.

"Bliss," came the grudging reply.

"And you're an artist?"

Bliss gave a short honk of laughter. "You'll go far in law enforcement with deductions like that, Chief. What gave

me away? Was there a stray dab of burnt umber under one of my fingernails?"

Shepard took a deep breath, allowing the wayward melody to rise within him again, calming him like a mantra. He prided himself on how well he could keep himself controlled and professional in the face of any provocation. The artist appeared to have no inhibitions at all.

"Mr. Bliss, something kind of peculiar has happened here. You may be able to help us."

This seemed to disconcert Bliss for a moment.

"Peculiar?" he asked, a trace of interest creeping into his voice.

"How long were you up on that hill?"

Bliss' mouth scrunched up. It looked, thought Shepard, like the edge of a clamshell. He'd seen something like it in cartoons, but he hadn't realized a human mouth could do that.

"Ha!" Bliss exclaimed. "If I admit I was on that hill, I'd be admitting I was trespassing. Are you trying to force me to incriminate myself?"

"You fell down the hill!" MacGregor sputtered. "We all saw you!"

"I'm a law-abiding citizen," Bliss replied without a hint of irony.

"I know who you are, Bliss!" MacGregor continued. "You've been cited for trespassing on every golf course on this peninsula! You're the one who gave that deer a heart attack over at Spyglass!"

Shepard stared at MacGregor. He'd missed this particular charge while skimming Bliss' file. How did you give a deer a heart attack anyway? Not about to let himself be drawn into battle, Shepard played the peacemaker.

"Mr. MacGregor, please. Mr. Bliss is an artist. If he was up on that hill, painting for some time, he may have seen something that can clear up this mystery."

The oldest of the three brightly clad golfers gave a snort of derision, looking elaborately out over the ocean to show how little he thought of this idea.

"Mystery?" Bliss licked his lips.

Shepard realized that he'd struck a chord. "Yes, sir." He indicated the golfers. "Mr. Romaine there and Mr. Webb and Mr. Holly were part of a foursome that arrived at the seventh tee about, what? Forty? Forty-five minutes ago?" He looked toward the three men. One of them, heavy-set, of average height, and florid complexion, nodded. The other two followed suit. Shepard turned back to Bliss.

"Were you up there forty-five minutes ago, Mr. Bliss?"

Bliss scowled. "I might have been."

"Which direction were you facing?"

Bliss made a vague gesture toward the ocean.

"Did you see anything unusual?"

"Unusual? Of course I did! I put it all in my painting!"

Shepard allowed himself a flicker of hope. "May I see the painting?"

Bliss looked around, spotted the canvas held by Charlie Revere, and yanked it from the young man's grasp. He held it out for Shepard's inspection.

Shepard recoiled, then hoped Bliss had missed his instinctive first reaction. Beneath the twigs, leaves, pine needles and raw earth added by the hill, lurked a monstrous creation. Colors abraded each other as they lay on the canvas. They assaulted the eyes. One line appeared to be the cliff edge. A kidney-shaped wound might even be the sand trap, but it could just as easily have been the front view of a dead fish with an American flag in its mouth. Shepard knew Bliss' fall must have smeared some of the painting, but not all of it. No, most of what Shepard held in his hands the artist had put there on purpose.

"I see," he managed to get out.

"Of course you do," Bliss beamed, his smile almost ghastly in its childlike pleasure. "It's one of the more

accessible works in my current series of seascapes. The coastline primeval flattened, twisted and pounded into synthetic shapes by the clumsy hands of avarice. A sterile wasteland perpetrated by men who can't see beyond the balance sheet expressly for men with senses so deadened, they can wear clothes like that without vomiting."

Here he gestured at the three golfers. The third, a good-looking brown-haired man in his late thirties, Shepard judged, sported various shades of designer green. What Robin Hood might look like if he lived in Palm Springs.

A pink shirt and maroon trousers hung from the thin, frail-looking frame of the first man, clearly the elder of the three by quite a few years. Shepard knew his name: Loren Holly, one of the peninsula's leading developers. The young man in green, Ben Webb, worked for Holly as his vice president of something or other. Webb had been the one who telephoned the police.

The red-faced golfer, maybe fifty years of age, wore a lemon yellow knit shirt and red trousers with a spandex waistband and white shoes. Beyond his name, Leonard Romaine, Shepard knew nothing about him.

Shepard admitted privately to himself that Bliss had a point. The color combinations did seem a bit much even for golfers, but the idea, translated to paint on canvas, may

have been too successful. Shepard could barely bring himself to look at it.

"Mr. Webb, would you mind telling Mr. Bliss what you told me? Maybe it will help him to remember something he saw that can explain... this..." He gestured at the green, then back at the sand trap.

Bliss squinted at Webb with an almost obscene intensity of concentration. Obviously ill at ease, Webb cleared his throat, and began.

"Mr. Holly, Mr. Romaine and I were part of a foursome with a gentleman named Alex Wagner. This is a regular match for us every Wednesday morning. We tee off at six o'clock precisely. Except in the winter," he added somewhat unnecessarily. "In the winter we tee off an hour later. Because of the light."

Bliss nodded. "I understand light."

"Everything proceeded pretty much as usual," Webb said. "I was up a stroke coming to the seventh tee. Our second shots all landed on the fairway."

He pointed to a spot that dipped down in a shallow bowl forty yards across. Dew glistened there, still protected from the morning sun, but trampled by cleated feet.

"My third shot landed on the front part of the green," Webb continued. "Mr. Romaine's carried over the back apron,

and rolled down that little hill. Mr. Holly's you can see there in the fairway on the upslope just short of the green. Alex's shot landed in this bunker."

Webb stopped talking, an irritated look on his face. Bliss had turned away. He walked across the green, scuffed with his shoe at something in the sponge-like grass that looked to Shepard like a runny bird dropping from the gulls overhead. Bliss glanced back down the seventh fairway, a slight dog leg, running roughly south to north. The cliff bordering the western edge of the fairway fell in places as much as thirty feet to the surf that hammered steadily against the rocks. Then the artist swiveled around to peer into the bunker.

Shepard turned to follow Bliss' gaze. The bunker lay parallel to the cliff. Shepard gauged it to be about twenty-five feet in length and half again as wide for the most part. It seemed fairly deep, maybe four feet nearest the fairway, gradually sloping down to only three feet or so on the cliff side. The thickly woven grass here still wore a heavy rime of dew. Several small rocks dotted the area, with more near the cliff's edge some thirty feet away.

Bliss rejoined them, his eyes scanning from side to side like a security camera.

One pair of footprints scuffed through the wet grass from the fairway to the shallow western edge of the bunker. Where they reached it, the turf at the lip of the trap seemed chewed up a little, probably by the golfer climbing down inside, Shepard supposed. The single set of tracks, now clearly made by golf cleats, continued across the sand to a spot closer to the green. There the sand looked somewhat kicked about. A rake lay on the ocean side of the bunker. A few feet from the disturbed patch of sand a golf club rested, its head caked with wet sand. Bliss pointed at it.

"What kind of club is that?" he asked.

"A sand wedge." Holly's lips curled in contempt.

Shepard saw Bliss' eyes narrow. There's some history here, he thought, and filed it away. He prompted, "Go on, Mr. Webb."

"Well, like I said. Alex... Mr. Wagner's shot landed in the bunker. He was away, so he played first. He took his sand wedge from his bag there on the cart, went over and climbed inside the trap. We stayed down there in the fairway."

"Why?" Bliss interrupted again.

Webb appeared momentarily at a loss. "It's what you do. You don't walk into the line of a man's shot."

"Then what happened?" Shepard prodded.

"After a little while his ball came sailing out of the trap, and... well, it was a miraculous shot. It hit the green about eight feet from the pin and rolled right into the cup for his par."

"He's never parred the seventh in his entire life," Holly interrupted with a scowl. "In five years he's landed in that bunker more times than I can count. He's always chipped short and two-putted for a bogey. Always!"

Webb nodded. "Like I said. Miraculous."

"Miraculous, nothing!" Holly glared at him. "He cheated. You know it. I know it. He was a cheat! Somehow he cheated!"

Bliss threw up his hands. "And that's why you called the police? Is cheating at golf a felony or a misdemeanor?"

Romaine spoke for the first time. His voice sounded deep, and as cool as the sea spray that occasionally drifted over them. "If it were a crime, the jails around here would be bursting at the rivets."

"We are wasting our time!" Holly complained.

"Go on, Mr. Webb, please," Shepard replied calmly.

"Well, so we came up here to see where the ball went. And sure enough, there it was in the cup. I almost fell down. We all began talking at once, shouting to Alex. We

expected him to climb out of the bunker so he could gloat like he always did when he managed to make a decent shot, and pretend it had been skill instead of luck. We waited, but he didn't climb out."

Bliss had a glimmer of what happened, Shepard realized. The artist's crooked smile grew broader, but he said nothing, waiting for Webb to finish.

"After a few moments, when he didn't appear, we looked at each other."

"I thought he wanted us to go over to congratulate him," volunteered Romaine.

"So we did," Webb continued. "We walked over here and stood just about where Chief Shepard is standing now. We could clearly see every inch of the bunker."

"And Wagner wasn't in it," Bliss finished for him.

"No," Webb chimed in with something approaching awe. "He'd vanished. Into thin air."

CHAPTER TWO

The words hung in the thin air Alex Wagner had vanished into, along with a few remaining traces of mist. Shepard watched Bliss wrestle with the problem. He realized that an artist, even a bad artist like Bliss, might spot something a policeman overlooked. He also could tell by the way Bliss concentrated that the man apparently felt the same way.

"We looked around," Webb concluded. "But there was no sign of Alex. I mean he was out of our sight for less than five minutes tops. Finally I cut through the trees to the clubhouse to call the police."

As presented, the situation sounded impossible. The sand trap appeared to have swallowed a man whole. If he'd walked away from it, his three companions, and probably the painter up on the hill, would have all seen him. Shepard turned it over in his mind, listened to the insistent melody that accompanied it.

"You didn't happen to see anybody climb out of this bunker while you were up on that hill, did you, sir?" he asked Bliss.

Bliss sighed and shook his head, looking down the fairway toward the tee, some four hundred yards distant. A mass of agitated golfers, kept at bay by a couple of security guards, grew steadily like a backed-up drain.

"Then I'm sorry to have troubled you." Shepard handed the painting back to Bliss, and indicated his men were to give Bliss his belongings.

Bliss made no move to depart. "You know anything about art, Chief?"

For one horrific moment Shepard thought he would be forced to give his opinion on the monstrosity Bliss had shown him.

"Well, not a lot..."

Bliss studied him. "You think this is all about perspective, don't you? Sight lines?"

"I'm sure there's more to it than that."

Bliss agreed with a belligerent nod. "There sure as hell is."

"There's color, of course, and light," Shepard went on, growing in confidence. "Choice of subject matter..." His voice trailed off when he saw Bliss' expression sink to one of outright disgust.

"What are you going on about?" Bliss growled at him.

"Art," Shepard replied.

"Art? Art?! I'm talking about murder!"

The last word rose and echoed. Those gathered around seemed to have turned to stone. Even the distant golfers stopped their impatient pacing and flailing of arms. The waves still boomed against the rocks. The gulls still wheeled raucously in the air above their heads. All else was a still life.

"Murder?" Shepard repeated, the soothing melody banished from his mind in an instant.

"What do you think happened here, Chief?"

Shepard hesitated, then saw that MacGregor, the three golfers, even his own men were gazing at him expectantly. Shepard took a deep breath.

"Okay. I think Mr. Wagner decided to play a little joke on his friends. You mentioned perspective and sight lines. Even though this bunker is only four feet deep, it's situated above that low area in the fairway where Mr. Webb said he, Mr. Romaine and Mr. Holly were standing. I suspect from there it would be difficult to see someone in it even if he stood completely upright."

"Bravo," Bliss muttered. "I'm on pins and needles."

Shepard plowed ahead, refusing to let Bliss get to him. "Since my men didn't find him hiding in the shrubbery, I figure after he made his shot, Mr. Wagner crawled over to the cliff's edge, keeping the rise of the bunker between him and the other three. Then he climbed down the rocks, and went off somewhere. Maybe he made his way back to the

clubhouse. He's probably there now, having a good chuckle, and wondering what's keeping his golfing buddies."

Shepard turned to Webb. "What was he wearing?"

Webb thought for a moment. "Red shirt... light blue pants and shoes..."

"White socks," Holly added in an impatient voice.

Shepard nodded. "Mr. Wagner was quite a practical joker, I'll bet."

"Yes, he was," Webb agreed.

Holly broke in. "Yes! Yes! Yes! But his ego would've filled Carmel Bay out there, with plenty left over for Monterey Bay and Elkhorn Slough!"

Shepard shook his head. "I don't quite follow.

Holly gestured in the direction of the pin. "The ball went in the cup! However Wagner managed that, he would've stood his ground, and basked in the glory! He wouldn't have crawled off on his hands and knees to play hide and seek like some pre-adolescent!"

Shepard saw the valleys in Bliss' face re-arrange themselves into a look of triumph. "Besides," Bliss said, "he couldn't have done it anyway."

"Why not?" Shepard protested, feeling things getting way out of control. "You yourself were talking about sight lines!"

"Of course!" Bliss wagged his head up and down. "The sight lines meant it was possible that whatever happened in this bunker would not have been seen by those down in the

fairway. But use your eyes, man! Observe! Your profession has at least that in common with mine! You must observe!"

"Observe what?" Shepard shot back.

"The dew! Down there in the hollow of the fairway the golfers and your men have tracked through it like a herd of sheep, but look at the dew on the grass between the bunker and the cliff's edge! Not a mark on it! There would've been some trace if a man walked across it, let alone crawled on all fours!"

Shepard studied the broad band of glistening gray moisture only now beginning to dry in the rising sun. How could he have missed it? Not a mark stained it, not a bird track. That awful man, squinting at him from beneath eyebrows that looked like two caterpillars smooching, was right.

"And then of course, there's the weapon..." Bliss added with surprisingly little rancor.

Shepard could hardly bring himself to reply. "The weapon?"

Bliss indicated the sand trap. "That club. What was it? A sand wedge?" The three golfers nodded in unison. "Well look at it! The head is plainly caked with sand." Bliss held out his hands, as if presenting the obvious to Shepard on a silver tea tray.

"It's a damp morning," Shepard began. "The sand in that trap--"

"--is granular, and drier than the grass," Bliss concluded. "It isn't even clinging to the rake!"

Shepard started to reply, thought better of it, and instead fought silently to recover his composure. Without a word he walked to the rim of the trap, gazed down at it for a long moment. Reaching a decision, he carefully moved along the cut. Finding an unmarked spot near where the lip of the trap looked damaged, he stepped gingerly down inside. His shoes leaving distinct prints, he crossed to the sand wedge.

The others moved to the very edge of the trap, and watched in silence. Shepard stopped two feet from the sand wedge, settled down on his haunches and frowned at it. He ran his hand over his hair. Another melody, low and ominous, insinuated itself into his thoughts.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Yeah, there's something on the head of the club all right. It's soaked down into the sand a bit, too. It's dark enough to be blood. Okay." He looked up at Durbin. "Stan, call it in. I want a crime scene team here ASAP. Rope off this whole area from that dip in the fairway across the green then out to the cliff on both sides."

"Wait a minute!" MacGregor cried. "That would prevent play on this hole!"

"Yeah," Shepard agreed, straightening. "It would."

He nodded to Durbin. The man carefully placed his share of Bliss' art supplies on the grass, and trotted off at a good clip toward the treeline.

"But we have over three hundred golfers lining up to play the most famous course in the world!" the security man exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, MacGregor. That's the way it's going to be."

MacGregor shook his head in wonder. "You don't play golf, do you?"

"No," Shepard said.

"You can't ask a golfer to skip a hole, particularly on this course! Some people wait their whole lifetime to get a chance to play Carmel!"

Shepard failed to keep the annoyance from his voice. "I don't care if they skip, hop or jump over the hole. Nobody else is parading through here until we get a better fix on what happened."

MacGregor opened his mouth to continue the debate, but apparently thought of a better tack. "All right," he said, his lip curving into a smirk, "This club pays a whopping share of Carmel city taxes. You'll be hearing from the manager."

Shepard shrugged. "You can drag the ghost of Bing Crosby out here to threaten me if you want. The seventh hole stays closed until further notice."

MacGregor nodded at his two men. The trio headed off toward the seventh tee. Shepard hoped the crowd, when it learned the tragic news, might turn on the messenger.

Taking a last look at the sand wedge, Shepard climbed back up out of the trap. He avoided the smug expression he knew must be firmly fixed on Bliss' face.

The three remaining members of Wagner's foursome moved forward. Holly spoke first.

"See here, Chief. There must be some mistake. Alex couldn't have been murdered! The idea is preposterous!"

"I didn't say Wagner was the victim. Maybe he was the murderer!" Bliss snapped at him.

"Nonsense!" Holly retorted. He stopped, momentarily distracted by the outcry that rose from the crowd at the seventh tee. MacGregor had delivered the news. Shouted threats reached them even here. Shepard saw somebody throw a golf club against a tree.

Holly brought his attention back to the issue at hand. "We've gone from one man sneaking out of that trap for no good reason. Now we're to believe there was someone else in there with him? Why only two? Why not three? Or four? Perhaps the Bach Festival Orchestra and Chorus hunkered down in there for a quick rehearsal of The Passion of St. Matthew!"

"The breeze is from offshore," Bliss pointed out. "I would've heard them."

"You are a raving lunatic, and everybody knows it!" Holly yelled.

"How do we know for sure you're telling the truth?" Bliss continued, undaunted.

"Chief," Holly said. "You are new to the peninsula. This man's reputation is infamous!"

"Not as infamous as the man who crushed half a mile of magnificent sand dunes and cypress with that resort complex near the point!" Bliss shot back, then turned to Shepard. "It was supposed to blend into the surrounding landscape. It's pink! Have you ever seen a pink tree, Chief Shepard?"

Shepard glanced involuntarily at Bliss' painting, then caught himself, and looked quickly away.

"No, but--"

Bliss wheeled around on Holly again. "Luckily I managed to capture the purity of the land on canvas before you smothered it in steel and stucco!"

"Chief!" Holly exclaimed. "Ask him how many times he's been arrested as a public nuisance!"

"Ask him about that other condo project of his up by Moss Landing!" Bliss countered. "How fast are the units sinking back into the sand, Holly? Four inches a year? The water supply's already undrinkable. The next earthquake'll probably bring the whole place down!"

"He exposed himself to a group of congressmen meeting at Asilomar!" Holly fired back.

Bliss shrugged. "They were Republicans."

Things were careening out of control again. Shepard held up his hand. "Gentlemen!"

Bliss continued, inexorable. "How do we know the three of you didn't see Wagner make that shot, realize the gloating you'd have to endure, and scurry over here to shut him up once and for all?"

The color drained from Holly's face. Webb hurried to his side, muttering something about his heart.

Romaine looked amused. "And how did we then dispose of the body?" he asked Bliss in his calm, bass voice. "You've pointed out that no one approached the cliff. I doubt that even the three of us combined could fling the body the thirty feet necessary to clear the edge. Maybe you'd better check our golf bags. Maybe we chopped Alex up with nine irons and hid chunks of him in each of them."

Shepard looked at Romaine with interest. "That's quite an imagination you've got there, sir, but if you were all in it together, two of you could've carried the body into the woods while the third raked away any telltale traces in the sand."

Bliss sighed. "Unfortunately they didn't. I would have noticed them lugging a body into the trees or hacking it to pieces, I promise you. For example I did see the young one there going off by himself."

"To call the police!" Webb retorted.

"I wondered about that," Shepard said. "You then notified MacGregor, is that correct?" Webb nodded. "Why

did you call us first? Did you already suspect a crime had been committed?"

Webb looked momentarily at a loss for words, but Holly leaped into the breach.

"It was my idea, Chief Shepard," Holly said softly. He leaned very slightly on Webb, but the color was seeping back into his face.

"I... there were certain things about Mr. Wagner that led me to believe it was something more than a simple practical joke."

"Such as?"

"There are a lot of people who may have wished him harm."

"What was he?" Bliss interjected. "A dentist?"

"He was an attorney." Holly said.

Bliss nodded. "That explains it."

"I'm an attorney," Romaine told him without a hint of ill will.

Holly went on. "Besides being a cheat, as I've mentioned, he was also a liar, a fraud, and very likely a thief."

Bliss nodded. "I'm surprised he hadn't made judge."

"Chief," Holly went on, "I am answering your questions as plainly as I can. I will be happy to give you a fuller account, but--" Here he looked Bliss squarely in the eyes. "--not while that hoodlum is present."

Bliss took an angry step toward the older man.

Shepard stepped between them. "Mr. Bliss, thank you for your cooperation. I'll have one of my men escort you off the course. I'd appreciate it if you'd provide him with an address and phone number. We'll need to take a formal statement."

Bliss fumed. "I have to practically stick your nose in it before you even realize a crime's been committed and this is the thanks I get!"

"Mr. Bliss, even I would have noticed the blood sooner or later and reached the same sticky spot where we now find ourselves. But again, thanks for your help. You obviously have a keen artist's eye to notice so many details so quickly. Charlie?" He nodded to the young officer still holding Bliss' easel. "Help Mr. Bliss with his things."

Bliss stood rooted in place for a long moment, glaring at Shepard. Then he turned his baleful gaze back to Holly. Holly returned it with a thin smile of satisfaction. Finally Bliss gave a melodramatic shrug, and lumbered off across the green, leaving Charlie to struggle with equipment that two policemen could barely carry before.

Shepard let out a sigh of relief, but it proved premature. He saw Bliss stop directly beside the pin, and gaze down into the cup. The artist looked back over at Shepard and gave an unpleasant laugh.

"I expect you also would have noticed eventually that there's blood on the golf ball."

Shepard, Charlie, and the three golfers all stared at him in stunned silence.

"Wagner must have been quite a golfer," Bliss continued with a look of almost ecstatic pleasure. "Either he calmly bludgeoned someone with his sand wedge before lining up his shot, or he made the shot of his life shortly after his death."

Bliss turned away without waiting for a response, and tromped toward the distant trees. Charlie stumbled behind like an over-burdened caddie.