

BLIND CURVES

A BLIND EYE MYSTERY

by

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2007

CHAPTER ONE

*H*oly Fucking Hell. Between curses, Velvet Erickson flipped off a passing motorist. The driver of the blue Behemoth XL SUV echoed the bird with his own finger held high below his rearview mirror. He had come out of nowhere, suddenly on her ass, up her tailpipe, flashing his lights at her to get out of the way, when she was already driving ten miles over the speed limit. *What an asshole.*

Velvet thought he didn't deserve the alluring spectacle of her long nails, painted Corvette Red, waving an insult. She would never crop them to the nub like some utilitarian lesbians; she was, after all, a femme, and butches were an enterprising lot. They could just work around her nails. Her lovers—and they were legion—had never complained. In fact, they seemed to prize the scratch marks she tattooed down their backs. Some even showed them off to their friends.

She glanced in her review at the solid stream of cars behind her. As she darted in and out of the traffic, distant brake lights warned of problems ahead on the 101 North into San Francisco. Damn. It was barely six-friggin-a.m. How could there be a traffic jam already? She should have stayed on the 280. No, she shouldn't have come down here at all. She should have stayed in her warm San Francisco bed instead of hauling her ass out at three a.m. and traipsing down the Peninsula to some filthy parking lot just on the odd chance of catching Rosemary Finney red-handed.

What was that place called anyway? Wonderland? What a crock. Wonderland should be a Disneyland attraction, not some overgrown hiking trail in the boonies. Okay, Woodside probably didn't count as

the boonies, not really. But it was, like, forty minutes south of the city down all these damn windy roads blacked out under a thicket of trees.

Velvet was exhausted. She felt like she'd been on some mythic quest, fighting her way through an enchanted forest searching for the princess trapped high in a castle tower. Except, Rosemary Finney was no princess. She was better suited for the role of wicked witch or evil stepmother. That woman was a bitch with a capital *B*.

Out the passenger window, past the empty darkness of the bay and above the East Bay's urban lights, the sun peeked over the hills like a shy geisha hiding behind her painted fan. San Francisco, still another ten minutes away, was stirring under a thick blanket of fog that would burn off early under the glare of the sun, leaving behind the Indian summer weather that was normal for October in the Bay Area.

Velvet loved the city in the fall. Temperatures were often in the seventies or eighties, permitting her to flaunt her buxom, kick-ass body in the tight, revealing outfits she preferred. By contrast, a typical summer's day was lousy, freezing cold with endless fog and winds that blew from the Bay to the breakers, forcing her to hide her curvaceous figure behind bulky sweaters.

Cresting the incline at Candlestick Park—she *refused* to call the professional baseball stadium 3Com Park or PacBell Park or eBay Park or whatever awful corporate shilling moniker they'd punished it with now—she gazed lovingly at the city spread out before her like a lover draped across her bed. Although she'd lived in San Francisco since she'd escaped from Los Angeles fifteen years earlier, she still felt a glow of euphoria each time she caught sight of its distinctive architecture. Rows of brightly painted houses undulated like waves lapping at the banks of the city proper. White stucco and pastel Victorians climbed high above the landscape, where they were, in turn, topped off by the grassy breastlike knobs of Twin Peaks.

Favored son, author Herb Caan, had described San Francisco as “Baghdad by the Bay.” The staff at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the newspaper where Velvet worked, had never quite gotten over the death of their most popular columnist. Even Stanley Wozlawski, the paper's editor in chief, who'd taken the position several years after Caan's passing, frequently waxed nostalgic about the good 'ol Caan days and invoked the man's name in times of crisis. “Herb Caan, save us,” he'd exclaim, as though the columnist was now a saint enthroned at the foot

of God, and he could put in a good word with the big guy in honor of his fellow journalists if he were so inclined.

Of course, Caan hadn't lived to see Bush destroy the real Baghdad, and now the moniker no longer seemed apt. Not compared to images of bombed-out streets and this stupid, never-ending occupation. Velvet had come to see Jerusalem as a more fitting comparison, with its white stone glistening in the sunlight as it climbed its way up a hill. From a distance San Francisco also appeared to have been cast in stone carved entirely from one quarry. While Jerusalem was a religious destination that beckoned people from around the globe, San Francisco was a gay Mecca that rivaled the Holy City's diverse demographics.

From the bowels of her old-school Louis Vuitton purse—no self-respecting dyke diva would carry one of those modern white and pastel bags—Velvet heard the muffled disco refrains of “More, More, More.” Her cell phone was ringing. Who ever it was, was going to have to wait. Not that she was opposed to driving and talking at the same time, but she'd shoved the bag under the passenger seat when she'd gotten out of the car to follow Rosemary Finney and she couldn't reach it now.

Yet again Velvet wondered what she'd been thinking, driving out here. She'd sworn to avoid close contact with her ex-lover, but that was before the phone call last night. She'd just returned to her Bernal Heights shotgun house after driving home her latest conquest, Tucker Shade. It was after midnight and she'd heard the phone ring as she jiggled her key in the lock. Assuming at first that the caller was her booty call checking in, she had rolled her eyes. Lesbians could be so needy.

Velvet supposed she could have spent more time with Tucker after they'd finished their physical transaction, but she didn't like her sexual quarry to hang around. When they were done she wanted them gone. Velvet fancied herself a lesbian cougar: a member of the growing legion of middle-aged women who preyed on younger sport, though she was, admittedly, under forty.

The buzzing phone had fallen silent as she sauntered nonchalantly down the long hall. With a shrug, she dropped her keys on the kitchen counter, slid off her shoes, and shuffled barefoot into the living room. The house made groaning and creaking noises that she'd long since gotten used to. She ignored the sounds and settled into the soft cushions of the couch to watch disc four of *The Simpsons* season six.

The phone rang again just as Homer throttled Bart for some malfeasance.

Letting the DVD play, Velvet picked up the receiver and mumbled, “Hello?”

“Velvet Erickson?” The muffled female voice wasn’t immediately familiar.

“Yes?” Velvet muted the Simpson family chatter.

“The reporter?”

“Yes.”

“I have some information for you. About Rosemary Finney.”

Velvet sat upright. That got her attention. “Who is this?” Maybe someone was playing a prank on her.

“I...I...” The caller stammered. “It’s not important.”

Of course it’s important. Velvet shuffled through the entertainment magazines on her coffee table, looking for a pen and paper. If she switched on her recording device, the woman might get spooked and hang up.

“What kind of information?” she asked.

“It’s about...let’s say, illicit business practices.”

The caller was a younger woman, Velvet decided, with a bit of an accent, like those corn-fed starstruck girls who poured off buses back home with nothing but an overnight bag and a fantasy in their heart. “Why call me?” Velvet asked. “Why not go to the police?”

“The police?” The caller scoffed. “You of all people should know that the Rosemary Finneys of the world aren’t stopped by *police*.” Though she emphasized it, the caller forced out the last word so quickly it sounded almost like “please.”

While Velvet *did* doubt law enforcement’s ability to enforce real justice upon those who could buy their own version of it, she didn’t like the overt familiarity inherent in the caller’s statement.

“What do you mean by me ‘of all people’? Do I know you?” she wondered suspiciously.

“I’m familiar with your experience. You know, with Rosemary.”

“Okay.” Velvet allowed that to suffice as an answer. “So, what do you want to tell me about Rosemary Finney’s business practices?”

“Uh, I...”

Velvet could hear the caller’s dry voice cracking, and wondered what was making her so nervous. “Well?” she demanded impatiently.

She could really use hearing a juicy bit of gossip about her archrival and former lover.

“I shouldn’t have called.” The woman spoke abruptly. “Sorry—”

“Don’t hang up!” Velvet’s interest was piqued, her heart beating hard, her mouth watering. “After all that? You have to tell me.” She’d never liked teases.

For a moment the line was so silent that Velvet was sure the mystery caller had already ended the call. Then the woman whispered, “It’s not safe.”

“What?” Velvet was surprised. “What are you afraid of?”

Words spilled out of the receiver in a rush. “It’s not safe for us to talk. Just go to Wonderland Park in a few hours’ time. You’ll see. That’s the lower lot. It’s in Woodside, down on the Peninsula. Got that? Be there by five thirty a.m. Bring a camera. Oh, and Velvet?”

“Yes?”

“Be careful.”

Velvet had wanted more information, but the line went dead and the dial tone buzzed in her ear. She looked at the caller ID, which, not surprisingly, read “blocked ID.” Apparently she wouldn’t be able to star 69 the caller or use the reverse directory to track her down. *Damn it.*

Still a little stunned, she looked at the paper in front of her. On the back of a used envelope, she’d jotted down a list of words: “Wonderland, lower, Woodside 530, camera, careful.” She wondered what “illicit business practices” Rosemary might be involved in, exactly who the caller could be, and why she seemed so frightened.

Oh, Velvet knew what Rosemary was capable of. At one time or another she’d been the brunt of everything the woman dished out. But typically, Rosemary’s preferred tools of torture tended to be emotional and financial more than physical. Rosemary Finney played with the emotions of friends, lovers, and employees, and she had a whole team of lawyers eager to impose the kind of pain people felt when their careers ended or they were forced into bankruptcy. Yet the woman on the phone had seemed afraid of something more tangible, the kind of something that might just lurk in the predawn darkness of a Woodside park.

Now, as Velvet jockeyed her way through the traffic near San Francisco’s downtown exits, she thought about the pain Rosemary had inflicted on her and about her own revenge just a while ago. Sure, it was *schadenfreude*—a German term she’d picked up from *The Simpsons*.

She'd thought it meant "shameful joy" until her editor corrected her in front of the entire *Chronicle* staff. Although she'd been mortified with embarrassment at the time, Velvet had immediately gotten back on the horse and began using the expression's proper nuance: "malicious delight."

The term perfectly described her feelings right now. She knew she would relish this day for years to come. She *was* gloating over Rosemary's misfortune. And why not? Rosemary Finney had it coming. Velvet was glad, *glad* that she had been the instrument of that woman's undoing. It was about time.



The sound of shattering glass rose from the shrouded sidewalk as someone collected recycling from the curb outside Yoshi Yakamota's Richmond District home. In the darkness of her bedroom, Yoshi lay nestled beneath a thick goose-down comforter the color of desert mud, atop a low-slung Asian-influenced bed. Reluctantly, she felt for her bedside clock and pulled it toward her. She pressed a call button and a computerized voice that sounded a bit like Hal from *2001: A Space Odyssey* said, "6:57 a.m." in measured but staccato notes.

In other San Francisco neighborhoods, the early morning cacophony signaled the influx of entrepreneurial individuals who arrived under the cover of darkness, liberated glass and aluminum from plastic bins, and transferred them into waiting truck beds, car trunks, or shopping carts—thus preempting the city's pickup.

Yoshi respected the capitalist spirit of these people, many of them homeless, and did not understand residents who opposed it on the grounds that since they paid the city for recycling pickup, it was stealing when others removed the bottles and cans. These self-righteous citizens had even formed a political action group, the End Illegal Recycling Action Committee a.k.a. EIRAC, which pressured city officials to crack down on the early morning "thefts."

Yoshi didn't care who picked up the recycling, so long as it didn't end up in the local landfill. Of course she recognized that here in the Richmond, far from the poorer enclaves of the city, the odds were 60/40 that the din outside was actually the city's official recycling operation, not the entrepreneurs, although she had no idea why this was happening

on a Wednesday morning instead of the usual Friday. Whatever the source, she wished she could just sleep through it. She used to be able to tune out the background sounds of the city. She used to be able to do a lot of things.

Yoshi sat up and swung her feet over the edge of the bed. Her toes inched sideways on the hardwood floor until they located the plush slippers tucked there. She pushed her feet in and shuffled slowly to the kitchen, where she pulled a mug from a bamboo-fronted cabinet and placed it in the sink. Keeping two fingers curled around the handle, she lifted the steel lever that turned on the tap and positioned the mug under the stream of cool water. Resting her index finger on the rim of the mug, she waited until the water moistened her finger before turning the faucet off. She then opened the ceramic container that held teabags, took one out, and dropped it into the mug's water and stuck the beverage into the microwave.

Her father would have been appalled. What respectable Japanese woman—or man for that matter—used a *bag* when they had access to fresh tea leaves? Her father had taught her to honor tea as far more than a beverage. It was a symbol of their cultural heritage, and the details of the Japanese tea ritual concealed lessons about one's connectedness to others, how to be present in one's actions, and the need to slow down and appreciate life's little moments. Having tea, in her father's sense of the word, bore little or no resemblance to Yoshi's current version: two minutes in the microwave and four quick gulps down as she rushed through her morning routine.

Yoshi pulled a smaller, handle-less Asian teacup from her cupboard and carefully poured some of her tea into it. She carried the cup into her living room, where she placed it on a diminutive bamboo table near an east-facing window. With her eyes closed, she bowed and then slowly backed away from the offering.

Maybe that would appease his spirit, she thought wryly. She missed him so much. Hiroki Yakamota's memory demanded more than an occasional cup of tea, and she knew it. But she did not want to think about that now, and the truth was, she missed the tea ceremony itself too. She yearned to have the slow-brewed tea infusing to perfection in one of her beautiful clay teapots. She had stopped using them recently when she nearly scalded her hand trying to fill one with boiling water fresh from the teakettle. Losing her eyesight had meant relearning even

the simplest tasks. Yoshi silently promised herself that she would take the time to repeatedly practice pouring cold water from kettle to cup and move on to hot water when she had the procedure down pat.

She left the kitchen, her slippers slapping against the hardwood floor as she sauntered into the living room. She located the TV remote on the back of the quilted ecru divan, turned on the news, and went to her room to dress. She was buttoning a cap-sleeved blouse with oversized lapels when she heard the television newscast switch from traffic to a breaking news item. Yoshi listened for a few seconds, then gathered the rest of her clothes and rushed back into the living room.

“San Francisco publishing magnate Rosemary Finney, owner of the lesbian magazine *Womyn*, was found dead early this morning in a remote wooded area above Silicon Valley. We go live now to Marty Honda at the scene. Marty?”

Rosemary Finney? Yoshi fumbled around for the remote to amplify the volume. *Did he say Rosemary Finney?*

Reporter Marty Honda covered South Bay events for San Francisco’s KTVU Channel Seven. Yoshi had met him once, ten years ago at the Cherry Blossom Festival. The annual event, held as the trees bloomed in April, brought hundreds of participants and onlookers to San Francisco’s Japantown. There were parades and pageants, bonsai artists and calligraphers, tea ceremonies and kimono dance troupes of all ages, from grandmother to granddaughter. Seeing multiple generations of a family’s women together always engulfed Yoshi in a storm of mixed emotions. It was beautiful and touching and cut her to the bone. Grandmothers and mothers, daughters and granddaughters, like an unbroken chain linking present with past.

It must, she imagined, be wonderful to be a part of such a lineage. Family meant so much to her people, and yet here she was without one, with only her father, a man who didn’t even like to speak of his dead wife, let alone the extended family they had left behind in the old country. Hiroki Yakamota might have been a brilliant detective, but when it came to raising a girl he had no clue how to provide her with a feminine influence. He had raised her like a son. Maybe it was the obvious absence of maternal guidance in her life that had led some of the community’s grandmothers to meddle in Yoshi’s affairs. That had been the case on the particular blustery day in April when Yoshi had been introduced to the up-and-coming reporter Marty Honda.

“He’s single,” wizened Mai Lee whispered before shoving her in

his direction, apparently not knowing, or not caring, that Yoshi was a lesbian.

Some of the elders in San Francisco's tight-knit Japanese community viewed lesbianism as a repudiation of their heritage and a naïve embracement of Western values. That or a meaningless activity a girl might engage in while "saving herself" for a proper Japanese husband. In Yoshi's case, it was also taken as proof of Hiroki's poor parenting skills. Without a husband, they reasoned, a woman could not have children. Without children a Japanese woman would have no family, no living proof of her achievements, no future generation to carry on her values—there would be no point to her life at all. After listening to this lecture repeated at each social function that Yoshi came to alone or with her father, she was actually relieved to speak with Marty Honda.

They were both single, but beyond that, they had little in common. While she was impeccably groomed, his black hair was unkempt and his suit wrinkled and reeking of cigarette smoke. She had wondered how he could be in television news looking the way he did. He had explained that when he was busy following a story he hauled his suit around with him in the news van, crumpled in a knapsack until he needed to step in front of the camera.

Yoshi had thought she might find Marty mildly interesting; after all, he was a reporter and she had recently become infatuated with a female journalist. But she had quickly bored of his penchant for name-dropping—the mayor played golf at the same club, he'd interviewed Steve Jobs—and his complete lack of interest in anything she had to say. As soon as his attention was diverted, she had skulked away into the crowd. Since then, she'd heard, he had gotten married, had a kid or two, increased his on-air time, and started losing his hair.

She adjusted the TV volume once more as Marty proclaimed with his customary swagger, "I'm here in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where the body of *Womyn* magazine CEO Rosemary Finney is being loaded into an ambulance. Ms. Finney, a longtime resident of Woodside township, was found dead on a popular Bay Area trail, apparently the victim of a homicide." He paused before asking someone, "Sir, can you tell us what happened?"

A young-sounding man replied, "I was just out on my morning run. Over there in the park."

Yoshi squinted, wishing she could see where he was pointing.

She could not. She could only make out two elongated blobs that she assumed were Marty and the eyewitness. Still squinting, she crept closer to the big TV, trying to catch a glimpse. The blur of dark greens resolved to vague shapes and shadows. She pressed her face against the monitor, feeling the little hairs on her cheek cling to the screen with static. Trees. A lot of trees. Tall trees. Flash of blue and red. Emergency lights.

“Santa Cruz Mountains—Highway 35!” Yoshi pronounced like a *Jeopardy* viewer confidently announcing the answer to television’s deaf ears.

“I was on the Huckleberry Trail,” the jogger continued.

“Wonderland Park.” Yoshi concluded. There was only one Huckleberry Trail on the Peninsula.

“Anyway, it’s kind of overgrown. They really should trim it back. That’s why I didn’t see her until I was almost right on top of her.”

“Can you tell us what you saw?” Marty Honda prompted.

Yoshi collected her tea from the kitchen and returned.

“...not moving, and her shoes were gone, which was the damndest thing. I kept focusing on how she didn’t have any shoes, out here in the woods and the trail’s muddy from the fog drip. I had to run all the way up here. I couldn’t get cell phone service. I had to use that call box.”

Yoshi imagined the man was pointing at one of the yellow boxes—strung up on telephone poles—that sprouted every few miles along the thin asphalt ribbon of Highway 35 that wound through the dark woods. If she recalled correctly, there was a call box just across the street from the top of Wonderland Park, near a row of mailboxes, tucked next to one of Midpeninsula Regional Open Space’s brown metal gates. What was the name of that open space preserve? Skeggs? No, that wasn’t its official name, just what people called it because they would park in the Skeggs Overview and dart across the highway, at a blind curve no less.

Yoshi remembered being afraid to cross the first time she had been there as a kid, when her father took her to see the Tafoni Caves. There was a large map on display in a wood and glass presentation—what had it said? She pictured it in her mind’s eye. El Corte de Madera Creek Open Space Preserve. The Spanish name translated to “cut wood,” which is what it had once been. Like most of the San Francisco Bay Area, the giant redwoods had long since been clear-cut and even the second growth harvested by the previous owner. Although half a dozen

giants still dotted the preserve, most of the redwoods, while tall, bore fairly thin waists. Between them grew a thicket of tan oaks that blocked the sun on the western slopes angling down toward the ocean. The tan oak's bark was once utilized in the process of tanning leather, but loggers considered the species an inferior lumber and declared them unmarketable, which gave the weed trees further rein on the forest.

"Excuse me." Marty Honda sounded peeved about something.

A brusque voice interrupted the reporter's protestations. "No, *excuse me*. I need this gentleman to come with me."

That must be one of the law enforcement officers, Yoshi surmised. It might be a Midpen Ranger, or Woodside PD or maybe a county sheriff. It might even be CHP, the state highway patrol. Yoshi used to see their black-and-whites when visiting parks along the Santa Cruz Mountain's Highway 35, but primarily, she reminded herself, for traffic accidents.

"I'm sorry, Bob, it looks like that's it for now," Honda addressed the Channel Seven's news anchor.

"That was Marty Honda, live from Woodside's Wonderland Park, where the body of Rosemary Finney was discovered this morning. I think we have a photo here—do we? Yes, yes, here it is."

Rosemary Finney. Yoshi could picture the woman's visage clearly, even if she could not see the image filling the screen. Rosemary's long, dark ginger hair and tortoise-shell glasses were unmistakably familiar, and not just from the photo accompanying the monthly letter from the editor that fronted each issue of the lesbian magazine *Womyn*. The lesbian community of San Francisco was surprisingly incestuous, and only a few fresh dyke faces could not connect themselves to any other SF lesbo within six degrees of relationships.

But it was not six degrees that separated Yoshi from *Womyn's* editor. It was one. *Velvet Erickson*.