

## 11. Psycho Murder Preempted

On the surface, Gerald Pepper, police investigator, seemed the least likely man to be involved with murder, yet murder followed him like his loyal pooch, Othello, the black lab, and never failed to land him right in the middle of some gruesome investigation.

He was a medium man, medium build, medium length brown hair, medium brown eyes, a medium age of 45 and a medium life which included one dog, and a quaint little cottage on the outskirts of Crookfield, California. His only distinctive feature was a deep scar below his right eye that continued as a distinct dent in the bridge of his nose.

With the addition of Police Inspector, Sergeant Carol Armstrong to the force, and his nice, long vacation in England, Gerald Pepper smiled into his diet cola with a slice of lemon, assured that he had finally made his point. Surely Eloise will leave him be. Eloise Block, the police captain's daughter, his, let's see, his friend, his mentee, his partner, his promoter, and his nemesis when it came to the subject of his retirement. *She* might add to these various roles Pepper's psychologist. She was constantly probing his emotional desert, for little oases of feeling. Today however, instead of a probe, she used a cannon.

"Gerald, hold onto your seat." Eloise sat patting Othello on the head under the table.

Pepper put his hands on the edges of his seat. "You predict earthquakes now?"

"Billy escaped from the psych ward." Eloise stared at every wrinkle, every little twitch on Pepper's face. Nothing. Not a drop of feeling.

"Gerald Pepper! Billy. The twenty-five year old child actor. The guy who did *that* to you." She nodded at the dent in the bridge of his nose.

Gerald nodded with the vigor of wilted lettuce in the hopes he could extinguish her drama in a lack of response. Not to be. She fired a bigger cannon.

"He murdered your wife." Her eyes fixed on him like Othello did when a fresh ham bone was held in his face. Intense.

Pepper rubbed his eyebrows in an effort to circumvent an oncoming migraine. The jingle bells on the Pizza Castle's door rang violently.

Sergeant Inspector Carol Armstrong burst through the door and marched quick-time to his table, her blond hair flouncing. “Gerald we need to put you into protective custody.”

“From...um... you?” Gerald simply couldn’t withhold the object of that preposition.

“Not the time for jokes, Gerald. The criminally insane ward of that facility is just eighty miles from here. Even on foot he could be here within twelve hours.” She just didn’t seem to know how to speak to him without touching some part of his body. This time, a shoulder.

“Should be an easy collar, then,” Pepper ventured, surprised at how warm her hand was, given the situation.

“Gerald, stop!” Eloise had lost her therapeutic perspective. “You know the deception he’s capable of.”

“of which he is capable.” Pepper tried to un-dangle her preposition.

“Am I going to have to cuff you to get you the protection you need?” Armstrong put on her police face.

The door jangled and yet another overly-responsible concerned, arm of the law came in. More like the head than an arm. Police Captain Block sauntered over to the owner of the pizza place and whispered some directions. Frederico Schwartz, pulled on his ring of keys and locked the front door.

“You are coming with us Sergeant Pepper,” Block nodded to Sergeant Armstrong who pulled her cuffs off of her belt.

“It’s not even *Inspector Pepper* anymore,” Pepper said. “It’s Mr. Pepper, retired senior citizen. Emphasis on citizen as in my attorney may not agree with you,”

“Oh, give us a break, Gerald,” Eloise Block interjected. “You hate lawyers.”

Sergeant Armstrong clicked the cuffs on him without a struggle.

“Just a brief consult with my solicitor please.” Gerald nodded at Eloise. “Oh, and by the way, are you going to cuff him as well.” He nodded at Othello lying under the table.

Captain Block rolled his eyes. “Two minutes.”

The Captain and Sergeant withdrew to the front door, checking the street through the neon beer signs. Armstrong, kept looking back at them more than necessary, Pepper thought. For some obscure reason Othello had an affinity for the blond and let her take him on his leash.

“Eloise, I will be out of these cuffs within the next five minutes. I have a mission for you. Go to Billy’s villa. The key to the door is under the plaster statue of the Oscar, the movie award. The password for the security pad is: m-i-l-d-r-e-d.”

“Your wife’s name.” Eloise said.

“And his mother’s. Above the mantle on the fireplace there is a Chinese dagger, about twelve inches long. Call my cell letting the phone ring only once if the dagger’s still there, three times if it is not. Then hang up. Take a look around the place, call me back ten minutes later and tell me what you found.”

“Gerald. What if he’s there.”

“Wait five minutes before you enter,” Pepper said. “He won’t want to be there any longer than that.”

Pepper rather enjoyed the ride in the back of the police car. Of course he removed the cuffs with a paper clip he kept taped under his belt in less than a minute. When Sergeant Inspector Carol Armstrong opened the door, she found the cuffs locked on Othello’s collar.

Crookfield’s answer to a safe house was the local jail cell with the door left open and a television set installed. Gerald decided not to disappoint Carol Armstrong by letting her know he hadn’t watched TV since it had rabbit ears.

*Chirrup, Chirrup, Chirrup.* Pepper’s cell rang three times. He liked the cricket sound cell ringer because it sounded like his phone was telling him to *cheer up*.

Five minutes later, Eloise called again. “I got all we needed in five minutes.”

“I expected nothing less,” Pepper prized.

“Beside nabbing the knife, he went to his bedroom for a change of clothes and something else...”

“Dramatic pause? Really?” Pepper said.

“Well, it was pretty cool. I found hairs, blond hairs on the floor of his closet. Three strands. Not human, I’m guessing.”

“Thank you Eloise. For solving my own murder.” He could almost feel her wide grin on the other end of the line.

What Bernadette Dubois, French accent and all, did not realize was how simple it was to discover what she thought was an extremely devious and well thought-out plan. Billy spent months in the mental ward working out her character and costume. Pepper was a little disappointed at just how simple it was. Did she have to use the first letter in her name the same as the first letter in the name *Billie*?

Another blond, Carol Armstrong, demonstrated her martial arts skill at subduing an opponent with a long knife. Bernadette, who had come into the station to report a theft, lunged at Pepper with the Chinese dagger. Carol Armstrong also lunged, and had the fake blond disarmed and cuffed within ten seconds.

Pepper tried to support. “Pretty good move, Inspector.”

Inspector Armstrong seemed a bit upset with Pepper as she removed the wig from Billy. “A little thick on the eye shadow there, Bernie.”

As Gerald Pepper tossed another stick for Othello into the creek behind their cottage, he reflected on the disappointed look on Carol Armstrong’s face at his attempt at support. Was it that he said *pretty good*. Or was it that he referred to her as *Inspector*. After all, she had joined

Eloise in referring to him as *Gerald*, these days. Maybe it was that she felt she should have been acknowledged a bit more for saving his life.

Pepper sighed and tossed again. *If they'd just let me be retired, I wouldn't have to be considering such things. Still, her hand was warm.*