MURDER IS PERSONAL

by BJ Condike

Chapter 1

I'll take blame for some of it. A lot of it, maybe. But part of it was simply bad karma, or bad juju, or just bad luck.

Like how I found myself in Rattlesnake Bend.

It had been the perfect hiding place, a backwater Texas town south of Fort Worth and north of Waco. In short, nowhere.

Everything was fine until that one odd thing happened. But odd things happen in threes.

The first one was working in Red Cloud's woodshop on my day off. Red wanted to spend his Tuesday catching stripers on Serpent Lake. I had nothing going on, so I said yes. The second was an all-day drizzle, a rarity for North Texas. That was another reason Red wanted to fish that day. He said the weather would improve the bite. The third strolled into our shop wearing yellow.

I didn't recognize the raincoat she wore but knew the face. My ex-girlfriend April Hunter. She was a long way from Massachusetts. And she shouldn't have been there.

But there she was in the viewing window, her L.L. Bean slicker as out of place in our store as a peacock in a chicken coop.

My hands shook as I avoided sawing off my fingers. Steeling myself, I braced for a different kind of pain. April and I had been together for ten years, but that was a long while ago. Our reunion was bound to be awkward, or worse, volatile.

April tucked wayward strands of blond hair behind her ear. Her face wrinkled in

puzzlement, then morphed into surprise. She gestured toward the workshop door.

I raised a finger in a “one-minute” mime and shut down the machines. The motors faded from a whine to a whisper to dead silence. My gut tensed as if expecting a punch.

I entered the retail area. She stood perfectly still, posed like a cigar store Indian in Birkenstocks and jeans, head cocked, one eyebrow raised.

“Well, if it isn’t Jake X. Powell,” she said. Just two old friends in a chance meeting. But it was more than that.

“April?” My voice cracked in three places.

My middle initial is subject to change, like the “x” in a math equation. That day it was an S as in Jake *S*. Powell—the *S* was for “Suave.”

I cleared my throat and spoke an octave lower. “What are you doing here, two thousand miles from home? Still combatting corporate America? Saving the gay whales?”

She grimaced. “I’m still writing, if that’s what you’re asking.”

April was a freelance reporter in Boston. She’d been the local incarnation of Lois Lane when we lived in Rollstone, an aging factory town an hour outside the city. Her passion for reporting bordered on obsession.

One day I left a note and took off in my Chevy van. I couldn’t tell her why. She’d never believe me. And never forgive me.

Eventually I landed on the Texas prairie, melting into the landscape. Until now.

“So what’s the Ghost Queen doing here?”

“Ghost? You’re accusing *me* of ghosting *you*?”

“April, you’re the only person I’ve ever known to ghost someone they’re living with.”

I must have raised my voice, because a customer tricked out as a Kardashian cowgirl

glanced in our direction. The twenty-something brunette continued to browse but stayed within earshot.

This was the reunion I had long yearned for, yet also feared. I had rehearsed it a thousand times. But her sudden appearance had rattled me. And I was blowing it.

April bobbed her head from side to side. “Maybe I do owe you an explanation, but…” She paused. “You owe me one too. You skipped town and all you left was a ten-word note.” She stepped closer. “Three years—” She poked my chest with a fingernail. “—and not one call.” The blood-red nail stung like a hornet. “Not one text.” Poke. “Not even a postcard.” Poke. “And your cell. Stopped. Working.” Poke. Poke. Poke. “You mean to tell me you’ve been here the whole time?” Her tone said it was inconceivable anyone would want to visit the tiny town of Rattlesnake Bend, let alone live there.

“I’ve been lots of places. This is just the most recent stop on my magical mystery tour.” The music and lyrics sprang unbidden in my head. I almost started singing.

“Unbelievable!” She said, her smile gone. “I mean, what the hell, Jake. You disappeared! Even your aunt didn’t know where you went.”

I shrugged.

“Why, Jake? You never gave me a reason.”

I shook my head, offering no explanation. Whatever I said would have been a lie, even if it was better than the truth.

Her shoulders sagged and she looked down. “You left right about …you know my dad died, right?”

I nodded. Yeah, I knew.

I never meant to harm anyone. Only one person knows what happened, but she’ll never

tell.

And now my three-year disappearing act had been wasted. The one person I had strived to avoid had found me, was standing in front of me. And the right words wouldn't come. Maybe there weren't any right words.

I closed my eyes and inhaled. The familiar scent of patchouli-laced perfume held hints of rain, mesquite, and prickly pear. Waves of memories flooded in but ebbed away on a tide of regret. I couldn't get involved with her again. The old Jake had loved her, but the new Jake was with Carlota.

Our eyes met, and I exhaled.

The brunette cowgirl no longer hid her interest and openly stared. She hovered over Red's most expensive pieces, jewelry boxes inlaid with turquoise and pipestone. The fringe on her western costume swayed with every movement. Our cashier Rosie squinted at me from the register. She'd give me hell later for distracting a customer.

I pulled April behind a display of Texas-shaped cutting boards and dropped my voice. "I can't explain. I just had to leave."

She rested her hand on my chest. My six-two frame dwarfed her by a foot. "Can't we go somewhere and talk?" she whispered. "Please?"

I must have been overtired because I relented. "Sure. Why not? The store closes in an hour. Let's meet at the Cock 'N' Bull." I pointed in the pub's direction. "It's around the corner. Six o'clock."

"Um, I can't meet you at six. I have a—a thing first. Can we get together later? Say, nine?"

I sighed. "What is it this time? Save the horny toads?"

"No! I have a reason for being in this one-horse town."

"Prairie chickens?"

"Stop it, Jake! I didn't come here looking for you. I was only killing time before my appointment and there you were." She paused and bit her lower lip, a sure sign her mental gears were turning. "You know, I don't know the area. Maybe you could come with me…"

"Hmm. Who is this appointment with? And where?"

"Some anonymous tipster. We're supposed to meet at a place called Castro Park."

"That's on the lake. Why would you want me there—to be, like, a bodyguard?"

She responded with a sheepish smile and a small shrug that asked, "Pretty please?" better than mere words could express.

There were two reasons to refuse. One of them was Carlota, and I couldn't mention the other. Besides, April was a professional journalist. She'd done things like that a thousand times. She never needed me before; she didn't need me then. I could just imagine Carlota's eruption if she knew I was skulking about at night with my ex.

"I don't think so, April. I'll meet you later, but you'll have to make your cloak-and-dagger rendezvous on your own."

"Yeah, right. Thanks for nothing, Jake."

"So, will I see you?"

"Maybe. I guess." She said it without conviction.

We exchanged cell numbers, and she left the store wearing an annoyed expression. She raised the hood of her raincoat against the dampness and didn't look back.

That was the last time I saw her alive.