

CLOSE-UP TO MURDER: A HOLLYWOOD COLD CASE MYSTERY

XANADU CANYON MYSTERIES
BOOK ONE



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ONE: TUESDAY



RIO

"KNOWLEDGE IS OUR ONLY POWER, PEDRO. I NEED YOURS!" RIO shouted over the rhythmic cumbia blaring from the speakers and the argument of rowdy drunks at the bar. "We can't let the studio go under because of this bastardo." She'd lost any childhood Spanish in a series of English-speaking foster homes but some words were self-evident.

Bent with arthritis, gnarled fingers clutching his beer, the former camera grip glared and responded in a string of untranslatable curses. She thought Pedro might be questioning where being smart had got him, but she wasn't about to engage in that argument.

"Por qué yo, Cruze? I remember nada. I am paid to remember nada." A familiar refrain, but Pedro didn't work for the studio anymore.

It had taken her quite a while to track down the former employee just from rumors and connections. Hollywood was built on connections. "Do it for your friends? For their families? If I don't find the Magician, the film is dead, the studio is dead, the jobs are gone. The investors don't care if we release it or not. You know that. They're

insured and will get their money one way or another. But all the little people, Pedro. . . In this economy. . . AI will take their place."

He slumped even more. "The Magician, he has to be over ciento años by now! It was a long, long time ago. Why do you not ask Luis?"

Rio would rather be dancing to that pounding beat right now, downing a beer or two and driving out demons. Maybe pick up a. . . well, the men here were old, scratch that. "Meyer has Luis running all over the state." And the driver wasn't answering his phone, as if he were avoiding her. Or his battery was dead. Her life was like that.

"Besides, I doubt even Luis knows how to find the *new* Magician, the one who produces digital magic, not special effects. Maybe the old Magician's grandson? I'm too new to know the histories." Rio was a former cop and a security guard, not an encyclopedia. "But the address and phone numbers haven't changed."

Except these days, the address went to a mailbox forwarder and the old-fashioned landline went to voice mail. And the elusive techie wasn't answering email—apparently a new communication addition and no more effective.

Pedro kept shaking his shaggy head. "Won't do no good, chiquita. I only carried equipment to the Magician's warehouse, back before we went big time. Why Xanadu? It's up past the castle, before Big Sur. You think he lives *there*?"

"It's a hunch, Pedro." Hunches had saved her life so many times that Rio had quit trying to explain them. This one seemed urgent.

Superstitious, like most in the business, he grimaced but accepted. "Is PCH open? Xanadu es un mito, from another time! Cliffs probably fell on the idiotas by now."

A myth, yes. But the coast road existed. Rio did mental calculations. If she left now and hit the pedal, she'd be in San Simeon before nine, but the rest of that winding highway. . . She didn't know if it was open. So many mudslides. . . She could check, but hadn't she heard an atmospheric river was dumping buckets up that way? *Triple danged filthy garbage.*

Desperation drove insanity. "I have to look, Pedro. It's my only hope. How do I find it?" Her phone was vibrating. She needed to hit

the road *now*. She had actors threatening suicide and directors threatening murder, although who the victim might be was probably a matter of who was closest when the rage exploded.

Being a cop had been easier.

Pedro shrugged. "You can't. That is why it is called Xanadu. If you miss the bit of gravel. . . Used to be one of them reflecting lights there, but I was only a nino! Ain't gonna be there now. No one out there no more. And the Magician. . . probably never there."

With the expertise of years in foster homes, Rio mentally parsed a string of bowdlerized obscenities. "But anyone at the estate might know where to find him?"

Because the spokesperson for the descendants of the studio's owners claimed no knowledge of the Magician's whereabouts. Surely, if he was at their family estate, they would have told her? But they were all sitting on buckets of wealth and no longer had interest in the insane film business. They Whitneys had quit responding to her frantic inquiries after her first call.

Surely, someone along the road could point her towards a former film titan's crumbling mansion. Even if no one lived there, an estate that size had to be historic and well known. For California, anyway.

Although it seemed less and less likely that anyone knew how to find the elusive technician. He'd probably moved to San Francisco. The kind of digital wizardry he produced required tech knowledge beyond that of anyone else in the industry. The Magician was single-handedly keeping XRM Studios alive, whether he knew it or not.

She refused to let despair win.

"There are a lot of miles between San Simeon and Big Sur," she said, trying to picture the coast road in her head. Except she was a city girl and had only traveled it once or twice, in distant memory. "Can you give me a beach, anything?"

She knew better. If Pedro hadn't been there in fifty years. . . everything had changed. And why would he remember a beach? He wouldn't have been allowed on it back then, even if he'd had the time.

"Tried to find it again, once," he admitted. "Couldn't. You have to

pull over at every gravel patch. Maybe it's better if the studio closes. Bad things happen there."

"Yeah, I know, which is why they hired me." Totally another story and not one she had time for today. "Thanks, Pedro. I can't give up now. This is the best job I've ever had."

She bought him another round, added a tequila shot, and strode into the smoggy gloom of a late May day. After a few hours of sunshine, the fog was already drifting back in.

She slid into the leather seat of her metallic purple Porsche. The beast ate gas, but the studio paid for it, so she wasn't complaining. Not about the ride anyway. Plenty of other headaches worth griping about

Speaking of headaches. . . She checked her phone. She loved Isabel but life's complications kept multiplying. She pressed the kid's number. An abandoned child as Rio had once been, Isabel had entered the Big Sister program last year. Poor kid had drawn Rio as her mentor.

"Hey, hermanita, qué es?" She checked the time. School was out. The kid was home.

"They took Arturo," Isabel whispered.

Filth and manure. Could this day get any better? "The feds? The cops? Do you know?" Rio could handle the cops, but her brother was undocumented. That was beyond her scope.

"I don't know," Isabel whispered. "He's not answering."

Deep breath, Cruze, very deep breath, keep your voice calm. "Okay, I'm out of town—" or would be in five minutes. "Do you have any food in the house?"

"No." She was crying softly now. "He said he'd take me shopping after school. He said he got paid."

"All right. You know Arturo. He'll figure things out. But you need to eat. You still have my key?" Rio brushed a heavy strand of black hair behind her ear, trying to recall all the situations they'd discussed. Rio had never known a nurturing family and wasn't the sort to provide one, but safety, she could do.

She could practically hear the twelve-year-old's head nod before she whispered, "Sí."

"Don't walk. Take the bus. Pack your bags, bring your school-books, stay at my place tonight. I don't know when I'll be home but it won't be soon. If Arturo isn't back by tomorrow after school, call Santa Maria." That wasn't the director's name but what the kids called her. "She'll find out about Arturo and make sure you're safe, *está bien?*"

She said a few more reassuring things, trying not to lie or raise the girl's hopes too much. Kids growing up like Isabel were too street savvy to believe pie-in-the-sky promises.

After Rio hung up, she called Maria herself, and set the social-worker-gone-rogue to looking for Isabel's butthead of a brother. Rio gave Arturo credit for looking after his sister after their parents were deported, but otherwise. . . he was a total flake, like any eighteen-year-old male.

But their mother had birthed both her children at home, away from authorities, to avoid deportation. Terrified, she had never obtained official documentation for them. One more burden she'd worry about later.

Personal business set aside, Rio zoomed the Porsche's engine to let off steam, then set her GPS in hopes of finding a road not blocked by rush hour traffic. Foolish, but she liked the power of technology. And the automated voice allowed her to cruise mechanically while she worked through her mental checklists.

A product of the foster system, she always had a packed bag in the car. She'd thrown in a few extras earlier today, when it had become obvious the Magician wasn't local. She didn't even have a *name* for the elusive genius. She half suspected a basement full of nerds and geeks were the CGI masterminds responsible for the studio's visual effects. Someone with a very warped imagination had created those purple aliens and realistic sasquatches wandering jungles that didn't exist.

As revved as the Porsche's powerful engine, she stopped for a to-go bag for nibbling as she drove. Iced coffee and chicken nuggets could be consumed with one hand. Nervous energy burned them off.

The department used to stick her in front of a computer to search

details because she was good. But that just wasn't her style. Talking to people worked better.

Rio had gone into police work because she liked being useful—and the police academy was cheaper and faster than college. Pushed out of the foster system at eighteen, she hadn't liked starving, so she'd taken the fastest route to a salary. Then, even when she had a full-time job on the force, she'd picked up extra hours, working security as so many others did. The extra money had allowed her to rent her own place—heaven on earth to someone who'd grown up in crowded households of bunkbeds and air mattresses.

Being offered the XRM job had been a fluke and a godsend. Any other cop on the force would have seen the crazy and taken him down, but she'd been the one guarding the head honcho that night. Meyer may have been impressed and grateful, but mostly, Rio figured he wanted someone willing to take a bullet for him. People really didn't like him. He'd offered the Porsche and a permanent position at twice her police salary.

She'd tossed and turned over the decision, but how could she turn down an offer that allowed her to give back to the community that had raised her?

She still lived in the same run-down rental, but now, she had a little extra money for Isabel and others like her. And she got to drive a classy car and hit the streets while doing it. That Meyer was a lying posterior pustule people wanted to kill was irrelevant.

She let down the window and smelled the foggy sea air as she drove out of town and onto the winding roads heading up the coast, with the GPS set on San Simeon. After that, she'd be on her own.

Hearst Castle had been built back in the Roaring Twenties, as she recalled, not long before the Whitneys built their exclusive, hidden estate on the proceeds of inherited wealth and the booming film industry. Of course, land in the rocky hills, with no population or utilities and useless for farming, had been really cheap back then. Now. . . she wouldn't even ask. A studio flat without a view started over a mil.

After years of tragedy, the reclusive Whitneys had left film decades ago and now hid behind the gated walls of exclusive LA

neighborhoods. They had probably sold Xanadu by now, but this was her last hope. She'd interviewed everyone in the city. Even those few who knew of the Magician's existence had no inkling he was still alive.

He had to be alive—or someone using his moniker operated in his place.

She'd left civilization behind and dark had set in by the time her headlights caressed rock walls large enough to conceal a hidden canyon. Her food and drink had run out an hour back. In this fog, she'd miss any turn off. She smacked the wheel in frustration. Maybe in the morning. . .

She was a product of the inner city. She'd never had money or leisure for cruising or surfing. She'd been born with brown skin and didn't need to sun herself on beaches. She'd never taken a vacation among the coast's luxury resorts and family campgrounds. She had, however, driven the coast highway once or twice and knew what to expect—a narrow road with almost nothing resembling civilization. She started looking for one of the rare wide gravel verges so she could pull over and Google a motel.

Her phone rang just as she caught a glimpse of a narrow, gravel pull-off ahead. Worried about Isabel, she decided to risk it. Traffic at this late hour was light. Easing as far off the road as she could, thanking heavens for small cars, she let Siri call back.

"They took Arturo," Maria reported without preamble. "I don't know what detention center he's in. I'll have our attorney look in the morning. Where's Isabel?"

"At my place. She'll be fine there tonight, but I'm on the job and out of town. I can't help. I'll try to check in when I can. Your resources with immigration are better than mine." Rio drew her fingers through her hair and rubbed her head, but her brain needed rest.

After a few brusque exchanges over practicalities, she signed off and checked for headlights before pulling out again.

That's when her low fog lights caught the reflection on a yellow marker lying in the ditch beside a boulder concealing. . . a gravel turn-off. Once more, her magic had placed her in the right place, at

the right time. It had happened enough that she credited guardian angels and not freaky coincidence.

Exhausted, praying hard, Rio eased her Porsche onto a gravel drive almost completely hidden by boulders, pines, and towering rock bluffs. She immediately caught flickers of light ahead.

Expecting turrets, swooping bats, and spectral ectoplasm at the very least, she drove cautiously on the rutted gravel until her headlights caught a paved drive. . . and a sprawling mixed California-Victorian mansion that would fit perfectly into Beverly Hills.

With a B&B sign out front.

TWO



JUDE

SITTING IN HER STUDY, SURROUNDED BY UNPUBLISHED FICTION, OLD journals, and scrapbooks, Judith Whitney stared out at the empty night. "I think I'll write my memoirs," she said as her sister carried in their bedtime toddies—herbal these days.

Sandra snorted. Outwardly as straight-spined and graceful as she had been in her dancing days, she could be inwardly twisted when she wanted. "No one cares about those days anymore, unless you have sordid gossip to share. I trust you aren't planning on digging up any bodies."

She hadn't been, but the thought perked her right up. Jude knew where a few figurative bodies were buried. "I think people ought to remember the freedom and creativeness of the sixties and seventies. It wasn't all shaggy hippies and war protests and LSD."

Sandra settled into the Eames lounge chair their father had bought back in those days. The house was stuck in the same time warp as their memories.

"You think they want to hear about your perky little stewardess cap? The pantyhose? Or the puny, little-over-a-dollar-an-hour

minimum wage we were paid? The fact that even if we were making a crap ton of money, we couldn't have a credit card or a bank account unless daddy signed for it? Such lovely memories." Sandra kicked off her shoes and put her feet up on the deteriorating ottoman.

Back in the day, their brother and his friends had used any loose piece of furniture as footballs. Young, they assumed they'd live forever, and so would the furnishings. Time changed their perspective. Their brother was dead now, as were so many of his cronies.

Jude had researched the Eames chair and ottoman at the library once. They could have earned a nice sum selling it these days, far more than their father had paid, if it had been in good condition. Battered as it was, it wasn't worth the effort. One more sin they could lay at their late brother's feet, a minor one, under the circumstances.

"I didn't just wear a uniform." Jude returned to flipping the pages of one of her old journals. "Remember Mary Quant? I shopped her boutique every time I had a flight into London. Airline wouldn't let me wear the eyeliner but off-duty. . . ." She'd been pretty back then. And thin as Sandra.

"Meyer about had a fit when you brought me back those hot pants." Sandra almost smiled. "Wonder if we still have those in the attic?"

Jude's attention had already wandered. "Are those headlights?" The drive was long and her eyesight wasn't the best. She rummaged for her glasses.

Sandra sat up straight to see out the enormous window overlooking the front of the house. "Either that or two extremely large flashlights." She dragged herself out of the lounge chair and looked for her shoes.

"Oh, dear." Jude struggled to pull herself from the desk chair, adjust her dress, and push her graying curls behind her ears. She'd quit worrying about makeup and designer clothes after forty, when the pounds had started piling on. But she couldn't get past the lessons of their youth and duties as hostesses. Visitors had Expectations.

They didn't even have a butler anymore.

"There's no one left to die, is there?" Sandra asked, her mind taking a decidedly different tack than Jude's. With no phone or internet, bad news reached them by car.

Sandra had lost everyone and everything she'd loved, so she expected the worst. But those losses had been decades ago, in a different time and place.

"Tray, maybe, but he's only in his fifties." Their nephew had several adult children, but it would be monstrous to lose the younger generation. With relief, she recalled, "Adrian's car is in the garage, and I doubt his sisters even remember us. I think we may have a *guest*." Excited, Jude hurried for the stairs. She missed having company. She used to like parties.

Sandra followed more sedately, checking a mirror, pinching her cheeks, fussing with her once-champagne-colored hair. Neither of them had visited the beautician in months and Sandra's roots were decidedly white.

Jude's sister preferred to make her grand entrance after guests entered. As the elder and the more daring, Judith preferred welcoming whatever adventure awaited beyond the doorstep.

They'd turned the grand foyer into a reception lobby of sorts, mostly drawn from their memories of luxurious hotels of their past. They never turned on the chandelier anymore and didn't bother now. It was late. And bright lights would reveal the shabbiness of the Chinese silk carpet.

She pressed the button opening the automatic doors they'd had installed when their father had been reduced to a wheelchair. The lights were still on around the B&B sign, although a few of the bulbs had blown out. They'd need to ask Garth to replace them if they were actually taking guests.

Entering with an expression of fascinated confusion, their visitor was a little on the tall side, with wide shoulders, lush black hair she'd clipped up in a messy knot, and sharply defined cheekbones. Disappointingly, she wore off-the-rack khaki, except for an exotic beaded necklace.

Petite nose, elongated, slightly slanted dark eyes. . . *Danielle?*

Impossible, of course. Their reminiscences had just exhumed memories of their cousin's daughter—who had been an interesting mix of Asian and Latin but not as strikingly featured as their lovely guest. The only unusual thing about their cousins' daughter had been her death in a fiery car crash.

THREE



RIO

OH YEAH, DESPITE THE LACK OF GHOSTS AND CRACKLING LAUGHTER, *she'd found Xanadu.*

Beyond the discreet B&B sign that merely said *Welcome to Our House* and an automatic door that might once have graced a grand hotel, Rio entered a towering foyer with mahogany paneling, antique carpet, and a crystal chandelier screaming opulence and exclusivity. The studio was going to pay for this little outing.

If it didn't go bankrupt first.

The plump, smiling woman approaching didn't appear ready to bite off Rio's head for sullying the carpet with shabby huaraches. She also didn't give the impression of any of the Nordic, stern Whitneys in the portraits decorating the studio's conference room. Maybe this woman was the housekeeper. The dowdy, flowered dress, comfortable shoes, and gray curls didn't scream wealthy socialite.

"Hello, I'm Jude Whitney, welcome to Our House."

Well, so much for her powers of observation. Rio quickly reassessed, backtracked, and held out her hand. No point in scaring off the kazillionaires until she had the lay of the land. "I'm Rio

Cruze. I'm lost. I tried to find a motel but my cell phone doesn't seem to be working. It's a miracle finding this place. Are you open?"

Her phone had been working fine until she'd turned down this hidden canyon. She'd lost interest in looking for motels at that point.

"We are, indeed, welcoming lost travelers. We don't see many but we're delighted to have you." Miss—Mrs.?—Whitney led the way to the polished, tall desk that belonged in one of those hotels in travel magazines. "If you'll sign in and give me your credit card and keys, I'll have someone fetch your luggage and park your car."

Her keys? No one touched her. . . *Forget it, Cruze.* She represented the studio. That was their car. She couldn't blow this.

"I don't wish to be any trouble," Rio protested, just because she didn't do submissive well. "I only have an overnight bag. Just tell me where to park. I am so thrilled to find this place. I was reaching exhaustion."

"You poor thing. That's a terrible road to travel tired. I'm sorry, the kitchen is closed, or I'd offer you a bite to eat. We park the cars in the garage to keep the birds off them." Jude offered an old-fashioned log requiring a signature and address and discreetly accepted Rio's offered credit card. She actually wrote down the number instead of running it through a machine. No cell reception, right. "This close to the water, the scavengers think we make a good nesting place."

Rio had never lived near the ocean, but she knew scavengers hung out where there was food—which was why she'd insisted on an apartment with a carport. She handed over her keys. Gulls were even larger than city crows. Did they have bears in canyons?

A tall, slender woman with fading blond hair, and the upright grace of a model, strolled down the red-carpeted stairway that blocked any sight of the rest of the house. Her bone structure resembled a feminine version of the Whitney portraits, but her smile seemed forced, or perhaps that was the Botox. "Adrian should be down shortly for your luggage. Welcome to Our House. You have a choice of rooms this evening. The Romance Suite receives morning light, although not too early because of the canyon walls. Or perhaps you'd prefer the Mystery Suite. No light reaches it until noon."

Romance? Mystery? Playing along with the oddity, knowing the

rich lived differently—perhaps she ought to label her own bedroom The Non-Romance Suite—Rio didn't wish to be so crass as to ask for price differences. "Mystery sounds interesting, if no one is murdered. May I see it?"

She didn't know what instinct prompted her to play this game, but she was wary about bringing up an elusive myth like the Magician before she knew who and what she was dealing with. And she had a vague notion that the well-to-do were rude enough to ask to see rooms first instead of taking the first offered.

Her instinct didn't seem to offend. The aristocratic blond who didn't introduce herself merely nodded and led the way up.

The chattier gray-haired lady followed behind. "Do you enjoy reading? You're free to indulge in any of the volumes except the rare first editions in the locked cabinet. The rest are just the accumulation of our reading habits."

Rio had never led the kind of life that had allowed for books or quiet introspection and discussions of literature. She had learned by doing and listening. Fortunately, she was pretty good at both. "You're both bookworms? Librarians, maybe?"

Jude Whitney laughed. "Hardly librarians, although I daresay we've learned a good deal about sorting books these last years. Our reading habits are quite appalling. Sandra, here, has started reading romantasy, of all things! Horrible, violent stories. But we have great-nieces and nephews who play those dreadfully violent video games, so we try to keep up with the times. I prefer cozy fantasies."

The labels flew right over Rio's head, but she nodded understandingly. After climbing three flights of stairs, she tried not to gape in awe at the book-lined room they brought her to. Every single wall had bookshelves, except the one over the bed, thank the heavens. She hated to imagine what would happen in an earthquake.

An old-fashioned ceiling-light fixture with a cut-glass globe threw rainbow lights around the room when switched on. Rich—silk?—draperies with gauzy curtains underneath decorated French doors opening onto a small balcony. The walls on either side of the doors had floor-to-ceiling shelves, stuffed to the top with moldering old leather volumes alongside ones with tattered cardboard covers.

The smaller paperbacks had apparently been assigned to the shelves near the ceiling on either side of the dresser. So, someone had thought of earthquakes.

Rio knew nothing of antiques but she was fairly certain the carved poster bed and elaborately carved dresser on curved legs were not from this century. Out of politeness, she examined the shelves nearest the door. "Agatha Christie?" At least she recognized the name as she pulled out the book.

"We have everything she ever wrote, including *The Mousetrap* in the original format," Jude said proudly, while the woman now identified as Sandra switched on a bedside lamp over an old clock that probably had to be wound. "Will this room suit or would you like to see one of the others?"

"Oh, this suits just fine, thank you so much," Rio gushed. She knew how to gush. She'd survived childhood that way. "This is an absolute blessing!"

"One of the lights is out." Sandra frowned at the porcelain lamp base. She glanced up at heavy footsteps on the stairs and called, "Adrian? Do we have more bulbs?"

Rio swung around to see a tall, professorial man wearing black-framed glasses wander in with her backpack, as if he'd been looking for a place to store it. Wearing a tan suede blazer, of all things, he absent-mindedly patted the pockets and produced a light bulb. Who carried bulbs in their pockets?

Blond, his high, chiseled cheekbones shadowing a few days of beard stubble, he loomed over the ladies. This was no normal porter. In fact, except for the glasses and distracted expression, *he looked exactly like all the Whitneys in the studio portraits*. That massive, cleft jaw gave him away.

This had to be Xanadu.

He screwed the bulb in where indicated. Not in the least subservient, he studied Rio as if examining her for size, set down her bag, and scanned the shelves. After selecting several volumes to set on the bedside table, he asked, "What brings you all the way out here?" No polite introduction, just flat frankness.

OK, this wasn't weird at all. *The Whitneys still lived in Xanadu*. No

wonder she hadn't reached anyone but a secretary. If anyone knew her quarry, it had to be them.

Glancing cautiously at the ceiling to be certain no bats clung there, Rio decided the sooner she left, the better, and went straight to the point. "I'm looking for the Magician."

Was it her imagination or did the temperature just drop thirty degrees?

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