

SCREENPLAY OF DEATH

A HOLLYWOOD COLD CASE MYSTERY

XANADU CANYON MYSTERIES

BOOK TWO



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ONE



RIO: MONDAY

"GET SERIOUS, CALUM. PETER PAN WAS AN IRRESPONSIBLE TWIT. OZ WAS A dangerous nutcase. Grow up, accept responsibility, move on." Clipping a dangling lock of black hair into her topknot, Rio Cruze watched several dozen security monitors at once while arguing with the genius too bored to bother watching cars driving past the gates.

How the mighty had fallen! XRM Studios had once monitored the arrival and safety of glamorous movie stars in limos and furs. Today, they were supervising the entrance of wealthy housewives, surfers, and business suits. . . the studio owners.

Beside her, Calum Iverson, the studio's CGI technician, was supposed to be acting in the place of the staff Rio no longer had, protecting those wealthy owners. He should be managing the cameras and observing the entry points of the blocks-long studio campus. Instead, he was pacing. Not a big man, he was lean, muscled, restless, and sucked up way too much energy in the narrow security office, without accomplishing a blamed thing.

She missed her last assistant. A former police officer like her, he'd have had a thing or two to say about this display of affluence while the

studio slowly sank into bankruptcy—and her career teetered on vanishing.

Of course, her former assistant's cynicism hadn't turned out well, so what did she know? She just knew one person didn't have enough eyes to monitor the entirety of XRM's sprawling campus. And the studio's obnoxious magician of computer-generated special effects had no intention of being useful.

"I'm running a multi-million-dollar business," Calum protested, stopping to zoom a camera up to the entrance where another limo arrived. "How much more responsible can I get?"

Rio snorted. "Money is simple. It doesn't talk back. Money just sits there like a stack of checkers to be dealt out so you might trounce your opponent and be king. You have a daughter—and a *grandson*—on the way, Iverson! Responsibility doesn't mean throwing money at them. Children are our future, *everyone's* future. It's our duty to teach them right from wrong, how to treat others as they wish to be treated, and not just how to play checkers with cash."

She found the monitor showing her own young responsibilities. Rio had no family of her own. Isabel was her Little Sister by way of a community program. Arturo, Isabel's eighteen-year-old brother, apparently came with the family plan. Their parents had been deported, leaving the older kid looking out for the younger.

Arturo had been born here but had no official documentation since his mother had birthed him at home, to avoid authorities. So he was hiding out while Rio's friends tried to get him authorized. He was Isabel's only support. Rio didn't lead the kind of life that would let her foster a kid, as she had been, but she did what little she could. Currently, that meant lending them one of the studio mobile homes to crash in.

"I'd like to believe I'm more sophisticated than *checkers*," Calum said with scorn, stopping to view a different monitor. "I'm pretty good at chess."

"Chess and you're the queen?" Rio chuckled.

Reassured the kids were still cleaning mobile homes on the back lot, she watched the arrival of more members of the Whitney trust. They were gathering to decide the fate of the studio. . . and her future.

If the studio closed, she'd be homeless, as would the kids—and quite a lot of others.

"You need a camera on the roof." Calum pointed at a monitor showing a couple entering the roof stairwell. "Looks like you've got people using it for trysts. A gunman could take out everyone on the lot from up there."

"Who says *tryst* anymore? And people go up there to eat lunch and work on their tans. They need a security pass to get through the front gate and key cards to enter the building. I'm pretty sure an AK47 would be noticed."

Rio opened a screen from the camera under the roof gutter displaying the dusty yard behind the main soundstage. "A gunman would have to cross that space to reach the back door. My problem is not lack of coverage. It's the need for a minimum of four people monitoring what amounts to a small town during the day, plus a reliable manager to work nightshift. Adding more cameras is useless unless and until that happens."

Calum shrugged. "Not my problem. That's what the VIPs are for. Did you count heads? Is the whole board in the conference room yet? Why aren't we monitoring that?" He sat down to zoom one camera after another, as if they were a video game.

Rio used the heel of her hand to smack his temple, half hidden in long, auburn-hair. "Privacy, O Great Wizard. Can you *imagine* the uproar if I planted cameras in all the offices? There are still a few laws!"

"But you're more likely to learn who is killing whom that way than watching these black-and-white screens." He gestured at one showing shadowy figures slipping from the soundstage into the writer's room, probably following one of their boss's cold reproofs. "It's not as if any of the chuckleheads running this operation believes the law applies to them."

"Look, I get it." Rio sat back in her chair to scan all the monitors at once. No AK47s in sight. "Hollywood invites the sorts who chase money and fame—not do-gooders and nuns. It was built by men who thought they were above the law and could pay off anyone who thought otherwise. Historically, they have succeeded more often than

not. Your father was no saint either. He could very well have extorted the wrong man and got himself blown up." Which was the entire reason Calum had left his cave to stalk her office. "That was what, fifteen years ago? What do you hope to achieve by finding out who did it?"

"Satisfaction. I—" Staring at a monitor, Calum froze.

Rio glanced over, catching a glimpse of what appeared to be feet falling past the roof camera. She froze too.

That was definitely a whole person falling past the ground floor camera.

Oh fudge nuggets, no, not again.

TWO



ADRIAN

CALLING HIMSELF THIRTEEN KINDS OF FOOL, DR. ADRIAN WHITNEY stalked down XRM's second-story catwalk, in the direction of the boardroom, still wearing his broad-brimmed hat and prescription sunglasses. Rio had told him he ought to wear a Stetson, presumably because his film star ancestors made Westerns. He'd amused himself by buying a vented straw one. The slight rebellion stupidly made him feel as if he still had some control over his life.

When he'd taken a doctorate in history, he thought he'd made it perfectly clear that he wanted no role in the film industry. He'd never wanted to be involved in the family trust and had steered clear of the studio his entire life. He taught *history*, for all that was holy! Not a money manager, not a film star—he barely even watched movies these days. They skewed heavily toward derivative and were certainly not better than the originals.

And here he was, giving up his travel plans for the summer, giving up any chance of research for his new book—to do what? Play nanny to a dinosaur?

The reason he had agreed to this insanity—and still wore the hat—flew out of a room on his right and crashed into him. He caught the

ball of energy by her slender waist and held her upright until she regained her balance. Rio had curves in all the right places but it was her long dark eyes one had to watch. They flashed fire now—and didn't even notice his new chapeau.

"Adrian, thank goodness! Run up to the roof, keep anyone up there, up there. I'm leaving Calum with the monitors but I can't trust him for two minutes. Call your dad, tell him I've summoned an ambulance. The police will be all over in ten minutes. Have him lock everyone in the boardroom until we know the situation." Carrying the weird crystal-knobbed walking stick she'd recently acquired, she broke free and flew down the stairs to the main floor.

What the frigging. . . A glance in the security room she'd just exited revealed the red-haired leprechaun frantically manipulating monitors like a video game. What was Calum doing here?

The presence of the recluse was weird enough for Adrian to follow Rio's warning and race for the roof stairs. Bursting into the June heat of the gravel-coated roof, he tilted his hat to better scan sun-drenched hiding places for snipers or dragons. One never knew. . .

A bespectacled shrimp in checkered, short-sleeved shirt crouched by the barrier wall, rocking back and forth. . . in terror? Seeing no one holding a gun—until this past month, that had never been a concept he'd ever entertained—Adrian approached cautiously.

Before he could find words, the guy looked up and cried, "I didn't do it, I swear! She was just sitting there, shouting at me, like she always does. And then—" He gestured frantically at the wall. "I don't know. She was gone!"

Holding his hat in place, Adrian glanced over the wall. A crowd had begun to gather on the ground. Rio reached them as he watched, taking charge, as usual, gesturing them back from a figure sprawled brokenly on the hard concrete loading dock.

Who? What?

Grasping that this might be very bad, Adrian punched his father's contact number and got voice mail. "Lock down the boardroom. Cops will be here in ten. Send PR to the rear of main soundstage." Ordering lockdown mode did not quell his gut-wrenching image of falling thirty feet to hard pavement. He needed more to occupy his mind. . .

The nerd looked terrified. "Police? Is she. . . ?"

Aware of his size and that he loomed, needing the distraction, Adrian slumped down to the roof and held out his hand. "Adrian Whitney, and you are?"

The nerd's grip was sweaty. Given the heat and the situation, perfectly understandable.

"James Cooper. *Whitney*, one of those Whitneys?"

"Guilty as charged, history prof at USC, scary stuff. Want to tell me what happened here? Pretend you're giving a book report."

Cooper stared at his tattered Skechers. "Book report, right." He startled at the sound of sirens, but this was Burbank. Sirens were part of city living. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, glanced nervously at the waist-high wall behind them, and groaned. "I'm a copywriter for Roberts Media. They're filming shortly. Jilly is supposed to have her own segment today."

Not how Adrian would start a book report but the guy was calming down to organize his thoughts. Accustomed to staying quiet while students pulled their acts together, he waited.

Cooper heaved a sigh. "I told her this wasn't the time for muckraking. She argued, she always does. She's ambitious, y'know? There's an investigative reporter slot opening, and she wants it. Deserves it. But she's all wrapped up with what's inside her head and can't read the audience. People don't want horror stories and scandal these days, unless they're about puppies. People love animals more than they do their fellow humans." He glanced at the wall again. "She'll be OK, won't she? Ambulance is coming?"

"Ambulance on its way," Adrian said with assurance. Maybe he should practice a calming Clint Eastwood drawl to match the hat. "So, you argued. Then what happened?"

Cooper cleaned his dark-framed glasses on his shirt tail. "She was just sitting on the wall, sipping that filthy green drink she calls lunch, watching the yard, I guess. She flings her arms around a lot when she argues, but she's pretty steady. I was pacing and yelling, trying to make her see sense."

He looked worriedly to Adrian. "We always do this. It's never caused her to fall." Without glasses, Cooper's eyes were small and watery. "But instead of arguing back, she got quiet. I turned, and she

was holding her throat, shaking sort of. And then—" He looked terrified again. "She just went backward!" He broke down weeping.

Adrian's phone beeped with a text message. His father, Douglas Whitney III—Dougie Tray—asking where he was. If he'd listen to his damned voice mail. . . He typed back,

WE'VE GOT A JUMPER

That was callous, but it would shut up his drama-prone family for a few minutes while they argued. Great-Aunt Jude would probably be up here shortly. She might be in her seventies and overweight, but she climbed worse stairs daily.

In the meantime—what would Rio do?

Adrian noted an insulated tumbler, lid off, spilling green sludge on the roof. "That your lunch bag?" He gestured at a brown bag blowing against a cooling unit.

At Cooper's wary nod, Adrian got up, captured the bag, and used it to lift the tumbler. Because, as a PhD, he thought sardonically, he learned quickly.

Given what they'd been through a few weeks ago, his brilliant security chief's cynical mind would instantly leap toward poison.

THREE



RIO

NOT KNOWING WHY SHE'D GRABBED THE WALKING STICK CALUM'S STRANGE friend had given her, Rio appreciated its worth now. Gripping the blackened wood, she calmed the sickening wrench in her middle at what she knew lay on the pavement in the center of the gathering crowd. Focusing on the wood and the people, she circled the crystal-knob like a fairy godmother's wand and cleared an opening. Apparently, film people believed in magic sticks, because they fell back so someone with CPR credentials could work.

Not that CPR or bandages would help, Rio realized with mixed sorrow and shock, gazing up to the roof. The main production building, built with high ceilings nearly a century ago, had to be the equivalent of nearly three stories. No one could survive that fall. Despite all the horrors she'd seen when she'd served with the LAPD, Rio had never watched anyone fall from a roof.

She didn't want to look, but her job required identifying the victim. Steeling herself, Rio tried to recognize the poor woman's face while the medic worked, but hundreds of people came and went through these doors on a daily basis. The victim's once elegantly coiffed blond hair could belong to anyone.

The medic sat back in defeat and shook her head.

This was so very not good. . . Pushing down the roiling in her gut, Rio ascertained the identity of the victim as a Jillian Eades, a Roberts Media employee. She hated her suspicious mind, but once a cop, always a cop. She ran inside to secure the writers' room, where they kept their lockers.

Jillian Eades might have simply fallen off the roof—but instinct said otherwise. Rio wished the stick in her hand really was magic capable of conjuring and capturing villains. Instead, she only had experience whispering in her ear.

People died at XRM. And scandals got covered up. Rio trusted Adrian but no one else. She needed a complete inventory of who had been in the building.

If Jillian Eades worked for Roberts Media. . . Where did she start? She wasn't familiar with the media staff.

Rio knew the studio's VP and major shareholder, Marvin Robert, employed the main soundstage every afternoon. Rio harbored an impression that the silver-fox media mogul thought acting and films one step removed from cockroaches and porn. But that could just be her personal bias against arrogant billionaires.

It didn't help that when XRM had quit filming major productions, Marvelous Marvin had renovated his news set but hadn't moved his business offices from downtown LA. Was he here yet? The sign warning that cameras were rolling prevented her from checking the soundstage.

Securing the writers' room, Rio checked on her next concern. The monitor had showed Arturo and Isabel outside the trailer. . . She dashed back outside, past the huddled crowd watching an ambulance maneuver its way around the admin building.

Shades of blue huddled behind the lattice fence and overgrown shrubbery partially concealing the mobile homes on the backlot. The kids had been wearing denim.

Hiding her horror, keeping one eye on the crowd, Rio eased back to the lattice. "You okay back there?"

"Will the lady be all right?" Isabel asked anxiously. At twelve, she'd seen far too much awfulness in her life, including watching her parents dragged off by masked militia.

Rio prayed the police didn't require witnesses. These kids may have seen worse but she wanted them safe. Sadly, interacting with the police was no longer safe. "I don't know, niña. Go back inside. Keep cleaning. Pretend you saw nothing. I'll order pizza later."

Isabel tried to question. Understanding Rio's concern, Arturo dragged her away, protesting. Kids shouldn't have to grow up afraid of authority.

While the paramedics carried out their business, Rio bottled her fears, as she'd learned to do as a child, and met the official white police car pulling up. She recognized the officers climbing out. Since leaving the force, she'd made a point to make contacts where she could. If she was hanging out in bars after hours, she might as well hang in the right ones.

She explained the situation and turned the older officer loose to question the sobbing crowd. She led the younger female officer inside.

Before they could head for the roof, Marvin Robert and another vaguely familiar silver fox emerged from the enclosed soundstage. As a news producer, Marvelous Marvin worked on his Clark Gable resemblance, including the trimmed mustache. Over seventy, bronzed, Botoxed, dressed in crisp tailoring concealing any flab, his hair professionally dyed brown and streaked with silver, he didn't look older than sixty.

Possibly still in his fifties, his companion eschewed the mustache, had gone fully silver to enhance his professional tan, and sported a gym-rat physique. He also lacked any hint of expression, whether from genuine disinterest or cosmetic surgery was hard to tell in this light.

Only a week ago, Marvin Robert had been avoiding the investigation of the studio CEO's death by checking himself into rehab. How did one come out of rehab looking as if they'd spent weeks at a luxury spa?

"We're filming," the billionaire newsman snarled. "What is this infernal racket? Can't anyone keep this place under control? Some idiot locked the writers' room and now half my crew has disappeared. I have a show to produce."

Rio resented Robert's absence after her boss was killed. As co-owner and VP of XRM, he should have stepped up. Instead, the coward had left her and Adrian with a fudge-load of responsibility

neither had been prepared to handle. She didn't take neglect of duty lightly.

"One of your reporters just jumped, sir." All right, that was mean-spirited, but if the studio was closing because men scrambling to become king of the mountain didn't notice the ants they crushed on the way up, she had to extract her revenge where she could. "You might want to halt production as a show of respect."

Going pale beneath the artificial bronze, Marvelous Marvin almost managed to raise his eyebrows.

The younger man in a Rodeo-Drive suit and Tweety-Bird tie succeeded in producing a glare. "Who are you?"

She couldn't take a man wearing a cartoon tie seriously, even with the flashy diamond stickpin. "I'm in charge of security, which means I get to ask who *you* are." She scowled back. She hadn't been a cop for years without learning intimidation.

Marvin Robert took his friend's arm. "My agent, Hank Radford, don't you read the papers?" Instead of asking who had jumped, he dragged his stooge back into the soundstage.

Coward. Tucking her stick under her arm, Rio continued on, accompanied by the police officer. She'd check Radford's credentials later.

"You saw her jump?" the unusually silent LEO asked.

Baheera Bey was her name, Rio recalled, with the experience of tying threads together while the world fell apart. "I only saw the fall from my monitor. I have no idea what happened. I'm just feeling mean."

The young cop grunted, whether in agreement or disapproval was hard to say. Rio didn't know her that well.

They took the metal stairs to the roof two at a time, not even trying to be quiet despite the illuminated warning signs that filming was in progress.

"I had Dr. Whitney block the stairs," Rio warned. "I'm hoping he's kept anyone from coming or going from the roof."

Unless they had a gun. She tried not to think about that. The heir to a few fortunes, Adrian wasn't a trained law enforcement officer. He was big and handled himself well, but no one argues with a gun, especially history nerds.

When they raced onto the roof, Adrian raised himself to his full height, the Stetson shading his blond Nordic-god looks as he shook

hands with Officer Bey. "I have worried stockholders about to storm up here. I'll give my statement later. Let me stave off riots first. Mr. Cooper here is a copywriter. He can tell you all you need to know."

Bless his pea-pickin' heart as they said in the studio's films, the professor had single-handedly held off his family of drama queens.

Pressing a paper-bag-wrapped tumbler into Rio's spare hand, Adrian didn't wait for permission to leave but brushed past with all the authority of his name and wealth. She admired the straw Stetson, even though it was more beach hat than cowboy. The nerd had a sense of humor.

Officer Bey waited for explanation. She'd have to keep waiting. It was blasting hot on the exposed roof, and the bespectacled writer crouching by the wall appeared ready to leap.

"Mr. Cooper? Let's go down to the commissary where it's cooler, get you something cold to drink. Thank you for waiting for us." Rio held the tumbler in one hand and gestured with her stick. She had a chilling notion that Adrian had collected the tumbler for reasons.

"Have you seen Jilly? Will she be all right? The ambulance is out there, isn't it?" He followed obediently, with Officer Bey bringing up the rear.

Rio breathed in relief that they didn't meet an army of eccentric Whitneys storming down the hall. Adrian had them under control. Still, the commissary downstairs, in the back of the building, seemed safer than her office off the catwalk leading to the boardroom.

Calum. She'd left Calum with a roomful of tech. Little green dragons would be climbing out of the air vents shortly. He'd bug the boardroom. . .

Torn between protecting a witness and the Whitneys going ballistic. . . "Excuse me, officer. I want to secure my cameras. I'll meet you downstairs as soon as I can. Mr. Cooper, show Officer Bey the way to the commissary." She didn't know the weeping man, but assumed he was with Roberts Media. They were the only company working while the studio was closed.

Whitneys came first. Should they decide to sell. . . They held her fate and that of legions in their hands. This day was bad enough without going there.

She entered the security office to find Adrian's elegant Great-Aunt

Sandra berating Calum the Magician, not exactly unusual. They both swiveled in her direction.

"One of Robert's journalists fell off the roof," Rio reported before they could bury her in questions. "I know nothing more. The police are interviewing witnesses. If you don't want to be one of them, Sandra, go back to the boardroom. I can't be in three places at once. I need someone monitoring screens while I monitor the cops. Calum, start copying the video of her fall. No doctoring! We are *not* getting involved in this."

"Jude's already down there. You'd better keep her out of trouble. Go, I'll deal with the others." Looking extremely sure of herself, Sandra shooed Rio off—although the equivalent of Nordic goddesses didn't *shoo* so much as nod her regal crown of well-maintained blond highlights. She might be in her seventies, but Sandra Meyer was no doddering geriatric.

Calum pretended to busy himself with the monitors. Rio didn't trust the spoiled rat one instant, but she had no choice. He was more than qualified to handle all the equipment at her control and more.

Relying on the instinct that had kept her alive this long, Rio was reasonably certain the terrified copywriter was no killer. Now, she had to learn if accidents happen—or if XRM's tragic history was repeating itself.

Given the unpleasant experiences of the past weeks, she expected the latter. The studio was steeped in a century of sin.

Downstairs, she had the commissary provide whatever Officer Bey and Mr. Cooper required, then led them to the locked writers' room, where Great-Aunt Jude was applying a ring of keys in an effort to unlock it. No matter how warm and cuddly the eldest Whitney appeared, Jude was not anyone's frail grandmother.

"Where did you get these?" Rio appropriated the ring, after a bit of a struggle with plump fingers. Most of the outside doors used card keys, but the studio hadn't wasted any expense on the interior since the turn of the century. She used her master key to unlock the door.

"We keep them in the boardroom." Adrian's great-aunt cruised into the cluttered, narrow space as if she owned it—which she did, sort of. Her gaze swept the room and she wrinkled her nose in distaste. "How do we find the victim's belongings?"

"You don't." Rio gestured at her companion. "Officer Bey requires privacy to take a statement. You need to be upstairs defending Xanadu."

Jude was a voracious reader and a frustrated writer. Rio liked the meddling old woman and she sympathized, but this was her job. She didn't have time for Whitney interference.

Unlike her model-thin sister, Jude hadn't bothered maintaining her youthful figure or disguising the ravages of time. She kept her curly, gray hair cropped and tucked behind her ears with her wire-rimmed glasses. Today, she'd almost dressed up for the board meeting—in a denim skirt and leather coat instead of her usual dowdy florals. She scowled at Rio. "I hate board meetings."

"You can tell me all about it later. And I'll tell you what I can. But you can't stay here. At the very least, keep Adrian out of trouble or he and his father may come to blows." Rio ushered Adrian's no longer protesting aunt out. Childless, the great-aunts doted on the family heir.

"Xanadu?" Officer Bey asked, studying the clutter of laptops and notes on the table.

"The Whitney estate." Rio turned to the writer clinging to his soft drink and sandwich, afraid to take a seat. "Mr. Cooper, do you know which things belong to Miss Eades?"

Nervously, he glanced around. "She kept her laptop in her locker. The pink backpack with flowers is hers. I'm not sure about her purse. Maybe the locker?"

Bey held up her hand. "All I need is a statement, please. You can gather the victim's belongings for her family later."

Rio was already looking for the locker list in the files on her phone. Finding the number for *Eades*, she removed another master key from the ring in her pocket. At the officer's objection, she glanced up in irritation and pointed her walking stick at the young woman. "I expected better of you. Do you want to spend the rest of your life on the beat or get ahead?"

The young officer blinked. She had brown skin and dark eyes, like Rio, but the resemblance ended there. Bey had the large nose and angular cheekbones of her ancestors, where Rio had small, undistinguished features from parents she'd never known. But Rio and Bey were both women in a man's world.

"I will put in my time, earn my stripes," Bey said carefully.

"While all the men you graduated with move ahead faster and farther. To get ourselves noticed, women have to be smarter and pushier." Rio gestured at the daunting mess of a room. "This is how you do it. Do not assume this is an accidental death. Be proactive. Are you carrying evidence bags?"

"There's a kit in the car," the officer admitted, eyebrows rising.

"Take command. Radio your partner to bring it in." Rio set the paper-bag-wrapped tumbler on the table and opened the designated locker. A laptop, a stack of papers, and a wallet filled the small space. "I'll make copies of these papers for you. They're company property and we have to keep the originals."

Rio totally made that up. She wanted copies and was generously providing the police with all possible evidence at the same time. She didn't have the equipment to analyze whatever was in the tumbler or run forensics on the victim, so she needed police cooperation. But she didn't trust them to look too deeply into what appeared to be an accident.

While Officer Bey used her radio to instruct her protesting partner, Rio snapped on gloves. She carried them out of habit, if only because parts of the studio were filthy. Rifling the flowered backpack, she found nothing of interest. The wallet was equally boring. The good stuff would be in the laptop, but Rio didn't see any way she could hand it over to Calum to crack.

Once Bey was off the phone, Rio showed her the papers from the locker. "While you interview Mr. Cooper, I'll make copies."

Without waiting for objection, Rio ran the papers through the copier-printer and pretended not to listen to the officer's interview with the shaken copywriter. He didn't have much to say. Poor squid apparently was in love or in awe of the ambitious reporter.

Studying the papers as they emerged from the machine, Rio gritted her teeth at the stupidity.

The lines appeared to be shorthand notes of the story Jillian Eades meant to give today. If Rio read them correctly, it very much appeared as if the reporter had decided to resurrect ancient scandals related to the glory days of XRM's past.

Even if the ambitious idiot didn't have a death wish, she'd set herself up to be unemployed and unemployable.

