

9Tail Fox

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PART I

CHAPTER I

Friday 6 February

‘Okay,’ said Bobby, ‘show me how you shot him.’

He handed his .44 Magnum to the child and watched thin arms tremble as Natalie Persikov tried to keep the gun steady.

‘Like this,’ Natalie said.

Taking the Colt from the girl, Sergeant Bobby Zha placed it on a table, next to one of the many photographs in her grandfather’s dining room. ‘Now show me.’

The eleven-year-old struggled to lift the gun. When she finally did, it was using both hands and its muzzle wavered between the door and a high sash window, which overlooked Tamsin Steps, one of the more exclusive areas of San Francisco’s Russian Hill.

At eleven, Bobby Zha’s own daughter had been wearing mascara and her mother’s Gucci sling-backs. Natalie Persikov had sandals, wore her blonde hair tied back in a loose ponytail and looked like the child Bobby remembered eleven-year-olds being. She was also thin as a stick. The recoil from a Colt .44 Magnum would have snapped her wrists. At the very least, it would have sprained them.

‘And he came in that window?’

Natalie nodded.

‘How did you know he was a burglar?’

The child looked at Bobby Zha as if he was stupid. ‘He was wearing a mask.’ This part was true. The dead man had been wearing a Russian ski mask made from black silk, with the label cut out. Forensics were still liaising with Moscow to identify the maker.

Then there was all that stuff with the icon. This sat on a wall by the window, a sour-faced virgin with Christ squashed onto her lap. *Opportunistic insurance fraud*, Bobby would have said. If not for the

fact the family were stupidly rich and Dr Misha Persikov notoriously honest. Apparently, reporting the icon missing had been a mistake.

Outside the window Ozzie, the family's odd-job woman, continued raking the tiny lawn for cigarette butts and plastic coffee cups left behind by a camera crew, while inside, industrial cleaners had already returned the dining-room carpet to a surgical purity it probably never possessed.

'Did the gun make a loud noise?'

Natalie glanced at where her grandfather had stood until Bobby sent him from the room.

'Very loud,' Natalie said, her chin going up.

This was also true.

'How about recoil?'

The girl looked blank.

'Guns often kick back,' said Bobby, 'when you fire them. It's called *recoil* . . .'

Natalie Persikov nodded doubtfully. She knew he was trying to trick her, Bobby could read that in her narrow face. She just wasn't sure what form his trickery would take.

'Did the gun move?'

Was that the trick? The police officer was waiting so she nodded, making her choice. 'Of course it moved,' Natalie said crossly, putting Bobby's revolver down on the table.

'And did it move up or down?' He was being unfair, Bobby knew that. The tears backing up behind the small girl's eyes said she knew that too. Pushing children so far was not something Bobby did willingly, but this was different.

If the girl was telling the truth, then Natalie Persikov had picked up her grandfather's unlicensed revolver and shot a burglar through the head. She did this from across a dining room bigger than some people's apartments, at dusk, when the light was almost gone and the victim little more than silhouette against an already darkened sky.

It was either the world's luckiest shot or someone was lying. And it didn't help Sergeant Bobby Zha's nerves that Moscow's embassy in Washington seemed unwilling to confirm that the amalgam in the dead man's fillings was typically Russian.

So what Bobby had was one eighty-year-old doctor, a pillar of respectability and friend to at least two of the city's last three mayors, one eleven-year-old girl and a dead burglar with every single label cut

out of his clothes. The child was adamant she shot the man. Sergeant Zha's instinct said Mihail Persikov was responsible, but since the doctor was blind that seemed unlikely.

'Come on,' said Bobby, returning the revolver to the girl. 'Tell me, did the gun move up or down?'

Taking the weapon, Natalie held it out in front of her, hands trembling, as if holding it so might give her the answer. A boy of that age would have threaded one finger around its trigger from instinct. Natalie held the gun as she might a snake, barely able to touch it.

'Down,' she said.

Bobby smiled. 'Okay,' he said. 'We're done.' He resisted the urge to ruffle Natalie's hair, in the way he would once have ruffled the hair of his own daughter, before things changed and Kris grew too old for that. He also resisted telling Natalie everything would be all right, because it wouldn't. Either the child had killed or she was being used as camouflage for someone who had.

'I have to go now,' said Bobby. 'And fill out lots of forms, like homework.' That usually earned him sympathy, from boys at least.

'I like homework,' announced Natalie.

'So does Kris, but only sometimes.'

The girl frowned, waiting for Bobby's explanation.

'Kris is my daughter.'

She looked at him then, as if to say, *you have a daughter?* It made Bobby wonder what she saw. A small man, in faded jeans and black T-shirt, an SFPD badge on a tape around his neck and tinted glasses hiding tired eyes . . . ? Natalie hadn't wanted to talk to him today, her silence holding until – in the end – Bobby sent her grandfather from the room.

'It's an odd name,' Natalie said finally.

'What is?' asked Bobby. 'Kris?'

'Zha . . .'

A mixture of Cantonese, Catalan and Scottish, Sergeant Zha looked foreign, no matter where he was or who he was with, whereas the child looked Russian, from her cheekbones and blonde hair to the speedwell blue of her troubled eyes. He was *za zhong*, which translated politely as *mixed race*, less politely as *bastard*. She was born and brought up in San Francisco and held an American passport. All the same, she looked as if she'd stepped out of an old Soviet poster, one advertising determination and youth.

‘My grandfather,’ said Bobby. ‘He came from China.’

‘Ahh . . .’ The child nodded, looked serious. ‘About the gun,’ she asked. ‘You believe me now?’

Bobby debated lying and decided not. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t think I do . . .’ Picking up the revolver, he slid it into a holster. The original was in an evidence locker at 850 Bryant Street but this was as near as damn in size and weight, even if it was a replica. Bobby Zha wasn’t the kind of man to put a real gun into the hands of a child.

‘I did it,’ insisted Natalie.

‘Gun’s jump up,’ said Bobby, ‘it’s got to do with how your elbow pivots. And if you’d held the gun like that it would have broken your fingers. Someone else shot that man . . . Was it your grandfather?’

‘No.’

‘Are you telling the truth?’

‘Of course I am.’ There was real anger in the child’s voice. An anger that Bobby suspected she either did not usually release: or, perhaps, wasn’t often allowed to do so. ‘He’s blind,’ she said. ‘And he’d never shoot anyone anyway.’

‘Whereas you would . . .?’ Bobby stopped, seeing panic blossom behind Natalie’s eyes.

‘I did it,’ she said, shaking her head.

Conflicted, it was such a great word. ‘You know,’ said Bobby, as he put the holster containing the replica into a carrier bag and put the carrier bag inside a cheap briefcase. ‘There’s one thing that puzzles me.’

‘What?’ said Natalie.

‘If your grandfather really is innocent . . . why would you take the blame for someone else?’

The odd-job woman was pruning police tape from a gate with a pair of scissors, Doctor Persikov sat by the porch, and two old men were watching from across the narrow street when Bobby walked Natalie back to the car in which she’d arrived.

He ignored them all.

Instead Bobby nodded to the uniform driving. She was someone he vaguely recognised. Hispanic, probably in her early twenties, full breasts under a blue shirt and a waist already beginning to spread over her regulation belt. She looked impressed to meet the famous Sergeant Zha, despite having seen him once already that afternoon, which was

how Bobby knew she must be fresh out of the Academy. Anyone else would have been around long enough for such innocence to rub off.

‘Sir.’ The officer sat up straight in her car.

Eighteen years before, within ten days of being sworn in, Bobby Zha took a bullet in the back to save the life of his partner, a man twenty years older who was meant to be keeping Bobby safe. Medal or not, it didn’t make Bobby a hero, it just made him unlucky, a kid straight from training in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He’d spent a lot of his career trying to live that down.

‘Take her back to eight-fifty Bryant,’ said Bobby.

‘You want a lift?’

‘No, I’m going to look around.’

‘CSI have already . . .’ The young officer stopped, suddenly unsure. The crime scene crew had crawled all over every inch of the house and the garden, taking photographs and plaster casts of footprints, lifting fingerprints and bagging up cigarette ends for DNA testing. Obviously enough, the scene had since been released, otherwise the camera crew would still be waiting, instead of having been and gone.

‘I know,’ Bobby said. ‘I’m just winding CSI up.’

She grinned, taking it as a joke.

Bobby wondered if the teks had been surprised by how many times Natalie had touched the glass of the broken window, the door handle to the dining room and the gun. If fingerprints were to be believed she’d even thumbed back the hammer when she fired, not to mention extracting the spent .44 case they found in the back of a drawer in her bedroom.

‘If you’re sure you don’t need a lift?’

He was. ‘In you go,’ said Bobby, opening the door for Natalie. Putting his hand up to bend the girl’s head, Bobby prepared to feed her into the back seat of the Cadillac, only to realise this was unnecessary, because the child was not resisting and, anyway, Natalie was so small she could climb into the vehicle quite happily, without needing to bow her head.

Bobby had offered Natalie Persikov the chance to ride in something anonymous but the child had wanted the full works, lights on top and sirens. There was an element of defiance in her choice.

‘We’ll talk again,’ Bobby promised.

Natalie grunted.

From Bobby's daughter that would have been the height of communication, since Kris had spent the last six months ignoring him altogether. For Natalie it was positively rude. All the same, she'd talked to Bobby and that was more than she'd done to anyone else in the last forty-eight hours.