

Loose Id

Josh Lanyon

THE DARK
HORSE

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Loose Id.®

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Dark Horse

Josh Lanyon

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Dedication

To all those for whom The Charioteer made a difference

“But I should have come back, anyway. I should have had to come back.

The Charioteer, Mary Renault.

Chapter One

The post card was nestled between *Variety* and the Edison bill.

Just an ordinary picture postcard. White font proclaimed *MALIBU!* across the mai tai-colored sunset. I turned the card over, and there was the spidery black writing I had thought I would never see again.

Miss me?

No signature. No signature needed. I looked at the postmark. Pacific Coast Highway. Yesterday's date.

I stared for a long time while Dan's deep voice receded into the cries of the gulls overhead and the pound of the waves on the beach a few yards away, until those too faded to a kind of white noise.

No. God.

Then Dan stretched across and took the card from my unresisting hand, and I was abruptly returned to the present.

The wooden chair creaked as he leaned back, his long muscular body at ease. His dark brows drew together. Absently, he raked his still-wet hair back. It wasn't like there was a lot to read. One simple sentence.

Miss me?

A rhetorical question if there ever was one.

Water glistened on Dan's broad sun-browned shoulders, one drop trickling down between his rock-hard pecs, sparkling through the dusting of dark hair across his flat abdomen. The tiny flicker of irritation I'd felt at his arrogance faded in the wake of lust. After he'd spent nearly a month playing Bodyguard to the Stars, I couldn't blame him if he still occasionally reacted like he was getting paid for overtime.

"It's not Hammond," he said, and tossed the card to the table. It landed face up in a blob of crabapple jelly.

"The writing is the same."

"Superficially. We'd have to get it analyzed. Anyway, it doesn't matter. Say one of his cards *was* delayed for a few days; it doesn't change the fact that he's dead."

"If he is dead."

His eyes, blue as the surf behind him, met mine levelly. "Sean, he's dead. I saw the car. No one could have survived that crash."

"Then why wasn't his body recovered?"

"It's somewhere in the aqueduct. I don't know. It must have been swept away or lodged somehow."

I nodded tightly. It's not like there's high tide in the California Aqueduct.

Dan's large hand slid under my fingers nervously fiddling with a teaspoon. "It's over, chief. Trust me."

"I do." It came out more husky than I'd intended.

He turned my hand palm up, lightly kissing it. The warmth of his lips against my surf-chilled skin made me shiver. I dropped the teaspoon. It hit the edge of my saucer with a silvery chime. He grinned.

You only ever hear about closeted cops, so Dan's relaxed attitude still caught me off guard. He was probably more at ease with his sexuality than half the "civilians" I knew. He sure as hell was more relaxed than me.

I pulled my hand away at the familiar yap-yapping of the four-legged hairball belonging to our nearest neighbor, Mrs. Wilgi. Sure enough, a moment later "Mrs. Wiggly" came around the cairn of rocks, armed with her usual binoculars and police whistle.

I caught Dan's eye. His grin was wry. He was getting to read me pretty well.

I said, "Hey, for all I know Mrs. Wiggly has a spy cam concealed in her muumuu."

He forked another waffle off the plate. "I don't even want to think about what that muumuu conceals."

I laughed. My glance fell on the jam-stained postcard, and I made myself look away. If Dan said it was over, it was over. He was the expert here.

All the same, after a year of being stalked, it wasn't so easy to drop my guard. One week after Paul Hammond lost control of his car during a police chase on Highway 138 and crashed into the California Aqueduct, I still tensed when the phone rang, waiting for that familiar whisper. I still sorted through my mail fast, trying to get it over with in case, like today, something ugly fell out of the mix. I still watched the rearview mirror everywhere I drove, although for the past three weeks Lt. Daniel Moran of the LAPD had been riding shotgun with me -- when he didn't insist on doing the actual driving.

I said, talking myself away from my anxiety, "I just don't want to turn up in the *National Inquirer* as the gay Bennifer or something."

"Dansean?" Dan suggested, playing along.

"I'm the celebrity," I pointed out. "My name gets top billing. Maybe ... Seandan."

"You can be the top anything you like." Dan's eyes were very blue. "Just say the word."

Heat rose in my face.

I mean, how ridiculous was that? You'd think I was a blushing virgin of seventeen, instead of being a reasonably experienced twenty-five year old veteran of the Hollywood party scene. True, most seventeen-year-olds probably saw more action than me -- although things were definitely looking up these days.

Automatically, I returned Mrs. Wilgi's wave as she tromped along the shoreline, her red and yellow dress puffing out and flattening against her ungainly body. The dog, barking hysterically, veered off, galloping toward the deck where we sat, as though he'd just noticed this house on the otherwise empty beach.

"Doesn't that thing have an off button?" I murmured.

Mrs. Wilgi began clapping frantically and calling to the dog.

"Binky! Binky!"

"Speaking of off buttons," Dan remarked, "I'm supposed to start back at work tomorrow."

"Oh."

I tried to hide it, but I knew he could see my disappointment.

He said, his tone very casual, "Were you planning to stay out at the beach for a few days or should I drop some things off at the house?"

"The House" being my place in the Hollywood Hills. My place and now, maybe, Dan's place, too. It was still so new this relationship, so unexpected. We were both tentative, feeling our way along. Trying not to take too much for granted. Or spoil it by not taking *enough* for granted.

I said, going for the same off-hand note, "I was thinking of staying out until next weekend. What do you think? Malibu too far to drive every evening?"

"Not if I'm waking up next to you every morning."

My heart skipped a beat. How the hell could he say this stuff and not sound corny? Practice, I guess. Dan was ten years older than me -- and they had been an active ten years.

I said, "That can be arranged."

We'd been sleeping together for one week, starting with the night Dan had returned home to tell me Hammond had crashed into the aqueduct. But the attraction had been immediate. My manager, Steve Kreiger, kept saying what a great screenplay it would make. Gay cop falls for the gay actor he's assigned to protect from a crazed stalker. And it was true: for once real life was every bit as satisfying as the movies. Dan was a decorated officer frequently held up as the poster boy for the new and improved (read "sensitive and diverse") LAPD. It didn't hurt that he was articulate, smart, and old-fashioned movie-star handsome. A straight arrow in every way but one -- and that one way got him assigned to my bodyguard detail.

So now we were finding out what happened after the screen faded to black and the final credits rolled.

Mrs. Wiggly was blowing her police whistle like a crime was in progress. The fur ball ignored her, barking shrilly, plummy tail waving frantically as he stood at the steps of the deck.

I tossed a sausage link, just missing Binky's indignant nose. Both Dan and the mutt disapproved of this -- the mutt vocally, Dan silently. I was getting to know him well enough to translate his silences. I smiled at him, and he shook his head a little.

"I'm trying to win him over," I said.

"I don't think he appreciates your cooking the way I do."

"I guess not."

I was going to miss our early morning swims followed by these lazy breakfasts. I was going to miss having Dan around all day. Hopefully, I'd be going back to work myself before long. But what happened if the next film I got required a location shoot? Dan and I were way too new to survive extended long distance. I knew, without asking, that he would not be willing to hang up his career in law enforcement to keep me company in New Zealand or

Romania for twelve weeks. And I was at a place in my own career where I had to pick my projects carefully.

He pushed his chair back and said, "I think I'll have a quick shower and drive into town. I want to pick up a few things."

"Okay." My gaze wandered back to the postcard.

"Want to help me try out my new back-scrubber?"

I laughed. He made it so easy. I rose, dismissing the card, but as I followed Dan indoors, I couldn't help wondering ... if Paul Hammond hadn't sent that card, who had?

* * * * *

"Gotta admit, I had my doubts about you when I saw the pink bubble bath." Dan squirted pastel gel into the ramie mitt and slid it over my shoulders. Scented steam rose from the granite floor of the large shower stall.

"Mm. That feels good." I bent my head, and he smoothed the mitt down the nape of my neck. "It's not bubble bath. It's shampoo slash shower gel. There's a difference."

"You'd know. I've never seen so many grooming aids in one bathroom." The rough cotton felt good on my wet skin, and Dan applied just the right amount of pressure. I relaxed -- only recognizing at that moment how wound up I'd been.

"Tools of the trade," I informed him. "I'm a commodity. I'm in business, and I am my product."

"That attitude and a pair of tight jeans will get you arrested on Hollywood Boulevard."

"They tell me attitude is everything."

He pulled me back against his wet, hard body. I arched my neck for his kiss and his mouth closed on mine, warm and male, and with a hint of the tart-sweetness of crabapple. Our tongues slid together, twined. My heart started that heavy slow beat that matched the throb in my groin.

“You are so beautiful ...”

“I bet you say that to all th--” His hands slid over my slick body, flicking my nipples. I moaned into his mouth, words failing me. It felt so good. Everything he did felt good. He never made a wrong move; that was the advantage of having so much experience. Of course, that kind of expertise was a little intimidating sometimes.

Putting my hands over his, I held them against my chest. He palmed the nipples, back and forth, just the right amount of teasing abrasion.

I turned to face him -- wrapped my arms around him.

Smoothing the mitt over my ass, Dan gave one cheek a playful squeeze before sweeping the mitt up my spine. My dick came up like a divining rod, nudging his already hard thickness. Heart pounding, I pressed against him, wanting more, wanting closer. I was surprised the shower drops didn't sizzle on my skin; I was so hot for him. Dan shook off the mitt and his hands closed on my ass, urging me closer. I groaned, feeling for his cock.

“Yeah, Sean, just like that,” he muttered.

His fingers slid down the crevice between my butt cheeks, intimate and familiar, finding the mouth of the secret passage. He delicately circled my opening, then slipped the tip of one finger inside: a sweet and slow piercing. I caught my breath.

Just a fingertip, like the press of a button -- a button I badly wanted him to push. That weird clawing ache started in my belly. I made a sound in the back of my throat; even I wasn't sure what I meant.

Dan's kiss gentled. He kissed the underside of my jaw, his finger simply holding its place, like a book he meant to read later.

Let go, I instructed myself, impatiently. What the hell is the hold up? You want him. He wants you. Act, if you have to.

Act like ... a porn star.

I found his mouth, kissed him back hard, surging up against him. I could feel his surprise. His mouth covered mine hungrily. He pushed his finger into me deeply; I started, my foot slipping out from under me in the sudsy warm water.

He steadied me, both hands on my arms, smiling. "Easy, chief."

"Yeah." I laughed, but after a week of this I wasn't fooling anybody, including myself. "I'm just not sure about that yet," I said, feeling like a fool. I still felt the memory of his finger in my body -- an erotic fingerprint.

"I know." He sounded easy and a little amused.

"I mean, I want to," I said. "I'm just ..." Why did I have to say anything? The last thing I wanted was for this to turn into an *issue*. Why couldn't I just have let it happen, naturally, spontaneously?

"We don't have to rush it."

Was six days rushing it? Probably not. His dick poked into my belly like an elbow in the ribs reminding me that he had places to go and things to do, and so far this morning he wasn't getting anything but talk.

Porn star, remember? Act. It's what you're good at.

"Let me tell you a little secret," I said and slid to my knees to take the head of his cock into my mouth.

"Oh, my God," Dan said, closing his eyes. His fingers brushed my cheek. "What you do to me."

Yeah, this I knew how to do, sucking him with soft wet heat and then hard. I murmured encouragingly -- not really an act, come to think of it -- and tugged with my lips. Sweet and soft. Tight and hard.

Dan's breathing went slow and deep, fingers fluttered over my ears, the base of my skull, urging me closer, but not forcing -- never forcing.

The water sluiced over his shoulders and rained down on me. I tasted shower gel and clean skin and the salty tang of pre-cum. His swollen cock throbbed between my lips; he pushed deeper into my mouth. I relaxed my throat muscles and took more of him. A muscle in Dan's cheek jumped. He looked down at me, and his eyes seemed dazed.

I made soft sounds, inciting him to riot.

Groaning, Dan braced his hands on the granite tiles. His legs trembled.

I backed off a little, laved the cleft in the head of his cock with my tongue, took him back in and sucked hard.

"I'm going to come," he warned throatily.

His cock jumped and he began to come. Hard.

Not a problem for me. I liked this part. I swallowed enough to show I cared, then buried my head in his belly, nuzzling his genitals. He twitched and shivered. Petted my wet head, stroking the hair back from my face.

I smiled, watching him. After a few moments he shook his head like a wet dog and gave a shaky laugh.

"You are one crazy guy."

"Hey."

"Hey, you." He reached up and turned off the tap, drawing me to my feet. Energized. And how the hell *that* worked, I had yet to figure out.

There were dents in my knees from the granite floor, and my legs felt wobbly with my own need. He pulled me against his long strong body, one hand cupping my balls. I rested my head on his shoulder, breathing in the scent of his clean wet skin. The hair on his chest tickled my nose. Just the feel of those steely fingers handling me ...

I guided his hand to where I needed it to be. He wrapped his fingers around my cock

"I like that little sound you make," he whispered.

The bedroom phone rang.

“What the hell!” I opened my eyes.

“The machine will get it.”

I nodded absently, listening. Dan’s heart was settling back into its normal rhythm. The phone rang again. Dan’s hand slowed. I rested my hand on his, urging him on. He tightened up a bit, and I caught my breath. Big brown capable hands. Good for all kinds of things: gripping a gun or shaking cocktails or ... driving me to total distraction.

The phone rang a third time, and then the answering machine picked up.

“Dude!” the tinny voice of Steve Kreiger, my manager, drifted from the other room. For an eerie minute it was like he stood in the doorway watching us; I could picture him scraping the lank red hair out of those mournful bassett-hound brown eyes. “You there? T.J. Hooker got you handcuffed to the bed or what?”

“*Damn!* I’ve got to take it.” I popped open the shower door and abandoned that sweet steamy warmth, sprinting for the bed and the night stand beyond. I heard the shower door close behind me.

I bounced on the white duvet and stretched, grabbing the phone off the receiver. Reached across to pick up the phone. “Hey.”

“*Hey.* So you *are* still alive.”

“Yep. Alive and ... uh ... kicking.” I sucked in my breath as two hard hands wrapped in a plush bath sheet closed around my waist. Dan toweled me down with hard efficiency, blotting shoulders and ribs and butt through the folds of the oversized towel. He rubbed my head briskly. I put the phone against my ear, listening through the fluffy cotton.

“I got a copy of the *Charioteer* script. I was planning to drop it by this afternoon,” Steve said.

“Roll over,” Dan ordered quietly.

I rolled over, the Naturlatex mattress molding to the contours of my body. The duvet felt damp beneath my back. I stared into Dan's blue eyes.

He smoothed the towel over my chest, sliding down to my groin. My dwindling erection made a pup tent of white towel.

I closed my eyes and expelled a shaky breath as Dan's fingers wrapped around my dick once more. "Er ... great." And it *was* great. I'd been hounding Steve to get me a look at the script for weeks. You wouldn't think that the screen adaptation of a minor gay classic would require security clearances worthy of the Pentagon -- especially given the typical indie film production budget.

Dan's hand slid up the length of my cock. Slowly slid down. I gritted my teeth to keep from moaning.

From a long, long way away Steve said, "Yeah. But there's a problem. Lenny Norman is directing and he doesn't want you."

I sat up, dislodging Dan's hand. "You're kidding!"

"Nope."

"I've never even worked with him. Why doesn't he want me?"

"For one thing he thinks you're too good looking for the part of Laurie."

I glanced across at the reflection of myself in the mirror hanging over the bureau dresser: tall, lanky, brown eyes, brown hair. "I'm not that good looking," I protested.

"I agree. I don't think you're so good looking. In fact, I think you're butt ugly. This is his opinion."

I gnawed my lip, ignoring these witticisms. "That's it? He doesn't want me because of my looks?"

Steve said, a little more serious now, "That, and he thinks you're not gay enough."

"What? What the hell does *that* mean?"

“Hey, I’m just telling you what was said.”

“But what does that even mean? I’m gay. I’m out. What more does he want?” Dan’s hand closed around the nape of my neck, his fingers knowledgeably prodding the muscles knotting up. I felt a spark of annoyance; I could practically hear him telling me to take a deep breath, relax. I didn’t feel like relaxing. This was business. This was my career.

“It’s not like we had an in-depth discussion. I think it’s a political thing with him. He feels like you’re walking a line with straight audiences, that you’re not openly gay. ‘You play it too straight,’ that’s what he said.”

“Well, so does Laurie! So does Ralph. I mean, it’s historical drama. It’s World War Two. Nobody was out. What’s this idiot planning to do, portray them as a couple of flaming queens?”

“Chill, dude. Don’t kill the messenger. I’m just letting you know what you’re up against. He went ahead and FedExed me a copy of the script, so you’re not totally out of the running.”

I was silent. Dan scraped the back of my neck with his fingernails and I shivered. Never mind the P-Spot. Apparently I had an N-Spot.

I made myself focus.

“Do they have someone else in mind?”

“For Laurie, no. For Ralph I think they’re looking at Peter Grady.”

I swore. The last film I’d done with Peter Grady had earned us the title of “The Gay Tracy and Hepburn” in the queer press. I loved working with the guy; we had major league screen chemistry -- one more reason I so wanted to do this project.

Steve soothed, “You haven’t read it yet. Maybe you won’t like the adaptation. Maybe you won’t want to do the film. Let’s not worry about it anymore ‘til you’ve seen the script. Okay?”

“Okay.”

"I'll see you around two."

"See you." I hung up and flung myself back against the mountain of pillows.

"So who's the bastard with the bad taste not to want you?" Dan inquired. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, putting his watch on, so apparently we had lost our window of opportunity.

"Oh." I grimaced. "Lenny Norman. He's directing that film I told you about. The adaptation of *The Charioteer*. He doesn't want me. He thinks I'm too good looking."

"The guy must be blind."

It barely registered. "It's that goddamned *People* magazine article. '*People's* 50 Most Beautiful People.' I was number 49 or something." I brooded over this for a moment. "And he thinks I'm not gay enough."

Dan's brows rose. "You seemed gay enough to me five minutes ago."

I grinned reluctantly. "Maybe you could vouch for me."

He got off the bed, the squeak of floorboards giving voice to my inner protest. "I'd have preferred to do something else for you, but now I'm running late."

I shot him a quick look. He sounded regretful, not annoyed; his smile was rueful. "Sorry," I said. "I kind of had to take that call."

"Yeah, I know."

I had the uncomfortable feeling that he did. Well, hell. I was out of practice at having relationships. Actually, who was I kidding? I'd never had a real relationship. Not like this. Not living together 24/7 with a for-richer, for-poorer, in-sickness, and in-health option. The closest I'd come was when Steve and I roomed together for about a year after college. That was when Steve had still been trying to make it as a comic. Before he'd decided that managing my career would be easier and more lucrative than having his own.

I watched Dan move around the room dressing. Casual wear: khakis and a black T-shirt. Not the beautifully tailored suits and expensive ties he wore on duty. You couldn't

afford suits like that on a cop's salary, but Dan supplemented his salary by working as a consultant for the film industry -- which was the other reason he had snagged the bodyguard gig with me.

I tried to think what I would do all day. Now that I didn't have to worry about being taken out by a potentially homicidal fan I'd have to find a new hobby.

Maybe I'd go for another swim after I worked out in the weight room. No problem going by myself now. Just like a big boy. Maybe I'd see if I had a copy of Renault's *The Charioteer* here at the beach house and reread it. Or no, maybe that would interfere with my reading the script. Maybe I'd just put on some music and catch some rays. Sunshine was supposed to be good for depression -- not that I was depressed. Exactly.

"What time will you be back?"

"About five." Dan slid the leather badge-wallet in to his pocket, double-checked the fit of his khakis in the bureau mirror. "You want me to bring something home for dinner?"

Home. That was kind of nice. I gave his question the careful deliberation it deserved. "I'll cook. Could you pick up some scallops?"

"I'll do that, chief." He bent down over the bed and gave me a quick, hard kiss. "Have a good day. And don't worry about anything."

I answered with one of Steve's favorite lines. "What, me worry?"

"You're right," said Dan. "That's my job."

Chapter Two

As usual Steve was late.

He showed up at a quarter to three, trudging around the back of the house to the deck where I sat sunning myself and flipping through the latest issue of *Food and Wine*. Duke Ellington's "New Mood Indigo" floated through the open sliding door, floating up to where the gulls wheeled overhead.

"Dude, you changed the lock on your front door," he announced, tossing a powder blue-bound screenplay onto the patio table. "You never even used to close the windows. Was that Dan the Man's idea?"

"Sort of." The truth was I'd changed the locks after the first time Paul Hammond showed up uninvited in my living room. Steve had to be thinking of the old days -- back when I'd believed I was the only crazy person to worry about.

He went into the house and reappeared a few moments later with a Corona. Pulling out one of the wooden chairs, he sat down.

"Where is he?"

I didn't need to ask who. "He went into town to pick a few things up."

He nodded noncommittally, took a long swig from his beer. "So how are you doing?"

“Good.”

“Yeah?”

I grinned. Steve’s answering grin was lopsided. He was my age, medium height, compact build, and an attractive freckled face. We’d been friends since college, practically as long as we’d been business partners.

He reached for the ring I wore on a silver chain around my neck. I put up a protective hand.

“Isn’t this moving kind of fast?”

I shrugged. “Feels right to me.” I could have explained the ring. It wasn’t what Steve thought. Dan and I had been in an antique shop. I’d seen the ring and said it was pretty, which it was: old-fashioned setting and “chocolate” diamonds. Dan had bought it for a couple of dollars. Mostly as a joke. It didn’t fit me or anything.

“So he’s moved in?”

“Not officially,” I admitted. “But we haven’t spent a night under separate roofs since he took the bodyguard gig.”

Steve’s smile was wry. “Well, you’re the happiest I’ve seen you in a long time.”

“I am.”

“Just ... fuck, I don’t know.”

I studied him curiously. “You don’t like Dan, do you?”

He reached over and shifted the screenplay next to his elbow a fraction to the left. “I don’t know. He’s okay. I mean, he’s a great looking guy and he seems to really care about you. He makes you laugh, which is good.” He grimaced. “Maybe I’m jealous.”

“Nah. Come on. What is it?”

Steve’s brown eyes met mine. “He seems a little controlling. Possessive.”

I considered this. “He does?”

Steve raised a shoulder. "Yeah. Maybe it's a cop thing."

"Yeah," I said slowly.

Steve drank more beer. "Hey, listen. I know you're hot on doing this role, and I respect that. It's a good script and a great role, I have no doubt. Just remember, it's the kind of part that's liable to get you typecast, which until now you've avoided. And that's a good thing, regardless of what that asshole Lenny Norman thinks or says."

"Duly noted," I said.

"Peter Grady has already expressed interest in working with you again."

"He has?"

"His people called your people."

"You mean his agent called you?"

"Yep. And Winston Marshall, who is producing the film, is definitely interested in you -- which I think is how we managed to score a copy of the script. I think he put pressure on Norman."

It was all I could do not to grab for the screenplay then and there.

"Just keep in mind that working with a director who didn't want you wouldn't be a good thing. Especially for you."

"Come on, Steve," I said.

"Hey. I'm just saying. There are other considerations."

"Like the fact that I wouldn't get my usual fee? Such as it is."

"Bingo."

"Money isn't everything."

"It is when you need it."

We talked a while longer and I invited Steve to dinner. He declined on the grounds that he had previous plans, and took off not long after. I wondered if he really had plans or if this was about Dan. It would be awkward as hell if Steve really disliked Dan.

I wondered what Dan thought about Steve. Or if he thought about him at all.

Rising, I got myself another beer from the fridge, changed the record to Frank Sinatra's *Only the Lonely* and settled back in the lounge chair with the screenplay for *The Charioteer*.

FADE IN

EXT. DUNKIRK -- DAY

The sea air worked its way into the script as I pictured the chaos of Dunkirk: the sprawl of the dead and dying beneath the black pall of smoke in the windless sky; the makeshift armada of ships and boats and skiffs and rafts and anything that could float; the exhausted and shamed British troops. Ice cold water, the whistle of shells overhead, the smell of guns and brine and blood and death -- Laurie Odell with his kneecap blown off, out of his skull with morphia and pain and seasickness.

Sort of put my own problems into perspective. How the hell did anyone hold it together under those conditions? And how the hell were they going to convey the magnitude of the disaster of Dunkirk on a shoestring budget?

I had just reached the part where Ralph Lanyon realizes that the blood-drenched soldier he is asked to pronounce dead is Laurie Odell, a man who holds a special place in his boyhood memories, when I got that prickly feeling you get when you know you're being watched.

Looking up, I expected to see Mrs. Wiggly on patrol. Nothing. The white beach was blindingly empty in the afternoon sun. A few boats dotted the distant blue glitter of the water.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head, staring up at the hillside behind the house. A man stood on the flat-topped rock that overlooked this private stretch of beach.

He was too far away to make out his face, but I recognized the shaggy blond hair, the baggy Hawaiian shirt, the black sunglasses.

Paul Hammond.

My mouth went dry. My heart started slugging hard against my ribcage.

It can't be, I thought. Don't flip out over a coincidence. This is a beach town. Half the guys around here have shaggy hair. Half the guys out here wear sunglasses and Hawaiian shirts.

I blinked. The guy on the rock was still looking my way. Or maybe he was just facing my way. *Don't start imagining things*, I told myself.

Shading my eyes with my hand, I tried to get a better look, and as I stared -- trying not to be too obvious about it -- he waved to me.

I short-circuited, incapable for several long seconds of thinking what my next move should be. Finally, shakily, I stood and walked into the house. From inside the doorway I stared back at the hillside.

The man was gone.

He couldn't be gone, gone. He must have moved on down the hillside where I couldn't see him from where I stood.

"Maria?"

Maria Martinez, my housekeeper, withdrew from the oven, holding up her inky-stained orange plastic gloves. "*Si?*" She gazed at me with her beautiful, solemn olive eyes.

"When you cleaned up the breakfast dishes, what did you do with the postcard that was on the table?"

"I didn't see no postcard, Mr. Fairchild."

"There was a picture postcard on the table. Right next to the jam pot." I could hear the agitation rising in my voice despite the silliness of the words.

Maria was staring at me, slowly shaking her head. "No."

"Yes." I made a little square with my hands as though that might refresh her memory. "There was a postcard."

Somehow her expression managed to look both polite and like she thought I was losing it. Then she brightened. "Oh, *si*. Mr. Moran. He take something off the table. You ask heem, Mr. Fairchild." She smiled to show me there were no hard feelings and returned to scrubbing the inside of the stove.

I walked over to the sliding door and stared out through the screen. Chaparral stirred in the wind. The hillside was bare of anyone.

Dan was late getting home -- and that was not usual.

I told myself to get used to it. I'd done enough cop shows to know that detectives keep irregular hours -- even when they're not working.

It was nearly five-thirty when the screen door suddenly slid open. I nearly jumped out of my skin, but Dan didn't seem to notice, walking out on the deck and kissing me hello.

"Sorry, I'm late. Traffic was a bitch down PCH." He handed me a bottle of wine and a flat brown-wrapped parcel.

"It's okay." I glanced at the wine -- a very nice chardonnay -- and took the parcel. "Are we celebrating?"

"Aren't we?" Just for a moment his smile was unsure.

"I guess we are." I picked at the string of the package. "What's this?"

"Something for you."

“Yeah?” I couldn’t remember the last time somebody bought me a gift Just Because. When you’re the guy with the money, people just assume you’re picking up the tab.

I tore open the wrapping and studied the indigo-blue cover: Ella Fitzgerald’s profile faced the New York nightscape. The original 1957 Verve recording of *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Gershwin Song Book*.

“My God, where did you find this?”

“That little place in Santa Monica where you buy the phonograph needles.”

“I ... thank you.” I turned the cover over and studied the play list. “The Man I Love,” I read aloud. “Nice Work if You Can Get It.” I smiled at him.

“Ain’t that the truth.” He leaned forward and kissed me again. Fresh male with a hint of mint. If this kept up I would soon be addicted to the flavor of him “Want me to put it on?”

I nodded, handing it over and following him inside to unwrap the scallops sitting on the counter. Looking through to the living room I could see Dan’s suitcases sitting by the staircase.

I was smiling as Ella launched into “But Not for Me.” *Wrong this time, Ella.*

I washed the scallops while the chopped onion and garlic sautéed. Dan poured himself a martini and refilled my glass.

“So what did you do today?”

I shrugged. “Relaxed mostly.”

“Good. That’s what you need.”

I bit back my first response. He didn’t mean anything; he was thinking of the last couple of weeks, that was all. And I couldn’t really blame him. By the time Steve had persuaded me to go to the police, panic attacks were becoming part of my daily routine -- right there with all the grooming aids.

I replied, “Then I got what I needed. I worked out. Read. Steve brought the script by.”

I measured out white wine and chicken stock, poured them in to the frying pan, turned the heat down to a “smiling boil.” I love that phrase: smiling boil. The aroma of the cooking garlic, onion, and wine worked their magic. Cooking as therapy.

“How’s old Steve?” Dan settled on the bar stool across the counter, sipped his martini. Not that many guys can carry off a martini glass, but he had that kind of ’50s cool that enabled him to drink martinis and still look tough.

Adding the Pernod to the pan, I reduced the heat. “Okay. Like usual.”

I hesitated. I wanted to tell him about the guy that looked like Paul Hammond, but I knew what he would think. And I knew that Paul Hammond was dead.

I did know that, it was just ...

“So what did you think of the script?”

“I’ve only started reading it. I like the choices they’ve made so far.”

He picked up the plate of scallops. “You want me to start these?”

I nodded. He went outside and I added more Pernod to the sauce and took the rice off the burner. The asparagus had been perfect ten minutes earlier, but there was no way of fixing that.

When I stepped outside Dan was seated on the railing, staring out at the sunset. The water looked dark and purple, the sun orange, like a Malibu postcard. I didn’t want to think about postcards.

He glanced my way and asked, “So you think you’ll want to do it?”

I knew what he meant. “I think so, yeah. Assuming Lenny Norman can stomach the idea of me playing the lead in one of his films.”

He held his glass out and we clicked rims.

“You get restless not working,” he observed. “Cooking is not much of a diversion. And God help you if your metabolism ever slows down.”

"I'll become the forty-ninth most beautiful character actor in Hollywood." My metabolism would never slow down. No one in my family was fat.

Or gay.

"Those are ready," I said, nodding to the scallops sizzling away on the grill.

According to Dan, any cooking that didn't involve charcoal or a spatula was out of his class. He claimed he had two dishes he served for dates: his secret recipe spareribs and his eggs benedict special. I had the impression these usually followed one another closely in his social calendar. He hadn't fixed either of them for me yet; I wasn't sure if that was a promising sign or not.

He rescued the scallops, handing the plate over to me. "Are we eating inside or out?"

Evenings were chilly here on the coast, but I liked being outside, liked the sound of the waves a few yards away, liked looking up at the stars. It felt like we were a million miles from town -- just about far enough.

"Out."

Dan brought down sweaters and we ate by the flickering candlelight, listening to Ella through the open glass door.

I talked to him about the script. In one of my rare pauses for breath it occurred to me that he didn't have much to say tonight -- but then Dan chose his words carefully. I wondered if he liked it this way or if I needed to give him more chances to get a word in edgewise.

In a way it had been easier a week ago when we were just dealing with being attracted to each other -- now that we were embarking on a relationship -- and we *were* embarking, the luggage in my front room made it official -- it was suddenly much harder. I found myself worrying about stuff I'd never previously considered -- like was he liable to suddenly notice that I was boring and self-absorbed?

I mean, I played make-believe for a living -- and earned (when I did manage to get paid) a ridiculous amount of money for it. Dan was a real-life hero. He had saved lives. His job made a difference -- *he* made a difference.

"You're quiet all at once," he observed.

"Makes a nice change, doesn't it?"

He shook his head a little as though that wasn't worth answering. "So what's the deal with this movie? Why do you want to do it so much?"

I shrugged. "It's hard to explain. The book was a big influence on me. You've never read it?"

"No."

"It's beautiful. It's by Mary Renault, the one who did all those historical novels about ancient Greece. This one is contemporary -- well, it was when she wrote it. Kind of a wartime romance. I probably can't explain it without making it sound trite."

"What's it about?"

"It's about a wounded English soldier who falls in love with a conscientious objector during World War II."

"Sounds like fun."

"Telling you the plot doesn't really explain it properly."

"I'm guessing they're both gay?"

"That's kind of the point of the novel. Coming to terms with their sexuality. Laurie knows he's --"

"Laurie?"

I had the sinking feeling that if he kept interrupting, or worse, if he mocked the book, it was going to change the way I saw him, the hopes I had for what was happening between us.

I took a deep breath. Tried again. “Short for Lawrence. Mostly he’s called Spud. Anyway, he knows he’s gay, but the kid, Andrew, who is a Quaker as well as a CO, doesn’t. Doesn’t know that *he’s* gay. Actually, he doesn’t know that Laurie’s gay either.”

I hesitated, expecting another interruption. Dan said nothing.

“And then there’s also Ralph who was Laurie’s house master or whatever they called it when he was at school. Public school -- which in Britain is private school. Laurie was sort of in love with Ralph, without realizing it. Because back then, he was like Andrew. Laurie, I mean, not Ralph. So his feelings for Andrew mirror his own relationship with Ralph, but they aren’t realistic. They aren’t real life love, see? And the book is really about *that*, about balancing the needs of the soul between the earthy and the ideal -- and about living your life with honor and dignity. It’s based on one of Plato’s dialogs, *Phaedo*, and Renault refers back to the metaphor of a charioteer trying to control two horses, a white one and a black one.”

I was babbling. But Dan nodded as though I was making great sense.

“So, anyway, Ralph comes back into his life and Laurie has to choose between Ralph and Andrew.”

“Who does he choose?”

“He chooses the dark horse. He chooses life with all its complexities and contradictions and disappointments and ... delights.” I half-swallowed on the last word, surprising myself by my own intensity. I tried to explain, “I read it when I was ... ill.”

I met Dan’s eyes. In the wavering candlelight his gaze was attentive, understanding. I had to look away. Maybe it would have been easier if he had just laughed.

Hurriedly, I said, “I don’t know how good a film it will make because it’s a lot of talk and a lot of Laurie thinking. And it’s a period piece. And it’s a gay romance.”

“But you want to do it anyway.”

I nodded. "It ... helped. The book, I mean. It helped a lot. It convinced me that there were people out there like me. Men like me. And that they were decent and honorable and courageous, not the warped diseased things that my parents believed in."

God, how much had I drunk? I couldn't believe I'd told him that. I wished he would say something. I felt naked; I had said too much. I shrugged. "I can't put it into words. It struck a chord with me. It struck a chord with a lot of people. It's considered a classic."

"I'll have to read it one of these days." He covered my hand with his.

"Or maybe you can just see the movie." Belatedly I was the one trying for lightness.

"I'll be in the front row." He lifted my hand and kissed the inside of my wrist, his lips sending little frissons over the sensitive scar tissue.

* * * * *

Later, when we were undressing for bed, I said impulsively, "I thought I saw Paul Hammond today."

Dan, mid-shooting his boxers into the dirty clothes hamper, halted and turned my way. "Where?"

"On the hill behind the house."

I knew immediately it had been a mistake to tell him. He continued to study me for a long moment, not saying anything, just assessing the situation like a good detective.

I said quickly, "I know it couldn't have been him. It just ... spooked me. It looked like him from a distance."

"What was he doing?" I knew that neutral tone.

"Nothing. I mean, I guess he was looking out at the ocean. He waved to me." Dan's face changed. Before he could say anything I qualified, "I mean, I was staring his way and he waved to me, so obviously he couldn't have been Paul Hammond. Especially since he's dead."

Okay. Shut up now.

Dan said, "It's natural after a year of that bullshit that you're still keeping an eye out for him. And it's natural that somebody with Hammond's build or coloring would remind you of him."

I nodded. Was he trying to reassure me or himself?

Chapter Three

There was another postcard in the mail the next day.

Vintage colored pencil drawing of the old “movie star colony” on Roosevelt Highway. I stared at the little white houses with their red and green roofs as though I could see my poison penpal sitting inside plotting his next move.

The message on the back was in Hammond’s writing.

Soon ...

I rang Dan at work.

He listened in silence as I finished, “If it’s not Hammond, then who’s sending these? The postmark is Malibu.”

He said quietly, “It’s probably some nutcase who read about you and Hammond in the papers.”

“How would he get the beach house address?”

“It might be someone local. Malibu has its share of whack jobs like anywhere else.”

“Great. So now what? I have another psycho after me? Have they found Hammond’s body?”

"It's not Hammond."

I clamped my jaw on a lot of things that I knew I would regret saying later.

"Fine. It's not Hammond. So who is it? And, by the way, what did you do with the postcard from yesterday?"

I heard him draw in a breath. He said very patiently, "Okay. Look, do you want me to come home?"

I did, but hearing him say it brought me back to Earth fast. Maybe it was the word "home."

"No."

"Are you sure? I know this is the last thing you needed right now."

Maybe he meant because I was in the middle of reading a script for a movie no one wanted me to do. Or maybe he meant because I wasn't bouncing back as quickly as he'd hoped from my last psycho-stalker bout.

"I'm okay. I just don't understand why this is happening again." What the hell were the odds of attracting two stalkers within a year? Was it my aftershave?

"I promise you, if I thought this was a genuine threat --"

"What *did* you do with yesterday's postcard?"

Did he hesitate? I couldn't tell. He said, "I'm having it analyzed."

So was that reassuring or not? He obviously thought the threat was real enough to investigate -- or maybe he was just being careful. He was a very careful guy.

"Well, how long will it take before you know anything?"

"It's not like TV or the movies. It takes time."

"I know that. How long do you think?"

"A couple of weeks maybe."

"*Weeks?*"

He said matter-of-factly, "It's not high priority, Sean. I'm doing it for confirmation, that's all."

Into my silence, he asked again, "Are you okay or do you need me to leave work early?"

There was only one appropriate answer. I said, "I'm fine. I'll see you this evening."

Swimming makes me ravenous. I was raiding the fridge after a late morning dip when the phone rang. I poured OJ into the glass Maria handed me, and passed her the plate with zucchini-walnut muffins to heat in the microwave.

"Dude, you're not going to believe this," Steve began as I picked up. "I think someone shot at me yesterday afternoon!"

"You're kidding me."

"No shit. There's what looks like a little bullet hole in the Sebring's windshield."

"When did it happen?"

"I don't know. Sometime after I left your place yesterday afternoon."

"Have you called the cops?"

"Dude. What would I tell them? I don't know when it happened, let alone where or who might have done it. It's probably kids screwing around. It looks like a BB hole to me, to tell you the truth."

"You should probably report it, though."

"Uh, yeah. Sure."

On impulse, I said, "Are you doing anything this afternoon?"

"Yeah. I'm taking a meeting at Warner Bros and then I'm driving down to Santa Anita Park."

"On a weekday?"

“You’re kidding, right? The Oak Tree meet runs all this month.”

“Could you postpone the race track and meet me for lunch?”

I thought for a moment Steve’s cell phone had cut out, then he said with unusual seriousness, “What’s up? Something with Dan?”

“Dan? No. No, it’s complicated.”

“Okay. Yeah. I can meet you. At the house?”

“No, I want to get out of here for a little while. Maybe Pt. Dume? We could eat at Coral Beach Cantina. I like the crab enchiladas.”

“Yeah,” said Steve. “Cause nothing goes with crisis like crab enchiladas. Okay, but I can’t be there before 2:30.”

“That’s fine. It’s past Heathercliffe on PCH. Down the big hill.”

“I remember,” Steve said. “I’ll call you if I’m running late.”

I said, “You’re already running late. I’ll wait.”

* * * * *

Sitting on the tree-shaded patio of the Coral Beach Cantina, I ordered a micro brew and nachos. The juke box was playing “Boys of Summer” by Don Henley, and I was counting the disproportionate number of blonds, both male and female, filling the seats around me, when Steve dropped into the chair across the table.

“Dude, you’re so mysterious. It must come from living with a cop.”

I summoned a weak smile.

“So what’s up?” He reached for a tortilla chip. Gooey strings of cheese stretched a foot from the platter.

“You want to order first?”

Steve grimaced and waved the waitress over. We ordered and then Steve sat back in his chair. “Okay, come on, Sean. You’re starting to make me nervous. Are you looking to change representation?”

“Of course not.”

“So what’s the deal?”

I said, “I think Paul Hammond is still alive.”

Steve swallowed his beer the wrong way. He set the mug down shakily, coughing into his bare arm. When he had his voice back, he questioned, “Why the hell would you think that?”

“Because they still haven’t found his body.”

“Because his car crashed into the aqueduct.”

“So what? There should still be a body.”

“It washed down the aqueduct.”

“It’s not like there’s a riptide in the aqueduct. They had divers looking and they couldn’t find the body.”

“Yeah, but Sean, there’s no way he could have survived that crash. I saw the photos in the newspaper. No way he walked away from that.”

“What if he wasn’t in the car when it went into the aqueduct?”

“It was a high speed pursuit. It’s not like he had time to stop, get out and push the car in and then hide behind some bushes. He was under police surveillance for another thing.”

“It was night. Someone might have missed something.”

“Sean --”

“I got a postcard from him yesterday. And another one today.”

Steve’s brows drew together. “What are you talking about?”

"The postcards have started again. Yesterday's card said, 'Miss me?' Today's said, 'Soon.'"

"Was the handwriting --?"

"Dan's having it analyzed to be sure, but I know his writing. It's Hammond."

"So Dan knows about this?"

I nodded. "He was there when I got the first card, but he doesn't believe Hammond is alive."

"Then who's sending the cards?"

"He thinks it's a copycat stalker. Someone who read about Hammond and me and decided to pick up where Hammond left off."

"He's the expert, I guess."

"There's more," I said. I lowered my voice as though afraid somebody -- Dan? -- might hear this part. "I think I saw Hammond yesterday."

Steve had a weird expression. "You are shitting me. Where?"

"On the hillside behind the house. I couldn't be sure, but from a distance it looked a hell of a lot like him: same build, same shaggy blond hair, same baggy Hawaiian print shirt, black shades."

"But that was from a distance," Steve pointed out.

"I know. But I did see someone. Dan thinks --" I bit the rest of it off.

"Dan thinks what?"

Reluctantly, I said, "I feel like maybe he wonders whether I'm imagining things. Or that I'm making too much of a coincidence."

Steve said slowly, "He knows about your breakdown, right?"

I nodded.

Steve thought it over. "But you didn't imagine the postcards."

“True.”

Two tanned twenty-somethings stopped by our table. A chubby blonde handed me a damp cocktail napkin to autograph.

“You were *so* great in *Winchester 2010*,” she said. “I was so, like, *totally* pissed when they killed you off.”

“Thanks.” I ignored Steve’s snickers.

“Told you so,” he remarked to no one in particular.

“Are you really gay?” the red-haired one said. She offered a Sharpie and her bare shoulder for me to sign.

“Nah,” I replied. “It’s just something I say to meet girls.”

They giggled then moved off whispering and looking back.

Steve drained his beer, and leaned forward on his elbows.

“Look, why don’t you come down to Santa Anita with me? Spend the weekend kicking back. I think it would do you good to get away.”

I studied him, liking the broad freckled planes of his face and his wide wry mouth. I remembered kissing that mouth. And how weird to think of that now.

I shook my head. “I don’t like crowds. And I’m tired of relaxing. I want to get back to work.”

His gaze dropped down to my chest, as though making note of the ring on the chain. “Okay. Well ... what do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know. Obviously we can’t go to the cops again, since the cop I live with doesn’t believe there’s a problem.”

“Dude.”

The waitress brought our lunches. I waited for her to depart before I offered a lopsided smile. "I don't know that there's anything to do at this point. I needed to talk to someone, that's all."

"Hey," Steve said, "I'm still here for you, you know that. Besides, I remember how long it took to convince you to go to the cops over Hammond. You don't panic that easily. If you say something's going down, I believe you."

"Thanks, Steve."

"One thing I can do," he said, "is talk to LAPD myself. Find out where they are in recovering Hammond's body."

I said, "That would help."

"Not if Hammond's still alive," he said with an odd laugh.

What I like about cooking is that, so long as you follow the recipe exactly, everything always turns out perfect. It's too bad there's no recipe for happiness. Happiness is more like pastry -- which is to say that you can take pains to keep cool and not overwork the dough, but if you don't have that certain light touch, your best efforts still fall flat.

The work-around is to buy what you need. I'm talking about pastry, not happiness, although money does make things easier all around.

There are a number of café bakeries in Malibu, but I mostly satisfy my sweet tooth at Cooke's Family Market, which is where I headed after saying goodbye to Steve. I felt better having shared my fears with someone who didn't instantly suspect I was cracking up, and I spent a pleasant half an hour selecting pastries for Saturday morning breakfast, lingering over the varieties of cheese and the amazing selection of olives.

I wasn't allowing myself to think about Paul Hammond. I focused my thoughts on *The Charioteer* screenplay, and while I shopped I thought about what it would be like to lose a knee cap. Now they could probably reconstruct the joint -- maybe do something bionic --

but back in the '40s? You'd be crippled, no doubt about it. And any injury to a kneecap was going to be excruciatingly painful. Laurie Odell was younger than me; what would it be like to face years of pain? To face the rest of my life as a disabled man? I tried to think of all the things I took for granted: swimming, running -- having sex. The film-Laurie was going to wear a leg brace. I felt that was gimmicky and heavy-handed, but it would make it easier to play. No having to remember which leg or faking a limp.

Pushing the cart, I turned into the arctic produce department and froze -- literally. Paul Hammond stood a few feet away. He held a cantaloupe, weighing it in his hand.

I couldn't seem to move. He was so close I could have rammed my cart into him. It was him: blue Hawaiian shirt, bushy blond hair that looked like a fright wig, deeply tanned pock-marked skin, black sunglasses ...

He had to feel me staring at him, had to have followed me into the market, but he just stood there, ignoring me, fondling melons.

His cheap aftershave filled my nostrils. I felt cold to the bone, shaking on the inside and out. I opened my mouth, but I couldn't think of what to say. If he had spoken to me -- even looked at me -- but he did nothing. We were alone here. Why didn't he acknowledge me?

I couldn't think of what to do. It was surely something obvious.

Hammond replaced one melon on the pyramid and chose another. He stepped a foot closer as he reached for a plastic tear-off bag.

I abandoned my cart and fled.

"Hi!" I said brightly as Dan walked into the kitchen.

Dan pulled off his sunglasses and studied the countertops crowded with plates of food: baked ham, scalloped potatoes, cheese macaroni, cauliflower-broccoli salad, applesauce, and pineapple cottage cheese. "Are we having a dinner party?" he asked.

I dumped a pan of corn muffins into a basket, wrapping a tea towel around them to keep them warm. “I just thought I would do something special for supper.”

Dan’s brows rose. He tilted my chin up to kiss me hello; a nice leisurely kiss that told me he had missed me and was glad to be home. I resisted the impulse to plaster myself to him and pour out my latest trauma.

“Catch any bad guys today?”

I thought my tone was just right but he was frowning a little, still watching me. “Not today.”

“Slow day for crime? Everything is ready. Why don’t you get changed?”

He ran an absent hand up and down my back. “Okay. You want me to open a bottle of wine?”

I nodded.

“Let’s see. What goes with everything in the pantry?”

I considered. “Martinis?”

* * * * *

Despite some really fabulous culinary exertions on my part, dinner was not a success. I wasn’t hungry and Dan seemed preoccupied, although he listened without interrupting as I chattered on about this and that and the other. Mostly the other.

It wasn’t until the third time I reached for the pitcher containing the blueberry vodka martinis, that he stirred.

“That’s your fifth, chief.”

“Third, but who’s counting?”

He didn’t bother to argue.

I was irritated, but I tried to keep my tone easy. “Does it matter?”

“It doesn’t so long as you’re not planning on going for a swim or getting behind the wheel. But you’re going to have a hell of a morning.”

“Promise?” I batted my eyelashes at him.

His lips twitched. “Now *that* is definitely the liquor talking.”

What did that mean? I thought I knew and opened my mouth to object, but Dan had apparently more to get off his chest.

“A couple of things I’ve noticed,” he said. “When you’re stressed-out you cook for a cast of thousands. And you stop eating.”

“I’m eating,” I protested.

“You’ve had one bite of ham and three bites of salad.”

“And five drinks. Jesus, am I under surveillance?”

“Hey.” His smile was crooked. “Naturally I notice what you do.”

“You notice what everyone does. It’s how you make your living. I don’t like it when you turn it on me.”

As usual he did not allow himself to be distracted from his point. “So far I’ve heard about the seasoning in the crab enchiladas at Coral Beach Cantina, I’ve heard that you’re not sure you approve of the sex scene in this new script, I’ve heard that damn dog crapped on our deck, and I’ve heard that the weather was perfect this afternoon. When do I hear what’s really on your mind?”

I laughed. And I knew I had it exactly right: lazy, untroubled. “Dan, relax. I’m just making after dinner conversation.”

There was a funny silence. He said, “You’re acting.”

Which I guess was better than being told I was lying, except he sounded like it really bothered him.

I stared at him. He stared back. It felt unpleasantly close to being emotionally strip searched.

I blurted out, "I think I saw Paul Hammond again."

He didn't move a muscle. At last he said, "Where?"

"At the market in Pt. Dume. I went grocery shopping after Steve and I had lunch."

Surprisingly, this did distract him. "You didn't tell me you were with Steve."

"It was an impulse. Why do you care?"

"I find it odd. This morning you were freaking over postcards from the grave and in the afternoon you're having a lunch date with Steve."

"It wasn't a date and it's not like I tried to hide it." But as I said it, I realized I had been avoiding telling him that I'd been with Steve; I wasn't sure why exactly -- or maybe this was why: the instant interrogation.

"Is that the issue?"

"Do we have to make an issue of it? You're not on the job now. According to you there's no danger, right? Hammond is dead."

"I'm not talking about my job," Dan said curtly. "I'm talking about the fact that we're supposed to be a couple."

Something in the way he said it caught me off guard. He was so cool and self-assured that it never occurred to me that he might not be secure about his place in my world.

For the first time it occurred to me that if I had decided to go to Santa Anita with Steve I would have to -- should, at least -- run it past Dan first.

I opened my mouth but before I could explain, Dan asked, "Did Steve see Hammond?"

"No. This was at the market afterwards."

"Did anyone see him?"

"I don't know. I didn't point him out to anyone. He ..." I stopped, knowing how it would sound.

"He what?"

"He was picking out melons. Or at least pretending to."

"I see."

His expression couldn't have been more impassive.

"I know you think I'm imagining this. I know --"

"Did this guy who may or may not be Hammond make any attempt to speak to you?"

I shook my head.

"Did he do anything that could be construed as threatening?"

"He was avoiding looking at me." I couldn't hold Dan's gaze. I knew how it sounded -- which is why I hadn't told him.

"That doesn't sound like Hammond, does it?"

I shook my head.

A little more gently, he asked, "Are you sure it was Hammond?"

"It looked like him."

"You're not sure."

"No." I said, "What about the postcard that came this morning?"

"I'll have it analyzed." My relief was short-lived as he added carefully, "Sean, maybe it would help if you talked to someone."

I felt like my stomach dropped to my feet. I stared at him. "You mean a psychiatrist?"

"Yeah."

"Dan," I said desperately, "I'm not cracking up. I did see Hammond. I'm not crazy!"

"I don't think you're crazy." He reached for me, resting his hands on my shoulders, kneading my knotted muscles. "I think you've been under a lot of strain. First the thing with Hammond, now this business with the postcards."

"So you agree there is something to these postcards! Or do you think I'm sending them to myself?"

I saw by his expression that the idea had crossed his mind.

I struck his hands away. "Jesus, Dan! I'm not crazy!"

"I know that. I know you're not sending yourself postcards, okay? But what's wrong with talking to someone? Cops do it. Hell, I've been through it."

I pushed away from the table. "I am talking to someone. I'm talking to *you*. I don't need a shrink. So stop using that careful tone with me. Say what's on your mind."

"Okay," he said evenly. "Then here it is. I want you to talk to me, and I will help you in whatever way I can and in whatever way you need. But I'm not a doctor and we both know you have a history of ..." He changed his mind about finishing that. "I think this kind of prolonged emotional strain would not be good for anyone, and it is especially not good for you."

I stared at him. When I could speak I said huskily, "I had a breakdown when I was a kid. Yes, I tried to kill myself. That was nine years ago. It had nothing to do with -- you *know* why. You know it was about trying to come to terms with who I was. With realizing I was gay and knowing how my family felt. How my friends saw me. How everyone saw me -- thought of me. How they would take it once they found out the truth ..."

I couldn't finish it. I got up and went to the railing to stare out at the path of moonlight across the black sea. The hurt and betrayal were almost more than I could deal with. I had told Dan about this in confidence, and he was using it against me now.

"You had a second breakdown when you were twenty," he said quietly.

Hurt gave way to indignation. Obviously he had run some kind of background check on me. Probably when he was first assigned the bodyguard gig, but maybe it was since then. Like this week when I appeared to be losing it.

I wheeled back to face him. "I was depressed. I got help. *Voluntarily*. It was nothing like the other time. And I've been fine ever since. I'm not unstable mentally or emotionally. Yes, I push myself hard, and I'm under strain -- that isn't anything new --"

"This isn't a normal amount of strain," he interrupted. "You had some freak stalking you for nearly a year and now you've got some other asshole harassing you. Anyone would need a little help dealing with that -- and, listen, the last thing I want to do is hurt you, which I can see I'm doing."

I knew I couldn't speak without my voice cracking, so I said nothing.

"I think it would help you to talk to someone neutral. Someone who could help you put this ... experience into perspective. Will you at least consider it?"

He was right about drinking so much. My head was already pounding. And that much alcohol on an empty stomach was not good.

I pushed away from the railing and headed for the glass door.

"I'm going to bed."

"Sean --"

I slid the door shut.

* * * * *

Scratchy beard, warm soft lips on my bare back. One velvety kiss for each link of vertebra in my spine. Kiss by kiss across the little mountains of bone and nerve to the small valley above my ass. I opened my eyes blearily.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Dan murmured.

"Great," I muttered.

“You feel great to me, that’s for sure.” His mouth moistly nuzzled the sensitive hollow; I sucked in a breath, trying not to wriggle. Closed my eyes. My head throbbed and my gut felt like it was filled with boiling acid, but it wasn’t the hangover that made me shiver. How the hell could you be irritated with someone and still crave their touch?

I burrowed my head in my folded arms and asked muffledly, “How was the couch?”

“Lonely.”

I considered this silently while he slowly rubbed his bristly cheek against my ass -- cheek to cheek. “You know, insanity is not contagious,” I said. I thought I was joking, but I sounded sour to my own ears. I didn’t think I was still angry or even wounded. I could see how this all looked from Dan’s viewpoint. He didn’t know me really. I didn’t know him.

“I don’t know about that,” he said, his breath warm on my bare skin. “I’m pretty crazy about you.”

I gave a short laugh. Never at a loss for words, was he?

The mattress shifted underneath as he sat up. “I wasn’t sure I was welcome in here,” he admitted.

I raised my head and eyed him skeptically. He wasn’t smiling, in fact, just for a moment he looked younger, unguarded.

I shrugged noncommittally and buried my head in my arms again. “It was lonely here too,” I told the sheets.

“Yeah?” I felt him relax. He stroked my flank lazily. I loosened up, rested there, trying to ignore the pounding in my head, just enjoying the feel of his hand on my skin. I wondered if it would be possible to ever get tired of being touched and petted. I wondered how I’d managed to go years without it. Wondered how I would survive if I had to go back to it.

Dan’s hand stilled. He shifted around on the mattress, nudging my legs apart. I didn’t have time to do more than register this when, to my shock, I felt him spread my cheeks and lick the tender flesh like you’d taste a peach. I bucked, and he gave a low laugh.

"Jeeeesus," I whispered.

He licked my balls, then behind my balls, working his way back up. I couldn't believe it -- this rude kiss. He was such a fastidious and careful guy -- and with the papers to prove it. I could not believe this was Dan nuzzling my ass. Maybe I *was* delusional.

It took all my will power to lie still as his tongue did those shattering things: delicate, wicked, teasing tracery as he worked the sensitive skin around my hole.

Rim job. That's what they called this. Ugly phrase for something that felt so ... ravishing. Now there was a good old fashioned word -- a Biblical word -- and this obviously was not Dan's first time at ravishing someone, and if he kept this up I was most definitely going to come --

Slippery heat slowly pressed in.

I whimpered, squirmed, humped. He caught my hips, holding me fast. He kept pressing, pressing.

"D-Danny ..." I wondered if I would simply dissolve; my insides felt like hot liquid. My mind felt gray and blank and shaken like the magic screen on an Etch A Sketch.

Dan's tongue circled and then pushed right in. Deep. I could hear myself mewling, inarticulate and helpless, as his hot slick tongue thrust in and out of my clenched-tight hole. And, right on cue, I began to come.

And all those words flitting around in my brain flew away and left me spiraling into some sweet and silent space where the only thing real was Dan's strong arms holding me close.

Chapter Four

When I woke the next time it was hours later and I had the vague memory of hearing the front door close. I rolled over and checked the clock on the other side of the bed. Nearly one o'clock.

I sat up cautiously. I felt a hell of a lot better than I had that morning, that was for sure. I rubbed my eyes, listened to the sound of the sea a few yards away and the wind whispering at the window casements. Beyond that ... silence. A safe silence. The security system would be on. Dan was meticulous about that.

My ring glinted on the nightstand. I didn't remember pulling it off, but I must have when I'd come in last night. That had been childish. I picked up the chain and fastened it around my neck.

The floorboard in the doorway creaked and I glanced around. Dan stood there filling the doorway, and I felt the hair at the nape of my neck prickle. He was so quiet. I was sure he'd gone out.

"Did I wake you? I just stepped out to check the mail," he said.

The mail.

Not easy to speak around the knot in my throat.

What would today's postcard read? *I'm on the first step ...*

Before I could form the question, Dan said, "There was nothing for you."

"There ... wasn't?"

He shook his head.

The wave of relief was so fierce it caught me off balance; I had to look away so that he didn't see the effort it took to control my face. I leaned forward, pretended to feel under the bed -- like, what was I looking for? My dignity?

The mattress sank. I stiffened as he sat down next to me on the edge of the bed. Then he put his arm around me, and I surrendered to the desire to be held, to be comforted, turning to him, resting my face against his throat. I could feel the warmth of his skin against my mouth and eyes, feel the pulse beating at the base of his neck, slow and steady and calm. His words vibrated against my face. "Did you have a good sleep?"

I nodded. Raised my head. Pretended I was wiping sleep out of my eyes. "Yeah. I did."

"Your cheeks are pink." He brushed his knuckles against the bristle on my jaw. "What were you dreaming?"

I thought of what had preceded that deep, deep sleep and felt my face warm. I had dreamed about him but in the dream we had been arguing. I was glad that it had only been a dream, that we were okay again.

"I don't remember. Remind me not to drink that much on an empty stomach."

"You want me to fix you something to eat?"

Spareribs or eggs benedict? I shuddered.

"I think I'm going to work out."

He smoothed his hand over my back. "Okay, chief. If you're going for a swim or a run, give me a shout. I need the exercise."

* * * * *

I was staring out the window watching the surfers when the phone rang.

"I can guess who that is," Dan commented. He closed the dishwasher and turned the dial. Maria only came in on weekdays and Dan couldn't tolerate clutter for more than a few hours. My eyes lingered on the broad shoulders beneath the plain white undershirt, lean hips and long legs encased in faded blue Levis. All this and housework, too.

"Dude!" called the answering machine over the rumble of the dishwasher.

I gave Dan an apologetic look and picked up the phone.

"Hey."

"So ..." Steve asked cautiously. "Any more special deliveries?"

"No."

"*No?*" He sounded as surprised as I had.

"Nothing since Friday." I glanced Dan's way. His back was to me, but I knew he was listening. It gave me an uncomfortable feeling.

Next to my ear, Steve said, "Wow. Maybe ... maybe it was just that Hammond's last few cards got delayed somehow."

That startled me. "What do you mean? Why would you say that?"

"Dude, chill. I mean cards he sent before he died were delayed by the mail. Not that he's still out there picking picture postcards. And try saying that three times fast."

"Oh. Right." I tried to inject a smile in my voice, but I must not have been successful.

"You okay?" Steve asked. "You sound ... off."

"Fine."

"No more panic attacks, right?"

I flicked a look Dan's way. He was watching me openly now. "Nope."

I wanted to ask Steve if he'd had a chance to talk to anyone at LAPD about the recovery of Hammond's body, but I couldn't do it with Dan standing there. I knew that would not go over well.

"Well, groovy. Nothing to worry about, because it's all over, right? Hey, listen, I've got some good news."

"About *The Charioteer*?"

"Huh? Oh. No. Have you finished reading the screenplay?"

"Yes. I want to do it."

He sighed. "All right. I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, what do you think about doing a voice-over for the new StarCatz series?"

"What the hell is StarCatz?"

"A very hot kid's show that NBC plans to use as a mid-season replacement. The creator and producer, Dick Dexa, saw you in *Winchester 2010* and he's expressed an interest in you for Captain Starbuckle's teenage son Jason."

"I hope you're kidding." Sometimes it seemed like I'd gotten more damn attention from a bit part as a smart-ass strung-out hired gun in a big-budget action adventure flick, than I'd received in my entire film career.

"I'm not kidding you. NBC anticipates a mega hit with this show."

"With a cartoon show?"

"I know. Unbelievable, huh? Even more unbelievable, they want you."

"But ... there's nothing distinctive about my voice."

"What can I say? Dick Dexa thinks you sound like a spunky space cadet."

"Spunky? Funny."

"I thought you'd like that." He grew serious. "Sean, listen for a sec. I know this isn't really your kind of thing, but it's an easy gig and ... we need it. The artsy fartsy stuff is fine

and it wins awards, but you've got to balance it with something that pays. If it wasn't for your Uncle Sean's trust fund you'd be living on pasta salad and oatmeal these days instead of whatever it is you and The Rock eat for supper."

I said, "I understand. Twenty percent of zero is still zero."

"Since you put it like that, yes. The decisions you make affect my income too -- or lack thereof. I don't have any rich dead relatives."

He had a point, but ... cartoon voice-overs?

I hated to disappoint him. I could hear how keen he was on this project. And I did have a responsibility to take jobs that would be good for both of us. I said reluctantly, "The thing is, what happens when the word gets around that a gay man is playing a teenage boy on a children's show?"

"Who cares if there's some kind of lunatic right-wing fundie boycott! All publicity is good publicity."

"Tell it to Pee Wee Herman. You think I was anxious before, wait till I've been the victim of a blacklisting campaign."

He laughed. "Hey, come on. You don't want Lenny Norman to hear you talking like that. He'll think you're not Proud and Out."

Now *that* bothered me. "It's Out and Proud, and I don't have to prove anything to Lenny Norman. He should be casting roles based on talent and ability."

"Yeah, well, it's not a perfect world," Steve said with unexpected bitterness. "So are you willing to read for the StarCatz pilot?"

"I'm not comfortable with it, Steve. I'll have to think about it."

Silence. At last he said, "Okay, dude, it's your life."

I replaced the phone and went to join Dan, who had gone out on the deck. He lay on one of the wooden lounges, reading the paper, which he put aside as I hopped onto the

railing, staring up at the cloudless blue sky. It was a truly beautiful day. The most beautiful day I'd seen in a long time.

"You're sure old Steve doesn't still have a thing for you?" His smile was quizzical.

"I'm sure. It's just business."

"What is?"

"The fact that he calls all the time. He's my manager. And, unofficially, my agent. We have to stay in touch."

"Out of curiosity, are you his only client?"

"I'm his main client."

He nodded as though this confirmed something.

"Do you not ... like him?"

"It doesn't matter what I think about Steve. I respect your relationship."

I realized that was the truth. I didn't have to defend or explain -- and the fact that Dan didn't demand it somehow made it easy to talk about it.

"The romantic thing only lasted about a year. We really didn't have a lot in common besides my career. I think I got on his nerves and --"

"He got on yours?"

"Not exactly. His insecurity makes him unkind sometimes. His humor, I mean. He makes these little digs; they're supposed to be funny, but there's an edge. It was ... tiring. Distancing."

"That is one hell of an observation, chief."

I grinned at his obvious surprise. "Crazy like a fox," I said, and tapped the side of my head. "But he's been a good friend and a great manager. He's gone to bat for me again and again. Personally and professionally. The fact that the other thing didn't work out ... well, that was probably just as well."

"I think so." He held out an arm and I slid off the railing and went to join him on the lounge.

"We survived our first argument."

"You sound surprised. Did you think we wouldn't?" Dan speared one of the shrimps out of the salad I had made for his lunch, chewed, his blue eyes thoughtful on mine.

"It's still a milestone." I selected a cherry tomato from his plate and popped it in my mouth. A little burst of sweet tangy juice on my tongue.

"I guess it is."

"Have you ever done this before? Lived with someone?"

"No."

"Why?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Maybe I have a few trust issues of my own."

I frowned. "You think I have trust issues?"

His smile was quizzical; he didn't actually answer me. I remembered the subject was supposed to be him.

"So what kind of trust issues do you have?"

"Maybe that's not the right term. It's probably a cop thing. People can get a little weird when they find out you're a cop."

"But it's probably a turn on for a lot of guys, right?"

He seemed to be looking inward at some unpleasant memory. "Sometimes. A lot of times, the opposite." He impaled another shrimp, chewed, swallowed. "There's a reason cops have a high divorce rate. The hours are brutal, it's a high stress job, and you can't talk about it most of the time."

I opened my mouth, and he said, "I mean it's the kind of stuff you don't want to bring into your own home, not that someone wouldn't be willing to listen." There was something in his eyes that made me feel young and naïve.

I said slowly, "And I guess it takes a toll being afraid the person won't come home."

He didn't say anything, just looked at me. I felt my breathing go funny like I was about to have one of my famous panic attacks. He said, "I'm careful, Sean. There are no guarantees in life, but I'll do my best to come home to you."

I nodded.

He hadn't really explained the trust thing. Or had he? I guess he was saying that he needed to be trusted as much as he needed to be able to trust. Which was pretty much the same way I defined trust.

I opened my mouth to make another brilliant comment, but Mrs. Wilgi's four-footed feather duster came hurtling across the sands toward us, barking hysterically.

"Jail break," Dan remarked.

"I keep hoping he's going to run away."

"He has. To you."

The dog planted itself at the foot of the stairs to the deck, yapping thinly.

"I was hoping for something further from home. Like Mars."

"I told you not to feed him."

"What happens if you shoot him? You have to fill out a lot of paperwork?"

"Yep."

"It's your lucky day," I informed Binky. He barked all the harder.

It was my lucky day, too. Dan and I had survived our first real argument and somehow come out of it a little stronger than we had been. We walked on the beach and talked, cuddled on the couch and talked some more. Casual talk. Nothing life or death -- no mention

of loony stalkers, dead or alive -- no reflection on where we stood as a couple. Just ... talk. Like real couples do.

Late in the afternoon Dan went out to rent a couple of DVDs and bring back my favorite guilty food pleasure -- Taco Bell. I think my Friday night culinary binge had unnerved him. Or maybe he was just getting tired of my cooking. We settled on the sofa with bags of tacos and burritos to watch *Cool Hand Luke*, one of Dan's favorite flicks -- and one I'd never seen.

We'd just got to the famous, "What we've got here is failure to communicate," line when the phone rang.

I stopped crunching. Dan sighed and hit the pause button.

"It might not be Steve," I pointed out. "I do know other people."

"None of them seem to have this number."

"True." The beach house was my get-away. I liked the fact that when I was there I was basically inaccessible -- or had been before Paul Hammond had somehow found out about this place.

The phone rang the third time, the machine picked up, and Steve called, "Dude! Are you there?"

"I'll make it quick," I promised.

"I'm not going anywhere." He smacked my butt as I crawled over him and off the couch.

I picked the phone up in the middle of Steve's imperious, "Sean? Are you there?"

"I'm here."

"Dick Dexa called again. Have you thought about the StarCatz role?"

"How is this going to work if I land *The Charioteer*? When would they need me in the studio?"

An awkward pause.

“Look, Sean, Lenny Norman hasn’t returned my calls. I don’t think you’re going to get *The Charioteer*.”

My Taco Supremes began to churn. “Can I try calling him?”

“No, you can’t try calling him!”

“I just mean --”

“I know what you mean. Do you trust me to handle your career or not?”

“Of course I trust you -- barring the sudden passion for cartoon cats.”

I was teasing, but he said shortly, “Do you want the part of Jason or not?”

“Doesn’t Dexa want me to read first?”

“Sean, it’s a fucking cartoon, not Ibsen. Dexa wants you. Can I tell him you’ll take the role?”

My pulse sped up. I hated arguing, especially with Steve.

I said haltingly, “No. I’m not comfortable with it.”

“Okay! Shit. Was it that hard to give me a straight answer?”

“No. I just know you think I should take the part.”

“Yes, I do. I think you need to start working pretty soon. I was right about *Winchester 2010*, wasn’t I? But whatever. If you’re not comfortable, that’s cool. We’ll find something else.”

I opened my mouth, but before I could speak, he added, “And, yes, I will try Lenny Norman one more time.”

“Thanks, Steve.”

I hung up and returned to the couch, climbed back over Dan’s legs. He caught my hand and pulled me down half on top of him scattering taco wrappers and shredded cheese and lettuce.

“Everything okay?”

“Fine.” I shifted onto my side and stretched out beside him, resting my head against his chest. He smelled like suntan oil and tacos and himself. Heady stuff. He put his arm around me and started the film again. I thought that maybe this was the best part of being a couple -- just relaxing together, spending time with someone you could be yourself with. To my surprise I realized that I was starting to be myself with Dan. Little by little I was letting my guard down and worrying less about who he might want me to be versus who I was -- I thought something in his easy acceptance of my ... vulnerabilities made that possible. Of course, he hadn’t had to put up with my ticks -- quirks -- for very long. He hadn’t had more than a taste of life in the fish bowl, and we hadn’t had to deal with *my* irregular hours or my being away for weeks on end.

There had to be some reason he wasn’t already taken. It couldn’t be for lack of offers. Maybe he really did have trust issues.

The movie ended and Dan said he had some paperwork to catch up before bed, heading for the spare room, which he had turned into his makeshift office. Through the wall I could hear the indistinct rumble of his voice on the phone while I did Pilates in the weight room next door. Kind of late for phone calls, I reflected, but cops don’t work regular hours.

I finished working out, took a quick shower and retreated to the bedroom to watch some TV and make notes on the *Charioteer* screenplay. I refused to think that I wouldn’t get the part. I knew how persuasive Steve could be when he wanted, and if Paul Grady was pushing for me to co-star, I knew I still had a shot.

Dan joined me in the bedroom as I was idly surfing through the channels.

“One thing I never noticed about *The Charioteer*,” I told him. “A lot of the misunderstandings between Laurie and Ralph and even Laurie and Andrew could have been so easily resolved if they’d just *talked*.”

“That’s true of most relationships, isn’t it?”

“I guess so.”

Of course, Laurie hadn't asked questions because he hadn't been ready to hear the answers. He had been afraid of the answers.

“Hey, go back,” Dan ordered, pulling on a pair of plaid sleep pants, and staring at the TV.

I groaned.

“Turn it back.”

I flipped back to the cheesy horror film.

He bounced down beside me on the bed. “That's you!”

“Don't remind me.”

We studied the on-screen mayhem in silence.

“Your hair,” Dan remarked finally.

“Yes, it's the scariest thing in the film.”

We watched for a few more minutes.

“So ... you're actually the star of this? Do you get the girl in the end?”

“Please, Dan,” I said, “This is heterosexual romance. The girl does not ‘get it in the end.’”

His laugh sounded surprised -- and I could guess why. I slanted a look his way and he shook his head. “You're asking for trouble, chief.”

“How many times do I have to ask before I get some?”

He raised his brows and then lunged. I fell back in the nest of pillows, bringing my knee up -- but watching where I put it because the last thing I wanted to do was really put him out of action. I planted my foot in his chest and he rolled over, taking me with him. We wrestled around, laughing. I liked the fact that though I was tall -- six feet -- Dan was taller. And I liked the fact that -- although I was strong and worked out regularly -- Dan was

stronger. It didn't threaten me and I didn't feel any of the competitiveness I usually would have.

He got one arm around my waist and the other around my thigh and managed to flip me over onto my back. The Swedish mattress swallowed my frame a few obliging inches.

"The bed is having me for dinner," I said, laughing up at him.

"And I'm having you for dessert," Dan said, his voice deep and velvety. He was braced over me, knee between my thighs, one hand keeping both my wrists pinned above my head - not easy to do to another healthy adult male.

I didn't have to glance at his crotch to know he was as excited as I was -- though admittedly neither of us was as excited as the guy on TV behind us selling cleaning products at the top of his voice.

I said, in a very bad imitation of James Cagney, "Okay, copper. You got me fair and square."

His lean cheek creased in amusement. "Oh? You're going to come quietly?"

"I always do," I whispered.

His eyes darkened and he shifted his weight back onto his knees. The hand formerly holding me prisoner was now stroking me, feathering down from the outside of my wrists to the insides of my elbows. I generally didn't like anyone to see -- let alone touch -- the scars on my arms. "No hesitation marks," Dan had said the first time his fingertips had brushed over the ugly tracks of scars. "You weren't kidding around."

Now my arms went relaxed and heavy under that delicate touch. I murmured my pleasure. His free hand slipped inside my boxers.

I sucked in a breath, arching blindly into his caress, reached up and yanked the soft flannel pants down, running my hands down his lean flanks. His skin felt warm and smooth.

"Open your eyes," he ordered huskily.

I lifted my lashes. Every muscular inch of him was brown and supple; his black hair, thick and glossy, fell boyishly into his eyes as he gazed down so seriously at me.

I raised my head and kissed him, a little nip of a kiss. He kissed back, wanting more as usual, wanting it slow and deep and sexy. His lips were so soft. I stilled, opened to him. Our tongues slid together, sweet and spicy. Dan groaned in the back of his throat as though it were too good to bear, sending a little shiver down my spine.

I pulled him down on top of me and we settled into each other, his hand fastening on my hip, tugging me into that fierce bulge against my belly. My own cock throbbed in time to the pound of my heart as his hand found the elastic of my boxers and I raised my hips enough for him to hitch them off. The feel of bare skin lowering on bare skin was satisfying. Our dicks scraped up against each other, old friends and good neighbors, rubbing shoulders.

“What do you want?” he said breathlessly, his breath hot against my ear.

I shook my head. Too hard to form the words when I was having trouble forming the thoughts. “You,” I got out.

“How?”

“Suck me?” It came as a little plea. I was a lot more comfortable giving than receiving, but tonight I craved the idea of burying myself in that wet heat. “Please.”

He chuckled at the “please.” Maybe it *was* funny. He lifted off me, resettled and ran a light possessive hand down my tummy, fastening on my shaft. I murmured encouragement. He bent, kissed the head of my cock and took it into his mouth.

Unbelievable.

It was like stepping into a golden bath -- whatever the hell that means. Wet and hot and intense. Was it the warmth or the wetness or the pressure that felt so good? Maybe the mind-blowing combination of all three? This was where all that experience came in handy. He’d obviously been on the receiving end enough to know the little things that made all the

difference. Where I offered style, he gave substance and the wonder was I didn't shoot my load in the first five seconds.

"Oh, my *God*," I groaned, and it did indeed feel like a religious experience.

That crazy mix of glib tongue and soft lips and the graze of teeth: sucking, nibbling, licking -- but it was mostly the sucking that felt so shatteringly good -- hard and then easy and then hard. I couldn't help making abject sounds as he brought me to the edge, then tilted me back, then tipped me forward into the moment.

I spilled over into pleasure, moaning and tossing my head on the pillow like I was in a high fever.

Afterwards I just lay there spent and a little stunned, and he lapped up my cream, the rough rasp of his tongue reminding me of a cat -- a big eat-you-alive cat -- like a panther. He braced himself over me and when his mouth took mine, I could taste myself. "Fuck me, Danny," I begged him huskily.

"Yeah?" He kissed me again, hungrily. "Sure?"

I nodded, moving against him restlessly, blindly. "I want it. I do."

I could feel him hesitating. I didn't want him hesitating; I didn't want to have time to think. I wanted to ride this wave of sensation all the way out. Eyes closed, nerves still quivering in the pleasure ringing through my body, I urged, "Fuck me. Please fuck me."

There was a dreadful little delay, cold air over my body, the slide of a drawer, a liquidy squirt. I opened my eyes. He was solemnly rubbing gel over his fingers. Lashes flickering on his cheek as he studied his slimy fingers. Oh, right. Preparation F. I closed my eyes hastily.

He moved next to me again, his hand brushing my dick. Just that accidental touch had my breath rushing in and out of my lungs, my heart pumping like mad. I scooted over to give him easy access.

He stroked and feathered, and then his well-lubed finger pushed into my tightly puckered hole. My eyes opened wide, breath catching. "*Oh*."

I tried to make it sound pleased because if there's one thing I've learned both from therapy and from acting, if you pretend strongly enough and consistently enough, eventually the thing you project will become real.

He smiled, but there was a little frown between his brows. "You're trembling."

I gave him a twitchy smile. Not so bad. I could do this. It almost felt good in a too-much- sensation-crawling-through-my-guts kind of way. He slid his finger in and out in a tame parody of fucking and my breath quivered in my chest.

It wasn't hurting. It felt ... exciting. Alarming, but exciting.

He finger fucked me gently awhile, and then said, "You want to take it to two?"

I nodded jerkily. I did. He wasn't pushing for anything more than I wanted myself.

He pressed his other finger in slowly. Sweat broke out all over my body. I bit my lip against a yelp. It wasn't that bad really, my body was accommodating him, it was just strange. So intense. So ... familiar.

"Relax. Try not to tense."

I laughed unsteadily. Yeah, right. I had what felt like a steel pipe jammed up my ass and I was supposed to relax? Then he did something with his fingers and I stopped laughing. A thrill of pleasure rippled through my body. What was he doing?

"How's that?"

I grunted.

He did that thing with his fingers again. I moaned -- even I could tell it was an encouraging moan.

"This is nothing," he said softly. "It gets a lot better than this."

I risked opening my eyes again. He was smiling, enjoying my reaction.

He knelt into the mattress, guiding my legs up to my stomach. I tucked my legs up -- not a really comfortable position. I felt awkward and exposed, my butt hanging out. I didn't

know what to do with my hands. I couldn't reach him at this angle. I couldn't read his face. My heart started pounding hard with anxiety. My breath caught in my chest. His hands were big, like fetters around my ankles. His dick swung around like a cudgel, sweeping against my ass and thighs. He positioned himself, the head of his prick nudging against my anus like a torpedo lining up to fire. He prodded. A flare of pain went through me. He was too damn big.

The bigger the better, if you were a chick. Not so great for a tight-ass like me.

"Wait!" I got out.

Dan waited, expressionless. A wave of cold sick panic flooded my gut. I brought my legs down and rolled away from him.

"I can't do it," I said. Way melodramatic, crouching on the edge of the bed in this flight- or-fight response, but I was aware that by now he must be ready to throttle me.

He sat back on his haunches. No need to fight. No need for flight. He was frowning but his body was at ease. He wasn't coming after me. His voice was dispassionate.

"We don't have to."

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head. Sorry was not necessary. "Not everyone likes it."

"You do, though."

Instead of answering, he said slowly, "We could try it the other way around."

"God, no!"

He gave a funny laugh. "Or not." He reached out, touched my cheek. "It really is okay, you know."

"It's not that I don't want to ..."

He got that speculative look -- the very thing I wanted to avoid. "It can be painful the first few times. Especially if your partner isn't experienced."

I shook my head. “There was no first time. No one hurt me. There’s no drama here. I just -- I can’t explain it.”

Maybe not totally accurate. I closed my mind to the memory of my father’s enraged face. The memory of spit-flecked words screamed in my face. “*Gay?* There’s nothing *gay* about queers. There’s nothing gay about taking it in the ass, getting butt-fucked by another queer. Men don’t take it in the ass. Queers do. Are you telling me that’s what you are? My only son is a *queer?*”

Dan said quietly, “Whatever is making you look like that, let it go. This isn’t a problem for me, and I don’t want it to be a problem for you.”

I nodded.

A smile tugged at his mouth. “It’s not like we can’t find other ways to amuse ourselves.”

Sunday started out every bit as beautiful a day as Saturday. Dan and I woke up early, made love, went for a swim -- although it was starting to get too chilly for swimming. Summer was truly over and autumn was in the air. I could smell the wood smoke down the beach from Mrs. Wilgi’s cottage.

Dan suggested we have brunch at the Chart House, which, despite being the place in Malibu where all the tourists go, has good food, a spectacular view of the ocean and a casually romantic atmosphere. I admit I hesitated. I was a little wary about my personal life getting into the tabloids. I thought a person’s private life should be exactly that, even if you were a “celebrity.” And the idea of photos of me and my gay lover in the *National Enquirer* or the *Star* took my appetite away. But I didn’t want Dan to think I didn’t want to be seen with him in public. More, I didn’t want him to think that being with me meant he couldn’t have a normal life, so I said, sure.

To my relief none of the dogs from the “Hollywood Hunt Club” lurked in the crowded parking lot. Inside, the restaurant was packed, but one of the perks of being a celebrity is that

we were seated right away. People at the crowded tables looked up and leaned over to each other as we wound our way to the table by the window. To my amusement, I realized that they were looking at Dan, wondering who he was, what they'd seen him in. Even in jeans and a sports shirt he had presence, style -- not to mention striking good looks.

He would never make it as an undercover cop, I thought.

"What's so funny?" he asked, glancing at me over the top of his menu.

I shook my head, smiling. He raised his brows and went back to his menu.

We ordered our meals, and the waitress brought our wine and warm sourdough bread crusty with garlic, thyme, and butter.

I looked across the table at Dan and he was smiling.

"Happy?" he asked.

And I realized I was. Very. And if that fullness in my chest meant anything, I was pretty close to falling in love.

He held his wine glass out and we clinked rims -- and I didn't give a damn who saw.

"Excuse me."

I glanced up. There was a scarlet-faced kid with terrible skin hulking beside my chair.

He threw a nervous look over his shoulder at a crowded table taking up the center of the room. "Hi, my name is Sam Bowers. You came and spoke at my school last year and I just wanted to say thank you. It ... meant a lot to me to ..." His voice cracked nervously. "To hear about how it was for you."

I said, "You're welcome, Sam. I'm glad I could help."

"I want to be an actor too. I've been in some school plays. This year I played Judd in *Oklahoma* and Iago in *Othello*."

"That's great."

"I got great reviews in our local paper. Well, for Judd."

I said, "That's excellent. Hang onto those clippings."

"Everybody makes fun of me, but I don't care. They make jokes about the way I look. They call me queer bait. They're all a bunch of pricks."

I wasn't sure what I could tell him. I hadn't been out in high school; I'd thought being dead was preferable. His courage awed me.

"It gets easier as you get older. You won't care what people think."

As much.

"I don't care what they think now!" His face got redder, his eyes were too bright. He glanced at Dan and seemed to recollect himself. "Anyway, I just wanted to thank you. You're my hero."

"You're ... welcome."

He suddenly reached down and hugged me awkwardly, meaty arms clutching fiercely. I patted his back. Sam let me go and walked quickly back to his table, which was now staring our way and whispering.

I glanced at Dan and was startled at his grim expression. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

I couldn't understand his tension. He couldn't be jealous. Did he view Sam as a potential threat? According to him there was no real threat -- not anymore. "He's just a kid," I said.

"I know. It's cool." He gave me a quick smile that didn't quite soften the blue steel of his eyes.

The waitress brought our meals, sea bass for Dan and swordfish for me. We drank more wine. Sam Bowers and his family left, Sam glancing back at me several times -- which did not go unnoticed by Dan.

"You can't think that kid's a threat."

"I don't." He said, in answer to my obvious puzzlement, "It's just ... you're very ... accessible. Even after what you've been through this last year, you're not ..."

He didn't finish it, and I realized he didn't want to make me self-conscious. Or afraid. He said instead, "You were great with him. Patient, kind. You're good with everyone. No star tripping with you; that's one of the things I noticed right off the bat."

"I'm not exactly A-List."

"The biggest assholes in this town are not the A-Listers." He smiled. "You'd be the same regardless of the roles or the money. You don't take it seriously."

That troubled me. "I take it seriously."

"I don't mean the work. You're a professional. You don't take the celebrity thing seriously."

"Oh. Right." That was true. I wasn't that crazy about being a "celebrity." I liked my privacy.

The waitress arrived with a dessert tray. Dan went for coffee. I chose café glacé.

Dipping my spoon into the coffee-flavored ice cream, I asked, "What did you mean Friday night when you said you had been through therapy?"

Dan's eyes followed my tongue as I licked the whipped cream from the spoon. "I had counseling after I made the decision to be open about my sexual orientation on the job. Law enforcement is still a conservative and fairly homophobic profession; it wasn't an easy decision."

"What made you decide to come out?"

"It wasn't that I wasn't out, but I was very careful to keep the boundaries distinct between my personal and professional life."

That sounded uncomfortably familiar. "Don't ask, don't tell?"

"Right. Which to a degree I still believe in. I don't feel like it's anyone's business who I sleep with." He sighed. "And ... law enforcement is, in general, kind of a macho gig. We've

got more than our share of assholes on the force, so I guess I was glad to not have to take a stand. But I had a situation come up: a homicide suspect recognized me from a gay bar and tried to ... let's call it 'negotiate' with me."

"You could have been undercover," I pointed out.

He smiled faintly. "I could have, but I was a regular at that bar, and we both knew it. I realized I had to come clean to my superiors -- had to put it all out on the table."

I wondered what I'd have chosen in that same situation. "Were you tempted to go along with the blackmail?"

"No." He met my eyes levelly. "I knew once I started down that slope there would be no stopping. I wasn't about to endanger a job I love. I was never ashamed of being gay."

"And what happened after you came out?"

"A few guys were assholes and a few guys were stand up, but mostly nobody really gave a damn. Except the brass. They saw an opportunity to reverse some of the bad press and capitalize on how diverse and sensitive the new LAPD was."

"Did the counseling help?"

"It did." His gaze was curious. "You do all those public service announcements advising teens to seek counseling. You don't have faith in the process yourself?"

"It's not that. If I had been able to talk to someone when I was sixteen ... things might have gone differently. Now I don't need someone helping me understand what I'm afraid of." I was no longer talking about being gay, and we both knew it. I added, "And I don't think my fears are unreasonable."

He was smart enough to leave it at that.

When we got back to the house I turned on the phonograph and put on the 1954 recording of Louis Armstrong playing W.C. Handy. I carried a stack of prospective screenplays Steve had sent over earlier in the week onto the deck and settled into the lounge

chair, smearing suntan oil over my shoulders while the music wafted out through the open sliding door.

It was cooler today, the sun slipping in and out of clouds; the salty wind off the water had a nip to it. I wiped my hands together and leaned back in the chair, reaching for the first screenplay: *Favored to Place*. My eyes focused on the brown rag hooked to the deck railing.

Not a rag.

More like ... a large toupee or something ... furry.

I dropped the script from nerveless fingers. The pages fluttered in the breeze.

Far overhead I could a seagull crying. What a weird sound that was. Like mewling. Like a cat. Like a fluffy brown cat. Or a fluffy brown dog.

I stood up fast, but my foot hooked and I tipped the lounge chair over, sprawling on the deck. I felt like I'd had the wind knocked out of me.

"Dan," I yelled breathlessly. "Dan! *Dan!*"

In the distance I could hear a jaunty trumpet sashaying into the opening notes of "Loveless Love."

Along with the sudden lack of oxygen, I couldn't seem to get my footing. I kicked away the cushions and chair -- unable to tear my eyes away from the thing nailed to the deck railing. Nailed by its tail ...

The screen door opened and Dan stepped out. "What the hell --?"

I scrambled to my knees. "It's the dog," I gasped. "Mrs. Wiggly's dog." I pointed, hand shaking.

The consternation on Dan's face changed to something else. Something dangerous.

"Get up," he said. He reached down and hauled me to my feet. "Inside."

He thrust me through the half open door, stepped in behind me and locked it. Guiding me by the arm, he edged me back a few steps. "Stay away from the door, stay away from the window."

"He k-killed it," I chattered. "While we were at brunch. He's watching the house. Why would he do that? That stupid little dog. How c-could he know -- But I didn't want *that!*"

Dan brushed past, lifted a gun the size of a small cannon out of the clutter on the middle bookshelf, and I realized in a distant sort of way that although he had seemed to dismiss my fears he was, in fact, on high alert.

Moving past me, he unlatched the door. "Don't open for anyone but me. Understand?"

I stared at him.

"Sean," he said sharply. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I sucked in a quavery breath. "I understand."

"I'll be right back. Lock the door behind me."

He stepped out. Gestured to the lock. I moved to the door and fumbled it locked. He motioned to me again, and I backed out of sight of the door.

Hearing his footsteps on the deck, I went to the window and, staying to the side, watched him cross the deck fast and jump down to the sand below.

He disappeared from sight.

Chapter Five

The scrape of a key in the lock brought me to my feet. Dan stepped inside, caught sight of me and stuck the gun in his back waistband, walking across to me.

“He’s long gone.”

“It’s Hammond,” I said. “I know it.”

“Shhh.” He took me in his arms. “Sean.” He held me tightly; I couldn’t have moved if I’d wanted to. I didn’t want to.

“He’s alive. I know it.” I spoke into his chest, the words vibrating against the strong thud of his heart.

“It’s not Hammond.” He stroked my back calmly. “This isn’t Hammond’s MO.”

I raised my head. Met his eyes. “It *has* to be.”

“Sean, over a dozen witnesses confirm that he went into the aqueduct. He couldn’t have survived that crash. It’s not possible.”

“Then where’s the body? Why hasn’t the body shown up yet?”

He said patiently, “It washed down the aqueduct and lodged somewhere. I don’t know. But I do know that whoever is doing this, it’s not Hammond.”

I was struggling against a riptide of emotions: fear, frustration, bewilderment all dragging me further and further from shore, from safety, from sanity.

"Then who?" I cried, trembling. "Nothing else makes sense!"

"You've got to calm down."

"How can I be calm when you can't -- or won't -- see what's happening? What does it take to convince you? He's *out there*. He's coming for me."

His hands clamped on my shoulders, anchoring me fast. "He's not getting you. *No one* is getting to you. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I stopped Hammond, I'll stop this freak too. He's not getting near you."

"He's already near me!" I couldn't help it. My control was slipping. I heard my voice shaking and wild. "He's out there now. How could he know about what a pest that damn dog was? Tell me that? He had to have heard us. He could be listening to us now. This place could be bugged."

"Jesus, Sean." He pulled me close, holding me against him like he wanted to smother the words spilling out. "Stop it. Sweetheart. Stop. You're making yourself sick."

He kept murmuring words I couldn't comprehend, but I understood that he was petting me, quieting me, and after a while I stopped ranting, stopped trembling, finally managing to slow those panicked shallow breaths that were making me lightheaded.

We moved over to the sofa. He left me for a moment or two. I scrubbed my face, wiping away tears I didn't remember crying. I rested my head in my hands and tried to think. Nothing made sense. The postcards had stopped but Hammond had escalated to violence. It had been all threats up until this point. What had changed?

Dan sat down beside me. Set a glass of water on the table. He held a small brown vial that I recognized from my bathroom cabinet. I had news for him; those pills were well past their expiration date -- like me apparently. I watched him shake two tablets into his palm.

"I don't want those."

"I know. But you need them."

I gave him a hostile look. Anything I said now would be put down to my irrational state of mind. I held out my hand. He dropped the pills in my palm, I popped them in to my mouth, took the glass of water he handed over. I washed the pills down, handed him back the glass, stretched out on the sofa and closed my eyes.

Dan brushed my hair from my forehead. I kept my eyes closed, rejecting that light, tender touch.

"Just relax."

Yeah. Right.

"Everything will be okay, I promise you."

I swallowed. Didn't answer. Kept my eyes closed. He said that a lot: "I promise you." But what did that mean? He couldn't promise me anything. Not when he didn't even believe me -- when his main concern was to shut me up.

He kept stroking my hair. I didn't want him to. I didn't want to be comforted by him. I didn't like the fact that his touch seemed to find a way through my defenses, that he seemed to be able to converse with me through his fingertips and my nerve endings. I tried to shut out my response, but my scalp seemed to tingle beneath the deft fingers threading my hair. The tears stopped leaking beneath my lashes. The torpidity lurking at the edge of my consciousness eddied around and sucked me down.

* * * * *

When I opened my eyes it was dark. I was lying on the sofa in the living room. Someone -- Dan -- had tossed the lambswool throw over me. The lights were off, but there was a fire in the fireplace. The shadows changed against the walls, flickering and indistinct. Never two the same -- like Rorschach plates.

I turned my head. Dan was sitting in one of the chairs before the fireplace. His profile looked flushed in the firelight. He was staring at nothing in particular. I wondered where the gun was now. On TV and in the movies cops shoot people all the time. Dan told me he had only drawn his weapon a dozen times -- and he'd only fired once. That was when he had shot and wounded a robbery suspect. He had been off-duty at the time. He had earned a citation for bravery, but there had also been an Internal Affairs audit.

"What time is it?" I asked.

His head snapped my way and he stood up. I didn't want that. It was hard to keep the walls in place with him near me, and I wanted the walls up. It was safer behind the walls.

"How are you feeling?" He started to sit on the edge of the sofa, but I sat up, moving away from him.

"Groggy. Sorry for the ... hysterics."

"Sean."

I cut across his compassion. "What happened -- while I was out?"

"I called the sheriffs and filed a report. Then I walked down to Mrs. Wilgi and told her what happened." He added, before I did more than look at him, "A deputy stayed here at the house until I got back."

I nodded. I wasn't thinking about who had been watching over me; I was thinking about poor Mrs. Wilgi who had loved that ugly little dog as though it had been her child.

"No one is taking this threat lightly, Sean."

I refused to look at him. "I know."

"I've been thinking that it might be a good time to move back to the house."

I shrugged. "What's the difference? He knows where I live."

He didn't speak for a moment, then he said, choosing his words, "If this is not Hammond, then he may not know that you have a home in the Hollywood Hills."

I laughed derisively. “*If?* You mean you’re willing to consider the idea that Hammond may not be dead?”

“Yes.”

That surprised me, and I did look at him then, trying to read his expression in the gloom. His eyes glittered in the glow from the fireplace -- a little spooky.

“Are you humoring me?”

“No.”

Some of my tension drained away.

“What changed your mind?”

“I don’t know that my mind has changed -- but I’m keeping it open. I agree with you that it is highly unlikely you would attract two aggressive stalkers in this space of time.”

Tiredly, I thought this over. He didn’t think I was crazy; that was good, right? The fact that someone was out to get me: not so good. “When you said it wasn’t Hammond’s MO, what did you mean?”

“Hammond was what we call an Attachment Seeker. Killing the dog is more the action of a Rejection-based stalker -- except the dog wasn’t yours. You didn’t even like the dog, so as threatening as the action seems, it could be perceived as a service to you.” Warily, he added, “Which still doesn’t make sense psychologically.”

“It makes sense,” I said. I’d done plenty of reading on stalkers all on my own. “He sees himself as rejected. He didn’t get what he wanted from me and he’s moved from simple stalking to intimidation and threats. Rejection-based stalkers are the most likely to turn to violence. Isn’t that true?”

“Yes,” he said reluctantly.

“If he’s watching me, he knows that you and I are involved now. That could be the catalyst.”

“Hammond wasn’t gay.”

"Maybe he was a closet case."

"Either way," Dan said, "We need to think about how best to ensure your safety. I think moving back --"

"I don't think the locale matters. We've got a great security system here and I can see anyone coming from a mile away."

He looked unconvinced but didn't argue, and I guessed that he didn't want to pressure me when I was already emotionally distressed. That's one of the perks of having a history of breakdown. People don't like to upset you unnecessarily.

"All right. We'll leave it for now. I've already spoken to my captain and we'll have someone from Special Investigations here tomorrow on security duty."

"Who? I don't want some stranger in my --"

"Listen," Dan said crisply, "We've got to have someone here during the day, and it can't be me."

"Why? I don't understand."

"Because we're involved now, chief. There are protocols that have to be followed in order to authorize protection for you. We're dealing with a government bureaucracy, among other things."

"What other things? If you were the best person for the job before --"

He drew a deep breath. "It's ... like a doctor operating on a family member. I can't be objective about your safety; I don't have any emotional distance, which means I'm not the best person for the job now."

I opened my mouth to argue and he said, "I don't tell you what roles to take in your career; how about you don't try to tell me the roles to take in mine?"

His tone was even and he was still sort of smiling, but he was dead serious. I stared at him. Finally lifted a shoulder.

Sergeant Jack Markowitz had apparently transferred in from a neighboring police state -- to his iron-jawed dismay. Tall, trim and no-nonsense, he showed up at the beach house at the crack of dawn on Monday before Dan left to drive into Hollywood. They greeted each other tersely, stepped out front briefly to discuss "the case," before Dan came out to the deck to tell me goodbye.

"Stick close to the house today -- and stick close to Markowitz."

I raised an eyebrow and he said, "Not that close."

Markowitz watched stonily from the doorway as we kissed.

"Can I fix you some breakfast?" I asked my new bodyguard after Dan drove off.

"No. Thanks." Markowitz managed, looking like breaking bread with me would choke him.

I spent an uneventful morning working out and reading through the stack of screenplays Steve had sent over. Most of them seemed to consist of roles for strung out smart asses; I began to think being typecast as a gay man wouldn't be so bad after all.

At ten o'clock Maria let herself in the back door, like usual, and Markowitz scared the shit out of all of us by throwing down on her. Once we got that sorted out, Maria, with a lot of muttering under her breath, got busy vacuuming, and Markowitz amused himself "checking out the perimeter" for the nth time.

By eleven o'clock I knew it was going to be a very long day.

Steve called after lunch. "I've got good news and bad news. What do you want to hear first?"

I didn't know if I could take any bad news at the moment. "What's the good news?"

"Winston Marshall, the guy producing *The Charioteer*, has invited you to dinner tomorrow night."

I felt like someone turned the lights on inside me. "For real? Where?"

I expected to hear Spago or Musso & Frank Grill, but Steve said, "At his place in Bel Air. Lenny Norman will be there too."

"Does that mean --?"

"I don't know what it means," Steve admitted. "I can tell you that Marshall likes your work. He was very interested when I said you were hooked on the idea of playing Laurie. The bad news is he didn't know you were hooked before because Lenny Norman hadn't mentioned it to him -- and that's because Norman doesn't want you. They're looking at David Cort for the role."

"David Cort," I echoed. Davie Cort would be perfect for Laurie Odell. I could see him already in the khaki wool Battle Dress uniform of the period. He was the right age, casually attractive, a decent actor -- and English. I felt nauseous.

"So is that the bad news: they're pretty much decided on Davie Cort?"

"No." Steve paused and I could feel my already wrenched nerves strrrrrreeetch another foot on the rack. "Um ... have there been any more postcards?"

"No."

Silence.

I said, "But someone killed my neighbor's dog and hung it on our deck."

"Jesus fucking Christ!"

"You said it." I glanced at Markowitz who was out on the deck using binoculars to check out the bikini-clad women far down the beach. A real security threat, those teeny little swimsuits.

"Okay, well, I did some checking, like you asked. This is totally unofficial, but according to my source at Hollywood Division, there's more than a little doubt as to whether Hammond was even driving the car when it went into the aqueduct."

It was like he was speaking a foreign language; I heard him but the words didn't make sense. "What?" I said at last.

“Hammond may not be dead.”

Wasn't this exactly what I'd been saying the whole time? Why had Dan tried so hard to convince me otherwise when it was obvious his colleagues thought there was a good chance Hammond was still out there?

“Why didn't anyone bother to share this before?” I asked.

Steve said carefully, “I think they did. I think Dan ... didn't want to alarm you.”

I bit down on my anger at Dan. “Do the cops have any leads on Hammond?”

“They're watching his apartment and the motorcycle shop where he used to work. Nothing's turned up. I mean, he *could* be dead. They're not ruling that out.”

My brain seemed to have stalled. Steve was still talking. I tuned back in to hear him query, “You coming to this premiere at the Chinese?”

“What?”

“Are you getting hard of hearing? The premiere party for this new Peter Jackson flick. You plan on making an appearance?”

“I don't think so.”

“*Why?* Sean, you need to get out and be seen. You know how this business is. Not to mention the fact that sitting around brooding is not healthy.”

“I don't know how healthy it is for me to set myself up like a sitting duck at some big Hollywood party.”

“What are you talking about? What could be safer than a tent filled with bodyguards, security, and cameras? It's called hiding in plain sight.”

“I just don't feel up to it.”

Mistake. I knew what he was going to say before he said a word. “Are you having ... trouble again?” Which was his diplomatic way of asking if I was headed for another stay in the loony bin.

"I'm okay."

"For real? I mean, you're eating and sleeping and taking your meds?"

"I'm not on meds, Steve. I'm fine."

"Hey, panic attacks are not fine."

"I'm not having panic attacks." Well, not many.

"Whatever you want to call not being able to function."

I was used to Steve, so I'm not sure why that stung. "I can function just fine."

"Really? Well, then explain to me what's going on? You don't want to work; you don't want to do the publicity. You do remember that acting is a job, right? That we're in business here?"

"Yeah, I remember," I snapped, because I was feeling guilty. Playing the publicity game is a big part of the acting biz.

"You're hiding out there in the sand dunes. I mean, if by some miracle you did land *The Charioteer*, would you be ready to take it on?"

"Of course!"

"Is this recluse shtick Dan's influence?"

"It's nothing to do with Dan. It would be easier for Dan if we moved back to Hollywood. He wouldn't have to drive so far to work."

"Then what the hell is going on?"

"I don't know. I'm just ... enjoying my Indian summer, I guess. I feel safer here." I hadn't meant to say that last bit aloud; it just slipped out.

"*Safer?* Is Dan telling you you're safer out there? Is it his idea to keep you so isolated?"

"Why do you keep coming back to Dan?"

"Because you've changed since you've been with him. You seem afraid to make decisions on your own. I don't know. Less confident. More dependent. More like ... before."

By “before” he meant when we had first met in college, when I was not that long out of the hospital, and still shaky. I had been less confident back then. I’d had trouble making my own decisions. No, that wasn’t true; I’d made my own decisions, but I’d agonized over the consequences. It had half-killed me to know I was disappointing people, hurting people, failing. Steve had been my only friend during that period, and I had depended on him a lot. And he’d been there for me, which is what now kept me from giving into the blaze of anger his words sparked.

I worked to keep my voice neutral. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m just worried about you, dude. I’ve known you a long time.”

I had to wonder if some of my anger wasn’t partly due to unease that Steve might be getting close to the truth. Was I starting to rely on Dan too much? Was I slipping back into unhealthy habits? I mean, as much as I wanted to believe that I’d be the first person to know if I wasn’t okay, that’s not usually how it works.

But I *was* okay. Anyone would be a little freaked with what I’d been through this past year. Even Dan agreed with that.

Although Dan had also suggested I might need to start seeing a shrink again.

Slowly, I absorbed what Steve was really getting at. I said, “Have you heard something about Dan? When you were asking about Hammond, did someone say something that gave you a bad impression?”

He hesitated, and I felt the hair on the back of my neck prickle. “Steve?”

“No,” he said quickly. “I mean, cops are sort of a different breed. Sort of above the law, right? He’s never ... I don’t know ... gotten rough with you or anything, right?”

“*Dan?*”

He gave an uneasy laugh. “Yeah. No, I mean, that’s what I mean. He’s not that kind of cop.”

“What kind of cop? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. The kind of cop you hear about on TV. I watch the news. Cops get indicted for shit all the time. Bribery, corruption, murder. They’ve got really high rates of domestic violence ... ”

My throat went so tight I could hardly wedge the words out. “Dan’s been nothing but wonderful to me. From day one, he’s looked out for me in every way.” Now I was angry with myself for having started this line of conversation with Steve.

He returned with unexpected bitterness, “Dan’s the man, that I do get. Unlike Dan, who I guess, gets it all.”

That caught me off guard. I didn’t know what to say. It never occurred to me that Steve truly had a moment’s regret for the past.

Into my disconcerted pause, he said, “Forget I said that. I’m sure he’s a great guy off-duty. Okay? Put it down to jealousy. Mine and maybe some other folks.” He tried to sound light. “Besides, you haven’t changed your will or anything, right? Left him your record collection and your subscription to *Food and Wine*?”

“No, I haven’t changed my will. And what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Chill. It was just a joke.”

“Good thing you kept your day job.”

“Okay, so it was a bad joke. Listen, Sean, don’t get pissed off because I still care about you. I understand the guy won a medal, and he treats you great, but just go slow, okay? You haven’t known him that long. You’ve only spent a couple of weeks together. Basically the dude is an unknown quantity. He’s a ... a dark horse.”

I laughed -- sort of.

“I’m serious, dude.”

“I know you are, and it’s fucking ridiculous.”

The glass door slid open and Markowitz gave me a narrow look. I realized I didn't sound nearly as relaxed and humorous as I'd hoped. I lowered my voice. "I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"Everything okay?" Markowitz growled.

I nodded.

Steve was saying, "Fine. I don't want to talk about it either. I'm sorry I ever brought it up. So, since everything is wonderful, do you feel up to taking this dinner with Marshall?"

"Hell, yes."

Stiffly, he gave me the details, and I wrote them down while Markowitz held an undervoiced conversation with Maria that apparently had to do with what he wanted for lunch.

"Are you going to be there?"

"No," Steve said shortly. "You're going to have to sell yourself to them. And let me tell you now, Lenny Norman is a tough audience."

* * * * *

Dan got home about six for a changing of the guard with Markowitz. Once again they went outside for their pow wow, which I found annoying. I watched Markowitz get in to his car and drive away.

"No postcards," I informed Dan when he came back inside.

"That's what I hear," he said, dropping a kiss on my mouth.

"What else did you hear?"

He gave me a curious look. "I didn't ask him for a report. Is there something I should know?"

I knew I was being a jerk and shook my head.

It was too cold to eat outside even if dining al fresco had been approved by my security team. I had the dining room table set and Dean Martin playing on the stereo. Hard to be down with Dino lounging around the room.

We had dinner and chatted about his day and mine. Dan had been called to the scene of an officer-involved shooting and was dealing with the fallout, and I'd read a bunch of scripts, so I wasn't sure why, as usual, I seemed to be doing most of the talking.

The record player needle moved to the brassy opening of "Ain't That a Kick in the Head." As much as I had tried all day to block out Steve's comments, they'd worked like burrs into my consciousness. I broke off what I was saying to ask, "Have you ever had any complaints about the way you do your job?"

Dan, in the process of cutting off a bite of pork chop, paused. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean did anyone ever accuse you of excessive force or anything?"

He didn't say anything for a moment, and I couldn't read his expression at all. At last, he said, "I'm a lieutenant now; it's not like I'm out there rousting suspects. But yeah, I've had a few complaints over the years."

"Like what?"

Reluctantly, he said, "Police put people in jail for breaking the law. That doesn't win you popularity contests. I've had suspects claim I violated their rights or that I used unnecessary force. I've had female suspects accuse me of sexual harassment." His smile was wry. "I guess that one was kind of funny, although I didn't think so at the time."

I wasn't quite sure what to make of his admission; I'd been hoping he would just categorically deny it.

"Why?" he asked.

Which was a perfectly reasonable question. But for obvious reasons, I couldn't give him a good answer. I already knew how he'd view my discussing him with Steve: pretty much the same way I'd view him discussing me with anyone else.

"I just wondered," I said.

"You must have had some reason for wondering."

I said vaguely, "It's just the cop thing, I guess."

I wasn't really thinking about the implications of that comment, so it caught me off my mark when he responded seriously, "Is that a problem for you? Because that is who I am."

"No, it's not a problem." But into the pause that followed my words, I wondered if that was totally true. When I felt vulnerable and threatened, I appreciated the fact that Dan totally took charge. I felt safe with him in a way I'd never felt as an adult. Maybe it was the gun. Or maybe it was the fact that he had an air of being able to handle anything. But was I still going to feel that way once the danger was passed? I didn't want or need someone taking charge of me in my normal day-to-day life. It wasn't reasonable, but there was a little part of me that resented how closely Dan watched me, and -- a little -- how he tried to protect me. I guess it reminded me, uncomfortably, of being ill. Of needing to be protected, of needing someone to take charge. I never wanted to be that person again.

But I didn't see how I could tell that to Dan without sounding like I was pushing him away, so I did what I always did when in doubt. I started babbling. And Dan did what he always did, which was let me blab until I had to stop for breath.

"So what is it about this role that makes you want it so bad?" he asked after I'd told him about the invitation to dinner with Lenny Norman and Winston Marshall.

I shrugged. "I guess because I identified with Laurie so strongly when I was a kid. Now that I've read the screenplay I see how blind Laurie is. The role with teeth is Ralph. He's the real hero of the thing. Even from the way Renault describes him in the book you can tell that it's his story. There's a psychological depth there that would be a real challenge to capture."

“But you want the Laurie part?”

“Well, I don’t have the physical presence to carry off Ralph. And Laurie’s not bad. He’s smart and sensitive, and he’s got a sense of humor. He sees the stupidity of war, but he never wavers about doing his duty, and once he’s crippled, he never whines about it. He’s not afraid to face up to things. Well, except the one thing. But he’s still got a lot of courage despite his blind streak.”

“He sounds a lot like you. No wonder you identify.”

I laughed nervously. “Oh, right!”

Dan’s brows drew together, and to keep him from drawing any more ridiculous comparisons, I said quickly, “I guess it’s his ordinariness that appeals to me -- appeals to most guys who read the book. Although I’m a little more impatient with him now that I’m reading as an adult. I don’t know if he’s afraid to face the reality of who he is -- *what* he is. Maybe he’s just afraid to lose himself by loving someone completely.”

Dan’s expression was odd.

Changing the subject, I said, “I don’t know what to do about tomorrow night. I can’t show up with a bodyguard. It’ll confirm everything Lenny Norman thinks about me.”

“I don’t give a damn about what Lenny Norman thinks,” Dan said. “Until we’ve figured out who’s harassing you, I don’t want you out there on your own.”

Once again I felt a flare of antagonism at what was, after all, pretty much common sense. I guess it was the authority -- verging on arrogance -- in Dan’s voice. Like there was no room for discussion. What was especially unreasonable was that I’d been resentful before because he hadn’t seemed to take my fears seriously, and now that he was taking them very seriously, I was equally offended. What did I want?

“Yeah, well, I care what Lenny Norman thinks,” I said. “I want this role and I don’t want to do anything that confirms his image of me as some stereotypical Hollywood himbo.”

“A stereotypical Hollywood himbo wouldn’t want that role,” Dan pointed out.

Somehow everything he was saying tonight irritated me. I said shortly, "He thinks I'm gutless, personally and professionally, and showing up with a cop escort tends to reinforce that idea."

"When is the dinner?" Dan asked. "I'll get off early and drive you."

"It's the same thing!"

I heard the hostility in my voice before it registered in Dan's eyes. There was an uncomfortable silence -- long enough for me to try and take the words back, but I didn't. Steve was right. I was getting way too dependent on Dan. I needed to set a few boundaries.

After a moment Dan said, "I wasn't inviting myself to dinner. I'll drop you off and you can ring me when you're ready to go."

I almost couldn't stop myself from saying, "How is that going to look?" but sanity prevailed -- a limited engagement. I said, "I'm supposed to be there at seven."

"I'll be home by five."

"Great. Thanks." If my tone had been any chillier we'd have had to throw another log on the fire.

Later that evening I stood in front of the bathroom mirror frowning at my reflection, trying to decide if there was anything I could do that might make me look more like whatever Lenny Norman imagined Laurie Odell looked like. I could skip shaving. Would chic-scruffy be more appropriate for an invalided soldier? Probably not for a guy in a World War II military hospital. Being tanned wasn't a good idea either. I was probably too tall as well -- although Peter Grady and I looked pretty good on screen together.

Davie Cort was shorter than me and a bit stockier. And a lot paler. Better shoulders. He had one of those appealing boney intelligent English faces -- saved from effeteness by a broken nose.

And he had that damned accent.

Not that I couldn't do an English accent. I was pretty good at accents, actually.

"I say, old chap," I said to my mirrored self.

There was a quiet laugh behind me. I turned. Dan stood in the doorway, smiling. Our eyes met in the glass. He unbuttoned his collar.

"What number were you again?"

It took me a second to remember *People* magazine. I bit back a laugh, although I wished he hadn't reminded me of that. "Go to hell."

He chuckled.

"You look more like a movie star than me."

"No need to be nasty."

It was true, though. For old fashioned good looks, Dan was the guy. My face was all bones, sharps and angles. I photographed well, but in real life there was nothing remarkable about me. Tall and lanky, brown hair, brown eyes (okay, "sherry-colored eyes" and "sun-kissed chestnut hair" if you wanted to quote *People* magazine).

"You'll do fine, Laurie," he said, turning away.

I caught my own wide-eyed look in the glass. It occurred to me that one of the things irritating me tonight was the very thing that bothered Laurie about Ralph: his take-charge attitude when no one was asking him to take charge; the protectiveness that verged on domineering; the assumption that, because he didn't see a problem, it didn't exist. The funny thing was that Laurie's attitude in the book had always bothered me. He didn't seem to fully appreciate Ralph. Now I sort of understood his point.

By lunchtime on Tuesday I was getting a little tired of Sergeant Markowitz. He had all the personality of one of those Easter Island statues. He ate about as much, too. Maybe he thought I'd sprinkled gay powder in the roast beef sandwiches. The only time he livened up was when he went out on the deck and checked out the beach bunnies -- and the beach

bunnies were few and far between now that the weather had turned. He even made Maria nervous -- not an easy thing to do.

It was obvious he felt like he was wasting his time, and maybe he was right. There were no more postcards, no phone calls, nothing but the horrible memory of the dead dog. Maybe someone else had disliked that damned dog and got rid of it thinking it was mine. It spent so much time at my cottage I could see how the mistake might be made.

The morning dragged. The afternoon wasn't much better. I was freaking myself out thinking about dinner that evening, wondering what I could say or do to convince Lenny Norman that I was the right guy for the job.

About two o'clock I worked out in the weight room, showered and came downstairs for a snack. As I reached the ground floor I could hear Steve's excited and tinny voice echoing through the dining room.

"Sean. Fuck. Sean, pick up. Fuck, *pick up!*"

Through the glass door I could see Markowitz and Maria out on the deck in deep discussion. About what? I stretched across the counter for the phone.

"What's up?"

"Sean! Someone shot Lenny Norman!"

I said stupidly, "When?"

"I don't know. His gardener found him this morning."

"Is he --?"

"Yes, he's dead! He was shot to death. Somebody blew a couple of holes through his chest."

Behind me I heard a key in the front door. Too early for Dan. I turned, automatically dropping the handset into the cradle, cutting Steve's shocked voice off.

I stared across the wasteland of counter and table tops, the stretch of carpet and wooden floor. The sunlight lancing through the blinds and bouncing off the wooden floor was so bright it hurt my eyes. Hurt my head ...

The front door opened and Dan stepped in, his face hard and unfamiliar behind dark sunglasses. He looked like a movie hit man, well-dressed and ruthless.

I said, "Lenny Norman's dead. Hammond shot him."

My voice was quiet and tired in the big empty rooms. Not strong enough to carry through the rush of noisy sunshine, but maybe he already knew what I was going to say.

I couldn't read his face behind those dark glasses, but his mouth opened. From a long way away he said, "Sean ..."

Chapter Six

I opened my eyes.

I was lying on the sofa. The ceiling fan whispered above me, the blades swirling in a hypnotic blur. It threw a black shadow flower against the plaster, the petals whirring into a smear.

“Hey, sweetheart.” Dan leaned over me, his face white. Even his lips looked pale. There were little lines around his eyes I didn’t remember seeing before. Poor Dan. Just what he needed after a hard day of chasing bad guys: scraping his crazy boyfriend off the carpet.

I whispered, “Sorry about that.”

He stroked my hair back from my forehead. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

There was, though. Lenny Norman.

I covered my eyes with my arm.

“Don’t, Sean. It’s not your fault.”

Funny how easily he could read my mind.

“No?”

“Christ, no.”

“He thinks he’s helping me.”

But how could Hammond possibly know that I was trying for a role in *The Charioteer*? How could he know that Lenny Norman stood in the way of what I wanted?

“Whoever is behind this doesn’t think he’s helping you.”

I lowered my arm. “We know who’s behind it. Jesus, tell me we aren’t going to go through this again. You know Hammond did this. He killed the dog and now --”

“Listen to me,” he said, and something in his tone caught my attention. “They found Hammond’s body.”

“They ...” I felt winded, like he’d punched me.

“There’s no mistake. Paul Hammond is dead.”

I blinked. I had been so *sure*.

Dan said, “He must have been thrown from the car when it went off the road. From what the ME could tell, he crawled several yards away from the crash site before he died from internal injuries. They found him in a small gully. Apparently, because the car wound up in the aqueduct, no one thought to canvass the surrounding area.”

I put a hand to my head trying to make sense of this. “There’s no doubt?”

Grimly, Dan said, “I visited the morgue myself to make sure.”

I gathered from his expression that the trip to the morgue had been pretty ghastly; I recognized that this had been done as a favor to me, something I should be grateful for. Instead I felt bewildered.

“Then who shot Lenny Norman?”

“We can’t assume that Norman’s murder is connected to whoever is harassing you. It could have been a jealous boyfriend, a drug deal gone bad; he was not a popular guy. It could have been someone he fired or someone he turned down for a role.”

“You don’t believe that, do you?”

“I know that you believe Norman’s death is too much of a coincidence, but I’m here to tell you that coincidences happen.”

I barely heard him. It was like someone had dumped water on the circuit board of my brain; my thoughts kept shorting out. Norman’s death *couldn’t* be a coincidence, but how could anyone outside my immediate circle know that I feared he would stop me from getting *The Charioteer*? Only a handful of people could possibly know I was interested in the role. And killing Norman wasn’t doing me any favors. Most likely the entire production would be cancelled now; the adaptation had been his baby, his project, he had been the one fueling it. So if someone was trying to do me a favor, it was someone who didn’t understand how the film industry ran.

Watching me, Dan asked, “Feel ready to sit up?”

I assented.

He slipped an arm behind me and I sat up, surprised to find that I really needed his help. I felt weak. Shattered.

I stared around the room like I’d never seen it. It was so white. White carpets and white upholstery, white walls -- so clinical. Medicinal. Had I picked all this stuff? The seascape over the fireplace, the dark wood furniture and bookshelves. The books themselves. They all looked like they belonged to someone else, someone who lived a long, long way away from me -- maybe on another planet.

The only thing that felt real was Dan’s arm around me. Was he afraid I was going to keel over again?

I said, “I need a drink.”

He hesitated. “You don’t want to mix pills and booze.”

“I don’t plan on taking any pills.”

Another pause while he searched for a way to say what he wanted to without antagonizing me. “You might want something to help you sleep. Later.”

I shook my head. He squeezed my shoulder and rose. He was back in a minute with two fingers of brandy in a tumbler. I knocked it back, barely registering the burn down my throat, the heat pooling in my belly. Dan's hand absently stroked up and down my spine.

"Where's Markowitz?" I asked, then nearly dropped the glass as the phone rang. "I can't talk to anyone," I told Dan.

"I've got it." He rose, and I instantly missed his warmth and strength. Too much.

From that detached distance I listened to him talk. Quiet and clipped. Cop talk. I remembered that I had hung up on Steve. I needed to talk to him. Later. He'd understand that it had to be later.

Dan came back and sat down beside me again. "Norman had an argument with his neighbor last night -- and not the first."

"I don't believe --"

"Just for the sake of argument, look at these things separately for a minute."

A thought popped into my head. I interrupted him, asking, "When did you find out Hammond was dead?"

"Yesterday."

"*Yesterday?*"

No apology, no explanation. Just the facts, ma'am.

Something else didn't make sense, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I said, "Where did you say Markowitz was?"

Dan nodded toward the front room. "Did you need him for something?"

"No. I don't need him."

I woke up with the confused memory of the phone ringing.

The room was in darkness, the shutters closed, drapes drawn. Dan's side of the bed -- he had a side now -- was empty. I rolled over in a twist of sheet, checked the clock on the nightstand. Seven-thirty. *At night?* What the hell was I doing in bed? I was supposed to be at dinner with Winston Marshall and Lenny Norman.

It all came flooding back. Steve's phone call and the news Lenny Norman had been murdered. My faint. Then talking with Dan until the alcohol had hit and I'd gone up to lie down. Had I taken pills after that? I didn't remember, but I felt groggy, doped.

I hadn't dreamed that single aborted ring, had I?

I picked the phone up and heard Dan talking. "... shock. I don't want to wake him."

Steve replied, "I understand, but I think he'll want to take this call."

"I'll tell him you rang as soon as he wakes up."

Still only half awake, I dropped the handset, had to feel around in the coverlet for it. I put it back against my ear in time to hear Steve saying, "You mean, what *you* think is best for Sean. Maybe Sean wouldn't agree."

"In this five seconds Sean isn't the best judge of what he needs."

I blinked at this from a great distance. Did Dan mean that the way it sounded? Because what *did* that mean? And whatever it meant, it was pretty damn high-handed.

And apparently Steve agreed. He said in a tone I'd never heard before, "But I guess you are?"

I waited for Dan's answer. He didn't say anything, which I guess was his answer.

I replaced the phone carefully on the hook. I didn't feel up to talking to Steve right now, I didn't feel ready to deal with whatever this new piece of news was, but Steve was right. Dan didn't have a right to screen my calls. I should be a lot more angry, right? It couldn't be a good sign that I felt so apathetic; that all I wanted to do was roll over and go back to sleep.

Maybe Dan wasn't so far off base. Maybe I wasn't as well as I believed. My stomach twisted into knots of anxiety.

But anyone would be shocked about murder, right? And death threats, that would take a toll on anyone.

Wasn't I basically stressing over how stressed I was? In fact, this was really sort of funny if I looked at it in just the right way.

Yep, hysterical. And if I started laughing, I'd never stop.

Say I did crack up again, what would happen with Dan and me? Nobody was going to hang in there for that. You couldn't expect it. I tried to picture Dan driving down on visiting days to have lunch with me in my bathrobe.

I hugged the pillow and buried my face in the cool cotton. It smelled good. Like Dan.

* * * * *

I jerked awake to furtive rustling sounds.

"It's me." Dan spoke from near the window. "I didn't want to startle you with the light."

Right, because creepy sounds in the darkness were a lot less alarming.

"What time is it?"

"About three in the morning." His shadow passed through the bars of moonlight. The mattress dipped on his side of the bed. I could hear the fatigue in his voice. "Do you need anything? You didn't eat dinner. Do you want some scrambled eggs?"

"No."

"A hot drink?"

I had a sudden and totally inexplicable longing for the hot cocoa and plain animal cookies my mom used to fix me when I a little kid and feeling sick or sad. I hadn't seen or spoken to my mother in five years. Not since the memorable lunch where she'd spent the

first half reassuring me that there were doctors and clinics and therapies to help me get over being gay, and the second half crying about what she and my father could have done to deserve a son like me.

Two days later I'd checked myself into the hospital for a few weeks of R&R. But, it only took a day for me to realize that being depressed or nervous didn't mean I wasn't safe with the cutlery. The first step had been learning to trust myself. The second step had been putting a healthy distance between me and my family.

"Nothing," I told Dan. And then belatedly, "Thanks."

He lay back with a sigh. "Jesus, what a fucked up day," he muttered. I don't think he meant to say it aloud. I'd never heard him sound so drained.

I lifted my head. "Are you okay? Can I get *you* something?"

He said huskily, "I could really use a hug right about now."

For a sec I didn't think I'd heard him right. I was so used to him being the caretaker that it didn't occur to me that he might occasionally need solace -- or that I'd be the person best qualified to offer it.

"Hey," I whispered, and reached for him. His arms locked around me. I wasn't exactly sure who was hugging whom. I rested my cheek against the soft crispness of his hair, kissed him lightly. His breath was warm against my ear. Toothpaste and a hint of the coffee he'd had earlier. He inhaled sharply. Held me even tighter.

"I love the way you smell," he whispered.

I smiled a little. Gave him another of those tiny stray kisses. After a few minutes, I felt his body relaxing against mine, growing heavy and drowsy. It was unexpectedly comforting. I held him until I too gave into sleep.

I slept late the next morning. Dan was gone by the time I wandered into the front room.

Markowitz sat on the couch reading *Variety*. Maria was scouring the granite countertops. She looked up, smiling with false brightness when I walked into the kitchen.

"Buenos dias!"

"Morning." I opened the fridge. Took out the jug of orange juice.

"I make you breakfast, Mr. Fairchild," Maria said, handing me a glass. Her soft brown eyes looked worried. Why was she worried?

"How about if I make you breakfast," I said. "Markowitz, would you like breakfast?"

"I had a couple of Pop Tarts before I left the house," Markowitz said from behind the newspaper.

"Me, I'm dieting," Maria said.

That made it unanimous. I drank my orange juice watching Mrs. Wilgi walking the beach. A little speck danced in front of her. A puppy.

I sat down and turned on the TV, flipping channels 'til I found a local station. I sat through two morning talk shows with celebrity guests -- all of them much younger and prettier than me -- cartoons I didn't recognize, and finally a news update on Lenny Norman.

Police were questioning a neighbor with whom he'd had a long-running feud. And that was about it. Norman had been shot to death late Monday night. His bullet-riddled body had been found by his gardener Tuesday morning.

News at eleven. Eleven *a.m.* because it wasn't very important news, the murder of one small-time indie director. Few, if any, of the at home viewers were going to recognize his film credits.

"The victim was killed by three shots from a 9 mm semiautomatic," announced the perky blond reporter in her faux trench coat.

I said to Markowitz, who had lowered the paper for this news flash, "That's the old police issue, isn't it?" I knew Dan still carried a Beretta M9, though a lot of cops had switched to Glock.

"I prefer the grip of a Beretta," Markowitz said quite civilly. "They've been having problems with the Glock 21s."

From the kitchen, Maria made clucking noises. "You don't want feel your head with that bad stuff, Mr. Fairchild!"

The phone rang. My keepers exchanged looks.

I uncurled out of the overstuffed chair. "I've got it," I said. I picked up before the answering machine.

"Dude, is that you?" Steve sounded unusually subdued.

"Yes." I glanced at Maria. "I'll take this upstairs."

She nodded.

I ran upstairs, picked up, and said into the phone, "You can hang up now, Maria." I waited for the clatter of the phone settling back on the hook, and then said, "What's up?"

"Is everything okay?"

"Of course."

"I tried to call last night."

"I know. I'm sorry. I was kind of out of it last night."

"Yeah. I heard."

Awkward pause.

"Well, listen," Steve said finally, "I've got some news. I think it's good news. Winston Marshall called me this morning. He's going ahead with *The Charioteer*. He's already talked to Bruce Watts about replacing Lenny Norman as director, and the first person Bruce mentioned when he heard the Laurie role hadn't been cast yet was you."

"Bruce is going to direct?" Bruce Watts had directed my last two films. He was wonderful to work with, an actor's director.

"The part's yours if you still want it."

"If I still want it? Of course I still want it!"

"Are you sure, Sean? Because there are other films and other parts."

"What are you talking about? I want this part. I want this film."

Steve, sounding totally unlike himself, said, "Okay, but are you ... sure you're up to it?"

"Hell, yes, I'm up to it." The realization of what he was really saying hit me in the gut. "Why don't you just say what's on your mind, Steve?"

Clearly uncomfortable, he forged on. "Yeah, well, Dan and I talked last night. He said that you might not be ... strong enough to go back to work so soon."

I was holding the receiver so hard I thought it might crack. "He said *what?*"

"Well, with all this shit going on. First Hammond and then this other lunatic and then thinking Hammond *was* this other lunatic. You have to admit you have been under a lot of strain. I mean, no wonder if you're emotionally fragile."

I felt like I couldn't get my breath. "Dan said I was emotionally fragile?"

Silence.

"Steve? Is that what Dan said? That I'm emotionally fragile?"

Steve said in an uncomfortable rush, "I think he's worried, Sean. I mean, we all are. But ... Dan especially."

"What else did he say?" I had hung the phone up too quickly last night. No wonder Maria and Markowitz were giving me funny looks this morning.

"That you --" He bit it off.

"That I *what?* Jesus! Tell me what the fuck he said!"

Steve spoke like the words were being dragged out of him one at a time. "He thought that maybe we should talk to you together. Convince you to get yourself admitted to UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Hospital."

I felt like gravity suddenly slipped and I was about to float off into space.

The Neuropsychiatric Hospital at UCLA is a facility for patients who require medical assistance in stabilizing acute emotional psychiatric crisis. Residential treatment. Supervised activity from eight a.m. to eight p.m. Deck time and occupational therapy and exercise and medication. It's a great hospital. I know. I once spent nine months there.

There was a weird humming in my ears. I wondered if I was going to make a habit of fainting.

My mouth was so dry I could hardly get the words out. "He wants to have me committed?"

"No! God, no. He wants it to be voluntary. Voluntary hospitalization, you know. Just for rest and observation."

I swallowed so hard he must have heard it all the way in West Hollywood because he said quickly, "Like before. The second time, I mean, when you went in yourself for a--a rest."

"I don't need a rest. I need to get back to work."

"We all want what's best for you, Sean."

I wanted to scream at that kind, noncommittal tone. He sounded like Dan at his most aggravating. I said as calmly as I could, "You've known me a long time, Steve. Do you think I need to be hospitalized? Do I seem irrational?" I had to fight to keep my voice even, in case I sounded as irrational as Dan apparently thought I was. "Do I seem like a danger to myself or anyone else?"

"Shit, no!" he said quickly and loyally. But then he said, "But I'm not living with you, Sean. Dan sees a different side, I guess."

I said tightly, "If anyone is crazy, it's Dan."

He said, "Hey, he never used the C-word."

"Yeah, they're not supposed to," I retorted. "It's not politically correct."

He did laugh at that, an unwilling snort of a laugh. "Well, you sound normal enough. Normal for you, anyway."

"I'm going to have this out with Dan," I said. "I'm tired of his --" I bit the rest of it off. Despite Dan's betrayal whatever happened between us was still none of Steve's business. "You can tell Bruce that he's got his Laurie," I said.

"Is Dan going to go for that?"

"Dan doesn't have a say in this."

"Okay," Steve said doubtfully. "Maybe I'll wait to tell Bruce 'til you talk to Dan, though."

"Tell Bruce I'm in," I said tersely. "I'll deal with Dan."

"Uh, sure, sure. But call me after you talk to him. I just ... want to make sure you're -- well, just call me."

"I'll call you."

I hung up and went downstairs. "I need some fresh air," I told Markowitz. "I want to go for a run on the beach."

"Not a good idea," he said.

"You'll be with me. I'll be fine. I can't stay cooped up here all day."

"Easiest thing in the world for someone to take you out with a scope and a high-powered rifle."

Maria dropped a cup on the granite countertop.

The smash of china barely registered. I said, "This guy doesn't want to take me out long-distance, or he'd have done it days ago. Whatever he's planning, it's going to be personal delivery."

I waited for Markowitz to deliver his verdict. Waited to see if I was, in fact, already in protective custody.

Markowitz considered. He shrugged. "You're the boss."

Wobbly with relief, I went upstairs, changed into running shoes, met Markowitz on the deck.

“Here’s the deal,” he said. “If anything happens -- and I mean *anything* -- you go into the water. You go out as far as you safely can, and you stay there until I give the all clear.”

I nodded, doing a few warming lunges, while I listened.

“If you hear me whistle--” He paused to whistle once, sharply. “Same deal. You go into the water and wait there.”

I nodded and took off running.

It felt good to give my anger this physical release. I needed time and I needed distance before I confronted Dan. I didn’t want to overreact. I realized that whatever he had said to Steve had been said out of concern for me. He cared for me; I didn’t doubt that for a moment.

He wanted to shield me--whether from a bullet or a breakdown. He had been *hired* to protect me. So it would be a little ungrateful to be angry at him for doing that very thing now, especially since he felt he had a personal stake in my well-being.

My feet pounded the sand, my muscles burned. I ran faster, stretching out, trying to out- distance the thing I couldn’t possibly outrun.

I was afraid I was losing it; so why did Dan’s fear feel like such a betrayal?

Why did I expect him to have faith in me when I didn’t have faith in myself?

Sweat stung my eyes. I slowed, stopped. Wiped my face with my sweatshirt front.

Markowitz was huffing and puffing a few yards behind, keeping an unhappy eye on the hillside above us. I realized that I was making his job a lot harder than it had to be.

I could imagine what Dan would have to say about this stunt. He’d probably program the guys in the white coats into speed dial.

“I’m starting back,” I called. Markowitz nodded, his relief plain, although I thought that was more about his heart exploding than my safety.

Turning, I started back toward the house at a lope.

Why the hell did I care so much what Dan thought? Dan had been wrong. Twice. He had been wrong about there being no threat to my safety, and he was wrong about me. Maybe I wasn't as calm and courageous as he'd be if someone was stalking him, but I wasn't losing my grip on reality. I was still operational, still firing on most of my cylinders.

For the first time I considered what would happen if I did collapse again. Would my parents be made my legal guardians? God help me. Or would I be placed in some kind of conservatorship? I'd been focused for so long on staying well and strong that the possibility had never occurred to me. I remembered Steve's joke about my will.

Not so funny, really.

I took the steps to the deck fast, went inside, not hearing whatever Maria said to me, and headed upstairs to Dan's office.

I told myself it was my house and I had a right to search for anything I felt I needed to search for -- but it still felt about one step lower than Bunny spiking Ralph's drinks in *The Charioteer*. I opened the top drawer of Dan's desk; it wasn't locked and I felt another stab of shame. Either he had nothing to hide or he trusted me to respect his privacy.

What had he said about having a few trust issues of his own? I guess the soup du jour was betrayal all around.

I shuffled briefly through his mail. A couple of utility bills and a credit card statement. I scanned the charges. Nothing ominous -- although I winced at the small fortune he'd paid for that Ella Fitzgerald record.

I told myself I should drop it right then and there.

Instead I opened the deep side drawer and hit pay dirt. Inside the drawer was a large clear plastic bag containing postcards. My hand shook as I lifted it out. Three postcards. I turned the bag over. In Paul Hammond's spidery writing were the usual threats: *You'll be sorry; I haven't forgotten;* and, chillingly, *Time is up.*

Paul Hammond's hand and this week's postmark. But Hammond was dead. Had been dead for over two weeks now.

Cold sweat broke out over my body.

Dan could have shot Lenny Norman believing he was helping me out, removing an obstacle from my path. Norman had been killed by a 9 mm and Dan carried a 9 mm.

Nausea welled in my throat.

But then reason reasserted itself.

Dan had been home with me Monday night.

And if Dan was my stalker, he would certainly have locked this drawer. And more to the point, if he was stalking me, he'd have made sure I got the cards. Not much point in hiding them from me if he were the one trying to terrorize me.

In this five seconds Sean isn't the best judge of what he needs.

Sick horror gave way to rage. He had hidden these cards from me, and whatever his reason had been, he'd no right to do such a thing. He had lied to me. Pretended there was no threat. Allowed me to believe that it was all in my head.

He had withheld evidence.

I sat down at his desk and picked up the phone. I dialed his cell. He answered right away.

"Chief."

He sounded so normal. Like he was simply glad to hear from me and hadn't a secret in the world.

I had to steady my voice before I could get the words out.

"Can you come home?"

"What's wrong?"

"I need to talk to you."

“Where’s Markowitz? Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine. When can you get here?”

He did some mental calculations. “It’ll take me about an hour.”

“I’ll see you in an hour,” I said and hung up.

* * * * *

He was home in fifty-five minutes.

Lost in thought, I was startled when I heard the front door. Heard Dan’s deep tones and Maria’s lighter ones. Heard his footsteps on the stairs, coming down the hall. He started to walk past his office, then looked inside. He seemed puzzled to find me sitting at his desk.

“What are you doing in here? What’s going on?”

“You tell me.”

He looked confused. Not guilty. Not wary. Just confused. “What’s wrong?”

“I had a talk with Steve. He said they’ve found a new director for *The Charioteer*, and if I want the part of Laurie, it’s mine.”

Dan’s blue eyes studied my face. “So that’s good news, right?”

“Yeah, I guess. Do you think I’m well enough to take the part?”

He said slowly, “Do you think you’re well enough?”

“Yes. I do.”

He considered me for a long moment. “Then what’s the problem?”

“Did you tell Steve that I wasn’t well enough to work?”

“Hell, no.”

That caught me off guard. I didn’t expect him to lie about it. I expected him to simply say what he obviously thought, that I needed to be locked up in a psych ward as soon as conveniently possible.

“You didn’t tell him that I was emotionally fragile?”

His face changed. “I might have asked him to go easy on fanning your fears about Paul Hammond.”

“You used the term ‘emotionally fragile?’”

“I may have,” his tone was guarded -- obviously not wanting to rile the maniac too much.

“Did you tell Steve that the two of you should try to convince me to check myself into UCLA’s Neuropsychiatric Hospital?”

“Huh?” He looked utterly taken aback. “Of course not.”

“You didn’t try to get Steve to pull an intervention with you?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m serious. Steve said that you told him that I was ill and needed to be hospitalized. Voluntarily if possible.”

“I don’t know what the hell Steve is playing at, but I never said anything like that. Ever.”

“Are you saying Steve lied?”

“Are you saying I would?”

I’d expected him to waffle a bit; claim that maybe Steve had misunderstood, although as far as I could tell Steve had got it right in every way that counted.

“*Steve* has no reason to lie.”

I could see that hurt him; his face went stony.

“Come on, Sean. Steve is jealous as hell of you -- and he plays you like a pro.” And as though that weren’t enough of a red flag flapping in my face, he added flatly, “And for the record, if I thought you needed to be hospitalized, I wouldn’t waste time calling Steve for back up or trying to talk you into it.”

I was so mad I could hardly get the words out without stuttering. “Now *that* I believe, you arrogant son of a bitch!” Dan’s eyes turned arctic-blue. Hard to believe I’d ever seen them warm with tenderness or alight with laughter. “You want to explain this?” I hurled the plastic bag of post cards at him. He caught them one-handed, barely glancing at the bag.

“You went through my desk?”

His contempt made me defiant. “Hey, it’s *my* house. And technically it’s *my* desk.”

He went so still he didn’t appear to be breathing, and yet, despite the silence I heard something shatter. I didn’t let myself stop to consider what I was doing; that I was deliberately destroying something that might be irreplaceable. I just kept sweeping the counters and letting the valuables smash on the floor.

“Saturday, Monday and Tuesday, but I never saw them. You want to explain that to me?”

All at once he was totally calm. “Why don’t you tell me what you think it means?”

I said, “I think you had Maria take them out of the mail when you weren’t here to grab them first.”

“That’s right.” Zero apology or guilt.

“How the hell dare you?”

He snorted. “How the hell *dare* I? You sound like a B-movie. I’ll tell you how the hell I dared. You were coming apart at the seams. I tried to protect you -- if only from yourself.”

Well, there was pretty much the confirmation I was looking for. He might not have phrased things exactly the way Steve remembered, but the intent seemed to be the same.

“I didn’t ask you to protect me!”

“What are you talking about? It’s my job to protect you!”

“*Then*,” I cried. “Before we were together. Not *now*. Not once we --” I couldn’t finish it because whatever we had been, it was ending now. Even if I’d wanted to pull out of this tailspin, it was too late. Our relationship was crashing and burning in front of us.

“Kid, you’ve got some weird ideas of what happens when people get together.”

He had developed a knack for pushing all the wrong buttons.

“Like you’re an expert on relationships?”

He opened his mouth and then bit back whatever he started to say. Unreasonably, his restraint further goaded me.

I sneered, “I don’t have your experience, that’s for sure. And I don’t want it.”

“Yeah, that came through loud and clear.”

Not like I hadn’t asked for that one, but all at once the heat went out of my anger. I felt numb. I said, “What else did you lie about? Obviously Hammond isn’t dead, is he? I’m still getting postcards from him.”

“The postcards aren’t from Hammond,” he said with acrid satisfaction. “I didn’t lie about him being dead or about getting the cards analyzed. The writing isn’t his. It’s not even that good of a forgery.”

“Then who sent them?”

“I’m not sure. Yet.”

It took a second for that to register. He didn’t say he didn’t *know*, he said he wasn’t *sure*. So he thought he knew. He had a suspect. Another piece of information he wouldn’t be sharing because he didn’t trust me with the truth. The arrogant son of a bitch actually believed that “protecting” me meant keeping me in a state of blissful ignorance. Only ignorance wasn’t bliss. It was dangerous.

“Really? I thought you had all the answers.”

Dan said wearily, “I thought I had one or two of them figured out. I guess not.”

I understood that we were no longer talking about Steve or Hammond. My chest rose and fell as though I’d raced to get to this moment with Dan, and now here we stood with a chasm growing wider and wider between us. I could feel the ring he’d bought me resting on my breast bone like a weight on my heart.

I heard myself say, "I guess it's over."

I waited for him to say something. Anything.

He said nothing. His eyes never wavered from mine.

"I can't be with someone I don't trust. And I can't trust someone who doesn't trust me."

To my amazement he laughed. Not a very pleasant laugh, granted.

His gaze moved deliberately from the plastic bag of postcards to the desk I had searched. "I can see that might be a problem."

Heat flooded my face.

Dan shrugged. "You got one thing right. It's over."

Chapter Seven

I watched the Sebring crest the hilltop and wind down the road leading to the beach house. The car disappeared from sight.

I checked my watch. Four-thirty. Steve was late as usual. He'd be late to his own funeral.

Over the distant crash of waves I heard the faint slam of a car door and my nerves tightened. Show time.

I caught a glimpse of a blue shirt and the top of his head as he hurried along the side of the deck. He started up the stairs, checking when he noticed me sitting at the patio table.

"Dude! What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for you."

"Yeah? Well, I got here as soon as I could." He glanced past me toward the open glass door. "So where is everybody?"

"Maria's gone for the day. Markowitz was recalled." I shrugged. "With Hammond dead, the cops didn't want to waste anymore of the taxpayer's money."

"How weird is that?" Steve shook his head. "I mean, to think he was dead the whole time." He eyed me speculatively. "But what about Lenny Norman's murder?"

"It wasn't connected. The cops are holding his neighbor."

"So it's just us? Dan really is gone?"

"Yep. That's over." I drained my glass. My hand shook a little and I watched him note it. The pain was real and raw; I couldn't hide it, but I couldn't let myself think about it for even a moment.

"Is he going to be stopping by later to pick his junk up?"

I shook my head. It had seemed like Dan's stuff was everywhere, but it had taken him exactly seventeen efficient minutes to collect his things. He'd left nothing but his fingerprints. He sure as hell hadn't left any excuse for coming back.

Straddling the bench across from me, Steve smiled that guileless smile I knew so well. The smile he wore when things had gone well at the race track.

"Shit, man. Just like that? True, I can't pretend I ever liked the guy, but I know you ..."

Despite the smile he couldn't bite back, his mournful brown eyes looked sadder than ever.

"How are you doing?"

"Not good." He rose, reaching for my empty glass, and I added, "Not bad enough to do a Norman Maine."

He laughed at the *A Star is Born* reference and went inside the house. It took him about four minutes. When he came back he had refilled my glass and poured himself a beer.

"So ... what happened?" He handed me my glass.

I took it and set it down on the table. "I asked him whether he had talked to you about getting me committed."

"He never used the word 'committed,'" Steve said, as though -- in fairness to Dan -- it was really important to keep this point straight.

"Yeah, that's what he said. In fact, he said he never had any such discussion with you at all."

"What's he going to say?" Steve asked reasonably.

“True.”

“So he just denied everything?”

“Pretty much. He admitted he asked you to stop encouraging me to believe Hammond was still out there.”

“Threatened me is more like it,” Steve said.

“Really?”

“He wanted to keep you in a bubble,” Steve said. “Like it was just you two and nobody else existed. That’s not healthy.”

He glanced at my untouched glass.

I said, “He also admitted he was having Maria pick up the threatening postcards each day before I could see them.”

“Ah,” Steve said. “Makes sense.”

“Does it?” I grinned twistedly. “I thought for sure you were going to suggest that he might be the one sending them.”

He met my eyes. “So you have considered that possibility?”

“For about three seconds. It wouldn’t make a lot of sense for him to head off his own death threats.”

“Oh. Right. But I don’t know if he was exactly *balanced* in his feelings for you. I mean, think about how possessive he was. And controlling. And way over-protective.”

I reached up, automatically touching the ring on the chain around my neck. Steve’s eyes followed my hand.

“I guess I just never trusted the guy,” he said.

“I guess it was mutual.”

He stared. “What do you mean?”

“You said he threatened you.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

He glanced at my drink again.

I asked, “So when do I start work on the film?”

“The ... film?”

“*The Charioteer*. What did Bruce say when you told him I was in?”

“Well, actually, I didn’t get a chance to call him yet. I’ll phone him tomorrow.”

I said, “It’s almost funny. I see this direct parallel between the characters in *The Charioteer* and what happened with Dan and me.

Steve blinked. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. In the book, Laurie keeps getting angry because Ralph keeps trying to fix things for him, but the truth is, Laurie is the one who sets that dynamic up. He turns to Ralph every time he has a problem. He knows how Ralph is. So why does he get so angry when Ralph tries to protect him?”

“Uh, dude, I have no clue what you’re talking about.” His eyes traveled to the lounge chair and the marked-up copy of *The Charioteers* script. “So which one offs himself?”

“What?”

“I read the scene in the script where the one guy is reading the other guy’s suicide note.”

“Oh.” My smile felt like it was on crooked. “Things aren’t always what they seem.”

“You got that right.” He held his beer out to me, and said, “Well, here’s to not looking back.” He nodded at my moisture-beaded glass, and I picked it up. He clinked the rim of his mug against my glass, and drank.

I watched the muscles in his throat move as he swallowed. I could remember kissing his throat -- he had this way of throwing his head back when he laughed. I could vaguely

recall what his mouth felt like on me, although those memories faded next to the vividness of my memories of Dan.

I said, "Like, for example, I can pretty much tell when someone is acting. Dan wasn't acting. You are."

Steve lowered his mug. Beer slopped out the top. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I thought I had myself pretty well under control, but heat suffused my body and my heart began to slug against my ribs in hard measured punches; I felt breathless with something akin to stage fright. "Can we just cut the bullshit?" I requested.

His eyes narrowed.

"You want to know where you first slipped?" I didn't wait for his answer. He didn't look like he would have one anytime soon. "It was that crack about changing my will. I haven't thought about my will since I first made it out -- back when we were living together."

Steve gave a strange laugh. Hey, dude, don't go psycho on *me*, okay?"

"Up until the bit with the will you'd been pretty subtle."

"You really are losing it, Sean. Dan's right."

"Dan was right about one thing," I said. "You do know how to play me. You know just what buttons to push, what triggers my self-doubt. And there was always just enough truth in what you said. But you way overshot the mark with that story about Dan wanting me to check into UCLA."

Steve seemed to struggle with himself. Apparently the desire to show me how smart he was, won out. "You wouldn't take a hint," he said. "You hardly knew the guy but you were so goddamn stubborn about him."

I stared. I knew Steve so well. I knew everything from how he took his coffee to the sounds he made during sex. And it turned out that I didn't know him at all.

"You had to know he was going to deny it."

“So?” He smiled, spreading his arms. “He denied it, but here we are. I guess you believed it on some level. Maybe not for long, but long enough.”

I swallowed hard. The truth was a bitter pill.

“How did he take it, by the way? You didn’t really say. Was he iron-jawed and dignified, or did he cry?”

Stern and silent, actually, but I wasn’t going to discuss Dan with Steve. Not now, not ever. I said, “Once I finally accepted that Hammond had been dead the whole time, I started thinking about who had a reason to want me out of the way. I remembered your comment about the will -- and then I remembered that the will was still in your favor.”

“I guess the fact that you never changed it says something,” he said lightly.

We were silent for a moment.

“Why, Steve?” I asked finally.

He didn’t speak, didn’t look at me.

“Is it just for the money? Because I would have given you the goddamn money.”

He rose then, shaking the table. He walked over to the railing, bracing both hands on it, staring out at the blue dazzle of the water. “No. It wasn’t just the money. Not like you think. I got in deep. Too deep. I owe over four hundred grand in gambling debts -- to people who don’t understand installment plans.”

“F-four *hundred* grand?” I said. “You owe almost half a million in gambling debts? How the hell did you manage that?”

“Easier than you think. I convinced people I was good for it. Actually, I convinced them that *you* were good for it.”

“Why didn’t you stop? When you were like ... I don’t know ... eighty grand in? Why didn’t you come to me for help?”

“How could I? Besides, I thought I could win it back. I thought my luck would change. It always changes sooner or later.”

“Jesus Christ, Steve!”

“Don’t be so self-righteous,” he said hotly. “It’s an illness -- compulsive gambling. Like alcoholism. It’s not like I could control it. You of anybody ought to understand about that kind of illness.”

Was I supposed to feel sorry for him? Because it was hard to feel much of anything other than bewilderment.

“And one of the symptoms was you planned to kill me and inherit my trust fund?”

He looked me right in the eyes and said, “I never wanted that. Never. You’re all I’ve got. I love you. I do. But ... it’s you or me, Sean. And I don’t want to die.”

I said, “I know the feeling.”

He reached behind himself and pulled out a gun. I was willing to bet it was a 9 mm semiautomatic. He came back to the table and sat down. Meeting my gaze, he gave me a sad lopsided smile.

Bitterly, I said, “Why the big charade? Why the postcards and killing my neighbor’s dog? Why not just shoot me on the deck one afternoon?”

“Because as soon as your will was read I’d have been the cop’s number one suspect.”

“You got the idea when Hammond’s body didn’t turn up.”

“That’s right. That was what originally gave me the idea. I realized that if Hammond had killed you, my problems would have been over. And when they couldn’t find his body, I thought maybe if something happened to you, it would be blamed on Hammond.”

“So you created the illusion that Hammond was still out there.”

“It was easier than I expected. I still had copies of those first letters he sent you. So I just faked the postcards.”

The idea he wanted me dead was bad enough, but the deliberate cruelty of sending those cards shook me.

“What did you do, hire some asshole who looked like Hammond to follow me around? Yeah, you did. And that’s why the fake Hammond never really did or said anything to threaten me.”

He got a weird look on his face. He didn’t reply.

“Or was that *you*?”

“No.”

I stared at him, and then I realized what I was seeing in his eyes.

“Did you ... ” I swallowed hard. “Jesus. He’s dead, isn’t he? That’s why he disappeared again.”

He said with macabre cheerfulness, “He asked one too many questions.”

I absorbed this and realized that I was going to have to give up any hope of talking Steve out of killing me.

“So what was Plan B?” I asked. “If you pushed hard enough I might have another breakdown and hopefully do the job myself.”

“If you had another breakdown and ... did yourself, that would be like your choice.” He was reasoning with me as though he believed he could somehow make me see it from his point of view. “I mean, you could have a breakdown a few years from now and off yourself and it wouldn’t help anyone -- whereas this way you’d be saving my life.”

“But Dan kept running interference.”

“Yep.”

I owed Dan an apology.

I glanced down at my drink, the ice melted in the glass. “So what happens if I drink this?”

"You just go to sleep," he said earnestly. "Very peacefully and naturally. There's no pain or anything. Your heart just stops. That would be the best way. I don't want to ..." he glanced down at the gun lying between us, and swallowed.

"Why not? You shot Hammond's double. You killed Lenny Norman, right?"

His eyes did this queer little flickery thing, like his brain was short-circuiting. But before I had time to react, he smiled, once more in control. "Lenny Norman was an asshole. I thought you might actually appreciate that one."

Years of training, but I couldn't quite control my expression, and reading my face, Steve said thickly, "I thought for sure that would be the end of that damned film. And I figured that might tip you over the edge -- you were so obsessed about that role. But it was ... bad. He begged me ..."

"My God, Steve." I put my hand over my eyes, and then remembered I needed to keep watch on him. "Think about what you've done."

"I know exactly what I've done, and we both know I can't go back now. Look, I don't want to hurt you, Sean. Just drink the stuff and ... go to sleep."

I stared into his eyes. This was *Steve*. Steve whom I had known forever. My partner, my friend, my former lover. I just couldn't seem to wrap my mind around it. Maybe because I didn't want to. I picked up the glass. "You know what? You're right. Living is overrated. Between you and Dan -- I am a little tired." I put the glass to my lips and his eyes flared with -- surprise? Excitement? Fear? Maybe he didn't know himself.

Wet touched my lips and I paused. "But you do know, Dan isn't going to believe this suicide scenario. Not unless I leave some kind of a note."

He hesitated, glanced toward the house, and I chucked the glass with all my strength at his head. It connected with a satisfying thunk and he fell out of his chair, nearly taking the table with him. As he collapsed, he grabbed for the gun, which went off with a bang, taking a chunk out of the railing a few inches to my left. *Jeeeesus*.

I hopped up from my chair, wiping my mouth with my arm. I hadn't swallowed anything but who knew what the hell he'd laced my drink with.

"God damn you, Sean!"

His fury triggered a hysterical laugh. He was angry because I was trying to stay alive. And *I* was the crazy one?

Jumping from the deck, I hit the sand and sprinted for the side of the house, yelling, "Markowitz, where the hell are you?"

I slammed into a wall. A wall of hard muscle and bone and warm flesh. The wall reached out and steadied me. Dan. I blinked up at him dazedly. With his free hand he was holding a gun. Definitely not a movie prop.

Without a change of expression he put me behind him and trained the gun on Steve who had paused at the stairs of the deck.

"Freeze, Krieger."

Steve stared down in disbelief. Blood trickled from a cut in his hairline.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"Drop the gun." Dan ordered, adding, "Or I'll blow your fucking head off." Which was probably not LAPD-approved script.

Steve hesitated. I could see him running his options, weighing the risk, figuring his odds: always the gambler.

Dan was like a statue; he didn't flick an eyelash, didn't move a muscle. He was ready and waiting -- and despite the fact that Steve had wanted me dead, had cold-bloodedly plotted and planned for that very thing -- I couldn't take the idea of seeing his head blown off. I croaked, "Please, Steve ..."

I spotted Markowitz edging behind the railing on the other side of the deck, his own weapon drawn.

Steve's eyes met mine over Dan's shoulder. He laughed the old Steve laugh and dropped his gun. It landed on the sand with a dull sound.

"Hey, what the hell." He held his hands out. "Book 'em, Danno!"

Dan went up the stairs, shoved Steve back into the table hard, and while Steve was picking himself back up, jammed his gun in his back waistband and took out a pair of handcuffs. Markowitz joined him a moment later.

"So it was a trap," Steve said, trying to look over his shoulder at me. "You knew and you set me up?"

"It's called acting," I said.

Dan's eyes met mine briefly. Blue and bleak. I had no idea what he was doing there -- I had set my "trap" with Markowitz's assistance -- but I was glad to see him.

The wail of sirens floated in the distance.

Steve was still trying to make eye contact. He said urgently, "Hey, Sean. I'm sorry, man. If there had been another way ..."

My throat closed up, choking off anything I could have said -- if I'd had anything to left to say.

"Very touching, asshole," Dan growled.

* * * * *

"When did you know?" I asked Dan.

The sheriffs had come and gone, taking Steve with them. Markowitz had followed shortly after, and it was just Dan and me now. Past that adrenaline overdrive, I felt a little numb and a lot shaky. I'd have given anything for a hug from Dan, but there were no hugs forthcoming. Dan looked like Dan, but there was a force field around him that even the Starcatz would have trouble neutralizing.

"That Steve was planning to kill you?" His smile was humorless. "I knew for sure this afternoon. That bullshit story of his -- the only possible reason for that was to play on your insecurities and distrust. To drive enough of a wedge between us that either you would send me away or I'd get fed up and leave."

"He was running out of time," I said. "It made him desperate."

"And stupid."

"I need a drink," I said, and went to the bar. I poured myself a Bushmills. Dan's whiskey. Apparently the one and only reminder of his brief stay in my life. "Did you want something?"

Anything?

"No."

I could see the tiny lines of weariness around his blue eyes and unsmiling mouth, but he didn't sit down, and he didn't take his jacket off. He wasn't staying. He didn't want anything I had to offer.

I tossed back the whiskey, welcoming the burn in the back of my throat. It distracted me from the burn at the back of my eyes. That wasn't going to get me anywhere. It would just embarrass us both.

Refilling my glass, I said, "But you already suspected Steve, didn't you? That's what you meant today when you said you weren't sure who was sending the postcards."

Eyes on my glass, he said, "You were right about the odds of attracting two aggressive stalkers in such a short space of time; so I knew after Hammond's body turned up that I needed to look for someone with another motive for getting rid of you. Steve fit the bill."

I forced myself to meet his gaze. It was hard because, as I feared, there was nothing in his eyes. No emotion. "Thank you," I said. "You saved my life."

He shook his head. "I was just tagging along. It was Markowitz's show -- and yours."

"Markowitz told you --?"

“He thought I’d be interested. He thought I had a right to know.”

There was no accusation in his voice, but I knew that he was sore about that. I took a deep breath.

“Dan, I owe you an apology.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” he said flatly. He looked at his watch. “If you’re okay now, I’ve got some place to be.”

“I’m okay.”

If he walked out that door I was never going to be okay again.

I set my glass down and followed him through the rooms to the front door. Hand on the door knob, he paused.

“That reminds me.” He pulled his keys out and began to work one off the ring.

“Don’t.” The word startled me. Startled him. I said, trying for lightness, trying to hide the desperation, “There’s no hurry, right?”

“And no reason to stall, right?” He smiled -- and he was either a better actor than me or he really didn’t give a damn. He handed the key to me, and like a little kid I put my hands behind my back.

“I don’t want it.”

He reached around me, took my hand and pulled it forward. Not roughly, but not playing. He pressed the key into my palm.

“The truth is, I never had this.” He folded my fingers around the bite of cool metal. “You were never open to me. Not really.”

He turned, opened the door and I reached past him, slamming it shut.

“So ... saving my life ... that wasn’t anything personal. That’s just your job, right?”

I couldn't read the expression in his eyes, but his voice was level. "Right. It's my job. And wrong. Of course it's personal. Of course I still have feelings for you. But the bottom line is, it didn't work between us." He shrugged.

The shrug hurt more than the words -- and the words hurt plenty. Mouth dry, I said, "I want to be open to you. If you'll show me how."

He said very gently, "You're still acting, Sean."

It was like taking a hard and unexpected fall. The air seemed to slam out of my lungs. "I'm not."

"Sean ..." He sighed.

I said quickly, "You're going to say it won't change anything. And I guess that's true, but I want to make love to you. One last time. And for the first time."

He said, still trying to be kind, "It wasn't about sex, Sean. It was about intimacy."

"And intimacy is about trust. I do get that, Dan." I controlled my voice. "I still want my first time to be with you."

His eyes flickered.

We were close enough that I could feel his heat, feel the warmth of his breath fanning my face. I held his gaze with mine and I could see the darkness there, the hunger.

Into his silence, I whispered, "Isn't ex sex supposed to be the best?"

He put his hand behind my head and pulled me forward, his mouth hard on my own. It was a grinding kiss, an angry kiss, the bump of teeth and the smear of lips. I closed my eyes and opened to him, and almost at once he gentled. We breathed in balmy moist unison until at last he broke contact.

He said softly, "You're too good an actor, Sean."

"You're not being fair to either of us." I found his hand and put it on my crotch. "I'm not that good. I want you." He felt me over, and I strained against his hand, craving his touch through the stiff material of my jeans. "Do I have to beg? I will."

Sick, shameless pervert, said my father's contemptuous voice next to my ear. I closed my ears to that memory, focused on Dan's face. It was a handsome face, but I loved the strength and caring and intelligence more than the trick of bone structure and coloring.

I loved *him*.

My hands went to my fly, and then I rethought that and reached for his. And Dan bit off a sound that could have been a laugh or maybe just impatience, and undid the button at my waist. He pulled, and the buttons popped through the denim, one by one. His big hands, warm and knowledgeable, slid inside my jeans, fastened on my hips.

I pulled his Levis down and his boxers, and his dick sprang free, ready and willing, regardless of whatever his brain was telling him.

"You don't have to beg," Dan said, acknowledging what we both knew to be true.

"Bedroom?" I asked hopefully.

He nodded, and then he was pulling his shirt over his head. I stepped out of my jeans, kicked off my boxers, and preceded him into the soft gloom of the bedroom, bouncing down on the bed.

I reached for him and he lowered himself beside me.

I was braced for his resentment to play out in roughness or haste, but Dan took his time kissing and caressing every inch of my body: His tongue scraped my nipple in pleasurable chafing, a fingertip lightly scratching the back of my knee; he brushed his nose against mine in a child's Eskimo kiss. I smiled and sighed and relaxed, kissing him back when he'd let me, stroking his lean hard flanks and sides.

"Please ..." I whispered. I didn't finish it. Even I wasn't sure what I was really asking. His leaving had left me empty, aching. I wanted to fill that emptiness with memories if nothing else.

At last he helped me over onto my belly. I ignored the tightening in my gut -- partly anxiety but mostly desire -- and spread my legs. There was no going back now, and I wouldn't if I could have. This was as much for me as for him.

The slide of the drawer, the squirt of the lube. I shivered convulsively as he worked warm lube between my ass cheeks. His finger delicately pierced me. I moaned at the strangely familiar invasion.

He paused. "It's not necessary, Sean. You don't have to prove anything."

"Want to ..." I wriggled back against his hand, trying to force him to action.

"Why?" He didn't so much as twitch his finger.

I groaned. "Dan, why are we *talking*?"

"Because I need to understand what's really happening here." I heard the pain in his voice, and it startled me. If I could still hurt him, then on some plane he still cared for me.

I swallowed hard. "I'm trying to tell you. Trying to show you. I love you. I want to share this with you. Even if it's ... too late for you." I pushed back against finger. "Please give me this."

He moved his finger again, and I caught my breath. His oily thumb lightly stroked across the sensitive mouth of my hole.

"Keep breathing," he said.

I whimpered as his thumb pressed in. He massaged, pushed a little deeper, rubbed some more.

"Relax."

I tried. I concentrated on loosening my muscles. The tip of his other thumb slid in and he used both to massage me strongly, widening my entrance. My breaths came in shallow pants as he prepared me. He was tender, but very thorough; I'd said I'd wanted it, and he was taking me at my word. It was intense and invasive, and seemed to go on forever.

My stomach muscles were quivering, and my legs felt like jelly by the time he withdrew.

“That didn’t hurt, did it?”

I shook my head. I didn’t think I could manage my voice. I rolled over onto my back, and tucked my legs up neatly.

He leaned over me, and his mouth found one of my nipples. He tongued it, wet heat turning the tip to a hard point. Distantly I felt the pressure from the blunt head of his shaft building at the entrance of my body, but more immediate was the tease of his lips as he moved to my other nipple. His teeth closed delicately on the bud, and I writhed beneath him, aching for more.

It was almost a relief when the pressure on my hole built to a distracting pain -- and then, staggeringly, I felt my body’s resistance give.

Dan’s cock slipped past the tight ring of muscle. Nerves and muscles spasmed. He was inside me.

“Okay?” He seemed to have trouble squeezing even that one word out.

I gulped and nodded. And I *was* okay. My shivering body was already adjusting to that thickness. I wasn’t tearing apart. I was still whole. Still me. I could still breathe. I could still move ...

Dan’s thighs tightened in response, and he thrust against me, just once. “Don’t move yet,” he gasped. His hands continued to stroke and smooth my belly, my ass.

Wonderingly I reached down and touched where our bodies were joined. We were like some astonishing mythological creature -- not the monster my parents pictured, but something very old and powerful. I felt wrapped in the wings of an unexpectedly sweet revelation.

“How’s that?” Dan’s voice sounded strained.

“H-hey, it’s not bad,” I said.

He laughed shakily at the wonder in my voice and cautiously began to rock his hips against me. It was a relief to give up all control and just feel, just let it happen, just ride it out.

Not bad? It was actually pretty damn good.

“That’s it,” he breathed. “Just let go.”

I looked into his face. It was too dark to read his eyes, and I wanted to watch his eyes while he took me. He was pounding me harder now. I began to move too. Awkwardly. My fists clenched on the comforter. Dan’s hands slid under my ass and he lifted me up, shoving a pillow beneath my hips.

The changed angle sent a jolt of sheer exquisite feeling surging through me.

What the hell was *that*?

I found my own rhythm, straining into the push and pull cadence of our bodies. I jerked out, “Dan ...”

He pegged me over and over, deep, powerful thrusts. It went on and on, lightning strikes of pleasure -- and who was it said lightning didn’t strike the same place twice?

My fists relaxed back into hands, and I reached for Dan, stroking his sides, running my fingertips down his back, fondling whatever I could reach. Trying to tell him with touch that this wasn’t an act, that there was no pretense here.

He murmured encouragement. His face bumped my face, his mouth closed over mine, hot and wet and urgent.

Dazed, I realized that he was going to make me come just like this. I didn’t think that was possible.

At the same time Dan yelled my name, and I felt liquid seed pouring into me. I began to come, white hot waves shivering through my bones and muscles and nerves. It went on and on, like a supernova.

Then, from a long way away I felt Dan gathering me up against him, saying comforting things -- like I would need to be reassured after that. I kissed him back dizzily. *Lights out*, I thought.

Fade to black -- although it was more of a soft and restful gray.

"Was it everything you expected?" Dan asked when he got his breath back. His voice was a little dry, but his callused hand was warm on my bare skin, lazy and caressing.

Was it what I had expected? I felt wrung out, used up, boneless. I felt sated. Complete. And at the same time I felt naked and unprotected. But it was okay to be vulnerable with Dan's arms around me. I felt closer to him than I ever felt to anyone in my life.

I shook my head. I didn't begin to know how to answer him. I said, "Are you going to leave me, Dan?"

He licked his lips, like this was going to be a difficult thing to say.

I reached for him, and his arms came about me, loving and strong. "I'm sorry for not trusting you, for the stupid things I said, for everything," I said into his shoulder.

"Shhh. Listen, Sean, I let *you* down. I screwed up. I should have listened to you. I did think you were letting your fears get the better of you." He took a deep breath. "I did believe the strain was too much for you."

It was painful to hear; clearly it was equally painful for him to say.

"I guess it was," I admitted.

"No. You're second-guessing yourself now, but the fact is, your instincts were correct. I let my own fear affect my judgment -- and ultimately put you at risk."

I could hear the guilt and regret in his voice. And what was the point of that? We had both made mistakes, both let each other down. Was the important stuff where we had failed each other or the parts where we had got it right? It felt to me like we had got a lot of it right a lot of the time.

I was afraid to ask, but I had to know. "Is it too late for us?"

After what felt like the longest moment of my life, he said almost inaudibly, “It’s not too late.”

I closed my eyes and pressed my face into his throat. I could barely hear him, but I felt the words against my mouth.

“It’s not that easy to turn it on and off.”

I said, “I don’t have a lot of experience.”

“Neither do I.” He must have caught my surprise because he said, “Oh, I have experience at this --” He ran a light hand down my back, leaving goose bumps of sensation. “Not with loving someone. I’ve never even used the word before.”

My throat closed up and I had to struggle against the bubble of emotion threatening to tear out of my chest. *Love*. He was right. That’s what this was about.

I managed to get the words out. “So this was your first time too?”

“Yeah, I guess it was.”

“Was it everything you expected?”

He turned his head on the pillow, and I saw the glimmer of his smile in the darkness.

 THE END 

Josh Lanyon

Josh Lanyon is the author of three Adrien English mystery novels. THE HELL YOU SAY was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award and is the winner of the 2006 USABookNews awards for GLBT fiction. Josh lives in Los Angeles, California, and is currently at work on the fourth book in the series, DEATH OF A PIRATE KING.