



# DON'T LOOK BACK

Josh Lanyon

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# **Don't Look Back**

## **Josh Lanyon**

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## Chapter One

The moon was enormous—ripe, red-gold, hanging low in the sky. From the flowering jacaranda, the mockingbird was scolding. *Chjjjj...chjjjj...chewk.*

Peter stumbled up the brick path. His foot caught and he went down, on his knees, breathing hard. His hands were white blurs on the warm stone. He tried to focus, and he could see the ink splotches of blood—*his* blood—running down his face and dripping onto the bricks.

His stomach rose in protest. Swallowing down his nausea, he pushed back to his feet. The black velvet leaves of the elephant ears seemed to twitch, listening, as his footsteps scraped unsteadily up the path, past the sundial and palely glimmering statues, past the solar lanterns fuzzily glowing.

The shadows cast by the jacaranda stretched chill and dark in the warm summer evening, but the darkness edging his vision had nothing to do with the deepening night. There was blood in his eyes now; he wiped at it uncertainly.

Peter reached the top of the long, shallow garden steps. The back entrance of Constantine House loomed before him, and he staggered forward, feeling for his keys. He leaned against the door, resting his head on the painted surface, fumbling in his

pockets. He pushed a key into the lock; it turned, and the door swung open, spilling him into the hallway.

Half blind with blood and pain, he wove his way down the hallway toward the main exhibit room and his office. His foot caught on the Oriental runner and he went sprawling. Somewhere in the distance an alarm bell was clanging. He opened his eyes. Dimly, as though looking through a telescope, he could see the cool white marble face of Kwan Yin gazing down at him. She held a little vase, pouring nothingness out over his pounding head. But it wasn't nothingness. It was nectar. Invisible nectar to feed the hungry ghosts.

Far, far at the other end of the telescope, the serene face of Kwan Yin receded, grew tinier and tinier...until at last it pinched out like a match spark in the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

*He was chuckling, a deep, sexy sound as he pushed Peter back on the satiny cushions. Was this for real? Was he going to go through with it? Peter blinked up as his tie was unfastened, tossed aside, his shirt unbuttoned, laid wide. The evening breeze—scented of smog and jasmine—felt cool against his overheated skin, like the lightest breath. Unlike their own breathing, which was hot and heavy and strained sounding. Gasps and groans that were pure skin flick. For a moment Peter was thrown out of the mood, his normal self-consciousness and reticence reasserting themselves.*

*He narrowed his eyes, trying to see the other's face in the summer darkness, but a warm weight lowered itself beside him. Their mouths locked; their cocks rubbed rigidly together.*

*Oh God. That felt good. That stiff length of soft skin and hardness—hard as bone—as desire throbbed through Peter, his heartbeat echoing in the pulse of his cock. So much sensation at once. It was overwhelming...but good. Warm breath and the tang of sweat on clean skin, the tickle of chest hair against his nipples, the glide of muscles as powerful arms pulled him close, legs wrapping around his own. Yes, it was really happening, and he wanted it to happen. He was happy to let go, loosing his doubts, his concerns, his anxieties, because this just felt right. And he refused to second-guess himself, to freeze up. He had waited a long time for this.*

*A long time. A lifetime.*

*Because this was Cole. Cole. His heart seemed to swell with emotion, happiness filling his chest because it was Cole with him. Together. The way they were meant to be. Finally...*

Peter's lashes stirred.

He opened his eyes, and the first thing he saw was the cop's hard face. He wasn't sure how he knew the man beside his bed was a cop...he didn't know him.

Or did he?

He was big. Not fat. Big. Tall, broad, muscular. Like a bull. One of those beautiful sleek, powerful bulls they use in bullfighting. Like Isidore Bonheur's sculptures. Lean, fierce features...smoke-dark hair, hard blue-gray eyes, and a thin mouth that looked inclined to sarcastic asides.

Even on that first glimpse under the fluttering of eyelids, Peter felt a jolt of alarm, the knowledge that something was seriously wrong. He opened his mouth and a funny sound came out. Then another face slid into view. A woman's face, calm and professional. A nurse. She said soothingly, "It's all right, Mr. Killian. You're going to be perfectly all right now."

She sounded very sure of it, and he relaxed. He did feel all right. He felt warm and floating...relieved that the hard, unfriendly face had gone. Even happy. He'd been dreaming about... He'd been dreaming. It was confused and faraway now. He let it go. Let everything go.

The second time was the real awakening. He opened his eyes with a start. There was another nurse at his bedside, and she said something to him, something calming, something reassuring. He responded. Things got a little fuzzy and then sharpened again. His room seemed full of people, and a doctor was there asking him questions.

It was...confusing. Tiring. His head ached. A lot.

"What happened to me?" he mumbled.

"You've got a concussion, Mr. Killian."

He thought that over. It wasn't an answer, was it? Or was it? "How?" he asked.

"You were injured during a robbery."

A robbery. Like...a mugging? He couldn't seem to remember, although it didn't seem like the kind of thing one would forget. It was all very bewildering. He wanted to go back to sleep.

"I don't remember," he said, and his eyelids drifted shut.

The next time he opened his eyes, the bull – the cop – was back.

The thin mouth curled into an unfriendly smile. "Well, Peter, we meet again."

"Yes," Peter said, trying to focus. His vision was off. "Do I know you?"

There was silence. The gray-blue eyes—which looked more gray than blue—narrowed. "Are you saying you don't?"

Peter's heart began to pound. "No."

"No...?"

"I don't know you."

Another silence. Another smile—a rather cynical one. "Is that so?"

"Should I?" Peter managed. His temples were now starting to pound in time with his heart. All at once he felt very ill.

"What *do* you remember?"

"I..." Peter stopped. He had the sensation of sand sucking away beneath his feet. "Who *are* you?" His voice sounded faint and faraway even to himself.

The other laughed, and then the dark face re-formed itself in a sneer. "Honest to God. You've got to be kidding. You're not seriously going to try and pull *that*?"

Peter stared at him; he couldn't think of anything to say even if he could have forced words out over his rising panic. This couldn't be happening. This... Something



was wrong. And he could not let this guy, whoever he was, know how very wrong things were – that much he knew instinctively.

"I think you should go," he said.

"Oh, you do?" Unimpressed, the cool eyes studied him. "Why? If you don't know who I am?"

Peter said honestly, "Because I don't like you."

Another one of those hard laughs. "I see you do remember something. What else do you remember?"

Peter opened his mouth. Nothing came to him. This was *impossible*.

Wait. He knew...the nurse had called him "Mr. Killian" and this asshole had called him "Peter." And the doctor had said...something about a mugging.

"It's... I know who I am. But...some...details are...vague."

"How convenient." Unfriendly mockery. "Well, let me refresh your memory. I'm Detective Michael Griffin. LAPD Robbery and Homicide Division." Griffin pulled a flat wallet-looking thing out of his jacket and flashed a very large, very official-looking badge in front of Peter's nose.

Peter narrowed his eyes. This made sense up to a point. He had been knocked out – in a robbery – so it was reasonable that the police would interview him. Right? But Detective Griffin was acting like Peter was the criminal, and clearly they had some kind of history.

And *that* was very hard to believe. Peter doubtfully studied Griffin's face. Peter was a law-abiding person. He knew that about himself. He had no doubt whatsoever on that score. Maybe he couldn't remember everything, but he knew he was not the kind of person who got into trouble with the law.

Right?

And anything else was out of the question.

*Ah.* So that was an additional something he now knew about himself. He liked guys. He was...gay. And comfortable with the idea.

But maybe Griffin didn't like guys who liked guys? Maybe that was the problem with Michael Griffin. Although how would he know about Peter's sexual preferences? Peter couldn't imagine him confiding such a thing to...well, really to anyone. Nor did Griffin seem like the kind of guy anyone would want to confide in. Even had he been Peter's type. Which he wasn't. Even if Peter couldn't quite remember what his type was, he was quite sure Griffin was not it.

"Is your memory coming back?" Griffin inquired.

"I was knocked out."

"Oh right. And now you have amnesia. That's the story?"

Griffin did not like him either. That was clear. And Peter did not feel well enough to deal with it. He closed his eyes. Opened them. Said, "Can we...talk about it later?"

"You're not curious about what happened to you? I'd think you'd be very curious...since you can't remember anything, right?"

Peter watched him. "I was mugged?"

"Try again."

Peter tried again. "I was...robbed." Griffin was from robbery and homicide, so that was a safe bet.

His thinking processes must have been transparent, because Griffin said slowly, "You're guessing. Or you're pretending to guess."

God. This asshole was too much. Peter closed his eyes. He couldn't deal with this right now.

Silence.

When the silence stretched – when Griffin didn't go away – Peter opened his eyes and surprised an odd expression on the detective's face. Mostly suspicion, or maybe

wariness, but there was some other emotion that Peter couldn't read. It vanished the moment Griffin saw that Peter's eyes were open.

"Why don't I help you out with a few points? Your name's Peter Killian. You don't like to be called 'Pete.' You're thirty-five years old, unmarried, a native Angeleno. You're the curator at Constantine House. Is this ringing any bells?"

Peter licked his lips. There was a horrible taste in his mouth and his head was pounding sickly. He knew he didn't want to hear anything more. He knew he needed to.

"You've been curator there for a little over three years—during which time the museum has lost slightly over a hundred thousand dollars worth of antiquities and art objects."

Griffin paused politely. Peter moved his head in slight negation. He couldn't have spoken even if he'd known what to say. His heart was thudding as though he'd found himself cornered by an attack dog—which was kind of how he felt. Griffin wasn't quite baring his teeth, but somehow the effect was the same.

"Two nights ago, for reasons known only to you, you went down to the grotto in the back of the museum garden and, to all appearances, surprised thieves in the process of removing a priceless, tenth-century painted mural."

Tenth century. A very bad year—all one hundred of them. The "Leaden Century" as described by Cardinal Baronius. The darkest of the Dark Ages.

"What was a priceless artifact doing in a grotto in the back of a garden?"

Griffin ignored that feeble protest. "Apparently, you were struck over the head and left unconscious while the thieves made off with the wall painting—at which point you regained consciousness, made your way back to the museum, and triggered the alarms by not disarming the security system when you let yourself inside the back door."

As Griffin spoke, Peter had a dizzying and fleeting impression of images. A small cave...flashing shadows...voices echoing in argument...the delicate lines and muted

colors of a painting...two riders on horseback...Chinese, yes. A tomb painting...yes. He did remember...

He remembered...something.

It took a few seconds to absorb the implications of Griffin's flat pronouncement.

"You don't think that's what happened?"

"I think it's convenient. Like your amnesia."

Peter let that sink in too. He had the disconcerting sensation of trying to feel his way through the smoke.

"You think I was involved in the robbery?" he managed at last.

"Were you?"

"No! Of course not."

"I thought you couldn't remember?"

Peter tried to sit up. Not a good idea. Quite a bad idea, actually. Despite the railing, he nearly overturned right out of the narrow hospital bed. His stomach overturned too as his brain seemed to slam the roof of his skull. Dimly, he was aware of Griffin grabbing him and putting him back against the pillows. Griffin said something to him, but he couldn't make it out. Maybe Griffin rang for help, because he could hear a buzzer going off. Peter felt sick and woozy and cold all the way through. He needed to make Griffin understand, needed to convince him, and he already knew that was going to be a hopeless cause. Griffin's mind was made up. He believed Peter was guilty.

Then the room was full of people. There seemed to be a lot of noise and activity. Somewhere behind the wall of sound, he could hear Detective Griffin protesting—and being overridden. Peter put a hand to his head, touching some kind of bandage; his skull felt like it was about to split in half. Someone leaned over him; there was pinch in his arm, and suddenly the commotion faded out.

It was quiet again. Warm. Dark. There was black tide rushing toward him and he stepped out to meet it.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Mouths locked, their cocks awkward, poking, stiff as they moved against each other. A slow wriggle that turned into humping – uncomfortable, embarrassing – but then slowly, rhythmically finding themselves in step, moving faster, faster, picking up a frantic kind of speed. No longer awkward or strange, just give-and-take, a lovely reciprocity. He could hear the hard, steady pounding of the heart beating against his own. A husky voice speaking against his ear... The words were lost. But that was all right. Even without the words, this was what he had been waiting for, what he had wanted for so long.*

*Why had he been afraid of this? Why had he thought this wasn't possible?*

"Cole?"

He woke, startled, to sterile silence. Had he spoken aloud?

"So, Professor Peabody, I guess your memory is coming back?"

*Professor Peabody?* He opened his eyes.

Blue sky and clouds. That was nice. Strange but nice. Ah. Fluorescent lights behind decorative diffuser panels. He turned his head – very carefully. Medical paraphernalia...and a face he'd hoped he'd dreamed up. Although...given his most recent dreams, maybe not.

Detective Griffin was at his bedside once more, faithful as any lover. Well, he'd known that reprieve couldn't last. Griffin had been a no-show yesterday evening, but here he was bright and early, as though standing in for Peter's nearest and dearest. That was unsettling, now that Peter thought about it.

"Why isn't anyone here?" Peter asked.

"I'll try not to take that personally."

"I mean...my..."

"Your?"

But Peter had already figured it out. There wasn't anyone. No family. Friends... He looked doubtfully at Griffin. Those blue-gray eyes that didn't seem to miss anything. Even if Peter had a crowd of friends queuing up outside the room, Griffin would not be letting them in till he got whatever it was he wanted from Peter.

Which was what? A confession of guilt?

When Peter didn't speak, Griffin said, "I guess you're wondering where Cole is?"

"Cole?"

The flash of impatience was almost concealed. Not quite. "You woke up asking for him. Now you're pretending you don't know who he is?"

He had to tread warily here. "I was half asleep."

"You're trying to tell me you don't remember Cole?"

Cole. Did he know who Cole was? He couldn't picture him. And yet the name seemed imprinted on his consciousness. Too important to forget.

And yet he *had* forgotten.

Peter's stomach knotted with tension. He was sliding out onto some very thin ice; he could feel the chill. What division did Griffin work for? Robbery and...homicide? Was that what he'd said? Peter couldn't remember. But there was something about Cole. He could feel it. Something bad. Something too painful to bear.

"Who is he?"

"Cole Constantine? He's the great-great-grandson of MacBride Constantine."

Peter must have looked blank, because Griffin's sarcastic mouth quirked and he said, "Captain MacBride Constantine. The founder of Constantine House. The salty old sea dog who ripped off all those treasures from foreign climes and dragged them home to Southern California."

"What is Cole to me?"

Griffin's slanted eyebrows rose. "Good question. For one thing, he's your employer. Well, one of them. He's on the trustee committee for the museum. And" — he

seemed to be scanning Peter's face closely—"you were college roommates and best friends."

"What else?"

"You tell me."

Peter stared. Griffin had a thin, cruel face, he thought. His eyes were wintry, like old ice.

"Has something happened to him?"

"Like what?"

The tension knotting Peter's muscles seemed to wrench tighter. He was afraid now—starting to shake with it.

"Like...something bad." He blurted, "Is he dead?"

Griffin laughed. "Worse than that. He's married."

## Chapter Two

"You really don't remember anything?" Roma shouted.

She was a small, slim woman of about forty with hazel eyes and dark hair cut in what they used to call a pixie. Apparently, she and Peter were great friends; she had turned up at the hospital to collect him and was now flying him home in her green vintage MG. She drove well, if terrifyingly fast.

He hedged, calling over the rush of wind, "It's coming back."

"But you remember me?"

"Sort of."

Not really, if he was brutally honest. He had been relieved to find that he did apparently have friends. His hospital stay, though relatively brief, had been lonely and nerve-racking till Roma had shown up claiming long acquaintance. He had to take her word for it. He liked her, though. Liked her directness, liked her easy acceptance of his plight. He could believe they were friends even if he couldn't recall that friendship.

She laughed now at his obvious discomfort. "In that case, I guess your trust is flattering." She spared him a glance—Peter wished she wouldn't, given the bat-out-of-hell speed they were traveling at down the 210. Having just escaped the hospital, he



definitely didn't want to wind up there again anytime soon. So there was something else he now knew about himself. He didn't like taking chances.

"Anything you want to stop for on the way? Jessica is stocking the pantry for you, so you'll be set for the next few days."

Jessica, he had already gathered, was Roma's partner. He had no recollection of her either. He had no recollection of anyone, though there was no organic reason for this lapse according to the doctors. He remembered the year, the month, and who was president. He remembered who won the fourth round at Wimbledon; he remembered seeing *Duplicity*—although he couldn't remember the circumstances of seeing the film. He remembered the Art Loss Register.

He remembered pretty much everything, provided it had no personal connection to himself. Which indicated, according to the hospital's resident psychiatrist, that his memory loss was psychosomatic. Amnesia, as it turned out, pretty much only happened in books and movies. If Peter wasn't remembering, it was because he didn't want to remember.

Either that or, as Detective Mike Griffin suggested, Peter was faking.

"I just want to get home," Peter answered. He had no appetite. The hot summer wind blowing against his face was making his head hurt, although he should have been sufficiently medicated.

"Coming right up!" Roma pressed the gas and Peter closed his eyes.

Constantine House was located in La Cañada at the junction between the 210 and 2 freeways. Built in 1880 by retired sea captain MacBride Constantine, the Victorian mansion overlooked ten acres of live-oak forest and a series of carefully cultivated gardens.

Peter had been hoping that his first sight of the house might trigger his memories, but though he recognized that it was a charming architectural hodgepodge of styles and influences, it did not resonate with him personally. It might have been the first time he

laid eyes on the ornate brick chimneys, fish-scale shingles, stained-glass windows, curved wood brackets, and corner turret crowned with an enormous copper fleur-de-lis that defined the grand old Victorian.

"I don't live *there*, do I?" he asked as the MG wound up the camellia-lined drive.

Roma shook her head. "You live in a cottage in the back. Did you want to stop?"

He should, of course. He should go straight to the museum. At the very least, he needed to know what was going on with the investigation from the perspective of the other victims, but even more than information, he craved silence, privacy. He'd been under a magnifying glass from the moment he recovered consciousness, and he already knew enough about himself to know that he was not comfortable with this much attention.

"I'll see how I feel later."

Roma nodded and they sped past the pastel-colored house with the colored windows shining like jewels in the bright sunlight. With the jacaranda trees in full purple blossom, it looked like a fantasy landscape.

It seemed strangely unpopulated too.

"Is the museum open?"

Roma replied, "Nine to five, every day except Christmas. Parking two dollars."

"Is it closed while the police are investigating the robbery?"

"Not that I know of." She shot him a quizzical look.

"It seems a little...deserted."

"It's not exactly Disneyland, you know."

"I suppose not."

Was the museum a fiscally sound enterprise? He had to wonder.

The drive wound behind the mansion, past the statuary and "ancient" garden and boxwood maze. Roma turned off from the main drive and headed down a small side road. Peter sighted a diminutive two-story California bungalow built in the Craftsman

style: dark wood shingles and multipaned windows, sloping roof, pale stone chimney, tapered porch posts.

"Here we are. Not a scratch on you. Well, at least no more scratches than you left the hospital with." Roma pulled to a neat stop on the half-moon drive in front of the house and grinned at him.

"Thanks. Really. I appreciate it. I'm just feeling a little..."

"Fragile?" She patted his knee and then opened her door.

Peter followed her more slowly up the stone stairs. The front door was unlocked, and they went inside the bungalow.

His immediate impression was of lemon oil and fresh flowers. The door opened onto a small living room with a hardwood floor, coffered ceiling, and a large stone fireplace. The furniture was tasteful and comfortable. Earth tones and cherrywood. Botanical prints were artfully arranged on one wall. There were a number of silver-framed photos on the low credenza. Peter recognized Roma among the other strangers captured for posterity.

Every item in the room seemed handpicked: an art nouveau wall scone, a wrought-iron umbrella stand, a framed Edward Weston photograph. He looked around, hoping something would click...but nothing did. It was a pretty little house—a showpiece—but it could have belonged to anyone.

An arched doorway led into the kitchen, where Jessica was putting groceries away. She was tall and thin with tiger-framed glasses and curly red hair. She came to greet them, kissing Roma lightly and hugging Peter hard.

"Welcome home!"

Peter hugged her back—uncomfortable but grateful; Jessica hugged like she meant it.

"How are you feeling?"

"Good," he assured her. And if he said it often enough it might eventually come true.

Jessica and Roma exchanged looks. Roma said, "He still doesn't remember anything."

*"Nothing?"*

He began to qualify, awkward with this. With them knowing so much about him when he knew nothing. "It's not that I don't remember. It's that everything is sort of jumbled." Plus he didn't remember.

"Gosh," said Jessica. "You mean you still can't recall what happened the night the mural was stolen?"

Peter shook his head.

*"Nothing?"*

He shook his head again.

"Yeeouch," said Jessica.

"You said it." That was Roma. She and Jessica were exchanging those meaningful—but indecipherable—looks again. It made him uneasy. As though he wasn't uneasy enough.

"If you'll excuse me, I think I'll change." Why was he asking their permission to change his clothes? It was bizarre to feel like a stranger in his own life. Yet he did.

He left them to it, their muted conversation following him down the hallway though the words were lost. Perhaps just as well.

William Morris olive leaf wallpaper, a Stickley library table, a New Haven Clock Co. shelf clock. The house was filled with a small fortune in antiques. His own, or did they belong to the museum? A nice perk for the curator of Constantine House if the bungalow came furnished with these lovely objets d'art.

And why was it that he could remember the name of the manufacturer of a 1904 clock but not the name of two of his closest friends?

This was his home. Presumably, it reflected his taste to some extent. It seemed comfortable, pleasant enough—immaculate. Not so much as a newspaper on a table or a coffee mug in the sink disturbed the magazine layout perfection. Was that because he was a neat freak or because someone had tidied up before he got out of the hospital?

Studying the dust-free tabletop, he wondered if the police had searched his home. If so, there was no sign, no spilled fingerprint powder, no emptied drawers or ransacked cabinets. But perhaps he had his friends to thank for that.

At the foot of the staircase was a framed picture of the house floor plan and next to that a framed black-and-white picture of the original house in 1908. The bungalow didn't look much different now, although the plants in the garden were much larger. He examined the floor plan. Four rooms on the first floor: dining room, living room, study, kitchen. Two bedrooms upstairs. It was like a doll's house.

Or a diorama. He went upstairs, unbuttoning his shirt. His bedroom was as clean and impersonal as the rest of the house. A brass bed, ceiling fan with etched globe lights, a folding floor screen featuring a doubtful frog gazing up at a bland heron. Again, not so much as a stray shoe or comb marred the perfection.

He tossed the shirt into the laundry, opened the closet, and blinked. His clothes hung in two neatly laundered and pressed rows—grouped by style and color. Could he really be this organized? It didn't seem...natural.

He selected a brown polo shirt and a pair of stone-colored chinos. He didn't appear to own a pair of simple Levi's.

The window across from the bed looked out toward Constantine House, the half-raised blinds knocking gently in the breeze. Through the open window, he glimpsed the ornate chimneys and gables of the main house behind the purple blossoms of the jacaranda.

All at once Peter felt very tired...deflated. The bed looked comfortable, and he thought briefly about lying down. There was so much to absorb, and none of it made

sense. Or at least, nothing he learned made him feel better. None of it made him feel like...himself. Whoever that was.

Turning from the temptation of the bed, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror over the dresser. He stared in fascination. If he'd expected some kind of surprised recognition now that he was on his home turf again, he was doomed to disappointment. If anything...he kept expecting someone younger. Taller. Just...different. Why? What could that possibly mean?

What he saw was a man a little above average height, decent build, brown wavy hair cut short, green eyes. He looked...ordinary. Like anyone, only...primmer. Yes. Like a librarian. Like the kind of librarian who only existed in movies. He hadn't expected that. Hadn't expected to look...so *neat*. Well, he did need a shave, but...he was so...conservative-looking. Was that who he was? He didn't *feel* that...controlled.

He pushed the oval swivel mirror away and went downstairs. In the living room, he paused to examine the array of tastefully framed photographs on polished tabletops. Who the hell *were* all these people?

Roma and Jessica were talking quietly. They broke off when they spotted him.

"Everything all right?" Roma asked too cheerfully.

"I... Yeah."

He could feel them making the effort not to look at each other. Jessica said, "There's chicken and wild rice casserole in the fridge. All you have to do is heat it."

"Thanks." He gazed at them rather helplessly. "Look, it's weird, I know. But there are some photos in the living room. Would you be able to tell me who the people in the photographs are?"

"Of course!" Roma said quickly. "I think we know most of your friends."

He followed them to the living room. Jessica picked up the largest frame, a formal photograph of a couple in outdated wedding clothes.

"Those were your parents," Roma said. Apologetically, she added, "They're no longer alive."

Breaking it gently. But he already knew that. He'd got that much in the hospital. No siblings either.

And so it went. *"This is Ray Stevens and Paul Cheney at Alpine Village Oktoberfest. This is Bob Rodriguez, Jess, me, and you at the Abbot Kinney Festival two years ago. This is..."*

With the exception of Jessica and Roma, he didn't recognize anyone. And yet, nothing rang false. The names were even vaguely familiar—as though these were people he had known a long time ago but couldn't quite put a face or voice to.

What did it mean? Did he really not want to remember?

Roma picked up another photo and offered it. "This is Sortilege." It was a photo of him and a horse. A big, black, ugly thoroughbred. "He's yours."

"He's my what?"

"Your horse. You stable him down at Griffith Park."

Jessica said, "He was a racehorse, but he couldn't run when people were watching him."

Peter laughed.

"Seriously. He was like a rocket on the track—provided the stands were empty."

"He has issues," agreed Roma. "So you bought him."

"How could I afford an ex-racehorse?"

Roma shrugged. "You knew his owner. You were at USC together." Her gaze was curious. "You belong to some private riding group. You meet every Thursday evening down at Griffith Park for a sunset ride, and then you wind up at a Mexican restaurant for chips and margaritas."

He closed his eyes, trying to picture it—feel it. Nothing. *Nada*.

When he opened his eyes, they were watching him anxiously. He nodded at the photo of a younger version of himself and a tall blond man of about the same age.

"That's Cole," Roma said without inflection.

So *that* was Cole. He stared, fascinated. Cole was handsome, no argument there. Like the leading man in a glitzy soap opera. He had a wonderful smile, wide and warm. Peter felt zero gazing at that white flash of teeth.

"And he's an old friend?"

Did she hesitate? "That's right. You roomed together at USC. He helped you get this job."

"And he's MacBride Constantine's great-great-grandson?"

"Yep."

He wasn't wrong. Roma's voice was brisk and colorless. Either she didn't like Cole or she didn't like...the way he felt about Cole.

How *did* he feel about Cole? Why couldn't he feel anything? How long was this emotional blackout going to last?

"And he's on the museum board of directors?"

"Right."

She didn't like Cole. He had been right, even if he wasn't sure how. "And Cole and I are...close?"

She certainly hesitated then. "At one time. I don't know how things are now. You don't talk a lot about him." She added, "But then you never did."

Peter bit his lip, thinking. "Was I...? Am I seeing anyone? At all?" It was the *at all* that probably gave him away. It was pretty obvious he wasn't seeing anyone on a regular basis, since no one had turned up at the hospital to hold his hand.

"Not steadily. You go out with friends. You have an active social life."

What did that mean? Book clubs and blind dates?

Jessica volunteered, "You signed up for one of those dating services. Match.com, I think."

"I...did."



"You go out a lot. Though usually not more than once with the same guy."

He absorbed that slowly.

"That's your choice, mostly," Roma put in.

He had the feeling she was trying to tell him something about himself, but he couldn't for the life of him think what it was. That he was hard to please? Hard to get along with? A workaholic? His life sounded...lonely. It felt lonely.

He looked at the other photos. Mostly group pictures. Cole—an adult Cole—was in a couple of those groups.

His face must have revealed some of what he was feeling, though he thought he was hiding it well enough. "You should lie down, Peter," Jessica said, putting a hand on his arm.

"Yes," Roma agreed. "You're supposed to get a lot of rest." She patted him too. Apparently he was making them nervous. They were going to begin fluttering in a minute.

"And after you've rested, you can have a nice supper and..."

"And an early night," Roma concluded.

They were trying to help obviously. Not their fault that he was feeling worse with every kind word.

"Yes, I will." He gathered energy for the social ritual, thanking them for everything—uncomfortably aware that there was probably more to thank them for than he knew. He promised to rest and eat and thanked them some more, ushering them gently toward the front door and then out to the tidy front garden.

"Call if you need anything," Roma told him.

"Are you sure you want to stay here on your own tonight?" Jessica worried. "We've got plenty of room, you know."

Roma said quickly, "That's an idea."

And it was. A bad one. "I'm sure," Peter said. "I'm fine. I'm looking forward to—I just need a little time on my own."

They appeared sympathetic and uneasy, but they went—reluctantly—with many admonitions to take it easy and not worry and rest and eat.

At last they had tucked themselves into Roma's MG and were speeding away as though auditioning for stunt drivers in an action flick.

Peter watched them go, and when they were out of sight, he found his keys and went out through the garden, walking slowly up to the main house.

\* \* \* \* \*

A portrait of Captain MacBride Constantine hung in the entrance hall of Constantine House. At the time of his portrait sitting, the captain had been in his sixties. He'd been around the world several times—and it appeared to have been lousy weather all the way. Beneath the captain's cap, pale blue eyes stared down any landlubber who thought he was getting into the museum without the price of an admission ticket. The snowy hair and long white beard, the ruddy cheeks and small mouth, gave the old man the appearance of a piratical Santa.

Beneath the portrait was a reception desk, and at the reception desk sat a girl scowling at the phone ringing in front of her.

She was about twenty and petite. Her hair was cut in a glossy black bob and her eyes were large and blue. She looked like something crafted in a Dutch toy shop...too perfect to be real. Like a little doll.

As Peter watched her make a petulant snatch for the phone, her name came to him. Mary. He felt a rush of relief. It was coming back. His memory was sluggishly starting to fill in the blanks. Mary Montero.

*Mary, Mary Quite Contrary.* He didn't care for her, but she was the daughter of one of the trustee members. Dennis Montero. Mary had been hired as an intern for the

summer, but that had been a washout and Peter had relegated her to answering phones and filing.

It was not a popular decision.

Catching Peter's approach out of the corner of her eye, Mary glanced up. She looked startled to see him. And none too thrilled.

He managed a perfunctory smile and a "carry on" nod, as he continued to his office—and that was the second flash of memory. He remembered where his office was.

Or maybe it was just common sense, because there weren't a lot of options. The bottom floors of the old mansion had been converted to exhibit rooms, and they were stuffed with...well, junk.

A lot of junk. Some of it relatively valuable, like the collection of jade trinkets, some of it, like the mummified crocodile, more appropriate for a white elephant sale.

He turned left at the marble statue of Kwan Yin. He passed a carefully preserved eight-feet-long giant squid, a battered mummy case, and a collection of Alutiiq masks.

It was not your ordinary Los Angeles cultural attraction, certainly. Although it seemed an accurate representation of the mess his life was currently in.

Peter turned down another hall decorated—if one was willing to use the term loosely—with a series of grim paintings by a contemporary of Hans Holbein the Younger who made Hans's work look like the stuff of Thomas Kincaid.

His office—PETER KILLIAN was blazoned on a small brass plaque beside the door—was at the end of the hall. The door was not locked. Had he left it unlocked or had the police invaded his sanctum? Given the instinctive unease he felt on finding it unlocked, he suspected it was not usual for him to leave his door open. It was a good bet the police had been there before him.

Pushing open the door, he found himself looking into a large and lovely sitting room that had been converted into an office. And a nice office at that. The furniture was antique but comfortable. Large windows overlooked the camellia garden.

He knew, without having to look, that beyond the camellias was a small grassy knoll. Stone steps built into the hillside led down to the grotto, which had once housed the Chinese wall mural.

A strange feeling swept over him and he reached for the desk chair, sitting down heavily.

After a few seconds he felt better and looked around. On the walls were several large photos of people he didn't recognize. Taken at museum functions, he guessed, judging by his own smiling presence in several pictures.

His gaze fell on the desk before him, taking in the old-fashioned bronze desk set, which included an inkwell. Surely he was not some kind of crank who wrote letters by quill pen? But no, his laptop sat right there in the middle of the cleared desk.

He stared at it for some time, feeling vaguely queasy. Not that he would be stupid enough to have anything on his laptop he shouldn't, but...it still gave him a weird sensation to think anyone—or everyone—had had access to his private communications for the past three days.

After a moment or two he moved to open a desk drawer and found it locked. He checked his key ring and the key was there. He unlocked the desk and found everything in its place. If the police had searched his office, they had been discreet about it.

Removing an ebony letter opener, he began to go slowly through his mail.

There were a couple of résumés, an invitation to a charity function at the Getty, a notice of an art gallery exhibition—and a ton of junk mail that Ms. Montero was supposed to weed out for him.

He tossed the mail back into his tray to deal with when he felt more on the ball and began to go through his desk drawers in earnest. Surely something here would trigger a few recollections or at least supply an answer or two. He came across a foldout brochure for the museum. It looked fairly old—and, as surmised, the date was 1997.

Well before his time. There was a small colored photo of the grotto at the bottom of the garden. He could just make out the faded tints of the stolen mural in the background.

For a long time he stared at the photo. Why the hell couldn't he remember what had happened? It would be one thing if he'd injured his brain, but the doctors said there was no physical reason for this blank.

At last Peter dropped the brochure back into the hanging file. As he did, he noticed a couple of snapshots loose at the bottom. He drew them out and stared. Cole Constantine on what appeared to be his wedding day. Cole, beyond handsome in a severe black tux. Cole obligingly nibbling wedding cake, kissing the bride, and posing with best man Peter.

Peter stared at the photos, at his own emptily smiling face. His heart began to thud in sick tattoo. He felt ill. Automatically, he tossed the photos back into the file, closed the drawer, and locked it. What was the matter with him leaving those pictures where anyone could find them? What was the matter with him keeping those pictures at all?

He rested his face in his hands. His head ached. What a bad idea this had been. He wasn't ready to deal with this — whatever *this* was.

But it was very obvious what this was. Pictures of his married best friend. Erotic dreams of his married best friend? It was pathetic. Even if he couldn't remember any of it, it was pathetic.

There was a noise from the hallway. Peter looked up. A tall blond man stood framed in the doorway. He was very tanned, his eyes indigo blue in his handsome face. He wore a baby blue polo shirt and jeans.

Cole.

## Chapter Three

"I didn't expect you in today," Cole said as Peter rose automatically. "Shouldn't you be taking it easy?"

Cole had a light, pleasant voice, and Peter suddenly remembered that he'd sung in the men's chorus at USC. His memory was definitely returning, and that was the good news. The bad news was he wasn't ready to face Cole. He'd wanted a little warning.

"I... Thanks," Peter said disjointedly. "But I can't just sit around."

"I don't know why not, with what you've been through. How are you feeling?" Cole still stood in the doorway as though waiting for permission to enter Peter's office. No. As though he felt a need to keep distance between them.

Peter felt his face heat, and he wasn't even sure why. "I'm fine."

"I'll take your word for it." Cole's smile was quizzical, attractive. "Then you do remember what happened?"

How would Cole know about Peter's memory lapse? But of course. Detective Griffin would have been in contact with his employers—in this case the museum's board of trustees. Cole would know that Peter was claiming amnesia. He'd probably heard what Detective Griffin thought of that claim.

"No," he added in his own defense. "It's not unusual to forget events just prior to a head injury."

"I guess that's true. But that cop...said that you said you didn't remember...anything."

"There are some blank spaces."

Cole was frowning, watching him closely. "Like what?"

"Just..." Peter stared at the gold band glinting on Cole's hand and abruptly lost his train of thought.

"Just...?"

What had they been talking about? Suddenly he couldn't remember what he had wanted to say—how odd was that? It wasn't as though he hadn't had time to get used to the idea that Cole was married.

"Pete," Cole said softly, and Peter's gaze lifted to meet Cole's. He remembered the cop—Griffin—saying he didn't like to be called "Pete," but Cole used the word like a pet name, and Peter felt no objection. How would Griffin know such a thing anyway?

"Sorry. What?"

"You shouldn't have come in so soon after being released from the hospital. The board is going to think you're well enough to face up to some kind of inquiry."

Peter's brows drew together. "I'm more than happy to talk to the board if that's what they want."

But Cole was shaking his head. "Bad idea. Better to let the police figure out what's going on. Especially if you're not clear on the details."

It took him a few seconds to work out what Cole seemed to be saying. "Do you think *I* had something to do with these thefts?"

Cole looked taken aback. "Of course not. But I'm not the problem. There are two other trustees."

Dennis Montero and Sally Orchard. But Cole was chairman, as befitted the last surviving descendant of Captain MacBride Constantine.

As though reading his mind, Cole said reluctantly, "I can't be seen to be using my influence because of our personal relationship, Pete. You know that."

"Right."

He spoke automatically, saying what was expected. But really...when the hell should one's personal relationship be taken into consideration if it wasn't when one's friend was fighting for his survival? Was it wrong to feel like maybe Cole's personal knowledge and faith in him might be expected to surface in his favor now? Was it wrong to feel a little chilled by this strict lack of bias?

Assuming Cole did really believe he was innocent and wasn't just saying so out of politeness.

Peter's mouth dried and he half stuttered, "Cole, I swear to God...I didn't have anything to do with the mural being taken. I haven't stolen a penny from the museum. I *wouldn't*."

Cole looked uncomfortable. He glanced over his shoulder as though afraid Peter's ragged voice was echoing through the museum. "I know that. I've already told you I have total faith in you."

Peter nodded. He was appalled to realize his lips were unsteady. He could not — could *not* — bear for Cole to see him cry. And apparently Cole couldn't bear it either, because he looked away. Then he stared down at his watch, saying, "Look, go home and rest. You look like death warmed over."

"I'm all right." Peter pinched the bridge of his nose hard.

There was silence but for the sprinklers outside his window jetting silver water into the bright sunlight.

"Of course you're not," Cole said softly.



Peter lowered his hand and Cole was gazing at him with an impatient blend of sympathy and affection. Before Peter could think of anything to say, Cole said in normal tones, "Damn. I'm meeting Angie for an early dinner, or I'd walk over to the bungalow with you."

For a moment Peter wasn't sure if he'd misheard that moment of tenderness or not. He gazed at Cole, who offered another flash of that white smile. "Come on, buddy boy. Get going." And as Peter gazed undecidedly at his unopened laptop, trying to choose whether to take it or leave it, "That will all wait for a day or two."

Reluctantly, Peter rose. Cole was already walking away down the hall. Peter locked his office and followed him back out past the *Ripley's Believe It or Not*-style exhibits: a stuffed kangaroo, a seven-tiered platform of antique Japanese Hina dolls, and a two-handed broadsword that was nearly as tall as a small man.

As they passed the front desk, Mary looked straight through Peter and gave Cole a bright smile.

"Good night, Mr. Constantine!"

"Night, sweetheart."

*Sweetheart*. Someday some unamused female was going to haul Cole up on sexual harassment charges, Peter thought with a flicker of irritation. He said nothing, suspecting this was a timeworn complaint of his. Mary certainly didn't seem to mind. She was still beaming after Cole when Peter glanced back from the doorway.

Upon meeting his gaze, she looked down at the papers on her desk that she had busily been pretending to shuffle at their approach.

The sunshine seemed very bright and very hot as they stood on the front steps. Peter's head was pounding quite desperately now, and he thought perhaps Cole was right about going home and lying down for the rest of the afternoon.

"Everything will work out; you'll see," Cole told him. "I don't want you to worry about anything. Just take it easy for a few days."

Peter nodded dully and Cole patted his shoulder. He went briskly down the steps and strode across the green squares of lawn to the parking lot. Peter watched him go, unmoving, and when at last he saw Cole's Mercedes leave the parking lot, he turned and walked slowly back to the bungalow.

The mockingbird was singing as he let himself inside the silent house.

He wandered into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and stared at the foil-covered casserole dish. He closed the fridge.

Ridiculous to feel like this. To feel...so alone. There was an enormous difference between being alone and being lonely. The fact that he was struggling to see the difference had to be a result of his head injury. He was overtired and overmedicated and behaving like an ass.

He left the kitchen and went into his study. A copy of Georgette Heyer's *The Masqueraders* lay on the table near the wingback chair that gazed over the garden. He picked it up and a bookmark fell out.

He glanced at the page.

*The ride at an end, it was Charles and Peter with them; they might have been blood brothers.*

He was comforted by the realization that he recognized this passage. He knew the book. It was, in fact, a favorite, one he had read many times. He was remembering, slowly but surely it was all coming back. He glanced at the bookshelf, and Heyer's romance titles were all listed there, from *A Civil Contract* to *Venetia*.

This was his home. His world. He was safe here even if he didn't yet recognize that fact.

Peter sat down in the chair, picked up *The Masqueraders*, and began to read.

\* \* \* \* \*

*He dragged Peter's trousers down and nuzzled his crotch. Peter's heart knocked frantically at his ribs. Slowly, lingeringly, he moved his hands over the other's long, lean body – broad back,*

*firm, muscular buttocks, hard, strong thighs. Beautiful body. The sleek glide of muscles beneath brown skin.*

*A hot, wet mouth closed over his thickened, stiff cock and Peter groaned as the other – as Cole – began to suck. That slick heat pulled at him, drew him on, setting off a tingling at the base of his spine, tiny explosions of delighted sensation. So good. So unexpected. Peter shifted around so that their cocks were deep in each other's mouths. Hard to concentrate, though, because it felt so good and he wanted to make it just as good for...for Cole.*

*Focus. God. Focus. But it was hard to focus because that wicked, knowledgeable mouth was doing such delicious things to him. It was like he couldn't form his lips to make suction, let alone words. He settled for a whimper that would have embarrassed him in less naked circumstances and a kiss for that other beautiful cock. All the while those feverish lips continued to work him with tongue and breath and the rumor of teeth. Peter was shivering from toes to crown, eyes fastened shut while that wonderful, warm, wet drag went on and on, sucking and sucking until at last he was delivered, screaming tension giving way in spurts of rich, salt-sweet cream.*

Peter opened his eyes, shivering despite the day's languid heat, aware that he had come in his sleep. Beneath his chinos, his shorts were wet and uncomfortable. Christ! Was he fourteen? Because that had been the last time *that* happened.

And someone was knocking at the front door.

Confused, he rose too fast and, head swimming, went to answer that impatient summons, pulling out his shirt as he went through the kitchen and letting it hang out.

Reaching the front door, he unlocked it and pulled it open, uncomfortably aware of the little crinkles all across the bottom of his shirtfront.

Detective Griffin stood on his porch.

"I was beginning to wonder whether you'd skipped town," he said after a pause.

"I was sleeping."

Griffin didn't seem to have a response to that. "Can I come in?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Griffin's grin was unexpectedly attractive. "Sure. For now. Be easier to get it over with, wouldn't it?"

"For whom?"

The grin went a little wider and a little more dangerous. Peter sighed and moved aside. Griffin followed him into the living room.

"Nice place," Griffin said from behind Peter. He moved quietly for a big man.

"You've seen it before, haven't you?" The quality in the silence behind him made Peter turn around. Griffin was staring at him narrowly. "Are you trying to tell me you didn't search this place while I was in the hospital?"

The set of Griffin's shoulders seemed to relax. A faint smile tugged at his mouth. "Nobody's searched your house. Or your office. So far. I haven't even asked for a search warrant. Yet."

"Why's that? I thought I was your number one suspect?"

"Yeah, well...I've been wrong before." His blue-gray gaze met Peter's levelly and then dropped to Peter's crotch. It occurred to Peter that he was standing there in sticky, wet briefs and a badly wrinkled shirt.

A strange moment passed. Peter had a vivid sense of déjà vu. He said at random, "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Sure," Griffin said genially, the acceptance surprising Peter even more than his own offer had.

"Have a seat, and I'll put a pot on."

Griffin took the leather club chair by the fireplace. "Funny how we still say that," he remarked. "Nobody puts a pot on these days."

Peter went into the kitchen and turned the coffeemaker on; then he went upstairs and changed out of his clothes yet again, this time opting for sweatpants and a T-shirt. In the bathroom, he splashed cold water on his flushed face and told his reflection, "You're afraid to be on your own."

When he came downstairs again Griffin was back on his feet, staring out the window at the bird-of-paradise. He glanced over his shoulder at the sound of Peter's footsteps and said, "I was starting to think you were trying to make a break for it."

"Why do you keep saying things like that? I don't have any reason to flee. I haven't done anything wrong."

"How do you know if you can't remember?"

"Because I know myself."

Griffin's mouth curled in one of those sardonic smiles.

Peter bristled. "I'm starting to take this personally. Am I honest to God your only suspect?"

"Pretty much, yeah." Griffin was studying him. "You're still claiming you don't remember *anything*?"

He said what he'd said to Cole only a short time earlier. "You must have spoken to my doctor. It's not unusual with head injuries to forget how the injury occurred."

"I'm not just talking about the night of the robbery."

"Then I don't know what you *are* talking about."

Griffin continued to eye him in that jaundiced way. "All right," he said at last. "I think it's time we had a little chat."

"Let's chat in the kitchen. The coffee should be about ready."

Aware that he was simply stalling, that he didn't want to have whatever conversation this was going to be, Peter turned and headed for the kitchen.

He didn't have to turn to know that Griffin followed him. The measured tread of his footsteps on the hardwood floor raised the hair on the back of Peter's neck.

The detective leaned against the long cabinet next to the breakfast nook while Peter took cups out of the cupboard. Griffin's steady, impassive gaze made him self-conscious. He didn't like it – and he recognized that it was out of character for him.

"How do you take it?" It was a perfectly reasonable question, and yet for some insane reason he felt the back of his neck growing warm.

It didn't help that Griffin seemed to have to make his mind up about something before answering, "Milk and sugar if you've got it."

Did he?

A quick glance in the fridge verified that he did. Jessica and Roma had done well by him. He had enough food here to throw a dinner party, were he so inclined – and could remember whom to invite.

He quickly prepared the coffee, aware all the time that Griffin was watching him.

"So explain to me how this amnesia thing works. How is it you know your way around your kitchen and how to fix a cup of coffee, but you can't remember who I am or what you were doing Thursday night in the grotto?"

Peter carried the coffee cups to the breakfast nook. Since Griffin made no move to sit, he stood too – though on the other side of the nook – and sipped his coffee. He could practically feel the caffeine working in his bloodstream.

Griffin picked up his mug, swallowed a mouthful of coffee.

Peter said wearily, "Look...I don't know why. If you talked to my doctor, then you already know that there isn't any organic reason that I can't remember. I just... I guess I don't...want to. That's what the hospital psychiatrist suggested, anyway."

"Well, that's sure as hell convenient."

"What do you want me to say? I don't know!" Peter's voice rose and he slammed shut on it. Getting hysterical wasn't going to help.

Griffin took another swallow of coffee, watching Peter coolly over the rim.

"I want to remember," Peter said. "Not knowing what happened is driving me crazy."

"So I'm supposed to believe that you suffered traumatic shock or something that night and now you can't remember what happened?"

"I guess. I don't know."

"You're not a lot of help, Professor Peabody. But then...that's kind of your MO."

Peter had been about to take a mouthful of coffee. He lowered his cup sharply, nearly spilling the liquid. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"About a year ago you reported a number of small thefts from the museum. I caught the case."

Griffin had already told him this much in the hospital. Obviously more was coming. Peter resisted the temptation to speak.

"This sound familiar at all?"

"No. I'd assumed I would have filed a police report at some point."

"That's right. You filed a police report. Your story was that until you began cross-referencing data from the old manual catalog system to the new computer program, you hadn't noticed that a number of small but valuable antiquities were missing from the collection. You claimed you initially thought the missing items might have been mislabeled or placed in storage. But when, after extensive searching, you were unable to locate them—and when more items disappeared—you decided that someone was stealing from the museum."

"You keep using words like *story* or *claimed*. Implying you think I'm lying."

Griffin raised his brows. He said blandly, "Let's say I reserved judgment on that point."

Peter swallowed his immediate furious response. He managed to say in an almost reasonable tone of voice, "Why would you think I lied? What would be my motive for stealing from my own museum?"

"The same as anyone's motive would be. Money. A hundred thousand dollars is over two years' salary for you. It's not *your* museum, after all. You're just an employee—like the gardener or the girl who answers the phones. And apparently there's been some discussion of replacing you. Maybe you thought you'd better —"

*"What?"*

Peter stared at him, unbelieving.

The echo of the cop's callous words seemed to reverberate through his brain. There was a strange rushing sensation in Peter's head—as though a wind tunnel had opened between his ears. The floor seemed to drop out from under his feet. Griffin grabbed his arm, and for a few odd seconds, Peter's face was pressed into the detective's starched white shirtfront. Warm cotton, some vaguely piney aftershave, and the steady pounding of Griffin's heart...

Blindly, he pushed Griffin away, feeling for the back of the wooden bench. He lowered himself awkwardly, bracing his elbows on the table and resting his forehead on his hands.

"All right," Griffin said roughly after a moment. "So maybe you didn't know that."

"Go away," Peter said from behind his hands.

"What does that solve?" The truculence in Griffin's voice was undermined by something...defensiveness? Guilt? "If I go away, I just have to come back later."

Peter struggled to control his voice. He managed, "Get out, will you?"

After a long pause, Griffin went.



## Chapter Four

The grotto was at the bottom of the oldest section of the garden. It was man-made, although it looked natural enough—like a small cave covered in flowering vines. Outside the entrance was a koi pond. The red and gold fish lay quietly in the bottom of the green water as Peter stood beside the pool staring into the grotto.

There wasn't much to see. Yellow and black police tape stretched across the open mouth. The interior was lined with tile and bits of colored glass that sparkled in the pale light from the solar lamps slowly winking on as the evening grew dark.

The ugly bare square where the mural had once hung was about ten feet long and six feet high. Not easy moving something of that size. It would take more than one man to get it safely down from the wall of the cave and carry it out of the grotto—and it would require a vehicle to transport it more than a few feet. The grounds were private and locked at night, so how had they done it?

Peter walked around the back of the grotto, passing through the grove of weeping willows, coming at last to a fence well concealed behind a bamboo wall. He followed the fence till he came to a padlocked gate marked EMERGENCY VEHICLE ACCESS ONLY. The gate opened onto a dirt road.

The thieves must have parked out here after the museum had closed for the evening and everyone had gone home. It was certainly quiet and deserted – even at this time of the evening.

The real question was, why wasn't there more of a security system? Who, in this day and age, relied on a padlock and a single security guard – a guard who, if Peter knew anything about it, spent most evenings watching TV in the gatehouse?

Was the responsibility for the security of the museum and grounds his alone? Had it been his decision to leave the mural essentially unprotected? If so, no wonder the board was discussing his removal.

Assuming it was true – that it wasn't something Griffin had made up to rattle him.

He'd like to believe that, but...

It had carried the ring of truth. Looking back, he thought that Griffin had probably regretted dropping that bomb. Something in his tone...some vast discomfort when he'd had to witness Peter's reaction. You'd expect a cop to be pretty hardened, but Griffin hadn't enjoyed seeing Peter poleaxed.

Which was interesting, because he didn't mind baiting Peter about suspecting him of stealing from the museum. So what had been different about telling him his job was in jeopardy?

Peter turned away from the pasture and started back up the hillside. The garden smelled wonderful at night. The camellias had no scent, but the fragrance of the heirloom roses drifted on the warm breeze. He cut across the grass to the steps. The solar lanterns threw triangles of light across the bricks. In the jacaranda trees, a mockingbird was calling.

*Chjjjj...chjjjj...chewk...*

Peter's steps faltered and he stood still.

He remembered falling on the steps, remembered the shock of seeing his own blood spattering the stones. He stopped and looked down, and sure enough there were

little raindrop stains in the porous surface of the bricks. For an instant he was back there, the scent of mown grass and fresh blood in his nostrils and the call of the mockingbird in his ears.

And if he pushed a little harder...pushed past that veil of forgetfulness...what had he seen?

*The glitter of stars beyond the pale flickering of the jacaranda blossoms. He had come outside for a breath of fresh air. He often walked down to the grotto at night. He liked the silence, the peace. But it hadn't been silent. Not that night. Crickets...frogs... That was all right. But he heard voices...voices where no voices should be. The grounds were locked at night. Once in a while teenagers jumped the back fence.*

*That's what he had thought. Kids. Kids – maybe vandals. He could hear them talking as he drew near the grotto. Talking...or arguing? He drew close and he saw oversize shadows looming against the glistening walls of the cave...*

And already it was slipping away again. Like a door closing firmly in his face. This far and no further.

If only he could remember. If he could just come up with something he could give Griffin, some solid piece of evidence so that he would stop wasting time talking to Peter and start trying to find out who was behind these thefts.

There was a noise behind him. Peter whirled, ready for...he didn't know what. It had sounded like the scrape of a shoe on brick. But there was no one behind him.

The shadow swaying on the grass was from the tree limbs moving in the breeze. Right?

He stood there for a moment, watching. Nothing moved.

And if something did move, what would he do? He glanced around for something he could use to defend himself...a fallen branch, a loose brick, a rock. One thing about Constantine House, the grounds were well maintained. No weapons available unless he was going to yank a solar lantern out of the ground and try to defend himself with it.

After a long, fraught moment, Peter began to feel foolish. The mockingbird seemed to confirm this opinion, chattering at him from high in the branches above.

He turned and went quickly up the steps.

When he reached the bungalow, he reheated the casserole left by Jessica and Roma. It was good, but he wasn't hungry. He ate a few bites, dumped the rest into the trash, and settled for a glass of milk and a couple of pain pills. His head was aching again, mostly due to rushing back to the bungalow before the bogeyman could snatch him.

Well and truly disgusted with himself, Peter retrieved his book from the study and went up to read in bed.

His dreams were strange and troubled, and despite the tablets he'd taken before bed, he began to fight his way out of sleep – which was how Peter became aware of the faint but persistent gnawing sound from beneath his open window.

In his dream, the gnawing turned into rats chewing at the wooden siding of the house...and as rats were absolutely unacceptable, Peter woke and opened his eyes.

For a moment he lay there, eyes picking out the outline of furniture silvered by moonlight.

There it was again.

A muted scratching sound.

What the hell was that?

He rose, crossing softly to the window, and looked down. A bulky figure dressed in black stood on the crescent-shaped patio busily working at getting inside the back door.

For the space of a heartbeat Peter was rooted in place, disbelieving. Disbelief gave way to alarm. He crossed to the bed, fumbled the phone. He needed light to dial, and fuzzy with concussion and pain pills, he automatically switched on the bedside lamp.

From down below came the *clang* of metal on stone, and then a sound that was probably one of the large geranium pots getting knocked over—pottery hitting hard brick. Peter got back to the window in time to see the bulky figure—ski mask concealing hair and face—racing across the grass to the outstretched shadow of the trees in the back of the house.

Peter angled around trying for a better view, but he saw no one else on the terrace. He got back over to the phone and dialed 911.

The emergency operator assured him a patrol car was in the vicinity and would reach him shortly.

Peter thanked her, hung up, and began to dress swiftly. He would need to call down to the gatehouse and let the night watchman, Donnelly, know that they'd had another intruder and that the police were on the way.

As he dressed, he began to wonder. Granted, Constantine House wasn't Fort Knox, but it seemed to him that their security was being breached with alarming monotony. And why his bungalow?

Dressed, he sat on the edge of the bed and phoned Donnelly, but no one answered the gatehouse line. The old man was probably sleeping in front of his television.

Peter sighed, hung up, and went downstairs.

For the first time, he began to consider the thefts from the museum itself. He had assumed the items—all small enough to slip into a pocket or purse—had been taken during business hours. There was a security system, but it was outdated and it only encompassed the outside perimeter doors. But the fact that intruders were getting onto the museum grounds after hours opened another unpleasant possibility.

What if the thefts were happening after hours? What if someone was bypassing the security at the main house and getting into the museum that way?

Only four people had the access code for the outside perimeter: Donnelly, museum trustee Dennis Montero, Cole, and himself.

At least...only four people were *supposed* to have the access code.

He shoved his feet into a pair of Vans and went down to the kitchen, turning on the overhead light to examine the back door. Sure enough, a perfect circle had been etched into the glass pane beside the inside doorknob. The circle must have been ready to pop out, because as Peter touched the doorknob to reassure himself it was still locked, the oval of glass fell out onto the bricks and shattered.

It glinted like broken pieces of moon on the terrace.

The hair prickled on Peter's neck. *Close call. Very close.* What would have happened if he hadn't woken when he did?

But what sense did breaking into the bungalow make?

He let himself out the front and ran down the long camellia-lined drive to the gatehouse. A marked patrol car was already sitting outside the tall iron gates, exhaust turning red in the glare of its taillights. Donnelly was talking to two uniformed officers. He spotted Peter.

"They're saying you called in a prowler, Mr. Killian?" he asked as Peter reached them.

Peter nodded, out of breath from his jog. "I tried ringing down here. Why didn't you pick up?"

Donnelly looked taken aback. "I guess I didn't hear the phone 'coz I was standing out here."

Peter turned to the cop who was listening to their exchange. "He – the prowler – ran toward the back of the property."

"Do you have a description of this prowler?"

Peter resisted the temptation to point out that the prowler would probably be the guy running like a bat out of hell. "Big. He was dressed in dark clothes and wearing a dark ski mask."

The second cop nodded and said to Donnelly, "You want to open these gates and we'll go check it out?"

"There's a gate in the back leading to the old fire access road. He'll have gone out that way."

"I'll take the front, Ramirez, you take the back," the cop said to his partner.

Ramirez nodded and went back to the patrol car as Donnelly moved to open the automatic gates.

Peter stood shivering while the tall gates slid slowly open. "He tried to get in the back door of the bungalow."

Donnelly said, "He must have thought nobody was home. Probably thought you were still in the hospital."

"Probably." Yes. That made sense, didn't it? Peter wished he felt convinced.

The gates open, the uniformed officer came through and followed them to the little security cart that Donnelly used. Peter grabbed a seat in the back and they shot away up the road, the cart engine humming as though they were off on a pleasure jaunt.

They pulled up outside the bungalow so Peter could get out. Donnelly eased his girth out of the little cart and led the second cop, Officer Simon, across the grass and down the hillside to the grotto.

Peter let himself back in the cottage and put the coffeemaker on. If he was going to be awake for the rest of the night, he might as well be wide awake.

Donnelly and Simon returned within ten minutes, and Peter led them around the back to see where the intruder had broken the glass.

"The glass is on the outside of the door." The cop was giving Peter a strange look.

"It fell out when I touched the doorknob."

"Why would you do that, sir?"

It took Peter a few seconds to understand what Officer Simon was getting at. He felt himself change color in a wave of irrational guilt. "I wanted to make sure the door was still locked. It was...reaction. If I'd stopped to think, I wouldn't have touched it, obviously."

The cop looked noncommittal. He proceeded to take all Peter's information. By the time they had finished, his partner had rejoined them.

"No sign of anyone," Ramirez said.

"I didn't fake a break-in," Peter said. "Someone tried to get in here tonight."

"No one is suggesting you faked a break-in, sir," Simon said woodenly.

"What'd I say?" Ramirez looked around for enlightenment.

"Nah, no problem," Donnelly said. In an apparent spirit of helpfulness, he added to the police, "No way is the boss trying to pull a stunt like this. He just got out of the hospital. It's natural he'd be jumpy."

This, reasonably, led to explanation about how Peter had landed in the hospital to begin with, and by the time the cops finally drove away, Peter was sure they were convinced he was either a nut seeking attention or a criminal who had just outsmarted himself. Either way...not good.

Donnelly also departed, promising to patrol the grounds every hour, and Peter finally turned out the lights and returned to bed, where he spent the remainder of the night tossing and turning – and sitting up every time a floorboard creaked.

It was a relief to open his eyes to sunlight.

The morning was growing warm by the time Peter woke, still tired and a little groggy, and for a few moments he rested in the clean cotton sheets, listening to the sweet birdsong, the lulling rustle of leaves outside the open window, the hiss of sprinklers. Drowsily, his fingers fumbled with buttons of his pajama pants, reaching



inside, touching the velvet warmth of his genitals. He comforted himself with the familiar motions, using the pearl of moisture at the head of his cock to slick his strokes.

Cole, he thought. Cole...

But, unsettlingly, it was Detective Griffin's face that kept interposing itself between Peter and the fantasy Cole. He closed his eyes against the image of Griffin's lean, hard face, the stormy blue eyes so different from Cole's bright blue gaze. Griffin was the last person he wanted to think of.

Especially in this context.

So how weird was it that he couldn't help wondering what it would be like with him? Did he have some hitherto-undiscovered kink for S and M? Because it was impossible to picture Griffin being anything but the most brief and brutal of lovers.

The weird thing was his increasing certainty that Griffin was gay. From where had that conviction arisen? Griffin had said nothing to indicate his sexual inclinations, had he? Did Peter have any reason to think Griffin was anything but heterosexual – and God help the woman involved with that bastard.

But...*had* he and Cole ever really done this? Done *anything*? The dreams were so vivid, so real, but...

A glance at the clock warned him he was going to be late. Punctuality being something apparently hardwired into him.

He moved his hand faster, just the right grip, the right angle...the quiet relief of his hand pumping in steady rhythm that was almost reverie...pumping...and then the fiercely sweet outcry – hot, wet ejaculation splattering belly and thighs, soaking into the thin cotton of his pajamas.

He closed his eyes, feeling that release echoing through his overstrung nerves and body, and then rolled out of bed heading for the shower.

It was when he opened the medicine cabinet looking for shaving cream that he spotted the small brown bottle of Zolof. His name was on the prescription.

What the hell? *Antidepressants*? Maybe they made sense now that his life was falling apart, but *before* he got whacked on the head?

For a second or two, he stared down at the bottle, trying to reconcile the drugs with what he knew about himself—what he felt he knew, anyway. In the end he was forced to conclude it was simply another mystery.

He dressed in a white tailored shirt—he seemed to have an endless supply of them—and brown trousers, breakfasted on Danish and coffee, and walked up to the museum.

The parking lot was empty, the building still locked. He let himself inside and stood there gazing in dismay at the blinking red light of the alarm system. And then, quite easily, the code came to him and he punched it in.

The green light flicked on.

The relief was almost as overwhelming as the previous panic. He was remembering. It was all coming back. First in bits and pieces, and now in greater chunks of recollection.

He unlocked his office and went inside.

Had anyone been here since the day before? It all looked exactly as he'd left it. Was this feeling of paranoia due to the remaining gaps in his recollection or was there a reason for it?

He opened his laptop. The sign-in screen came up. He stared at it, frowning.

Then...he closed his eyes and just typed.

And just like that he was in—and blinking at a desktop background of himself and Cole. There were other people in the photo as well, but the center of attention was obvious—and embarrassing.

And all at once it was as though someone had splashed a bucket of cold water in his face. What was *with* him mooning over his married college roommate?

Was he really this lonely? This obsessed? Because from the strange perspective of an outsider looking in at Peter Killian's life, this just seemed...pathetic.

The first thing he did was change the desktop background to a generic picture of woods. As the autumn woodland scene flashed up, replacing the photograph of his fatuous smiling face gazing at Cole's profile, he felt an almost physical relief. Like a weight had been lifted off his chest.

Peter spent the next few hours reacquainting himself with his work life. It was some solace at least to see that however screwed up his personal life was, he was efficient and thorough when it came to his professional life.

As he went through e-mails, more and more came back to him. And not just his work life. He remembered all kinds of things. The door had swung back open – and this time it stayed open.

When he hit the gaps, it was almost disconcerting. But perhaps some of these were normal gaps. No one could remember the details of every meeting, every phone conversation, surely?

He clicked through the mail in his in-box. He had been working with a couple of local schools to arrange tours, and Sally Orchard was demanding a number of answers on questions relating to the annual charity ball to be held the following month.

He checked the files on his desktop. It looked like he had still been working on cataloging the museum's collections. That supported what Griffin had said – that Peter had discovered the thefts when he began to move from the manual catalog system to the electronic.

What had he noticed? What had tipped him off? Somewhere he must have made notes.

Certainly there was nothing threatening in any of this. Nothing that he should have wanted or needed to forget. In fact, there was remarkably little personal information in his office or his computer. Nor was it like museum curator was a high-risk job. Mostly it was planning, displaying, and cataloging the museum's myriad

collections, which certainly seemed to be how he mostly spent his days. He also planned and oversaw tours and organized programs and the occasional workshop. That was about it. No Indiana Jones stuff for him.

His phone buzzed. He picked it up, and the perfect android voice said, "Mr. Constantine on line one."

"Thank you, Mary."

She clicked off. He took a breath and said, "Peter here."

"Pete." The warmth in that voice made him close his eyes. "I tried the bungalow, but you weren't answering. I thought I ordered you to take it easy."

*Ordered?*

"I feel better working."

"Peter."

Indulgent. Affectionate. Knowing. Yes. That was why he kept hanging on. But hanging on to *what*? A dream. Because sure as hell no memory of anything more tangible than a few brotherly hugs was coming back to him.

A little more briskly, Cole said, "How *are* you feeling today?"

Peter replied crisply, "Fine, thanks. Much better, in fact."

"After last night's adventure? Are you trying to pretend you're Superman?"

"No, of course not. I feel fine. How did you find about last night's attempted break-in?"

"Donnelly called me. I don't want to chew your ass, Pete, but you really should have called me yourself."

He should have. And the fact that he hadn't was more proof than anything that he was still a ways from back to normal.

"I was going to call first thing. It was two o'clock in the morning. I didn't see the point of disturbing you and...Angie." *Angie*. That was it. Yes, it was all coming back. The good and the bad.

"I understand, but –"

He blurted out, "My memory is starting to come back."

There was a pause and then Cole said heartily, "Excellent!"

"Yes."

There was another pause and then Cole said, "Well, since you *are* feeling better and since you say your memory is returning...the board of trustees would like to meet with you this afternoon. Are you up for that?"

Peter's heart sank. "Of course."

"It shouldn't be... Well, obviously there are questions. Things to discuss. But I don't anticipate any problems for you personally."

"All right."

The fact that Cole was bothering to say this indicated to Peter that he did indeed anticipate problems for Peter.

"We'll see you at four in the conference room then."

"Yes."

Cole clicked off. Peter hung up and jumped as the phone buzzed again.

"Yes?"

Mary said tersely, "The police are here."

## Chapter Five

Peter left his office and walked to the end of the short hall in time to see Detective Griffin crossing the main exhibit room. A group of special-ed students was touring the museum, and one of the boys was making loud bird sounds.

Griffin watched them without expression.

Peter said, "You're here bright and early."

The hard blue gaze turned his way like an artillery battery zeroing on a target. "I heard about your break-in."

"And you think I faked it in order to throw suspicion off myself."

Griffin laughed. Not only was his laugh unexpectedly appealing, something about it struck Peter as...familiar. "I admit it doesn't really seem like your style."

"What do you think my style is?" He threw that over his shoulder as he started to turn away, but his attention was caught by Griffin's expression.

He hadn't been sure before, but now—something about that lazy, knowing appraisal—he was certain Griffin was gay.

Griffin said, "I think you don't like to take chances. I think you're careful and that you think before you act. You'd know enough not to knock the glass out on the wrong side of the door."

Peter grimaced. "I did knock the glass out, but it was an accident."

They reached his office as Griffin responded, "Right. But I don't think you have a lot of accidents. Which is why I have trouble with the scenario of you happening to walk down to the grotto at the exact moment thieves were yanking out that mural."

"Coincidences happen."

"Not to guys like you."

"Careful. Thoughtful. Crooked."

Griffin smiled that lazy smile again. "Anyway, that's not why I dropped by."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"I have news. Good news and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?"

Peter said honestly, "I don't know if I can take bad news right now."

Griffin gave him a long, unreadable look. "You have a partial alibi for the night of the robbery."

Peter sagged back against the wall. "I do?"

"Don't sound so surprised."

"I'm not surprised I have an alibi. I'm surprised you bothered to look for it. I didn't get the impression you had any interest in proving me innocent."

"It's not my job to *prove* anything. My job is to collect evidence and arrest the most likely suspect."

"Which you've decided is me."

Griffin stared at him for what seemed like a long time. "You think I'm being unfair to you? Trying to railroad you?"

He probably got excellent results with that intimidating stare. Peter refused to be intimidated. "I don't know. You seem to have your mind made up about me."

"I consider myself a pretty good judge of character."

"And you think I'm a thief?"

He was surprised when Griffin didn't immediately answer.

After a pause, Peter asked, "What's my alibi?"

"You were at Griffith Park horseback riding with friends who you later went to dinner with at Viva Fresh Mexican restaurant. Apparently that's how you spend all your Thursday evenings." He managed to make it sound like the kind of lame-ass thing Peter *would* do.

The relief was considerable. Except...the look on Griffin's face was not reassuring. In fact, if it weren't so unbelievable, he'd have said Griffin looked slightly sorry for him.

He made himself ask. "So what's the bad news?"

"Donald Herschel, a local pawnshop dealer, identified you as the man who's been coming in for the past twelve months selling items that showed up on the police report you filed."

A perfect and utter stillness gripped Peter. Somewhere, a long way off—possibly in another lifetime—he could hear that kid in the main exhibit room squawking like a frightened bird. Farther in the distance, a phone was ringing, muted and musical.

His lips felt stiff as he said, "It's not true."

Griffin simply looked at him.

Peter was shaking his head, denying it, denying the panic that was threatening to close him down. "There's some mistake."

"Maybe. He picked you out of a photo lineup, but we'd like to see how he does with the real thing."

"The real thing," Peter repeated numbly. "A-a lineup, you mean?"

"Right."

He swallowed hard. His throat felt fossilized.

"At a police station."

"Yep."



Peter couldn't seem to tear his gaze away from Griffin's. He said finally, dully, "I need to get a lawyer, don't I?"

Griffin eyed him dispassionately for what felt like a very long time. "Yes," he said. "You do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Time flew. Not because Peter was having fun. Not even because he was busy, though he worked through the morning and afternoon. Whether he truly accomplished anything was debatable.

After Griffin left, Peter phoned a lawyer friend who recommended another lawyer who then referred him to a criminal lawyer. Peter set up an appointment with the criminal lawyer for the following morning, which was the soonest he could get—although the lawyer assured him that if Peter was arrested, he'd be there to bail him out before his mug shot was dry.

Far from reassuring Peter, this brought home to him the fact that he was probably going to be arrested—and that he had nothing to make bail with. He earned a very modest income. It was sufficient to his needs, mostly because his living expenses—rent and utilities—were covered by Constantine House. He owned no property—unless someone was in the market for a neurotic ex-racehorse—and there was less than four thousand dollars in his checking account.

Peter thanked Mr. Stephenson of Stephenson and Crane Law Offices, hung up the phone, and made straight for the men's room, where he spent the next three and a half minutes having dry heaves.

When he'd recovered sufficiently, he returned to his office and tried to work, but the struggle to concentrate was exhausting. Given the gaps in his memory, it would have been exhausting anyway. But silent panic was now his constant companion—practically a second presence in his office.

He was so anxious about the impending police lineup – and this lunatic pawnshop dealer who had misidentified him – that he had little energy to worry about the meeting with the board of trustees scheduled for that afternoon.

It was almost a shock when he looked at the clock and saw that it was 4:02.

Mary had not told him the trustees had arrived. He wondered with a surge of hope whether the meeting had been postponed, but when he walked down the hall to the conference room – formerly the mansion’s dining room – he found the three trustees were not only already there, they were beginning to check their watches.

Sally Orchard was a heavyset, middle-aged woman who made a point of doing nothing with her hair or clothes. If she had ever worn makeup, it would have been in the interest of scaring little children on Halloween. Peter could remember a series of long and silly skirmishes with her on a variety of petty issues over everything from the museum electrical bills to a personal parking space for Sally.

Dennis Montero – one of the four people who had access to the museum security code – was a small, portly man who vaguely resembled a pig. Not an ugly pig. A cute, roly-poly, piggy-bank kind of pig. Peter had always got on well with Dennis, and Dennis smiled in greeting – and then looked guilty – as Peter entered the room.

Peter barely registered the other two, his attention being focused on Cole, who had apparently been trying to find him.

“There you are!” Cole was smiling, his blue eyes warm but troubled.

“Sorry. I lost track of time.”

Sally sniffed disapprovingly. Cole said, “We understand you’re busy. Have a seat, Peter.”

Peter took a seat at the long dark dining table that now served as conference table. Sally was clicking down the meeting’s minutes on her laptop.

Cole cleared his throat. “First of all,” he said, “the board wants to make it very clear that we’re pleased with your work at Constantine House. Your knowledge and

ability is unquestioned. Your energy and enthusiasm for working with the public has been instrumental in bringing the museum out of the red. I think we'd all agree with that."

Cole looked pointedly at Sally, who sniffed noncommittally and continued typing on her laptop.

Peter managed to find words in the dry desert of his mouth. "Thank you."

"However" – Cole stared at the file before him as though it were the most fascinating thing in the world – "the past week has brought to light some disturbing...information."

"I'm not stealing from the museum," Peter said. It came out more harshly than he intended, and Dennis jumped.

"No one's suggesting... That is..."

Cole looked at Sally, who raised her head from her laptop and said in that heavy, pompous way, "I think if you'll look at this objectively for a moment, Killian, you'll agree that we have no choice but to suspend you pending the outcome of the police investigation."

Peter looked at Cole. Cole seemed unable to hold his gaze, his own eyes dark with emotion.

"It's hard for me to look at it objectively," Peter said. "I know I'm innocent of any wrongdoing. I'm the one who went to the police a year ago. No one would have been aware of the thefts if I hadn't brought them to the attention of the police."

"That's not true," Sally said. "The thefts were bound to be discovered eventually. It's probable" – she corrected herself – "it's *possible* that you hoped to shift any suspicion from yourself by bringing the matter to the attention of the police. After all, the investigation didn't go anywhere."

"So the failure of the police is my fault too?"

Cole said quietly, "Peter, this isn't easy for any of us."

Peter stared at him in disbelief. "No, but I think we can agree that it's a hell of a lot less easy for me."

Cole's face tightened, and Peter caught himself before he said anything else. This wasn't helping; it was probably making it worse. And maybe Cole didn't realize how personal this betrayal felt, although he'd have to be pretty stupid not to. But maybe he was stupid. Maybe that was one of the things Peter had forgotten.

For all he knew, this was just an excuse for the board of trustees to get rid of him. He remembered what Griffin had said about there being discussion of terminating his contract with the museum. So maybe this was so much smoke screen, and the bottom line was, he was out regardless of what the police found or didn't find.

Still, he couldn't help saying, "Everyone seems to forget that I was attacked and injured during the robbery. If I was in on it, that wasn't a very good plan."

"You weren't killed, though," Sally pointed out. She'd have been a hit with the Salem witch trials, Peter reflected.

"I see. So you think I'd risk brain damage to try and cover my tracks, is that it?"

"No one thinks that," Cole said, although it was obvious from Sally's expression that, that was exactly what she thought. "This isn't a trial or a board of inquiry or anything like that. We're just taking the normal steps any organization in our position would take. As soon as you're exonerated, you'll be reinstated, of course."

Sally clicked busily away at her laptop without comment. Dennis was looking at his watch.

Peter said tersely, "Very well. I'll abide by your decision."

Not that he had any choice, but the other three looked various shades of relieved.

They began gathering up their notes and paper cups, and Peter stood motionless, wondering if he was supposed to hand over his keys. Probably, since he was suspected of ripping off his own museum, but he was not going to volunteer, and apparently none of them thought of it—or if they did, had the guts to ask him for the keys flat out.

He turned and left the conference room. He could hear the murmur of their voices before he was halfway down the hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm so glad you called!" Roma screamed over the roar of wind as they tore down Sunset Boulevard, weaving in and out of rush-hour traffic. "We've been thinking about you."

Jessica, her hand to her tiger-framed glasses to keep them from blowing away in the gale-force breeze, nodded eager agreement.

"Thanks for doing this. I appreciate it," Peter said. "I didn't know who else to call."

"We'd have killed you if you called anyone else," Roma cried. "This is so much fun. Such a great idea!"

Peter smiled weakly. He didn't know if it was a great idea or not, but at least it was an idea—so far the only one that had occurred to him. Whoever this Donald Herschel was, this pawnshop dealer who Detective Griffin claimed had identified Peter as the seller of stolen goods, he clearly had Peter mixed up with someone else. Photos weren't reliable. And inevitably Herschel would be trying to match the Peter of the physical lineup with the photo he'd seen. But if presented with the living, breathing Peter, surely he'd see his mistake?

And if he didn't?

Well, if nothing else, Peter wanted a look at *him*. Maybe Herschel was someone he'd had some dealings with through the museum? Someone who had a grudge against him or the museum? As far-fetched as that seemed, it wasn't as far-fetched as the idea that Peter would be fencing stolen articles from Constantine House.

It hadn't taken him long to track the pawnshop down through the Internet. Sunset Boulevard Jewelry and Loan, proprietor: Donald Herschel. Hours: ten thirty a.m. to eight p.m.

With some fancy maneuvering, Roma managed to secure a parking space on the crowded street. She and Jessica went inside to pretend to browse as they'd discussed on the drive over.

Peter waited in the car, giving them time to position themselves. The shop was quite a bit larger than he'd expected. It looked successful and busy.

He looked at his watch and got out of the car, crossing the street.

As he was buzzed inside the security door it occurred to him that in an operation of this size, Herschel might not be there. He'd been expecting a little hole-in-the-wall with an aged Shylock, jeweler's loupe at ready, waiting behind a battered front desk.

The reality was a large, well-lit shop stuffed with everything from televisions to musical instruments. An assortment of rifles and handguns were locked in cabinets along one wall. There was an enormous glass case of jewelry in the front of the shop. Jessica and Roma were talking to a slender young man about a man-sized harp—somewhere an angel was apparently in hock.

Another man stood behind the counter. Tall and broad-shouldered, he had long dark hair, thinning on top and a full, dark beard. His automatic smile of welcome died at the sight of Peter walking down the center aisle.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Donald Herschel?"

"You know damn well who I am. What are you trying to pull?"

"I'm not trying to pull anything. I want to know why you lied to the police."

"Lied to the police!" Herschel laughed. "You're kidding me, right?"

Peter glanced at Roma and Jessica, who were watching with dismay. Definitely not going the way any of them had hoped.

"Are you trying to tell me that I've been in here before?"

"Are you trying to tell me you haven't?" Herschel laughed again and nodded at the security camera in the corner over the counter. "It's a little late for that."

Peter gazed into the security camera. He hadn't expected that, but...it didn't change anything. He knew he had not stolen from the museum or tried to pawn his ill-gotten booty. "You have me confused with someone else."

"No I don't. And I'll tell you now what I told you the last time you brought that junk in here. I don't deal in stolen property and I don't deal with crooks. Now get out of my store. I'm calling the cops."

## Chapter Six

"Why?" Griffin asked when Peter opened his front door later that same evening.

Peter repeated warily, "Why?"

Griffin moved forward and Peter stepped back, allowing the detective into the bungalow. It wasn't as though he had much choice. Griffin was bullying his way inside whether Peter wanted it or not. He jabbed his finger in Peter's chest, emphasizing his point with each poke.

"You know something, Killian, you really are pretty stupid. Cute, in a stick-up-the-ass kind of way, but stone stupid." Peter opened his mouth but didn't get a chance to speak as the cop continued, "Why the fuck would you confront a witness in the case being built against you?"

Peter halted his retreat. "For that reason. Because you're building a case against me and it's a goddamned lie. And I don't care how many fake witnesses you come up with—"

"You think I'm *manufacturing* evidence against you?" If Griffin had looked furious before, he looked combustible now. "Are you nuts? If I was manufacturing evidence against you, do you think I'd have told you we had a witness who could link you to the property stolen from the museum?"



"What the hell did you tell me for if you didn't want me to do anything about it?"

Peter knew that wasn't a reasonable question, so he was astonished when Griffin roared, "So you could hire a lawyer. So you wouldn't be broadsided."

"Why the hell would you care? You've been trying to stick me with this from the beginning."

"You know why! So quit feeding me that horseshit about not remembering."

"I *don't* remember!" What the hell were they yelling about? Peter wasn't completely sure. He only knew that the level of anger—on both sides—didn't make sense.

Maybe Griffin had the same thought, because all at once he was ice-cold.

"I don't know if I feel sorry for you or I'm actually a little glad to see you get what you deserve. You want to stick to that idiot story, go right ahead. But I've got to tell you, that amnesia bullshit might work in those romance novels you're so fond of, but it's not going to fly in real life. Whatever the hell it is you're hiding, you better give it up and come clean. Or you're going to wind up in prison."

And on that note, Griffin wheeled away and slammed out of the house, leaving Peter gaping after him.

The door Griffin had banged shut drifted open again. Peter closed it absently, thinking hard.

Every encounter with Griffin seemed to indicate that he and Peter had had some previous interaction—and it had to be something more intimate than Peter reporting museum thefts, given the detective's level of hostility. Peter put a hand to his chest where Griffin had poked him. Even that, that level of physicality, seemed indicative of a more personal relationship. And that comment about romance novels. How in the hell could Griffin possibly know he read romance novels?

Unless the police *had* searched his bungalow while he'd been in the hospital? But Griffin had said no, and why should he lie about it? He was blunt enough about everything else.

Yet another mystery, but this one niggled at him.

Unable to relax, Peter prowled around the bungalow for a time, before deciding to go up to the museum and retrieve his laptop. If nothing else, he could catch up on some e-mail.

Crickets chirped in loud chorus as he crossed the otherwise silent garden. The scent of flowers hung in the still-warm air.

Peter unlocked the back door of the museum and let himself inside, punching the security code in. In the eerie green glow of the emergency lights, the museum looked even more macabre than usual as he walked quietly down the hallway past the exhibits to his office.

He put his laptop in its case, locked his office, and returned to the main hall, his footsteps echoing emptily.

Before he reset the security code he paused, listening. All was quiet. What was he expecting to hear?

Peter left the museum and made his way quickly across the garden back to his bungalow.

He reheated another portion of chicken rice casserole and settled down at the desk in his study to work but instead found himself listing out all the possible suspects in the museum thefts.

First on his list was Mary Montero. But that was mostly because he didn't care for the kid. As criminal masterminds went, she'd probably be too busy filing her nails. Granted, she was at the museum all day and certainly had access to the exhibits. Furthermore, her father, Dennis Montero, was one of the only people with the after-hours access code to the museum, which meant—at least in theory—that Mary had

access to the code as well. But the first thefts had occurred before Mary was working in the museum.

Dennis Montero. Well, Peter had always pegged him as indolent and affable. The Monteros appeared to be affluent, though who knew about the financial details of other people's lives. The Monteros could be struggling beneath the comfortable country-club surface. Even so it was difficult to picture Dennis down in the grotto dirtying his own hands. He'd definitely subcontract his life of crime.

Donnelly, the night watchman, certainly had access to the museum and grounds. He might be hard up for money; Peter didn't know him well enough to speculate, let alone draw conclusions, there. The old fellow had always appeared to enjoy his job for whatever that was worth. Apparently not much since Peter had loved his job too, but the police still viewed him as viable suspect.

Cole... Well, that was ridiculous. However, for the sake of argument...yes, once upon a time Cole had been hard up for money – relatively speaking – but all that had changed when he wed Angie. Angie Rowland was a very wealthy young woman. It seemed pretty unlikely Cole would have to resort to stealing from his own museum.

Anyway, it didn't have to be anyone with after-hours access to the museum – nor anyone on staff or working at Constantine House in any capacity. The theft of the wall mural could have been pulled off by professional art thieves, and the pilfering from the museum could possibly be occurring during business hours. Granted, it wasn't probable, but it was possible.

Clearly it wasn't what Detective Griffin thought. But Griffin...

Peter kept coming back to that crack about romance novels. How *did* Griffin know that?

It was about ten o'clock when the doorbell rang. Peter rose from his desk and went to peer through the peephole in the front door.

Cole.

Briefly he considered telling him to get lost, but not only was Cole technically still his employer, Peter felt a bitter curiosity as to what Cole thought he could possibly say.

He turned the lock and opened the door. Cole stepped inside.

"We have to talk."

Peter moved aside and Cole brushed past him. He smelled of aftershave — Armani Code — and, very faintly, whiskey.

Inside, Cole looked around narrowly; did he think Peter might have stolen items from the museum lying about the bungalow? He looked haggard as his eyes met Peter's.

Peter folded his arms across his chest. "What did you want to talk about?"

He could hear the coldness in his voice and could tell from Cole's wince that he heard it too.

"If you think I'm happy about what happened today, you're wrong."

"I don't think you're happy. But you sure as hell didn't lift a finger to stop it."

"How could I?"

How couldn't you? Peter thought, but Cole sounded genuinely pained, so he said wearily, "Look, I don't want to fight with you."

"That's the last thing I want either."

"Would you like a drink?"

Cole nodded distractedly. "Thanks."

Peter went to the liquor cabinet, realizing as he did so that he knew what Cole drank — two fingers of Johnny Walker Black Label on the rocks — and he also knew that he would find a bottle in his liquor cabinet, where he kept it in hope that Cole might drop by.

He poured two drinks and carried them into the living room. Cole was still standing, gazing down at the collection of photos as though looking for answers in those freeze-framed faces.

Peter handed him his drink, their fingers brushed. Cole tossed the whiskey back in two long swallows.

"Again?"

Cole moved his head in the negative. He turned the glass nervously in his hand. "Are you still...? Do you still really not remember anything?"

"You don't believe me, do you?" Peter studied him curiously. Why would Cole think him capable of making something like this up?

"You were... You've been very...unhappy."

"Unhappy enough to turn to a life of crime?"

"Of course not."

"Then what are you talking about? What am I so unhappy about?"

Cole said awkwardly, "I suppose a number of things in your life didn't turn out the way you wanted."

Wasn't that true of everyone to a degree? Was Cole suggesting that Peter didn't want to remember because he was unhappy and disappointed? About...what?

"I don't understand. I have good friends. A job I love." Yet as Peter said it, he remembered the Zoloft in the bathroom cabinet. Clearly something had not been right in his life.

As though reading his thoughts, Cole said, "But it wasn't enough. You were lonely."

Suddenly it was hard to meet his gaze. "Maybe."

"I'm sorry for that. Sorry if I hurt you. It wasn't intentional. You're...you're one of my oldest...one of my closest friends."

It had to be asked. "Is that all we are? Friends?"

The Adam's apple in Cole's throat jumped. "Yes. God. I'm sorry. But yes. We've never been anything more than friends." He said it very firmly.

"Why are you sorry?"

Cole seemed to have trouble meeting his eyes. "Because..."

"I would have liked more?"

He nodded. "It's a long time in the past, but yes. At one time you would have liked our friendship to be more."

Peter nodded. He thought of the dreams he'd had been having. Such vivid, detailed dreams of himself and Cole. Fantasy, not memory. But very real for all that. Apparently he was a lot more of a romantic than he'd realized, carrying a torch for his best friend all these years. Romantic...or maybe just an ass.

"I don't know why," Cole was saying. "I've never...had any curiosity that way. I don't know what you thought you saw."

"Neither do I." He didn't mean it insultingly, but he could see from Cole's expression the way it sounded. "I mean...I don't remember feeling that. I know I – It's obvious I had feelings for you at one time."

"Yes."

At one point Cole had clearly been one of the most important people in his life. Presumably someone he trusted – someone who trusted him. But that hit on the head must have knocked some sense into him.

"Was it a problem for us? My feelings for you?"

"No. God, no. We'd resolved all that years ago. Back in college."

"Then why do you think I was so unhappy?"

Cole looked even more uncomfortable. "It's just an impression. Things changed after my marriage last year. We weren't as close."

"Well, we wouldn't be, right?"

Cole's eyes met his. "That's true. And maybe you had come to terms with it. But you seemed distant...worried."

"Couldn't it have had to do with the thefts at the museum?"

"Perhaps."

*Perhaps?* Was it his imagination or was Cole something of a narcissist? Because somehow Peter had trouble believing—not that Cole wasn't an attractive guy; he was. But...seeing him these past few days, as though for the first time, well, Peter really didn't feel like Cole was all that much his type.

Maybe it did have to do with that fat gold wedding band on Cole's left hand. Maybe it had to do with the fact that Cole hadn't stood up for him with the board of trustees. Or maybe his feelings for Cole had been mostly infatuation that he was finally—and high time—growing out of. Whatever it was, as Peter scrutinized the other man, he felt oddly dispassionate, even cool.

"Cole, why did you come here this evening?"

Cole didn't answer.

Peter thought he understood. "I appreciate your concern, but at this point it's up to the police."

"Yes." Cole continued to watch him in that hard-to-decipher way.

"Or is there something else?"

"Such as?"

"I don't know." Peter said slowly, "Detective Griffin said that there had been some discussion of replacing me at the museum before today."

"*What?*"

"He said that even before I became a suspect in the museum thefts that there was talk of terminating my contract."

"He's saying it to get a rise out of you or something. It's not true."

Peter had not thought it was true either, until he listened to Cole denying it. Then he realized that Griffin had apparently got it right. It was right there in Cole's tone. It wasn't the idea he was shocked at, it was the fact that Griffin had found out.

"I don't understand." And despite his best effort, Peter couldn't hide his upset. "I've worked my ass off for the museum. You said yourself we're finally beginning to see a profit."

"Pete" — Cole rested his hands on Peter's shoulders — "it's not true. I don't know why he told you that, but of course it's not true."

And the more Cole denied it, the more Peter could see that it was true.

Chilled, he said, "That's good. I've been completely loyal to you and the museum. I'd be disappointed to think my loyalty wasn't returned."

Cole's hands, still resting lightly on Peter's shoulders, began to knead gently. "There's nothing for you to worry about. No one is going to disappoint you. As soon as this mess gets cleared up, you'll have your job back. Trust me."

"I'd like to."

"You can. I promise you." He seemed to re-collect himself and let Peter go. "Everything will work out. You'll see."

"Griffin seems to think I'm going to be arrested."

"I don't believe that."

Peter had no real response to Cole's optimism. He'd have liked to believe Cole, but he tended to think Griffin had the inside track.

"If I am arrested —"

"That's nonsense. You won't be arrested." Abruptly, Cole headed for the front door, and Peter followed him slowly.

If he was arrested, it was obvious that Cole would feel himself unable to help — all part of that antifavoritism thing, apparently.

At the door, Cole hesitated. His blue eyes gazed deeply into Peter's. His whiskey breath fanned Peter's mouth. It was a little weird, actually. Was Cole...? Did Cole want to kiss him? Peter wasn't sure, but it sort of seemed like...

Cole said a little huskily, "Good night, Peter."



"Good night."

Peter closed the door, locked it, and wondered what the hell that had been about.

## Chapter Seven

Peter knew what the result of the lineup would be from the moment he arrived at the police station Wednesday morning. He could feel it in the way he was greeted—even by his lawyer—and in the way he was escorted down to the waiting room. It was obvious that this was pretty much a formality. Mr. Stephenson had as good as said so. In fact, he'd actually said he wasn't sure why the police were wasting everyone's time with a lineup since Donald Herschel had already identified Peter, before, during, and now after his impromptu visit to the pawnshop, as the man who'd tried to sell him stolen goods.

Peter wondered if he should apologize for wasting Mr. Stephenson's valuable time. He'd have been happy to skip the lineup himself. At least he didn't have long to wait before he was summoned to join a queue of eight other men approximately his height and build waiting in a hallway. They were led inside a long bare room and instructed to face what was clearly a two-way mirror.

A voice over the loudspeaker asked them to turn to the right, back to center, and then to the left. They were each asked to speak an innocuous line—Peter had already forgotten what they said about three seconds afterward.

They were thanked for their time, escorted back to the waiting room, and Detective Griffin appeared for the first time—Peter's lawyer in tow.

Peter saw it in Griffin's face. He was absolutely prepared, so it was a little shock to feel that wave of light-headedness washing over him as Griffin told him he was under arrest. He managed to hide it, he hoped, standing silent while Griffin put the handcuffs on him.

"Is this necessary?" Stephenson said, sounding mostly bored. "My client has cooperated every step of the way. He's *already* in police custody."

"We've got procedures to follow, counselor," Griffin said, snapping the handcuffs closed. "Sorry," he added brusquely—and that was directed to Peter, though he barely registered it.

"I'll arrange bail proceedings as we've discussed, Peter," Stephenson said, moving away.

Peter nodded. He felt like he was watching it all happen to someone else, and that was probably just as well. He embraced his inner numbness. If he could have climbed onto an astral plane, he'd have done it. He thought Griffin might have addressed a couple of other remarks to him before he was handed over to the uniformed officer who took his mug shots and fingerprints, but it was like listening to someone across a busy street.

He spent hours in a cell with a sullen-looking Asian kid who appeared to be tattooed over every visible inch of his hide and an elderly drunk with a bushy mustache who was snoring for all the world like a cartoon character.

Every so often the Illustrated Man would get up, shrieking obscenities, and slam at the bars of the cell, and the sleeper would snort loudly like he was about to go into respiratory failure.

At last Peter's name was called and he was escorted to where Roma and Jessica waited for him.

He managed a terse thanks before going to collect the envelope of his personal belongings.

"You didn't think we were going to leave you to rot in there, did you?" Roma demanded, wrapping him in a big hug as he returned to where they patiently waited for him. She must have seen that he was fighting for his composure because she said briskly, "God, this is a depressing place. Let's get *out* of here."

"You should have called us first thing," Jessica said, taking her turn at hugging him tightly.

"I was hoping..." Peter didn't try to try to finish it. He'd been hoping for a miracle. He hadn't got it, but the next best thing had happened: his friends had stood by him, and he'd never been so grateful to see anyone in his life. In fact, he was very much afraid he was going to make a huge fool of himself if they didn't get out of there fast.

He sat in the back of the MG, eyes closed, while Roma rocketed them home. The hot, dry wind blowing against his face felt clean and comforting.

When they got back to the bungalow, it was nearly five o'clock. He'd spent the entire day in jail; it felt like a month. Like a lifetime.

He excused himself and went upstairs to shower, standing under the warm spray for a long, long time, letting the cleansing water sluice over his head and shoulders.

He felt marginally better when he went downstairs. Roma and Jessica were in the kitchen. They had found the flask of cold brew in the fridge that he'd put in there what felt like a year ago and were drinking iced coffee. Peter opted for whiskey.

"Hungry?" Jessica asked brightly. "There's plenty of chicken rice casserole left."

"Maybe later." There was something funny about the way they were watching him. Newly – and possibly rightly – paranoid, he asked, "What is it?"

Roma nodded at the table, and he saw that there was a letter there with the official stamp of the museum.

"It came while you were in the shower," Jessica said in a stifled voice.

Peter reached for the letter and ripped it open before he had time to think about it.

*Dear Mr. Killian.*

His eyes scanned the neatly typed page. It was polite and perfunctory. The Constantine House Board of Trustees had convened in an emergency meeting to reach the unanimous if regretful decision that they must terminate his contract with their organization—effective immediately. He had ten days to vacate the bungalow in which he currently resided.

His eyes were drawn again to that weirdly formal *Dear Mr. Killian*.

"What is it?" Roma demanded, although it was clear from her tone of voice that she had a pretty good idea what it was.

He handed her the letter and went to stare out the window over the sink at the trees.

"That lousy son of a bitch Cole," Roma snarled. "When are you going to see him for the manipulative, selfish bastard that he is?"

Not that Peter was feeling particularly high on Cole at the moment, but this did seem a little out of the blue.

"How is it Cole's fault?"

"Don't defend him!" Roma and Jessica yelled in chorus, and he stared at them, bewildered.

"For God's sake, Peter! Cole has traded on your feelings for him for *years*. He gives you just enough to keep you hanging on—without ever actually giving you *anything*. He got you to work for him instead of taking the job in Boston..."

*"Boston?"*

"How can you not remember this?"

Good question. He opened his mouth and closed it again.

Jessica said, "You'd agreed to take a job at a museum in Boston for nearly double the salary when Cole asked you to take the position here at Constantine House."

"I—"

"*You*," Roma said flatly. "And you'll want to notice Cole didn't come up with the job when *you* needed a job; he only suggested Constantine House after you'd already accepted another, better position. When he saw you getting away."

"Getting away?" Peter echoed, staring at her.

"That's right. Oh my God." She ran both hands through her dark hair, causing it to stand up in tufts. "You have no idea how badly we wanted you to go—as much as we love you—just to get away from him. But of course he couldn't let that happen."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Roma's right," Jessica said calmly. "We don't know what Cole's story is. We only know him through you—but that's plenty. Maybe he's truly conflicted or maybe he's just so self-centered it's pathological, but every single time you start to move on, he finds some way to drag you back. Do you know how many relationships he's spoiled for you over the years? Just by crooking his little finger."

Peter was shaking his head. "You're wrong. He told me last night there was nothing between us—and there never has been."

"And as he said it he smiled into your eyes and held your gaze and brushed your arm with his hand. Peter, we've been watching him in action for *years*. He plays you like a...a..."

"Maestro," Jessica supplied.

Peter trailed off, unwilling to believe what he was hearing, although it was obvious from both their faces that this was a truth they had been long wanting to deliver. "Even if you're right...even if it's true, how does that"—he nodded at the letter now lying on the table—"have anything to do with it?"

"Because Cole totally controls that board. If you're being terminated, then that's Cole's decision. For whatever reason, *Cole* wants you gone. Either because he thinks you're guilty or a liability or because he's afraid of the scandal. Or all of the above."

"Or because you're too much of a temptation," Jessica put in. "I don't think that marriage is exactly a grand passion."

"Cole is not gay," Roma said shortly.

"We don't know what Cole is."

"Other than a manipulative bastard."

"On that we're agreed." Jessica looked sympathetic. "I'm sorry, Peter, but there really is a pattern here, and it's been going on for a long time. Every time you meet someone and it seems like you're happy, Cole finds some way to yank you back."

Roma interjected, "He gives you just enough that you start to think maybe you do really matter to him after all. We've seen this again and again. I mean, I was actually glad you couldn't remember Cole after you got hit on the head. That's how bad it is."

One thing was patently clear. They believed every word they were saying. And that belief, that certainty, was painfully convincing. Peter asked dully, "When was the last time this happened? That I started seeing someone else and Cole...yanked me back?"

"It's been a while. About six months. You were seeing someone you met through work, and it seemed like it was going really well. And then Cole started having marital problems and he needed a buddy's shoulder to cry on. And the next thing we heard, you weren't seeing anyone anymore."

"What was the name of this guy I was seeing?"

Roma and Jessica were both shaking their heads. "You didn't say," Roma said. "In fact, you were kind of mysterious about it. We thought maybe it was someone you'd met at a conference."

"Maybe someone married."

"Great."

Roma said darkly, "I don't think you'd get involved with someone married. It's not like you haven't had plenty of that already. I think subconsciously you didn't want Cole to know you were getting involved with someone again."

"You were really depressed afterward," Jessica said. "I mean...not just down, but down."

Peter thought again of the bottle of Zoloft in the bathroom.

"And that's not like you," Roma put in. "You've always been very positive and optimistic. Just a really enthusiastic person." She added, "If a little slow on the uptake."

He shot her a look, and she offered a lopsided grin. "And I say that with the greatest affection."

"Yes. I see that." He sighed. "I appreciate the concern. And the honesty. It's... Don't take this the wrong way, but I have enough to deal with without this."

"But you need to hear this, Peter," Jessica said earnestly. "You cannot trust Cole."

It was practically like one of those TV interventions. He said tiredly, "I won't. I don't."

Roma was glaring at the letter. "This is *typical* of the no-balls way that gutless jerk would handle something like this."

He appreciated their sympathy, but really this was just making it harder. He said, "Thank you for telling me. I mean that. To be honest, I don't know what I feel for Cole anymore." At their expressions, he said hastily, "Except that I know I don't...feel *that*. I don't love him. And I know that whatever he feels for me" — this was the part that still felt raw — "it's not enough to inconvenience himself when I'm in trouble." He finished the rest of the whiskey in his glass, and the burn going down his throat helped.

There was a pause. "Why don't you come back with us?" Jessica urged. "You shouldn't be alone tonight."



Peter shook his head. He dredged up a smile, which he hoped looked more reassuring than it felt. "I'll sleep better in my own bed, and that's what I feel like I need now. A good night's sleep."

They didn't like it, but in the end they had to accept his decision. Even so he had to promise to remember to eat the rest of the dried-out casserole, not get drunk by himself, and call if he needed anything.

When the MG had sped away, leaving the sound barrier lying broken in the dust, Peter headed for his study. Drawer by drawer he went through his desk, conviction growing with each moment.

*"Those romance novels you love."*

*"So you could hire a lawyer. So you wouldn't be broadsided."*

*"Sorry."*

He found what he was looking for in his address book. There was just a large initial M under the G's. Large enough to take up the height of two lines. Whoever M was, he had been someone Peter didn't want to lose track of.

He rang the number. It rang and rang and then an answering machine picked up and Detective Griffin curtly recited the phone number and instructed him to leave a message.

Peter hung up.

After a moment he realized tears were running down his face. He wiped them away impatiently. One mystery solved.

For a short time he and Michael Griffin had been lovers.

So that was really a relief because it was the uncertainty eating at him, right? And here was one uncertainty explained at last. Good news, really, despite the incontrovertible proof of the fool he had been, so no sense sitting here sniveling. He had probably made worse mistakes than that, starting with passing up the job in Boston.

He started as the phone at his elbow rang.

He picked it up and answered, only to discover it was the *Los Angeles Times* wanting an interview.

He declined and hung up.

Now Griffin's fury at his amnesia made more sense. Or did it? Why exactly was he so angry at Peter? He'd apparently done the dumping. It was a bit unclear. Unless he really did think Peter was ripping off his own museum. Was that why he'd broken it off between them? Did he believe Peter was a thief?

The phone rang again.

Peter picked up. Another newspaper. The blood was in the water, and the sharks were circling.

Peter declined the opportunity to appear as newsworthy chum—less politely than he had turned down the *Times*—and hung up.

He was still staring at the phone when it rang yet again. An unpleasant reminder that he had more pressing problems than the fact that Mike Griffin didn't like him anymore. Peter was jobless, soon-to-be homeless, and probably going to prison for theft.

He took the phone off the hook.

It wasn't until Peter was scraping his dinner plate into the trash that he suddenly registered the absence of his laptop on his desk. He went into the study, and sure enough it was gone.

A quick search of the bungalow confirmed what he already knew. His laptop was gone.

Heart pounding, mouth dry, he called Cole.

It seemed a long time before Cole came on the line, and the sick knowledge roiled in Peter's belly that Cole might simply refuse to speak to him at all. But at last Cole got on the line sounding friendly but wary.

"Peter! How goes it?"

"You mean aside from your firing me today? Well, I was arrested. But I guess you knew that."

"I know. I heard your friends Roma and Jessica were able to put up the bail for you. I wish I could have... Well, you know that. But the conflict of interest between the museum and —"

"Thanks for your concern," Peter bit out. "But that's not why I'm calling. My laptop is missing."

"Oh." Cole said awkwardly, "Someone should have left a note for you. That laptop is museum property, as I'm sure you realize."

"For chrissake, Cole. You're acting like I'm suddenly an enemy. Like I can't be trusted —"

"No, no. It's not that," Cole broke in. "It occurred to us, to Dennis, actually, that the police were probably going to confiscate your laptop anyway, and we wanted to download everything we might need before it disappeared for God knows how long waiting for you to go to trial."

"Waiting for me to..." Peter's voice gave out at the casual reference to his future trial date and probable fate.

"Pete." Cole stopped. He said carefully, "We have to be realistic here."

Peter couldn't have spoken had his life depended on it.

"Angie and I are more sorry than we can say that things have worked out like this for you. We don't think you stole from the museum, but..."

*Angie and I?*

"Right. Thanks."

"We have no doubt that you're going to be proven innocent, but I'm sure you see what a difficult position this is for me. Regardless of my personal feelings, my first responsibility is to the museum."

"Yes, I got that. I assume you want me to turn over my keys too?"

"Your keys to the museum, yes. There's no hurry about the bungalow. You still have nine days to vacate."

Peter said, "That's...kind of you. Nine whole days. Can you wait for the keys until tomorrow or did you want me to bring them to you right now?"

A pause. Cole sounded very subdued as he said, "We've been friends a long time, Pete. Try to look at this from my perspective."

"Through your ass, you mean? Because that's what you're talking through." Peter slammed the receiver down with a shaking hand. The phone rang half a minute after that. He let it ring until it stopped, and then he took it off the hook once more.

It took him a long time to relax enough to fall asleep when he finally calmed down enough to go to bed.

He wasn't sure what woke him. The squeak of a floorboard? A shadow cutting across the band of moonlight through the window? Whatever the warning, Peter's eyes jerked open on the knowledge that someone was in his bedroom.

There was a moment of sheer and paralyzing disbelief, and then some instinct urged movement, and he rolled off the edge of the bed. The mattress next to his head jerked, he heard the weird, squished sound of a silenced shot, then another, then another.

Horrified, he recognized that someone was shooting at him. Unbelievably, someone had just tried to *kill* him.

There wasn't time to think it through. He reacted automatically, grabbing the brass clock off the nightstand and throwing it hard at the tall silhouette illuminated in the moonlight. It made a *ping* as it connected with the intruder's head. He staggered back and fired, hitting the lamp next to the bed a few inches from where Peter was crouched and getting off another shot into the wall behind the nightstand.

There was nowhere to go. Peter dived beneath the bed. The shooter came around the side of the bed, stepping on the small round rug beside it, and some instinct guided Peter to grab the rug and yank hard. The man went down firing. Plaster drifted from the ceiling and a window broke.

Peter was out from under the bed desperately wrestling for the gun. He knew he was fighting for his survival, and that the only rule was to survive the next minutes. It was quick and dirty and brutal. Using both hands, he wrenched the gun out of the man's hand and threw it across the room. The shooter punched him in the head. Dazed, Peter let go, and the man rolled away and scrambled for the door. His footsteps thudded down the stairs, a door slammed and Peter scrambled over to the phone. There was no dial tone.

He thought his attacker must have cut the phone line, and then he remembered that he had taken the phone off the hook before bed.

Legs wobbling, he went downstairs, replaced the phone, and called 911.

## Chapter Eight

“That is a beaut of a shiner,” a familiar voice said admiringly. “What’s the other guy look like?”

Peter looked up from the earnest face of the young female cop taking his statement. Michael Griffin stood beside the kitchen table, his blue eyes taking in Peter’s battered face.

Peter held an ice pack to his right eye, swollen and already darkening. In addition to the black eye, he had a bruise on his jaw—as well as other less visible parts of his anatomy—a chipped molar where his teeth had collided, and two sets of scraped and bloodied knuckles.

He said bitterly, “What makes you think there was another guy? Maybe I did this shaving.”

Griffin gave a harsh laugh, but it was a sore spot with Peter. The crime scene personnel currently wandering around the bungalow had been unable to find where his assailant had broken in. The window of the kitchen door was still boarded up and no other windows had been broken. Nor had either of the locks on the doors of the house been picked or broken.

No one actually came right out and accused Peter of rigging the whole thing, but the fact that he was the primary suspect in the theft of a very valuable painting was obviously being taken into account.

Griffin flashed his ID to the female officer. "Thanks. I'll take it from here. This is part of my ongoing investigation."

She slid out of the breakfast nook, leaving her notes, and Griffin slid in to take her place. He eyed Peter unsmilingly, "You okay?"

"Great."

"I'm serious. Do you need medical attention?"

Peter shook his head.

"Okay. So what happened?"

So much for sympathy. Not that Peter expected it—although, knowing what he now did about their former relationship, maybe he was unconsciously looking for some sign...but there was nothing. He nodded—gingerly—at the uniformed cop who was disappearing into the other room, and Griffin said, "I know. Let's hear it again."

Peter told it all again. How he had woken out of a sound sleep to find someone in his bedroom and twenty seconds later found himself fighting for his life.

"What woke you?" Griffin asked, watching him closely.

"I don't know. Or at least I don't remember. It happened so fast. I was only half awake."

"What made you roll out of the way of those bullets?"

So Griffin had already been upstairs, already heard what the investigating officers had to say. This was probably just a formality. He already thought he knew everything he needed to.

Peter said wearily, "I honestly don't know. There was a shadow over me, and I just...jumped out of the way at the same time he started firing." He added without heat,

"I know you don't believe me. I know you all think this is part of some involved cover story."

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to." He stared through his good eye at Griffin. It was so weird knowing what he now knew. He wished...he wished he could remember their former relationship. He wished Griffin didn't hate him so much.

Not that Griffin was acting like he hated him. Tonight he was all business, cool and professional.

"They can't find how he broke in," Peter said.

"Maybe he didn't break in."

"Yes, that has already been suggested."

Griffin offered the wolfish grin. "Has it? That's not what I mean, though. I don't think you're stupid enough to imagine something like this would work to divert suspicion from you for the theft of the mural."

"And yet you think I'm stupid enough to steal from the museum and then report it to the cops."

Griffin's gaze held his own. "No. I don't, frankly."

Peter sat up a little straighter. "You don't?"

"No." Griffin added, "That doesn't mean that having gone to the police about the thefts—establishing a precedent—you couldn't have arranged to have the mural stolen in an attempt to make it look like part of the same pattern. This was a very different kind of crime. The earlier thefts were all small items easily pilfered. Taking the mural required planning and a partner."

Peter gave a short, disbelieving laugh.

Griffin eyed him for an assessing interim. "But I don't believe you were involved in that either."

"You don't."



"No."

"Then what *do* you think is going on?"

"I think someone wants you dead, Peter."

Peter opened his mouth, but he couldn't think of what he wanted to say. The truth was, as shocking as it was to hear it aloud, he had already figured that much out.

Griffin was watching Peter's face as he continued, "Either because this someone thinks you know something, or because it's too obvious you *don't* know anything and will make a better scapegoat dead than alive." He glanced over the uniformed officer's notes. "Let's take it from the top."

Griffin was thorough, no doubt about it. By the time he had finished reviewing Peter's account of the night's events, the crime scene personnel had cleared out and the windows were growing light. Peter's bruised and pummeled body was beginning to ache. He hurt from his face to his left foot – where he'd accidentally kicked the dresser while he'd been wrestling on the floor. He was so tired he could barely concentrate – but no way was he going to spend the rest of the night in the bungalow, and he said so to Griffin as he at last concluded their interview and rose.

"Where do you plan on going?"

"A hotel."

Griffin was staring at him, his expression unreadable. "What hotel?"

"I don't know. Wherever I can get in this time of night." He glanced at the window. "Morning."

Griffin said, "I'll make a phone call and get you booked into the Best Western."

As gallant gestures went, it wasn't much, but tiredness and pain had lowered Peter's resistance and he was grateful for any sign of kindness. "Thanks."

Griffin brushed it off uncomfortably.

Peter blurted, "I remember, Mike."

Griffin looked guarded, wary. "Oh yeah? What is it you remember?"

Peter met his gaze straight on. "Not everything. But I know we started seeing each other after I reported the museum thefts. Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Because we shouldn't have been seeing each other," Griffin replied shortly. "I crossed more than a couple of professional lines when we started going out. You want the truth? I thought you were pretending you didn't remember about us for your own reasons."

"What reasons?"

Griffin raised a shoulder in a kind of who-knows-with-you gesture.

"Why did you...? Is that why you broke it off? Because it was a violation of professional ethics?"

Griffin's face tightened. "I thought you said you remembered?"

Peter admitted, "It's more that I finally managed to put two and two together. I don't remember..." He couldn't seem to look away from Mike's blue, blue eyes. Hot color flooded his face as he got out, "I've been having these dreams...and I think they're about you."

"You *think*?"

Peter said, "I know it sounds idiotic, but...the doctors were right. I think I didn't remember because I didn't want to—because it was painful. I've been taking a prescription for anxiety and depression since December."

There was a funny break.

Mike's brows drew together. "You're on antidepressants?"

"I quit taking them after I got out of the hospital."

"Hell. You're not supposed to just stop taking that stuff, you know. If someone gets hold of that information...your credibility could be further damaged."

"I know. Judging by the number of pills in the bottle, I think I was in the process of weaning myself off them. Anyway, the point is, a couple of friends told me that after we broke up, I was pretty depressed."

Mike was still eyeing him skeptically, but something had changed in his face. Some of the hardness had gone.

"And those dreams... I kept telling myself they were of Cole. Even in my dream I kept telling myself they were of Cole, but I couldn't see my...my lover's face. I guess my subconscious was trying to show me that it wasn't Cole I was with. Once I realized" —his color heightened, but he said it anyway — "the dreams are of you, yeah. Why did you break it off with me?"

Surprisingly, there was color in Mike's face too. He said, "If you're really not planning to stay here for what's left of the night — and I wouldn't, if I was you — let's go back to my place. We can talk without getting interrupted. I have to be at the station later in the morning, but you can stay there and sleep without worrying about anyone breaking in and trying to cap you again."

As invitations went... Well, at least it *was* an invitation, and the best one Peter had had in a long time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mike lived in a condo in Flintridge. On the outside it was just an innocuous, pink stucco, two-story building, and Peter was too tired to pay much attention as he followed Mike upstairs.

He remembered the inside, though — or at least it felt familiar. But maybe because it was pretty much a generic bachelor pad: comfortable furniture, plasma TV, and an impressive stereo system. There was a large tank of tropical fish against one wall and a couple of nice oils of the ocean on the other.

"You want a beer?"

Peter shook his head, watching without interest as Mike disappeared into the kitchen. He reappeared a few moments later and sat on the other end of the sofa. He took a long swallow of beer from the bottle and sighed appreciatively. "Man, it's good to be home."

Yes. It must be nice. Peter didn't think he would know that feeling again until he finally regained his memory.

He said, "So what made you change your mind?"

Mike raised a lazy eyebrow. "About what?"

"You don't think I'm guilty anymore? In the hospital you acted like you thought I was guilty."

Mike took another swig of beer and seemed to consider the question. "I'm not going to pretend. I'd have been happy if you were guilty. I was mad as hell at you. At the way things ended between us."

Peter tried to take this in. "But *you* ended them."

"Yeah. I did." Mike seemed to weigh his words. "I liked you a lot, Peter. I thought... Well, it doesn't matter. But before long it was obvious it wasn't going anywhere, and that it never would so long as Cole was part of your life."

"There wasn't anything between Cole and me. Cole said himself—"

"I don't know what Cole told you, and maybe you weren't sleeping together, but he had you on a very short leash. You've been infatuated with him since college, and from what I could see, he liked and encouraged that."

Peter was shaking his head, rejecting this. "He's married."

Mike said dryly, "I know all about Cole's marriage. I heard about it in detail from you. The third time you broke a date with me to go listen to Cole whine about his marriage was when I told you I'd had enough. That you were going to have to decide whether you wanted a relationship with me or with Cole. You chose Cole."

"I...chose Cole?"

Mike said wearily, "Not in so many words. Your argument was that you weren't going to be handed any ultimatums. And my argument was I wanted a real relationship with you—or to at least to explore the possibilities of having one—but that I didn't want to work around Cole's schedule."

Peter said slowly, "But if Cole was going through a bad time..."

"Yep," Mike said curtly. "I wasn't very sympathetic, and I'm still not. I think Cole Constantine is a user and a manipulator. And probably a closet case. I think he married Angela Rowland for money, and I think he got what he paid for. I told you then and I'm telling you now, he's bad news."

"And you couldn't —"

"No, I couldn't. Like I said, I had feelings for you."

Peter said resentfully, "You sure didn't have trouble closing the door on me."

"You have no idea how I felt. You didn't make any attempt to find out. You chose Cole, and that was that."

"I think six months of Zoloft says otherwise."

After a hesitation, Mike said, "Obviously, I didn't know that. I still don't. That is, you might have been taking antidepressants for a lot of other reasons."

But Peter was pretty sure, even if the details were still fuzzy, that the tension of trying to balance his changing feelings for Cole — his growing disillusionment and fear that he was indeed being manipulated — and losing Mike, who he knew, even without his complete memory, had been special, someone he could have really cared for, was the explanation for his turning to chemical relief.

He rubbed his aching temples, and Mike said gruffly, "Why don't you get some rest. We'll talk when I get home tonight."

Peter raised his head, scowling. "Sleep? You think I can sleep? My life is a train wreck." He gave a sour laugh. "I've lost my job, I'm being kicked out of my home, and I've been arrested for grand theft and charged with a felony. I'm probably going to go to prison — if someone doesn't kill me first. How am I supposed to sleep?"

"What's the alternative? A thirty-day supply of NoDoz?"

"You're all heart."

Mike sighed. "What do you want from me? You're in deep shit. And if I tell you who I think is responsible for it, you're not going to be happy."

Peter stared. "You think *Cole* is responsible for my being arrested?"

"I think Cole has been stealing from his granddaddy's house of horrors for some time now. And so do you, I suspect, which is why after initiating an investigation, you suddenly got cold feet. For the record? It's another thing we argued about." He added, "Which is why I thought you might be faking amnesia. I thought you might be trying to protect Cole."

"Faking amnesia. You honestly thought I might *fake* amnesia?"

A flicker of self-consciousness crossed Mike's face, but he said, "And if you were trying to protect Cole, I thought that putting pressure on you, making you think you were a suspect, might get you to crack."

"You deliberately let me think I was a suspect?"

"Unfortunately, my plan backfired."

"You're quite a bastard," Peter said civilly.

"I never said I wasn't. But I'm not as big a bastard as your best buddy Cole who, I think, hired someone to try and kill you last night."

"No. No way."

"I don't think he'd have the balls to do it himself."

Peter stood up. "Cole did not break into my house. He did not hire someone else to break in. You don't know what the hell you're talking about!"

Mike was unmoved. "Here's what I think is going on. I think you walked in on the middle of Cole and an accomplice carting off that mural. I think that's why you don't want to remember what you saw."

"If that were true"—Peter swallowed, and the persistent ache in his temples turned into a sick, heavy thudding behind his eyes—"then you think Cole or this

accomplice attacked me. Why wouldn't he just kill me then? Why would he wait to have to hire someone?"

"Maybe he didn't know for sure what you saw. Maybe he was a little squeamish. Maybe he's even a little fond of you. But he's not fonder of you than he is himself. I think he began to worry about you getting your memory back. Or maybe it's more that he saw—or believed he saw—you were becoming the focus of our investigation, and he decided to set you up."

"By killing me? Wouldn't that defeat the purpose?"

Griffin said calmly, "I think there's been an ongoing difference of opinion on what to do about you."

"Between who?"

"Cole and his accomplice."

"Who's this accomplice?"

Mike said nothing.

Peter dropped back down on the couch. "Well? You've told me this much. Go ahead and hit me with it."

"I think it ought to be pretty obvious."

Peter fell silent, thinking. He was so god-awful tired. It was difficult to string sentences together. Let alone actually think before he spoke.

"Come on," Mike said. "Use your head. Where did the real evidence against you come from?"

Peter said slowly, "Herschel. The guy who picked me out of a lineup. The guy who claimed I approached him trying to sell stolen goods."

Mike didn't agree or disagree. "See, the problem with Herschel's story is, if it's *not* true...then what does he have to gain by such a lie? It could be Cole is paying him to frame you, but the fact that he coincidentally owns a pawnshop—and has more than a

few unsavory connections—leads us to speculate that his motive is a little more personal. Like a useful cover story for himself.”

“Cole is working with Herschel?”

“We began to look at Mr. Herschel more closely when he couldn’t come up with the surveillance tape of you that he originally claimed he had. His story was they reuse the old tapes, which is common enough, but claiming he had it and then backtracking aroused suspicion—especially since I was pretty sure you weren’t stealing from the museum.”

“Pretty sure.”

“What do you want?” Mike said irritably. “I didn’t think you were guilty. But I’ve been wrong before.”

Peter continued to work it out. Reluctantly, he said at last, “And the reason Herschel didn’t have to break in tonight was because Cole gave him the key to my place?”

“I wouldn’t have been surprised if they’d planted some items in your bungalow to make it look like your accomplices double-crossed you—or feared you were double-crossing them. I can’t say I expected them to try to take you out.”

Peter rose again, brushing against the coffee table as he went to the window, staring out.

He didn’t want to believe it, but...too much of it made sense.

He remembered telling Cole his memory was coming back, and Cole had immediately arranged for a convening of the museum trustees—and Peter’s suspension. Roma and Jess were right. Cole ran that committee. Nothing happened that Cole didn’t want to have happen, so if Peter had been suspended, it was because Cole wanted him gone.

“I don’t believe he wanted me dead.”

Mike said nothing.



Peter turned back to face him. "I don't believe it!" His own anger surprised him. "He wouldn't do that to me. He wouldn't have reason to do that to me."

"No? Would you have gone to prison for him?"

Peter opened his mouth and closed it.

"You're a good friend, and God knows you're loyal, but you're not stupid. Generally. And even if Cole was willing to take the chance that you would keep your mouth shut or even take the fall for him, Herschel isn't the trusting type."

Peter shook his head.

Mike ignored this silent protest. "I'll tell you something else. Herschel's got a case full of guns in that shop of his. I'm betting one of them is going to turn up missing. First thing today, I plan on getting a search warrant."

Peter sat down, resting his face in his hands. He wasn't crying. He felt too numb for tears. Too tired to feel much of anything at all.

How in love with Cole he must have been to have chosen him over Mike. Funny that he couldn't seem to remember that feeling at all.

"Hey." Mike rose and went over to him. He squeezed Peter's shoulder. "I'm sorry it worked out like this, okay?"

Hadn't Cole said something similar? Peter said listlessly, "Yeah."

"It's not... I don't enjoy this. What I said earlier? I don't really...want you hurt."

Peter nodded, still not looking up. He...couldn't. There was just too much to deal with, to try and make sense of. Too many losses in twenty-four hours.

Mike stood over him for a moment while Peter struggled for control.

"Don't, Peter," Mike said at last, and there was something in his voice—a roughness intended to disguise an emotion Mike didn't want to feel.

"I'm okay. Just..." His voice cracked and he shut up because he'd embarrassed himself enough times already in front of Mike Griffin.

To his surprise, Mike sat down next to him and pulled him, with impatient kindness, into his arms. "Cry if it'll make you feel better," he rasped. "But he's not worth it."

Peter looked up, managing an unsteady smile. "No, but you were."

## Chapter Nine

Mike stared at him, not moving—not even blinking. “You had a choice,” he said finally. “And if you had second thoughts...”

“I could have what? Are you telling me the door was always open?”

Mike seemed to experience some kind of inward struggle. “No. The door wasn’t open.”

“So? If I’d realized I’d made a mistake...?”

“Is that what you’re saying?”

It seemed sort of odd to be cold-bloodedly discussing it when he was right here in Mike’s arms. Peter angled his head and cut off anything more Mike might have had to say with a kiss. It was not the smoothest move he’d ever made, his mouth landing off-center on Mike’s. But it was surprisingly sweet—and, astonishingly, Mike tasted familiar. He tasted like spearmint gum and warm male, and the memory of all those dreams came rushing back. Except...maybe it wasn’t all dream.

Mike’s powerful arms wrapped around him, pulling him still closer, and Peter slid his hands into Mike’s thick, soft hair, trying for a better approach this time. He could feel Mike smiling wryly against his mouth—and then Mike’s lips parted.

Their tongues touched, parted. Tongue tag, he thought dizzily at the soaring rush of that contact. And you're it. He flicked his tongue again, and Mike's tongue – wet and hot – pushed delicately back. They were kissing deeply, hungrily then, kissing like it was a matter of life and breath, pressing closer, noses bumping, eyelashes skimming, teeth grazing. There was a wonderful relief in being wanted, knowing he *was* wanted.

Peter didn't have to have his memory back to understand how much that must have meant to him six months earlier. To be wanted, appreciated, desired, after Cole's careful maneuverings. Cole, affectionate and teasing and always keeping him at arm's length. Whereas Mike...Mike held him close and kissed him like Peter was the one he'd been waiting for all his life.

And Peter had been stupid enough to let him go. To choose Cole and all his hang-ups and problems. Why? Habit? Loyalty? Or something more complicated? The fear that maybe Mike was trying to manipulate him too? But it sounded like Mike had had right on his side. That Peter had been the unfair one – even if he'd acted out of loyalty and friendship to Cole. Expecting a man like Mike to sit home patiently while Peter ran off to hold Cole's hand every time Cole had a crisis? No wonder Mike had told him to figure it out or get lost.

Peter had managed to get very lost indeed. That was obvious. He groaned against Mike's mouth, and Mike broke the kiss to eye him watchfully. "If this isn't what you want, you better make it clear now."

"I'm thinking of the time we lost," Peter said, his mouth tingling from the assault of Mike's. "I'm thinking of what a goddamned fool I was."

"Yeah, well if you'd stuck with me, you wouldn't be in the mess you're in now, that's for sure."

"I'm depressed enough, okay? No need to put the put the boot in."

"No." Mike's grimace was rueful. "You know, if I'd known you were... If I'd known about the antidepressants... I don't know. It never occurred to me you had any regrets."

"I thought I'd blown it. That you wouldn't —"

"My bark is worse than my bite."

"Yeah?"

"Well, no." Mike's grin was lopsided.

Peter banged his mouth onto Mike's again in a kiss both urgent and deep. His hands went to the buttons of Mike's collar, and he began undoing them as quickly as he could. Mike grabbed Peter's sweatshirt and tugged upward. Peter took over, wriggling out of it as Mike finished unbuttoning his own shirt, hands dropping to his belt buckle. The rest of their clothes went flying in a matter of seconds, and then they were sliding to a heap on the floor, hands slipping over each other's bodies, kissing once more.

The coffee table rattled as Peter bumped into it, and Mike reached out blindly, shoving it away. Peter's dreams and memories were colliding as they rolled together in a tangle of legs and arms. Mike's heart was thundering against his own chest, and he was acutely aware of the smoothness of bare skin and the crackle of soft hair, the hardness of muscles and bone — and the hardness that was neither.

"Oh my God, I want to fuck," Peter moaned.

Mike stopped kissing him and laughed.

Peter opened his eyes. "Why are you laughing at me? What's funny about that?"

"You. You were always so prim and proper. I practically had to seduce you every time." Mike asked huskily, "Have you been with anyone since me?"

Peter shook his head. "I don't think... No. I'm sure I haven't."

"I have, but I'm clean."

Peter blinked at him, not following — trying not to mind about the fact that Mike had been, reasonably enough, still seeing people, still sleeping with people. It occurred to him what Mike meant and he blushed.

"Yeah. I want to. I want you to."

"You want *me* to—" Mike needed no second invitation. His hand was between Peter's thigh, and his mouth was latched onto one of Peter's nipples, and Peter was crying out and arching against him.

"Mike... Oh *Christ*..."

Mike sucked and then bit gently down, and Peter gasped and grabbed for Mike's head, pulling it closer even as he was squirming at the intensity of pleasure. One of Mike's hands was on Peter's balls, squeezing them gently, teasingly. No wonder he'd been depressed. Giving up this? For *what*?

When was the last time he'd had this?

No question. Mike had been the last time. Mike, who despite appearances to the contrary, was tender and coaxing and sweet, who seduced with fingers and tongue and soft words till Peter—despite the aches and pains of his fight with the midnight intruder—was feverish and panting and aching for more—and then more.

And then all at once he was on his own, his body chilled by the sudden retreat.

"Where'd you go?" Peter lifted his head, and Mike was crossing the floor in three big steps from the bedroom and throwing himself down on top of Peter again.

"Right here. We need this." He held up the tube of lubricant, and Peter shuddered with anticipation, letting his head drop back against the carpet.

"God. Yes. Do it."

The gel was cool, startling but not unpleasant. Mike's fingers slid along Peter's crack, stroking, and Peter swallowed hard.

"Relax. I've never hurt you yet," Mike whispered. His eyes seemed to watch every quiver of Peter's face as he slipped inside Peter's body.

How strange, Peter thought dreamily, even as his body moved to accommodate that invasion. Detective Mike Griffin's finger is in my hole. Mike Griffin is thrusting his big, fat finger in and out of my ass, and I'm lying here cooing at how good it feels.

"You like that?" There was a smile in Mike's voice.

Peter smiled too, although he didn't open his eyes, just focused on the sensation of Mike's finger pushing into him, drawing out, sliding back in. "Oh yes."

"*Oh yes!*" Mike mimicked, but there was something indulgent in his tone. He slid another finger in, taking his time, petting and stroking, and Peter wriggled, trying to feel that touch more deeply, more intensely.

"I think you should... I think I'd like..."

"That's what I like about you, Professor Peabody. Your way with words."

Peter's eyes opened. "Don't call me that. Don't make fun of me."

He was astonished when Mike's face changed. "I'm not making fun of you. At least...not like that. You're just...funny. Sort of cute."

"*Cute?*"

"In an uptight, buttoned-down way, yeah." He rubbed his nose against Peter's. "Very. I like you. I told you that. I like you a lot."

Peter relaxed again under these ministrations, and then Mike was urging him up. "Here. You ride me. It'll be easier on all those bumps and bruises." They were trading places on the floor, Peter awkwardly straddling Mike's hips. He was definitely feeling the battering he had taken earlier, but it didn't matter.

He felt for Mike's erection, pressing the head of his cock against his own well-oiled hole. He lowered himself down, and he could feel Mike shaking a little with the effort of holding still. Mike's thick cock scraped its way in, a welcome burn, and then Mike's hips pushed up and he could feel the softness of that silky body hair against his ass.

"Sorry. Okay?" Mike managed.

Peter nodded. Too full for words, he thought giddily.

And Mike did fill him. That thick, long cock stretched and stuffed him so that he was trembling, working to relax and accept and allow the intimacy. Mike slammed right up into his body, hard thrusts penetrating deeply, then withdrawing, to shove

inside again, stroking over the place that made Peter gasp each time at the blaze of pleasure.

"I like watching your face when I fuck you," Mike grated, rocking his hips.

Peter laughed shakily against the burn behind his eyes, because he was thinking the same thing. Mike's face was wonderful to watch. He hoped that this was the beginning of something and not the end...

Pressure built inside him, and the pulse in Mike's cock was echoed by his own heartbeat.

"I'm going to come..." Did they say it at the same time?

Peter came first. He hadn't even been looking for that yet. He'd just wanted the closeness, the sense of belonging...but he was coming all right. The tension soared and then bloomed, like ginger or some more exotic spice rushing through his bloodstream.

And then he was shivering with it, wanted to curl up in the melting release of it and close his eyes.

Mike was still thrusting into him—fierce, deep strokes—and Peter could take it now, no problem. He watched Mike's taut face through half-closed eyes, never wanting to forget this...homecoming.

Then Mike gasped something Peter missed, and the next second he was coming and Peter was feeling the shock of wet heat in his own body. Mike, chuckling unsteadily, tugged at him, and Peter was only too happy to collapse on top of Mike's brawny chest and close his eyes, feeling absurdly safe in the powerful arms holding him tight.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hell. I'm late."

Peter opened his eyes. It took him a few blinks to place himself. Oh, right. He was in Mike's bedroom—in Mike's bed. Mike was sitting on the edge of the mattress, his broad brown back to Peter as he pulled his wristwatch off and set it on the night table.



Peter reached a lazy hand to brush down Mike's back, but Mike rose and disappeared into the bathroom. Peter heard the shower running.

He didn't remember how they'd got from the living room to the bedroom, but he was glad he wasn't sleeping on the floor. He was in enough pain as it was. He sat up, biting back a yelp, and managed to pull on his pants. It was not a fun process.

He hobbled into the kitchen and put the coffee machine on.

He looked at the clock. Nearly eleven o'clock. He still felt groggy.

The shower cut off. He heard Mike leave the bathroom and go into the bedroom, heard the slide of closet doors.

Mike walked into the kitchen. He was wearing black trousers and nothing else. He was combing his wet hair, and he was the sexiest thing Peter had ever seen. He felt a little self-conscious suddenly. A little out of his league.

He was painfully aware that, unlike him, life had not stopped for Mike. Mike had moved on. And sex—even some relatively spectacular sex—didn't change that. Mike had plainly said that the door had not remained open.

"Coffee is nearly ready," he said.

"I don't have time." Mike continued to comb his hair. "What are your plans today?"

"I'm supposed to meet with my lawyer." Peter's gut was knotting up at the recollection of everything hanging over him. Maybe Mike was right about Cole and Herschel, but in the meantime Peter was the one facing trial and jail time.

"Okay. Why don't you come back here afterward?"

Peter's heart rose a little. He managed not to ask, *Why?* because he wasn't sure he wanted to hear Mike say something about it being safer. He wanted to think Mike wanted him for the pleasure of his company.

"I need to pick up some things from the bungalow."

"All right." Mike disappeared into the living room.

Slightly disappointed, Peter poured coffee.

When he turned around, Mike was right behind him, and he jumped.

Mike laughed. "Hey, I'm the good guy, remember? I'm on your side." He was dressed completely now. Fast as Superman in the quick-change department. He handed Peter a key. "Here."

Peter took the key and put it into his pocket. "Thanks. Thanks for everything, in fact. For letting me stay here last night, and for —"

Mike kissed him, effectively shutting him up.

"You're welcome. Be good today."

And with that he was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was not a good day.

Late morning, Peter made his appearance in the overly air-conditioned offices of Stephenson and Crane. It was immediately obvious to him that Mr. Stephenson had suffered some kind of crisis of faith. Or maybe it was a crisis of confidence. Either way, it didn't look good for Peter.

After a few costly minutes of fencing, Mr. Stephenson bluntly informed him that the DA was pressing for the maximum penalty, which likely meant up to sixteen months in a state prison.

When Peter could speak again, he protested, "But I haven't been convicted. I haven't even gone to trial yet."

Mr. Stephenson didn't seem to hear this. Given the fact that Peter had no previous criminal record and that his employers had spoken up on his behalf, there was a possibility he would get off with the lighter sentence of one year in county jail. Provided...

"What?" Peter meant, *What in the hell are you talking about?* But Mr. Stephenson seemed to think he meant he needed more details on his plea bargain.

"Provided," Mr. Stephenson said briskly, "you plead guilty, thus sparing everyone the expense and scandal of a trial."

"Provided I— are you joking?"

Mr. Stephenson's expression indicated he was not joking. "Hear me out. It's an *extremely* generous offer. The museum has indicated that they will waive your paying financial restitution, which you are clearly in no position to do."

"But I didn't steal the mural. I didn't steal anything!"

Clearly, all Mr. Stephenson's clients said that.

Peter said, "I don't understand why you're throwing in the towel. From what I understand, the main witness against me can't even come up with the incriminating videotapes."

Abruptly he seemed to have regained Mr. Stephenson's attention. "Where did you hear that?"

"From the police."

"Ah." Mr. Stephenson was shuffling papers on his desk, as though getting them to all line up properly was of vital importance. "Well, that may be true, but it's also true the police believe they have an airtight case."

Not *all* the police, but that wasn't something Peter could share.

Watching Mr. Stephenson rearrange papers some more, Peter said, "Don't you find it suspicious that 'the museum' is waiving my paying financial restitution? We're talking a small fortune."

"A fortune you have no hope of repaying. I find it a gesture of rare compassion. Mr. Constantine, speaking on behalf of the rest of the board, testified as to your long friendship and the fact that you've been under considerable strain for a number of

months. In fact, I believe he'd have been happy if we could have eliminated any jail time for you, but unfortunately the DA won't consider it."

Peter studied Mr. Stephenson, who seemed to be avoiding meeting his gaze directly.

"I see," he said finally. "And you think taking this deal is in my best interests?"

"I do, yes." Mr. Stephenson continued to stare at the papers on his desk.

"Thank you for your advice," Peter said. "You can tell 'the museum' that you tried. However, I'm absolutely determined to take my chances in a courtroom."

Stephenson did look up then. "That's a mistake, Peter. Believe me, we do not want this case tried in open court."

That was obvious.

"I appreciate your advice," Peter said, "but I'll be seeking new legal representation."

Mr. Stephenson's mouth was still open when Peter closed the door to his office.

He drove back to Constantine House and parked in front of the bungalow. Inside, everything looked perfectly normal—barring the broken window in the kitchen and the bullet holes and knocked-over furniture in the bedroom.

Peter quickly packed a couple of changes of clothing and a few other things he would need for the next few days—hoping that Mike would be agreeable to his staying on for that long. He pulled open his underwear drawer, lifted up a stack of undershirts, and spotted what at first looked like an enameled teacup with varicolored stylized flowers, mushrooms, and foliage on a cream and dark blue background.

Finally, he picked up the silver-gilt and cloisonné enamel tea glass holder by its scroll handle. His hand began to shake and he had to set the cup down. He had noticed its absence from the museum collection several months ago. One of the first items that he had noticed missing, in fact. It wasn't in the same class as the stolen jade or the mural

that had been removed from the grotto, but it was a nice piece of work and worth three to four thousand dollars. It was also an easily recognizable piece bearing the stamp of the 20th Artel and town mark for Moscow. No wonder Cole and Herschel had thought better of trying to move it right away.

Peter could just about hear the reverberation of the prison door clanging shut behind him.

Any minute now the cops were going to show up with their search warrants and a list of all the items missing from the museum. How many other items from Constantine House were salted in here among the items rightly kept at the bungalow?

He needed to act quickly. Alarming, the only thing he could think of was calling Mike, and after a brief struggle with himself, that was exactly what he did.

Mike picked up on the second ring and Peter barely waited for him to identify himself before saying, "Are you someplace you can talk?"

"Yeah. Listen. Bad news. We didn't find the gun at Herschel's. We're going through his records now. Maybe something will turn up, but —"

"It's worse than that. I think my lawyer has been bought off. I've been advised to plead guilty in order to receive a lesser sentence. It's like...they already have me convicted."

"You're not going to jail." Mike sounded so definite, Peter felt a flicker of hope.

"Mike, it gets worse. I stopped at the bungalow to pack a few things, and I-I found a cloisonné glass holder — one of the items I originally reported missing to you."

There was dead silence on the other end of the line.

"I don't know what to do. Should I...? What should I do? Someone's going to show up here with a search warrant."

"Yeah. The search warrant has already been issued."

"Oh God. Should I call someone? Report finding it?"

"You've called me."

"I know. But..."

Mike said brusquely, "Look, I'll handle it."

"How?"

"I'll tell you about it when I get home."

"That's another thing." This was the hard part. Peter sucked in a deep breath. "I can't go back to your place. I... How can I? This...conspiracy is going to drag you down too. You can't be seen to have a personal connection with me. You know what that could mean. You could ruin your career. You could lose your job."

There was silence. Mike said crisply, "We'll talk when I get home."

"Mike—"

"Listen. I think you're worth the risk, all right? Now go back to my place and try to keep a low profile."

It was hard to speak around the tightness in his throat. "You...don't have to do this."

"I know. I want to. So stop worrying. I'll see you tonight."

Mike disconnected.

## Chapter Ten

By the time Mike made it home, Peter was just about climbing the walls. He transferred his attentions happily to Mike.

"Nice to see you too," Mike said, breaking from the kiss long enough to dump a bag of Chinese takeout on the floor near the door. He turned back to Peter, who slipped his arms around his neck. Mike slid his free hand down the back of Peter's trousers, his bare hand palming and kneading Peter's ass, drawing him even closer.

"I've got a plan," Mike said between frantic, hungry kisses.

"Me too."

Mike maneuvered them toward the sofa. The arm hit Peter beneath his butt, and they fell backward onto the cushions – and then onto the floor.

"Ouch."

"Sorry," Mike gasped.

"This is beginning to be a habit..."

"That a problem for you?"

Peter raised his head and met Mike's glinting gaze. He shook his head.

"Good." Mike kissed him again.

There was mutual fumbling with buttons and zippers, a lot of flapping and kicking out of unnecessary clothes, and then they were rocking and rubbing against each other with an animal enthusiasm that most people who knew Peter would never have thought him capable of. Maybe he wasn't capable with anyone but Mike.

Mike nipped Peter's chin and then kissed him hard and wet, while Peter ground his hips against the stiff erection poking him in just about every vulnerable place of his anatomy but the one that counted.

Thrusting powerfully against Peter, Mike reached down and his fist closed around Peter's bobbing cock, pumping him with pleasurable efficiency. Peter arched his back and groaned into Mike's mouth.

The next moment he was coming in hard, creamy jerks. Mike kissed him harder as though in congratulations. He was still doing the bump and grind. Peter shivered in the aftermath, his cock giving a last spurt. Mike's hand turned gentle and soothing. His wet fingers stroked Peter's flank, and Peter shivered pleurably.

Then, a few seconds later, Mike was coming too, and Peter felt more liquid heat splashing him from chest to belly.

They lay on the floor breathing hard. Peter asked finally, "You said you had a plan?"

Mike nodded. "Yours wasn't bad, though."

Peter huffed a laugh. Rubbed his nose. "Is that Chinese I smell?"

Mike snickered. He expelled a long breath and sat up. He was on his feet and reaching down to Peter.

"Let's eat. I'll tell you what I've got in mind."

They dished out the Chinese food in the kitchen. Spicy-hot garlic beef for Mike, and plain chicken chow mein with crispy noodles for Peter. Either that was a happy coincidence or Mike remembered what he liked, and that flattered Peter probably more than it should have.



Mike put a bottle of Tsingtao beer in front of Peter and sat down across from him. "So how is your memory now?"

Peter gave him a self-conscious smile.

Mike laughed. "I didn't mean that," he said. "Although..." His expression softened fleetingly. "Yeah, I'd like you to remember. We had some...times worth remembering."

And if Peter didn't wind up in a state prison, maybe they'd have more.

"It's like I've plateaued," Peter admitted. "At first it seemed like I was going to get it all back, but...now I think a lot of it might be gone for good. I can't seem to remember anything about last week, and I..." He gave Mike an apologetic glance. "It seems like I've blocked out everything about you."

"Well, that doesn't sound physical. Those are two completely separate chunks of time. If you're not remembering, it's because —"

"I don't want to."

Mike said with unexpected sensitivity, "Maybe you can't yet. Maybe it's more than you're ready to deal with."

Peter nodded, reaching for his beer.

"So you don't remember anything about the night the mural was stolen?"

Peter shook his head. "Every so often I get a flash...like a series of impressions. I know I probably just walked down there for a breath of fresh air. I used to do that — sit on the stone bench near the koi pond at night and just...watch the stars. I guess I must have heard or seen something that night, and the thieves must have seen me before I could get back up to the house."

"Who knows that? That your memory of that night is still a blank?"

"My lawyer. Pretty much everyone."

Mike seemed to consider this. "Okay. Well, here's what I want you to do. I want you to phone Cole and tell him that you've got your memory of that night back. Tell him you've remembered it all, everything."

"You're kidding. That sounds like an idea I'd come up with."

"I know," Mike said. "That's why I think he'll believe it."

"He'll just ask me what I saw."

"It doesn't matter. You tell him that he knows damn well what you saw—and what you heard. Don't let him bully you into giving up details. Tell him you're going to the police with everything you know, unless he'll pay you one million dollars."

Peter choked on his beer. When he could breathe again, he said, "One million dollars? He'll laugh in my face."

"His old lady is worth ten times that."

Peter knew his gut reaction was not a logical one, but he heard himself protest, "That's true, but Angie controls the purse strings pretty tightly."

"I don't blame her," Mike said dryly. "But Cole can get the money. I think you're forgetting how he supplements his income—and who his partner is."

Yes. He was still resisting believing that. Why? It was obviously true. Why was it so hard—so painful—to accept that his friendship with Cole had been mostly one-sided? That he had spent years loving and serving a dream. Or maybe he had just answered his own question.

"And after I ask him for the money, then what?"

"Tell him to bring you the cash tonight at the grotto. Nine o'clock. Tell him if he's even five minutes late, you go straight to the cops."

"Nine o'clock at the grotto? He's going to know that's a trap."

Mike said, "No. He's going to think it's exactly the kind of silly storybook plot you'd cook up. He thinks you're a fool, Peter. And he knows that you've been in love

with him a long time and that—more than anything—you want to believe he cares about you too.”

Peter couldn't hold Mike's gaze any longer.

“All right. I'll do it.”

He could feel Mike's scrutiny. “I'm not going to lie to you. We're taking a risk here. He may just let Herschel handle it, in which case...we're going to have a few interesting minutes keeping you alive.”

“He won't do that.” Peter's tone didn't even convince *him*.

“Or, if he's got balls, he'll turn you over to the cops. If he does that...it's going to be bad. They'll have you for extortion as well as the rest of it.”

“They'll have you too.”

“I can take care of myself. You...”

“What option do we have?”

“We have other options,” Mike said seriously. “You could take your chances in court, for one. Most of the case against you is circumstantial. The most damning testimony is Herschel's ID, and with a little time we can throw significant doubt on his credibility as a witness.”

“But in order to do that, you have to reveal your hand, don't you?”

“*Reveal my hand?*” Mike was faintly amused. “Why yes, I would. But I'm going to reveal it tonight too. That's not my main concern. My main concern is that there's a possibility that you might lose your court case and end up doing time.”

Peter heard his own gulp.

“Yeah. That's my thought,” Mike said. “You won't do the kind of time you will if you're nailed for extortion as well as grand theft, but even if you just wound up in county...no. On the other hand, we could keep digging. We could stall for a few days. You could hide out here while the investigation continues. The proof against Constantine and Herschel is there, we just have to find it.”

"But if you don't find that proof...and I go to trial and lose..." Peter closed his eyes, then opened them. "Even if I *don't* lose, I don't want to waste all those months to this. It's a nightmare having this hanging over me. You don't know. I have no place to live. No job. And what museum will hire me? How am I supposed to survive for...however long before my trial date comes up? I'd rather do this, take this chance and maybe be able to start work on having a normal life tomorrow."

Mike said seriously, "Are you sure you can do it?"

Peter's jaw tightened. "What do you mean? You think I'll panic? I'm not a coward, Mike. And I'm not as stupid as you think, even if I have made some dumb decisions in my personal life."

Mike shook his head. "I don't think you're a coward. And I don't think you're stupid. No. We're talking about you setting up Cole Constantine. Are you sure you can handle that? Because for a very long time, Constantine's been the most important person in your life."

Peter said, "Cole stopped being the most important person in my life the day I met you."

Mike blinked.

"I know." Peter grimaced. "More than you wanted to hear. But it's the truth. Meeting you was the best thing that ever happened to me. You did me a favor when you gave me that ultimatum, even though I didn't see it at the time. I think I had pretty well worked the truth out for myself by the time I got some sense — literally — knocked into me." He rose. "Talking makes it harder. Let's get it over with."

"Okay. If you're sure." Mike was still giving him a sort of quizzical look.

"I'm sure."

Mike rose and grabbed his keys from the counter. "You can't call from here. We'll have to find a phone booth."

They found a phone booth in the valley, and Peter dialed the Rowland mansion while Mike leaned against the side of the booth, head close to Peter's as he listened in.

A maid answered the phone, and Peter asked for Cole.

The maid asked who was calling. Peter looked at Mike, who nodded infinitesimally. His breath was warm against Peter's cheek, and Peter could see how long his eyelashes were.

There seemed to be a delay on the other end and then a couple of clicks. Were the police tapping Cole's phone? Or was Cole just having the call transferred to someplace where he could talk in private? Cole came on the line, and Peter almost jumped at the suddenness of that familiar voice in his ear.

"Pete, where have you been? The police are looking for you. They've found—I'm sorry, you must know that already." Beneath the regretful warmth, Cole didn't sound sorry. He sounded edgy, a little impatient. Like Peter was a pain in the ass for not hanging around to get himself arrested. "When the police searched the bungalow this afternoon, they found a number of items missing from the museum."

"I know."

"Pete. Listen to me. You've got to give yourself up. What the hell are you thinking? You're not...you're not cut out for life on the run. I'll help you however I can, you know that. We'll get you a good attorney."

"Like Stephenson?"

There was a little hesitation. Cole said, "Stephenson seems like a good man to me, but if you don't like him, we'll find you someone else. You have to realize, though. You're in a bad spot, Peter. There's a mountain of evidence against you."

"Planted evidence."

Cole said in the tone of someone humoring a nut, "Of course. But the bottom line is...things look very bad for you, and running away like this, well, you must realize you're just making it all that much worse."

A part of Peter felt a bitter satisfaction that Cole was so predictable, that he was making this easy. But the other part of him felt sick. Sick that Cole could do this to him, sick that Cole had taken all his admiration and affection—say it, *love*—and used it against him.

“Did you tell Stephenson to instruct me to take the plea bargain?”

“You’re getting sidetracked,” Mike said very softly.

“I did, Peter.” And Cole sounded regretful and kind. “And he told me how...how wildly you reacted. You don’t seem to realize we’re all trying to act in your best interest. You don’t seem to realize the trouble you’ve got yourself into. But if you want another lawyer, I’ll see what I can do to find someone who’ll work harder to see you don’t have to do any...er...jail time. But you have to give yourself up. You have to face up to this.”

“Stop it, Cole,” Peter said. “We both know I didn’t take so much as a marble from the museum.” He felt Mike relax beside him, saw the nod of approval out of the corner of his eye.

“Peter. They found enough evidence to—”

“I know exactly what they found. And I know who put it there. Listen to me. I’ve regained my memory.”

Another beat that felt like a misstep. “Excellent,” Cole said heartily. “All the more reason to come in and talk to the police. We all want to get this mess straightened out...” His words died off in the face of Peter’s stony silence.

“I don’t think you understand,” Peter said coldly. “I remember *everything* I saw that night. And I don’t plan on doing one minute of jail time.”

“Well, that’s... I’m not sure what...” Cole seemed to give up midsentence.

Mike mouthed, *Offer him the deal.*

“Since you’ve pretty well already ruined my name and my career, I’m willing to make a deal with you.”

Silence.

"I'll give myself up and plead guilty to stealing from the museum in exchange for one million dollars."

Cole laughed, although it sounded slightly hysterical. "That knock on the head must have scrambled your brains. This is clearly a desperate attempt at blackmail on top of your other crimes. Listen, old friend, I suggest you count yourself lucky the board isn't demanding you pay restitution. That's what Sally wanted."

"One million dollars, *old friend*, or I tell everything I know."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Cole asked angrily. "Dragging me into this won't save you. The police will see this for what it is!"

"That's why I'm willing to make a deal. According to Stephenson, I'm going to prison either way. This way at least my future will be secure when I get out. Either pay up or I tell everything I know – and I know quite a bit. I covered for you for a long time, Cole."

"Y-y-you covered for me!" Cole was stuttering his astonished outrage.

Mike whispered, "Don't debate it. Wrap it up."

"I'll meet you at the grotto tonight."

"I can't get a million dollars by tonight! Are you crazy?"

"I'll take a down payment, and we'll arrange how you're going to pay the balance."

"You're out of your mind. This is ri –"

"Ask Herschel for the money. I'm sure he can lay his hands on some quick cash."

Mike was nodding approval. Dead silence from Cole.

"Tonight. Nine o'clock at the grotto." Peter hung up the phone hard.

"Okay?" Mike asked brusquely.

Peter shook his head. His eyes met Mike's and then he looked away. "Yeah. It's just... I guess I hoped..."

Mike snorted.

"He sounds like he's going to turn me over to the police. If he does, I'm sunk. We both are."

"They won't turn you over to the cops." Mike sounded very confident.

"I would."

"That's because you're looking at this from the standpoint of an innocent person." Mike touched his arm, indicating they should head back to the car. "Anyway, if he does report your extortion attempt, I'll get a call and we'll abort."

They did not get a call, however, and at seven o'clock, Peter and Mike drove behind the back of Constantine House, hid the car, and climbed over the back fence into the museum grounds.

While Peter waited in the grotto, Mike did a quick reconnoiter of the garden.

"All clear," he said when he'd returned to where Peter was nervously pacing up and down.

Peter watched while Mike set up the tape recorder he'd brought from work.

Mike showed him where to stand. "Say something."

"I hope this isn't a mistake," Peter said.

Mike pressed Stop and then Play. Peter's voice said faintly, "I hope this isn't a mistake."

"You'll have to speak a little more loudly," Mike told him. "Constantine's voice will carry, but yours is softer. So speak up."

Peter nodded.

"How often does the security guard make his rounds?"

"Donnelly is supposed to patrol the grounds every hour, but" —Peter shrugged, his eyes meeting Mike's— "I wonder now if there was a reason the museum security was so lax. I always put the board's resistance down to cheapness, but now I think Cole



must have actively discouraged investing in decent security to make it easier for him to pilfer."

"I think you're right."

At eight o'clock, they heard the whine of the security cart at the top of the hill and a few seconds later Donnelly zoomed by without even glancing down at the grotto.

Peter and Mike spent the next half hour talking desultorily, and then Mike told Peter they'd better get into position in case Cole was early.

Peter nodded and Mike faded into the deep shade beside the grotto.

"Mike!" Peter said sharply.

Mike appeared again. "What's wrong?"

"I just wanted to say...either way this goes down, thank you."

"Thank me when it's over," Mike said briskly and stepped back into his concealment.

Peter was left on his own in the grotto as the night deepened and cooled. Moonlight sifted through the jacaranda, casting odd shadows over the grass and still water of the koi pond.

*Chjjjj...chjjjj...chewk*, scolded the mockingbird from overhead.

And just like that...like a key turning a lock, tumblers clicking over...Peter's memory came flooding back.

He had been thinking about Mike. Thinking how good it would have been to come home and find Mike waiting for him. Thinking of those hot, wicked things Mike used to do to him—and would never do again because Mike didn't do second chances, and Peter had blown it. But he'd had a couple of drinks that night, and as he walked down to the grotto, he was thinking that maybe he'd try to call Mike. Maybe use the excuse of the continuing thefts at the museum, because something had to happen there. It had to stop. Had to. And...because he wanted to see Mike so badly it was worth taking the chance that Mike would tell him to go to hell. He would take the chance

because maybe Mike would say –like he'd used to – "*Why don't you come over?*" It had been a beautiful night, the air sweet with flowers from the garden above and the music of the crickets and the frogs, and he'd heard voices from the grotto –

Cole appeared in the mouth of the grotto, and Peter's recollections broke off.

"Don't look so surprised," Cole said. "This was your idea, remember?" He tossed Peter a bundle of money wrapped in plastic.

Peter caught the bundle. It took him a second to reconcile the past with the present. So Cole had come on his own. He had not gone to the police, and he had not sent Herschel in his place. Maybe it was going to be all right after all.

Peter found his voice. "How much is it?"

"Fifty thousand dollars." Cole added coolly, "You'll get the rest *after* you turn yourself in and plead guilty."

"That's...not what we agreed."

"That's the deal, though. Once you keep your end of the bargain, we'll deposit the balance of money in an offshore account for you."

Absorbing this, Peter almost laughed. Not a bad move on their part at all. Once Peter had been arrested and pled guilty, no one would listen to his protests when the rest of the money didn't suddenly appear in a mysterious offshore bank account. He'd have effectively discredited himself by that point.

Cole was watching him closely, waiting to see if he swallowed it.

Peter said, feigning reluctance, "I guess I don't have any choice."

"No, you don't."

"All right then. We'll do it your way."

"Yes, we will. Which means Stephenson is handling your case again – and this time you take the plea bargain like a good boy."

"I'm not going to jail."

Cole snorted. "For one million dollars? I think you'll do whatever you have to, don't you?"

Peter said bitterly, "And you're okay with that? With me going to prison? All these years I thought we were friends. The best of friends."

"We are friends," Cole said curtly. "Don wanted to kill you. I'm the one who insisted we should just pay you off. I saved your life, so don't forget that."

"Just pay me off.' You do remember that I'm the victim in all this, right? I'm being *paid off* to take the rap for you. You and Herschel."

Cole's gaze flickered. "I remember."

"And before you take credit for saving my life, did you give him the key to my bungalow so he could try to kill me last night?"

That seemed to spark something in Cole. He snapped, "He wasn't supposed to try to kill you. How can you think I'd agree to that! He was supposed to plant a few items from the museum to guarantee the police would have enough to strengthen their case. That bastard Griffin apparently had some doubts even after Don identified you in the lineup."

"Herschel tried to shoot me while I was sleeping."

"I know. I know." Cole even looked a little queasy. "But that was not the plan. Don's impulsive, but I never agreed to that. Never. No one wants you dead, Pete, least of all me. If you're smart, you'll simply do the jail time and collect your money. Think what you can do with fifty thousand dollars."

"Let alone a million."

"Uh...yes."

Peter smiled, though it wasn't much of a smile. All at once he was very tired of this game they were playing—and of Cole. He raised his voice slightly, saying, "That's got to be enough, surely, Mike?"

Cole whipped around as Mike stepped out of the shadows beside the grotto.

"That'll do it," Mike agreed. To Cole, he clarified, "For both you and Herschel."

Cole seemed to actually sway, as though shock had knocked him back on his heels. He stared at Mike in disbelief. He turned to Peter. "It's a *setup*?"

When Peter didn't answer, he repeated in a stunned tone, "You set *me* up?"

Mike said dryly, "Seems only fair, doesn't it?"

Cole ignored him, speaking directly to Peter. "How could you do this to me, Peter?"

"I guess it was easier knowing that you could do it to me."

There was a rustle of bushes behind Mike.

"Don't move," a harsh voice said as Mike half glanced around. Mike froze.

It took Peter's eyes a few seconds to adjust to the flickering light, and then he made out the burly figure of Donald Herschel standing half in shadow. Light gleamed off the barrel of the gun he was aiming at Mike's back.

For what felt like a very long time, no one moved. No one spoke. One of the koi in the pool drifted lazily to the surface, gulping for air.

It occurred to Peter, on some very distant plane, that the pond must need tending – and that he and Mike were probably going to die in the next few seconds. His gaze found Mike's.

Herschel said in that same hard tone, "You dumb bastard. Didn't I tell you? I told you it was going to turn out to be some kind of trap."

Cole blustered some protest. Peter was still staring at Mike. He was hoping that Herschel would shoot him before Mike, because he really couldn't take losing Mike again, not even for the few seconds before he died himself.

Mike looked right back at him. He looked utterly calm, utterly cool. "It's under control," he said to Peter – and he actually smiled.

And to Peter's utter astonishment, the grove was suddenly ablaze with lights. Cops were seemingly springing out from behind every bush and rock, and Herschel was being ordered to throw down his weapon.

For a tense moment, Peter was sure Herschel would open fire like someone in a bad TV movie, but instead he tossed his gun into the koi pond. It landed with a heavy *plop* as uniformed officers moved forward.

"I told you," Herschel said to Cole. "You never listen."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was Mike who walked Peter up to the bungalow as Herschel and Cole were handcuffed, and listened stonily to their rights being read to them. As they reached the top of the stairs, Peter could see red and blue lights cutting swaths in the warm night air. There was a veritable fleet of cop cars waiting up there.

Mike had not chosen to share that information with Peter — the fact that they were going to have backup for their little charade — but it was hard to feel resentful about having his life saved. Maybe later. Maybe after he'd had time to accept the fact that he was going to be okay after all.

"I've got to go down to the station to interrogate these assholes. It's probably going to take most of the night," Mike was saying. He broke off.

Peter looked his way and found Mike watching him alertly.

"I'm listening."

It wasn't easy to tell in the eerie flashing light of the police cars, but he thought Mike's expression changed. "You okay?"

Peter nodded. He had no idea if it was true or not. Too soon to tell.

Mike nodded too, as though this confirmed his own thoughts. He didn't say anything else until they reached the bungalow. Peter fumbled for his keys, got the door open, and felt around for a light.

The living room looked weirdly untouched. He had that sensation again of being in a museum. He had lived here for how many years? And he had never felt as at home here as he had in Mike's apartment. Suddenly, he wondered what they were even doing there.

Mike cleared his throat. "Hey."

Peter looked at him.

"You...you did great tonight."

"Thanks. So did you."

Maybe the wryness showed, because Mike said, "Peter, I didn't tell you about the backup because you're not very good at hiding your feelings."

"And yet you thought I was capable of faking amnesia and stealing from my own museum."

Mike grimaced.

"It doesn't matter," Peter said. "You're right. I probably would have given the whole thing away." He gave a short laugh. "I thought Herschel was going to kill you."

Mike's gaze slid back to his. "Sorry. I mean that."

"It's okay."

"You...er...got the rest of your memory back, didn't you?"

"Yes." Peter was surprised. "How did you know?"

Mike raised a dismissive shoulder, and it occurred to Peter that he was nervous. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he did. Something else: Mike was hovering. He wasn't much of a hoverer, but it was clear he didn't want to walk away, and Peter felt his hope rise.

"Not sure. Something in your voice changed. Your stance too."

"I remembered, yes." Not that it really helped. Other than to clarify exactly how much he had to be depressed about, because six months ago Mike had been very definite that it was over between them. And Mike was not a man given to easily

changing his mind—despite the fact that he was still standing in Peter's living room looking like he wasn't sure what to do with himself.

"So what are your plans now?"

"Well, I'm still out of a job and a place to live, but at least I'm not going to jail."

Mike took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "If you need a place to stay—I mean, until you figure out what you want to do—you can stay with me."

In the pause that followed Mike's words, Peter could hear the distant crackle of police car radios.

"Mike, I'm sorry about before. When you told me to make up my mind and decide if I wanted a real relationship with you or a pretend relationship with Cole, and I chose... It was a big mistake."

"So you said before." Mike sighed. "Hell. I guess I could have been a little more tactful. A little more patient."

"I could have been a little smarter."

"That's for sure." Mike relented slightly. "But maybe I could have been a little more honest too, because what we had was worth some extra effort."

Peter gathered his courage. "Was?"

Mike stared at him for what seemed a long time. "Is," he said finally.

One word. And such a little word to contain so much hope. Peter said carefully, because if he had this wrong the disappointment was probably going to kill him, "I thought that door wasn't open anymore."

"So did I." Mike shrugged. Then, as he studied Peter's face, his wolfish grin appeared. He reached for Peter. "But I've been wrong before."

 THE END 

## **Josh Lanyon**

Josh Lanyon is the author of numerous novellas and short stories as well as the critically praised Adrien English mystery series. *The Hell You Say* was shortlisted for a Lambda Literary Award and is the winner of the 2006 USABookNews awards for GLBT fiction. In 2008, Josh released *Man, Oh Man: Writing M/M/Fiction for Kinks and Ca\$h*, the definitive guide to writing for the m/m or gay romance market. Josh lives in Los Angeles, California, and is currently at work on his next manuscript.