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why I write what I do.*

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CHAPTER ONE

Friday, 8:20 AM, Vista del Valle Drive, Griffith Park, Los Angeles

Something had done a number on the corpse.

The early morning call-out had been brief and to the point. Griffith Park. Shallow grave. Mutilated arm. Probably wild animals.

LAPD homicide detective David Eric Laine hoped it was animals. He crouched beside the makeshift grave, behind the screen of freshly broken branches and crushed vegetation, studying the exposed arm with the manicured nails and winking diamond ring; the animals had nearly worked off the bone. Wondering what her final moments had been like. Knowing it had been ugly. He looked beyond the grave, visualizing. Had he raped her? Had that been the last indignity she had suffered, before the ultimate one?

Overhead, dense black clouds roiled across the western sky, a late Pineapple Express had roared in last night, straight from Hawaii, promising more rain in an already wet spring. The chaparral and Ceanothus had started their seasonal bloom, thin green shoots emerging from what had once been desiccated limbs. Under foot the moisture retaining hydro-mulch, spread after the ravaging 2007 and 2008 fires, soaked his feet, chilling his skin. The steady thump-thump of the LAPD airship called in to do an aerial survey echoed his heartbeat, driving him relentlessly, as unforgiving of failure as he was.

David scanned the ground, taking in the fresh horse tracks, and the fading coyote spore. The animals had scattered when the woman who found the body nearly rode her horse over them. She stood with her shoulder touching her horse's neck, the animal's reins still held in her gloved hand. Blindly she touched the burnished chestnut coat, seeking comfort. David turned away; he had nothing to give her. His promises were for

the dead. They didn't ask for guarantees. They didn't get angry when he was called away in the middle of the night to do his job.

"So what have we got?" he asked.

The first officer on the scene, Donald Lessing, pulled out his notes, "I received a call at seven-fifty-six AM that a body had been discovered in a shallow grave. My partner and I were dispatched, and arrived about fifteen minutes later." He indicated his partner, a paunchy, silver-haired Asian, who was adding a second loop of barrier tape to keep out the curious, then indicated the equestrienne, "We found Mrs. Rosenfield right about where she is now. She was pretty upset."

"I'm sure the last thing she expected to find was a dead body on her morning ride."

"Yes sir."

Nothing could be done to process the crime scene until the photographers had taken their shots. Everything had to be kept intact to preserve possible evidence. They had the time; the body wasn't going anywhere. In the distance, thunder rumbled. He amended that, maybe they didn't have so much time.

David studied the dark, crouching clouds, and wondered if Chris would get over his snit long enough to close the windows against the coming rain. Otherwise their newly refinished oak floors were going to get a soaking. One more thing for Chris to get pissed at. He retraced his steps and approached the horse and rider.

He pulled out a notebook and twisted his arm around to check the time, only to discover he wasn't wearing his watch. Right, he'd stuffed it into his jacket pocket after he'd left an angry Chris in bed this morning. Chris always seemed to be angry these days. He got that way when he was between jobs. He drew out the Rolex Chris had given him for his fortieth birthday and wrote the exact time, the crime scene location, and his own name and rank. David studied the watch ruefully. He had told Chris a gift like that was too extravagant, but Chris wouldn't listen. "You deserve it," he had said. "You put up with me for four years, didn't you?" Still, David took it off when he

could; out of sight of Chris, who took it as a personal affront when he didn't wear it all the time. David was a Timex kind of guy. Even after four years he never got comfortable with the easy wealth Chris displayed.

Mrs. Rosenfield looked young. David doubted she was more than twenty-five. Under normal circumstances she would have been attractive—large, doe eyes, soft hair flying loose from under her riding helmet. But now her face was pale, and her eyes were glassy with shock. David pushed aside his sympathy and assembled his cop face; the one Chris hated so much, claiming it made him look cold and robotic. Well, there were times when cold and robotic was the right way.

She wore a tailored riding outfit and boots that gleamed, even in the sunless light. A pulse beat in her throat, like a wounded animal.

"Mrs. Rosenfield," he said. "I'm Detective David Eric Laine. Could I have your full name, please?"

"Danielle," she said. "Just call me Danielle." Her gaze darted toward the grave. "Who is it? Do you know—?"

"No, ma'am, Danielle, we don't know that yet. Can you take me back to when you first spotted something out of the ordinary?"

"S-sure." She visibly collected herself, her hand going out to stroke her horse's neck. "Toby and I were on our morning ride, when these coyotes came racing right out under our noses—I thought they were attacking us at first. You hear about how bold they've gotten over the years."

"Yes, ma'am." What coyotes could do was frightening. What people could do to each other was so much worse. "What then?"

"Once they ran away I realized they were just as scared as we were. I was going to head back home. I'm supposed to be to work at ten." She shook her head, a strand of hair falling over her eyes. She swept it aside with a kidskin gloved hand. "I guess I should call my boss. I don't think I'll be in today—" Her voice broke.

“Yes, ma’am,” David said gently. “What was the first thing you noticed before the coyotes appeared?”

“Toby spooked.” Rosenfield grimaced. “I guess when he got wind of them. He nearly dumped me. That was when I saw the arm. I screamed. That must have scared them away without taking...taking it with them.” The grimace deepened and the flesh around her mouth whitened.

More thunder cracked, closer this time. She looked around uneasily.

“Anything else you can recall about your ride?” David asked even more gently, knowing she was very close to losing it. “Before you noticed anything amiss?”

“We rode by the Roosevelt Municipal golf course,” she said. “I go that way all the time. Usually it’s so peaceful...”

“You see anybody on the links?”

“Two players, and a caddie.” Rosenfield squinted as she recalled her morning. “I don’t pay much attention to the golfers, unless they’re driving carts. Sometimes they spook Toby.”

“Would you recognize the golfers if you saw them again?”

“W-what? You don’t think they had anything to do with this, do you?”

“It’s just standard procedure,” David assured her. “Look, I know this is tough. Even cops can have a hard time stumbling across something like this. If you like, I can give you the number of a victim’s support group. They can help you with this, if you want.”

“T-thank you. I don’t think that’s necessary...”

David handed her the card anyway. “You might change your mind. I hear they’re good.”

She slipped the card into her jacket pocket. He knew she wouldn’t call. He’d seen it before. Misplaced pride would keep her from seeking help. “What did you see then?” he prompted.

“I didn’t know what it was at first, then I thought it was a mannequin.” She gave a short bark of laughter, quickly stifled.

“That someone had stolen a storefront dummy and was playing a gag. It was only after I saw the teeth marks that I knew.” She swallowed convulsively and David wondered if she was going to be sick. The human arm had been heavily gnawed by strong jaws. He distracted her as smoothly as he could.

“I need you to come down to the station, to make a formal statement. I can send someone out to get you if you like—”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll drive myself. Will I have to go to court?”

“I won’t lie to you. It depends on the D.A., and whether a suspect is found, and it all makes it to court. But I’m sure someone from the prosecutor’s office will be in touch with you if it becomes necessary.”

David watched her stiffly remount her horse and urge it back onto the trail. They broke into a fast trot before they were out of sight. He very much doubted she would ever ride this peaceful trail again.

Out of the corner of his eye, David saw a white Pontiac Firehawk, splattered with debris from the previous night’s rain, pull up beside the LAPD crime scene van. It was driven by a lithe, dark-skinned Latino man, with that young urban scruffy beard thing going on. Chris, always quick to adopt new fads, had tried it once, until David complained that it was like kissing five o’clock shadow, all day long, and he reluctantly shaved it off.

The Latino climbed out of the low-slung car. He surveyed the scene of controlled chaos with dark eyes, taking in everything in a sweeping glance, before he shrouded them with a pair of Ray Bans. He looked like he just stepped out of GQ, sharp creases on his wool dress pants and sedate black and blue tie. He wore his gold detective’s badge on a chain around his neck. David caught a glimpse of his Beretta nine under his LAPD blue nylon wind breaker. Incongruously, he wore a pair of hand-tooled black and blue Tony Lamas boots instead of the usual military gear most new detectives favored. David wouldn’t be surprised if he had a closet full of Levis and Stetsons at home. He was a tall man, though not as tall as David’s six-four,

dark-skinned, with high cheek bones. His eyes were dark and dangerous. Too dangerous for David's taste.

The guy was going to spell trouble.

Already the eyes of the two female SID criminologists kept straying his way. David had heard rumors about the guy, even before he was assigned to Northeast; he'd ignored them at the time, like he ignored all the trash talk around the squad room. In the stories the guy was a wannabe actor. David had heard—and dismissed—the story about his involvement with a producer's wife that had ended messily. The tabloid press had been all over it. Maybe the guy had a problem keeping his dick in his pants. Maybe he was only guilty of bad judgment. He wouldn't be the first. Cops and badge bunnies went together like chili and fries.

David extended his hand and introduced himself. Might as well give the guy the benefit of a doubt, he didn't like it when people jumped to conclusions about him. Being one of the few openly gay detectives carried its own baggage. "Glad to have you on board."

"Thank you, sir," the detective said. "Detective Jairo Garcia Hernandez." He pronounced it Yairo. "Most gringos call me Jerry." His smile was all teeth and David knew he was being tested by the new D.

He'd nip that one in the bud before it went south. "I think I can handle Jairo." He gave the word a Spanish lilt. The guy wasn't going to catch this gringo ignorant of the language. Good looking or not, he was just another rookie D.

Jairo saw the Rolex on his wrist and whistled. "Nice watch. Your wife give you that?"

"No, I'm not married," David said. Deciding to make small talk, he ventured, "You?"

"Yes."

"How's that going for you?" Cops loved marriage; so many of them did it so often.

“Fine.” Jairo grew defensive. “You gonna tell me that’s gonna change? Already got that from my smart-ass sergeant first time I showed up for roll-call.”

“It’s hard,” was all David said. “Marriage is a work in progress.”

“So you were married? She divorce you?”

David shrugged. He finally slipped the Rolex off and tucked it back into his inner pocket, over his heart. It would be safer there, away from nosy rookies. “It’s complicated.” Then he saw Jairo had noticed the plain gold band he wore on his left ring finger. The gold band Chris had given him following the first year they had lived together. He closed his hands into fists, but made no attempt to hide the thing. What was the use? He was almost as notorious in the LAPD as Mark Fuhrman.

Jairo’s disingenuous eyes widened. “You’re the... you’re him.”

David saw something glitter on the ground at the entrance to the crime scene, and crouched down to study it. It was a bottle cap. Still, he signaled a photographer over to take a picture. Sometimes the littlest things proved useful. Sometimes they were just litter. All around them crime scene techs were placing evidence flags, and doing their best to catch everything, before the skies opened up. He was glad to see that the victim’s hands had been bagged, covering the ring he had seen earlier. “You can say it, you know.” David stood up and brushed debris off his pants. “I’m the gay cop.”

Jairo flushed and looked away. “Yes, sir.”

Now what was that all about? Surely as soon as he knew who his latest senior partner was going to be, Jairo would have known all about David’s sordid “secret.” He would have found all kinds of officers eager to share the scuttlebutt about who he’d been saddled with. “That’s Detective, Hernandez.” David was already beginning to miss Martinez, his partner of ten years. He had been reassigned to South-Central, for the next six months, to work a gang detail. They had forged a tight partnership; a partnership that even David’s abrupt outing over four years ago had not disrupted. David wasn’t looking forward

to breaking in the new kid, even if he was, as rumor also claimed, top of his graduating class. Good grades, like good looks, weren't everything.

He moved around to stand beside the grave again. A tarp had been laid over the torn earth to protect against the coming storm. He thought he could still see the outline of the arm. He glanced sideways when a flash of lightning illuminated the dense brush. He almost felt sorry for the boots who was going to have to guard this site all night.

He turned back to face the grave and its nameless victim. Jairo came up to stand beside him. David kept his eyes on the tarp, ignoring the man beside him.

"I'll find him," he promised.

CHAPTER TWO

Friday, 11:35 AM, Two California Plaza, South Grand Avenue, Los Angeles

Christopher Bellamere reached across the black melamine table and vigorously shook Dr. Curtis R. Jantz's hand. Jantz, the head of R&D for Microchip Interface Technologies, gestured for Chris to sit, and did the same. A young, preppy looking man appeared and offered coffee. Chris accepted, and within seconds a steaming china cup was delicately placed in front of him, along with a silver cream and sugar service. He accepted both.

After sparing a brief look out the polarized glass, fifty stories above the Los Angeles city center, looking west toward the hazy beaches of Santa Monica, and Venice fifteen miles away, he turned his full attention on Jantz. At least the storm had blown over. Maybe the weekend would be decent, after all. Nice. Go into the weekend with a new job under his belt. Now if only David would get some time off, it would be perfect. He might even be able to plan a little make-up sex to let David know he was sorry for being such a bitch.

"You've seen our business plans," Jantz said. It was more a statement than a question.

"I went over them last night," Chris said, anxious to get to the meat of their discussion, but equally anxious not to show his eagerness. The delicate dance of negotiation.

Jantz steeped his fingers, his eyes, behind a pair of Gucci glasses, pale blue and watchful. "I've already spoken with my partners, and they've indicated they'll leave this decision up to me. I still have some concerns I'd like to address, if that's acceptable to you."

"Of course. We both want to know this is a good fit. I have some questions as well."

“Good” Jantz pulled a slim-line gunmetal gray attaché case onto the table, and popped it open. He withdrew a sheaf of paper. “I see you’ve put some consideration into assembling a local team. I assume you’re familiar with all these people.” He held aloft the list Chris had faxed to him yesterday. “But, first, our non-disclosure agreement.” Jantz pulled out a second ream of paper. “I’m sure you’re familiar with them. Have your lawyer look them over if you’re not.”

Chris took the pages and skimmed through them. He’d signed enough such contracts, over his career, to see it was a basic boilerplate agreement, simply stating that he wouldn’t use what he learned at Microchip Interface Technologies for personal gain. Nothing hinky, as David would say. He slipped his Mont Blanc pen out of his jacket pocket, and used the nib to guide his eyes through the verbose legalese. He blinked a couple of times at the tiny print and wondered if it was time to start looking for reading glasses. Unlike David, he wasn’t ready to admit he was getting old. Maybe he should look into laser surgery. Across from him he sensed Jantz’s growing impatience. Refusing to be rushed, he finished the first page, and glanced up to find Jantz still watching him, with an intensity that might have made a lesser man blink.

He didn’t, and after another couple of minutes he slid the papers into his laptop case. “I’ll give my lawyer a call and get back to you with these tomorrow.”

“Of course.” Jantz stood up. “I’ll have my secretary set up an appointment. Is ten good for you? I have a conference call at eight with our European affiliates.”

“Sure, ten’s fine.” Chris extended his hand, and felt it engulfed in Jantz’s cool one. Back in the elevator he descended to the parking garage where his kiwi green Escape sat nose in to a parking stall. He fished out a couple of bills, parked his Prada shades on his nose and activated his BlackBerry.

Des, his best friend since their days together at UCLA, answered on the third ring. He sounded breathless, but that was Des; he always sounded like he was racing through life, eager to get from one fabulous scene to the next.

“Oh thank God you called. I’m in such a tizzy. Clive has just lost it. Completely lost it. He put together a window yesterday with our latest shipment of Nicole Farhi, *and* he put them out with this old rag that was left over from last season! I ask you, if a little queen like Clive doesn’t know yesterday’s news from the trash what’s a girl to do?”

Chris laughed, which only incensed Des more. “Hon, you take this all way too seriously,” Chris said. “Come on, I want to take you out for a drink. Surely you can trust the store to Clive for the afternoon.”

“Not if I want to retire before I’m 50,” Des sniffed. “What are we celebrating?”

“Why do we have to be celebrating anything? Maybe I just want to have a drink with my best friend. You ever think of that? Besides,” Chris flicked on the radio and got KROQ. The sounds of Rise Against filled the cab. “I think I’m about to sign my biggest contract yet. I may be retiring before you.”

“That is so not fair. I take it you’re buying then? Koutoubia? We can get the Couscous Royal pour Deux.”

“I haven’t signed the contract yet. Besides, I thought I said ‘drink,’ not ‘gourmet Moroccan feast.’”

“Drink. Tagine. Same diff.”

“Fine,” Chris said, knowing he’d never win an argument with Des. “Give me an hour to shower and change.”

“I can already taste that Princess Martini.”

He swung onto the Pasadena Freeway, and had just gotten off the freeway onto Silver Lake when he saw the dog at the side of the road. He slammed on the brakes when the gaunt, black and tan animal stumbled into the street, nearly going under his wheels. He threw the door open with a shout, and barely missed getting creamed himself by a pickup truck, that swerved around both of them with a blare of horn and Spanish expletives. Chris ignored the irate driver. He crouched down and eyed the shivering animal.

“What are you up to, guy?” Chris looked around, hoping to see someone coming out of one of the shabby businesses that

lined this area of Silver Lake Boulevard. He turned back to study the dog, disgusted to see ribs and gaunt hip bones protruding from its dull coat. "You're a long way from home, aren't you?"

The animal's stub of a tail wagged uncertainly. Chris reached into the car and retrieved his BlackBerry from the passenger's seat. He'd have to do a search on animal shelters to find somebody equipped to help. He looked up from Googling to find the dog's eyes staring at him intensely.

"What?"

The tail moved again.

Christ, he was losing it here, talking to a half-starved mutt, in the middle of Silver Lake, while traffic flowed around them. Asking to get them both killed.

Another car came too close, its horn dopplering into an angry mutter as it swerved around them. From inside his Escape came the surreal lyrics from Good Charlotte singing about walking in the shadow of L A. Chris straightened. "Okay," he said, indicating the inside of the SUV. "We'll settle this at my place. But don't start thinking I'm a pushover. I'm not. You're going to the pound."

The dog wiggled his nearly tailless butt and despite his half-starved appearance leapt into the cab easily, settling onto the seat, as though he did it every day.

Half an hour later Chris pulled into his drive-way. David's yellow and white '56 Chevy coupe wasn't there. But then it was early. It could be hours before David got home, and if there were any troubling deaths, then he could be gone longer than that. It was probably a good thing David wasn't home. Chris didn't have to strain his imagination to know what David would say about him bringing this stray home.

He took the path around the side of the house, and let himself in through the locked gate to the backyard. Telling the animal to stay put, he slipped into the house, grabbed a large ceramic bowl, which he filled with tap water, and pulled a plate of leftover chicken pasta from the fridge, carrying both outside. The dog hadn't moved. Chris offered the water first, then slid

the plate onto the pavement stones. The dog emptied the plate in two inhalations, and looked for more.

Chris still made no move to touch the animal. He did see it had a collar, but no tags. Had it gotten away from someone's yard? Or had it been dumped? It was skinny, so whatever had happened wasn't recent. He couldn't see any sign of abuse or injury. He wished he knew more about dogs. But all he'd ever owned were cats, and that was mostly due to David's love of them. Chris could have happily gone through life without owning any animal.

"What am I going to do with you?"

The dog crept close and tentatively shoved its damp nose into Chris's hand. Without another thought, Chris pulled out his BlackBerry and punched in Des's number. Before Des could speak, he said, "I need you to come over here, right now."

"What's wrong?"

"Just come out. I can explain it better then."

"If this is your way of getting out of lunch—"

"Trust me, Des."

Des sniffed. "Well, okay. But don't think you're getting off. I still expect lunch."

While he waited for Des, Chris got a towel, and a bucket of warm water, and tried to wipe down the short-coated dog. The dog seemed to have lost its reticence, and tried to lick Chris's skin off his face. Warm doggy breath, smelling vaguely of pesto chicken, washed over his face. Chris belatedly realized he was still wearing his Brunello Cucinellis suit from the interview. Not exactly dog washing attire. He took one final swipe of the animal and stood up.

He changed into jeans and a T-shirt, since the day had turned warm. Back outside, he found the dog sprawled on its side, on the sun-warmed patio, looking more asleep than aware. His upright ears barely moved when Chris shut the French doors behind him.

"You sure know how to make yourself at home."

Chris studied the sleeping dog and began to realize it looked familiar. In fact it looked just like the dog a neighbor down below the stairs owned. He remembered David had admired the dog more than once. A Doberman Pinscher.

"Is that what you are? *Sprechen sie Deutsch?*"

The dog smiled, revealing perfectly white, gleaming teeth.

"So does that mean if I try to take you in you'll chew my ass off? You're worse than one of David's drill sergeants."

He heard Des pull in behind his Escape. Chris opened the patio gate and called Des over.

"What are you doing back here?" Des pulled the gate shut behind him. "Now, will you please tell me what the hell is going...?"

He caught sight of the dog, which had half-risen at his appearance.

"Jesus." Des backpedaled until he was pressed back against the redwood gate. "What is that?"

"It's a dog."

"No shit. What are you doing with it?"

"Well, that's the problem," Chris said, guiding Des to one of the Adirondack chairs and settling him into it. "I found him. How about you keep an eye on Sergeant and I get us a drink."

"Jesus, you named it already? You know you can't do that. Once you name it, how can you get rid of it?"

"You see our problem then."

"Our problem? I didn't participate in this doggie rescue operation. How is it my problem?"

Chris went inside and returned minutes later with a bottle of Pinot Blanc and two glasses. He handed one to Des. "*Mi problema es su problema.*"

"Ha, good luck with that. I've got enough problems keeping Trevor in line. This is a whole other can of Alpo."

"Speaking of which, what do you feed dogs? I doubt they should have cat food."

Des eyed the empty plate on the patio stones. "Not that, I'm sure, if it came out of your fridge. You're not seriously thinking of keeping him are you? What is David going to say?"

"I adore you, Chris." Chris batted his eye lashes. "Whatever you want is fine with me, Chris."

"You do live in a fantasy world, don't you?"

"A very rich one, thank you very much. I'm not worried about David. He likes animals."

"No, he likes cats and he likes you. I think you're stretching the definition of animal lover here."

"Oh pish," Chris said, getting the requisite smile from Des.

"Well, I don't know about you," Des said. "But I'm still hungry, and since going out for lunch isn't an option anymore, how about we order in?" He gave Chris a mock glare. "Your treat."

They ordered souvlaki and Greek salad from down on the Boulevard. Chris followed that up with a call to his lawyer about going over the contract and an area pet supply place which promised to deliver a bag of dog food by the end of the day.

Waiting for lunch, Chris faxed the contract to his lawyer. The dog food arrived before their own, and Chris found a small bowl to portion some out. He left the dog happily scarfing down his food, while he and Des headed into the kitchen to eat.

It was nearly seven before Chris heard David's key in the door. He hadn't heard the car, but then David probably had to park on the street, since Des's Mercedes was taking up the other parking space. Des jumped to his feet, a half grimace on his classically beautiful cafe-au-lait face. "Well, I think I'm going to call it a night. You two take care—"

"Des—"

David paused in the door to divest himself of his weapon and badge and dropped his shoes in the foyer. He passed Des.

"Leaving so soon?" David asked, when Des gave him a hurried hello and goodbye.

"Gotta go, Trev's waiting."

They both watched Des race out the door; David turned to greet Chris. "What's with him?"

"Don't know," Chris said. He stood up and kissed David. "You hungry?"

"You have no idea." David grimaced. "Let me take a shower and get changed first."

"Rough day?"

David only mumbled something as he dragged himself upstairs. Within minutes the shower came on.

Chris threw together some left over lamb and couscous, and had it on the table with a bottle of David's Bud. David bussed him more thoroughly before he sat down. Sweeney, David's Siamese, strolled into the kitchen looking for attention. David scratched him behind his ears then pulled his plate over toward him. He looked over at Chris's empty place setting.

"You eat already?"

"Des and I had a late lunch."

David dove into his food, letting Chris know he'd had a busy day; too busy to eat. Pretty typical of David.

"You going back out?" Chris asked when David declined the beer and poured himself an orange juice instead.

"Yeah," David sighed. "Paperwork. I'll be leaving at first light tomorrow, too."

"New case?"

"Body in Griffith Park." David refused to talk about his job with Chris, which Chris didn't mind at all. He wasn't into dead bodies or mangled corpses. He was happy to spend his days in the antiseptic and non-violent world of computers. "Don't wait up for me," David added.

It was Chris's turn to sigh. Once David was finished, Chris scooped the plate and glass up, rinsed them out and loaded the dishwasher. Then he took David's hand and pulled him off the chair.

"Need to show you something."

“What?” David hastily wiped his mouth on a napkin, and followed Chris through the back of the house, to the patio door.

Chris put his finger on his mouth and peered around the French door. The dog was curled up beside his empty food bowl, his sides bellowing in and out in gentle sleep. The instant Chris popped the door open, the dog bolted upright.

David stood on the stone step overlooking the patio. He stared at the animal, who stared right back.

“Chris...”

“I found him. I almost hit him with my car. I couldn’t very well leave him out there, now could I?”

“And animal control—”

“Who knows what they’d do to him. Look at that face.” Chris crouched down by the dog’s wedge-shaped head and fondled his ears. The dog wriggled his butt. “How can you send a face like that into purgatory?”

“I hardly think an animal shelter is purgatory,” David said dryly. “Most of those people love dogs. Besides, maybe somebody’s looking for him. You ever think of that?”

Chris snorted. “Didn’t do a very good job of looking after him, if you ask me.”

“You have to look, Chris. You can’t just take something you found, just because you want to.”

“I took you, didn’t I?”

“You hardly found me lost on the street.”

“Close. You were a lost soul until I rescued you.”

“Very cute.” David pulled Chris to his feet and enfolded him in his arms. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

A low growl punctuated his words. They both looked over to see the dog standing, glaring at David.

“Whoa, guy.” Chris crossed over to the angry dog and made him lie down. “Don’t go throwing a hissy fit.” To David, “He’s just jealous.”

“Jealous or not, you’re going to have to get rid of him. Can I trust you to at least try to find the owner? Promise me that?”

Chris played with the buttons of David’s stiff white shirt. “Sure, I promise. I won’t find anyone, just wait and see.”

Still shaking his head, David gave Chris one more kiss and left. Chris sat on the patio until the sun sank over the reservoir and darkness cloaked his hillside home.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he said to the dog.

Eventually he and Sergeant headed inside.

CHAPTER THREE

Saturday, 6:50 AM, Vista del Valle Drive, Griffith Park, Los Angeles

Dull shadows still clung to the inner boundaries of the chaparral guarding the entrance to the grave. David edged past the limp barrier tape that had been strung up to delineate the scene. A second, outer layer of tape had been put up to keep the inquisitive away, and avoid potential contamination. David nodded at the two boots, who had been assigned the task of watching the grave overnight, to prevent any further predation and keep out the curious. They both looked in need of a hot shower and eighteen hours in bed.

As added protection, a privacy screen had been put up between the roadway and the site, which had been covered last night when it was clear the rains were going to be too heavy to continue. David kept glancing at the sky, but so far it remained hazy, but cloud free. Maybe they'd get this finished today.

David knew it was only a matter of time before the local network affiliates showed up. There was something infinitely sexy about a body in a public park. So in your face.

The forensic technician and the deputy coroner arrived, pulling the crime scene van up to the edge of Vista del Valle, tires sinking into the loamy earth. Jairo was right behind them, his newly washed Firehawk catching the early morning light. If it was possible, he was dressed even more sharply than the day before. He still wore the Tony Lamas. When he got closer, David could smell his cologne: Giorgio Armani—Chris wore it sometimes. It evoked a wholly unwanted reaction in him.

He edged closer to the rim of the hole, crouching down to observe the proceedings. They had pulled the tarp back, and marked out a grid around the arm, which he could now see was clearly still attached, by a few shreds of flesh, to the buried torso underneath. So much for the idea that this might have

been a dismembered body, which would have been a nightmare to solve.

"Don't you hate this kind of thing?" Jairo said, kneeling beside him.

"Why's that?"

"You have one of the best solve records in the Northeast, this kind of scene has to throw a spanner into that."

"I hate all of them. There's no such thing as a good homicide."

"Right, boss."

The day crawled by. The body was slowly uncovered, the evidence bags filled with varying bits of debris that hadn't been collected the day before. You never knew what might prove pivotal. The rain held off, but the humidity soared. Paper bags covered both hands, though with the degree of putrefaction, David doubted the nails would yield much, even if the victim scratched the killer.

Teresa Lopez, the deputy coroner for the county morgue, climbed out of the grave. Her Tyvek suit hung off her diminutive frame and strands of white hair broke free of her sterile cap. She shoved them back impatiently.

"Well, she's dead."

"Gee thanks, Lopez. That was inspiring."

Lopez gave him a lopsided grin, then trained her attention on Jairo. Her grin widened. "Well, who do we have here? You trade Martinez in for a younger model? 'Bout time."

"Martinez is over in South-Central playing footsies with the *carnales*. I'll tell him you were asking after him."

"You do that."

"So our victim's female. TOD?"

"You do live in your dreams, don't you."

"All I want is a time of death. How hard can that be? I thought you were the miracle lady."

“Only on even days that end in a ‘y.’ Let me get her on a slab first. Maybe then I can help you narrow it down to what decade.”

The digging with small trowels and camel hair brushes continued past lunch. Around two, David sent Jairo down to Hillhurst Avenue to pick up lunch at Simply Thai. He came back thirty minutes later with curry beef and some overcooked shrimp in a watery sauce. David ate anyway; it might be a long time before the chance came again.

The body bag was prepared, the sterile rubber sheet on which the body would be placed, ready. SID cleared the last few inches of dirt, sieving each trowel-full. The senior technician pointed at something. David leaned closer and saw it was a dirt-encrusted cell phone. He watched the tech photograph it, before bagging it.

“Good find,” David said. Whether the phone belonged to the victim or the perpetrator, it could yield valuable information.

Suddenly one of the other technicians sat back on his heels. “Oh man.”

David was instantly alert. The technician glanced at Lopez then at David. “You’re not going to like this.”

“I already don’t like it,” David said. “What is it?”

He heard Lopez suck in her breath. “A baby.” She crouched down and peered intently at the tiny corpse. “Probably a coffin birth.”

“Ah, no,” David said.

“What-what’s a coffin birth?” Jairo, looking more than a little green around the edges.

“When a pregnant woman dies before the baby comes to term, the baby dies too, naturally. Once gases inside the uterus expand, they push the fetus out the birth canal—”

Jairo backed away from the grave. David had to give him credit, he made it past the barrier tape before he threw up the pitiful lunch they’d consumed little over two hours ago.

Jairo refused to meet anyone's eyes when he returned. Lopez handed him a stick of Wrigley's which he took gratefully. David suppressed a smile. Got them every time. Still, he wondered what was wrong with him that he felt so little. Shouldn't he be as horrified as Jairo by what they'd found? Except, it was too much like a hundred other crime scenes he'd attended since he'd made detective.

Mother and child were laid out on separate sheets, then tucked into body bags. David saw the way Jairo's wary eyes watched every move the technicians made. He dragged his gaze away and met David's.

"You can attend the post. Lopez will tell you when," David said. "Make sure you take lots of notes."

He could tell Jairo wanted to refuse, but in the end he just grimaced and nodded curtly. "Yes. Dr. Lopez?"

"I might be able to get to it tomorrow, early afternoon. Provided there aren't any major incidents."

"Head over there after lunch," David said. Jairo only nodded.

David's cell phone chirped. It was Chris.

"You heading home soon?"

David pulled his watch out; it was after five. He turned away from Jairo. "Can't say. I doubt it. Don't keep supper."

Chris sighed. "Des and I are going out to lunch tomorrow. But I wanted to make reservations next weekend for us."

"Reservations? What for?"

"It's Valentine's day. I know it's actually this weekend, but we'd never get a reservation this late. Plus I signed that contract today. Tell me we can at least do supper sometime in the next month."

"I'm on rotation, but not first string, so unless things get crazy I should be good next weekend."

"Where do you want to go?"

“Surprise me.” David took a deep breath, all too aware of Jairo watching him. “You have any luck finding the dog’s owner?”

“The vet thinks if he’s a purebred he might have a microchip and we should be able to trace the owner with that. But—”

“No buts, Chris, the dog’s not yours. For all you know someone’s worried sick about him.”

“Yeah, I saw how much care he got,” Chris muttered. “Okay, okay. I’ll track the asshole down. You don’t mind if I give him a piece of my mind, do you?”

“Like I could stop you.” David grinned and was relieved when Chris laughed back.

“Don’t worry, I won’t give him more than I can spare.”

“That’s good. I’ll see you when I get there. Don’t wait up.”

He hung up. Jairo was still staring. “Your partner?”

“Yeah,” David said. “Come on, the day’s not getting any younger. We’ll lose our light soon.”

Shadows replaced the weak sunlight, and a sharp breeze sprung up, rolling off Cahuenga Peak. Chillingly a coyote howled nearby. A second one yipped back.

“Lining up at the smörgåsbord?” Jairo muttered.

“Don’t worry, they lost their chance at this one.”

“You got a dog?” At David’s look Jairo shrugged. “I heard you talking. We have one, big ugly lab, got an IQ of about ten.”

“No, we don’t have a dog. Long story.”

“You look like a dog guy to me.”

“How’s that?”

“Some people just look like dog people. What kind of dog don’t you own?”

“Doberman. It’s a stray, we’re taking it back.”

“You mean you’re taking it back. Didn’t sound like Chris—is that his name? That Chris isn’t so sure.”

“He’ll come around.”

Jairo snorted. “How long have you been together?”

“What’s that got to do with anything? Listen, we’re here to work, not jaw about family pets.”

“Whatever you say, boss.”

Smart ass. Like he didn’t get enough of that from Chris.

CHAPTER FOUR

Saturday, 5:20 PM, Vista del Valle Drive, Griffith Park, Los Angeles

The coroner's wagon trundled back out onto the road, followed by the eager hordes of media people who had showed up midday, trying to snatch a look at the grisly discovery. It must have been a busy news day; it usually didn't take that long. Buzzards took longer to find a corpse than a reporter. They crowded around the barrier tape, jostling and yelling at David.

"Come on, David," a cameraman he recognized from Channel 5 trained his shoulder cam on them. "Throw us a bone here. Who's the vic?"

"No can do, guys. You know better than that. Next of kin and all that."

Roz Parnell, a reporter for the *LA Times*, leaned over the yellow tape, her large breasts nearly popping out of her low cut blouse. She knew her charms were wasted on him. Instead her gaze arrowed in on Jairo. "Maybe your friend here can talk to us. How about it, sugar, what's the scoop? Get your name in the paper."

David was surprised when Jairo blushed and turned away from the reporters. David met Roz's eyes. He smoothed the hair of his mustache. "Guess not everyone needs their fifteen minutes."

The final shadows of the day crept out of the chaparral, and pooled in the grave, where the SID technicians still labored. David decided he'd sign off, and release the site, once full darkness fell. They wouldn't get anything else done tonight, and he knew the brass would be getting heat if the park road was closed for another day.

"Come on," he said. "Grab a flashlight and let's do one more grid."

“You really think you’re going to find anything else?”

“Who knows. I’d rather take the time now than realize later we missed something. You only get one—”

“One chance,” Jairo said. “I know. I know. I took the academy course too.”

Jairo took the flashlight out of the trunk of his Firehawk. He flicked it on as he approached the grave, the beam sweeping across David’s feet, revealing the mud coating his wool pants.

David tuned everything out as he focused on the disturbed ground beyond the original grave, not knowing what he was looking for, only knowing he’d recognize it when he saw it.

The technicians were stowing their gear away. “Thanks, guys. Let’s call it a day—”

David put his hand on Jairo’s arm, stilling the sweeping beam of light. He pointed straight down at his toes. He crouched down, ignoring the wet earth seeping into his knees when they brushed the ground.

“What is it?”

David motioned the nearest tech to bring him an evidence bag. While he waited, he skimmed a pair of nitrile gloves on. He scooped something out of the mud and slid it into the bag.

He handed it up to the tech. “What’s it look like to you?”

The Tyvek-suited man turned the baggie over in his gloved hands. “Looks like a proximal phalanx.” He caught David’s look. “Finger bone.”

“Human?”

“Unless there’s a missing bear in the area, yes. Did you know that bear paws look almost identical to human—”

“Okay.” David waved them all out of the grave. He flipped his phone open and said to whoever answered, “I want a cadaver dog down here pronto. And bring some spots with you. And the generator.”

“I take it this means we’re not going home,” Jairo said.

"You're not on the four-ten anymore. You don't get to clock out at a sane hour and get three days off. Better call your wife. We're going to be here a while. Pray the weather holds."

Jairo pulled out his cell and spoke in soft Spanish to whoever answered.

Finally he said, "*Te quiero mi amor*. Don't forget to take the dog out," and disconnected.

He glanced at David's empty hands. "I take it you're not calling?"

"He knows better than to expect me."

"You're not going to tell me he likes it."

"No," David said shortly. "He doesn't like it."

It took over ninety minutes for the cadaver dog and his handler to arrive. They started out where David directed them, in the already excavated grave, confirming his suspicions. The dog almost immediately went into alert mode, barking at the ground to the left of the hole's center.

"How do you know it's not just smelling the other corpse?"

"They're not that easily fooled." Once the SID technicians got to work excavating the new patch of ground, David pulled the dog handler aside, with Jairo at his side. "Can you start a spiral search? I hope I'm wrong, but let's make sure there aren't any more."

The dog handler nodded and began to circle the grave.

"You think they're related?" Jairo asked.

"We proceed like they're not."

"You can't believe that."

"No, but it's the way we'll play it until we confirm, one way or another."

"If you didn't have such a high solve rate, I'd think you were a doddering old fool."

David raised one eyebrow at him, hoping there was a but. Jairo didn't disappoint.

“Anyone with your rate of solved homicides must know something.”

“Glad you think so.”

They set up the spotlights in a loose ring around the grave; David made sure some of the light spilled over the outer perimeter, where the dog was diligently snuffling along the ground. After several hours of searching and digging, they’d freed the blanket-wrapped corpse from the ground, and found no traces of more bodies.

This body was almost entirely skeletonized. A few moldering strands of cloth, and a clump of blond hair, were collected from outside the thick synthetic blanket, that might have been a comforter, and labeled.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and the hair will have roots,” David said. “We can pull DNA out of those. If not, we can always get mDNA, that traces back through the maternal line. Lopez can take over this tomorrow. She might decide to bring in a forensic anthropologist.”

“You mean like Bones?”

“Yeah, like Bones, only for real. Not Hollywood.”

“Nothing wrong with Hollywood.”

David grimaced. “Don’t tell me you really are a player?”

“I’ve had a few parts,” Jairo seemed proud. “Maybe you saw me.”

“I doubt it. I don’t watch much TV outside of sports.”

“My agent says I could be the next Michael Hall.” Off David’s confused look he grinned. “Dexter.”

Now that David had heard about. “Ah, a show that celebrates serial killers. Good role model.”

“Hey, it’s not real.”

Having dealt with his share of serial murderers, David disagreed. But he kept his opinion to himself. “Come on, we can get all this stuff logged into evidence. Then maybe we can even get home before the bars close.”

“That an invitation?”

“What? No, I didn’t mean that—”

“*No es problema*. I just wanted to pick your brain some more.”

The cadaver dog didn’t have any luck after another hour. The handler praised the animal and gave him a treat before he loaded the dog back in his van. SID wrapped up too. The floods were dismantled and stowed away. Jairo put his own flashlight back in the trunk. He met David around the driver’s side.

David eyed the gleaming white car. “Nice set of wheels. You do your own work?”

“Every piece of it. She’s all mine.”

“I’ll have mine with me tomorrow. We can trade war stories.”

“Sure, no such thing as too much car talk.”

He clearly didn’t know Chris. His lover had little use for any kind of vehicle, unless it cost a mint and was a hot property, even if he’d had to settle for a Ford Escape when he’d launched his own business four years ago. He still dreamed of lush wheels and trendy little emblems. He loved the end result of David’s work on the Chevy ‘56 two-tone sport coupe that had consumed over six years, but always got glassy-eyed when David actually talked about the work he had done on it.

They were alone at the crime scene. David waited for Jairo to sign the log book, then he did the same, and officially released the site.

“Meet you back at the station,” Jairo said and slipped into his car. He revved the engine and spun around in a circle, vanishing down the road, toward Los Feliz in a cloud of dust.

David climbed behind the wheel of his Crown Vic, and sat there for several minutes, running over the day’s events. Jairo was right on one thing, the case didn’t look good for an easy solve. Too many unknowns, including the identities of the victims, and the actual location of the deaths. And unless the post gave them something more concrete, this kind of homicide did have a lousy close rate.

He debated calling Chris, deciding not to. Once he told Chris he was all but done for the night, he'd want him to come home. But David didn't feel like going home just yet. Chris had been in such a bad mood lately. If he waited long enough maybe he'd be in bed when he got there, and hopefully in a better mood tomorrow.

Maybe a beer would be a good idea. He could unwind and put this thing in perspective.

Jairo was at his desk—the one Martinez had occupied until he'd been sent to the 77th Street Area Community Police Station to work in their gang detail—the phone pinned under his chin, a pen in his hand. He looked up when David entered the room.

He finished up his conversation and wrote up some notes.

"Still want to grab that beer?" David asked.

"Sure," he said. "You said you like sports?"

"Yeah, you know a place?"

"Leo's All-Star Sports Bar, up in La Crescenta."

David had never heard of it. "Why not?"

"How about I drive? You can tell me what you think of the wheels. I'll drop you back here, later."

The bar was packed and noisy. A juke box poured out country laments and the place reeked of hops and jalapeños. Every wall was full of TVs, including a giant projection screen that filled one whole wall.

The click of billiard balls, and the buzz and whistles of pinball machines, could barely be heard over the hum of voices. They found a corner table recently vacated, where they could both sit with their backs to the photo covered wall. There they waited for their whip-thin server to clear the table and take their drink orders. David got a Bud draft, Jairo a Sierra Nevada.

The juke box switched from country to easy listening. The nearest TV was showing a UFC match. Jairo leaned forward, eyes alight.

"All right, Penn and Sherk. Now there's a righteous match." He looked back to find David watching him. "You into the fights?"

"I'm a hoop fan. Lakers."

Jairo grinned. "Forget that crap. The Clippers are the team. Lakers haven't done shit since Shaquille retired."

"To each his own. You from L.A?"

"San Diego. We moved up here when I was twelve, to Arcadia. We moved back four years later. But when I knew I wanted to be a cop, I looked at the San Diego PD and wasn't exactly thrilled. Even after all the troubles I still wanted to join LAPD. So I took the test and got accepted. Let me tell you, I got some flack over that."

"Family?"

"You'd think I'd killed the pope. Become a cop? Worse, an LAPD cop?"

David couldn't help but smile. He'd had a similar reaction from his family when he announced his intentions. "It could have been worse, they could have wanted you to be a lawyer."

"At least the hours would be better," Jairo said. "Not to mention the pay."

David buried his face in his mug. "I don't need more money."

He knew it was the wrong thing to say even before it was out of his mouth.

"Right," Jairo said, and didn't say anything else for a minute. Finally he ventured. "So, what about you? How long you been a detective?"

"Ten years."

"And you still like it?"

"It's satisfying. When a case goes well. Frustrating as hell when it doesn't."

"Yeah, the bad ones hang on like a rotten smell."

"What did you do before you transferred to homicide?"

“ABC, part of the safe and sober school patrol. When they first recruited me, someone thought I had a baby face, so I got assigned to a shoulder tap operation in this area. That’s how I found this place. At the end of the day I got tired of trying to get greedy adults to buy me booze, so I came here to buy my own.”

David could see it. Remove all signs of his facial hair and dress him down in a teen’s baggy getup, and he could easily pass for a delinquent high school student, who hadn’t quite mustered the brains to graduate. A badge of honor in some high schools. David bet he got carded all the time until he adopted the carefully cultivated ragged urban look.

They talked about their days at the Academy. Though ten years apart, little had changed except the instructors.

“Cept by the time I got there, the modified choke hold had been banned, so we never learned that. Then, after I graduated, we get told we couldn’t use the term ‘distraction strike,’” Jairo snorted. “We could still do it, we just couldn’t call it that in our reports.”

“You have to love bureaucrats,” David said. “Be glad they finally dropped the Federal Consent Decree. That was a mess to work under.”

Jairo shrugged. “There’s always something, right.”

David lifted his mug to his mouth. “Yeah, there’s always someone who knows how to do our job better than we do.”

Jairo laughed.

Something hard and metallic came on the juke box. Jairo grimaced and jumped to his feet. “There’s gotta be something better than that on there.”

He searched his pockets, and came up with a handful of change. In the process his jacket came open, revealing his duty weapon in its shoulder holster. Several nearby patrons noticed it and stared. There was some whispered conversation, which David ignored while he watched Jairo feed the juke box, and whack the machine when it tried to spit his money back out.

Finally it must have accepted the change; the Dixie Chicks came on talking how they were going to kill Earl.

“You don’t think that’s an odd choice for a homicide cop?”

Jairo dropped a plastic bowl of peanuts onto the table between them. He helped himself to a handful, sprinkling shells on the floor.

“Come on, you can’t tell me you don’t think it’s funny. Besides, how can it be worse than Dexter?”

David just shook his shaggy head, and gulped the rest of his beer down. Jairo leapt to his feet and grabbed the mug. “Here, let me get you another one.”

Before David could object, he was gone. When he came back, he slid two mugs onto the scarred table top.

“You going to attend the autopsy tomorrow?” Jairo asked.

“Why, you don’t think you can handle it?”

“I can handle anything. But you’re supposed to be my training officer. How can you train me if you’re not there?”

“Then I guess I better show up. I wouldn’t want a dereliction of duty charge.”

“Let’s grab a late lunch before we head over. You got any favorite hangouts?”

“We go to Little Thailand a lot. It’s close to the station. Bill Maruti owns the place. He’s a retired cop. If you’re sure you can handle food before watching a corpse get sliced.”

“I can handle it.”

David didn’t mention the incident in the park. “Thai it is then.”

“Great, I love Thai.” He seemed to be thinking about his earlier lunch. “Well, good Thai.”

One of the waiters sidled over to their table. Both David and Jairo looked up at him. “You guys cops?” he asked.

“There a problem?” David asked.

“No, no, just that some folks saw your gun and they were concerned.”

David pulled his gold tin out and flashed it. Jairo did the same.

They were being watched by nearly everyone now. David noticed a couple of females were showing an avid interest in Jairo. Badge bunnies? He also noticed Jairo wasn't paying attention back. Maybe the rumors were lies after all.

The bolder one approached their table. Her heavily made up face tried to look provocative. "You guys really off-duty cops?"

"No sugar," Jairo drawled. He leaned toward her and whispered, "We're undercover vice, big drug bust coming down. You might want to make yourself scarce. Wouldn't want your pretty ass to land in a cage full of dykes."

She flounced away. David laughed. "You better hope there isn't any surveillance on the place, or you just compromised an operation. That could make you real popular with Professional Standards."

"Hadn't thought of that," Jairo didn't sound the least bit chastened. "Promise you won't tell? I won't do it again."

"See you don't," David said, but he was still laughing.

He got another beer, part of him all too aware that he was drinking too much, too fast. Jairo was barely into his second. He was going to have to take a cab home. But when he said that to Jairo, the younger man scoffed. "I've hardly had anything. I said I'd drop you off."

"Where do you live?"

"Simi Valley."

A popular spot with cops. David frowned, "That's really out of your way. A cab would be easier—"

"Forget a cab. Those bastards soak you. I know, my brother drives a hack in Glendale."

David knew he should refuse, but he'd already made too many bone-headed choices today. Coming here was only the latest. Besides, what was wrong with relaxing a bit after work? Unlike a night out with Chris, where he could never talk about his job, or any of the ugliness he saw firsthand, Jairo did, and

saw the same things he did every day. David nodded. He checked the clock behind the bar: after midnight. On the jukebox Billy Ray Cyrus sang “Redneck Heaven” and David could feel Jairo’s booted foot tapping on the wooden floor. He grinned when David met his gaze, and signaled the waiter to bring another beer.

Jairo launched into a long, rambling account of a call he and his T.O. had gone out on. “It was a full moon, natch, and this woman calls 911, all hysterical. At least we thought she was a woman. She says her ex won’t stop coming around and bugging her. So we code three it out there, thinking we’re walking in on a domestic, wondering: is this guy armed? Are we gonna be met by some out-of-control Neanderthal, who just beat the crap out of this woman, and is just warming up for round two?”

David took another swig of beer, and watched the way Jairo came to life in the retelling. He was really getting into this story. “So we roll, get to the place in record time and go charging into the house, sure we’re gonna find mayhem. She’s there, all alone. And she ain’t no woman. She’s the biggest dragon I’ve ever seen. Six-five even without the Jimmy Choos and the giant pink beehive. She—he—hell, I never know what to call them, is raving about this guy who won’t leave her alone. But he ain’t there.”

“So what, the guy split?”

Jairo grinned. “You’re gonna love this. We’re there, ready to rumble on this guy, right? She’s still hysterical. ‘Get him out of here,’ she yells. ‘He knows he’s not supposed to be here.’”

“So he was there.”

“I’m looking around. There ain’t no one else in the house. I searched that place top to bottom. I’m looking in closets, under beds, everywhere. Nada. Zip. But when I tell her this she flips out on me again.

“No, he’s right there. Can’t you see him?” She’s pointing at this big sagging easy chair that I swear was all sunken in like some lard ass actually *was* sitting in it. She’s damn near having a stroke about this time. My partner, Cutter, is starting to lose it with this...thing. But I’m still on probation, I don’t need any

reports on my jacket this early in the game, so I try to calm her down. Like, there's no one there. He's gone. He's not there. But she ain't buying. She points at this damn chair and says he's right there. Can't we see him? My partner's about ready to blow a gasket by this time. I decide to try something different. I turn to the chair and tell this 'spirit' he ain't wanted here any more. He has to move his bony ass out of there and never come back."

"So, did he?" David was laughing. At Jairo's look he asked, "Did he leave?"

Jairo popped a shelled peanut into his mouth. "Hell if I know. But she was all happy as a tweaker with a baggie full of meth. Kept thanking us until we finally got out of there."

"He ever come back?"

"If he did, I never heard. Turns out the guy died like six weeks before this. She just couldn't let him go."

"Full moon'll get you every time."

They shared a grin over the peccadilloes of the people they were bound to protect and serve.

They watched some more of the fights while they traded stories of past capers, then David put his empty mug down. He tossed a couple of bills on the table. "That's it for me. If that ride's still on, I accept."

"Sure." Jairo leapt to his feet. He added another two dollars to the tip and led David outside into the dark parking lot. Arriving as late as they had, they'd parked a good distance from the bar. The overhead street light was burned out or broken. Jairo fumbled with his keys, but finally popped the passenger door open. David slipped past him, only to be stopped by Jairo blocking his path. Their hips rocked together, and Jairo leaned forward, his hands coming to rest on David's hips, planting his mouth on David's.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sunday, 12:10 AM, Honolulu Avenue, La Crescenta

Desire swept through David, and he opened his mouth to Jairo's encroaching tongue. He tasted of beer, and peanuts, and it brought him to instant hardness. David's hands roamed over Jairo's back, sliding over the hard muscles of his ass, feeling them clench at his touch. It was several heart-pounding seconds before he pushed the other man away. Mesmerized, he stared down at Jairo's slightly parted mouth, and closed his eyes when their lips met again.

Jairo cupped David's erection and pressed his mouth against David's fevered throat.

David put his open hand against Jairo's chest, feeling his heart thumping under his jacket. Both of them were breathing hard.

"Stop. You're married. I'm married—"

"You're not married. Not in any church at least."

"That doesn't matter to us."

Jairo's hands roamed over David, knowing full well he was aroused. They both were. "You can hide behind that stuffy exterior all you want, but I can see through that. You want me, admit it."

David wrenched away from him. He hurriedly glanced around the empty parking lot. "I don't do everything I want. It's called self-control."

Jairo folded his fingers around David's pulsing hard-on. "Hey, some things don't lie."

"Neither do I." David stepped back, out of reach. "Listen, this isn't going to work. I'll call that cab—"

"No, I promised I'd take you home and I will. I also promise I won't touch you again." Jairo ran his finger over his chest. "Cross my heart."

David was feeling the effects of the beer now, as his lust faded and left an ache like a tooth gone bad. He knew he should go back into the bar and call a cab, but the wait was going to kill him. All he wanted to do was go home and crawl into bed.

He slid into the seat, jerking his seat belt on, while Jairo crossed around to the driver's side and started the car up. The vehicle roared and vibrated under David's feet. He gave the address and before long they were on the Glendale Freeway heading south. Nearly forty minutes later they pulled in behind Chris's Escape. He glanced up at the second story window, but the house was dark. Maybe he was lucky and Chris was asleep.

From inside the house a volley of deep, menacing barks could be heard.

"Guess you still have a dog."

David swore under his breath. One more problem to add to his growing pile. He turned to Jairo. "Thanks for the ride. I'll see you at the station tomorrow."

"Tomorrow." Jairo saluted him and seconds later was racing down the normally quiet street, back toward the freeway.

David eased the door open, ready for the dog, hoping it had a good memory. "It's me boy."

Sergeant stood just inside the door, still barking, his head lowered, as though ready to charge. David tried to stare the animal, down but it only seemed to increase its rage.

He was about to retreat, when Chris stumbled downstairs in his silk robe, blinking owlshly at the commotion. The dog was instantly at his side.

"I thought you were going to get rid of him." David noted the dog had a new collar and a set of dog tags. That wasn't good.

"Couldn't find the owner."

“Chris—”

“I tried, okay. I’ll try again tomorrow.”

David jerked the wall safe open, and put his Smith & Wesson .40 and his gold badge inside, slamming it shut. “Tomorrow’s Sunday.”

“So? People are home on Sunday.” Chris looked at his watch as he led the way upstairs. “So, you just get off work?”

Knowing Chris would smell the beer, David shook his head. “Stopped for a drink. Needed to unwind.”

“Bad case?”

“Yes.”

“Poor baby.” Chris made room for him on the bed, patting the sheets beside him. Sergeant almost took him up on the invitation until Chris quelled him with a look. “There’s only one guy I share my bed with. Get your own man.”

Sergeant looked wounded, but curled up at the foot of the bed.

David undressed down to his boxers and climbed into bed. Chris immediately rolled over to fold his arms around his lover. He nuzzled David’s furry chest. “I missed you.”

David rumbled something that he hoped would seem sympathetic. Chris stroked his left nipple, circling the outline of his chest and nibbling on the flesh over David’s heart.

“You miss me?”

“Sure,” David shifted on the bed. “I’m beat. I have to get up early again tomorrow,” he said, more sharply than he intended, still unsettled by Jairo’s kiss, and his reaction to it. What the hell had he been thinking? “You got the dog back into the vet at least? Tell me you did that much.”

“He read the chip and gave me a contact number. No answer. I left our number and I’ll try to call again tomorrow.”

“Good. Did you make a reservation for next weekend?”

“Yeah.” Chris rolled away from him, the tension between them escalating. “Doug Arango’s. I hear they got a new chef in.”

David picked up the paperback he was half way through, and slid his reading glasses on. Normally a few minutes of reading relaxed him enough to get to sleep. Not tonight. He could barely focus on the words in front of him. He could still smell Jairo, could still feel his heat, and his strong grip on his cock. It took every ounce of will power he possessed not to get up and march downstairs. Whatever else he did, he had to keep Chris from suspecting anything. "What time?"

"Eight."

"Good," he said "That gives me time to do some work in the garden."

Sunday, 9:10 AM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

When Chris rolled out of bed the next morning David was long gone. He fed Sergeant and took him outside, with the Sunday Times, which he read while the dog took care of business. He looked up when the dog stuck his cold nose between his legs. Chris patted his bony head.

"Maybe we'll take a walk down to the park. How does that sound?"

Sergeant wagged his rump; it obviously pleased him.

Chris went back inside and got the coffee going. While it brewed, he pulled out a yogurt and mixed fresh fruit with it. Coffee in hand, he sat at the kitchen table and finished the paper. When he couldn't put it off anymore, he grabbed the phone and called the number the vet had given him. This time a woman answered.

"I'm looking for a..." He checked the name that had been on the implanted microchip. "Barry Dustin."

"I'm sorry, you must have the wrong number—"

Before she could hang up, he swung forward in his chair. "Wait. Did you used to own a Doberman. Big black and red male?"

“What? No, my husband and I never owned anything bigger than a budgie. Why do you ask? Did someone tell you we did?”

“Ah, this number came up on the dog’s ID. Did you just get this phone number?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, we did.”

“Sorry then, I guess he moved on.”

She hung up without another word. Chris sighed, and looked down at Sergeant, who wagged his tail hopefully. “You get the feeling fate’s trying to tell us something? We can’t go back to the vet till tomorrow so I guess you’re stuck with me for another day.”

They spent an hour down at the meadow, on the eastern shore of the reservoir, then Chris returned home to shower and dress for his lunch date with Des.

Sunday, 12:30 PM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David was grateful when Jairo didn’t mention last night. Maybe he realized it had been a huge mistake, too. They spent the morning writing up incident reports, for everybody and their uncle up the food chain. He also had a couple of 60-day reports to produce for two cold homicides that didn’t even have suspects to question. He hated those kinds of reports the worst. Finally he wrote up the RHD report on the park bodies, the elite Robbery and Homicide Division that often took on the more complex and newsworthy cases the other detective divisions picked up. He doubted RHD would want this mess. Too much possibility it would prove unsolvable. RHD detested those kinds of public nightmares worse than David. It would probably stay in their court. Lucky him.

At twelve-thirty, they grabbed their suit jackets and headed out to David’s car. Jairo was duly impressed; he whistled.

“Now that’s a nice set of wheels. You did all that yourself?”

“Yes,” David said stiffly. “Took me nearly six years, but I did it all.”

“You must have spent a pretty penny on this one. Guess it helps having a rich boyfriend.”

“My relationship isn’t really your concern.”

“Right, you’re ‘married.’”

David ignored the dig. His eyebrow went up. “So are you, as I remember. You tell your wife what you’re getting on the side?”

“What do you think? She’s a good Catholic girl. The whole family is. No tolerance there, I assure you. But then you probably don’t know anything about that.”

“You know what they say about assuming things. I didn’t exactly step out of the closet on my own.”

“Was it worth it?”

Considering that anything less than full disclosure would have meant losing Chris, and continuing to live a lie, yes, it had been. “Yeah, it was worth it. Something like that has a way of showing you who your real friends are.”

“It’s still a huge risk. I’ve heard the way the guys talk. They get the sensitivity training up the kazoo and it doesn’t change them.”

“Anybody can talk. I’ve heard a lot of trash talk since the day I entered the academy. You take any of it personally and it’ll grind you down into dust.”

“So you just let it slide off you? That’s hard.”

“I know my worth, and I know what’s right. I don’t need to let anyone’s macho posturing tell me what matters.”

CHAPTER SIX

Sunday, 1:40 PM, Koutoubia, Westwood Boulevard, Los Angeles

Chris settled up the bill, while Des managed a final sip of wine. He heaved a sigh of fulfillment, and leaned back in his seat, stretching his arm out over the back of the embroidered love seat. Their waiter served them fresh Moroccan Sweet mint tea. Neither one of them had room for dessert.

"I won't be able to eat for a week," Des said.

Chris laughed. "I'm not sure I'll even move for week."

"Good thing we don't try this every day."

"Ready to head back to my place? I just picked up a nice bottle of Chilean Bordeaux that's supposed to be good."

"Yeah, sure. I can get Trevor to pick me up later. He's working today, but he said he'd be off by five. Can I ask one favor? Can we swing by Melrose, there's a new store just opened, and you know me, I have to check out the competition."

"No problem."

"Good. I won't be long." Des grabbed his jacket and stood up. "You still got that dog?"

Chris counted out the cash tip, and slid it into the billfold. He nodded. "At least until tomorrow. I have to call the vet back, the number he gave me for the previous owner's no good. If he has something else, then I guess I call it."

"Except you don't want to, do you?"

"Truth? No, I don't. But David's a stickler for protocol. He says I have to at least try."

"He's right. And maybe it's for the best. Honestly, Chris, what would you do with a dog?"

“Why not? David has Sweeney and I’m supposed to be good with that. He never asked me about bringing his cat over when he moved in. I just accepted it. He’ll come around, if we can’t find Sergeant’s home.”

“I hope you’re right. For your sake. I do not want to listen to you whining and crying in your tapenade.”

Chris snorted. “As if.”

Sunday, 2:15 PM, County Coroner’s Office, North Mission Road, East Los Angeles

The morgue assistant wheeled out two gurneys into the sterile white room, and parked them end-to-end under a row of stark white lights. Lopez waited beside her tray of instruments, shield over her face to protect her from fluids, and sterile gowns covering her street clothes. Nearby other autopsy technicians were working over other tables, moving from body to body. An assembly line of corpses. The County Coroner handled nearly eight thousand autopsies a year. Sometimes the dead were famous, but mostly they were just dead.

The rich effluvium of the morgue, the stench of death, chemicals, and sickly smell of ozone locked into the back of David’s throat. He knew by the time he left here, his clothes would reek. He always kept a change of clothes in his locker just for that reason. Sometimes even his hair stank, and the smell lodged in his nose, so that for days after, all he could taste was death. It was a great diet aid.

Lopez opened the body bag and unfurled the now dirty sheet exposing the adult corpse. The sheet was carefully folded and sent up to trace, where it would be examined for anything that might help identify both the victim and the cause and location of death. Then Lopez set up the X-ray machine and took a series of images front and sides. She measured the length of the corpse, checking its weight on the built-in scale on the gurney. The technician collected and bagged the clothing remnants, which would be tested by trace. Once naked and photographed, the body was carefully cleaned and more

photographs taken. Her assistant saw the tattoo first. Everyone leaned over to look more closely at the discolored, inked skin.

It was a stylized image of an eight-pointed flower, and something that looked like letters, thought David didn't think they were Latin characters. It looked Russian. He copied the design in his notebook, even though he knew photos would be taken.

"RUZHA?" he asked no one in particular. "That mean anything to anyone?"

Apparently not. The only thing they agreed on is that it wasn't English.

"Now this is interesting," Lopez said, focusing the X-ray machine back over the head.

"What is?"

Instead of answering, she pried the woman's mouth open and shone a strong light inside.

"Interesting," she repeated.

"What is?" David tried not to show his growing exasperation.

She took another pass with the X-ray, then signaled the photographer to come in for a close-up shot.

"Dr. Lopez..."

"Gold teeth."

"Gold?" David leaned forward. "You mean fillings?"

"More than just fillings. I've never seen this in an American." She went on, "Trauma on the throat. Pretty excessive. Lots of hesitation marks. Whoever did this didn't have a clue. A real hack job. Hard to believe someone would sit still for this." Off David's look she added, "Don't worry, I'll run a full tox screen."

"Cause of death?" David asked, eyeing the ragged throat wounds. It was indeed a mess.

"Could be a knife. I'll be able to tell you more once I get a look at those X-rays. Skull appears intact and is that of a normally developed Caucasian woman. Height is one hundred

and sixty-four centimeters, gross weight...seventy-one kilograms.”

While the morgue assistant began to capture a visual record of the autopsy, Lopez used a sterile swab on the face and throat. Next, she used a syringe to draw fluid from each of the eyes. She stared at the cloudy liquid in the syringe.

Jairo watched Lopez table the two syringes and leaned forward. “What is that you’re collecting?”

“Vitreous humor. It has a lot of uses forensically. We can make a diagnosis of alcoholism as well as drug use. Changes in potassium levels, lactic acid, non-protein nitrogen, and chloride can help us pin down the time of death, unless too much time has passed. Then the formulas break down. Sorry, wish I could give you more. But we’ll analyze it, and hope for the best.”

“It’ll give us time of death?” Jairo perked up. “I’ve always understood that’s pretty hard to pin down.”

“You heard right.” Lopez met David’s gaze. “Some people expect miracles. This probably won’t help much. My best guess is we’re looking at seven to ten days minimum. Things have been on the cool side these days, that would slow decomp down.”

“Any way to tell if this is the scene of the crime or a dump site?” David interjected.

“Nothing stands out right now,” Lopez said. “Not a lot of external insect activity, so she may have been buried the whole time. I’ll know more, once I open her up.”

But before she did that, she used cotton swabs to take samples of the victim’s ears, nose and mouth. Each one she bagged and labeled.

“Now this is interesting.”

David leaned over to get a closer look at what she was pointing at. It was the swab from the victim’s nose. Tiny white specks, like undersized rice grains, covered one side of the cotton.

“What is it?”

“My guess? Fly larvae. Unhatched. Which means that the body was exposed to the elements long enough to attract flies, but not long enough for them to hatch. We can get one of our bug guys to hatch these babies out and see what kind of fly we’re dealing with.”

Using rib cutters and a bone saw, she opened the corpse up to their prying eyes. The photographer avidly captured everything, while Lopez gave a running commentary aimed at the mike suspended above the table.

David folded his arms over his chest. He never quite knew what to do with his hands during an autopsy. He wasn’t allowed to do any more than observe, even though he often thought he could move something faster than Lopez could. He noticed Jairo was taking the notes he’d requested. He also noticed the young man’s hands shaking. David felt an irrational urge to take one of those hands, and stop the shaking, which was crazy. Jairo was a cop, for God’s sake. A cop who wanted to be a homicide detective. Dead and mutilated bodies were going to be his bread and butter until he came to his senses, and went back to being a vice cop catching underage drinkers, which couldn’t be soon enough for David.

Lopez swapped the protective goggles for filtering ones, and scanned the body with a UV light, which glowed wherever some body fluid revealed itself. She flipped the light off and pulled down a more powerful white light.

“Still no sign of visible trauma anywhere besides the throat. Let’s take a look at the innards.”

One at a time she removed all the internal organs, weighed and took samples of each one. After that, she cut the throat open, revealing the larynx and thyroid cartilage. “Fascia is intact. Resectioning of the thyroid cartilage, incising through the cricoid cartilage before opening the larynx dorsally, inspection of the laryngeal joints reveals the hyoid is intact.” She skinned off her nitrile gloves, and swapped them for a clean pair. “No overt signs of ligature strangulation. I’ll check the lungs for any sign of asphyxia.”

When she sliced open the skull and pulled the brain out, David heard Jairo's sharp intake of breath. He glanced sideways at him, hoping he wasn't going to get sick again. Jairo looked green but held his own. The lunch they had had less than two hours ago was in contention with his stomach. David's gaze moved impassively from the wan looking man, to the decaying corpse, and felt nothing.

Finally Lopez removed the paper bags from each hand, and slid a thin scalpel under each fingernail, trapping whatever came out on small, sterile sheets of paper. Each one was sealed, and labeled, and joined the other samples in the growing pile. She lifted the exposed arm into the light, and studied the wounds closely.

"Coyote?"

"What? Oh, yes, definitely canine. What were you thinking?"

"You don't want to know what I was thinking."

"You're a dark one, Detective Laine. I like that in a man."

David tapped the table between them. "Do me a favor, doc, run that tox screen as soon as you can. I really need to know a cause of death. I don't want some suspect telling us later that she was already dead when he found her, and buried her out of respect."

"The baby's father, maybe?"

"He's definitely a person of interest."

"Well, let's see what we can find out." Lopez exposed the fetus, its placenta still intact. It looked considerably less decayed than its mother. She pointed at a tiny, shriveled penis. "Him. About seven months to term."

"Could he have lived if she had been taken to a hospital?"

"Probably. They've got wonderful neonatal care these days. Miracle workers."

"If only someone had cared."

"Unless he's the reason she died," she said.

"Wrong girl gets knocked up by the wrong guy," David said. "No happily ever after there."

Jairo seemed upset by the conversation. David looked at him gently. "You need a bathroom break there?"

"No," he said in a strangled voice. "I'm okay. But how can you be so cold? That's a baby!"

"Ah, you got kids," Lopez said. "Can always tell the ones who got kids."

Jairo's nod was almost imperceptible. "Two," he whispered. "Sons." Abruptly he turned away.

"I can finish up here, Jairo. You don't need—"

"No, I am no woman to hide behind tears." Suddenly he flushed. "I am sorry, Dr. Lopez, I meant no disrespect."

"None taken. Well, if you think you can handle this, let's get on with it."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sunday, 3:50 PM, Figueroa Street, Los Angeles

After stopping at not one, but two West Hollywood stores, and a side trip downtown to grab a latte for Chris, at a new Espresso cafe he'd heard a lot about, they took surface streets back to Chris's Silver Lake home. From Figueroa Street they swung north toward Sunset, passing the distinctive Bonaventure Hotel and the downtown Marriott.

Des chattered animatedly all the way, hands waving as he described what he had seen in each store. Des was never more in his element than when he was trashing the competition.

"Did you see that green thing in that storefront? I mean, is Joan Collin's campy slut look back? And where on earth did they find those hideous shoes? Even the Olsen twins would be repulsed by those. I don't care if they were Jimmy Choo's."

"You don't even sell women's clothes, hon. What do you care what they wear?"

"Honey, I don't, but I still have to walk the planet with them. Wearing something that butt ugly can ruin even my appetite."

Ahead of them were the Santa Ana and the Hollywood freeway overpasses. Chris saw the flashing lights of a white, unmarked CHP car that had pulled over some hapless driver on the freeway ramp. The uniformed officer was standing behind the driver's side door, reading something the driver had handed him while traffic streamed past them.

Before they had passed the access to the ramp, the khaki-suited cop strolled back to his vehicle with the red lights pulsing inside. Instinctively Chris looked at the speedometer, but he wasn't speeding, probably why everyone else was passing him.

Des seemed to notice where his gaze was because he said, "You know, ever since you and David hooked up, you've become a real Nelly drive safe. I liked the old, reckless Chris."

"No you didn't. How many times did I have to listen to you complain that I needed a keeper, that I was always getting into trouble?"

"Well, I never really meant it."

Chris took a sip of latte, and found it was still too hot. He sloshed coffee into his lap and cursed. The cup tumbled out of his hand and he reached for it, resting his chin on the steering wheel while he groped for it under the seat, before it could dump its contents on his carpet, and stain it.

They headed into the shadow of one of the dozens of overpasses that turned the downtown interchange into a spaghetti ride. The roar overhead from the two freeways, and the nearby Pasadena freeway, penetrated the sealed vehicle, and thrummed through his feet. Movement on the top of the overpass caught Chris's eye, and he peered upward, confused.

"What the—"

Something tumbled onto Figueroa right in front of him. He yelled and jerked the steering wheel hard right, slamming on the brakes at the same time. Tires squealed and the Escape shuddered as it impacted something, then was rear ended by the vehicle behind them. There was the sickening crunch and scream of tearing metal and shattering glass.

The last thing Chris remembered were the air bags deploying in an explosion of powder. He was slammed back into the seat. Beside him Des cried out.

Then there was only the tick-tick of cooling engine parts. Steam hissed from the punctured radiator. The Escape listed alarmingly to one side. Chris could barely move. Or speak. When he tried to call out to Des, all he could do was manage a weak, "Des, you okay? Please, Des..."

In the distance all he could hear was the roar of traffic overhead.

"Hang on, hon," he whispered. "Someone's coming."

He tried to turn his head, to look out the side window, but he couldn't move, left or right. Out of the corner of his eye he could see someone approach the driver's side door. He tried to call out, to let them know he was okay, but not even a croak emerged this time. He could hear heavy breathing, but didn't know if it was his own or Des's. Every time he tried to suck in air, pain lanced through his chest. His vision grew red-tinged.

He had no idea how much time passed. It seemed like hours. The traffic noises faded to a dull roar. Overhead he heard a helicopter.

Finally Des's door was wrenched open and he heard a soothing voice speak softly to Des. Meanwhile he heard the sharp grind of metal that went on and on. Finally his own door was pried opened, and gentle hands guided him out of his seat. They lay him on a stretcher, checking his vital signs as they wheeled him toward a blue and white ambulance, lights strobing on the top of the vehicle.

Free of his Escape Chris was now able to look around at the crash site. Figueroa was closed in both directions and was crowded with fire trucks and neon yellow vested paramedics. What had happened? He saw the vehicle that had rear-ended him, a panel truck that had been carrying a load of plate glass which now lay shattered in glittering shards around the pavement. He could hear Des muttering to someone who was trying to calm him down. Then he looked over at his Escape. Totaled didn't begin to describe it. It looked like it had been opened by a giant can opener, the once clean lines twisted into a nightmare form.

One of the paramedics bent over him. "Can I check your wallet sir? I need to find some ID, so I know who to alert."

Chris managed to nod, and felt his wallet being taken from his jacket pocket. He even heard the man flip it open and presumably read his name. He knew his emergency contact would be David. He wanted to tell the guy not to call; David would only worry. But he couldn't get the words out. He turned his head, letting his gaze wander out to where his Escape lay in a twisted mass of metal and rubber. That was when he saw the third body. A woman—at least he thought it was a woman,

though she was too mangled to be positive—lay sprawled untidily on the pavement between the bumper of his SUV, and the concrete abutment he had slammed into when he swerved off the pavement. Already yellow crime scene tape had been strung around the two vehicles and the body. A wave of nausea rolled through his stomach, threatening to bring up the lamb couscous he'd shared with Des earlier.

Sunday, 4:20 PM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

When the autopsy concluded David and Jairo had returned to the station. In the locker room, David stripped off his shirt and tossed it into the bag he kept there for that purpose. Everything he wore today would need to be washed before it could be worn again. The morgue smell clung to every porous surface, and only hot water and soap could dull it. He skimmed off his wool pants, and replaced them with a lighter, linen pair. When he snagged a golf shirt out, he realized Jairo was beside him, staring.

The younger man had already changed into another all black outfit that hugged his broad chest and did nothing to conceal the bulge between his long legs.

"You know if you keep looking at me like that everyone's going to know."

"Know what?" Jairo licked his lips. "That I want you to fuck me? You like bluntness, eh? How's that for bluntness."

"I think you need to transfer to another division."

"No." Jairo stepped closer. David could smell his cologne all too well. Worse, he could smell Jairo. "I won't ask. And you can't, can you? Not without giving a reason. You can't even claim sexual harassment, since you're my senior officer."

He was right. David couldn't ask for reassignment. He slammed his locker shut and looked around to verify they were alone. "Can you explain to me what the hell you're up to? You're married and have no intention of telling your wife

anything. Do you really think if you keep this up no one else is going to notice? Maybe you can shield your wife from the gossip, but we both know the guys here. They get a hold of this and both of us get dragged through the mud. Is that what you want?"

"Everyone knows I like pussy. Don't tell me you haven't heard about Vanessa."

"Vanessa?"

"The producer's wife," Jairo said it like he was reading one of the headlines from the gossip rags. "She was a hot little number, and a perfect cover, don't you think?"

"And it doesn't bother you that you ruined a perfectly good marriage?"

"There was nothing perfect about that marriage. The guy was a pig. I did her a favor."

"So now you think no one's going to notice you sniffing around me like a dog in heat?"

"They won't. We both know they won't see what they don't want to see."

"I think you overestimate your ability to keep secrets," David snapped. Except Jairo was right. The other cops would never look beyond the reputation and see Jairo for what he was. He only had to leer at a woman now and then and his cover would never be blown. "Fine, I'll be your training officer. But there are going to be some ground rules."

"Fine. Name them."

"No touching. No innuendos and no more attempts to seduce me—"

"I don't have to attempt anything. I only have to stand beside you and you wonder what it would be like, don't you? Well, I know what it would be like. *Incendio y hielo. Muy grande!*"

David closed his eyes and thought of Chris. Chris didn't deserve this. David had never had a problem with fidelity before. Why was this time so different? Why was this man so different?

His cell phone rang. He answered it curtly, then fell silent as the voice at the other end sent his heart plummeting into his stomach.

Sunday, 5:15 PM, South Figueroa Street, Los Angeles

Chris must have fallen back into unconsciousness then. When he came to next, he was being unloaded from the ambulance. He had a mask over his face that smelled vaguely of sweat and vomit. Something was strapped to his wrist. Every time he tried to take a breath, his chest burned and shards of raw pain scored his nerve endings.

"You're at USC county, sir," the paramedic said. "I'll need your insurance information—"

"He'll get it to you when he can. Trust me, he's good for it."

Chris couldn't believe it, it was David. He crouched down beside Chris's stretcher, his normally dark face parchment white.

"Chris, honey, you're going to be okay," David said. "Don't try to move. Stay still—"

"How—"

"The paramedic recognized my name on your contact card. I guess being infamous has its benefits."

"Des?"

"Is okay. Trust me. He's fine."

Of course he trusted him. David had never lied to him, not in all the years they'd been together. It wasn't in his nature to lie. Someone came up behind David, a lean, dark man in a black, long sleeve shirt, equally black pants and cheap sunglasses. Another cop?

David saw him looking. "My new partner, Jairo Garcia Hernandez. Remember I told you Martinez was being reassigned for six months."

Chris didn't know where the words came from; he was probably in shock. He smiled, though it hurt like hell. "He's a lot better looking than Martinez."

And damned if David didn't blush.

Chris struggled into a sitting position. He ignored David's efforts to get him to lie back down. He looked over at Des on a gurney beside him. His friend's face was nearly as ashen as David's, and a scratch over his right eye had bled freely, staining his hairless head, and dappling his Christian Dior shirt. His eyes were closed, but he was breathing normally.

Then Chris remembered what he had seen in front of his ruined vehicle.

"Oh God, did I hit someone?" His voice was edged with hysteria. "Did I kill her? Oh, God, David—"

"Shh. No. Hush baby. You didn't hit anyone. Someone...someone threw her off the overpass into the path of your vehicle."

"S-she was murdered?"

"Yes," David said grimly. "She was murdered. A CHP officer saw it just before she landed in front of you."

Chris grasped David's hand. "Who was she? You have to tell me, David."

David gently disengaged his hand. "I don't know, hon. When I find out more, I'll let you know. Now," he said sternly. "You have to go to the hospital. I'll come around later and check on you."

"Take care of the dog? I called, but it was a wrong number, so I couldn't take him back like you wanted. I'm sorry—"

"Don't." David put his finger on Chris's lips, stopping his words. "I don't care about the damned dog. I'll take care of him, okay. We'll both be all right. You just get better and come home to us."

Chris subsided back on the gurney. "Okay." He closed his eyes. "I love you, David."

"Love you too," David whispered.

Chris smiled and let his muscles go slack as the doors rumbled open and the gurney rolled into emergency.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sunday, 5:50 PM, USC County General, North State Street, East Los Angeles

At the hospital David wasn't allowed to see Chris after he was checked in and the emergency team took over. He would have to wait until he was out of surgery and in ICU. Even then he could only stay ten minutes.

Jairo took him back to the station, though he would rather have stayed at the hospital. "Come on, I've got a brother who's an emergency doctor, he hates it when family won't give him any peace."

"I thought your brother was a taxi driver?"

"Big family. What can I say? Devout Catholics, and all that."

Back at the station David made sure he put Jairo to work on his autopsy report. At seven they called it a night. David would have just enough time to make it out to the hospital before visiting hours were over.

He found Chris dozing in a semi-private room with an empty bed by the door. A flat screen TV hung over his bed, and a set of earphones were plugged in. A tray with a can of ginger ale and a half-empty package of digestives had been pushed to the side of the bed. An IV was taped to the back of his left hand, pumping a clear liquid into him, and an oxygen line was inserted in his nose. He started when David gently tugged the phones out of his ears.

"Wake up, sleepy head."

"David." Chris smiled, eyes still at half mast. "What time is it?"

"Seven-twenty. How are you feeling?"

Chris reached over and picked up David's hand with his unencumbered right, holding it in his lap. "Tired. Sore. Did I really hit that woman?" He sounded plaintive.

"No, hon, you didn't. And I don't want you thinking like that." His voice hardened and he clutched Chris's hand when thoughts of what might have happened invaded his waking nightmare.

"But she's dead, isn't she?"

David raised Chris's palm to his mouth and kissed it. "Yes, she's dead. But that's someone else's doing. Not yours."

"You'll catch him, won't you?"

"I'll do everything in my power to do that. But meanwhile, I need you to concentrate on getting better."

"Sure." Chris yawned, his eyes blinking as he fought sleep. "Can you find out how Des is? No one will talk to me. I hope Trevor was called. He'll be worried sick if Des doesn't come home."

"Shh, I'll call Trevor and let him know, and I'll talk to the doctor about Des. Being a cop has to have some advantages, right?"

When Chris didn't answer, David stooped down and kissed Chris's forehead. Chris's eyes fluttered open again, and this time David kissed his mouth. He ran his thumb over Chris's lips. "I love you hon, no matter what, remember that."

Chris fell asleep smiling.

And David had never felt like more of a shit heel.

David talked to Chris's doctor and found out that they wanted to keep him for observation. He'd broken a rib, which had punctured his lung. They wanted to monitor him for a couple of days, to be on the safe side. The doctor assured him it wasn't life threatening, but he needed to be watched. His friend, Desmond Hayward, was listed in stable condition and would probably be released later that day, pending test results.

Back home, he called Trevor, and told him what the doctor had said. Trevor was just on his way in to see his lover. Was there anything he wanted him to take to Chris?

"Sure," David said. "A big hug and kiss." Then he had to add, "But not too big a kiss," in case Trevor wondered at the lack of his normal jealousy towards the man who had almost been Chris's lover.

"Sure," Trevor said easily. "I'll let him know you're thinking of him. What's this I hear about you guys getting a dog? Where did that come from?"

"Long story. I'll let Chris explain it to you."

Sweeney came into the room and insisted on being picked up. David let the tension flow out of him as he stroked the purring cat. The next morning he and the dog spent a tension packed hour staring at each other. David would have called the pound then and there, but he remembered Chris begging him to take care of the dog. Finally he gave up the uneven battle, heading back in to work. Jairo was already at his desk, a half-eaten bear claw beside the dregs of station coffee.

David eyed the cup. "That stuff will kill you."

"What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger." Jairo pulled a pencil out from behind his ear. "How's Chris?"

"Fine. They're keeping him in a few days for tests."

"Bet he's a happy camper."

"You don't know the half of it."

"So, what's on tap for today?"

"I want a report on that overpass toss job. ID, anything the M.E. can tell us. Who was she and why did someone throw her onto a busy freeway?"

"Isn't that Central Division's radio car area?"

"Let me worry about that. Just get the data for me."

Jairo grabbed his bear claw, and crammed it in his mouth, scooping his jacket off the back of his chair. "What are you going to be doing?"

"I've got some reports to finish up. If you want, we can meet up for lunch."

"Sure, Little Thailand again?"

"One?" David asked. "Make sure you start a murder book on the autopsy you attended. I started the initial incident report, and the one for RHD, you can finish them up. I'll warn you now, they expect details. Don't try to bluff through it. They'll see through it and nail your scrote to the wall. Then they'll tell you to write it again."

Jairo grimaced. "Later."

David called CHP and got the name of the first responding officer. From him he found that the case had been assigned to Central division; a Detective Yamagata was the lead.

He called Central, only to find that Yamagata was out. He left a message to call him, then waited to hear what his protégé was up to. He would have been more than happy to hear Jairo had asked for a transfer to another division, but he doubted Jairo would be so accommodating. For some reason, he seemed determined to disrupt David's life as much as possible. It didn't help that Chris wasn't around to buffer his clumsy seduction attempts. And that thought enraged him. Since when did he need someone to run interference with his honor? He wasn't a slave to his libido. Chris was the only one who had been able to insinuate himself past David's defenses. He'd damn near given up everything for Chris, his job, his future, his life. Surely what they'd forged was stronger than a casual lust from an almost perfect stranger.

David sighed and leaned his forehead against the steering wheel. The late morning sun had already heated the leather wheel cover to an almost scalding level. He welcomed the burn.

CHAPTER NINE

Monday, 8:15 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

David spent a short twenty minutes with Chris at the hospital, but he was heavily sedated and barely aware of David's presence. He tried to talk, keeping his tone chatty and full of funny happenings about the dog and his day, but his heart grew heavier as the evening wore on and Chris never responded. Finally he gave up, kissed Chris's slightly parted lips and left, promising to return the next day.

David let himself into the house, receiving a noisy greeting from Sergeant. They stood in the foyer staring at each other across the tile floor. David held himself stiffly. The dog glared, posturing.

Finally David said, "We're going to have to come to an understanding here. Right now it's just you and me. Chris is gone and much as I'd like to drop kick you into the nearest pound, I promised him I'd take care of you. But you better behave. Besides," he said in the same voice he used to talk to armed punks. "I've got a gun. It's a .40 caliber Smith & Wesson, with 15 rounds and one in the chamber. You do not want to mess with me."

Maybe the dog knew what a gun was. Maybe he knew a threat when he heard one. For whatever reason, Sergeant turned his head, and after another tense few seconds, padded back into the kitchen. One problem solved, now what was he going to do with the thing? He personally wanted to do nothing more than sprawl in his lounge and watch a game that didn't require any thought. But he could hardly leave the dog to his own resources. Not unless he wanted to clean up a different kind of mess.

He changed into sweats, grabbed his LAPD jacket out the hall closet and scooped up the new leash. Sergeant bound

toward him, clearly having forgiven all their beefs. When David, determined to drive himself to exhaustion, took up a ground eating jog, the dog smoothly fell into step beside him. They trotted over the crest of the hill and headed down toward the reservoir. He couldn't help notice, with some amusement, that a lot of people crossed the street when they saw the two of them coming.

He glanced down at the trotting dog at his side. "You're a scary guy, you know that?"

He slowed to cross Silver Lake Boulevard so they could head across to the meadowland, the area some local committee was fighting DWP over. The first time he spotted the white car, it didn't click. But when it became obvious the all too familiar Firehawk was trailing them, he slowed, and eventually stopped. Sergeant fell to sniffing around the grassy verge, but he looked up eagerly when Jairo climbed out of the car, a large chocolate lab trailing after him.

"Thought you could use some company since you're flying solo these days," he said as he came alongside David.

The two dogs greeted each other cautiously, which quickly degenerated into play bowing and leash tangling lunges.

"Do you know the definition of stalking?"

"Sure." Jairo grinned easily. "I'm not stalking you. We're partners, remember."

"Somehow I don't think this is part of the definition of what partnership is supposed to mean."

"Hey, I need the exercise, you need the exercise and the dogs... well, look for yourself."

It was hard to deny the two dogs were ecstatic. Jairo tugged at his dog's leash. "Come on, Popeye, let's blow off some steam."

"You call your dog Popeye?"

Jairo grinned. "The kids came up with that. Could have been worse. Could have been SpongeBob SquarePants."

David blinked at him. "You're serious?"

"You don't hang around kids very much, do you?"

They jogged north along Silver Lake Boulevard and cut through to the park that bordered the reservoir there. Though it was dark, the park was still active with other joggers and dog walkers.

They ran until all four were forced to stop, sucking in great drafts of air. A cold breeze off the water fanned the sweat off David's forehead. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his jacket.

"That does it for me," David said. "I'm heading in. I'll see you tomorrow." He tried to be forceful with his words. The last thing he needed was Jairo following him.

"Sure." Jairo did some leg stretches, baring the bronze skin of his belly, where a thin line of hair snaked down into his track pants. "I guess I'll see you *mañana*."

"I want to see those reports. We can go over them together. What did you find out about the autopsy on the overpass victim?"

"Fenton's going to do the post tomorrow. You going to attend?"

At first David was going to say no, but this one was a little too close to home to brush off. He nodded. "I'll be there, the D from Central said we can sit in."

"Gonna be a crowded morgue," Jairo drawled.

"You offering to transfer out? I can start the paperwork tomorrow if you want."

Jairo smiled. "No, that's okay, I'm sticking around. I'm not a quitter."

"Good for you," David muttered.

He caught the beginning of a Lakers and Houston game, but turned it off during the half time show, when the Lakers were trailing badly. Sergeant followed him upstairs and took up his normal place at the foot of the bed. But sometime in the middle of the night, David awoke to find the dog sprawled across Chris's side of the bed. He didn't have the heart to kick him off.

He would never admit it to anyone, least of all Chris, but it was comforting to have something in the bed with him. He refused to entertain the image of Jairo taking Sergeant's place. That played havoc with his already well defined fantasies.

Sergeant snored.

Tuesday, 8:15 AM, County Coroner's Office, North Mission Road, East Los Angeles

Inside the drab white coroner's, David greeted the forensic pathologist Fenton and Detective Yamagata while they waited for the body to be wheeled in and transferred to the autopsy table. David knew Captain Fredericks had already cleared it with Central's chain of command to allow them to observe the post. If Yamagata had any issues with that, he wasn't letting on.

The first round of photos were taken, then the woman's bloody and torn clothes were cut off her and stored in paper bags. The pockets were searched, but no ID or wallet was recovered. More photos were taken of the now naked body.

Fenton had the photographer take a couple of extra pictures of the victim's face. He frowned. "Some pretty heavy damage done to the facial striata. Not entirely consistent with an impact. In fact..." He leaned closer. "It looks like the wounds were beginning to heal, so they were definitely pre-mortem. Skin appears to have been sliced, possibly with a razor or a very sharp knife."

"Scalpel?" Yamagata asked.

"Possibly."

"So she was cut before she was tossed?"

"Looks that way. I can tell you more after I get a better look."

Fenton then pointed out a small, angular tattoo on the upper thigh. It looked like a series of triangles and diamond shapes. "Looks like a weird scarecrow." The photographer

caught it at several angles. The X-rays taken revealed one anomaly. "And some kind of writing. BEREHENYA."

"Something else," Fenton said. "Gold teeth."

David straightened. "What?"

"Gold teeth." Fenton shone a strong light into the back of her mouth and David caught the glitter of metal. "Two upper molars. We'll include that with the dental records. Can't be too many women with gold molars."

Yamagata caught David's interest. "That mean something?"

"We caught a pair of DBs in Griffith Park, female Caucasian and her unborn. She had gold teeth too. And some unusual tattoos, similar to that."

"Other than the teeth, no gross abnormalities," Fenton went on. "Normal Caucasian female," Fenton lifted each eyelid and peered into her eyes. "Severe facial lacerations, blunt force trauma to the skull. No petechial hemorrhaging in the conjunctiva."

Y incision, then weighing and measuring everything took the better part of an hour. Through it all, Fenton's gravelly voice intoned each observation. Finally the reproductive organs were removed. Fenton's voice changed. "Got another similarity for you. Subject is approximately fifteen weeks pregnant. Fetus appears to be a normally developed female."

David met Jairo's startled gaze.

"Does that mean something?" Yamagata asked.

David chewed on his lip. He addressed Fenton. "Any idea what's happening to the second body from that grave? Has an autopsy been scheduled on that?"

"I believe a forensic anthropologist has been called in for it. The bones are in the process of being denuded. You want to be notified for that autopsy, too?"

"Yes."

"I'll let him know."

"Thanks," David said. "So, can you give us a cause of death?"

“Severe trauma, intracranial hemorrhage, intraparenchymal bleeding and subarachnoid hemorrhaging.” The blank looks on everyone’s face made him add, “Bleeding in the area between the arachnoid membrane and within the brain’s ventricles.”

“That’s a lot of help,” Jairo muttered. “I didn’t know you had to have a medical degree to do this job.”

Fenton, unfazed, smiled, showing a gap between his teeth. “That’s okay, I didn’t know I had to be a legal eagle to work here. But it helps. Layman’s terms? She hit her head so hard on the pavement it cracked her skull open and she bled out into her brain. There’s other trauma too—broken bones, burst spleen, but those things she might have survived with prompt medical attention. The head thing, not so lucky. Even if she’d fallen from the top floor of the USC medical center, she wouldn’t have made it.”

“Can you run a full tox screen?” David asked.

“Already in the works,” Fenton said. “The original incident report stated the officer thought she appeared drugged. It will take a few days for all the screens to be run. We’ll test her stomach contents. If anything’s there, we’ll find it.”

David glanced at Yamagata. “If the primary agrees, I’d like to hear the results of those tests.”

Yamagata nodded. “I’ll see you get them. This related to something you’re on?”

“Our Griffith Park DBs.”

The autopsy ended and the body was returned to storage for future internment if an identity could ever be established. No one in Northeast had to write up an incident report on this one. That would be Yamagata’s job. If Yamagata was feeling generous, he might cc the report to David. David would keep himself in the loop as much as possible, but he had his own caseloads to contend with. Not to mention he had a randy rookie D to keep in line. Still, he intended to approach Lieutenant McKee about rolling this case into his Griffith Park case.

Outside the morgue he stripped off his sterile coverall and Tyvek booties and dumped them in the hamper. Then he headed back to the station, Jairo following. There was a note from the division captain; he wanted David's 60-day reports on his desk by roll call tomorrow. He also wanted a status report on Jairo's progress. David was really looking forward to that.

With nothing new on any of his cases, and no new ones, David called it a day at six. He grabbed a French dip from Philippes and walked in on Chris just starting up on his supper, a tasteless looking plate of gray potatoes, grayer meat and something that might have been green beans, except they were gray, too.

Chris looked up at his entrance, and the bag swinging at his side. "Thank God, I was thinking I might actually have to eat this stuff."

He practically inhaled the sandwich and Coke and lay back with a sigh. "You just saved my life."

"Glad to be of service," David belatedly stooped down and collected a kiss, which tasted of beef and au jus. He perched on the edge of the bed, holding Chris's hand in his lap.

"Talked to the doctor today," Chris said, playing with the fingers of David's hand. "He's sending me home tomorrow."

"Good, Sergeant misses you."

"Oh, and you don't?" Suddenly he dropped David's hand. "It's good, but I also saw Dr. Jantz today and he wants me to fly out to New York, to meet his partners."

"Jantz?"

"You know, the new contract..."

"They want you to fly out east? What does the doctor say about that?"

Chris shrugged. "As long as I take it easy and don't try anything strenuous, he's okay with it."

David raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, but he doesn't know you very well, does he?"

"I'm not going to get into trouble, if that's what you're implying. I don't do that anymore."

"Leopards don't change their spots."

"This one does," Chris purred, stroking David's thigh. David stirred uneasily, all too aware of the open door.

David caught his hand and held it captive. "The dog misses you. We're both tired of going to bed alone."

"It'll only be for a few days. I really need to do this."

"Hey, I understand," David said. "It's your job."

"I'll make it up to you..." The smile he gave his lover was alive with promise. "Seriously. Do me a favor, pack a bag for me tonight. I'll call you when I know what time my flight leaves."

"What about dinner this weekend? Or will you be back by then?"

"Better if I reschedule. But, call the vet, will you? I posted his number on the fridge. Find out who else we can call about the dog. Call them."

"What if they want the dog back?"

Chris looked away. "Then you do what you gotta do. I'll understand."

I might not. But David couldn't very well say that, not after making such a big deal about finding the dog's real owner. He didn't want to admit he'd miss the big goof. After a rocky start they'd started bonding. It was fun having a jogging partner. He did his best not to think of his other jogging partner and the thoughts that kept playing in his head as he remembered things that never should have happened.

David stayed until visitor's hours were declared over. Reluctantly he leaned over the bed and kissed Chris soundly, determined to wipe out all treacherous thoughts of Jairo from his overactive imagination.

Then he drove home and found his nemesis parked in the driveway, his chocolate lab gamboling on the lawn, the next door neighbor out with her own yellow lab.

David nodded at his neighbor, told her Chris was doing much better, and would be home soon, then introduced Jairo, though he could see the two were getting on like a house on fire. The personable young man didn't seem to have any trouble making friends.

David took hold of his elbow, and led the compliant Jairo into the cool foyer, away from his nosy neighbor. He was forestalled from giving his partner a piece of his mind by Sergeant's greeting. By the time he got out of his work clothes, and changed, Jairo was waiting serenely by the front door with both dogs.

"You have got to stop doing this," David snapped.

Jairo handed him Sergeant's leash. "Why? It's not like I'm dragging you up to bed, though I admit I'd like to. But I promised I'd be good."

"What the hell would you do if I called your wife up and told her what you were up to?"

"She wouldn't believe you. She wouldn't understand why you were saying it, and she wouldn't believe you."

Just like the cops down at Northeast wouldn't believe what was going on right under their noses. They wouldn't see what they didn't want to see. He sighed, wishing Jairo would just give it up. Wishing he would leave. But a treacherous part of his mind didn't want Jairo to go away. And that horrified him. Could he really give in to temptation that easily? He'd always seen himself as rooted in honor. He loved Chris. That had to mean something, didn't it? Something more important than what he wanted to do to Jairo, right now, right here.

"So I guess if I can't get rid of you until we've walked the dogs, let's get it over with."

CHAPTER TEN

Tuesday, 9:15 AM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David spent most of the morning at his desk, fielding phone calls and trying to track down tattoo parlors that might recognize the weird lettering. He'd had to do this before when a tattoo was the only distinguishing mark on a dead victim. It still amazed him how many tattoo artists the city of L.A. had.

Jairo wasn't. "Oh, yeah, getting inked is cool. Don't you watch TLC?"

"No, what's that got to do with anything?"

"L.A. Ink—it's a show about people getting tattooed. They do some cool shit. Lot of celebrity clients."

David shook his head. To him, tattoos were synonymous with jail house ink and gang tats. "Don't tell me, you've got them."

"Sure." Jairo popped pulled his shirt out of his belt and pointed to a sinuous double headed snake engraved on the solid muscles of his back. "*A coatl*. Aztec. It's something, ain't it?"

David started at the expanse of brown skin and forced himself to look away. "Yeah, it's something. The Lieutenant won't be happy he sees you doing that."

Jairo tucked his shirt back in. He shrugged his jacket back in place and straightened his clip-on tie.

David's phone rang. He scooped it up. It was Chris.

"You going to be able to run me out to the airport? Jantz booked me a non-stop from Burbank, so at least you don't have to fight traffic all the way to LAX."

"Sure, what time's your flight?"

"United 6532, one-thirty."

David glanced at his watch. "How about I get you in half an hour? Can you be ready?"

"I'll be ready."

David hung up. Jairo met his gaze. "Chris going someplace?"

"New York on business. Don't get any ideas."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Chris was still moving stiffly when David put him in a wheel chair and took him down to his car. He'd brought the Chevy with him, so there wouldn't be any problem with giving Chris a ride in a city vehicle. Chris eased himself down into the seat, and gingerly clipped on the seat belt, wincing when it rubbed his bruised rib cage. While a worried David watched, he popped a couple of pain pills, and took shallow breaths.

"You sure you're okay with this?"

"I'll be fine."

Reluctantly, David dropped Chris off at the United terminal and headed back to work. At one he got a phone call about his tattoo. Someone in Hollywood might know the artist. He grabbed his jacket and headed out the door.

Jairo joined him and together they rode west toward Sunset. The tattoo shop was a small, wooden facade over a cinder block rectangle with a garish neon sign of a Chinese dragon flowing around the word TATTOO. A multitude of curling pictures filled what remained of the window space, blocking out all the sun from entering the shop.

Inside it was dim and smelled vaguely of cheap cologne and sweat. A heavily tattooed twenty-something woman was leaning over a reclining chair where a skinny man lay, his chest exposed to the tattoo gun she held. The image of a snake winding through a skull was taking shape on his skin.

The tattoo artist stared at them for several heartbeats then scowled.

"You the cop who called?"

"I am," David said. He waited for the woman to put her needle gun away and help the man to his feet before bringing out the photo of the tattoo from the bridge toss victim. "You said on the phone you might know this tattoo."

The tattoo artist stripped off her gloves and wiped her hands on her jeans. She made them wait while the customer paid up and left. Taking the photo, and the flower sketch he had made at the second autopsy, from David, she carried it over to a cluttered table covered with sample books, where a goose-necked lamp bathed the table in harsh white light. She dragged a stool over with her booted foot and hunched over the table, studying the images. Jairo and David took up position on either side of her. She stared at the images for several seconds, her fleshy lips pursed. Finally she nodded her hairless and heavily tattooed head.

"Yeah, I remember this." She held up the oddly shaped image and letters. "She came in several months ago, with a picture. It was strange. Never saw anything like it before or since. She called it a goddess." She climbed off her stool and rooted through a drawer, her tension putting David on edge. He watched her movements with a sharp eye, knowing he was being paranoid. This case was starting to get to him. Or something was.

Finally, she pulled a wide sheet of rolled up paper out. She unfurled it on the desk and David and Jairo leaned over, shoulders touching, studying the large sketch of the same image as it had appeared on the body.

"Pretty dramatic image," Jairo said, tracing the outline of the symbol or whatever it was.

"Don't touch it," David said. He snapped on a pair of gloves and carefully rolled the drawing back up. "Can we take this with us?"

"Sure, I guess—"

David waited until Jairo put on his own gloves and handed the roll to him. He turned back to the tattoo artist. "You keep records of your clients?"

"Yeah, we offer specials to our regulars. I don't think she ever came back, but I probably have an address on her."

"Get it for me, will you."

"Sure, officer—"

David stood over the heavy-set tattooed woman, feeling her tension, watching the line of sweat roll off her tattooed forehead as she pulled open the sliding drawer of a small filing cabinet beside the cash register. He wondered if there was a square inch of skin that wasn't covered in tattoos. The soles of her feet maybe, other body parts he refused to think about. He thought of the tattoo Jairo had shown him. He'd never thought skin art was all that sexy; certainly Chris had never marred his nearly perfect body with anything but a discreet ear piercing. Chris didn't need to enhance anything. David, on the other hand, had never cared what he looked like. Chris insisted on buying him nice clothes, but there were still times when David couldn't have told anyone what color socks he was wearing.

"Here she is."

David took the flimsy sheet from her and studied it. Halyna Stakchinko. Sounded Russian or some other Eastern European country. Russian? He made a mental note to check with Immigration on that. It showed an address in Hollywood on a Leland Way. There was a phone number too. The tattoo artist seemed to have gotten over her initial reservations about talking to the cops; she became garrulous.

"I remember her," she said. "She was a looker. I mean, this is Hollywood, right, they're all babes, but this one..." She whistled. "She made this old dyke sit up and take notice. And I don't usually react to the young stuff, know what I mean? Not that she was jail bait or anything," she said quickly. "Just way out of my league. Out of everyone's, you ask me."

"She was an actress?"

"She could have been, but I don't think so. Too nervous, if you know what I mean. And her accent, it was hard to understand her, so how could she act? But she had a real presence."

"Is this her?" David pulled out the head shot from the morgue. The tattoo artist recoiled.

"My God, what—she's dead!"

"Yes, she is, ma'am. Is this Halyna Stakchinko?" David stumbled over the name.

"What happened to her?"

"That's what we're trying to determine." David glanced down at the sales record. It was dated nearly two months ago. "Is this the last time she was in your shop?"

"N-no, she came in about four or five months ago, a couple of weeks after the first time."

"To get another tattoo?" David was certain the woman who had been thrown onto the Harbor Freeway had only had the one tattoo.

"No, she came in with a friend who wanted a tattoo." It didn't surprise David when she pointed at the other image, the flower. RUZHA. "Helen—that's what she said her name was—wanted to help her friend find the right piece of art. It was unbelievable. They were like twin goddesses. Not that they were twins, mind you, though they were both blond. Foreigners, from the same place as far as I could tell."

Two beautiful women, almost unnaturally beautiful. Where had they come from? And what had happened to them? "Who was her friend?" David asked. "Is she in your files, too?" Maybe they had a witness they could interview. That would be a break. Beside him Jairo was furiously taking notes. David was pleased to see he was studying every aspect of the shop. David just wished he'd ask more questions. This was as much Jairo's investigation as his own.

As though reading his mind, Jairo asked, "She have an address?"

"Yes, yes, she did." The tattoo artist dug through her miniature filing cabinet. She extracted another sheet of paper. Same address, different name: Zuzanna Konjenko.

"So they were roommates," Jairo said when David handed both sales slips to him.

"They never said, but I guess so," the tattoo artist said. "I tried to talk her into something more imaginative, but she couldn't be talked. Some people got no imagination. Is that all, guys? I got customers..."

"She ever tell you what the letters meant? Were they words?"

"I never asked. Figured it was whatever language they were speaking. Didn't mean anything to me, so I didn't ask."

David glanced up to see two leather clad biker types, alternately trying to look tough and invisible at the same time, enter the shop. David glanced from them, to Jairo who was watching the duo with glittering eyes. He gestured at the papers in his partner's hand. "Take them?"

"Sure, sure. Hope you find out what happened to her. She was a sweet kid, even if she was foreign."

Back outside, Jairo fell into step beside him. David paused to make notes of the names and address in his own notebook. Then he flipped it shut and stuck it back in his jacket pocket. He nodded at the rolled up drawing and the two sales slips. "Log those into evidence when we get back to the station."

"Sure, what then?"

"I talk to the Lieutenant about rolling those cases together. I think we have enough evidence to do that. After that, we go visit."

"Think we'll find our mystery woman?"

"We can hope. But don't forget we have two other Jane Does to account for. They can't find a tattoo on bones, but I'm going to let them know that the first victim needs to get a closer look. Even badly decayed skin can hold ink well enough to photograph."

First they had to book their evidence in, followed by a phone call to the Central Division's detective telling him what they'd found out. He followed that with a call to the victim's number. Not surprising, there was no answer, though the phone was still active. There was an answering machine with a heavily accented message. The voice was male; David couldn't

catch the name. David hung up before the tape could start. They stopped at Tommy's for a chili burger. David hadn't had one in years. Chris was too much of a food snob to indulge in greasy pseudo fast food. He wouldn't be caught dead in most of the places he and Martinez frequented over the years.

The day waxed hot. While they ate, standing outside Tommy's, Jairo took his jacket off and tossed it in the car window. He set his Coke on top of the Crown Vic he had signed out that morning, and leaned over the roof of the car. His shoulder holster was snugged under his armpit, his police issued Beretta within easy reach. He drew a lot of male and female eyes, all of which he ignored, while he took in everything and everyone around him. A poster boy for the LAPD. David had been seen that way once, until he'd committed the unpardonable sin of falling in love with a man.

Their late lunch over, they tossed their garbage and climbed back into the Crown Vic. Jairo drove. They parked under a no stopping sign and Jairo flipped an LAPD ON DUTY sign on the dash.

The house was a trim little Craftsman cottage, nestled within rose trellises, and a profusion of fuchsia and red Bougainvillea. Dusty fan palmettos draped over the cracked sidewalk. A narrow veranda held a couple of rusting lawn chairs. Flimsy looking lace curtains were drawn, concealing the dark interior. The house had a stillness about it. Even before he rapped firmly on the flaking wooden door, David knew the house was empty. Jairo moved down the veranda, peering in through the curtained window. David followed and shaded his eyes while he tried to see inside, but he couldn't penetrate the gloomy interior.

Finally he straightened and met Jairo's gaze.

"What now?" Jairo asked.

"Track down the owner. He may or may not have heard about his tenant. Or he can lead us to the property manager."

"Always hated being the bearer of bad news." Jairo's easy grin belied that statement.

"When you find him, you can tell him."

“I can—sure boss. Whatever you say.”

They returned to the Northeast Station. David called the forensic pathologist and relayed the news about the tattoo. Fenton promised to go back and examine the original Griffith park corpse more closely. Then he added, “The anthropologist has scheduled his autopsy for this afternoon. You want to be present?”

“We’ll be there.”

David got home in time to miss a call from Chris saying he’d got in okay and would call again. Then he and Sergeant went out for a long run, burning off despair and unwanted desires, before collapsing in front of the TV to watch an insipid comedy.

That night he dreamed of Jairo, and woke in a sweat to sticky sheets, and deeper depression.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tuesday, 3:20 PM, County Coroner's Office, North Mission Road, East Los Angeles

Same smell of corruption and formaldehyde, same harsh buzzing lights. Every autopsy table was occupied. White, sterile walls closed in on them.

The denuded skeleton wrapped in the comforter was wheeled out and gently transferred to the autopsy table. The forensic anthropologist, Antoine Galt, introduced himself.

There were no bone saws, or collection pails to hold samples, no scales to weigh organs. There would be no tox screens. A sample of hair had been recovered; it was already at the DNA lab waiting to be tested. The thick covering was carefully removed, its contents examined and collected. David studied what looked like several bits of plant debris and watched Galt bag each one and label them.

"Looks like several different types of vegetation. I'm no gardener, so I can't say what kind. They'll be sent off to a forensic botanist."

"Might be some kind of bedding plant. Nothing like what we found at the burial site."

"With any luck it can help pinpoint a secondary site," Galt said.

David and Jairo stood side by side, opposite Galt, a stoop-shouldered man who looked like he spent his life bending over an autopsy table, peering down at the dead. The bones were first photographed, then X-rayed. A scanning electron microscope stood on the sidelines, in case anything like tool marks showed up and needed closer examination.

"This is most unusual," he said in a dry, pedantic voice.

David leaned forward. Jairo did the same and their shoulders brushed together. "What is?"

"This woman has four gold inlay molars. Upper and lower arches."

"And that's three for three. Is there some new fad I haven't heard of?" David mused, staring down at the earth-stained skull that grinned up at him. "I've heard of pimps getting gold grills, but women? Since when?"

"They real gold?" Jairo asked. "Or just an overlay?"

"Who would put real gold in their mouth?"

"I'll let you know," Galt said. He moved off. "Cranial sutures fused, so she's not an adolescent. Auricular surface and pubic symphyseal separation of nearly nine millimeters could indicate prenatal distress."

Jairo leaned forward. "What does that mean? She was pregnant?"

"Possibly."

David and Jairo exchanged looks. "Twice might be a coincidence," David muttered. "This is turning into an epidemic."

"Who kills pregnant women? Hard to believe there could be three mistakes some asshole's trying to cover up."

"Homicide *is* the leading cause of death among pregnant women," Galt said.

David felt like snapping, "Don't quote me statistics I already know," but he knew the anthropologist was trying to be helpful. Still, it hardly mattered if the three dead women fit some statistic; he needed to know *why* these three were dead.

"Can you give me a cause of death, Doctor?"

Galt nodded and got on with his autopsy. He made tiny measurements using calipers and a ruler, and spoke his findings into the hanging microphone, putting the scanning electron microscope into action more than once. Finally he spoke again. "Subcomponents of the auricular surface correspond with early adulthood. Include the pregnancy as a factor of age, and I think

we're looking at a young Caucasian woman, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, give or take five years—although I'd hesitate to say she's less than sixteen."

"So, young, white and the hair found with her was blond. Bottled?"

"The test results will tell us that."

"Cause of death?" David repeated.

Galt pointed at the skeletonized form. "Hyoid has been fractured. Strong indications she was slashed with something very sharp, possibly serrated. See here and here," he indicated areas of the neck where the vocal chords would have been. "Sorry, I can't tell what kind of knife was used."

"Was the baby buried with her?"

"Let me get back to you."

They'd have to be content with that. David and Jairo left the morgue and stepped out into the surprisingly hot pre-spring day. The sun had turned the parking lot into a simmering cauldron, and Jairo's unmarked stewed in the unseasonable glare that bounced off the mullioned windows of the red brick building in front of them. As he waited for Jairo to unlock the vehicle, a meat wagon rolled into the lot, rolling around to the unloading zone. Jairo cranked the air on the minute he started the car.

"What now?" he asked.

"We track down the building's owner and pay a visit."

They still hadn't found him by the end of the day. Before it got too late, David called the vet about the dog and was given the number of Sergeant's breeder, in Anaheim. He called the number and got a young girl on the phone.

When he asked to speak to someone about one of their dogs an older woman came on the line. "Yes?" she said.

David introduced himself. "My partner found a dog we think belongs to you, but the owner isn't showing up. We'd like to know what you want us to do with him."

David rattled off the number the vet had read off the implant Sergeant carried.

“Oh that’s Avanti’s Special Edition,” she said. “You say you found him?”

“Like I said, my partner found him on the street. He’d obviously been, ah, left to his own devices—”

“You mean abandoned?” the woman’s voice was cool. “Did he call animal control?”

“He didn’t feel comfortable doing that.”

“And what exactly does he want to do?” she said shrewdly, and David suspected she knew exactly what Chris wanted to do. “Does he want me to take the dog back? I will, I tell all my dog owners if they ever find they can’t keep an animal, to bring it back. I don’t countenance dumping any dog into the street, but especially not one of mine.”

“No, ma’am. Actually he was kind of hoping you might see your way to letting us keep him.”

“You want him?”

David took a deep breath, wondering what he was getting himself in for. “Yes, ma’am. We do.”

“Tell me a bit about yourself. Aside from the fact you’re a police detective. Why should I let one of my dogs go to you?”

David had no idea how to respond to that. So he countered. “You’re free to come out and see the dog for yourself. You can see if he’s happy, or not.”

She agreed to that and he gave her their Silver Lake address. But she couldn’t commit on a time. “I’ll let you know.”

David called it quits around six, and headed home for a much needed shower. Sergeant met him at the door, a scrap of skin hanging from his nose. Upstairs in the bedroom, the bed looked like a small bomb had gone off in it. Sweeney lay on David’s pillow, eying the dog with disgust.

David scooped the angry cat up, and gave Sergeant a stern look when he surged forward, trying to nudge the Siamese in his arms. Putting both animals outside on the hall landing, he

stripped the bloodied sheets where the two had tussled, and put fresh ones on. When he let the two back in, Sweeney curled up on David's pillow. Sergeant took up his place at the foot of the bed.

Shaking his head, David carried the bed clothes down to the laundry room, and put a load in. Then he went in search of supper, settling on a quick-fry steak and rice side dish. He ate in the media room, flipping through channels until he finally settled on a NASCAR race in Daytona.

Someone pounded on the door. Sergeant beat him to it, and even before he threw the heavy oak door open, he knew who was on the other side.

Jairo leaned against the tiled courtyard, legs crossed at the ankles, his brown lab lying at his feet. The dog scrambled up when the door opened, and greeted Sergeant enthusiastically. Jairo tousled the Doberman's head fondly.

"Looks like you had a run in with a claw," he said with an easy grin.

"I think he lost that argument," David said, determined not to respond to Jairo's unwanted presence. It was getting harder and harder to ignore his own wholly unwanted physical reaction to the man.

In the meantime, the dog needed a good run. He grabbed his jacket and running shoes, and led Jairo at a fast clip over to the park, where the two dogs were free to gambol, and chase each other along the shoreline.

Back at the house, Jairo grinned when it became obvious David wasn't going to invite him in. He saluted him and tugged Popeye back to his car. David didn't bother watching to see if he left. He shut and locked the door, and led the exhausted dog into the media room, where they both settled down to watch a Johnny Cash retrospective. Half way through the show Chris called. He sounded tired, but upbeat.

"You're taking care of yourself, right?"

"Sure," Chris said with a laugh. "Trust me, no wild parties. How's the dog?"

"He's good." David shook his head, looking down at the sleeping dog at his feet. "He misses you." His voice dropped. "He's not the only one."

They traded "I love you's" and David got off the phone. Blindly he reached down and stroked the dog's dark head, wishing more than anything that Chris had never gone to New York.

The next morning Jairo located the Leland Way landlord. He had done a property search and found the owner, who was renting the place out. He agreed to meet them at eleven outside the house. Jairo reported his findings.

"Mr. Bailey Larson has owned that particular building since nineteen ninety-four. He and his wife used to own it, but they divorced in ninety-six and he purchased the structure from her."

"Did he know the two tenants?"

"He met them, but doesn't know much about either of them, except they spoke with heavy accents and they were lookers. Like with the tattoo artist, they made quite an impression on our guy."

"No trouble with them?"

"Paid their rent on time. Last check cleared a couple of weeks ago. He would have been expecting next month's check in another week."

"What bank were the checks drawn on?"

"We're in luck. He photocopied all his checks. They were drawn on Wells Fargo, Fountain and La Brea."

"Depending on how this goes, we may be able to subpoena those records." David rubbed at the rough skin of his cheek. "You tell him anything about our suspicions?"

The look Jairo gave him said "What do you think I am, stupid?" all too clearly. David shrugged. "Then let's go talk to him."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Wednesday, 10:50 AM, Leland Way, Hollywood

Bailey Larson was a bearded, heavy-set man with narrow, weaselly eyes who spoke in a rushed whisper, as though afraid someone was going to shut him up before he got all the words out. When David and Jairo pulled up in Jairo's dusty brown Crown Vic, he stepped out of his Kia and shaded his eyes against the late morning sun. David carried an evidence kit.

David extended his hand, swallowing up Larson's. "Mr. Larson? Detective David Eric Laine. My partner, Jairo Garcia Hernandez."

Larson fished a set of keys out of his jacket pocket and motioned them up the step to the front door. He rapped smartly on the wooden panel, and waited for nearly a minute before glancing back at David and Jairo.

"Are the two girls in trouble, officers?"

"No, sir. We just want to be sure they're fine," David said, thinking trouble wasn't the word for it.

Larson shrugged. "Okay, but if they get angry, it's on your head."

"Understood, sir."

Larson tried knocking one more time, but the only sounds were the soft cooing of a mourning dove, and the swish of distant traffic on nearby Sunset. Finally he shoved the key in the lock and pushed the door open.

Uneasily, he peered into the lightless room, seeing as much of it as he could without actually entering. David eased past him, and Jairo followed on his heels. Only then did Larson cross the threshold.

The living room was dim and empty. It had the stale smell of a room that had been closed up for days. A faint scent of

lavender, and laundry soap, lay under the smell of uncirculated air. The room was pin neat, though David could make out a thin layer of dust on the nearby table, when he eased the curtains open to shed some light on things. It was obvious no one had been in the house for several days, maybe longer. There were no signs that anything violent had occurred. To be sure, David moved through the house, checking behind every closed door, even peering outside into the matchbook-sized backyard. A flock of starlings argued from a nearby rubber tree. A dog barked at him from next door; the yard itself was empty. Not even a scrap of lawn furniture was in sight. A single large Eucalyptus tree crowded too close to the back of the house, filling the air with the familiar pungent smell. The yard was scuffed and dusty. The grass, thinned in spots to bare dirt, was already starting to brown under the relentless sun. A bucket, half-filled with scummy water, sat under the southeast corner of the house. A crawl space, half concealed by a ragged boxwood, was a black maw under the house.

Larson shook his head, and marched over to the bucket, upending it in the dirt. "Gotta keep telling them not to encourage mosquitoes. Maybe they don't have them where they come from, but they should know better."

"Any idea where they are from?" Jairo asked. His gaze swept the tiny backyard, taking in the houses on either side.

"They never said. I never asked. They were pretty hard to understand, so we weren't big on conversation. They paid their rent on time. Can't ask for more than that." He glared at the now empty bucket. "Well, not much."

"Who arranged to rent the place? Them or a second party?" David asked.

Larson frowned. "A guy who said he was their uncle was helping them get settled in the country. Now that I remember, it was his name on the rent checks."

"You keep copies of those checks?"

"Of course, have to or my accountant has a fit."

"We'll need to see them," David said. He turned away from the landlord.

"Do I need a subpoena to do that?"

"Up to you. I can get one, no problem."

"Guess there's no reason you can't have them. I'm not hiding anything, right?"

"I can send an officer over later to pick those up."

They checked out each of the two bedrooms. The bed in the first one was neatly made, flowered duvet and a threadbare area rug at the side of the single bed. A framed image of what David took to be Madonna and child was on the plain white wall, over the bed. A row of cosmetics and a hairbrush sat on a vanity. David picked up the brush. Several blond hairs clung to the teeth. He pulled an evidence bag out of his kit and extracted a couple of hairs. Larson watched him uneasily.

"Just what do you think happened here?"

"Can't say, sir. We're just checking out all angles."

Larson was skeptical, but David didn't elaborate. He'd learn soon enough if David's suspicions about the whereabouts of his two tenants were true.

"What were your tenants' names? Can we see copies of their leases?"

"S-sure, I'll have to get them from my office..."

"Please do that, sir. We could pick them up, too, if that would be easier. We can take photocopies of those checks at the same time."

Larson glanced at this watch. "I'll be heading back there once I leave here." He handed David a business card. "My address. I'll have everything ready when you get there."

The second bedroom was messier than the first. The bed was unmade, and clothes, mostly simple dresses, and a pair of jeans, were scattered on an easy chair and over the uncarpeted floor. The closet yielded more clothes, finer dresses, all size 0, though how clothes could be zero was beyond David's comprehension. Several pairs of stiletto shoes lined the closet.

"Ankle breakers," Jairo said. At David's look he murmured. "My wife likes those things. Still can't figure out how anyone

can walk in them.” He grinned. “But it sure makes their legs look good.”

“Women.” Larson shook his head. “Does anything they do make sense?”

Back out in the living room, they found an odd display in the eastern corner. A small, hand-carved wooden table held a leather-bound book, on a red and white embroidered cloth with writing David didn’t recognize but was similar to the tattoo, and a pair of candlestick holders with simple white, unburned candles. A lamp hung from above, and an embroidered towel was draped over several small paintings of religious figures. Facing the corner was a large, worn easy chair. Beside it was a wicker basket filled with various colored thread and a half finished piece of intricately embroidered cloth. He stared at the cloth, then picked it up and held it so he could study it. There was no mistaking the image, even though it was only partially complete.

It was the same odd picture of triangle and diamonds of the dead woman’s tattoo. Around the main image were several smaller ones, various stylized barnyard animals. He knew who at least one of his victims was.

On a second table, an answering machine was blinking. Two messages. David played the first one. Something, Russian or similar, went on for nearly a minute. The second one could have been the same voice, it only lasted a few seconds.

“That mean anything to you?” David asked the landlord.

“Sorry, no.”

“Sounds Russian to me,” Jairo said.

David frowned. They’d have to find an interpreter, and hope it was Russian. He picked up the black leather bound book. Inside was more of the odd script, plus some hand-written notes. He began going through drawers, looking under books and papers.

“What are you looking for?” Jairo asked.

"Pictures, passports, ID, bills, address books, doctor's prescriptions... anything that might give us some background on these two."

They found no formal ID, even after an hour of searching. But they did find several paid ConEd bills, in the name of Halyna Stakchinko, and a small notebook full of handwriting David couldn't make heads or tails of. David would have stayed longer, but the landlord was getting impatient, and without a warrant, they couldn't force the issue. And until they had probable cause, getting a warrant could be tricky. He decided to call it a day.

"Let's go request a translator." David said to Jairo as they followed the landlord to the front door. "You ever see any visitors, Mr. Larson? Anyone else ever stay here or was it always just the two women?"

"No one I knew about, but like I said, I didn't come around often. I leave my tenants alone. Long as they pay their rent on time, I got no reason to hassle them."

David and Jairo thanked the landlord, who locked up behind them, reminded them he would have the lease papers and photocopies ready that afternoon, and drove off.

Back at the station, David put in a formal request for a Russian interpreter, and was told one would be temporarily assigned from the Hollywood Station. He and Jairo went over the lease applications. The names were the same ones the tattoo parlor had provided. Zuzanna Konjenko and Halyna Stakchinko. He hoped their translator would come through soon. This case was going nowhere without some help. On the checks another name: Valerian Mikalenko.

His phone rang. It was Chris.

"Did you talk to anyone about the dog?"

David toyed with a pencil on his desk. "I called the dog's breeder. She may come by to check the dog out, but she didn't say for sure she was going to take him back."

"Well, you need to sell her on us keeping him. You want to, don't you?"

“He got into a fight with Sweeney.”

Chris laughed. “Who lost? Don’t tell me, the dog did.”

“Nah, the bed sheets did. The dog’s smarting a bit. You’ll have to kiss it better when you get home.”

“So, are you hurting anywhere?”

“What? No—”

“I could kiss your hurts all better,” Chris’s voice dropped. “I could kiss all kinds of things better.”

David cleared his throat. He felt heat rush to his face, and other body parts. It didn’t help that he was in the middle of the squad room, surrounded by a bunch of middle-aged men in suits and ties. Or that Jairo was watching him, an all too knowing look on his dark, handsome face.

“Cut it out,” David said.

Chris laughed. “Gotcha. I’ll be back in a couple of days. Keep it warm for me.”

He hung up, and David was spared any time to think about their conversation by the phone ringing again. It was Galt this time.

“Those four molars contain twenty-two carat gold. Even more curious, one of her teeth had a filling.”

“What’s so curious about that?” David asked. “Lots of people have fillings. I even have a couple.”

“Not concrete mixed.”

“Concrete—?”

“Definitely not American. My guess would be the former Soviet bloc. I’ve seen that before—a Ukrainian priest ended up on our slab a couple of years back. They called me in when there were some odd discrepancies. One was the teeth.”

“So, Ukrainian. It fits with a few other things. I wonder if I can replace that Russian interpreter with a Ukrainian one. Can you give me a time of death yet?”

"I'd say your victim's been in the ground at least two, maybe three months on the outside. If I had to guess I'd say eight-nine weeks."

"Ah, thanks, doctor." David hung up. "Looks like our victim might be Ukrainian after all." David told Jairo about the teeth.

"Twenty-two carat gold and concrete. Now there's a combination for you."

David called the coroner's office about the other two bodies, but no tox reports had come in and there was nothing yet on the other victim's teeth. DNA was still being run; no results yet. Could be days. Sometimes David wished RHD would take the case; they'd have better luck getting the results back sometime in living memory. Even with the brand new lab he was still stuck dealing with an overloaded system, and no clout to make them move faster.

He looked across at Jairo. "Start drafting a warrant for the Leland address. We're looking for anything that might suggest a crime. Phone messages, notes, bills, address books, journals, whatever we can find. We can get trace in there, too. Run it by me before you submit it."

Jairo nodded and turned to his keyboard.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Wednesday, 6:20 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

The dog and the cat had declared a truce of sorts. David found Sweeney in his usual spot on his pillow. Sergeant scrambled off the bed as soon as he entered the room, looking guilty.

“Busted,” David said. The dog smiled at him. “You learning all your bad habits from Chris? Cut it out.”

David changed into a sweatshirt. It still got cool at night, too cool for a T-shirt. He paused to give the cat some much needed attention, knowing what it was like to feel left out. Finally he trotted downstairs, Sergeant at his heels. The cat watched them go with disdain.

At the front door, David slipped his running shoes on and grabbed Sergeant’s leash. He threw the front door open just as Jairo pulled up to the curb. Popeye raced across the lawn before Jairo could get the leash on him. The two dogs greeted each other enthusiastically. It didn’t take Jairo long to get his dog leashed, and they set off for the park. There were more people out this early. Several had dogs. David noticed again that a lot of them, especially if they were walking small dogs, seemed apprehensive around Sergeant. Nobody had a problem with the big, goofy Popeye.

“Stereotypes,” Jairo said. “Guess you know all about those.” At David’s look he added, “Big macho cop who couldn’t possibly be gay. Even when he is.”

“Let’s just run,” David snapped.

An hour later, back at the house, Jairo followed David to the front door.

“Can I get a drink of water?”

David studied the younger man for several seconds. Finally he held the door open. "Sure, follow me."

He grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge and handed it to Jairo, who stared at the label. "You know they say this stuff is bad for you."

"How's that?" David asked.

"It's not as pure as the makers tell you. Lot of hype. Basically just tap water."

"You don't have to drink it, you know."

Jairo grunted and twisted the top off, guzzling half of the cold liquid in one long gulp. He smacked his lips. "Now that hits the spot."

Sweeney entered the kitchen, stopped when he saw the stranger. Jairo and the cat stared at each other for several heartbeats. "You're the killer cat."

"That's him," David said.

Jairo stooped down to pet the animal. Sweeney moved smoothly away from the hand, sitting haughtily just out of reach. "Guess I got put in my place."

"It's not personal," David said. "It's just you."

"I can take a hint." This time Jairo rubbed Sergeant's head and the dog fawned against him. "Now who's a good boy," he said, grinning at David. He put the empty bottle on the kitchen counter. "See you in the morning."

"Get to work on that warrant. I'd like to present it to the judge by end of day, if possible. I'm going to work on the Lieutenant about getting the Halyna case rolled over into ours. It ties in with it."

"What's your probable cause for the warrant?"

"ID on the one woman by the tattoo artist. Missing roommate of same woman. DNA match imminent. The tattoos. The pregnancies."

"You can't know the missing woman is our DB."

"We go on the assumption. The women are missing, and we've got three bodies to account for."

David was thoughtful when he shut and locked the door behind Jairo and Popeye. Maybe this partnership would work out after all. Jairo was sharp, no doubt there. If he would just focus on his job, they could prove a productive team. They'd both benefit.

At nine he popped a beer open and settled in front of the TV to watch *The Green Berets*. He wasn't a big war movie buff, but anything with John Wayne was just fine with him. He thought of Jairo's cutting remark about stereotypes, and wondered just where he fit in that. Most of his life he'd done his best to deny what he was. It was easier to hide it than face the loathing and ridicule of his peers. But now he didn't have the comfort of the closet, not with Chris in his life, and the whole world knowing what he was. The media had done its usual brilliant job of dismantling his cover. Chris made it worthwhile. Most of the time. Still, there were times he thought life would be simpler if he didn't have to live in the public eye. But it was a moot point. There was no putting that genie back in its bottle.

Jairo was already at his desk when David arrived the next day. He barely looked up from his laptop to nod, then bent back over his work. His fingers flew over the keyboard. Finally he hit a last key, and leaned back with a grunt. David slipped off his jacket and draped it over his chair. He logged into his own computer, and put the finishing touches on the daily report for Lieutenant McKee.

"That's it, then," Jairo said.

Before David could say anything he jumped up and headed for the squad room printer. When he came back, he handed several sheets to David.

"Tell me how this looks."

David skimmed the warrant. Then he grabbed a pen, and read it through more closely, slashing and burning as he went. Two years of pre-law always came in handy when he wrote up warrants. He handed the heavily marked up papers back to a scowling Jairo. "Not bad, for a first attempt."

Jairo took the proffered pages and bent back over his laptop, muttering under his breath. This time the revised warrant passed David's muster. He grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair and stood.

"Let me see the Lieutenant, then we can go find a judge about getting this signed."

McKee nodded through David's carefully thought out recital. Finally he picked up his phone and called Central. Several minutes of back and forth and he hung up, a smug look on his face. "It's all yours, Detective. I hope this is a positive move for us. I'd hate to get saddled with a 60-dayer that we asked for."

"Yes, sir."

The sitting judge signing warrants that week read through their request. "You have a positive ID on the woman," he peered through reading glasses at the name, "Halyna Stakchinko?"

"Yes, your Honor, we do."

"And you want to search her residence for signs of foul play?"

"Yes, your Honor."

The judge nodded and pursed his lips. "You'll be taking a crime scene technician with you, I assume."

"Two, I think," David said. "A serology tech, and a trace guy. Plus we need to take those tapes in and the writing for translation. I want to run them by a Russian language expert."

The judge looked at the warrant again. "I'll agree, with the exception of the Bible. I see no probable cause to take that. You don't know who the Bible belongs to, do you?"

"No, your Honor, not at this time—"

"Then there's a reasonable expectation of privacy. I won't allow it to be seized at this time. Bring me more evidence and we'll revisit the search warrant."

David wanted to disagree, but knew he'd be wasting his time. He could only hope more evidence would show up at the

apartment to extend the warrant. He wanted to have a look at that book. But more important, he wanted to get someone under the house, into that crawl space. He nodded.

"Fine, your Honor."

The judge made a notation on the document, signed the papers and handed them off to David, who passed them to Jairo. "Let's go call SID."

David had Jairo call the landlord and let him know they were coming back out, and this time they had a warrant. Jairo called and after he hung up, he grinned at David.

"That is one unhappy camper."

"He'll get over it."

"I don't know if he's more upset having us make him let us in, or of losing two tenants."

"Did he give the impression he thought the women were in trouble?"

"No, he still seemed pretty shocked by the whole idea. You think he's involved?"

"Do you?"

Jairo thought about it for several seconds then shook his sleek head. "Nah, he's too ingenuous. He liked them, as well as any landlord can like their tenants. Besides, he's got no reason to harm them."

"Unless he was the father of those babies."

Jairo smirked. "If they were as hot as the tattoo artist said can you imagine them letting that little twerp get to first base, let alone home."

"I've seen stranger things," David growled. In Chris's orbit he didn't qualify as much more than a "twerp." He still wondered sometimes what Chris saw in him. Not that he'd ever talk about that kind of thing with this guy, no matter his sympathies.

David's cell rang. He flipped it open. It was his translator, an Officer Stefan Konstatinov. "My lieutenant says I am all yours

as long as you need me,” Konstatinov said in a light, barely perceptible accent. “What exactly are we dealing with?”

“Don’t know yet. I’ve got some handwritten notes and a couple of answering machine messages. Two roommates missing, at least one presumed to be the victim of foul play. We don’t have an ID on our second victim yet, or the third one.”

“Three?” Konstatinov said. “All Russian?”

“Don’t know that either. I’m hoping you can help us figure that out. We’ve got a search warrant for the house, the landlord’s meeting us there later today. You look and tell us what you think.” David rattled off the address.

“I will be there,” Konstatinov said and rang off.

“One down, two to go,” David said. He picked up his landline.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Thursday, 11:45 AM, Leland Way, Hollywood

Larson met them on the front veranda of the Craftsman house. His weasel eyes darted between the six people who crowded onto the small concrete porch. He stared at the kits the two technicians carried, then met David's eyes.

"Please tell me what you think happened here. Are the girls in trouble?"

"I'm afraid it might be worse than that, Mr. Larson." David drew the image of the bridge toss victim out and handed it to the landlord. "Is this your tenant?"

Larson went pale and swallowed convulsively. "Y-yes, that's her. What the hell happened to her?"

"She was murdered," David said.

"By who?"

"That's what we hope to find out."

With more alacrity than he had shown earlier, Larson let them into the house. It was just as gloomy and airless as it had been the first time. David immediately crossed to the answering machine. Bingo. Another message.

Before he signaled Konstatinov over, he set the warrant out on the nearly empty kitchen table. Then he pointed at the blinking answering machine. "Can you translate?"

Konstatinov played the messages. The third one sounded like a different voice than the first two. Guttural and harsh, like that of a heavy smoker. Konstatinov nodded when all three had played.

"Not Russian," he said. "Ukrainian. You're in luck, I speak both. My mother married a Ukrainian man."

"So what are they saying?"

“The first one talks of their first meeting with the one called Zuzanna. He wants to know if her friend will join them next time. The next message is from the same man. He’s angry because Zuzanna didn’t show up for their ‘date.’”

David glanced at Larson who was avidly listening to the conversation. He stepped between Larson and Konstatinov. “Sir,” he said. “This is a police matter now. I promise I’ll return the key to you when we’re done.”

Larson didn’t want to go, but David didn’t give him the option. He threw one last glance at the answering machine, then he handed David the house key and slipped outside. David glanced at Jairo.

“Secure the place, okay? Don’t let anyone in.”

Jairo nodded.

“Okay,” David said to Konstatinov, “So the first two are the same man. Any name given?”

“He called himself Johnny,” Konstatinov said. “But I doubt that is his real name.”

“Maybe a job description,” Jairo said. “Were the two hookers?” When David threw him a look, he headed toward the front door.

“Bible reading hookers?” David muttered. “Guess it wouldn’t be the first time. What was the third message?”

“That the two had better be ready when he came to get them. It was time, he said.”

“Time for what?” David asked.

“He didn’t say,” Konstatinov said.

While Konstatinov listened to all three messages again, the two other technicians began to set up for their tests. The sixth man lugged around his 3D Leica camera. The evidence technician was a lanky red-headed woman, who sported a frizzy afro under her sterile cap, took out a mini vacuum, and carried it into the first bedroom. The serology technician, already suited up in protective clothing, popped the evidence kit open and prepped his Bluestar solution. Once done, he went around

closing all the curtains and plunging the room into darkness; he lingered in the living room. He couldn't do his tests until the other tech was done. David brought a flashlight out and used it to provide light. Jairo reentered the room.

Konstatinov began to go through the various notes David had spotted the day before. They tagged each one into evidence, then moved on to the odd shrine in the east corner. David shone his light into the corner.

"It's a *postina*, an ikon corner," Konstatinov said, pointing at various items on the wall and the table, which David promptly directed the photographer to get. "That's an ikon of St. Nicholas, a crucifix" He indicated a wooden cross beside the crucifix, and the red and white embroidered towel draped over several religious images on the wall. "A blessing cross, and a *rushnyk*—probably embroidered by one of the girls. Most Ukrainian women pride themselves on their skills. Looks like *nyzynka*, an embroidery technique used in the Chernihiv region, in northern Ukraine. They're famous for their very simple red and white *rushnyky*. That figure is a BEREHENYA, a goddess. All those little images around it are symbols of the goddess. Mostly fertility related. The hanging lamp is a *lampadka*. It would be filled with oil and lit at special times."

"Which all implies some pretty strong devotion, doesn't it? Would women like that really be prostitutes?" Jairo seemed skeptical, whether of the dead woman's devotion or of her profession.

"They might, if they weren't given a choice," David said. "Prostitution is rarely the victimless crime the social liberals claim."

Konstatinov nodded. "A lot of Ukrainian women find themselves forced into slavery against their will. They are tricked with promises of lucrative jobs in America. Only when they are smuggled into the country do they learn that the 'job' is servicing men or working illegal peep shows where they do much more than put on shows."

"So why kill them?" Jairo asked no one in particular.

“Good question. Not a very sound business move,” David said. “So there’s something more going on here.”

“Maybe they tried to break free,” Konstatinov said.

David had trouble believing that. “From everything we’ve heard about these two, they were very beautiful. That makes them a valuable commodity. Not something you throw away over a little rebellion. Not when there are ways to ensure their cooperation. Holding their babies would be enough to ensure most women cooperated.”

“Or threats to the families they left behind,” Konstatinov said.

“Okay,” Jairo said. “Then what happened?”

“I’ll tell you when I figure it out,” David said.

Konstatinov stooped and picked up the half embroidered cloth in his gloved hand and held it up to the light. It had more of the odd lettering on it. “It says *CHRISTOS VOSKRES*, or Christ is risen. It’s an Easter basket cover. It would have been put over a woven basket following church on Easter day. The basket would have had a ham, kolbassy, a round loaf of homemade Paska bread, salt, a few nice pastries, maybe some wine, and of course a decorated egg.”

“So they were getting ready for Easter. That’s when?” David pulled his Rolex out and checked the date. “Sorry, when is Easter this year?”

“April 24th,” Konstatinov said. “But the Russian Orthodox Easter is a week later.”

The serology technician poked his head out of the bedroom. “I’m ready,” he said.

The three men broke off their conversation and headed for the back room. When they entered, the flashlight was flicked off and the alternate light source was turned on. Once sprayed, the Bluestar would react to blood and glow in the light. No amount of cleaning could completely remove the stuff.

The room looked like a slaughter house.

Actually it looked like a funhouse freak show where someone had splashed the horror house with Day-Glo paint. The walls glowed with an eerie blue light, and David saw the pillow was stained with fluids, though everything had looked pristine in the daylight. The photographer worked feverishly, knowing the Bluestar effect would only last a short while, though unlike luminol, the tests could be done again and again without degrading the blood being sampled. The presumptive test done, the serology tech began the confirmatory tests which would corroborate the substance was indeed blood and whether it was human. Then the typing would be done, and samples for DNA testing taken. It was all very labor intensive, and David knew it might be weeks before they got the results back. He felt a surge of anger that whoever had done this was not only still out there, but could kill again, and they couldn't do a damn thing to stop him, until they could figure out who he was.

The same routine was performed in the second bedroom. It was clean of any body fluids. The bathroom was next. It was another Day-Glo nightmare. Someone had tried to wash the sink, but enough residue remained to be clearly visible.

"Clean out the trap," David said. "And while you're at it, check the shower drains too."

While that was being done David returned to the living room where Konstatinov was looking over the ikon corner. Jairo followed. Konstatinov glanced up at their entrance. He held up a letter-sized envelope.

"I found this behind the Christo's icon." He flipped the unsealed flap open and showed David several large denomination bills. There was writing on the outside.

"What does it say?"

"*MAMUHA*." Konstatinov touched the outer envelope. "Means momma."

David's eyebrows shot up. "Did they know trouble was coming? They hid this to make sure someone wouldn't find it."

"Not necessarily," Konstatinov said. "Lot of people keep money in safekeeping by putting them in the backs of icons. Nothing sinister or hinky about it. My Baba does it all the

time.” He looked shamefaced. “When we were little we used to borrow from it all the time.”

Another possible angle shut down. David glanced at the Bible, but with it being off limits he didn’t dare ask Konstatinov to look through it. If the results of the search were as positive as David suspected they would be, he’d get an amendment on the warrant to include the Bible. He did point it out to Konstatinov, who read the front cover.

“Looks like old Church Slavonic. It’s only used in the church services, kind of like Latin in the Roman Catholic church.”

The trace technician came up to them. “Anything else you want me to sample?”

“You got both bedrooms?” Jairo asked. He indicated the living room. “And in here?”

“All done.”

“The serologist will take care of the bathroom and kitchen, if needed. Then get the crawl space under the house. Don’t forget to get soil samples, as well as checking for fluids,” David said.

The technician nodded and headed outside. Someone—Jairo?—had strung barrier tape up around the front of the house. A small crowd was now clustered on the front lawn. David spotted a couple of local reporters. If they saw him, they weren’t letting on. They crowded against the barrier tape and questioned neighbors, no doubt trying to get some inside dirt.

He’d send Jairo out later to deflect them. Let him face the dragons. Then he’d find out what real man-eaters were like. He could use his considerable charms on them. Maybe he’d even get some of the publicity all Hollywood players seemed to crave.

It took the better part of the day to finish up the small house. As he’d suspected, the crawl space showed signs that at least one body had been there at one point. The technician thought there might be enough DNA to figure out who once the samples were tested, probably weeks from now.

Finally they wrapped it up. David pocketed the house keys, and the warrant that had sat out in plain view all day, and waited for everyone to file past him. The reporters had given up when no breaking news was forthcoming and no scandals were elicited by bored neighbors. Only a couple of area residents saw them leave.

David locked up and followed Jairo to his unmarked. He cranked the window open and took a deep breath of exhaust laden air. The industrial stink coated the back of his tongue.

"You want to grab a beer on the way home?" Jairo asked.

"Can't," David said. "Got to take care of the dog. Besides, there's a Lakers game on tonight."

"We could take it in at Leo's."

"Sorry, can't do that."

Jairo dropped it.

David spent an hour at the station writing up his incident report. He logged on and added his files to Halyna Stakchinko's murder book. Two other books sat on his desk, neither with names. He knew the two Jane Does were linked to Stakchinko, he just had to prove it. He hoped he hadn't bitten off more than he could chew by requesting the case of the woman Chris had hit.

At six he put everything back and signed off his PC. Grabbing his jacket he headed home. After feeding the dog and making sure everyone had water, he took a shower and browsed the fridge to see what was available. Usually if Chris knew he was going to be out of town he fixed up some easy meals that he left in the fridge for David. But this time there'd been no prep time. David had to fall back on his old stand by: a can of soup and some leftover French bread, toasted.

His cell phone rang as he was putting on his Nikes. It was Jairo. "I'm just outside. You going running?"

David looked down at Sergeant, already standing by the door. He closed his eyes, knowing he should say no, knowing he wasn't going to. "Yeah, we're almost ready."

“Meet you down by the lake,” Jairo said and cut the connection.

Jairo and Popeye were easy to spot in the fading light over the lake. As usual Jairo wore all black, and his short cropped hair framed his dark face and sharp cheekbones. He grinned at David, and crouched to roll Sergeant over on his back, rubbing his tan belly. Popeye bounced up and down, eager to run.

It was full dark by the time they got back to David’s. All four of them were puffing from the strenuous run. David unlocked the door and indicated Jairo should enter first. In the kitchen David opened the fridge. He glanced at Jairo. “Beer?”

“Sure.” Jairo held his eyes for a single heartbeat, then took the proffered bottle and followed David into the media room. He whistled at the sixty-four inch plasma screen Chris had treated them to late last year. “Living large agrees with you.”

David found the Laker’s game and sat in his lounge. Jairo took the love seat Chris and he often shared on evenings they were both home. At the end of the second period, David stood up.

“Want another?” He held up his empty bottle.

“I’m driving, I shouldn’t...”

David got one for himself. The game was tight and fast paced. The kind of game that reminded David of why he loved basketball. He had one more beer, offering Jairo another chance, which he declined.

“I’ll have a water, though.”

David came back with both. Jairo seemed antsy. He played with the label on his bottled water.

“What’s your gut say about this case?”

“Which one?”

“Weren’t you the one saying you thought they were all linked?”

“Okay, I agree. So do I think we have any hope of solving any of them?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

"There's always hope," David said dryly, knowing it wasn't the answer Jairo wanted. He added, "We've got some promising leads. Don't believe everything you hear about it having to be solved in forty-eight hours or it's bust. Sometimes the turtle really does win the race. So yeah, the short answer is I still think it's solvable. I'll let you know when I change my mind."

David could tell Jairo doubted that, but kept his disbelief to himself. David didn't bother telling him that the only thing that made the job bearable was the prospect, sometimes so distant it didn't even appear on the horizon, that this case was solvable, that this case would be closed to his satisfaction, that kept him slogging through the daily crap. Jairo would have to make that discovery himself. David watched Jairo, but when he maintained his silence he went back to watching the game. It was the second half and the Lakers were doing well.

They finished the game in companionable silence. The Lakers won.

David collected their bottles and took them into the kitchen. Jairo followed. David dropped the two into the recycling bin under the sink, and turned to lead Jairo to the front door.

Jairo stepped in front of him. David looked down at the shorter man. "What—?"

Jairo put his hands on either side of David's face, leaned forward and kissed him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Thursday, 9:15 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

David meant to push him away. Instead he opened his mouth and groaned when Jairo's tongue invaded his mouth. This was wrong. He couldn't let this happen—but even as the thought skittered through him, he was aroused, his erection pressing against Jairo's belly, his hands winding through Jairo's short hair, pulling him closer.

Their tongues tangled and he could feel their hearts beating a ragged matching tattoo. His smell was intoxicating and even the feel of Jairo's rough face was arousing.

David was barely aware of Jairo shoving his sweats down his thighs, then he was kneeling on the floor with his hot mouth wrapped around David's erection. David cried out.

He had no idea how far it would have gone. If the woman hadn't knocked on the door, he might have let Jairo finish what he started, to his eternal shame.

At first he thought the thunderous pounding was his heart, but when the dog started barking, he realized someone was there. He pushed Jairo away and stumbled back, catching himself on the counter. Jairo looked up at him, eyes glazed, lips parted and breathing hard. His shirt was askew and the flat expanse of his belly was exposed to David's hungry eyes.

"David—"

"Cover yourself," David said in a strangled voice. At the same time, he shoved his cock back into his sweats so hard he pinched himself in the process. He sucked in his breath, welcoming the pain. It brought him back to his senses, which had deserted him so completely. He left Jairo in the kitchen and grabbed Sergeant's collar, telling him to sit before he threw the door open.

A short-haired Latino woman stood in their courtyard, a frown on her round face. She smiled when she saw Sergeant. "Well, aren't you looking handsome?" She raised her eyes to David's. "From what you told me I was expecting... well, I don't know what I was expecting. Nothing good." She held out her hand. "I'm Karla Fortunesca, the breeder."

David dropped his hand to the dog's head and rubbed his warm flesh. "He was in pretty rough shape when my partner found him..." He trailed off, not at all sure how this woman might react to his living arrangements. "I think you can see he's quite at home here. Ah, why didn't you call, I wasn't expecting anyone..."

"I guess you can say I wanted to see you unprepared. People put on a face when they're expecting company. My dogs are too important to me to be fooled that way."

David suspected this woman was fooled by very little. "I think you'll find Sergeant is very happy here."

"Sergeant, huh? Funny, it suits him. Yes, I can see he's happy. So," she grew more serious. "Tell me about yourself. You're a police officer?"

"Detective," David said, all too aware of Jairo coming up behind him with Popeye. "I'm currently assigned to the Northeast Division. This," he indicated Jairo, "is my partner and his dog, Popeye."

"Have you ever owned a dog before?"

"When I was younger. I own cats right now."

"And how does Zeus get along with them?"

"Zeus?"

"That was his kennel name before Mr. Simons bought him." She frowned, clearly unhappy with that memory. "I'm usually pretty good at seeing through people like that, but I missed it this time. I've never had one of my dogs abandoned like that."

"No, ma'am. But I assure you, we're serious about giving him a good home. And I think he and the cat have reached an understanding."

"Is your, ah, partner home right now?"

"Sorry, he's back east on business."

Her frown deepened. "I'd like to meet with him before I make a decision, if I could."

"I'm sure he'd be glad to come out and meet you at your convenience."

She seemed to abruptly make a decision. "I'll leave it as it is for now, but I will insist on meeting both of you together before I agree to sign the AKC papers over to you." She threw an enigmatic look at Jairo, who returned the look coolly.

David extended his hand. "Agreed."

She shook his hand, then paused to pat Sergeant and Popeye one more time, and left. David closed the door and stood staring at it for several heartbeats. Behind him he heard Jairo step closer.

"Get out," he said, his voice flat.

"David—"

"Get out, now. Before I do something I'll regret and it won't be what you want."

Jairo collected his dog and left. David locked the door behind him and stood there for a long time.

Sergeant came up beside him and shoved his nose into David's hand, whining softly. David dropped into a crouch and hugged the dog to his chest. He buried his face against the dog's neck.

"God, how did I mess up so bad?"

Sergeant licked his face and pressed closer. David raised his head and looked down at the animal.

"Is that your answer to everything?"

Sergeant wagged his stubby tail. Before he could change his mind, David grabbed Sergeant's leash and headed outdoors, jacketless, hoping the cool temperature that had fallen over the area earlier, replacing the unseasonal warmth, would clear his head and chill out his overactive imagination. He could all too easily see Jairo in his bed, rising to meet him, impaled on his

cock. What was it Jairo had said: *Incendio y hielo*. Fire and ice. He wasn't used to being the object of anyone's desire. Even before he had met Chris, he'd rarely been tempted by any of the pretty boys who were into cops or bears. Sometimes his needs overcame his natural distaste for the fumbling mess of unfamiliar partners, and he had picked one of them up. It never lasted more than a few sweaty hours. Not until Chris forced himself past all of David's carefully erected barriers.

So what had possessed him to respond to Jairo's clumsy seduction? What possessed him to want so much more?

A cold wind blew off Silver Lake, and despite the sweat he built up, or because of it, he was shivering by the time he and the dog stumbled back into the house. The phone was ringing, a persistent burr that forced a response. He snapped it up and barked, "Yes."

"Jesus, did I wake you up?" It was Chris. "I didn't think it was that late back there."

David sank into Chris's I-Ching chair. "I—" God, he thought he'd have more time to wrap his head around what had happened. Or *almost* happened, he reminded himself. He fumbled to hold the phone in his suddenly sweaty hand. "I— oh, hi."

"Were you in bed? I'm sorry to wake you—"

"No, that's okay. I had the dog out for a run..."

"Oh good. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon. The flight leaves here eleven-forty-five, I'll be in Burbank at one-twelve. Can you pick me up or should I grab a cab?"

David rubbed his temple where a headache was starting to bloom. "I can pick you up."

"Miss me?" Chris whispered. "I missed you. Make yourself available tomorrow and I'll show you how much."

David closed his eyes. But he couldn't shut out the image of Chris's beautiful face, or the look of revulsion he could expect if he revealed what he had nearly done. But how could he not tell? He wasn't a liar, and he'd never hidden from the truth before. Was he going to start now?

"I'll be there. Maybe we can eat out tomorrow, since we missed supper."

"We didn't miss it. It was for this Sunday. Geez, do I need to send you an invitation to get your attention?"

"We can still go out tomorrow," David said, knowing damn well he had to be ready to face Chris tomorrow and school himself not to give his betrayal away. How was he going to do that when every bone in his body demanded he confess? Could he live with himself if he told the truth?

Could he live with himself if he didn't?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Friday, 7:25 AM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David arrived at the station while the graveyard shift was wrapping up. He huddled over his desk while the day shift drifted in and the squad room came alive with chattering voices, shrilling phones and the smell of fresh brewed coffee. He took several phone calls related to various cases and drank copious amounts of coffee before the morning shift officially started.

It was five minutes past eight when Jairo threw his coat over the back of his chair and set his laptop case on the floor beside his chair.

“You’re late,” David said.

“Traffic—”

“Then leave earlier.” He stood up and grabbed his jacket, making sure his Smith & Wesson was secure in its shoulder holster and slipped the coat on. “We have a call-out to Glassell Park. A drive-by on Drew. You’re the senior on this one.” Drew had become the most notorious area in the Northeast division, full of Avenues gangbangers and *Las Sureños* who had turned the never peaceful neighborhood into a gang and drug riddled enclave, ruled by AK-47s, Tek-9s and meth. Nearly three years ago, a combined force of cops and federal agents had stormed Drew Street and cleaned out the worst of the viper’s nest, snagging the gang leaders and sending the rest scattering. They hadn’t scattered very far, and those that hadn’t been picked up in later raids had regrouped, and were trying to own the street again. The cops at Northeast were just as determined to keep them out.

“Ah, *el barrio bajo*,” Jairo said.

David looked at him. “The low neighborhood? Don’t tell me you’ve got family there, too?”

"Nah, not immediate family. Distant cousins from Tlalchapa. Rough place, I've heard."

"So's the home they made here."

Jairo grabbed a coffee on the way out, and nursed it in the car while David drove the car he'd signed for.

"I hear they got ties to the Mexican Mafia. The *Sureños* want to rule the world."

"You heard right. We still got our gang injunctions in place against them."

"That really work?"

"It gives us a bit more leg to stand on." David stared into the distance. "It's still hard."

It was too much to hope Jairo would keep his mouth shut about last night. But if nothing else, David had learned Jairo could be as stubborn as he was.

"We need to talk," Jairo said as they turned onto San Fernando Road, yielding to a produce truck.

"No, we don't."

"I'm being real with you," Jairo persisted. "You're the one pretending this doesn't exist."

"I'm not pretending anything. We are going to be professional about this."

"You lost that claim when you kissed me back." He flashed a satisfied smile. "And when you shoved your dick down my throat. Tell me that was a mistake. If that woman hadn't come by right then, you'd have had your cock up my—"

David's hands closed around the steering wheel, so hard his knuckled were white. "I made a mistake. I admit that. It was my fault—"

"Not anybody's fault. It happened, we need to deal with it."

"We need to forget it."

"Not going to happen."

"Yes," David said. "It is."

South on industrial San Fernando Road and through the gray, rundown streets to Drew. A line of parked cars in various states of decrepitude sat in front of row after row of long, tall apartment buildings. As they approached, David could see the streets clear, doors slam shut and shadowy figures vanish down narrow alleyways. Business was shut down for the day. Sometimes, Drew was little more than an open air drug market. David pulled up behind a radio car with its bar lights still flashing. Barrier tape had been strung up around the vacant lot. In the center of the cordoned off space, a sheet covered lump.

A scarred and tag covered Sycamore tree threw ragged shadows over the cracked sidewalk. Women with hostile eyes sat or stood on front lawns, children on their ample hips, watching the all too familiar sight of police cars that crowded their street. It was a claustrophobic neighborhood, something the local gangs used to their benefit. Violence visited this area of Glassell Park almost daily. Near the closest radio car a crude shrine to Jesus Malverde, the Mexican folk hero, and unofficial drug smuggler's saint, had been defaced with rival gang tags. He could make out HLP written over AVE and LA, which in turn had been tagged with an MS-13. Highland Park and Las Avenidos. Rivals in the war for Drew Street's soul.

One apparent difference between Glassell and Hollywood: no reporters crowded against the yellow tape barrier, vying for information or to catch a juicy picture. Even the gang interventionists refused to visit. This corpse would be lucky to make a squib in the back page of the Times, if it was mentioned at all. Just another dead Latino banger.

David introduced himself to the first responding officer. He left Jairo, as the senior officer, to get the particulars and sign over the crime scene to the detectives. He went over to meet the SID crime scene technician, who had just pulled up in his van. Chihn Huyhn, a slender, bald Asian man, emerged and slid open the side door, pulling out a massive 3D Leica camera almost as big as he was, and a laptop case. They'd gotten lucky this time around. The Leica was in high demand and wasn't always available. He unloaded the laptop and set it on the

scarred ground. The Leica was set up to straddle the laptop, connected by cables.

Jairo came up behind him. He glanced back at the younger man who said, "First respondent says they recovered an automatic weapon, possibly the murder weapon, of unknown origin."

David grimaced. They'd have to run down what kind of weapon it was and where it came from.

David studied the covered body on the ground, trying to imagine what was underneath it. The criminologist flipped the sheet off and knelt down to examine the young man more closely. He was Latino, with no visible gang tats David could see. Huyhn carefully examined the numerous pockets, feeling around his ankles and groin for ID or concealed property.

"What do you think?" David asked. "Turf war? Drug buy gone south? We dealing with Avenues, La Mirada Locos or MS-13? Please tell me he isn't an MS-13 banger."

Huyhn shrugged. "No drugs, no money, no ID. Doesn't mean your killer didn't take the booty with him. He just left the guns."

Plural, David noted. "Guns?"

"This was found under the body." The criminalist held up a .45 caliber Firestar, a small, lightweight, but deadly, pistol beloved by gang bangers. "Good old pocket rocket. Small but efficient." David and Huyhn studied the line of bloodied bullet holes that strafed the victim from crotch to shoulder. Overkill. The look of surprise on the man's face said it all. Was he more used to dishing out death, never expecting to be on the receiving end?

"This did that?" He indicated the Firestar and the dead banger.

"No, that was the assault rifle. Much more efficient," he said laconically.

David prowled the perimeter of the crime scene, trying to stay out of Huyhn's way. A second tech joined him, using a digital camera to capture still images. The Leica would allow

them to take 3D images of the crime scene, and the body for later scene analysis. Jairo seemed fascinated by the unit. He followed Huyhn around, asking questions that often went right over David's head. It sounded like Jairo was a camera buff.

The second tech had traded in his digital camera for a metal detector, which he swept in a tight circle around the body. Each time the machine pinpointed something in the scraggly grass he would stoop and put an evidence flag beside it; only when all pictures and sketches had been completed, would the evidence be removed, bagged, and tagged.

At twelve-thirty David suggested they break for lunch. Jairo headed back to the station. David drove out to the Bob Hope airport to pick up Chris. He beat a nervous tattoo on the steering wheel, hoping Chris wouldn't notice how uneasy he was, knowing he was a lousy liar. But when Chris finally got through the baggage check, and stepped out into the concourse, all David could see was his exhaustion. He immediately took Chris's bag and took hold of his arm.

"You okay, hon?"

Chris smiled tiredly. "Guess I took on too much. I should have waited to do this..."

"Come on, let's get you home." David didn't drop Chris's arm as they wended their way through the busy airport to David's car, in the short term lot. He secured Chris in the front seat and popped the trunk for his luggage. Then he hurried around to the driver's side. Before he could start the car, Chris pulled him over.

"Hey, I may be tired, but I'm not too tired for a welcome home kiss."

David would have protested, but Chris didn't give him a chance. He pressed his mouth over David's and demanded tongue. David opened his mouth and a rush of desire filled him. They were both breathing hard by the time Chris leaned back, resting his head against the car seat.

"Well, I was wrong," he said, with a smile.

"About what?"

“You didn’t forget.”

“Forget how to kiss you?” David forced a smile. “Not a chance.” He cranked the Chevy on. “Now let’s get you home. I expect you to rest this afternoon. No catching up on work. I’ll lock your laptop up.”

“Yes, Sergeant Laine. Speaking of Sergeant, how’s the dog?”

“Pining away.” David smiled. “The breeder came by last night. I think she’s considering letting us keep him. She just wants to meet you.”

“Well, then it’s a sure thing, isn’t it? How can she not be charmed by my inestimable appeal?” His hand went between David’s legs. But he belied the gesture by leaning his head back and closing his eyes. “How ‘bout you? You charmed?”

“Always,” David said, in a strangled voice, and looked away. Thankfully Chris was too weary to notice much of anything.

He greeted Sergeant enthusiastically, but that seemed to take the last of his strength. He kissed David and trudged up the stairs. David let himself out.

Back at the station, Jairo was already at his desk, his laptop open and a new blue murder book open beside him. David caught a glimpse of a name: Carlos del Gato, AKA The Cat Burglar, AKA T-Bone, AKA Lil G.

“Was he?” David asked, flipping the book around to look at the booking photo Jairo had pulled out of the files.

“Was he what?”

“A cat burglar?”

“Crack dealer and small time burglar.”

“Where’d the rifle come in? He steal it?”

“No idea. But I’ve IDed it as an Mk 46 Mod 0, specialty of the Marines and SOCOM. Special Ops,” he said off David’s querying look. “With a TAC16 suppressor. That’s some heavy military grade hardware. High end shit, even for a rent collector.”

David felt cold. “Suppressors?”

“Right. If they’re planning a war, they don’t want the neighbors to hear.”

“Any reports of stolen weapons stashes in the area? Military bases? That kind of thing?”

“None that I can find,” Jairo said. “I’ll widen my search zone.” He shrugged. “So, our cat burglar just came off a nickel at Centinela. Guess he didn’t learn anything there.”

“Or he learned too much. He an Avenues at Quentin?”

“No, get this, he was Cypress Park.”

“In Avenues territory? Any witnesses?”

Jairo shook his head. “You gotta be kidding. I could light you up on the front porch in front of a crowd of *carnales* and no one would see anything. I just hope they’re not getting piped for another set-tripping. Last thing we need is a gang war.”

All too true. David sighed.

“How’s Chris?” Jairo asked.

David looked up sharply. Jairo looked artless, but David didn’t trust him for a minute. “He’s fine. Tired from the trip.”

“So he won’t be up to running tonight, will he?”

Chris was never up to running any night. He always said all that pain and no gain made it a useless venture. But to forestall Jairo from doing anything stupid he said, “But I won’t be going out tonight anyway.”

“Liar,” Jairo said softly.

“You know, most men would take exception to being called a liar by someone whose whole life is a lie.”

“And name calling doesn’t become you, *sir*,” Jairo’s voice dropped. “And most *men* have the guts to admit when they want something. They don’t hide behind a rich boyfriend who protects them from the real world, when you can’t protect you from yourself.”

David knew in that moment if they hadn’t been in a crowded squad room he would have hit Jairo. Would have hit him until he threw his hands up and begged for mercy. Fingernails dug unfelt into his palms, until something warm and

wet ran down his clenched fingers, and he realized he had cut himself. He wanted to wipe the smug look off Jairo's face when he saw the blood and knew what David had done. Instead David grabbed several Kleenexes and wrapped his throbbing hand in them.

"You're mad because you know I'm right," Jairo whispered. Abruptly he stood up. "Go on, go home to your sugar daddy. I'm going to see a man about a baby."

David blinked, and took several deep breaths, knowing he had to get his rage under control before he destroyed everything. He stood up too. Jairo watched him in alarm. It was good to see he could still inspire respect from the man.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"While you were out mooning over your keeper, I found a doctor who may have been our victim's OB/Gyn. Dr. Jozef Sevchuk saw Halyna Stakchinko four weeks ago. At the time she was eight and a half weeks pregnant, which, since she was killed four weeks later, jibes with what Fenton said. You want to know how I found him?"

"Please, enlighten me."

"Your translator found an appointment book among her effects. According to it—and the doctor—he saw the woman when she first suspected she was pregnant, then followed that appointment up with a second one. That was about four weeks before she was thrown off the overpass. She had a third appointment four weeks from tomorrow. Sevchuk seemed to think the patient was eager to have this baby. He described her as being almost manically happy."

"What does manically happy mean?"

"She was thrilled, but she was scared too. The doctor didn't know why. He suspected some kind of abuse, but when he tried to talk to her, Halyna just shut him out. But he says he never had enough to take to the police, and he knew that would only drive Halyna away for good. He seemed genuinely upset, but he couldn't open his records without a subpoena."

“So we’ll get him one. Fenton said the victim had been cut—slashed with a razor or scalpel.” David mused. “Bet the doctor never saw that.”

“But that really doesn’t make sense.” Jairo seemed truly puzzled. “If these girls were prostitutes, then their looks would have been a big factor in their demand. Who would damage their property that severely?”

“Someone pissed beyond reason,” David said. “Logic doesn’t always have much to do with it. You attending the banger’s autopsy?”

Jairo nodded. “This afternoon. You want to come?”

“No, you can do this one yourself.” David thought for sure Jairo was going to say something else, but he pressed his lips together, and went back to his laptop. David sighed and went to grab another coffee. It was going to be a long day.

He was still writing reports when Jairo returned from the coroner’s and started his own Death Report from his notes. David ignored him. At five Jairo shut down his PC and left without a word. David continued to laboriously enter data into his Investigative Report, aware of the quiet settling over the squad room as the day shift left, and the smaller night shift took over. He sat hunched over his desk, ignoring the growing crick in his neck and the dull thud in his head. Finally he printed out two reports, which he put in Lieutenant McKee’s inbox. He poured a cup of tepid, hours old coffee and forced himself to drink it. He hadn’t eaten anything since a sandwich from the vending machine just after noon. But he wasn’t hungry, and all the thought of food did was generate a faint nausea. He popped a couple of antacid tablets in a vain attempt to quell his heartburn.

His desk phone rang at five to eight, and he stared at it, sure it was Chris wondering where he was. He picked it up and murmured, “Detective Laine, Northeast Homicide.”

“Officer Stefan Konstatinov here, Detective. I was not sure if you would still be at work.”

"I'm here," David said, his relief that it wasn't Chris settling in his gut like a mass of fermenting lead. "Did you find something?"

"I discovered the notebook you recovered from the house was a diary, written by the missing woman, Zuzanna Konjenko. She did not write every day, and she was not always consistent in dating her entries, but I think I have put together a time line on their activities for the last couple of months."

David sat up. "Where are you right now?"

"In the locker room. If you were not at your desk I was going to go home and call you again tomorrow..."

"Can you get up here?"

"Yes, of course. Right now?"

"Yes, right now. I'll sign off on the overtime."

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Friday, 8:25 PM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

Konstatinov straddled the chair Jairo had vacated earlier. He was still in uniform, his equipment belt laden with the usual trappings a patrol officer carried at all times. He held a sheaf of notes, which he rifled through, and a bag of donuts which he dropped on the desk between them. "I thought you might be hungry."

"Thanks." David helped himself to a cinnamon raisin. He didn't have to ask to know that Konstatinov had aspirations of becoming a detective someday. Most newly sworn officers did. "What have you got?" David asked, setting aside the dregs of his cold coffee. If he had the energy, he'd make a fresh pot. He didn't. He ate the donut and brushed sticky crumbs off his fingers.

"Zuzanna Konjenko wrote much about her and the roommate, Halyna. She uses euphemisms and is clearly upset over what they are being forced to do."

"Prostitution?"

"Yes. Their 'man' is someone called Mickey and he visits about once a week."

"Did he bring Donald?" At Konstatinov's look he shook his head. "Never mind."

"They do not like his visits. He is not nice to them. He wants them to do things..."

"Does she say what things?"

"Not in any detail. Just... terrible things. Her words, not mine." He fanned out some papers. Some were photocopies of the original diary entries, and David could make out the Cyrillic script. The others were apparently hand-written translations.

David's sense was that Konstatinov was a detail man. He would be as precise in his translation as in any other aspect of police work. An officer who could go far on merit. Like Jairo, his treacherous mind added. Jairo was smart, too, and personable to boot. Too damn personable, as far as David was concerned. He knew Lieutenant McKee expected his preliminary report on his newest detective and David flat out didn't know what he was going to say. The kid was a good cop, but he didn't know how to keep his dick in his pants? That would go over well. McKee was a fair man, a shrewd one, and a fine lieutenant, but he didn't understand the new LAPD. He didn't comprehend a world that accepted the likes of David into their ranks, and rewarded them through promotion, and medals of valor, no matter who they slept with. He would never understand someone like Jairo; would never get why such a fine young man would risk his family, or his reputation, for a little cock on the side. A lot of cops were pussy hounds, which was not surprising, since women threw themselves at the guns and the glamour, that had little to do with the reality, but the same latitude wasn't allowed for deviants.

He thought of Chris. A man so good he didn't know the kind of raw evil that existed in the world. A man so good, he imagined the man he loved had to be equally as good. Trying to live up to that was sometimes the only thing that kept David sane.

Could he really risk that for a tight ass and a hard cock?

He blinked and realized Konstatinov was asking him a question. He shook his head and met the other man's worried gaze.

"Are you okay, Sergeant? It is late, we can take this up again tomorrow—"

"No, that's okay. We need to sort this out now. Tomorrow we can get a subpoena for the doctor's records. See if we can shake something out of him."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, what were you saying?"

“Halyna and Zuzanna often went to parties, ‘special parties’ she called them. They were instructed to be nice to the men who chose them. Some of the men were okay, they even brought gifts for the girls, or their families back home. But Zuzanna thinks the gifts never made it home. She thinks Mickey lied to them, that he was pocketing all the money and gifts.”

“A dishonest pimp. Who’d have thought? Does she give any names to these friendly johns?”

“The odd nickname. *Zayachik*. Means, ah, rabbit. There’s another called *Kutsup*, means goat. And it looks like they call their manager *Medved*. The bear.”

David knew what that meant in the gay scene. Muscle men with lots of body hair. Did it mean the same in the straight world? “I’m guessing they didn’t use the names on the johns,” he said dryly. “They knew better. Any idea how they ended up here, in L.A., I mean.”

Konstatinov scanned through his handwritten notes, flipping back to look at earlier ones. “Zuzanna talks about meeting a man in Kiev, and being promised a good job in the United States. She signed some papers and they took her passport. She never saw it again. At first they were taken someplace where everyone spoke ‘funny,’ not English which they sort of knew, but something else. And they said it was hot. She was very unhappy about that. I guess it was a lot hotter than they were used to in her area of Ukraine.” He frowned, then added, “And the sun was very bright and the air...smelled funny. I guess the food was terrible. Their tomatoes were green.” He grinned wryly. “I am thinking *tomatillos*.”

It was David’s turn to frown. “Could be the San Diego area, or any of the border states. They’re all pretty hot.”

“Or Mexico,” Konstatinov said. “Hot and they talk funny. At least to a Ukrainian. And the food takes some getting used to.” At David’s look he said, “Married a lady from Guadalajara. She can cook a mean streak, but it is all nouvelle Mexican.” He patted his stomach, which David now saw had a soft mound to it. “She is in love with *habaneros*.”

"You should introduce her to my former partner. It'd be love at first sight." David smiled at the memory of Martinez, wishing the federal overlords hadn't decided Northeast needed some shaking up. As far as David was concerned, Martinez's transfer, however temporary, had been an unmitigated disaster. "Let's take a look at those names, see if anything pops."

David pulled up the criminal database, and entered the names Zuzanna had put in her journal. Only one got a hit. Konstatinov came around to his side of the desk, and peered over his shoulder. "Mickey. Valerian Mikalenko, two counts of soliciting, one assault with a deadly." David read the details of the charges. "Got a nickel in Corcoran. Wonder if he ran with Manson." David flipped through the entry. "Given illegal alien status, but no order to deport. Connected? Or did he just fall through the cracks?"

"In what way?" Konstatinov pulled a chair around and sat down. He leaned over to study the screen. Mikalenko's booking shot was on the page, along with his vitals. The guy was barely five-seven in stocking feet. And he was clearly hirsute. "How does our little Ukrainian bear get connected?"

"Knows the right people. It could help explain how they got the girls into the country." David pulled out his notebook. He flipped it open to a blank page. "Let's see if we can talk to someone at the Consulate." But ten minutes later they found out that Ukraine had no consulate in Los Angeles. The nearest one was in San Francisco. After that they'd have to go to New York.

David sighed and called up a new document. "We'll have to go through channels to get someone upstairs to request the information on that."

"Yes, sir."

David started the internal request; the first round of paperwork designed to get someone above them to shake the dust off their tail and make something happen. A lot of tails would have to be shaken before anything would respond to their request. If it happened at all. David didn't hold out much hope. They'd have to find another way.

When he was part way through the bureaucratic labyrinth of words, his cell rang. It was Chris.

"You coming home tonight?" Chris sounded tired, but plaintive. David closed his eyes at the pain in his lover's voice.

"Sure, I'll be home soon." He glanced across at Konstatinov, who was trying not to look like he was listening. "Just got caught up in something."

"Wrap it up soon, hon. I miss you. Sergeant and I both miss you."

"I'll be home soon." David hung up before Chris could say anything more. He took another ragged breath and abruptly stood up. "I need more coffee. What about you?"

"Sure. I could go for a cup."

David got the pot brewing. He nodded to a couple of swing shift D's who came by to grab a cup and carried two mugs back to his desk. He handed one to Konstatinov. "Wasn't sure what you took."

"Black is fine."

It was another forty-five minutes before David called it a night. He rubbed his forehead, where a headache had taken root right after Chris's call. "That's it then," he said to Konstatinov. "We'll pick it up tomorrow. I'm going to see if we can get a subpoena for those patient records. Want to ride along?"

"Yes, please."

"Meet back here around eight, we'll draft it up and take it to the sitting judge."

"I will be here."

David let himself into the dark house. He paused in the foyer after he'd divested himself of his Smith & Wesson, shoes and badge. Then he made his silent way to the kitchen where he grabbed water out of the fridge and stood over the sink, drinking.

Finally he couldn't put it off any longer. He trudged up the stairs and slipped into the bedroom. Sergeant looked up from the bed and wiggled in greeting. David signaled him down, got

undressed, and exchanged places with the dog. Chris snorted and rolled over, his arm draping over David's bare chest.

David held his breath but Chris didn't wake up. Feeling like thirty pieces of shit, David put his back to Chris and tried to sleep. Finally he slipped into a tangled web of erotic dreams. A dark-haired man stroked him, and mouthed his hardness until he cried out. He woke to find Chris between his legs, lips wrapped around his cock. He arched his back, and wound his fingers through Chris's short, spiky hair. But the image that came as he orgasmed was of a dark, sloe-eyed Jairo.

Chris crawled up his damp body and pressed his mouth against David's throat. "I couldn't resist. You're too yummy. Sorry I woke you up."

David laughed shakily. "You don't really think I could sleep through that, do you?"

He tucked Chris under his arm and forced his frantic thoughts back into the dark corners of his mind. He'd think about what it meant tomorrow. Except it hadn't meant anything. Jairo didn't mean anything... Did he?

The next morning he made sure he was up first. By the time Chris stumbled downstairs, he was on his second cup of coffee and had the L.A. Times half read. The dog had been fed and had his short morning walk. Chris stooped to brush his lips over David's mouth and patted the dog.

"You should have woken me up last night when you got home. We could have made it a little more interactive."

David avoided meeting Chris's gaze. "You were sound asleep. I didn't have the heart to wake you." He buried his head in the sports section. "You going in to work today?"

"Have to. Jantz wants me to start the initial implementation of their server rollout. Plus I have to meet the rest of the L.A. team. I could be gone a while," he said apologetically. "I probably won't be back for supper."

"That's okay. I'll find something, I'm sure. You're not taking on too much, are you? Remember you just got out of the hospital."

"I'm okay. Honest." Chris picked up the salt shaker, and studied it like he'd never seen it before. "How's your new partner? He working out for you?"

David suppressed the urge to get up from the table. He still didn't raise his head from the paper. "He's okay. No Martinez, but then not many are."

"That's probably a good thing."

David knew Chris was trying to lighten things up with his joke, but this morning it fell flat. "Yeah," he muttered. "That's just the way he is."

"So," Chris said. "You find out anything more about that poor woman?" Off David's blank look he looked impatient. "You know, the one I didn't hit?"

"Come on, Chris... you know I don't talk about my work. That isn't something you need to think about. It wasn't your fault. That's all you need to know."

"Right, so don't think about it. Easy for you to say." Chris rubbed the back of his neck and opened his mouth to say more.

"Just let it go Chris."

Chris shut his mouth and looked away. David hastily finished up the paper, bussed Chris on the lips, and left. Only the dog followed him to the door. He patted the black, knobby head. "Take care of him, huh, guy?"

Sergeant wriggled his butt. David shut the door on his too happy face.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Saturday, 7:20 AM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David strode into the homicide squad room shortly before seven-thirty and found Jairo already at his desk. He took his jacket off and turned on his computer. He'd barely called up the first report on the Halyna homicide/missing person when Konstatinov walked in. His uniform looked freshly pressed, even his equipment belt looked polished. David felt frumpy beside him. Jairo just looked like Jairo. Cocky and full of himself.

"So what is up for today?" Jairo broke the stilted silence that had fallen over their part of the squad room.

David busied himself writing up the justification for the subpoena he wanted to get on Zuzanna's doctor. Finally he looked up. "We need to follow up on that cell phone recovered from the dig in Griffith Park. If it was the doer's we might get lucky. Even if it belonged to one of the victim's we could get some useful hits. I also want you to follow up on the tox screen results on the Stakchinko case. Find out what she was on when she was pushed. Where are we on IDing either of the victims in the park? Talk to Lopez about those fly eggs she collected. It might help narrow down a location."

"They might have a lead on the dental records of Zuzanna Konjenko," Jairo said. "They should be able to give us a yes or no later this week."

"What about the other one?"

"Nothing yet. They're pulling a list of missing persons. The gold teeth help. Not many women have them. I've already checked out her travel documents," Jairo went on, mousing through something on his screen. "They entered the U.S.

through the San Diego portal sixteen months ago. They were here on a student visa that was set to expire in eight months.”

“San Diego,” David mused, meeting Konstatinov’s gaze. “Matches what we’ve learned so far. They crossed over from Mexico. What are the odds we don’t find anything on the Mexican end?”

“They would have had to show papers at the border. And the girls would have had to produce ID.”

“Probably being held by this Mickey character, if the paperwork was even legit.”

“He would more than likely warn them that if they tried to do anything to alert the authorities that their families back home would suffer,” Konstatinov said. David and Jairo looked at him. “It is how these traffickers operate. They intimidate the girls and there is swift retaliation against transgressors. They are brutal.”

“Pimps usually are,” David said. “They don’t make money on compassion, though they’re usually pretty good at faking it.”

“How do you know all this?” Jairo asked Konstatinov.

“This is a much talked about crime among our people. It shames us all, colors us all with the same black brush.”

David interrupted and spoke to Jairo, “I want you to call forensics and ask when we can expect those cell phone records and the tox screen and entomology results. You,” this time the look was directed at Konstatinov, “come with me. We’re going to talk to the judge, then go see a doctor.”

But the doctor wasn’t in his office. David left a message with the receptionist, and he and Konstatinov headed back to Northeast to figure out their next move.

Saturday, 8:50 PM, Cove Ave Silver Lake, Los Angeles

Chris let himself in to the cool, silent house. Sergeant greeted him at the door and circled him excitedly. He patted the

dog's head. "Sorry day when a guy gets more attention from his dog than his lover."

Sergeant went ballistic when Chris pulled out his leash. "We have to make this a quick one," he said, exhaustion already dragging him down. All he wanted to do was curl up in front of a mindless sitcom and veg until bedtime. Which at the rate he was going was going to be before ten.

He took the same route David had told him about, down the hill and through the park. He was startled when a man stepped out of a white sports car with a brown dog and greeted Sergeant like they were long lost brothers. Only belatedly did he recognize David's new partner. Jairo Hernandez.

He pulled Sergeant to heel and wrapped the leash around his hand. "What are you doing here?"

"Brought my dog to the park," Jairo said. "Isn't that what everyone does?"

"You live around here?" Chris was surprised. It wasn't an area many cops could afford, unless, like David, they lived with someone who had money.

Jairo shrugged, and gazed out over the placid lake, now lit only by a combination of city lights, and house lights glittering off the waveless surface. "It's a nice park."

"Yeah, it is." Chris let out the leash and started walking north. He wasn't surprised when Jairo followed. Not surprised, but not happy. He wasn't sure he liked this guy he didn't know. But he could hardly be rude to David's partner. He'd made that mistake with Martinez, and Martinez had won that round.

"You don't run?" Jairo jogged in place, clearly ready to take off if encouraged. Chris shook his head.

"Sorry, no."

"Guess you're still tired from your traveling."

Chris stopped and turned to stare at Jairo. "David told you that?"

"He mentioned it." Jairo showed his teeth in what Chris figured was supposed to be a smile. To him it looked like all

flash and no substance. It struck Chris with mounting horror that Jairo reminded him of himself before he met David.

"Just yesterday," Jairo kept talking.

"Yeah, I was back east."

"Work?"

"David didn't tell you that?" Chris felt like turning around and going home, but Sergeant didn't deserve that. He straightened and stared at Jairo; they were nearly eye to eye. "If you need to know, I was in New York, on business. Do you want to know what I was doing?"

"Touchy, aren't we?"

"Not normally. Listen, I have a dog to walk, then I have to get home. My business doesn't end when I leave the office."

"Guess we're in the same boat," Jairo said. "Neither does mine."

Jairo finally left, but not until he had totally ruined Chris's time out with the dog. He fed Sergeant once they got inside, and grabbed a beer from the fridge, too lazy to open a bottle of wine. He dropped onto the I-Ching chair, and moodily sipped his drink, while his gaze played across the reservoir out the big bay window. An almost full moon played hide and seek with a low lying wisp of cloud, light dancing over the restless water's surface. The dog came to lie at his feet.

He was nearly finished his beer and was debating whether to have another or call it quits when the phone rang.

He didn't recognize the number and picked it up with trepidation. "Yes?"

"Ah, Chris, I was hoping to catch David at home." It was Martinez. "He's not there is he?"

"No, he's not," Chris snapped. "What did you expect, he'd leave work to come home?"

"Whoa. Where's that coming from? Something going on, Chris?"

Suddenly Chris dropped his chin into his chest. He squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't know," he whispered. "David's... David's

just acting weird. Ever since he got that new partner. I don't know what's going on. He won't talk to me anymore."

"I'm sure it's nothing," Martinez said. "Some days are just like that. Even to someone like David, who takes pride in his work, it can get you down. Eat you up and spit you out."

"Does that ever happen to you, Martinez? Do you ignore your family, your wife and kids, because you're 'down'?"

"You don't know Inez, you say that. No one ignores that lady, not if they want to stay healthy."

Chris forced a laugh. From David he knew that Martinez idolized his wife and five kids.

"I just wish I knew what was bugging him," Chris said. "Can you talk to him, Martinez? Find out what's wrong?"

"Not a good idea, man. David wouldn't appreciate either of us butting our noses into his business."

Chris sighed. He knew Martinez was right. It had been a long shot. If he wanted to find out what was eating at David he'd have to do it on his own.

He told Martinez he would let David know he had called. Soon after breaking the conversation, Chris climbed the steps to bed, trailed by Sergeant who seemed subdued, as though he knew something was wrong. Just not what.

He tried to out wait David, but at midnight he had to surrender to another night spent alone. Sergeant crept into bed as he dozed off and he didn't have the heart to kick the dog off. It was only as sleep crept over him that he realized Jairo had never answered his question about whether he lived in Silver Lake.

When he woke the next morning the bed beside him was empty, both David and the dog were nowhere in evidence, though there was a faint lingering smell of David's scent. Chris rolled over and hugged David's pillow to his face, inhaling deeply. At first he thought it was the dog roaming around downstairs, then he realized it was David.

He scrambled out of bed and threw on a robe. He'd get dressed later, after David left for work.

He found David sitting at the engraved Santa Fe table, a fresh cup of coffee in front of him. He had the sports section of the *Times* open on the table before him. Sergeant lay sprawled at his feet under the table. Both of them looked up when Chris entered the room.

Chris made no move to kiss David, who didn't seem to notice the lapse. He grabbed a coffee, dosed it liberally with flavored cream and sat opposite David.

"Busy again last night?"

"Yeah, it's pretty hectic these days."

"So what time did you get home?"

"Wasn't paying much attention. What time did you go to bed?"

"Late," Chris said flatly.

David picked up a blueberry muffin from the basket he had put together. He slathered the warm muffin with butter. He avoided Chris's eyes as he chewed on it, eyes glued on the basketball scores inside the paper.

"Your partner came by last night. He live around here?"

David took a sudden deep breath, and Chris could have sworn his normally swarthy face grew pale. "Jairo?"

"Yeah, that's the one. You got more than one partner?"

"Ah, no, he's the only one," David muttered. "What did he want?"

"He didn't really say. Just he was out walking his dog and he liked the park. So," Chris fished out a lemon poppyseed muffin, and took a bite, though the last thing he wanted was food. A fluttering worm had invaded his gut. "He live around here?"

"Ah, don't know exactly where he lives. It never came up..." David dropped his half-eaten muffin onto the plate, not seeming to notice the spray of crumbs that dusted the table in front of him. He grabbed his coffee, sucking it down quickly. He stood up.

"Well, I have to run." David leaned over and brushed his lips over Chris's. "Have a good day."

“And don’t wait up, right?”

The outer door shut and Chris sank back into his chair. He stared unseeing at the empty place across from him. The dog rose, his toenails clicking on the tile. Finally Chris got up and used a damp towel to wipe the table clean. Sergeant watched him intently.

He had lied. David had lied about not knowing where Jairo lived. David never lied. About anything.

“What the hell is going on?” Chris whispered to the dog.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sunday, 7:55 AM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David sat at his desk, his PC booted up, but inactive. David stared at it, but didn't see the screen. He couldn't believe it. What the hell was Jairo up to? Did he think if he made Chris realize what was going on, that Chris would leave him, and he'd be free to pursue Jairo? The man couldn't be that egotistical, could he?

Or was he just playing games, letting David know he could ruin his happy little family? And what? Leave him to pick up the pieces?

Jairo came in, shrugging off his black suit jacket and flinging it over the back of his chair. He fired up his laptop.

David kept his voice low, but did nothing to conceal the fury in his tone. "You went to see Chris last night?"

Jairo blinked at him, and David could have sworn there was a small smile around his shadowed, unshaved mouth. "He tell you that? Yeah, I was in the neighborhood. Don't worry," he said softly. "Nothing happened between us."

Rage flowed through David. He felt the heat in his face, and it felt like he was watching Jairo through a narrow looking-glass, that distorted the younger man's face. "You stay the hell away from him. He's not part of your sick fantasy."

"Sure, no problem. He's not my type anyway. I like strong men. The kind who know how to give orders and make you obey them." His voice became liquid honey. "You and me, we could have something hot. You just don't want to admit it."

"We are having nothing," David said. "Get that. This is not going to continue. There's an order for you. Back down, Detective. Before I do something we'll both be sorry for."

Jairo shrugged. "Whatever you say, boss."

David forced himself back into work mode, knowing if he continued in this vein, he'd do or say something he'd regret. "Call forensics. Don't let it go until they give you something. When you get it, write up a report and drop it on my desk. Mess it up and I'll make you do it over."

Jairo's smile slipped. "Yes, Detective." He swung around in his chair and began tapping away at his PC.

"When you're done that, follow up on the dental records. Then you can tackle Fenton about the tox report."

Jairo didn't respond that time.

David forced his attention on his own reports. He needed to write up his latest incident report with the information about the Ukrainian gynecologist, Dr. Sevchuk. First thing he needed to know was if the guy was also Zuzanna Konjenko's doctor. The two Jane Does found in the Griffith Park grave had also been pregnant. David didn't believe in coincidences. Someone was killing pregnant Ukrainian women. The why totally escaped him. Could one man get three women pregnant, then decide to terminate those pregnancies the hard way? Seemed farfetched, though not an unreachable conclusion. In his fifteen years on the force, he'd seen his share of unspeakable atrocities committed for the dumbest reasons.

His cell rang. It was Martinez.

"How's it going, cuz?"

"It's fine," David said, throwing a glance at Jairo then turning his back on the younger man. "Something up?"

"Nah, just in between dead *Chingasos* here. I don't know how the hell we ever got to a place where we can elect a bloody mayor, when we can't stop killing ourselves. Seems like we stop long enough to go to the polls, then pull out the AKs again. And between the commission being a tool for the ACLU and community leaders only interested in getting their names in the news, it's a wonder we can do anything about it except clean up the bodies and bag 'em for the morgue. They representing the hood," Martinez said, his voice dripping sarcasm. "Damn fools

live and die in dog years. Yeah, they representing. Should get measured for body bags when they born. So,” Martinez said laconically. “How are you guys doing? Haven’t seen you or Chris in a while.”

Something in Martinez’s voice alerted David. He straightened and said, “What do you mean?”

“Everything okay with you two?”

“Sure, why wouldn’t it be?” A light went off. “You’ve been talking to Chris.”

“I, uh, called your place last night, but you were still at work. Wasn’t important enough to try to catch you there. Things are kosher with you guys then? It’s hard enough in this business to find someone who cares once they know what we do, but to find someone who will stick by you. That’s rare, man. You don’t want to lose that.”

“I know how special Chris is,” David said stiffly. He never thought he’d live to hear Martinez giving him romantic advice. “You don’t need to tell me that.”

“Good. Good. So, how’s the new boot working for you?”

David was silent. He heard Martinez’s sigh.

“That bad, huh? Well, you can look at it this way, it’s only six months. I gather Chris isn’t too thrilled by the dude. He another homo-hater? Sorry, man, didn’t mean—”

“That’s okay,” David muttered. He was used to Martinez, which was part of the problem, wasn’t it? “Besides he’s not really a boot. He is a detective first grade.”

“Worse than a boot, you ask me. Think they know it all. Least a boot knows he’s green.”

Which was true enough, but David’s problem with Jairo had nothing to do with what he thought he knew, but in the feeling David had that he’d like to find out what going to bed with the young man would be like. He refused to acknowledge the desire. He wasn’t like that. Wouldn’t be like that, for anyone but Chris. “Not going to happen,” he muttered.

“What, man? What’s not going to happen? You got some shit going down there, *socio*? Don’t fuck with me, man. You know I hate that shit worse than a liar.”

“Nothing. Everything copasetic.”

“Well, okay,” Martinez didn’t sound like he was a believer. “We’ll have to pop out for a drink sometime, play catchup. I can tell you all about rousting bangers and playing pit bull soccer.”

“Pit bull—never mind, I don’t want to know. You almost sound like you’re having fun. You aren’t going to ask for a permanent transfer, are you?”

“Too damn many *chollos* around here,” Martinez said, under his breath. “Damn homies, always down with their brothers, don’t know enough to stay in the house, gotta run with the bangers and make macho. Bunch of bullshit. Glad I’m not like that.”

Oh no, nothing machismo about Martinez. For the first time in days David smiled. “Well, I’ll keep your desk warm.”

“Tell that little boot he messes with my stuff I’ll shine his Sam Browne with ceiling wax.”

David didn’t bother reminding Martinez that Jairo didn’t wear a Sam Browne.

He got off the phone the same time Jairo put his down with a war whoop. “Righteous shit,” he said. “I got the LUDs off that cell. And an owner.” He held up his notes and read, “So, we can get subpoenas for the owner now, right? Based on those LUDs?”

“Maybe,” David said. “Let’s see what we got first. We’ll worry about the paper later. Before we go, call forensics again about those autopsy results.”

They headed out, to sign a car out of the pool, and drove over to pick up the evidence. The LUDs, or Local Area Usage details, would tell them who, and when, the cell had called, and been called. Besides all the local calls, most modern phones contained commonly used telephone numbers, appointments and calendars.

"Get this," Jairo said. "One of the numbers this guy keeps calling is to a known Avenues banger."

David straightened. "What does a dead Ukrainian hooker have to do with an Avenues banger?"

"Good question. I'll put it in my report," Jairo said with a touch of acid, which David ignored.

Jairo went in and retrieved the paperwork from the technician who had processed the cell. David remained in the car, where the heat from the newly risen sun quickly turned the interior into an oven. He should have been sweltering, but all he felt was a numb coldness that no amount of sun seemed able to dispel.

He had to talk to Chris. Had to make him understand that while there was nothing going on, he had *thought* about it. Chris deserved that much.

A small voice nagged him. But what if Chris got so angry he left? *Can you live with that? Can you really live without him?*

If I have to, came the cold thought.

His phone rang. It was the coroner's office. The results of the autopsy on Zuzanna Konjenko had been finalized.

"We found the tattoo you suggested we look for," Fenton said. "A symbol, unrecognized, on her upper thigh. And the fly eggs appear to be *Musca domestica Linnaeus*, which is just a fancy name for house fly. Often first on site and found indoors. Suggests she was killed indoors then moved outside to be buried."

"Thanks, Doctor. I think that's a solid ID. It's Zuzanna."

"And we confirmed the presence of chloral hydrate in sufficient quantities to cause diminished capacity in the original dead woman. The one who went off the freeway overpass."

"Knock out drops? They still use that?" The drug of choice today was GHB or ketamine.

"Good old Mickey Finns," the forensic technician said. "Sometimes the old ways work best."

Jairo returned, and David took the printouts from him, telling him about the chloral hydrate. Jairo didn't seem surprised. David skimmed through them, noting when the same numbers occurred. Each one would have to be run, to see who was on the other end. It would be a tedious job. He flipped through to the end of sheets. On a separate page the account holder's name: Valerian Mikalenko. Mickey.

The second number was even more interesting. It was a Hollywood exchange, like Mikalenko's. He flipped through the notes Jairo had made on his own discoveries. There it was: Dr. Jozef Sevchuk, Halyna's gynecologist.

"Bingo," he said.

Jairo cocked his head. "What?"

"Well, there's our connection," he said softly. "Dr. Jozef Sevchuk called Mikalenko. Or Mikalenko called him. Now we just have to find them both and get their side of the story."

Back at the station he pulled out the arrest report for Mikalenko. He had been sentenced to eight years, spent five in Corcoran. He tracked down his probation officer. Gus Stevenson worked out of the Los Angeles County probation office. No one was in the office on Sunday. He found Mikalenko's last known address from DMV instead. It was on Cherokee Street in Hollywood. Not more than four blocks from Halyna and Konjenko's house on Leland Way. Another coincidence? Or a man keeping a close eye on his stable?

David added the information to the growing file on his little-known Mikalenko. The DMV records showed a car registered to him. A 2009 Caddie. Someone was doing pretty good. The property was registered to a holding company. A front or a legitimate property holder? The owners of record didn't seem to exist outside of paper.

He told Jairo his findings.

"So we go visit the place? See if Mickey is still in residence?"

"Do some more digging on the guy. Financials, whatever we can find. If his source of income is hinky, it may give us grounds for a search warrant."

Jairo snorted. "We need the warrants to find the information we need, not the other way around."

"Welcome to the wonderful world of modern day policing."

"Sometimes I think I should have become an accountant."

"There's still time. Lots of people go back to school at your age."

"Yeah, but where's the fun in accounting? No one ever tries to whack a CPA."

"I'm sure you could find someone who'd make an exception."

"Funny."

David shrugged. "Some excitement I can do without."

"Don't you get off on the adrenaline high? The rush?"

David only gave him a dark look. "If you're going to be a blue flamer, and get us both killed, do me a favor, transfer out. I don't need the headache."

"I told you I'm not a quitter."

"Bully for you."

"Who pissed in your Wheaties this morning?"

"You did, remember? With your little chat with Chris?"

"That's water under the bridge. Told you nothing happened."

David shook his head. "You just don't get it, do you?"

"I get you," Jairo said. "Better than you do. If you were just honest—"

"Stop it. Now." David's voice went up, and he was aware of several eyes swiveling toward him, and Jairo. Ears alert to some juicy gossip. "Can it, Detective."

"Sure." Jairo smiled again. "Whatever you say."

Sunday, 11:40 AM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

Chris dragged himself upstairs to take a shower, though all he really wanted to do was crawl back into bed and escape through sleep. Escape what he wasn't sure of, he just knew something was going on in David's life and he wasn't sharing. And that scared Chris. What could be so bad David had to keep it locked up, eating him up inside? What would make David *lie*?

When he climbed out of the shower, and wandered into the bedroom, toweling himself dry, he stood a moment staring down at the king-sized bed that had been such a source of joy in their relationship. What the hell had gone wrong? He couldn't recall the last time they had made love. He didn't count his midnight seduction. He hadn't given David the chance to reject his advances. Before that... it had to be before his accident. Two weeks? God, could it have been three? No, not that long. But too long. Even after four years, he and David had a very active sex life. It was the one arena where they could forget their differences. So what had changed?

Was someone else the cause?

Jairo.

Something hard and unforgiving settled in Chris's chest. Was David even capable of infidelity? He had always been the moral anchor in their relationship, keeping Chris on the straight and narrow, when Chris's innate thirst for excitement had pulled him another way.

Chris threw on some jeans and a polo shirt and dashed downstairs. He had to talk to Des. Des had been in more long term relationships than Chris, who had only ever had one actual boyfriend, outside of a disastrous year spent with a flake from the Valley. BD—before David—he had played the field, a different dick every night. He could barely remember those days, or the faces and pricks that went along with them, and had never been tempted to go back. David satisfied him in more ways than he had ever imagined. But something had clearly gone wrong.

Des answered after an excruciatingly long time.

"I need to come talk to you," Chris said in rush, praying Des wasn't in the middle of something. "It's really important."

"Sure hon, what is it?"

"I can't say over the phone. I need to see you in person."

"Ah, sure, babe. Come on over. Trevor and I were just sitting down to lunch. I'm sure we can stretch it to serve three—"

"I'm not hungry, and this won't take long." A lie, this could take all day to talk out. And if he was right in his suspicions, it could go a long way to ruining his life, let alone his day. "I'll be right there."

He didn't bother changing. Throwing on a pair of sliders he grabbed his keys and bolted out the door. Sergeant followed him to the door and he felt bad telling the dog to go to his bed. But he knew Des wouldn't appreciate any animals in his Beverly Hills bungalow. Well, aside from Trevor. Even that whimsical thought didn't penetrate his mood. He swung the rental car he had picked up, while the damage was being assessed on his Escape, west toward Beverly Hills. Personally he figured the little SUV was a total doom buggy, and fully expected the insurance company to write it off, which would mean shopping for another vehicle. Normally that might have been fun—he was no auto junkie like David, but he loved the new smell and high sheen of a brand new car. But now he couldn't muster up any enthusiasm for any of it.

Des was waiting outside when he pulled up behind Trevor's newly acquired Sky. Des's latest acquisition, a brand new Mercedes sedan, sat in front of it.

One look at Chris's face and Des was at his side instantly. He took Chris's arm and guided him into the living room, sitting him down in a chair. Seconds later Trevor brought him a mug of strong coffee.

"Drink, hon," Des said gently. "Then talk."

Chris did as he was told. When he put the mug down, it rattled against the koa wood table. Des ignored it, totally unlike him. He leaned toward Chris and took his hands in his.

“What is it Chris? What’s wrong? Is it David—?”

“I don’t know. Yes, I think it is,” Chris stammered, aware of how cold his hands were in Des’s. He stared at his best friend and felt tears form. He bit his lip, determined not to cry. “I think David might be having an affair.”

Both Des and Trevor gaped at him. Des finally spoke. “An affair? *David?*”

“I don’t know what else to think. He’s been so cold lately. Indifferent. He works all the time; he’s never at home, and when he is he’s not *there*.” His throat closed up and he glared at Des, as though this was all his fault. “We haven’t made love in over two weeks. That’s not like David.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s...doing anything,” Des said. “Maybe something’s going on at work. You know he never shares that with you. You always said you were glad he kept you out of it.”

“I know, but this isn’t the same. He’s got a new partner. Jairo. He’s gorgeous and... he came around the house the other day, pretending to be walking his dog. David’s been taking Sergeant out in the evening for a run. He never asks me to go with him, he knows I hate jogging. This guy came looking for David.”

“You don’t know that—”

“Yes I do!”

“Then you need to talk to David. Tell him what you’re thinking,” Des said firmly. “I think you’ll find he has a good explanation and that your imagination’s been playing with you. David would never do anything like that.”

“He loves you, man,” Trevor said. “You know he does.”

“Then why doesn’t he come home anymore? Why does he avoid being in bed with me? Why did he lie to me?”

Des squeezed Chris’s hands. “Ask him. It’s not fair to think this, if you won’t talk to him about it—”

“Fair?” Chris could hear the shrillness in his own voice as rage took over. “*Fair?* What’s fair about him fucking some little

twinkie who has more in common with him than I ever could? This guy's a cop, for God's sake. Someone who can share David's worst nightmare and understand it. I can never do that, as long as I live."

Des drew him against his chest, pressing his smooth cheek against Chris's wet one. "Shh, hon. Don't make yourself sick with these thoughts. Talk to David. Or if you want, I'll talk to him. Do you want me to do that—"

Trevor shook his blond head. "Not a good idea, hon. This is between Chris and David—"

Chris pulled away from Des, his face set in a new hardness. "No, Trevor's right. I have to deal with this." He sagged. "I just hope I'm wrong. I'll die if I lose him. I love him so much—"

"Then tell him that. I know David. He'd never do anything to hurt you."

"God, I hope you're right." Chris dashed tears out of his eyes and forced a smile, though he didn't feel like it. "I'll call him and tell him he has to come home early tonight. We need to talk." Suddenly his face fell. "But what if he won't come?"

"Tell him he has to if he wants to save his relationship."

Chris shivered, shrinking away from the coming confrontation. Would he only succeed in making David mad? Could his attempts to save what they had backfire, and drive David away for good?

"If he gives up on you that easily, then maybe it's for the best—"

"No! I won't let him go."

"Then fight for him," Des said. "Fight this bitch out to steal your man. Don't you dare give up without a fight. Isn't David worth it?"

Chris returned home, and immediately took the ecstatic dog out for a long walk, to clear his head, and think about what he was going to say to David. Finally, at four he sat down in the living room and picked up the cordless phone. He dialed David's cell, rather than his office phone number. If David was out on a case... he refused to think about David being out there

with Jairo, pushing the horrible images that popped unbidden and unwanted out of his head. David answered on the fifth ring. Chris knew he'd have seen the caller ID and would know who was calling.

"Hello, David."

"Hey, Chris. Something up?"

"Yes, something is up." Chris chewed on his inner cheek, still unsure how to approach this. Then he plunged ahead. "I need to talk to you."

"Ah, sure, I'll be home as soon as I can—"

"No, David. That's not good enough. I need you to come home now."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Chris could almost hear David's mind turning. He knew something was wrong. "I don't know if I can—"

"Do it, David. If what we have is at all important to you, then you will come home right now and stop playing these stupid games."

"I've never played games with you," David said quietly. Chris could hear the fear in his normally strong voice. Was he starting to realize what he had done? "You're not making any sense, hon. Let me finish up here and I'll come right home—"

"I'm not your fucking hon. Just get home, David. Then we'll talk." He slammed the phone down, immediately regretting that all his carefully thought out words had failed him and he had attacked David like some rabid pit bull. Fretting that David would call back and demand an explanation. But the phone remained depressingly silent.

Was David sleeping with Jairo? He sat staring out the window, even ignoring the dog, who whined and shoved his damp nose into Chris's groin. He didn't want to know—

No, he had to know. Even if it meant ruining what had been up until now a perfect relationship... only who was he kidding. Had it ever been perfect? David had never opened up to him. Had never really been part of 'them.' He kept a small part of himself from Chris, ostensibly to protect Chris from the

ugliness of his world. But really, wasn't it about keeping Chris isolated from his world? As long as Chris was at David's side and in his life, David couldn't hide who he was. The whole world knew.

Chris tried to redial the number, but the cell was unreachable. David had broken regs and turned it off.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sunday, 4:20 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

A stone settled in Chris's gut and he jumped to his feet. He paced through the kitchen to the backyard. Sergeant trailed after him, bouncing after the knotted rope Chris and David used to play tug-of-war with him. He brought the treasured toy over to Chris, who half-heartedly tugged on it, releasing it almost immediately. The dog raced off, leaping over David's carefully tended flower beds and coming back to beg Chris to do it again.

After nearly half an hour of this Chris heard a car door slam outside. He stood up when David came through the patio door. He ignored everything but Chris. Chris only had to look at his dark, pockmarked face to *know*. It was true. Some part of him had wanted it to be nothing but his overactive imagination. He could no longer do that.

"What's going on?" David asked.

"I think you know," Chris said. "Are you sleeping with him, David?"

"Sleeping—God no, what gave you that idea?"

Chris noticed he didn't ask who he was making the accusation against. His heart sank further. "But you want to, don't you? That's why he came around here last night, isn't it? He was hoping he'd come across you out with the dog. Then what? You'd find a nice cozy motel room? Or maybe you don't care and you'd do it right in the park—"

David grabbed Chris's arms and jerked him around to face him. "No, it's never been like that."

"Then tell me how it is. Because I really want to know, David. Do you get hard for him? What's it like to fuck him, like you fuck me? Is it more exciting when it's so sneaky? Does flouting your vows make it hotter?"

"We never said any vows. We agreed it wasn't necessary—"

"No, you made that little agreement all on your own. We never talked about what I wanted. It was always what you wanted, and you didn't want the enlightened boys in blue you work for to make fun of you. Getting married would have given them a whole new game to play with you. They'd have had a field day and you know it," Chris was shouting now, hands clenched at his side, shaking with rage. "What about the ring I gave you? Doesn't that mean anything to you? Or do you just take it off and moon over your new pretty boy? You never did take us seriously. I was always an embarrassment to you."

"That's not true. I've never taken my ring off. I never will, unless you tell me it's over," David tried to pull Chris into his arms. He was stiff with anger. David's voice was thick with sorrow. "Please don't tell me it's over. I love you."

"I love you, too, David—"

"Then—"

"But that's not good enough right now. I want you to tell me what's been going on. I know I'm not wrong, something's going on between you two. I want to know what."

David sighed. "He came onto me. I never expected... He's married, so it was only natural to assume he was straight."

"And would it have mattered if you knew he was gay at the start? Or are you making excuses that since he came on to you, that it's okay you wanted him back?"

"It wasn't—okay, when he first kissed me, I'd had too much to drink. I guess I wasn't thinking... It was wrong. I knew it right away and I stopped it."

"But that wasn't the end of it, was it? I was gone for several days, first the hospital, then back east on business. Is that when you fucked him?"

David winced at the crudity. "I never, I swear. You have to believe me, Chris."

"No, David, I don't have to believe anything you say right now. You're still trying to pretend nothing happened, but it did, didn't it? Why did he come by here looking for you?"

"He seems to think if he's persistent that I'll give in. He kept bringing his dog over and wanting to walk. I didn't see the harm in it, at first."

"Didn't see the harm in it? The guy fucking kisses you and you don't see any harm in his coming around while, conveniently, I'm not home."

David flushed and looked away.

"Then what happened?"

"Then one night he showed up and after our run I invited him in for a beer. When he was leaving, he kissed me again..."

"Don't tell me." Chris knew he was being a full blown bitch but he couldn't help it. "You kissed him back."

David's gaze fell. *God, he can't even look at me.*

"Is that how it went?"

"Yeah," David whispered. "Something like that."

"And that was okay with you? You kissed this guy in our home and enjoyed it? Or did you do more?" Chris was watching him closely and saw David flinch. "My God, you did, didn't you? Did you fuck him? Did he fuck you? Maybe he sucked your cock—"

David's gaze skittered sideways and Chris *knew*. "He gave you a blow job?"

"No! Yes, but it wasn't like that. I swear—"

"How could you, David. Four years, David. Four years. You getting the seven-year itch early? Or is this some kind of mid-life crisis? What's next, a little red sports job you can use to cruise West Hollywood looking for twinks?"

"That's craz— No, I'm not interested. I was never interested even when I was alone."

"Just Jairo, right? He the only one these days who makes you hard?"

"Chris—"

"I don't believe you, and because I can't, I can't trust you and I want you out. Right now I don't want to see your face. I

can't believe you would do this to us. That the last four years don't mean anything to you."

"Oh God, Chris, don't—"

"Go. Maybe we can have a civilized talk later. Right now I can't even look at you."

David's shoulders slumped and he turned away from Chris. "I'll let you know where I am. Is that okay with you?"

"Whatever."

David went upstairs and returned ten minutes later lugging a large suitcase. Chris followed him and stood in the living room, facing the front door. He was rigid and his body vibrated with unleashed tension. David paused at the door, and tried, one more time.

"Please, Chris. I would never cheat on you. I swear."

"Except you already did, didn't you?" Chris turned away, hands clenched into fists. "We'll talk later. Right now I wouldn't be very polite. If we're going to have any hope in hell of saving us, I need a chance to cool off. You need to get this Jairo out of your system, one way or another. If that means fucking him, then so be it. But if you do, then it's over. I never want to see you again. Just so you know what you're losing. So there's no misunderstanding."

"I—" David started to say something else, then he clamped his lips shut and left, gently closing the solid oak door behind him. Seconds later Chris heard his Chevy fire up and roll out of the driveway. Only the soft mournful call of a dove filled the yard.

Chris slumped against the wall, eyes closed.

"What did I just do? Oh David. I'm sorry..."

Sunday, 5:45 PM, Orchid Hotel, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David threw his suitcase on the geometric patterned comforter that somebody must have thought looked New Age, and sat on the bed. In the window an air conditioner rattled and

blew out air that was only slightly cooler than the stuffy room held. There was a greasy spoon next to the hotel, and he knew he should get something to eat, but his appetite had completely deserted him. He couldn't eat if he wanted to, though his stomach growled in reproach.

How could it go so wrong, so fast? He'd thought at least Chris would be willing to talk. Chris might be hot-headed, but he was fair.

David knew he had hurt Chris more than anything he had ever done before. Face it, their relationship had almost been an accident. They had nothing in common, and it had been a long time before he realized he needed Chris. Maybe more than Chris needed him. More than honor or life itself.

But he had apologized, hadn't he, and meant it. What more did Chris want? What more could he give? The crack about them not taking vows had been the lowest blow. What was he thinking? Vows or not, they had long ago made a commitment to each other. How could he be so cavalier about that? Or was Chris right, he didn't take them seriously? Admittedly Chris was right in one thing: David had never been as comfortable flaunting the fact that they were a couple. He had always known it made him the object of a lot of fellow cops' derision, and he had always chafed at that. He thought he'd learned to ignore them, but a part buried deep inside him had never made peace with his 'deviancy.' Was that going to destroy what they had now?

Chris meant the world to him. Why couldn't he make him see that? This was a nightmare. A nightmare he didn't have time for. He had a Byzantine case to sort out, a partner who seemed determined to turn his life upside down and an ongoing headache that made clear thinking impossible. He lay on the bed and tried to sleep, but couldn't stop his mind from racing, futilely pursuing some sense of the last week. The pillows and bed clothes smelled of industrial laundry soap and a vague, underlying smell from past tenants. No Chris anywhere. It was as though he had already been erased, tossed in the landfill of broken hopes. "Jesus." He slammed his fist down into the thin pillow. "Now you're being a melodramatic fool."

Instead of going next door to the diner, he found the nearest drugstore and bought a large bottle of Advil and a six-pack of beer. If he couldn't think straight, then at least maybe he could dull the pain enough that he couldn't think at all.

But sleep eluded him even after he finished the six-pack and downed several pain pills. When he finally dragged himself out of bed the next morning at five, he threw himself under a hot shower, scalding his skin and scrubbing his body so hard he left it red. He didn't bother shaving. It seemed like too much effort.

Throwing his jacket on, he found his Rolex in the pocket and held it up to the light. He didn't need to actually see it to know the inscription Chris had had engraved on it for his fortieth birthday. *To David, with all my love, Chris.* He stared down at the watch for several heartbeats, then he slipped it on his wrist and shrugged the jacket on.

Jairo did a double take when he walked into the squad room later that morning.

"Whoa, man. What chewed on your ass?" He took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring. "Jesus, you spend half the night boozing it up? Should have called me, I'd have kept you company."

"Shut up, Jairo. Talk to me when you got your reports done and not before. Hear me?"

"I hear you. Loud and clear."

They both fell into a dark silence that neither felt like breaking. David spent the time on his subpoena for the doctor's records. After nearly two hours, he sent the job to the printer and put it in a folder, along with the LUDs from the cell phone. Now that he had more than one tangible connection going on he didn't think they'd have any trouble convincing the sitting judge to sign their *subpoena duces tecum*, or the warrant for the doctor's patient records. Then they'd be in business.

Given what they'd already found out, the judge was only too happy to sign the papers. David picked up Konstatinov and they headed out to Hollywood.

This time they lucked out. Dr. Sevchuk was seeing patients today. David badged the receptionist, and waited while she made a hushed phone call. Minutes later a short, stoop-shouldered man of about fifty emerged from the back room.

"Can I ask what is about this?" His accent was heavy and his English slow. David figured most, if not all, of his patients must be Ukrainian. "I'm with a patient—"

"I'm sure she can wait," David said. He handed the warrant to the stunned man and signaled Konstatinov to step forward. "Introduce yourself. Tell him he needs to answer some questions and this," he waved the warrant languidly, "gives us the right to search his office. Which we intend to do very shortly."

Konstatinov launched into a barrage of Ukrainian. The doctor's eyes widened and fear pinched his face. He stammered back in Ukrainian. Konstatinov translated.

"He wants us to go into his office. He fears others might overhear what we're saying. He also said he doesn't understand. What could you want of him? He's just a simple doctor. His patients are all women..."

"That's part of why we're here." David and Konstatinov followed the doctor into his office, a simply decorated room of blond wood and Aubusson area rugs. "Ask him if he knows Halyna Stakchinko, or Zuzanna Konjenko."

Before Konstatinov could translate, Sevchuk grew confused. "Halyna and Zuzanna? What want you with those two?"

"Are you saying Zuzanna Konjenko is also a patient of yours?"

"Yes, she was living with Halyna. Both were pregnant. What do you want from me?"

"To find out when you last saw them," David said. "Why are you speaking of them in the past tense?" He leaned forward. "Do you know something you want to tell us?"

Sevchuk stammered, "I do not know anything. Halyna was nearly five months pregnant when I see her last. Zuzanna about four. Why, what this is about?"

"I'm sorry to tell you that Halyna is dead, the victim of foul play. Zuzanna appears to be missing."

"Missing?" Sevchuk sank into his leather chair and stared blankly at David, licking his lips. "I do not understand. I was told—" Abruptly he fell silent.

"What, Doctor? What were you told?" David leaned forward. On the other side so did Konstatinov, hemming the much shorter doctor between the two.

"Nothing. Yes, both women were my patients. That is all I will say."

"No, Doctor. That isn't all. If you know something, you will tell me."

"I know nothing."

"We're in the process of determining the identity of two Jane Does discovered in Griffith Park," David kept his tone casual. No bombshells here. "You know anything about that?"

"Bodies," Sevchuk's eyes darted right then left, before finally settling on Konstatinov, a good half a foot shorter than David. "I heard, of course. It was on all the news stations a few days ago. You think one of those bodies is Zuzanna? And who else?"

"You tell us. Any other pregnant women fail to show up for appointments in the last few weeks. Anyone who knew Zuzanna or Halyna?"

"I don't... I'm not..."

David held up the search warrant again, in case the man had forgotten it. "We need access to all your patient records. The only ones we'll touch will be those of Halyna and Zuzanna, unless you can supply another name to us."

"You will not bother yourself with other patients?"

"No, they're not our concern. We're trying to build a case around missing women, not pregnant women who are still around."

Sevchuk began speaking rapidly in Ukrainian, Konstatinov spoke too, at length. Finally he stopped and glanced at David. "Women do not come in all the time. They make appointments

and do not keep them. He wants to know what case we mean and why do you think he's involved. I wasn't sure how much to tell him."

"Tell him the fact that two girls were his pregnant patients and that at least one is dead for sure, the other one missing, that we need to examine all of his connections with the victims. Tell him I know he's lying. Oh, and ask him if he knows Valerian Mikalenko, or Mickey."

This time there was no mistaking Sevchuk's fear. He swallowed convulsively and ran his finger inside the collar of his shirt as though it had suddenly grown constrictive.

David's voice grew gentle, trying to calm the terrified man. "Tell us about him, Doctor. Anything at all. Is he the one who told you Zuzanna was not coming back?"

"I-I can't. He will kill me."

"We'll protect you," David said, knowing the gesture was largely empty, since the LAPD had no money to spend on protecting witnesses. But they needed Sevchuk's testimony and information to go on with their case, and he suspected the man knew something incriminating, else why be scared? "Talk to me, Doctor."

"He is from the old country. I do not know when he come to this country. Many years ago." Suddenly Sevchuk lapsed into Ukrainian. Konstatinov took over. David recited his questions; Konstatinov relayed them.

"Ask if he knows when Mikalenko came here. Or when he first showed up here. Did he come alone?"

Sevchuk responded. Konstatinov said, "He insists he does not know when Mikalenko left Ukraine. But he does know he came from Kiev."

"Where Zuzanna came from. That's where she met Mickey. Recruitment drive? Wonder if he met anybody else in Kiev?"

Konstatinov put the question to Sevchuk, who nodded rapidly, clearly excited. "He says the two girls came from the same place. And there was a third woman. She also was his

patient. Now that he thinks of it, she missed her last two appointments.”

“Bingo. Was she pregnant too?”

“He is surprised. How did you know that?”

“No one but a pregnant woman would need to see an OB/GYN on a regular basis. Tell him we want to see her records too.” It wasn’t exactly on the up and up, since they had little probable cause, but if they could cop a name they could do other records checks and see if they could ID the second, more skeletonized corpse in the grave. It was a long shot, but worth the risk of a little above and beyond.

Sevchuk went to the door and called his receptionist over. They spoke in rapid Ukrainian, which Konstatinov was unable to hear well enough to translate. Minutes later the receptionist knocked on the office door and handed Sevchuk several green folders.

Sevchuk handed the top three to David, who flipped each one open in turn. There were the names that had become so familiar to him. Zuzanna Konjenko. Halyna Stakchinko and a third name: Natalya Lapchuk, six months pregnant at her last visit, on September fifteenth. The skeletonized corpse had been dated at two to three months dead. If she was six months pregnant at the time, then she was impregnated sometime last June or July. So she was the first? Had she roomed with Halyna? Before or after Zuzanna moved in? Or had all three been roommates? Was that the link between them?

He let Konstatinov finish his questioning of Sevchuk, coming up with nothing new. But they had their connection and it was a good start. And they might have an ID on their third victim. David thanked Sevchuk and he and Konstatinov returned to the car with the records.

“We need to talk to the landlord again.”

“You think this third woman, Natalya, might have known them?”

“Or lived with them. Maybe Mikalenko wanted to keep his party together so he could keep an eye on his stable.”

"He did not keep a very good eye on them, if that is the case."

"Unless he's the reason they're dead."

"You still think he is the father?"

"No proof one way or the other. But we do know he knows the three women. Now we have to confirm the ID of the two in the Griffith Park grave, and find Mikalenko. This should be fun."

"Does he know we are looking for him?"

"Depends how guilty he is. If he killed them or knows who did, then yeah, he knows. As soon as he realized he'd lost his cell phone, he knew. Especially if he knew where he lost it and couldn't go back for fear of discovery."

David looked up the number for the landlord and arranged to meet him at Leland Way at two. He then called Jairo and told him about the meeting. "Be there by two if you want in on this. We may be able to ID our two Jane Does."

"I'll be there," Jairo said and hung up without another word.

With a sigh of relief, David disconnected. Briefly he considered calling Chris, but figured it was all too raw yet. He needed to give Chris time to calm down and realize what was being thrown out here. Then David had to figure out how to let Chris know how much he loved him, and hope that it made the difference.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Monday, 1:45 PM, Leland Way, Hollywood

Jairo pulled his unmarked behind David's on Leland Way, under a spreading jacaranda tree that was just starting to bloom. The brilliant lavender blossoms hadn't yet started falling all over everything, turning the ground into a purple stew that stained shoes and pant hems. There was still tattered barrier tape strung around the front porch along with a notice on the door that the site was sealed and off limits to all but LAPD and forensics people.

Earlier he had called Larson to tell them they were going in one more time. The landlord had not been happy.

"Any idea when I can get the place back? I still have to make a living in this city."

"We'll let you know, Mr. Larson. In the meantime it's still a crime scene, so I'd advise you to stay clear of it."

"What are you looking for this time? More information on the two girls?"

"Yes, and a possible third woman. Are you familiar with Natalya Lapchuk?"

"Natty? I knew her. She stayed here with the girls about a month right around Thanksgiving. Then she left and I never saw her again. I didn't put up a fuss, since I just assumed she was visiting from wherever they came from. All they did was chatter away in that lingo they spoke."

"Ukrainian," David said.

"Whatever."

Thanksgiving. And the skeletonized body in Griffith Park was found in February, two and a half months.

"Was she a looker, too?" David asked.

The look Larson gave him said it clearly. "What's that got to do with anything?" he muttered. "This is Hollywood, they're all good looking."

"We think the women were targeted because they were all very good looking. A certain type. Blonde, Slavic, that sort of thing. It's just theory we're looking at."

"Oh, okay. Yeah, I remember her. She was built like Dolly Parton, if you know what I mean. And very blond, though I guess that coulda come out of a bottle, right?"

"Yes, it could have. Thank you, Mr. Larson."

David and Jairo went back through the house, looking for signs that might point to a third girl in residence, no matter how short lived. There wasn't anything.

"If we can get SID to genotype that blood maybe we'll find more than two types." David held Jairo's eyes briefly. "You can follow up with them when we get back. I'm going to take a look at missing persons between Thanksgiving and Christmas. See if I can locate any dental records. Right now I want to check out the backyard again."

He prowled the backyard, trying to imagine what it had been like. At least one person had died in the house. Had it been the same one who had left the forensics behind in the dirt under the house? And if so, which one?

There was an increased flurry of interest in the case when the morning *Times* had an above the fold, front page spread, when both victim identities were leaked, as well as their condition. It didn't do any good for the Lieutenant in charge of handling the press to make it plain the IDs were tentative at best, the press ran with it. Pregnant women caught up in a prostitution ring. They spun a fine, sordid story, too bad very little of it was based on anything but the wildest speculation.

It also brought a rush of phone calls from 'witnesses.' And a few confessions.

Jairo took one call, listened for about two minutes then held his hand over the mouth piece. "Woman says she's a psychic.

Wants to talk to the officer in charge. She's calling from Hollywood."

"She ask for me?" David asked. This was the fifth psychic of the day. Was there a convention in town?

"Ah, no, just the officer in charge. Why?"

"She's so psychic, why doesn't she know my name? And it's not officer, it's Detective."

"You want me to tell her that?" Jairo took his hand away from the phone.

David grabbed the phone out of his hand. "You want the PSB rats or some ACLU lawyer down on us for insulting some helpful citizen?" David cleared his throat and spoke to the psychic. "Yes, ma'am. This is Detective David Eric Laine. What can I do for you?"

He spent the next twenty minutes listening to her tell him how she saw the bodies of the two women and their heavenly children playing in a field someplace with sunflowers and poppies. David began to think the woman had been smoking a few poppies herself before she called.

"If you find that field, officer, you'll find those two women. And their darling children."

He felt like asking her if she saw any Eucalyptus trees in her visions—maybe he could find a psychic-sympathizing judge who would sign a warrant based on a vision—but instead all he said was, "Yes, thank you, ma'am. I'll be sure to get someone on it right away."

He hung up the phone, shaking his head. "Is it a full moon out there? Some national druid festival no one told me about?"

Six rolled around. Jairo left, David didn't. He made a fresh pot of coffee and sat at his desk browsing criminal records, trying to find more on Mikalenko and Sevchuk. Sevchuk looked clean, though for all David knew he had a record back in the old country. No way he'd ever get those records, though, even if the Ukrainian police were cooperative. The state department would never go for it. So they had to assume that the doctor had come into the country clean and remained clean. But

Mikalenko was another matter all together. He had an impressive record of soliciting, smuggling, trafficking across state lines, which was a federal beef, and even a couple of liquor violations. It seemed Mickey ran two clubs in Little Russia and used them as undercover ops for assorted vice beefs.

The liquor licenses implied more pull inside some government agency. First he doesn't get deported, then he doesn't lose his liquor licenses, though with a felony rap, and an illegal alien status, he should have been turfed out years ago.

When had he started smuggling women into the country? And how many of them were dead? And why was he killing his golden geese?

David kept working until the third watch came on. Finally he grabbed his jacket and went out to get his car. On the drive back to the hotel, he stopped at a florist and bought a huge bouquet of Chris's favorite flowers, orchids and daisies, a combination he always said showed his dual nature. Pampered prima donna and down to earth sensualist. He sent them to Cove Avenue.

He didn't include a card. Chris would know who they were from.

He went back to the hotel and watched grainy TV until exhaustion forced him into bed.

He still didn't sleep worth a damn.

The next morning he called Des even before he left for work. Des's drowsy, sleep-filled voice came on the line. He snapped awake the minute he realized who he was talking to.

"David, where are you? We've been frantic—"

David felt a lightness push the weight off his chest at the thought that maybe Chris had realized how rash his decision to kick David out had been. Then Des kept talking.

"Chris is beside himself. I've never seen him so mad. You have to tell him you are so sorry you scared him like that. It's unbelievable that anyone would think you would have an affair. Chris knows better, he's just not thinking straight, pardon my French."

"It's true, Des," David said quietly. "Well, not exactly, but he's right, I thought about it. I know it was a mistake, but I can't lie—"

"Oh, you and your pigheaded honor. Of course you lie. You have to tell Chris it never happened and this Jairo guy is nothing to you. He isn't, is he?" Dark suspicion clouded Des's normally bouncy voice.

"No, Des, he's not. He doesn't mean anything. He never did. I tried telling Chris that, but he's in such a state he won't listen. I figured I'd give him a few days then talk to him again."

"I'm scared for him. You know Chris. He might do something stupid and we'll all regret it."

"I'll try Des. Maybe if you talk to him—"

"Honey, I've been talking until I'm blue in the face. He's just not listening."

David sighed. "Well, keep trying."

"I will hon. You take care and I'll give Chrissy a big hug for you."

"You do that, Des."

When he hung up David forced himself into the bathroom, where he scraped two days of thick, grizzled hair off his face. Still smarting from the application of aftershave, he took his Smith & Wesson out from under the bed and strode out to his Chevy.

The diner next door had just dumped fresh garbage into the open dumpster out back and the gulls were squabbling over tidbits. Their raucous cries followed him down the street toward Northeast. The stench of rotting food drove away any thoughts he might have entertained about breakfast.

Back at his desk, again before Jairo traipsed in right at eight, he fired up his PC and let it grind through login, and pulled Mikalenko's rap sheet, hoping to spot something he missed the first dozen times through. Nothing popped.

When Jairo came in, he barely nodded a greeting at the younger man. He scooped up his phone and called Konstatinov.

"You ready to roll? If we find Mickey, I'll need you along in case he plays dumb."

"I am on my way."

David couldn't help but smile at Konstatinov's enthusiasm. He was loving this. Most boots never got the chance to work detective detail until they'd been on patrol forever. And even then, they had to take the exams, and orals, and do well on them to hope for a promotion. It was the ultimate gig. Everyone and his cousin's dog wanted a posting to detective. If this kept on David would have to give a good word to Konstatinov's lieutenant. He'd make a good D.

David signed a Crown Vic out of the motor pool, and he, and Konstatinov, rolled west toward Hollywood. He'd already apprised Hollywood Station that they were looking at one of their own illustrious residents. Their attitude seemed to be "He's all yours."

The house on Cherokee Avenue was a little more upscale than a lot of the surrounding buildings. A rough gem among zirconium. New wave gentrification that was ongoing in this tiny, kitschy enclave.

David knocked on the bungalow door, with a pair of monstrous rubber trees flanking either side, and several beds of less than perfect roses. The door opened to reveal a statuesque blonde who would have been called *zaftig* in another era. She had what used to be called an hour glass figure, the kind that women today spent a small fortune trying to get rid of in their quest for the eternal anorexic Hollywood figure.

David could tell Konstatinov was smitten by the beautiful woman. When she greeted them with a softly accented voice, Konstatinov spoke to her in Ukrainian.

Her face lit up in a smile that made her seem like she was about sixteen.

"Ask her if Mikalenko is here?"

She frowned when the question was put to her. She answered in the same tongue.

"She says no, he went away a couple of days ago and has not been around since."

"Any idea where he went?"

"No, sorry."

"Ask her if there's anyone else in the house. Impress on her that lying to us is not a good thing."

More heated back and forth. Finally the woman nodded unhappily. "Yes," Konstatinov said. "There are two other girls here. They are in the back room. Mikalenko said they must not be seen by strangers. He will be very angry with her for telling us this."

"Tell her we may have just saved her life."

The woman's eyes went wide and she barked out several words in rapid fire succession.

"She does not believe you. Mickey is always good to them. He would not hurt anyone."

"What's her name?"

"Irinka Komichuk."

"Find out if he drove away and if so, what's he driving."

"She says he did drive. He always drives. He loves his big car more than he loves her. That seemed to upset her. Guess Mikalenko is quite the stud." Konstatinov smiled. "She calls him her little bear."

"What kind of car is he driving? The Caddie still? I can put a BOLO out on it."

"She does not know the type of car it is. Only that it is big and brown and very soft inside. I think she means luxurious."

"Like a Caddie. Ask her if we can come in. We won't touch anything, we just want to look around."

After several minutes of back and forth, the zaftig woman stepped aside, and let the two past her. The neatly furnished

living room smelled of lemon and something sharp. Konstatinov inhaled.

“Borscht. My mother used to make it. Hers was the best.”

Having never had the pleasure, David wouldn’t know. He let his gaze roam over the snug house, taking in the spotless kitchen, the avocado green fridge and stove, which spoke of the appliances’ age. Most interesting was the ikon corner on the eastern wall of the house. It looked similar enough to the one they had found in Halyna’s house that David didn’t have to ask Konstatinov what it was. In a shallow alcove beside the ikon display was a small wooden table with three place settings and chairs that had recently been pushed back.

“And how long has Ms. Komichuk been in the country?”

Now she looked really scared. Probably thought they were INS.

“Tell her we’re not from immigration. We don’t care about her status. It’s Mikalenko we need to talk to. If she helps us I’ll see she isn’t deported.”

Konstatinov looked at him shrewdly. “You can’t make that kind of promise.”

“No, but she doesn’t know that.”

Shaking his head, Konstatinov spoke again, more slowly and gently. Still Irinka looked dubious and David thought for sure she was going to refuse to talk. Finally she tucked her chin turtle-like into her chest and sighed. Then she started talking and Konstatinov translated.

“He used to be a sweet old man, until a week or so ago when he got very angry and silent. He ignored their attempts to make him happy again. He was mad all the time and he even hit Katrina last week, knocking her down and cutting her lip. She doesn’t know what he’s mad about, just that it started two weeks ago.”

“When Halyna was killed. Ask her if she’s ever heard of Stakchinko, Konjenko or Lapchuk.”

After a lengthy discussion Konstatinov nodded. “She does not know the names, but she does remember seeing two blond

women with Mickey. She admits she was jealous of them, and was glad when they didn't come around again."

"When was this? As close as she can remember."

"She thinks about...a month ago? Maybe longer. Seven-eight weeks. Mickey doesn't have any calendars in the place and they have no way to mark time. But it was during a soccer game—she called it football—between Russia and Sweden. Of course they all rooted for Russia."

"Who won?" The score and the teams might give them a time frame. Things were looking up.

"She says the Swedes won. They were all very unhappy. Especially Mikalenko, she thinks he might have bet on the game. He tried to get them to bet too, but they have no money so they didn't."

"Bookmaking too, or is that too much to hope for?"

"She doesn't know. I'm not sure she knows what bookmaking is."

"Very sheltered, huh? Does she say what her and her friends do for Mickey? Were they sent out with men they didn't know? What were they expected to give the men?"

"You want me to ask that?" Konstatinov was aghast. "I can't ask them that."

"We're helping to establish probable cause for another search warrant on this place. We can't do that without somebody here talking. Tell her we're not going to use what she says against her or her friends."

"She won't believe me. In her country the police are not so nice, and they are not bound by the same conduct code as we are."

"Try to get through to her. I'd hate to have to take her downtown, but we might have to if she won't cooperate."

Konstatinov nodded and went back to talking in earnest. After what seemed like half an hour, but was probably only minutes, Komichuk started talking. She went on as though a dam had burst and David let Konstatinov listen without

interference. He'd get the gist of it later. Let the woman run out of steam first.

Finally she fell into an uneasy silence. Konstatinov patted her arm and turned to David.

"She is afraid. She knows that what Mikalenko does is not right. He makes them all feel bad with his lies and what he makes them do. They are supposed to pretend they are not married, though Irinka has a husband back in Kiev, even has a daughter. Mikalenko brings men around. There is talk of marriage and the worst is he forces them to 'do things.' I'm sorry, but she won't say what things, she is too shocked by it all. And afraid. I don't blame her, considering what we think has happened so far."

"We may need to try to find a female interpreter to talk to her. Maybe she'd find a woman easier to talk to. Will she show us where the other women are? We need to hear their stories too. Tell her we will protect them. We can't do that if she won't talk to us."

"I already did. I'm not sure she believes me. Of course in her country the police protect no one but themselves. They are more likely to work for someone like Mikalenko. Mafia soldiers."

"What about the other women?"

"Without a search warrant we can't search for them, can we?"

"Not unless we know there's imminent threat to them, and I'm not sure we can make the case for that just now. Tell her we'll be back, but she is to say nothing to Mikalenko if he comes around. Can she use the phone or is that off limits?"

Konstatinov talked, then Komichuk. He turned to David. "She says it would be very hard to use the phone. Always he is suspicious of them. He only lets them talk to people when he is there and he stands by them so he always knows what they are saying. He tells them he will know if they call while he is away. He told her there was a... *brobak*?" He looked puzzled, then amused. "I think she means bug. She thought the phone was bugged. At any rate, she could not make a secret phone call."

David wasn't surprised. What better way to control your property than by keeping a tight leash on it. They couldn't do anything else here. He gestured toward the door.

"Tell her thank you, and we will be back. Reiterate that she is not to tell Mikalenko about our visit."

"She knows she would be in trouble if she told, so she will keep quiet, for her own safety."

They let themselves out. Back at the Crown Vic they paused and scanned the quiet residential street with neatly manicured lawns and trimmed hedges. A sharp contrast from Drew Street only a few miles away. It was eerily quiet, as though nothing evil happened here. Both of them slid into their seats and David started the car when a brown Caddie turned onto the street, saw it out of the rear view. He touched Konstatinov's arms and pointed to the car gliding down the sun dappled street.

"Mickey?"

"Let's go find out," David said.

They waited for the Caddie to coast to a stop. Two spots in front of them a pale blue Ford Fairlane van half blocked their view of it. David climbed out as the man they assumed was Mikalenko got out. The guy had a really bad hair weave. His natural hair was almost entirely gray and it so didn't match his blond add-on. He was also heavy set and even from the passenger's side door David could see the thick hair that covered nearly every inch of exposed skin. The Bear. The guy wore as much gold bling as a rapper at a midnight rave. He looked like a mange-ridden cat with a gold fixation.

David and Konstatinov approached the unaware man cautiously. David was glad to see Konstatinov had his rover out, and was ready to call for backup, if Mikalenko rabbited.

The Ukrainian finally noticed them. He tensed, then tried to look nonchalant as he turned away from them. Then before David could react, he bolted across the street. Konstatinov was right on his heels. David raced after them. Mikalenko darted down an alley between two apartment buildings. He darted left, and came up against a wooden barrier surrounding two half-filled dumpsters. He threw himself at the wall, and would have

made it over, if Konstatinov hadn't been right behind him. He grabbed Mikalenko's ankles and hauled the heavy man back, onto the ground, snapping his cuffs on him with a single practiced move.

Mikalenko screamed like they were beating him with batons. David hauled him to his feet and shoved him back toward their unmarked.

"Why are you chasing me?"

"Why are you running away?" David countered.

"Police brutality," Mikalenko yelled. "I want my lawyer. You cannot touch me, I have done nothink. I am innocent."

"We're just going down to the station for a little chat. You can call your lawyer there," David said. They loaded Mikalenko into the back seat of the Crown Vic, still cursing in English and Ukrainian. They listened to twenty minutes of that while they returned to Northeast where they booked Mikalenko on suspicion of soliciting with intent to sell. They didn't bother laying the murder charges on him yet. David knew there wasn't enough proof to take that charge to the DA.

Mikalenko was good as his word. He lawyered up the minute they Mirandized him and took him down to the booking station, where he was fingerprinted and photographed. Now they had an up-to-date picture for their files.

They didn't have a lot more, and David knew if they didn't find something soon, Mikalenko was going to walk. No doubt bound for the first plane back to Ukraine.

They were on a tight leash now.

"Come on," he said to Konstatinov. "Let's go back and talk to those girls. Maybe they'll believe us now."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Monday, 3:55 PM, Cherokee Avenue, Hollywood

They found Irinka packing for a trip she flatly denied planning. She stonewalled any attempts by Konstatinov to get her to talk until David shrugged and pulled out his cuffs. Then she did an abrupt about face and starting talking so fast even Konstatinov had trouble keeping up with her.

The two other women were still in the house, hiding in the closet of the smallest bedroom in the back of the bungalow. They crept out like whipped dogs when David popped the closet door open. Konstatinov kept up a constant stream of soothing conversation, and after several minutes, all three women calmed down enough to talk.

David put a call in to the station to try and round up a female officer who at least had some understanding of Ukrainian. As luck would have it they found one in Chatsworth and she would be dispatched to Northeast that same day. Now, all they had to do was talk the three women into going to the station with the two men, without resorting to arresting them.

Fortunately Konstatinov seemed to have a golden tongue, and a way with the ladies, so it wasn't long before they were laughing and teasing the handsome blond officer, who blushed furiously every time one of the good-looking women looked at him. He seemed especially enamored of the soft zaftig Irinka. He spent the ride back to Northeast leaning on his elbow over the back of his seat, chatting up Irinka and getting her chattering like a magpie.

Back at the station, David threw the car into park. "If you're going to marry the girl, you can set the date later. We need to get them into interview rooms and wait for our translator."

Konstatinov blushed but he still took the time to guide Irinka into the station, leaving the others to be escorted by David, who brought up the rear.

Activity in the station halted as all three women tottered in on high heels, their blond hair swinging free, and their flushed faces taking in the sight of a half a dozen men, most wearing uniforms, stopping whatever they were doing to watch the Ukrainian beauties walk by.

Some wag noticed David and couldn't help from saying, "Now there's a waste. How do I volunteer for a duty like that?"

David ignored him.

Konstatinov led Irinka into an interview room. David took his charges in to two others, separating them so they couldn't cook up stories between them, or corroborate their activities. If he was right, the three women were victims here, but he had to establish that before he could release them. He also had to know they weren't going to skip once they were released. His case against Mikalenko might just hinge on them.

David left the two other women with soft drinks and a quiet word, and joined Konstatinov and Irinka in interview room one.

"You ready?" David asked the younger man.

"What should I ask?"

"I'll feed you lines, you just translate."

"Yes, Detective."

"First, for the record, ask her if we can record? Then get her full name, social, place of birth and employer if she has one."

Irinka was clearly uneasy about recording her interview but Konstatinov soothed her rattled nerves and got her to agree. The rest was easy. They already knew most of it. Then, "Ask her when she first met Mikalenko. Was it here in the US or was it in Ukraine?"

"Ukraine. In Kiev. That was over two years ago."

"Did he have other women with him at the time?"

"No, he was alone. Later there were women, but she's not sure where they came from. Irinka only knew their first names. Halyna and Zuzanna. That was maybe two years ago."

"What did Mikalenko offer them?"

"She is not sure what you mean by offer."

"Did he promise the girls anything? Jobs? Money? Visas for the US?"

Irinka was nodding vigorously. "He told them they would get good jobs in America. That they would be well paid and he also said they would get good husbands. American husbands. It is like marrying a prince to them. Happily ever after."

"It's a wonder he didn't tell them he'd make them movie stars," David snorted. "What's one more impossible dream to shoot for. Was she ever pregnant?"

Irinka bolted upright at the question, her already pale face going parchment white. "She wants to know how you knew? Have you seen her baby? Mickey told her it was dead, that it was born dead. She was never quite sure she believed him. She felt him move when he was born. She thinks she heard him cry."

Tears were leaking down Irinka's face now. She flinched when Konstatinov used a Kleenex to wipe her face dry.

"What about the other women? Any of them have babies too?"

"All of them. Natalya was last. She had her baby only last month."

There had been no babies in the small bungalow. "Natalya? Does she mean Natalya Lapchuk?"

Konstatinov shook his head. "She does not know her last name. Only Natalya."

"What happened to the babies?" David asked.

"She does not know, but she is beginning to fear that the answer to that question is terrible. Mikalenko was present at all of the births and he said they all died. But how do three babies die, boom, boom, boom? It is not like they did not see a doctor.

Mikalenko took them to see a nice Ukrainian doctor several times during their pregnancies. He always seemed to care. So what did he do with them? If the other three were also pregnant, then Mikalenko wanted it that way. He wanted those babies. Why kill them all? Talk about cooking the golden cow.”

“Black market for blond white babies is huge. The sky’s the limit for some rich couple who can’t have their own. They don’t ask too many embarrassing questions. Babies get into the system, they disappear just like that.”

“I am very confused,” Konstatinov said. “Why are the three women dead then? It does not make sense.”

“I don’t know.” David frowned. “You’re right, it doesn’t make any sense. He could have kept the three of them immobile for a few more weeks, induced labor and he’d have had three more very marketable babies to sell. So what went wrong?”

“She seems genuinely confused. She does not see that he might have done harm to them. He was so good to her and her friends. He did not do what he said he was going to do, they never got jobs and the visas they came with were never used. She never even saw them again. Mikalenko took them and told them it was for ‘safe keeping.’ But he did bring men around. And there was talk of marriage.” She gave a delicate shudder. “Some of the men were not nice. Some smelled bad and they were rough.”

“A marriage scam? I’ve heard about them.” David wished Chris was still talking to him. He could get Chris to run down all the information that was available on Internet marriage scams. David never paid a lot of attention to that world, though he knew there were cops who did nothing but work Internet crimes, mostly kiddie porn and identity theft, but something like this might tweak their interest. But he couldn’t go to Chris, could he?

“Did she hear Mikalenko ever talk about money changing hands? For any reason?”

Irinka talked long, waving her arms around to emphasize some points, curling her hands in her lap at other times. Finally

she stopped and sat looking at Konstatinov, who said something soothing to her.

He turned to David. "She says no, then qualifies it. He did want them to be extra pretty for the men and more than once she saw the other men give Mikalenko 'stuff,' she's not sure it was money, but it could have been. She did not like what it implied so she never asked. Whatever it was, none of them ever saw any. Mikalenko bought food, but he expected them to cook it themselves, and keep the house clean. He got very angry when it was not cleaned properly."

"Did he hit them? Beat them when they did something that made them mad?"

"At first she said no, then she admitted he did—once or twice. Not much. I get the impression they pretty well thought that was par for the course. All men hit women. It is their nature."

"Did he claim room and board from them?" Off his puzzled look David explained. "If we go to him with a complaint that he didn't pay his 'workers' he'll claim they were working for room and board. Still not legal, but it might be enough to let him slide out from under."

Konstatinov posed a question and Irinka answered. "Ah, he expected them to pay him. That is why they were supposed to be nice to the men he brought over. If they weren't nice, he told them he would put them out on the street and they would be picked up by immigration."

"Bingo," David said softly. "Now let him try to tell us he was just helping out some fellow country women. How much? How much did he charge them?"

"It depended on how many men they had to be 'nice' to. If there were many, he said they owed more since it was more work to clean and cook for them."

"But they never saw any of this payment? Did he buy them things?"

Irinka nodded. Konstatinov said, "Yes, clothes, toiletries. He even brought in a professional makeup lady who taught them to

put on makeup and look pretty. The woman used to work in movies, she said. She told a lot of fun stories. All the girls hoped to impress a big Hollywood person and live up in the hills. They felt very glamorous, with their faces dressed and the new clothes Mickey gave to them. Sometimes Mikalenko would take them driving in his 'soft' car and show them all the beautiful homes. He implied he could see that they lived up there and had all the money and clothes they ever wanted." Tears welled up in Irinka's eyes as Konstatinov said, "But she says 'All I wanted to do was go home to my baby.' The one Mikalenko didn't get away from her. She is glad now he talked her into leaving the baby behind with her Baba—her grandmother, and her husband. She does not know what Mikalenko would have done to the child if she had been here."

"So if he didn't already have this baby selling scheme planned out, he must have come up with it later. What happened? Did one of his girls get pregnant, and he couldn't force her to get rid of it, so he decided to sell it?"

"It's possible. He is a monster, either way."

David nodded. "Tell her if she cooperates with us, we'll see that she gets home. That I can promise her."

Konstatinov spoke for nearly a minute. That seemed to rejuvenate the woman who chattered for several minutes, presumably about her daughter back home.

David stood up, drawing an alarmed look from Irinka that was quickly quieted by Konstatinov. "I think that's enough for now. We need to interview the other two, then we can see about getting them home. Mikalenko will be in jail at least for the night, even if he does get a mouthpiece. After that, they may want to think about relocating."

Konstatinov relayed the words of advice. Irinka frowned and shook her blond head. "What will they do? Where will they go? They know no one here. Only Mickey—"

"I know, I know. He was always good to them. Tell her I'll think of something. I'm sure we can contact the local women's shelters. They'll help us."

The other two interviews were only moderately productive. They mostly confirmed Irinka's words. It turned out Katrina also had a child in Ukraine, a six-year-old boy who was staying with his aunt, Katrina's sister. She had been married, but her husband was killed in Iraq. He had been dead for over five years. She had no prospects so she had jumped at Mikalenko's offer.

"I'm sure it sounded too good to be true," David muttered after they completed both interviews and released the three women.

"He is one sleazy character," Konstatinov concurred. "I hope you can make a strong case against him."

"You and me both." David glanced at a nearby wall clock. It was nearly six. "Well, I'm calling it a night. We can pick this up tomorrow. Maybe our friend in lockup will decide to spare us all and confess."

Konstatinov snorted. "Even I am not so naïve."

David grinned, though the effort felt strained. "Listen," he said. "Maybe we can get together over breakfast this week and we can talk about what you're looking for in the LAPD. I've been around a few years, I might know a thing or two that could help."

"I would like that very much." David noticed that when Konstatinov became excited, his accent thickened. This time David's grin held more warmth. "Does tomorrow work for you?"

"Is fine. Is great!"

"There's a place down the road that has a pretty decent breakfast. O'Malleys. Come hungry, they feed large. How does seven sound?"

"I will be there."

"Then have a good night," David said and headed for the parking lot where his Chevy waited.

He stopped into the florist again. This time he ordered a dozen red roses, suppressed his inner wince at the bill and sent them to Chris with the message: *I love you, David*. Then he broke

down and ate in the diner beside the hotel. The food wasn't quite as bad as he had feared; he still didn't have much of an appetite, and left most of his meatloaf and mashed on the plate.

He wasn't surprised to find Konstatinov already seated when he walked into the diner the next morning. There were two menus on the table and Konstatinov was half way through what David assumed was his first coffee. Or he could be wrong and the guy had already been here a while, waiting. It wouldn't have surprised him. He'd been that gung-ho in the beginning, too.

"Coffee," he told the waitress when she came by the table. She brought a steaming mug.

"So tell me what are your plans for the next five years? Where do you want to be then?"

Konstatinov put his coffee down and grew serious. "I wish to be a homicide detective, like you."

"Do you know what's involved in that? I mean really involved? It means no more seven-thirty to four shifts, or even ten hour shifts, then off for the night or four days. It means working forty-eight hours straight, no sleep, then being lucky to grab a thirty minute lay down in the pod, before going into another forty-eight. It means considering yourself lucky if you're only working a half a dozen homicides at one time. Only RHD gets the luxury of picking and choosing their cases, and getting the time to actually work them. I've got a light caseload right now, only five active ones and a couple of 60-dayers I still have to work on occasionally, at least to keep my hand in, in case something breaks."

"I am prepared to go the far way. I am strong."

"I'm sure you are, but it's not just strength. It's fortitude, too. With the second guessing pundits always hanging over us all, policing isn't what it used to be. It's a bureaucratic nightmare and I don't know if it's ever going to get better."

"Then you will quit, no?"

David sighed. The kid was shrewd. He saw right through David's bluster. "No, I'm not quitting, though some days I question my sanity."

"Ah we are all Rasmussen crazy. Like a fox, eh?"

"Yeah, crazy like a fox. You can do something for me today. Can you check out some Russian websites and look up those soccer games—Sweden and Russia. I'll see you get an Internet-capable PC."

"I would like that much."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Tuesday, 10:20 AM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

After breakfast, Konstatinov went back to his patrol assignment. David promised to procure him a computer. He found Jairo away from his desk, hopefully for the day. Just before noon he looked up to find the desk sergeant standing over him, a shit-eating grin on his dark face. "You got an admirer, Detective."

The fat, balding ex-NYPD cop set a monstrous bouquet of mums, carnations, lilies and baby's breath ferns on top of his already cluttered desk. He had to grab a pile of folders that threatened to spill onto the floor and find space for the thing. The sergeant was still grinning, and belatedly David saw everyone else was, including Lieutenant McKee, who stood outside his office, arms folded over his chest.

"Laine."

"Er, yes, Lieutenant?"

"What is this about? Some fan of yours?"

Jairo appeared at his desk. He was smiling even more broadly than the desk sergeant. He pulled one of the red mums out of the basket and inhaled the smell. "Maybe a little psychic bluebird sent them."

"Get them off your desk, Laine. This is a work space, not a flower shop."

David's face grew hot, but he obeyed, with some reluctance. He carried the flowers down to his locker, hating to shut them up where he knew they would wilt and die, but he had no choice. Once he was sure he was alone, he pulled out the small gift card that had come with the flowers. It said simply. *"I love you. Let's talk."*

He smiled down at the colorful array of blooms, and plucked a carnation out. He wove the stem through his buttoned down shirt front and paused to admire the effect. He knew he was going to be razed by the guys, he knew someone would make some stupid crack about not bending over to pick up anything off the floor when David was around. Sometimes their taunts were so predictable. Yesterday's news.

He touched the bouquet, inhaling the smell of cut flower, green fern and earth. He knew it was a test Chris had sent him. A message, how far was he willing to go for his lover? Into the land of ridicule? Or would self-loathing hold him back? His heart felt twenty pounds lighter, and though it wasn't an admission that Chris wanted him back, things were looking up. At least he wasn't sending David his clothes. Maybe they could work this out for real.

After lunch Konstatinov called David and told him the results of his morning search. "Eight and a half weeks ago the Russian national team played the Swedes. Sweden won by twelve points."

"Any other plays between them around that time?"

"The only other game was about a week later. That one was won by the Russians."

Around two Mikalenko's mouthpiece, a high-priced lawyer from Brentwood, showed up. David and Konstatinov met him and the prisoner in an interview room. He set Jairo to watch the proceedings through the two-way.

After introducing themselves, David gestured for the lawyer and Mikalenko to sit at the table.

"What exactly are you charging my client with?" the mouthpiece, Donald Fishburn, asked, before they had even taken seats.

Before he could start, David recited everyone's name, his rank, the time and place for the recording device and video. Then he ticked points off on his fingertips, "Forced confinement, solicitation for the purposes of sex, crossing interstate lines, the illegal procurement of children for sale, murder."

"Murder!" Mikalenko sat bolt upright, his face flush with anger and fear. "Who did I kill? You have proof? You have no proof!"

Fishburn put his hand across Mikalenko's arm. "Don't speak, Mr. Mikalenko. They're trying to goad you into speaking rashly."

"I'm trying to get your client to tell us the truth, that's all. He can do that and we can wrap this up."

"My client has nothing to say to you."

"Then I suppose we should go ahead with charging him. I'll strongly support no bail, as your client is clearly a flight risk, since he's not even American. He's already shown his skill at getting people in and out of the country, it's only one step further to getting himself out. I'm sure the judge will agree."

"I did not kill anyone!"

"Then tell me who did."

Mikalenko folded his arms over his chest. His arm muscles bulged. If David had to guess he'd say Mickey lifted weights. The better to intimidate the smaller, lighter females he smuggled into the country?

"Did you know a Doctor Jozef Sevchuk?"

"No," Mikalenko said.

"He was a gynecologist," David said helpfully.

Mikalenko shook his head violently. "No, I say."

"What did you do with the children, Mikalenko?"

"What children?" But this time Mikalenko's eyes shifted left, moving to study the far wall. He licked his fleshy lips. "I know nothing of any children." He muttered something in Ukrainian.

Immediately Konstatinov wrote something down and passed it to David. It said "Damn children. Should never have gotten involved."

"Hush," Fishburn snapped to his angry client. "Don't you know they would bring an interpreter?"

Mikalenko scowled and picked at the skin of his cuticles. "I did not kill her."

David leaned forward. "I don't recall giving a sex for the victim. Who is 'her'? Halyna Stakchinko?"

"I did not kill Halyna." He raised his head and glared at David. "I love her."

David glanced at Konstatinov, then back at Mikalenko. "Love?" he said, filling his voice with loathing. "You sold her into prostitution. Did you impregnate her too? Easy enough to prove. Once we get a warrant for your DNA we'll be able to match you to the baby Stakchinko was carrying."

"Bah, your witchcraft does not scare me. If Halyna was carrying my baby then it was God's will she do so. Just as it was God's will she fall to her death—"

Two things happened then, Fishburn leaned forward and hissed in his client's ear, "Shut up!" and David stood up.

"Mr. Valerian Mikalenko, you are under arrest for the murder of Halyna Stakchinko and for causing the premature death of a fetus."

"My client is invoking his right to silence," Fishburn said.

"He can invoke anything he wants; he's still under arrest." David nodded toward the two-way. The door opened and Jairo entered the room. He held a pair of handcuffs in his hands. Mikalenko went pale at the sight of the bracelets dangling from Jairo's lean fingers.

"Stand up, Mr. Mikalenko—"

"I did not kill her!"

"Three women are dead at your hand, Mr. Mikalenko. You can make this a whole lot easier if you just tell us about them—"

"Three?" Mikalenko gaped at him and David saw genuine confusion in his blue eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Halyna Stakchinko, Zuzanna Konjenko and Natalya Lapchuk. Halyna and Zuzanna roughly five months pregnant at the time of their deaths. All having resided in the same address,

1208 Leland Way in Hollywood, between November of last year and eight days ago.”

“I never touched any of those girls.”

“You better have more than just some DNA on my client to bring on such charges. Being the father of a woman’s child does not automatically make him a killer.”

“Having all three women under his roof at the same time, having all of them wind up dead, is pretty strong circumstantial evidence. I’m sure a Grand Jury will agree.”

“I wish to leave,” Mikalenko said.

He and his lawyer stood up. “This interview is at an end.”

David rose too. He nodded at Jairo who cuffed their prisoner and pulled him out of the room followed by his still protesting lawyer.

“I’ll see you in court, counselor.”

The interview room door shut behind them. David met Konstatinov’s gaze. “Did he really say that?”

“I exaggerate a bit. I make an inference on what he means. Was I wrong?”

“No, your instincts are dead on. You spooked him good. We’ll see if the seeds you planted bear anything interesting.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You can probably go back to your Lieutenant for the rest of the day. I’ll call you if Mikalenko wants to talk more.”

“Yes sir!”

David had a bounce in his step when he headed back to his desk. He didn’t even mind facing the blank screen of his PC while he formulated the right words to do his report of the interview. He could taste success. After a grueling—not to mention frustrating—investigation they were about to nail their killer. It was always a heady feeling.

Jairo returned shortly after. Some of David’s good mood evaporated. He ignored his partner and concentrated on his computer.

"Whatever you did to him, I'd say it's working," Jairo said.

"What do you mean?"

"The little twerp was sweating bullets while I was taking him to lockup. His lawyer spent the whole time trying to get him to shut up but he blubbered all the way there."

"Did he say anything incriminating?"

"Nah, he may be a stupid asshole, but even he's smarter than that. But he sure didn't like your inference that he lit up those other two broads."

"The other two—you mean Zuzanna Konjenko and Natalya Lapchuk?"

"Yeah, those two. He didn't seem too put out you told him he did the other one, but for some reason the mention of those two got his ticker all in knots."

David frowned and leaned back in his chair. "So he seems willing to cop to Stakchinko, but denies the other two? I wonder why."

"Hey, the guy's a whack job. How can you expect him to sound sane?"

"You're right. But I think I'd like to schedule another interview with the guy soon anyway. See how he likes his new home over at Men's Central. It might soften him up a bit, make him even more talkative."

"Works for me. You going to do it today?"

"Tomorrow's good enough. Let him stew in lockup for a night."

"You have a cruel streak, anyone ever tell you that?" Jairo's voice dropped. "I like that in a man."

David glared at him. "What did I tell you about that, Detective?"

"I can cool my jets," Jairo said with a shrug. "For now. I know it won't be permanent."

"You *know* too damn much."

Jairo licked his lips. "Yeah," he said softly. "I do."

Tuesday, 4:20 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

Chris got off the phone after a lengthy conversation with Jantz. His new boss apologized for dragging him to New York for business when he was so recently out of the hospital, and it was several minutes of back and forth, before Chris could convince the guy he was fine. In fact he planned to come in to work the next day to start planning the implementation of their new system. The equipment was already on order, equipment Chris had overseen the procurement of, and now the next phase would begin. Chris felt the usual burst of excitement a new contract brought. He was good at what he did, and knew it. It was especially gratifying when someone else recognized his skills. Jantz had been suitably impressed, and Chris figured working through the injuries didn't hurt his cause. He foresaw a long and profitable future with Jantz, and his startup enterprise.

He threw together a quick pasta dish, and ate in the living room where he could moon over the flowers David had sent. He hadn't even had a vase big enough for the roses and had to go out and buy something. Now both bouquets sat on the dining room coffee table and Chris wasn't sure which one he liked more. The orchids and daisies were wonderful, and he knew David remembered how he liked the combination of sophistication and down-home-feel-good, but the roses, each a deep crimson red, were beyond compare. They spoke of a truly deep feeling and Chris got all teary-eyed when he thought of what David was going through. So he had gone online to a local florist and arranged to have flowers delivered to David at work, since he had no idea where David was staying right now. He thought briefly about how David would react getting such a wildly inappropriate gift at the police station, and almost succumbed to the giggles when he thought of David's reaction. Not to mention the other cops. He got the dishes into the dishwasher and grabbed his jacket out of the hall closet. Sergeant trotted after him, knowing what was coming and eager to get out of the house.

Chris paused only to make sure his BlackBerry was on his belt, he had the dog's Frisbee, and his keys were in his pocket,

then he grabbed the leash, snapped it on, and headed to the park. Sergeant trotted briskly at his side, eager to run. Once in the park Chris made a short dash to let Sergeant stretch his legs and blow off some steam, then they settled into a more sedate walk.

“Bet you’re sorry David’s not here to take you, aren’t you big guy? He’d give you a real running.”

Sergeant wiggled his butt and leapt up to catch the Frisbee Chris held in his hand.

“Yeah, I miss him too.”

The dog worried the Frisbee, throwing his head from side to side as he tried to “kill” the flying disk. Chris looked around surreptitiously, and when he saw no one in sight, he unclipped the leash, drew the Frisbee back, and flung it out across the grass. Sergeant took off after it, flying through the air to snatch it out of the sky. He raced back to Chris, dropping it on the ground in front of him, waiting for Chris to do it again. They did this several times, until a lady with a pair of salt and pepper Schnauzers came into the park. She eyed Sergeant with wary eyes and pursed her mouth in a thin line.

“You’re supposed to have your animal on a leash,” she sniffed.

He mumbled an apology and clipped Sergeant’s leash on. The dog picked up the Frisbee and followed Chris down toward the reservoir.

That was when he saw Jairo. He stood beside a low, sporty car with the same brown lab he had brought to the park the last time. The dog got all excited when he saw Sergeant, which told Chris they had met before. How many times, his treacherous mind wondered. He thought of the two huge bouquets of flowers David had sent him the last two days. Guilt gifts or true regret? Then he thought of his own gift he had sent only this afternoon. Would it come across as an apology for how he’d kicked David out? Or a simple declaration of love? He glared at Jairo, who sauntered over.

“What are you doing here?”

“Came to see David.”

“David’s not here.”

Jairo frowned. “Not sure I follow you.”

“David has gone. You want to talk to him, I guess you’ll have to do it at work.”

“You mean he left you? So I guess the flowers are your way of saying you’re sorry? He put them in his locker, you know. Didn’t want them on his desk. Left you, huh.”

“That’s none of your fucking business. Now leave us alone.”

Jairo and his dog retreated to his car, and Chris took Sergeant home, where he shut and locked the door behind him. After a while he collected both bouquets and dumped them in a large plastic garbage bag. He put them out in the sealed bin out back that helped keep the local wildlife at bay, and slammed the patio door shut on the way back in. The glass panes rattled at the violence. He barely registered it. In the kitchen he opened a bottle of Merlot, and took a glass, and the bottle, into the media room where he watched sitcoms until the bottle was empty.

The next day he went to work and arranged to have the locks on the house changed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Wednesday, 7:55 AM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

Jairo entered the squad room minutes after David. He draped his jacket over the back of his chair and slid his laptop up on the scarred desk. He glanced up at David.

“I’d like to sit in on any further interviews you do with Mikalenko. It’s as much my case as yours and I think I’ve earned the right.”

It galled David to admit it, but Jairo was right. He had earned it. When he wasn’t trying to start something, he had proved his mettle, and his willingness to buckle down and get the job done. It wasn’t entirely his fault that he completely rubbed David the wrong way. It was David’s. He finally had to accept that it was his own desire for the sexy young man that had brought grief down on himself. If he could have maintained a professional mien from the beginning none of this would have happened. Before he had met Chris, he had indulged, picking up one guy or another for a few hours of hard, satisfying sex, but he had always been in charge of those encounters. He hadn’t let anyone penetrate his guard, and pick the time and place.

Jairo was a whole new experience and David found he didn’t like it one bit.

“So what’s our first stop with this guy?” If Jairo was aware of his turmoil, he gave no sign. “How do you handle someone who’s lawyered up?”

“Ask him as many questions as you can think of until the lawyer makes him stop. These guys have egos that don’t quit, they want to brag. And we make him sweat. You don’t always have to get verbal responses to figure out what’s bugging

someone. He gets spooked, he's going to give something away. Only the coolest psychopath can remain calm all the time."

"You lie? That always puzzled me, that we have to tiptoe around these scum bags, but it's okay to lie through our teeth to them."

"We can lie, but don't threaten them. It might make you feel better to promise them the gas chamber or a needle, but we can't do that. The lawyers will ace you every time if you try that stunt. And it would set you up to lose an appeal if you do manage to get a conviction. So play it cool. Tell him we found meth in his house, but not that he's going to death row in the big Q."

"So how are you going to approach him?"

"Get all my facts on the table. Show him what we've got. It's dirty and I hate it, but sometimes it's better if we can plea them down and get the guy off the street instead of being stubborn and going for the max and losing it all to a technicality or a jury having 'reasonable doubt.' The CSI effect can kill us too. People watch those shows and think the forensics is really a magic bullet that always tells the whole story. If the DNA evidence doesn't match their expectations they walk the perpetrator." David shuffled some papers. "I think we've built a pretty solid case, even if it is mostly circumstantial. DNA's not going to help us much in this case and that's always worrisome. We can prove he's the father of Halyna's baby, maybe even the baby in the first grave, Zuzanna I suspect. But I doubt even Dr. Galt can type the bones of the third baby. It's pretty hard to even sex them at that age. But we've got them all in the same house, all coming over from Kiev where we can put Mikalenko at least part of the time. I suspect he traveled back and forth a few times, recruiting girls, arranging to smuggle them over. We can start working on warrants to get the flight manifests from Ukrainian flights to the US or Mexico. The cell phone records that put him in touch with the doctor, and some other numbers I want to look at. Maybe we'll get lucky and find some of his business associates."

David chewed on his mustache. "The only thing I can't figure out is their connection to the Avenues. What possible

association could a Ukrainian ex-pat and baby broker have with a low life gang set? Do gangs even broker babies? It's not part of any MO I'm aware of."

"It's a little too touchy-feely for them," Jairo said. "Face it, someone would have to look after the kids while they waited for the perfect mark. They'd have to make sure it was well taken care of too, no crackhead sitters. They might be happy pimping the girls out, but these women were pretty high class for the Avenues to run. They could hardly sell them on a street corner in Glassell Park to other homies." Jairo snorted. "That would be like giving prime rib away to the tweakers on Western."

David met Jairo's eyes squarely. "You seem to know a lot about bangers."

"I got a cuz or two in the hood," Jairo said warily. "I never got jumped in. Knew some of the sets, but that's about it."

"It's still more than I ever did. You can look into that angle. Tell me why the Avenues are doing business with a Ukrainian doctor."

Jairo seemed excited. Finally a venue he could shine in? "I'll get right on it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Wednesday, 8:40 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

Chris's car was not in the driveway. Working late? David felt an ice worm slide through his gut. He hoped that's all Chris was doing, but if he wasn't... He couldn't fault his lover for seeking comfort somewhere else. But the thought brought a pain worse than a knife slash. How could he live if Chris was unfaithful? Had he given up all his rights to Chris? Just how much of a fool was he?

The biggest one. Just how badly had he messed up here?

And was it salvageable?

He stood outside his cooling Chevy and stared at the home he had shared with Chris for over four years. Then squeezing his fist around the house keys he strode up to the enclosed courtyard, past the two Italian cypress trees Chris's grandmother had planted thirty years ago.

He tried to insert his key. It wouldn't go into the slot. He stared down at the innocuous piece of metal and frowned. And tried again. Same result. He swallowed past a sudden lump in his throat.

Chris had changed the locks.

Inside the house he heard Sergeant growing increasingly excited; he knew David was on the other side of the door. His fretful whining deepened in the gloom that had sunk into David's chest. Behind him he heard the shuffle of human footsteps and a dog padding along with them. He turned to find Joanne, their neighbor and their black lab Koko.

"Hello, David. Haven't seen you around lately. You and Chris keeping busy?"

"Ah, yes, Joanne. We have been."

"I hardly see either of you." Something seemed to penetrate her mind. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh sure," David said. "I guess I just left my keys at work..."

They both looked down at the keys in his hand. He abruptly stepped down onto the cobblestoned driveway. "Well, I need to get back to work. Take care, and say hi to Tim. Maybe we'll see you around now that spring's coming..."

"Of course. You and Chris will have to come over for a barbecue some night. Tim's got some new fangled gadget to use on the barbecue and he's dying to try it out. You know men and their toys..." Her voice faded into an awkward silence. He took advantage of it to get to this car and flee before she could say anything else. As he drove back to the hotel his mind was numb.

Chris was beyond mad this time. He seemed willing to wipe out everything they'd forged over the last four years. Was it really over?

David refused to accept that. Chris might be willing to give up on them, but he wasn't.

Wednesday, 11:55 AM, Two California Plaza, South Grand Avenue, Los Angeles

Chris had spent the morning in the boardroom with the other two technicians who would be responsible for overseeing the installation of the new system and securing it so the vital data it would eventually hold would be protected. Now as lunch rolled around he could get back to his first love, hands on implementation of the newest flavor of the network operating system he had recommended to Jantz and the others. They had been more than willing to let him be the arbiter in those matters, for which he was grateful. So many CEOs, or even CIOs, often let smooth talking salesmen guide their choices, not time tested facts.

They would primarily be running a Linux distro, with a full SQL database on the back end and even Linux firewalls to secure the whole site. Every server was running in a virtual state, on several high-powered quadcore stateless servers that, in turn, were networked into a storage area network. A pair of RAID 10 multi disk SANS would constantly hot sync and act as mirrored backup sets over 10 Gigabit Ethernet fibrelines, each maintaining an exact copy of the other, so if one went down the system would remain active, secure and intact. The RAID 10 was overkill in Chris's experience but Jantz seemed more concerned about industrial espionage than crackers. According to Jantz they were dealing in some pretty heavy new technologies and they were determined to keep the competition in the dark as long as possible.

He glanced around the table at his crew. One face was more than familiar. He had finally talked his old DataTEK colleague, Rebecca Chapman, into joining him at the growing Intelligent Security Ltd. He had started the company when he had left DataTEK after his debacle with the Carpet Killer, which had brought David into his life—his mind shied away from thoughts of David. It wasn't going to do him any good to dwell on that right now. He would have to deal with David later, once he could think straight. Right now he had a business to run.

He nodded at Becky. Beside her sat the Frenchman, Geissel, who everyone called Dr. Seuss or just Doctor. He was their Information Security Manager, and he was in charge of protecting Microchip Interface Technologies' data from all threats. One of Jantz's secretaries glided into the room to distribute the lunch Chris had ordered earlier. Silently she passed out cutlery, napkins, cups and plates of steaming offerings from a local bistro.

They broke off to eat, but in typical IT fashion they kept talking shop. IT people never left their work at the office.

Chris was especially interested in the latest news from the Jericho Group, the Open source organization that was changing the paradigm of how businesses managed their data and kept it safe from inside and outside threats.

But though the food was exceptional and the conversation everything he could have wanted, Chris felt restless. His mind kept going back to the last time he had seen David, and the short conversation he'd had with Jairo. Had he been too rash in his decision to cut David out of his life without once talking to him? Was he being fair? David had admitted what Jairo and he had done, which in hindsight wasn't very much. He hadn't bedded the guy after all. Only wanted to. Which was bad, but it wasn't as bad as a real physical encounter. And if Jairo was the initiator, then why was he trusting him to tell the truth about what he and David were doing? Maybe he was using this schism to get between the two lovers. Well, it was working. Was he making it too easy to isolate David and make him even more vulnerable to his admittedly good-looking partner, who clearly had some serious intentions on David? Now that he thought about it, Jairo had made tracks to tell Chris that David had disposed of the flowers he sent. Why was that? He was hardly just being "helpful."

No, the guy was being a nasty bitch. Why hadn't Chris seen that before?

Belatedly he grew aware that his name was being called. He shook himself out of his funk and found Becky and the Doctor watching him, confused. He flushed and smiled.

"Ah, sorry. Wool-gathering. Where were we?"

"I was just saying since Dr. Jantz is so concerned with network penetration that I've devised a honeypot to deflect any probes into the inner network," the Doctor said, his slight French accent giving his voice a musical slant that normally Chris would find sexy as hell. Right now it was just distracting. "My focus is going to be on safe-guarding the data as opposed to the entry ports. Right now we're securing the terminal devices. That will be a major effort, even given the use of Linux on back and front ends."

Chris nodded. "Good. Send me the latest on that and I can get it to Dr. Jantz for his weekly partner meeting. Anything else?" He looked at Becky who shook her dark head. The Doctor gathered up his laptop and BlackBerry and left. Becky hung around.

"Everything okay, Chris? You seemed preoccupied there for a bit. You usually don't get so distracted in a business meeting."

"No, everything's okay."

"You don't lie worth a shit."

"Thanks, Beck. I'll keep that in mind."

She shrugged. "Well, my shoulder's always there if you need to lean on something. I always had good ears."

"Thanks," Chris said and this time he meant it. He might have confided in her, she'd been around since before he met David, but his mind was still in too much of a stew to make sense of it all, and he knew he'd only confuse her if he tried to tell her what was going on. "Let's get to work on those final SAN configurations. I want to verify the collection of virtual desktops that Jantz ordered. Afterwards we can run our initial tests and hopefully give it a green light by the end of the week."

They piled the dirty dishes and garbage on the tray the secretary had left behind and headed to the secure server room. There they found the Doctor hunched over a laptop he was using to remotely connect to one of his servers.

Chris and Becky headed over to where the SAN racks were located. Both of them pulled out their own laptops and logged into the network. The next four hours were spent in the kind of semi-daze Chris always experienced when he was immersed in the virtual world of networked computers. He was glad to go where there was no room for David or his worrisome habits.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Wednesday, 2:15 PM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David and Jairo met outside the interview room and waited for Mikalenko and his lawyer to show up. Once inside David set up the recorder and started the session with everyone's name and the date and location. Then he casually slid the list of LUDS across the table. Fishburn picked it up.

"What is this?"

"A list of all your client's calls from the cell phone recovered from a shallow grave in Griffith Park. A grave, I might add, that contained a total of four bodies."

"Four—"

Fishburn put his hand on Mikalenko's bulging arm. "I have told you not to speak."

"But the cellular—"

"Is not your concern. Leave it. Make them prove you used it and that you dealt with those people." He indicated the LUD list. "We give them nothing, understand?"

Mikalenko subsided into his seat, seething.

David noticed the once robust man was already showing the prison pallor of long term inmates. He knew Mikalenko hadn't been incarcerated long enough to produce the effect naturally, so it must be stress. Was Mikalenko coming unglued? David pressed his advantage.

"I'll ask one more time, do you know Doctor Jozef Sevchuk?"

"And I'm telling you no!"

David met Fishburn's gaze. "I think you might want to talk your client into telling the truth. We have corroborating

witnesses that state that not only did your client know Jozef Sevchuk, but that he employed the doctor's services for his captive women."

Fishburn leaned over and whispered fiercely into Mikalenko's ears. Mikalenko flushed with rage. Finally Fishburn turned back to David.

"He says he will tell you about the girls, but he still insists he didn't kill them."

"Then maybe he knows who did." David was watching, Mikalenko when he said that, and saw his eyes widen imperceptibly, until he shuttered them again. "Tell him I want full disclosure."

"He wants to know what kind of deal he can get."

"That's not up to me, you know that. The DA will need to be involved on that end."

Fishburn relayed that to Mikalenko in more whispers. Mikalenko squared his shoulders and met David's cool gaze. He bore no guilt in his eyes. Only guile. David knew he was trying to figure out what he could get from this.

"Then I wish to speak to your DA," he said.

David nodded and stood up. "I'll see if I can get her to come over."

"Her?" Mikalenko sneered. "I do not deal with women."

"You'll deal with whoever is sent to talk to you. Better tell your client, counselor, that he doesn't call the shots here."

More hurried whispering, then a much chastened Mikalenko nodded.

"He'll cooperate with your DA, whoever it is." Fishburn traded another look with Mikalenko. "But we will say nothing else until we meet with this person."

"Fair enough, but if your client clams up, then all bets are off. We have more than that to go on, so tell him not to think he can weasel out of talking."

"Bring your DA and we will talk," Mikalenko said, his eyes cold and hostile.

Jairo took Mikalenko back to lockup. When he returned to the squad room, he dropped into his chair. "Well, was that good or bad? Will he talk?"

"He'll talk. Whether he'll say anything of real value..." David shrugged. "But we don't stop here. I need you to follow up on the Avenues angle. I'll talk to the doctor again. There are big gaping holes in this whole thing. I want to do some back and fill before we meet Mickey again with the DA."

"I got a couple of people to talk to," Jairo said. "I'll try to set up a meet."

"Yeah, well, be careful."

"Aw, I didn't know you cared."

David just glared at him. He turned away from Jairo and picked up his phone. He put a call in to Konstatinov's watch commander and requested the young man for another day.

After he hung up the forensic botanist called to report on what he had found in the skeletonized woman's shroud.

"I found traces of a commercial fertilizer, as well as plant debris from several cultivars and some *Eucalyptus globulus*, blue gum Eucalyptus leaves."

"So nothing like what you'd expect to find in Griffith Park?" David asked. He tried to remember if that section of the park had any of the drought resistant Eucalyptus trees, transplanted from Australia in the nineteenth century.

"Depends on what area of Griffith you're talking about."

Scientists. They could never give a definitive yes or no. "They came out of someone's garden?"

"There's a high probability."

"I'll take that as a yes. Anything unique about the cultivars?" It was probably too much to hope they were some rare, just released variety.

"Nothing, I'm afraid. These varieties could probably be found in every garden center in the state."

"Thanks, Doctor. If I get a sample, I'll get you to look it over for a match."

“Any time, Detective.”

Konstatinov was there within half an hour, like he’d been waiting for the call.

David grabbed his jacket. “We’re going to talk to the doctor again. See if we can shake anything else loose.”

Konstatinov nodded, his face alight with eagerness. David could almost hear the sirens going off in his head. He was a real cop. Doing real cop work.

“We will just fall in?”

“Drop in? Yeah, put the element of surprise in our court.”

Konstatinov’s grin was contagious. “Most excellent.”

“So let’s get our most excellent asses out to Hollywood.”

Dr. Sevchuk was just finishing up with his last patient, a very pregnant blonde who happily waddled out of the examining room, to be met by a florid-faced man, several years her senior. He solicitously helped her out the door. Sevchuk didn’t see them as he came out of the room and crossed to the receptionist. She must have told him they were there because he spun around, his face blanching.

For a guy who was so innocent, he showed a lot of guilt. David wasn’t leaving until he found out why.

“Doctor, we just have a few more questions.”

“I am a busy man, officer—”

“That’s okay, we won’t be long.”

David and Konstatinov flanked the short man and guided him into his office. Konstatinov shut the door behind them. Neither of them sat, towering over the sweating Ukrainian.

“Y-yes, how can I help you? I am about helping the police.”

“Good, then this should be easy,” David said. He leaned toward the stoop-shouldered doctor. “When you last saw either Halyna or Zuzanna, did either of them seem apprehensive?”

“I do not understand—”

“Scared. Nervous.”

Konstatinov spat a few words at the doctor, who grew more agitated. "Nervous? No, not at all—"

"Don't lie to me, Doctor. It will come out and it will look bad for you. You could be charged with an accessory to murder."

"M-murder! That is insane. I am a doctor, not a murderer!"

"Then tell us what happened."

Sevchuk sighed and his already small frame seemed to shrink into itself. He finally spoke at length and Konstatinov translated. "He says, 'Halyna was the first to come to me with her fears.' At first he dismissed her as just being a silly, pregnant woman, but after a while he had to wonder if she wasn't right."

"And what were her fears?" David pressed.

"She feared that Mikalenko was going to do something with the baby. In fact she was sure of it."

"Did she say what she suspected he was going to do?"

Konstatinov listened carefully to the doctor's voluminous answer and nodded. "She was afraid he was going to take their babies away. He's very insistent that she said 'they.'"

"So she knew his designs encompassed all the women and their upcoming births. So if she was afraid, why didn't she try to get away from him?"

"He says she told him that Mikalenko watched them like a bird—I think he means hawk. They were never let out of the house and he was around a lot more then, like he knew something was up. Plus, no more men came around."

"I guess selling babies is a lot more lucrative than prostitution. Besides one of the johns might have been too sympathetic to the new mother. Mikalenko couldn't have that." David stared hard at the doctor, who was sweating profusely now. "Did either she or Mikalenko say where the babies would be born? It hardly seems likely they'd do it in a hospital. Too many people who might help the women. Some nurse might have seen something hinky and called a cop, or a social worker."

"I think Halyna said he had arranged for a mid-wife to assist the women..." But when Sevchuk spoke he refused to meet David's eyes.

David knew the man was lying. He took a step closer, his face less than a foot from Sevchuk's. "Stop bullshitting me, Doctor. You were going to deliver the babies, weren't you? You, and maybe your receptionist."

"No!" David leaned so close his hot breath fanned Sevchuk's flushed face. He began to speak again in Ukrainian. Konstatinov translated. "Yes! He say he pay me ten thousand dollars for all three women. That all I had to do was make sure they were safe and their babies healthy."

"Did Halyna know this? Did she know you were going to deliver the children and hand them over to your boss?"

"Mikalenko not my boss."

"He owns you lock, stock and breathing baby," David snapped. Sevchuk hung his head.

He whispered. "I think she knew. They all knew. Just as they knew Mikalenko would not let them keep the babies and that there was nothing they could do about it."

"What did they do, Doctor? They felt trapped. Just how desperate did they feel?"

"She would not have done anything to harm anyone. Halyna was not like that. All she wanted was to have her baby—"

"And instead of helping her by making a single, lousy phone call to the police, all you could think of was your ten thousand dollars. The money was more important than the safety of those women. Don't you take the Hippocratic oath in Ukraine?"

"I thought I was helping them! You do not know Mikalenko. He can be a very cruel man. A monster, even. I knew he would hurt the girls if he found out they was trying to get away." He swallowed convulsively. "He would have killed me if he ever thought I was trying to help them."

"But calling the police was out of the question?"

Sevchuk hung his head lower, his chin tucked into his chest. Eyes squeezed shut as though blocking out unwanted images. What nightmares did he have at night when the lights went out? Whatever it was, it wasn't enough. "I was afraid," he whispered.

David straightened. He nodded to Konstatinov. "Well, we'll see how less afraid you are in jail."

Konstatinov pulled his cuffs out and stepped forward. "Put your hands behind your back, palms together," he said, repeating the command in Ukrainian. Sevchuk hesitated, a pleading look on his round face, then resignedly he turned and assumed the position. Konstatinov snicked the metal bracelets in place. He guided the doctor toward the office door.

"I guess office hours are officially over," David said.

"Am I under arrest, officer?"

"Yes, Dr. Sevchuk, you are under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder and conspiracy to engage in the exchange of sex for money. We'll get into the baby brokering some other time. Just know we've got enough to put you away for a good long time. That ten thousand came with an expense you weren't expecting."

The receptionist stared at them in wide-eyed horror as they paraded Sevchuk through the waiting room. But when she stood up David motioned her to stay where she was. Sevchuk launched into a stream of heated Ukrainian. Konstatinov translated.

"He is telling her that everything will be okay, that it's all a misunderstanding. Oh, and he asked her to call his lawyer."

"The words of a truly innocent man."

Wednesday, 6:15 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

Chris let himself in and was immediately overwhelmed by dog. Sergeant seemed unusually hyperactive and Chris wondered why. Until he went outside and met his neighbor, Joanne.

“Oh hi, Chris. I was just telling David earlier that we don’t see either of you very much any more.” She chatted away, completely oblivious to the ashen silence that fell over Chris. “I said you two have to come over for dinner some night for barbecue...” Finally something seemed to penetrate. She fell silent. “Is something wrong, Chris? Are you still not feeling good? After that terrible accident and all, I was worried. It’s so bad on the freeways today, you just never know—”

“No, I’m fine, Joanne. Just tired, is all.”

“Oh, I understand that.” She looked down to where Sergeant and Koko were twined around each other leashes and giggled. “Your dog is beautiful. Funny, I never really saw you or David as dog people. Guess you never know, do you?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her if she thought maybe faggots didn’t own dogs, then he bit back the uncalled for snipe. She and her husband were good neighbors, a little square and conventional, but still the kind of people you wanted next door, if something ever happened. He’d never seen any sign that they were bent out of shape at him and David being a couple. They said they liked having a cop next door.

So did I, he thought wistfully. This was crazy. He missed David. *And he came around to see me?* Just how bad was it for David? Bad. He just knew it. It was bad for him, too. He never meant for it to go this far. David was just supposed to apologize and Chris would forgive him. Wouldn’t he? God, he wished he could see him right now, this second. He would forgive him, if he could just see him.

But... hadn’t David betrayed his trust? David and Jairo... the thought had the power to make him physically sick.

He tugged at Sergeant’s leash. “Come on, guy. Let’s take you out for your walk.” He waved at Joanne, eager to get away from her, before she could ask more questions. They headed toward the park, part of him dreading the reappearance of Jairo, part of him welcoming the chance to put the horrible little queen in his place.

The opportunity never presented itself. The walk was uneventful. Sergeant played with some other neighborhood

dogs, and was a hit with anyone who had the courage to approach him, and get past the fact that he was a Doberman. Once they did, Sergeant won them over with his friendliness and his charm.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Thursday, 7:55 AM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David ate a fat bear claw and black coffee at his cluttered desk for breakfast. Outside a weak early morning sun, and a fitful breeze off the San Gabriel's, was finally clearing off the smog that had rolled in so thick during the night he had thought there were forest fires burning somewhere. Jairo was nowhere to be seen. A momentary blessing. David typed up his second interview report on Mikalenko and Sevchuk, neatly tying the two together. He could see the light at the end of a long, tortuous tunnel and it no longer looked like an oncoming train. Maybe, just maybe he wouldn't have to write a 60-day on this one.

The DA still hadn't gotten back to him about his request. No doubt she needed time to look over his evidence and Mikalenko's previous record. If she was suitably impressed he was sure he'd hear from her. Meaning if she thought the case was a slam dunk she'd call. The current DA, like most of her predecessors, was a political animal through and through. She wouldn't take on anything she wasn't almost guaranteed to win. David had long ago given up letting the political exigencies of an elected official's need for gold stars get to him. There was no doubt the press would love this one, so if David could convince her of its winnability, then she would go for it. Saving beautiful blond women from foreigners was always worth brownie points at the election polls.

David knew he had abandoned whatever ideals he might have had when he joined the force. They had largely been driven out by a press that wouldn't know the truth if it was a ravening weasel attached to their face, or a mayor who could only see as far as the next election. Now that the self-serving politicians and so called community leaders had ham-strung the

LAPD with their useless chest-pounding, he guessed they got the police force they wanted. He was just no longer sure if he wanted to be a part of it.

But David, like Jairo, wasn't a quitter.

It galled him that he had something in common with the brash young detective. He would rather they were miles apart in everything. But the truth was, they both wanted to be good cops. And no one would let them be that anymore.

Following a late lunch, the DA finally called. She could meet him tomorrow morning at the Men's Central where Mikalenko and Sevchuk were being held. She would speak to Sevchuk first, since he offered the better chance of breaking his fragile defenses and getting what they needed to get Mikalenko.

"I hope you're right in your assessment," she said. "We don't need a diplomatic incident where it looks like we're targeting foreign nationals."

"I doubt the Ukrainians would want to touch this pair either. Unless one of them is connected."

The DA made a rude sound. "Just what I need, a mob connected Ukrainian soldier."

"I doubt if the doctor is connected to anything. It's Mikalenko that's the questionable one. He wants to deal too, but I'd feel better doing a deal with Sevchuk. His biggest crime was greed. Not like Mikalenko, who was evil all around."

"Well, bring me the goods and I'd love to put them both away. I'm happy cutting this doctor a deal if he'll give us the goods on the other one."

"I'll deliver what I can, counselor."

"You always were a cautious one, Laine. But you get results, that's all that counts in the end. Not like some of the hotshots who think all they have to do is phone it in and I'll do the work."

David didn't know whether to thank her or be insulted. He chose silence.

"Eight o'clock tomorrow then."

“Eight.”

Back in the squad room, Jairo was waiting for him. His eyes were glowing and he jumped to his feet when David entered the room.

“I think we have an ID on the skeletonized remains. Dental records for a Katrina Mydry. Found her records through a Ukrainian dentist in Westwood.”

“What made you go there?”

“Ukrainian, right? They had Ukrainian doctors and a Ukrainian pimp, so it figures he’d take them to a Ukrainian dentist.”

“Good work. Is it a positive ID?”

“The guy’s ninety-nine percent certain. The gold teeth were the clincher.”

“So it’s not Natalya. Wonder where she is? What about the other body? The one we thought might be Zuzanna.”

“Can’t seem to locate records on her. I’ve got my Ukrainian dentist looking at his records. He’ll let us know tomorrow if she was a patient.”

“Good,” David said. “Now you get to put it all into a report. I’m meeting with the DA tomorrow to talk to Sevchuk, see if we can shake anything more out of him in exchange for consideration.”

“What’s she considering?”

“She didn’t say. Our DA keeps things pretty close to the chest.”

“But it’s a righteous bust, right?”

“Yeah, it’s righteous. It’ll look good in your jacket. Might even get you a commendation.”

Jairo beamed.

“A few more details and we can shut the case down. Hand it over to the prosecutors.”

“And then we go to court.”

David grimaced. “Yeah, then court.”

“And you were almost a lawyer?”

“You get lucky sometimes and you don’t get what you ask for.”

“You don’t think you’d have been happy as a lawyer?”

“Who knows.” David shrugs, not really wanting to talk about it. It was a moot point and the memories of those days weren’t pleasant. He had disappointed his parents, he had disappointed himself. No one had been happy over his choices.

And was it much better now? Chris hated what he did nearly as much as his parents had. Feared for him. Every time there was an officer involved shooting on TV, Chris would be pale and withdrawn for the rest of the evening. And David could do nothing to reassure him. Accidents happened. He was the first to admit his job was dangerous, though he tried to tell Chris he was really more of a desk jockey. The really dangerous police work occurred in patrol. He did what he could to mitigate the danger, but the truth was he could catch a bullet, or the business end of a knife any day.

So what was he going to do? Sit here and feel sorry for himself, or try to fix the one mess in his life he could fix?

He impatiently waited for the shift to end. He worked on finishing up his reports, delivering the ones that were ready and logging out of his PC.

Then, instead of heading to the hotel for another lonely, frustrating night, he pointed the nose of his Chevy home, to Silver Lake.

Chris’s rental car was in the driveway. David wondered if he’d heard anything about his own car. Well, only one way to find out. Squaring his shoulders he strode up the walkway and rapped on the wooden door. Inside Sergeant went ballistic.

The door cracked open and before Chris could stop him, Sergeant bolted past him and leapt up, his non-existent tail wiggling in his butt, his tongue lolling out in rapture.

David patted the knobby black head. “Hey guy, glad to see me?” He looked up to meet Chris’s gaze and suddenly felt ill at ease. “Chris.”

“David.”

They stood in the doorway, making an awkward plateau, the dog totally oblivious to the atmosphere. Finally Chris seemed to have made a decision. He opened the door wide. “Come on in.”

David followed him into the living room. Sergeant bounced after them. David took the seat Chris offered him.

“I’ve still got some beer...”

“Ah, sure. Thanks.”

Chris got the Bud and brought himself a glass of white wine. He sat in his I-Ching chair, catty-corner to the sofa where David sat. Neither one spoke for several seconds, then David took a deep breath and opened his mouth to ask Chris how he was doing.

“So how—” They both said.

Chris grinned weakly. “You first.”

David shrugged. “Okay, I guess. I miss you.”

Chris looked away, then back. His lantern bright eyes held David’s gaze and seemed to peer into his soul. David wondered what he would see there.

“I missed you, too.”

David made a decision then. If the only way to get Chris back was to lie about Jairo, he would do it. Getting Chris back was suddenly more important than his integrity. More important than anything. He knew he’d never succumb to Jairo again, but if he couldn’t convince Chris of that, it didn’t really matter, did it?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Thursday, 6:20 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

Chris stared at David's rough face, drinking in every crag and crater. He wanted nothing more than to fling himself into David's arms. But there was a shadow between them. A big man-sized shadow that kept him rooted to the spot, refusing to give in.

So when the inane conversation started he was more than happy to play along.

On the floor at their feet, Sergeant shifted so that he was pressed against David's legs. They both looked down at the snoring dog. "He misses you," Chris said. He looked up to meet David's gaze. "So do I."

"Yeah," David's voice was husky. "I'm glad I stopped by."

"Joanne said you came by yesterday."

"Well, yeah, I was hoping to catch you..." No mention of finding the locks changed. But then David would never deliberately embarrass someone for any reason. David took another swig of beer and looked away.

"What's going on with the car?" he asked. "They made a decision yet?"

"They say not," Chris said. "But it can't be much longer. I don't see how they can try to fix it. It's a write-off."

"Yeah, well, you know insurance companies. What will you get to replace it?"

"I don't know." Chris took a sip of Chardonnay. "I'll look around. Something with some room to carry equipment, though most of my work no longer involves equipment procurement. Someone else delivers that. Maybe you can help me when I go looking. You know me and cars, I like driving them but picking one out..."

"Sure," David said, not even trying to hide his enthusiasm.

Chris saw his drink was almost empty. He offered him another. David looked down at the brown bottle in his hand. He looked like he was going to accept, then he shook his head. "I shouldn't. I'm driving."

Chris almost said he could stay here, but something stopped the words in his mouth. There was still unfinished business between them. Unfinished business called Jairo.

"So how's work?"

"Fine."

"Anything interesting happen?"

"No." David seemed to realize the conversation was a non-starter. He ventured, "How about you. Your new contract working for you?"

"It's going well. We've made good progress in a short time. We may beat our deadline. There's a bonus if we do."

There usually was in Chris's line of work. He often got bonuses for a job well done. There were no bonuses in police work, unless you counted putting a piece of scum behind bars for a very long time a bonus. David never got kudos for a job well done, not even verbal ones. There was always someone waiting to criticize the work he did. Questioning his methods. Success was never a factor.

David nodded. "You were always so good at your job. You deserve the bonuses."

"It's fun working with Becky again. I'm glad I finally talked her into crossing over to the dark side," he laughed at the reference to her going out on her own and forgoing a steady pay, since with him, she only got paid if she worked. He couldn't afford to keep a payroll going for non-production. But when she got paid, she got paid well. And she trusted there'd be enough work to make it worthwhile.

"She still living with Clay?" David asked.

"Yeah." Chris was still laughing, as though he hadn't in a long time, and he was finally letting go. "She keeps saying she's

going to make an honest man of him, but really, can you see her married?"

It was David's turn to laugh. "No, not really."

They both skirted the five-hundred pound gorilla in the room; there was no reference to Jairo by either of them all evening. David did mention Martinez once. "I think he's having the time of his life, beating *chollas* at their own game. But he doesn't mean to stay, or at least so he says." He set his beer bottle down on the coffee table. Chris immediately picked it up. David stood.

"You going so soon?" Chris couldn't hide the sorrow in his voice. David met his gaze and something in him surrendered. He stepped closer to Chris, his hands coming up to grip Chris's biceps. Then his mouth came down on Chris's.

His breath was hot against Chris's throat; he could feel his own pulse on David's lips. He growled and dug his fingers into David's thick hair, dragging his face down, and ramming his mouth over David's again.

They were both breathing hard by the time they broke apart.

"Chris—" David stroked his face, smoothing the hair back from his forehead. Their eyes met and held. What passed between them was raw lust, untamed by the deprivation. Maybe grown stronger.

Chris was so hard he hurt. He couldn't help it, he rocked his hips forward, moaning when David's thigh went between his legs.

David's voice was hoarse, "I'm going to get him transferred. I won't see him again, ever. I promise."

"Oh David—"

"Let's go to bed—"

But then a memory/nightmare image broke through Chris's lust. Jairo doing exactly this and David responding with the same fever. He jerked away from David, staring up at his face with disgust and horror.

"I can't... Oh, God, I want to, but I can't..."

He whirled and fled up the stairs, leaving David with his fading tumescence and a confused dog. After about five minutes, in which he half expected David to follow him—and would he have sent him away again? He would never know. He heard the soft click of the front door closing and knew he would have to creep downstairs to lock up.

He did and he went to bed soon after. To his surprise he slept like the dead, though he was not refreshed when he dragged his butt into the shower the next morning.

Friday, 7:45 AM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

The day shift was just drifting in, chairs scraped the tile floor, the sharp smell of coffee permeated the always stale air. The smell of conflicting deodorants and colognes fought for dominance amid the walls of posters, flyers and peg boards.

On the wall overlooking both of their desks, the murder board David and Jairo had begun the first day of the case, the day they had come back from Griffith Park, was now a mass of crime scene photos, mug shots, and questions still unanswered. Jairo had put up a hand-written diagram listing everyone's name involved in the case from the dead women, the missing women, Sevchuk, Mikalenko, the Avenues's unnamed connection, and a shadowy figure with no name, and no stats. Oddly, and totally unexpectedly, he had added the dead drive-by banger on Drew. The Cypress Park banger shot in Avenues territory. Did he see a pattern that wasn't visible to David?

David pulled the thick murder book out of the ancient green cabinet and opened it to the first page. Halyna Stakchinko had her own murder book, even though it looked like all three were now inextricably intertwined.

Finishing up yet another report, he added it to the growing puzzle. He thought they had a handle on what had happened to the three women, but the key answer was still missing. Why? Why had Mikalenko, who stood to profit so much from both the babies and the women themselves, killed them? And why

did he go to so much trouble to get them good medical care, assure they were healthy, and that their babies were too, if all he was going to do was erase them? David had seen murders done for the flimsiest, and most ridiculous of reasons, though usually those kinds were impulse killings. A fight gone wrong. A towering rage unchecked. But this had the ring of deliberation. What had changed to make Mikalenko turn from calculating businessman to cold-blooded killer? The press frequently labeled such crimes senseless, but the truth was that there were reasons for everything. They just didn't always make sense to anyone but the killer.

Or were they chasing the wrong cat here? Could Mikalenko be telling the truth? But if he didn't kill the other two women, who did?

The more he stared at what they had uncovered so far, the less he understood. He was almost glad when Jairo came in. At least he'd have someone to bounce ideas off of.

"I don't get it," he said without preamble. "Why did Mikalenko turn on them? He's always been pretty cold up until now. It was all a business transaction. What changed?"

"He did," Jairo said. "Or he didn't, and this is his true face. Maybe there are more than these three women. Maybe he has impulses."

"And maybe he didn't do it."

"So we're looking for a second doer? Murder partnership. Pretty rare."

Like all Academy trained cops, both David and Jairo took courses on not only criminology, but on psychology. David had spent six months in Quantico being taught by the world renowned behavioral profilers. He'd even met FBI Agent William Hagmaier, who had gained Ted Bundy's trust, while he sat on Florida's death row, and got the killer to admit to over thirty sadistic slayings over the years he targeted young women.

"He might have a partner," David conceded. "But I don't read him that way. I think he's just a mercenary man who sees profit in everything, and doesn't care about the consequences. Not a disorganized, impulse killer. And there's never been any

sign of sexual abuse or posing in any of the victims.” David tapped his fingers across the surface of the blue binder. “I think the key is in the doctor. I want to take another run at the house on Leland. Stakchinko, Konjenko and Katrina Mydry, plus the missing Lapchuk, spent their last days in that house. We already know Konjenko kept a diary of sorts. Why not the others? I want to tear that place apart before I release it back to Larson. Then we need to go back to Mikalenko.”

Jairo nodded. “Before or after the DA’s visit?”

“After. We won’t have time before.”

The interview was set for eight and David and Jairo were at the Men’s Central several minutes early. The DA, Ann Marie DeSoto, met them in the interview room after the two detectives signed their guns into security. Feeling somewhat naked without his Smith & Wesson, David led the way to where Sevchuk waited with his attorney.

The recorder was turned on, introductions were made all around, coffee distributed.

DeSoto spoke first. “I have the list of charges we are prepared to enter against Dr. Jozef Sevchuk. Do you have anything to add to this, Detective Sergeant Laine?”

“Only that it appears the second body in the Griffith Park grave was a Katrina Mydry,” David said. “And not Natalya Lapchuk, as we first thought. We’ll need to check if this woman was also a patient of Dr. Sevchuk.”

DeSoto nodded and handed the papers she had prepared to Sevchuk’s lawyer, Barney Pearlman, who slipped a pair of reading glasses on and read them slowly, his fleshy lips pursed in concentration. Finally he slipped the glasses off and met first David’s gaze then DeSoto’s.

“What are you offering my client?”

“Reduction of conspiracy to commit homicide to criminal misdemeanor, first degree murder reduced to second. Ten to fifteen years concurrently. With good behavior your client could be out in eight years.”

“And facing deportation and revocation of his medical license.”

DeSoto shrugged. “That’s not in my playing field; that would be up to Immigration and the Medical board. I’m telling you what I can offer.”

Pearlman and Sevchuk held a whispered conversation. Pearlman leaned back. “In exchange for what?”

DeSoto ticked off each point on her neatly clipped pink nails. “He tells us everything he knows about Valerian Mikalenko, AKA Mickey, and his involvement in the deaths of Halyna Stakchinko, Zuzanna Konjenko and Katrina Mydry. With additional time off, if he can tell us where Natalya Lapchuk is. What he knew about Mikalenko’s plans for the babies born to those women, and any others he knows of and what was his involvement with the death of those fetuses.”

“And if he doesn’t know anything?”

“Then he has to convince me of that. And I might have been born at night, but I assure you it wasn’t last night. I believe your client knows a great deal he’s not telling us. We’re willing to toss him back in exchange for a bigger fish.”

“Ten to fifteen is hardly being tossed back. Time served and deportation.”

“Unacceptable. This level of crime has to be punishable by something. Dr. Sevchuk betrayed not only his Hippocratic Oath, but the trust of all those women who looked to him for safety. He hoped to profit from their misery.”

More hurried whispering. Sevchuk was beginning to look like a whipped dog, who only expected more abuse, and was resigned to it. Finally Pearlman nodded grimly. “My client accepts, though he thinks he is being given a raw deal here.”

DeSoto was cool and didn’t say any of the things David might have, like what kind of deal did Halyna, Zuzanna and Katrina get? But it wasn’t his place to comment on the charges. It was just his job to give DeSoto the facts to back up those charges.

“Does he know where Natalya is?”

"He says not. She had wanted to return to Ukraine. Maybe she got out."

"Maybe." David was doubtful. He would check the flights to Eastern Europe but didn't hold out much hope. Chances were Natalya hadn't got her passport back.

David turned the tape on and Mirandized Sevchuk, who looked paler and paler as the words fell between them. Finally David said, "So start talking. Tell me everything from how you met Mikalenko, to how he brought in the women, and what he said about them. Surely you must have wondered about this man who had so many pregnant women around him. Did you know he was running a baby brokerage?"

"No! Mikalenko first called me nearly eighteen months ago. He knew of some Ukrainian immigrants who were in need of a doctor, that is all. One of them was pregnant, and she wanted a Ukrainian doctor. She did not trust American doctors. I am sorry—"

David waved him on.

"Natalya was the first. I thought nothing of it, until Mikalenko brought me another pregnant girl, and he offered me ten thousand dollars to be present for the children's birth."

"Did he ever say why he offered this?"

"He was..." Sevchuk shot a glance at his lawyer, who nodded reluctantly. Sevchuk sighed and went on. "I thought I could do the girls some good. Sometimes I do not think Mikalenko treated them very good. They feared him." He saw the contempt on David's face. "But you must understand. They loved him, too. He was everything to them, and he told them he would take care of them."

"Seems to me you all did a fine job of that."

"I did not kill anyone. I would not have harmed any of those women—"

"What about Mikalenko? Would he have harmed any of them?"

"No! I do not know. He was a volatile man. He had a temper..."

“So he could have hurt someone who made him angry.”

Sevchuk hung his head, staring at his hand manacled to the table. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Did you ever see him get rough with anyone?”

Sevchuk still would not meet his gaze. He nodded. “Once only.”

“Tell me about it.”

“He asked me to attend to Halyna at her house. She was distraught and Mikalenko was furious, though neither of them said why. At one point he called her terrible names and slapped her across the face so hard she fell to the floor. Then he walked out. I would have stayed, but she told me to go, and Mikalenko was waiting...”

“What kind of names did he call her?” David leaned over the table. So, he noticed, did DeSoto and Pearlman.

“He called her a murderer. That the blood on her hands would never wash off. I am so very sorry. I never meant any harm to anyone...”

When it became clear Sevchuk couldn't or wouldn't speak anymore, DeSoto loaded her files back in her briefcase, and with a curt, “I'll be in touch with the details by day's end,” she left, her briefcase slapping against her nylon clad leg. Jairo took Sevchuk back to the Men's Central and Pearlman left to chase other ambulances. David made his way back the Northeast, where he spent the time waiting for Jairo to return, so they could make one more run at the Leland house. While he waited, he made a courtesy call to Larson about their visit. Larson declined to meet them. David had secured a key from him earlier. He'd leave it in police hands, though he reminded David he hoped he'd be getting the property back soon.

“I can sympathize, Mr. Larson, but this is a murder investigation, and that takes precedence over your needs.”

“This is going to be costing me soon, officer. It's going to take me at least a week to get this place cleaned up before I can even think about renting it out.”

"I'll do my best." David hung up before the landlord could continue.

They rolled as soon as Jairo got back, signing out a Crown Vic from the motor pool and heading west.

The house might have entered a sort of Twilight Zone, where time was suspended. There was a new layer of dust on everything and the air felt even more closed up.

David started at one end of the house and Jairo the other. They would overlap, both searching each bedroom, then they would meet in the living room. David pulled on a pair of sterile nitrile gloves and searched every nook, and cranny, first in Zuzanna's bedroom, then after that turned up nothing, Halyna's. Zuzanna had been the diarist, but that didn't mean a stressed out Halyna, fearing the worst, wouldn't have tried to sort out her nightmare by writing about it.

Her bedroom yielded nothing. The same results in the cramped bathroom. A look into the depths of each kitchen drawer and the cupboards packed with canned vegetables and packaged soups held no surprises.

After nearly three hours of searching, and a headache that had lodged behind his eyes and pulsed with each heartbeat, David headed for the last room: the living room. Jairo was already there, checking out a side table and up inside a tall floor lamp. David headed straight for the ikon corner.

"I already checked there," Jairo said.

"S'okay, I'll check it again."

He remembered what Konstatinov had said about people hiding things in ikon corners, and the money they had recovered. Had they overlooked something else? He pulled every picture off the wall, examining each one front and back, even prying open the mat and frames of all of them. He checked out the ornate crosses and the empty Easter basket with its colorful embroidered liner. He lifted out the liner and shook it. A small notebook flipped out onto the floor. He stooped to pick it up.

Jairo came over and crouched down. David opened the first page of the palm-sized booklet with a colorful cover and briefly scanned the contents. "Ukrainian. We're going to need Konstatinov again. I'll call him, you keep on looking."

Konstatinov agreed to come out as soon as he could get away. Maybe forty minutes. The two detectives went back to searching, with more diligence, now that they knew something had been overlooked. This time when nothing more showed up David was satisfied nothing more would. They met Konstatinov outside on the front porch. David handed him the booklet and he began to read, his lips moving as he made sure he got each word.

When he met David's gaze he looked shell-shocked. "You will not believe this."

"Try me."

"They despaired of getting out. They knew they could never escape and Mikalenko would turn them into baby-making machines, making money off of the having of sex with strange men and the giving birth of children that would be forever lost to them." He closed his eyes as if the pain was too much. "They knew there was only one way out, so they all agreed they must do this."

"Murder/suicide pact," David said softly. Beside him Jairo took a deep shuddering breath. "Well, it explains the hesitation marks. She really didn't want to do this."

"Yes. Halyna would take care of the other two girls. It was horrible, she says. There was so much blood... Katrina died as planned but Zuzanna didn't. I think they both lost the stomach for it. The two hid Katrina's body under the crawl space of the house, wrapped in a thick blanket from Katrina's bed. Mikalenko was furious. He thought Katrina had run away and he punished both of the other girls harshly for allowing her to run. Zuzanna was badly cut but Mikalenko made her work anyway. He would not let them go to the hospital. Only Sevchuk was allowed to treat them. He tried to beat it out of Zuzanna, about what had happened. He never guessed the truth. Six weeks later Halyna writes that she would try again.

She says part of her had hoped it would not be necessary, that they could find another way. She wanted to live..."

Konstatinov flipped to the last page of the notebook. "There is nothing more, so I cannot be telling you if she succeeded or not."

"Oh I think we can safely assume she succeeded," David said. "There were two bodies in the park. We've finally IDed them as Zuzanna Konjenko and Katrina Mydry." His two nameless and faceless murder books now had identities. Sometimes it would be nice to be wrong.

"But how did they get there?" Jairo asked. "We've seen no sign any of the girls knew how to drive, let alone had access to a car."

"I doubt Halyna disposed of the bodies." David was speculating now, examining each fact he knew in light of what they had found. "This explains Mikalenko saying he didn't kill the women. He only knew about Halyna. I think he caught her after she'd killed Zuzanna and before she could finish the job on herself. Remember the slash marks on her face at the autopsy? They were all inflicted pre-mortem. Either she did it to herself to reduce her 'value' to him, or he did it in a rage, when he found out what she had done. Once it was done, whoever did it, he still had to dispose of their bodies." His voice grew cold. "And decide what to do with Halyna. I think he dragged her up to the overpass and threw her over as punishment. He couldn't let her get away with it. If she escaped, she'd be a witness against him. He couldn't allow that. Plus, I imagine he was furious, and that rage fueled him. Maybe he didn't even mean to kill her, just terrify her so she'd never do anything like that again."

"He still had her baby, if he kept her around long enough to have it," Jairo said.

"Right. But Halyna was bent on self-destruction, and I don't imagine it would be too hard to goad Mikalenko into doing something foolish. He might well regret it later, but she would have escaped him in the only way she knew how."

Both Jairo and Konstatinov looked dumb-struck by the horror of what the three women had endured. What they had been driven to. David watched the array of emotions march across their faces, and wished he could feel those kinds of things again. Unbidden came a memory of Chris getting all teary-eyed when they had come across a baby mule deer that had wandered onto the Golden State Freeway west of Griffith Park and been struck by an SUV. Maybe Chris was doing the best thing for them. Maybe David didn't deserve the love of a man who could feel so deeply, when he seemed able to feel nothing.

"She was a very brave girl," Konstatinov said softly. All three of them nodded.

"Well," David said brusquely. "Let's go tell a killer he's going away for life. No plea bargains for this one."

"He was truly a monster," Konstatinov said.

"Come on, let's get this back to evidence and book it in," he said. "Then we're going to see Mikalenko again. Let him explain this."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Friday, 4:40 PM, Los Angeles Men's Central, 450 Bauchet Street, Los Angeles

Mikalenko looked like he'd endured a few sleepless nights. His cheeks were unshaven and gave lie to the blond hair weave on his head. Prison pallor hadn't set in yet, but he was pale anyway, with an unhealthy yellow sheen and sunken blue eyes. He appeared to have aged a decade.

David had arranged to have the notebook found in the Easter basket transcribed and translated. He slid both copies across the scarred table.

"What's this?" Mikalenko's lawyer asked.

"Just a little thing Halyna penned confessing to the murders of Zuzanna Konjenko and Katrina Mydry."

Fishburn sat up. "Then you have nothing on my client. I demand he be released at once. And I assure you, Detective, I will be pursuing a law suit against the city of Los Angeles and the LAPD for this harassment—"

"Not so fast, counselor," David tossed the statement Sevchuk had given to DeSoto just an hour ago. "You might want to look these over first."

Mikalenko picked up the transcript from Halyna's note, the one in Ukrainian. David watched his face grow paler as his eyes scanned the sheets of paper. For once Fishburn ignored his client as he read Dr. Sevchuk's confession.

Fishburn spoke first. "What are you offering us?"

"Offering you?" David suppressed a small smile. "Why, nothing, counselor. Not a damn thing."

"What if we told you who was above Mikalenko? Wouldn't that be worth something? Talk to your DA. I'm sure we can reach some agreement—"

"Is this person here in the US or back in Ukraine?"

"I am sorry, we can't divulge that information without some guarantee—"

David stood up. "Well, I'm sorry too, then," he said. "But I'm not giving this guy a walk on the basis of a name I can't even pursue. Either he's in the country and touchable or there's no deal."

Mikalenko hemmed and hawed but after several heated discussions with Fishburn he nodded. "We agree." Under his voice David heard him mutter, "Rat bastard."

"Why thank you," David said. "From you that's got to be a compliment."

David stood. Jairo followed. "I'll talk to the DA and let you know what she thinks and what conditions she might apply."

"Conditions," Mikalenko spat. "What are these conditions?"

"Oh, things like you have to tell us the truth. You can't bullshit us and we let it slide. You'll be required to provide a full name and possible contact information. If you can't, then no deal. She may have more, but that will be up to her. Now once more: is this person in the US?"

Mikalenko nodded sullenly. "He is here, in Los Angeles."

Jairo was charged with taking Mikalenko back to his cell. The Ukrainian grumbled until he was out of earshot. David made his way outside, retrieved his Smith & Wesson and waited in the car for Jairo, who showed up ten minutes later.

"Not a happy camper."

"Well, he's standing alone on that one. I feel pretty good," David said.

Jairo grinned. "Me too."

Back at Northeast David sat down and logged in, preparing to write up the Mikalenko interview before he called DeSoto. Jairo did not sit. After a minute David looked up at him.

"I'm supposed to be meeting someone over on Drew. About that connection between Mikalenko and the Avenues. It may tie in to that gang shooting, too."

David nodded. "Okay. Keep me in the loop, don't go all blue-flamer on me at this point."

"Wouldn't dream of it. Trust me, if it starts going south I'm the first one out of there."

After Jairo left, David finished his report, dropped a copy of it in Lieutenant McKee's inbox, and called DeSoto. She seemed surprised to hear from him, but quickly brightened when he told her what he was calling about.

"Think it's legit, or is he trying to save his sorry ass now that he can't see any other way out?"

"I'm willing to check it out. If it is legitimate, then we gain. If not, he still goes to Folsom."

"Let me draft up a tentative agreement," she said, and he could almost hear her wheels turning. "The main thing is going to be keeping him from weaseling out of giving us what we want. You realize it will make him a marked man."

"I bleed for the guy." David grimaced. "You didn't see Halyna's body after he tossed her off the overpass." He didn't mention that his lover had been in the path of that fall and had almost died. She didn't need to know that.

"Yeah, me too. Just thought you should know. Hell, he's good at dishing it out, let's see how well he can guard his own backside."

"Some people might think you were vindictive."

"Because I'm female?" She snorted, a very unladylike sound. Not that David would ever have mistaken this tough broad for a lady. "No one who knows me."

He had to laugh. He didn't really know her, but he would have seen that much about her.

He began calling bus stations, airports, travel agencies, hospitals, city, state and county agencies, registration, utilities, and even the morgue to see if Natalya Lapchuk had left the city or wound up dead on someone else's watch. She probably couldn't leave the country without her passport, but she could travel anywhere in the US and might have figured that was big enough to hide from a guy like Mikalenko who, face it, wasn't

the brightest bulb in the drawer. Maybe his boss had been the brains of the outfit.

McKee came by his desk. "How's Detective Hernandez doing? Things working out with him?"

"Fine," David said stiffly, not knowing what else he could say. "He's got some rough edges, but I think if he buckles down he'll be an asset." He couldn't meet McKee's eyes, but he could hardly tell the guy the truth, could he? All that would do was smear both him and Jairo.

"Rough edges?" McKee said. "I'm sure it's nothing you haven't seen before. Speaking of which, how is Martinez these days? Haven't heard from his new commander. Don't know if that's good or bad."

"Long as they don't try to hang on to him."

"Don't worry, I want him back too. Don't tell him I said this, but Martinez is a good cop. I think Hernandez could be too. Given time."

"Time makes us all good cops."

"Wish that were true," McKee said. "Wish that were true." And went back to his office where David could see him pick up his phone.

David met with DeSoto over lunch and went over her proposed offer. Mikalenko was going to have kittens when he saw it. David raised his eyebrows as he handed the document back to her.

"You don't mince words, do you?"

"I'm giving him one chance to save his miserable ass. He knows it, this just puts it in black and white even his lawyer will understand." Off his puzzled look she added, "I've known Fishburn for years. Let's just say the gentleman makes real sharks look like a kinder and gentler species."

After lunch DeSoto offered to take David out to the county lockup to see Mikalenko. "I've already talked to Fishburn and he's expecting us."

"Sure. I'm just waiting for Jairo to check in over some lead he's got. I'll let McKee know where I am so if anything comes up he can get in touch with me."

That done, they drove out together in DeSoto's silver Beemer. DeSoto proved chatty once they set work aside, and he soon learned she was recently divorced, and had two children, both in private school in Brentwood. She had heard about Chris and asked if that was still ongoing. He muttered what he hoped was a non-committal reply. He wasn't yet ready to admit to his own "divorce in progress," still hoping it wouldn't come to that.

Fishburn met them outside the glass doors, smoking agitatedly. He did not look happy. DeSoto greeted him effusively.

"Ready, counselor?"

"Maybe we should establish some ground rules." Fishburn stubbed out his cigarette in one of the stone receptacles flanking the doors, as though he was still calling the shots.

"What ground rules might that be? We've got your client nailed on this one. If he admits to that, we'll be off to a good start. Otherwise I might feel less inclined to deal."

"He has good information that will help your case."

"If he can prove that, then I'm ready to listen."

It started out bad and went downhill from there. Mikalenko was hostile and argumentative one minute and conciliatory the next. He still didn't seem to grasp the simple fact that he had lost this round. David almost enjoyed watching him crash and burn. But it was exhausting: giving him yards of rope, and watching him run with it, only to be reeled in like a hooked bluefin. And still he fought.

Finally even DeSoto seemed to have enough. She slapped the agreement on the table loud enough to make Mikalenko jump. Fishburn didn't move. His eyes remained pinned to DeSoto as though he had already foreseen this move.

"We're done, counselor," she said. "Either your client agrees to the rules or we walk."

“Okay, okay, I will sign your paper. Is not important anymore.”

Mikalenko seemed genuinely resigned. He grabbed the pen out of his lawyer’s hand and scratched his signature on the legal agreement. Fishburn signed it too, and David acted as a witness. Once the papers had been returned to DeSoto’s briefcase, she leaned back in her chair.

David produced the tape recorder they had brought with them.

“So start talking.”

“His name is Harmon Degrasses. He is not Ukrainian.”

Like that made it okay to drop the dime on him. Right now David frankly didn’t care. If Mikalenko was willing to rat him out, then David would be the cat who took him down.

“Where can we find this Degrasses?”

“He has taken a room in the Marriot.”

“Which one?”

“The big one, downtown.” Mikalenko refused to meet his gaze. David wrote the name and the hotel down. He’d check it out himself.

“I’ll be back, counselor. Better hope your client is telling the truth.”

“I tell you the truth.”

“What exactly is this guy’s role in all this?”

“He makes arrangements to bring girls into country. Sometimes he gets them visas, but they are not allowed to use them. He keeps the visas, or sells them to other hungry women. Ukraine is full of hungry women.”

And you’re right there feeding off their misery. But David kept his thoughts to himself.

“How did you hook up with him?”

“What you mean, hook up?”

“How did you meet him? In Ukraine, or in the US?”

"We meet in Odessa, on Black Sea. He was rich American on holiday."

"Who brought up the idea of smuggling women out of Ukraine?"

"Was my idea, of course," Mikalenko said. "Fat, bumbling American thought it would be funny to bring eager young Ukrainian women past American authority's noses."

"But you said he was the mastermind."

"Pah," Mikalenko dismissed the notion. "He was the money, that is all. Someone must have money to pay the officials, to buy the right papers and pay for girls to be taken to Mexico. After that we must hire the, how you say, coyotes, so we can bring them into Los Angeles. These men must be watched. They are not honorable and will take money and not deliver women."

"No honor among thieves," David said. Mikalenko completely missed the irony of the statement. He nodded sagely as though he was now talking to a cohort.

"They are thieves, and worse."

"So you've met with Degrasses here in L.A.? Tell me what those meetings were like."

Mikalenko grimaced. He clenched his fist, rattling the manacle that chained him to the table. "I met him first in Ukraine. He told me of some girls he knew who would like to come to America. He wanted to help them, he said. Then in December, two years ago, he instructed me to find a place where three or four girls could live. I rent the house in Hollywood and he brought the first of the girls to live there."

"Give me names. Which girls?"

"Katrina was the first. After that Natalya, and Zuzanna. Then Halyna."

"Who got pregnant first?"

"That was Natalya. She was always stupid girl, always forgetting what she was told. But she was popular. The men

love her. Childish. Simple. But once she started getting big with child, it was harder to find men who pay.”

“Why not just make her get rid of the baby?”

Mikalenko nodded. “I was going to, but then Degraesses says we can make money selling the babies. Rich Americans will pay to have beautiful Ukrainian baby.”

“How did you know the baby would be Ukrainian? What if the father was black, or Latino?”

“Bah.” Mikalenko dismissed the idea. “Our girls only go with white men. No man wants to touch a woman who has been with a colored.”

“I’m sure your customers appreciated your diligence.”

Mikalenko again missed the sarcasm in David’s tone.

“Did Natalya have her baby? What happened to it?”

“Yes, her baby was born, a son. We already had a family ready for it. The baby was taken from L.A., Natalya was told he was dead. I do not know where the family was from. Only that it was back East.”

“Would Degraesses know? Someone had to.”

“Yes, is likely he knew. Better an American make the contacts and negotiate price. They think a Ukrainian man cheating them.” Mikalenko looked put out by that, as though he was an upstanding business man and should be trusted.

“What else can you tell me about Degraesses?”

“He told me once he was a war hero. He was in the Iraq war, the Desert sand—”

“You mean Desert Storm? The Gulf War?”

“Yes, yes, that one. He made much of being a medal winner, he said the State Department would never suspect a decorated hero to be a smuggler. He was right, no one ever questioned him.”

This just got better and better. A decorated war hero, a vindictive human trafficking partner, three dead smuggling victims and three dead fetuses who never had any chance at life. David itched to get his hands on Degraesses. But he knew the

same things that had protected him from suspicion, would safeguard him against an investigation now.

David would have to tread softly here. He tapped the notebook in front of him. "I'm going to check out this guy. If he's legit, then I'll get back to you with more questions."

"What you mean, legit? I tell truth—" Mikalenko protested. "You will be scaring him away. Blowing me off."

Nobody got more bent than a liar being called on his lies.

"I'm just going to confirm that indeed Degrasses is staying at the Marriott. I won't let on I'm looking. I won't blow your cover."

Mikalenko stared at him several seconds then dropped his gaze into the lap of his orange jail house jumper. The manacles on his arms clanked as he shifted in his seat. When he spoke, his voice was full of melancholy. "I am dead man, either way."

Was the guy fishing for sympathy? "I won't let anything happen to you in jail."

Mikalenko looked at him like he was a fool. Maybe he was.

"I am dead."

"Well, let's try to keep you alive a little while longer," David said, not caring how callous that sounded. Only Mikalenko's lawyer seemed to notice.

"If anything happens to him, you'll be sure to hear from me."

"I expect it, counselor."

DeSoto dropped David back at the station. Once there he added notes about the interview to the murder book. Jairo was still out in the field. David wished he could talk to Chris. Chris would be able to go online and find out everything out there on this Degrasses character. Give David ammo for when he confronted the decorated war hero.

Then on the heels of that thought came another. Why not talk to Chris? He'd have a good reason. Chris would help. Even if he didn't want David around, he wouldn't want to let a guy like Degrasses off so easily. He would hate it as much as David

that this guy thought he was above the law. The best part was, it would give David a chance to see Chris again. Maybe plead his case.

Before he could call, his landline rang. He scooped it up. It was a representative from Greyhound bus lines about his search for Natalya.

"The person Natalya Lapchuk purchased a one way ticket to New York that departed the Glendale station a week ago yesterday."

Right around the time the bodies were discovered. "How long would such a trip take?"

"The average travel time is two days, eighteen hours."

David thanked him and hung up. So Natalya had escaped. Interesting. Had she known who the bodies in Griffith Park were?

Feeling lighter in heart, David called Chris's BlackBerry. His nerve almost deserted him, but before it could, Chris answered. He sounded cool and David's heart sank. He plowed ahead anyway.

"I need to talk to you."

"Yes?"

"It's not about us," David said quickly, trying to get it all out before Chris could disconnect. "It's about something I'm working on. I need your help finding out about a guy I think is involved in something very bad."

The coolness fell aside as Chris asked, "What kinds of things?"

"I'd rather not go into any detail, but it involves women forced into prostitution and smuggling. At least three of them are dead. So are the babies they were carrying." He knew Chris's sister had just had another baby, and it was as close as Chris would ever get to having his own kids. He loved his nieces and nephews.

"When do you want to meet?"

"Tonight? I'll cook supper."

"You? You want to make barbecue?"

"No, I'll pick up something else. I can cook, you know."

"You learn something new every day. Sure come on over. I'm working till around five-thirty. I'll be home soon after that."

"I'll be there."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Friday 5:55 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

David spent more time in Ralph's Market in the meat aisle than he normally spent in the entire grocery store. But he wanted this meal to be perfect. Or as perfect as his non-cooking skills could make it. He finally settled on chicken and new fingerling potatoes, figuring you could hardly go wrong with chicken, and how hard could it be to roast potatoes? He saw Chris do it all the time.

Before heading over to Silver Lake, he grabbed a bottle of Chilean Sauvignon Blanc he knew Chris liked, and stopped at the florist again to get another dozen roses. Maybe this wasn't a date, per se, but he wasn't going to pass up a chance to show Chris he still cared. Maybe he could get through to him before this went much further.

Chris and Sergeant met him at the door. Chris took the flowers and the wine and kissed David lightly before heading in to the kitchen to find a vase David had never seen before and pop the wine into the fridge.

"So what are you making me?"

"It's a surprise."

Chris watched him unload the cloth sacks and raised his eyebrows. "A feast. You sure you don't want any help?"

"I'm sure. Now go in the other room and have a glass of wine. I'll let you know when it's ready."

Chris backed out of the kitchen. Sergeant stayed behind. He stood beside David and occasionally would butt his head against David's leg as though to assure himself David wasn't going anywhere.

David found the fresh herbs, oil and garlic he knew Chris always kept in the pantry. In twenty minutes he had the chicken in the oven and the potatoes ready.

He washed his hands and headed into the living room where Chris was ensconced in his I-Ching chair. David sat on the sofa. Sergeant leapt up beside him. Neither of them told him to get down.

"The breeder came by the other day," Chris said. "She seemed to think Sergeant was fitting right in and didn't have any more qualms about leaving him here. She wants me to keep in touch. I said I would. She seems to care."

"Maybe that's why he's such a good dog," David said. At this praise Sergeant lifted his head off David's knee and smiled at both of them. David laughed. "Definitely spoiled though."

"Oh yeah, big time." Chris shifted in the chair to face him. "Want a beer?"

"Sure. Thanks."

Chris got it and came back. When he slipped back into his seat he faced David, one leg dangling over the edge of the chair. "So what was it you wanted me to do for you? I'll help any way I can."

"The case..." David had never talked about his work with Chris. He found it hard to start. "Ah, you remember the woman who fell onto the freeway in front of your car?"

"Hard to forget."

"Right. Well, she was involved in a human trafficking case where she and several other women were smuggled into the US and essentially sold into slavery—meaning prostitution. The man who ran the ring here in L.A was also Ukrainian. We've arrested him, but he gave up an American, named Harmon Degraesses. He's supposed to be staying at the downtown Marriott..."

"And you want me to search him out online? This is a first."

"I know, and if there was any other way, I wouldn't ask. But if this guy gets wind of his partner getting busted, he'll be gone and chances are we'd never find him."

"So you really did just come over here for work."

David could hear the disappointment in Chris's voice. He wanted nothing more than to take him in his arms and tell him "No, I came because I love you," but all he said was, "Yes."

"I had hoped... I miss you. I know I shouldn't, not after what you did—" he caught the look on David's face and amended his statement, "I want to forgive you. I want us to be *us* again. But it's hard to trust you."

"I know," David whispered. He scraped at the label on his beer and couldn't meet Chris's eyes. "I am more sorry than you can ever imagine, but I know that's not good enough right now. I shouldn't have come..."

Chris stood up so fast Sergeant jumped to the floor and came over to him. "I don't want you to go, David." David brightened. "But I don't want you to stay, either. You make me hurt with wanting you so much, I can't think straight, and right now I *need* to think straight."

David stood and took Chris's cold hands in his. "Let me feed you dinner, then I'll go. I know it's too soon. But I'll keep coming around until you can think straight and we can talk. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good." Chris inhaled. "Smells good, too. If I'd known you could cook like this I'd have made you take your turn years ago."

"That's why I never told you." They both laughed. "I didn't want to get drafted."

Chris opened the wine that David had brought while David set the table and portioned out the chicken, potatoes and snap peas he had pan fried in butter. Chris made appreciative noises while he ate. "Probably a good thing you didn't do this all the time. I'd have been as big as a house."

"I'd still love you."

Chris met David's eyes and his grew unfocused with desire. David leaned over the table and fed a snap pea to Chris, who chewed on it without tasting anything.

"I should go," David said softly.

"Not until I've checked out your guy on the computer. Or did you forget?"

"I'm afraid I forget everything around you."

"Flatterer."

"Truth."

David would have pursued the byplay further, but Chris was clearly nervous. He dropped the banter, and followed Chris into his office, taking a seat on the futon behind Chris's computer desk.

Chris logged into his laptop and called up a web browser opened to Google. He started to enter the name then looked over his shoulder. "How do you spell that?"

David pulled his by now dog-eared notebook out of his jacket pocket and flipped through to the end. He read, "Harmon Degrasse," and spelled it the way Mikalenko had.

"Marine," Chris said. "Shipped out of Camp Pendleton in May seventeen years ago. Re-upped for a third term, this time in Iraq. Decorated twice, the last time with a bronze star for saving the crew of a downed helicopter and getting them all to safety. Ain't the Internet wonderful? You sure this is the bad guy?"

"That's what my snitch says. Though if it's not true, why he'd pull that name out of the hat escapes me." Something Zuzanna had noted in her journal came back to him. "When did he serve in Iraq?"

Chris let his fingers play over the keyboard, mousing through various hits from an assortment of searches. David, as always, was amazed at the quiet skill he displayed. Chris could be flighty and emotional at times, but in his work he was as methodical as anyone David had ever met. His movements were flawless; he knew how to worm information out of places David didn't even know existed. David had long ago learned not to underestimate him.

Finally Chris leaned back and rubbed the back of his head.

"Two years in, the last six months in a place called Basra. Why, what are you thinking?"

Instead of answering David pulled out his cell phone. "I have to make a phone call." He saw the way Chris's eyes narrowed and knew he thought David was calling Jairo. But he couldn't stop to reassure him. This was too important.

Konstatinov picked up on the second ring. In the background the pitched battle from a TV vied with a child screaming and a dog barking. The sounds were only partly muffled when Konstatinov realized who was calling and left the room or covered the phone.

"Officer Konstatinov. It's Sergeant Laine." Chris face cleared up but David's gut still roiled. Was Chris ever going to trust him again?

"Yes, Detective? I was not expecting to hear from you this night."

"Well, I didn't expect to call. Do you still have those notes you transcribed from Zuzanna's journal?"

"Of course." Konstatinov sounded wounded that David would think otherwise. "A direct transcript and the translation."

"Can you go back to the original and see what she tells us about Katrina? You can call me back at this number, it's my cell."

"Yes, sir. Immediately." Konstatinov rang off. David turned back to find Chris still watching him. "A Russian/Ukrainian officer who's been acting as a translator and cultural interpreter for us."

"Oh." Chris had the grace to look embarrassed and look away. David should have let it go, but he couldn't.

"Do you really think I'm having an affair with every man I meet, Chris? Do you really think so little of me?"

"No! I don't... it's just..." Chris shrugged and looked away, then looked back, his eyes full of pain. "I was hurt. Can you understand that?"

"Yes, I can, and I will tell you I am sorry as long as I live, but *nothing* happened. At least nothing we can't fix, if you'll forgive me."

Chris sighed. "I know that, in here," he tapped his head, "But here," his chest this time, "it's another story. I want to believe you, you have no idea how much, but I keep seeing his face. He's sexy and hot and I can't help it... Maybe I'm afraid that under the same circumstances I wouldn't be able to resist and what does that make me?"

In an act of desperation, David got up off the futon and crouched beside Chris's chair, taking Chris's cold hands in his. He rubbed them, both to warm them up, and to feel his skin. "I don't ever want to hurt you. Ever. Please believe that and trust me. I told you I was getting rid of Jairo," he lied, praying Chris would never check. "Neither of us will ever have to see him again." He lowered his voice. He'd make it happen. Somehow. "Trust me."

"I-I'm trying. I really am."

David forced a lightness he didn't feel into his voice. "That's all I can ask." He kissed Chris and stood up. "I should get going now. I need to go see Konstatinov to see what he might have found out about a woman."

Chris stood too. "Well, you take care. I can look into this guy a little more, if you want."

David hesitated, knowing that for Chris, "a little more" would probably entail doing something questionably legal. "I, ah, sure. Just don't, you know, break any laws."

Chris threw him a sly grin. "I won't tell you how I do what I do, how about that?"

Knowing it was the best he'd get from him, David nodded, and he was out the door, and back in his car. On the way back to Northeast, Konstatinov called him back. He pulled over and answered. "Yes?"

"Is Officer Konstatinov. I found the entry Zuzanna wrote about Katrina. She is the woman who lost her husband in Iraq, yes?"

"Yes, now does Zuzanna say *where* in Iraq?" David held his breath, knowing it was a long shot.

Konstatinov was couple of seconds getting back to him. David knew he was rereading the passage he had called about. "She says Katrina lost her husband in the Iraqi war, during a skirmish in some place called Basra."

"Bingo," David said softly.

"This is important?" Konstatinov sounded excited.

"You have no idea. Listen, I'm heading back in to the station. You don't have to come, I know this is your family time..."

"I will be there. Perhaps half an hour?"

"I'll see you then."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Friday 8:45 PM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David signed out the original notebook that had been found at Leland Way. Already checked over by trace, it was still in a sterile baggy and they would have to wear gloves while reading it. If Konstatinov was insulted that David wanted to check the original instead of his transcription, he never said. He rolled Martinez's chair around and studied the pages along with David, carefully translating as he went.

"Here," he said, pointing with a gloved finger at the middle of page that was about half way through the notebook. "Here she writes about Katrina and how she befriended a man after her husband died in Basra. He said he was all about helping her and would bring her to US to find a good job, and a home, for her children. He did not want her to bring her children with her, though, he said 'he would send for them later.' He tricked her, no?"

"Yes, it was all lies. He never had any intention of finding legitimate work or bringing any children over. Probably a good thing for Natalya. If her children were here then she would not have been able to slip away so easily, and she truly would have been trapped." David touched the notebook. "Plus, as long as they were back in the old country, he could use them as insurance. Talk and they come to harm. Does it say anything about who this man Katrina met was? A name? A description?"

"He is American, that much she says. He told her he met her husband in Iraq." Konstatinov looked up with dawning comprehension. "He knew her husband had died. No doubt if they met, the Ukrainian man would speak of his wife and family back home."

“Which implies premeditation. All he had to do was find a Ukrainian partner and he was in business. No name though?” David hadn’t expected one. What were the odds Katrina would remember the name of a man she only met once. And would Degrasses even use his own name? If the guy was as slick as David suspected, then no, he wouldn’t do anything that might come back to haunt him later.

“No name. Only that he was American, with bright red hair. She knew he was American before he even spoke to her. Because of the way he dressed. She had never seen a man wear jewelry before. Especially earrings. She was quite taken with them.”

David tried to remember if Chris’s online search had brought up any photographs of the decorated war hero. Probably, but he couldn’t remember. He thought briefly of making it an excuse to return to their Cove Avenue home, then dismissed it just as quickly. It would be too easy for him to do the same search. Chris knew that and wouldn’t be fooled for a second about David’s real motives. The only question was whether he would be annoyed or flattered.

Chris seemed to be doing some heavy waffling right now. He hated what David had done, but he still loved David. It wouldn’t take a lot to make him swing totally to one side or the other, but how stable would that state be? Would David always be second guessing himself and what he said? Or would Chris be trying to catch David out in a lie, or start snooping to see if he was doing something suspicious. And with David’s erratic hours how long before that became an issue? If Chris could never trust him could they really forge a strong alliance again?

To stop his useless speculation David began his own Google search. He found the same pages Chris had called up, and did indeed find several images of a uniformed Degrasses. He was clearly a red head, even with the typical high and tight hair cut of a jarhead. And also visible was a glittering gem in his left ear, something he didn’t think was exactly regulation. In one image he stood at rest, with an assault rifle David didn’t recognize at his side, his eyes staring past the camera with the thousand mile stare of a man seeing something no one else saw. David

couldn't get any kind of read on him. He'd have to meet the guy in person to form an opinion. Hard to do, without alerting him to an LAPD interest. Degrasses was no longer a Marine, having resigned his commission, after his last posting in Iraq, at the rank of Major. If he knew there were dogs on his tail he'd be gone in sixty seconds and finding him would be next to impossible.

His phone rang. It was Jairo.

"I'm meeting with a guy out here in about an hour. You want to tag along?"

"What's the meet about?"

"Someone who claims to know something about the Polish smuggler."

"Pol—what Polish smuggler?"

"That's what this clown seemed to think Mikalenko was. He said it, not me. I just didn't enlighten him. But he claims his information is righteous, so I'm going to meet with him. Want to come?"

"No, I don't think so. You take care of it and write up a report for me on what you find. We should meet up today to go over our notes and wrap up any loose ends."

"What about this big cheese, you going to go after him?"

"Once I know more, I will. But I'm not doing anything premature."

"Maybe what I find out today will help."

David seriously doubted that. A white ex-Marine would have even less in common with a gangbanger than Mikalenko. Still, it would keep Jairo busy and off his back.

"If you find anything, you let me know."

Jairo rang off. David went back to his web search. He knew Chris would be able to tease a lot more information out, but he also knew Chris could, and would, skirt into gray legal areas that David never could. He had a habit of delivering bombshells, then refusing to explain how he got them. David would sometimes take advantage of the information, though he always

knew he had to back it up with admissible proof. But he had never asked for Chris's help.

He took a break at ten. Jairo still hadn't checked in. David pulled up his account of Mikalenko's meeting. Eventually it would be converted to a formal report but for now he used it to speculate on Degresses and how he fit into the whole convoluted plot. Being a Marine had to open doors for him. Had Degresses used those powers to gain information he then turned to his own use? Ultimately, who had thought of moving women through back channels into virtual slavery in the US?

His phone rang again. He scooped it up. "Detective David Eric Laine, Northeast division—"

"Hey, David, it's me."

It was Chris. David's hand tightened on the phone. "Hi, ah, what are you calling about?"

"I figured you'd still be at work. I thought about this guy you're after, so I went back online after you left and did some more research. I found some things you might be interested in."

"Okay, sure. What things?"

"I'd rather you come here. It's not something I want to explain over the phone. Are you free right now?"

"Sure, I was just wrapping things up for the night..."

"Fifteen minutes?"

"I'll be there," David said and hung up the phone. He took several deep breathes, telling himself it didn't mean anything. Chris had just found out more about Degresses. Nothing more. *Don't get your hopes up.*

Abruptly he grabbed his jacket and bolted for the door.

Chris led him into his office. David stood behind him as Chris cleared his sleeping screen.

"I did some more sniffing around about Degresses. Interesting character."

"How so?" David leaned in to see what was on the screen. Chris glanced up at him, a half smile on his parted lips. "Degresses was suspected of being involved in the black market

in Iraq, but no charges were ever laid. His resignation appears to have been someone else's idea."

"Maybe under threat of court martial," David said, skimming through the jumble of text on the laptop screen. "The Corps would hate to air that kind of dirty laundry, so if he'd leave they'd let it slide."

"Good deal for him."

"Yeah, well, *Semper Fi*," David muttered. "If he's not a Marine, he can't disgrace the Marines. Any idea what he dealt with in the black market?"

"Stolen equipment, arms, Iraqi antiquities—I think that's what got his butt nailed. There was a lot of wholesale looting of museums and palaces during the initial months of occupation. Degrasses name kept coming up in the investigations. But I guess no one looked too closely." Chris cleared his throat. "There was also a rumor about prostitution—"

"Ah."

"I thought that might interest you. It was never substantiated."

"I won't even ask how you got that," David said and Chris laughed.

"Ah, my law-abiding sweetheart. What a team we make."

David laughed and for the first time in a while it didn't feel forced.

"Degrasses has a mother," Chris said.

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Not staying at the Beaumont Arms."

David frowned. "Which is...?"

"A very upscale nursing home in Westchester County, New York."

"Upscale how?"

"Eighty thousand a year. She's been in residence for six months." Chris called up another page. This one featured an image of a southern plantation style house, complete with

outbuildings, under the Gothic script “The Beaumont Arms” and under that, what sounded more like a blurb for a resort—stunning foyer, spectacular rural views and elegant fountains, plus formal, and casual dining rooms, fitness center, pool, day spa.

“Hell of a place to retire.”

“Or not,” Chris said. “Mrs. Lisabeth Charmaine Degrasses has just celebrated her seventy-first birthday. She’s in advanced stages of Alzheimer’s and hasn’t responded to any treatment for the past four months. If I’m reading her charts right, she’s not responding to anyone, either.” Chris looked away from the screen to meet David’s eyes. “So how does a guy on a government pension afford eighty large a year?”

“Trick question? How does he?” David laid his hand on Chris’s shoulder, feeling a jolt of desire raced along raw nerve endings. “You starting to feel sorry for him?”

Chris shook his head, clearly affected by David’s touch. “No—yes. Who doesn’t want what’s best for their parents? Would I shove my mother into a third-rate home where she’d be treated worse than a dog?”

David was torn between telling Chris to stop it, that this kind of prying wasn’t necessary, but then again maybe it explained a lot. Was this why Degrasses was pushing the boundaries of his quest for money?

“And I found this.”

A new image resolved on his laptop. A photo of what he now recognized as the Beaumont Arms. Summer shadows threw the distant windows into deep relief. Beside a fountain and a garden, a wheelchair. In the wheelchair, an elderly white-haired woman, with a vacant look on her heavily lined face. Beside her Degrasses sat on the stone bench, both of her hands held in his. David had never seen such naked pain on a man’s face.

“Oh great,” he muttered. “The guy’s human.”

“But that’s not all,” Chris went on. “Degrasses applied for stress-related injuries following the Gulf War, and his claims for

PTSD were denied. As far as I can tell, that was around the time his mother was diagnosed. His father left them when he was five, and he had no other family, so it was just him and his mother for most of his life.”

“He must have thought he was getting the shaft after all those years of glorious service.”

“Yeah, so long and thanks for all the fish.”

“Don’t start feeling sorry for the guy,” David warned even as a worm of doubt squirmed into him.

“I’m not,” Chris said too quickly. “I also checked out this guy’s hotel here and he booked it four weeks ago from New York, with an American Express—I have the card number if you want it—and he’s booked in for ten days. He leaves in three days. No forwarding. His home base appears to be New Rochelle, New York. A pretty tony area, so being a Marine didn’t hurt his financials. He didn’t come from money, either, but he’s doing okay now. Maybe there’s some truth to the rumors about trading in looted Iraqi treasure. It would explain the lifestyle. Want to know what his bank balance is?”

“No!” David said before Chris could tell him. “Better I don’t know. I already know too much.” He could almost see Chris shrug, a small self-satisfied smile on his beautiful face. Once again Chris had delivered the goods, as flawed as they were. “You can tell me what his official business is.”

“Import/export,” Chris said. “Guess he’s not really lying. He’s only being cute on what he imports.”

“Good cover, though. If he was involved in the black market, he’d know the local shipping connections. And it gives him leave to travel without raising suspicion. I think I need to pay this guy a visit before he skips town.”

“Well, be careful if you do. Any Marine who would sell weapons to the enemy is a dangerous man.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll watch my back.” David lowered his voice. “I’d like to see you again.”

When Chris and David had first met, it was under the extraordinary conditions of a murder investigation. They had

literally been thrown together in a situation neither would have contrived on their own. Out of that had grown an unlikely love that until now had weathered a lot of disruption. But in many ways there had never been a normal “dating” period, like most people had, where they got to know each other. David had never “dated” anyone in his life. It had always been a purely sexual encounter he had surrendered to, usually accompanied by a tremendous amount of shame that he couldn’t control his own desires. Chris, on the other hand, had always been lackadaisical about his bed partners. But they had never just gone out as a pre-committed couple.

Maybe it was time to start.

“We could go out to dinner. Some of the guys have been talking about a new Argentinean place out in the Valley. Supposed to be a meat lovers’ paradise.”

“Mmmm, *asada*.”

“And *empanadas* and *lomitos*,” David added with a laugh. “You game?”

“Always,” Chris whispered. And David knew he was talking a lot more than dinner. He grew flushed just thinking about it. But they’d be safe in a public place, right? He wasn’t going to lose his cool in front of an audience, no matter how much he wanted to drag Chris onto a horizontal surface and fuck him until they were both screaming.

“When?” Chris broke through his heated thoughts.

“Ah, I already booked us in for eight on Saturday. That okay?”

“You work fast. I’m flattered. But yeah, that’s okay, I don’t have any plans. Tomorrow then. Pick me up? I’m still in the rental. They’re going to tell me then what’s going on. I may be going car shopping sooner rather than later.”

“Sure, I’ll get you. Have you decided what you’re looking for?”

“I was thinking a hybrid. They’re more expensive upfront but the savings down the line could be phenomenal. Hell, if gas prices keep soaring it will be cheaper.”

"Feeling some carbon guilt there are we?"

Chris shrugged and gave a deprecating grin. "You know..."

"There's a hybrid Escape. You always liked that thing."

"Yeah, but does it come in kiwi green?" He laughed, sounding a lot more relaxed than he had when David first came into the house. While David watched Chris left the Degraesses website and Googled the Ford Kiwi. "Hey, it does."

"Then how can you resist?" David's cell phone rang. He pulled it off his belt and looked at the call display. Jairo. Trying not to give anything away, he flipped the tiny phone open. "Laine here."

"I'm just heading back to the station. You coming back in tonight?" Jairo asked.

David didn't look at Chris. He kept his voice level. "I was."

"Then I'll see you when you get here."

"Right." David disconnected and slid the phone back into his belt. He grimaced at Chris. "Have to go. More paperwork."

"Sure. Don't work too late," Chris said. "You're starting to get bags under your eyes."

"I'll call it a night soon. Want me to call before I come tomorrow?"

"No, I'll be ready by seven-thirty. I'll take Sergeant for his walk early."

David almost suggested he wait, and they could walk the dog together, but that might be too much like asking to come home with Chris. Right now that kind of suggestion had to come from Chris.

"See you then." He leaned down and gave Chris a quick kiss, not lingering like he wanted to. They both sighed when he straightened, and he headed out, before he could do something foolish.

David got to work and found Jairo still at his desk. He looked haggard, like he hadn't slept. David glanced at a wall clock. It was nearly midnight. The squad room was empty; everyone else had gone home hours ago.

"You forget to go home last night?"

"Spent the night chasing my tail." Jairo stretched out in his chair, which protested noisily "I don't think a single lead panned out. What a fucking waste of time."

"Happens sometimes. You calling it quits?"

"I never call it quits," Jairo snapped, then thought better of it. He took a deep breath. "Sorry, I should have gone home and caught a few hours shut-eye, but I kept hoping the guy would show up. Yeah, I'm going back. My luck's turning. I got a new contact. He's gonna meet me tomorrow."

"You be careful. That's a rough area."

"I know, I know. I got—"

"Cousins who live there, I remember. Knowing cousins is not the same thing as living there yourself."

"No, having cousins there is why I don't live there. I almost got jumped in when I was a kid. Only thing saved me was my brother."

"He talk you out of it?"

"He got killed bein' in the set. I took that as a message from someone."

"Sorry," David didn't know what else to say.

"No, you're not. He was just a banger. But now you know why I live in Simi Valley."

"With your wife and two kids. Oh and a dog. You got a cat, too?"

"Nah, hamsters. I'm not ashamed of who I am."

"No? Then why not tell your wife what you like to do in your off hours."

He shrugged, either completely unaware of his hypocrisy, or not caring. "She would not understand."

"I don't understand. Why would you expect her to? So, if she decided to find a nice piece of tail you wouldn't object?"

"She would never betray me like that. I told you, she is a good Catholic girl."

"Then why did you marry her?"

"Better to marry than to burn."

David bristled. "Don't you dare quote scripture to me."

Again the shrug. Jairo popped back to his feet and saluted David. "Off to the trenches. Try to think kind thoughts of me."

"Get some sleep before you go out again," David said. He thought of something. "Hold on, before you go. How are you at gun recognition?"

"I know my way around a few. Why?"

David pulled up the image of Degraesses and his unknown firearm. "Recognize this?"

Jairo leaned over David's shoulder, his breath warm in David's ear. "Yeah, I think... if I'm right, it's an Mk 46 Mod 0, same type they found on that dead banger last week."

"What do you know about them?"

"Military use them. SOCOM, the Marines..." Jairo switched his attention to David, who was close enough to see the narrow pores of Jairo's skin. "Who is this guy?"

"He may be the one who supplied the Avenues with their weapons. I also suspect he's behind this trafficking ring."

"Marine?"

"Ex-Marine. But he probably used his connections to get the weapons in."

"Ain't it enough that the terrorists are trying to get our weapons, we have to be supplying bangers to light up the 'hoods?"

"Money knows few limitations."

"It's way too late to get that heavy." Jairo straightened. "I'm going home."

"Don't come back till morning. And that's an order Detective."

"Aye, aye, sir."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Saturday, 10:45 AM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

Chris spent the morning feverishly cleaning the house. Sergeant followed him around, unsure what was going on, but knowing something was up. Finally at eleven Chris collapsed onto a kitchen chair. He rubbed his sweating face with the sleeve of his sodden T-shirt. He still had to go shopping for tonight. David might be taking him out to dinner, but he fully intended to bring him back here after. What would happen then Chris refused to think about. To think about it would make it seem like he was planning something.

Like what? David's seduction? From the vibes coming off of David every time they were in the same room, it wouldn't take any effort on Chris's part to get David into bed. His imagination was all too ready to envision those fireworks. He spent most of the morning hard, which made cleaning uncomfortable.

Finally he put his tools away, showered, tweezed and tweaked himself to perfection and headed out to Samborra's, Des's boutique in Beverly Hills. He hurried in, and barely waited for Des to finish up with a customer when he grabbed him and hauled him to the back of the store.

"You gotta help me."

"Yeah, sure. What—"

"David's taking me out to dinner tonight. I have to be ready."

"Aha, it's like that is it? 'Bout time you two stopped this nonsense."

"Whatever," Chris snapped. "Just get me something that will knock his socks off."

Des eyed him critically. "Honey, you could show up in a sackcloth and you'd knock him over with a feather. He is so hot for you—"

"Des."

"Okay, okay. Geez Mary Alice, you need to get laid in the worst way."

"You think?"

Des just shook his hairless head and rolled his eyes. "Come with me, Des is going to make one fine peacock out of you. Nobody, man or woman, is going to be able to resist you."

"That's what I want to hear." Chris patted his short, spiky hair. "Oh shit, I need a cut. Can you get Jules to come in and do me?"

"Honey, for me Jules would fly to the moon."

"He only has to come to Beverly Hills before five."

Des sniffed. "That's not much of a challenge."

Three hours later Chris walked out laden down with packages and a new cut. He walked with a springy step and nodded at everyone he passed. Very few nodded back. This was Beverly Hills, after all.

He didn't care. He was going to see David tonight.

Saturday, 11:55 AM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David had been at his desk for hours, watching the time crawl by. Jairo had called earlier to tell him he was on his way to Drew for a noon meet with his mystery informant. He swore up and down to David's questions that he had indeed gone home the night before and slept. "You want to call my wife and check up on me? I feel fine," he said to David's probing questions.

David had almost forbidden the young detective from going off on his own, but if it kept Jairo out of his hair one more day, then what was the harm? Jairo had proved himself a capable officer. He could take care of himself.

His landline rang. He picked it up. It was Captain Fredericks. "Get in my office now, Laine."

David closed his system down, and made his way to his Captain's office, wondering what was up. Fredericks never sounded happy, but this time he was clearly angry.

"Yes, sir," he said even before he had shut the door behind him. He faced Fredericks across his oak desk.

"I just got off the phone with Men's Central. Seems one of yours just went dancing on the blacktop with another inmate. Sorry, he didn't make it."

David's mouth went dry. He had two incarcerated there. Which one? "Who?" he asked.

"A Valerian Mikalenko. Yours?"

"Yes sir, he was. He was giving us names of people involved in the human trafficking ring we recently uncovered."

"A CI?"

"Not officially, sir. He signed a deal Ms. DeSoto drew up."

"I'd hazard a guess someone uncovered him."

"Yes, sir. How did it happen?"

"The usual. Beef in the yard, next thing you know it breaks up, but there's one body doesn't get up to join the rest. Homemade shank from the kitchen."

"What about my other buster?"

"Who might that be?" Fredericks asked, furrowing his brow.

"The doctor, Sevchuk. The one who turned Mikalenko."

"No word on him—"

"I need to check. We have to protect him now. He's our last tie..." David met Frederick's gaze and frowned. "They know who did it?"

"Some little tweaker from Glassel Park. An Avenues soldier, I guess. At least that's the affiliation we know about. He'd just been booked in on a weapon's charge this morning."

David felt ice invade his gut. "Avenues? From Drew Street?"

"You got something going on down there, Laine? I know you and your new partner caught the gangbanger 187 last week. This involved?"

"I don't know, sir. I do know Detective Hernandez was working on some leads in the area."

"Where is Hernandez now?"

"I don't know sir. He said he was going to meet someone down on Drew..."

"And he doesn't know the case has been compromised?" Fredericks looked even more thunderous, if such a thing was possible. "I suggest you talk to your partner and reel him in. Get him out of there, Laine."

"Yes sir."

"Take a couple of cage cars with you." Frederick picked up his phone. "I'll call down to Central and get them to put the doctor in ad seg."

David returned to his desk and tried Jairo's cell. Out of service. That wasn't good. Jairo was too good a cop to turn his cell off while out on a call, unless he suspected it would break his cover. He checked. Jairo hadn't taken a rover with him, either. Next, he put in a call for a couple of uniformed teams to join him on Drew. One call went to Konstatinov, who readily agreed to meet David with his shop partner. Then he signed out his own unmarked, checking to see if Jairo had signed out a car this morning. He hadn't, which meant he had taken his own wheels. Probably to blend better. A Crown Vic would stand out down there as much as a black and white cage car.

David beat the two unis to Drew. David quickly scanned the street but there was no sign of the white Firehawk. He called a third unit down to look for it. He parked his car outside the empty lot that had once been the Satellite house, the major drug center in this neighborhood, demolished by the city. Scraps of paper clustered around a scarred Eucalyptus tree, and the smell of smoke, and garbage, and car exhaust lingered in the air. David could have sworn he smelled fire crackers. The street was empty, but he could feel eyes watching him. The open air drug market the street usually hosted had been interrupted by their

arrival. He thought of the automatic rifle they'd recovered earlier, and the Mk 46 Jairo had IDed Degrasses carrying. His spine twitched, as he thought of how many of those watchers were armed. Before exiting his vehicle he strapped on a vest.

He huddled around his car with the six uniformed patrol officers, and briefed them on what he knew. "Detective Jairo Hernandez was en route to this location for a noon meeting with an informant. I don't have a location for the meet, just Drew Street."

"Lots of alleys and backyards," a graying sergeant said. Beside him Konstatinov nodded grimly.

"We will find him, Detective," Konstatinov said.

"So let's quit jawing and do it," his partner said, adjusting his belt and slapping his hands on his legs.

A crowd had gathered. Blank and angry faces watched the police fan out and begin their search. Rotting fence boards were ripped down and flashlights shone into darkened crawl ways. The restless crowd followed them down the street. A few of the bolder ones shouted obscenities at them.

"Hey *pendejo*, go home. This our hood."

David knew it was a useless gesture, but he strode out to confront the growing mob.

"We're looking for someone. A detective who came out here this morning to meet with someone—"

"Yeah, a buster. You know what we do to busters."

David eyed the hulking Latino with prison tats up and down his bulging arms. From his gray pallor, and bulked up form, David knew he'd only just been released. He got right up in the guy's face, and was gratified to find he was looking down at him.

"You know who we're looking for? You better tell us if you do, or I will come down on you like white on rice."

"Oh, 5-0 don't scare me. *Chucha de tu madre*—!"

David took another step closer and poked the homie in the chest, forcing him to retreat. "You listen, and you listen good,

because I will not repeat myself. Go home. Stay in your crib until someone tells you hibernation is over.” Another poke. “Do not get in my face again.”

David spun around and left the stunned man, hoping he wasn’t armed.

Behind another run down, scarred building, David ducked out of the alley, when he spotted a footprint in the dirt beside a torn chain link fence. It looked like the imprint of a boot. Jairo had been wearing his Tony Lamas the last time David had seen him. He peered through the fence. Here the yard, for lack of a better word, though David had seen greener parking lots, was packed with cigarette butts and used condoms. More bootprints and one discarded nitrile glove. He crouched down and studied the glove. Nothing amiss about it. No blood. It was just there, where it shouldn’t be. Was it Jairo’s?

David donned his own and picked the glove up. Behind him Konstatinov approached. He saw what David had found.

“Is that the Detective’s?”

“No idea. Could be.” David pointed at the house they were behind. It was a one story structure with a sagging step and one broken, duct-taped window. A chromed out Oldsmobile sat on four flat tires, weeds growing through the engine block, the front window starred. A doorless fridge and a rusted out bicycle crowded between broken Olde English forties, Night Train and cheap tequila bottles. The back door of the house was shut, but dirt and dust on the porch had recently been disturbed. David could see footprints leading into the building, too scuffed to tell if they were from boot heels. He signaled to Konstatinov and his partner to follow. Hand on his Smith & Wesson, he edged up the stairs sideways, trying to present as small a target as possible. At the first window he pressed his face to the glass and tried to make out the interior. All he could see was more decay, and junk strewn through the filthy living room, devoid of any furniture except a threadbare sofa.

“Is that loudmouth still out front?” he asked Konstatinov who nodded. “Bring him back here. Cuff him if you have to.”

“Yes, sir.”

The homie came willingly enough. But then a smart man didn't argue with a pair of angry cops, with guns, and by now all the officers were getting their blood up. One of their own was in danger.

"Who owns this place?"

"This dump?" The homie threw off Konstatinov's hand and folded his arms over his chest, missing the tension his move generated. Konstatinov caught David's eye and shook his blond head. The homie had been patted down for weapons. "Don't know."

"Who lives here, then."

"Don't—"

David was back in his face, so close he could smell the guy's hot sour breath, and see the details of the small teardrop tattoo under his right eye. His face was cadaverous, and marked with broken pustules. He would have stepped back, but Konstatinov blocked his way. His face grew pale and tight.

"Police brutality. I'm gonna call the ACLU on your ass. *Chinga a tu madre—*"

"Tell me who lives here and you can go fuck my mother. *Who lives here?*"

"Celio Garza, everyone calls him *Podrido*."

"He *eme, ese?*"

The guy gave him a look that said "Get real, this is Drew Street. 'Course he's a banger."

"I'll take that as a yes. He an Avenues?" David leaned closer. He could have counted the pores on the man's sweating face. "What's his affiliation? Who jumped him in?"

"Yeah, he *Avenida, ese*."

"Was he around earlier today? Here? With another man?"

With his fear spiking, David swung the homie around and slammed him face first against the wooden door. He jerked the tattooed arms behind him and pulled out his cuffs. "Do you tell me what I need to know, or do I put these on you?"

“¡Joder! I tell you. I tell you!” The homie screamed as his shoulders were wrenched back. “He here this morning. He meetin’ some dude going to give him some juice. He got a need.”

David didn’t need to ask for what. Just as it was obvious this guy was a tweaker, his buddy would be too. “Who was he going to meet? A dealer? He going to score some ice?”

“No, not ice. He gonna fence some stuff he got from a lick. Then he gonna score some ice.”

“So he was meeting a fence here?”

“I said that dinn’t I?”

Konstatinov’s rover spat out some rapid fire words. David glanced up to see the younger man listening intently. His gaze met David’s.

“They have located Detective Hernandez’s vehicle. In a dead-end alley off Drew, near Andrita Street. It looks like it has been trashed and someone tried to torch it.”

“Any sign of a struggle?”

Konstatinov listened some more then shook his head. “Nothing to indicate a struggle took place in the vehicle, but then there is extensive fire and smoke damage.”

Hardly reassuring. David stared out into the ravaged yard, and trashed wheels, and wondered where Jairo was. He dragged the homie down the steps and handed him over to the other officers. “Take him in. I’ll question him later.”

He was about to call for a direct assault on the door when a rapid crack-crack-crack echoed from inside the house. Automatic fire. Over their heads a window blew out, and on the street a woman screamed. Every one in the yard dropped to the ground. “Shots fired at officers,” Konstatinov shouted into his rover. “Requesting assistance on Drew, north of Estara Street. We need assistance. We need assistance.”

David waved Konstatinov over and when he was at arm’s length he took the rover from him. “Officer involved shooting. I need SWAT out here. We found an Mk 46 earlier.” Gun fire strafed the air. More screams and a car screeched down the

street. "They're firing automatic weapons. Possible hostage involved. A police officer. Out." He handed the rover back to Konstatinov. "Take cover. We wait for backup."

Together they wormed their way off the porch, taking dubious cover crouched beside the porch. No one moved inside the house. Was Jairo in there? Time moved in slow motion. Dust motes drifted by, light blurred and distorted his vision. Cracks in the boards underfoot seemed to swell and sway, his heart thundered in his chest. His breathing was hoarse.

Soon sirens filled the neighborhood, overriding the continued bursts of ammunition. The window above the porch exploded in a shower of glass, and shredded plywood, and duct tape that had covered the already broken pane.

SWAT's armored van roared into the alley behind the house, followed by several Chevy Suburbans. A half dozen vested and heavily armed Rapid Response SWAT personnel swarmed out of the vehicles. One crawled over to consult with David. He introduced himself. "Wayne Garner. How many in the building?"

"Not sure. No sign there's more than a single gunman. We had a witness who says my partner showed up this morning to fence some goods in a sting. No one's seen him since."

Both of them turned to look at the house. The SWAT commander signaled his men to bring up the battering ram and a bullhorn. "No phone, unless someone's carrying a cell."

"Detective Hernandez might be, if he's inside. But he wasn't responding earlier."

"We'll go on the assumption he's incommunicado." He raised the bullhorn to his mouth and began speaking to whoever was in the house. "Hola, the house. This is the police. Come out of the building with your hands behind your head."

The only response was the thunk, thunk, thunk of automatic rifle. Puffs of drywall and the smell of wet firecrackers filled the cooling evening air. "I'll take that as a no," Garner said. "Sounds like a SAW, maybe an MK," he added.

“We found one of those here earlier,” David said. “Alongside a dead banger. I suspect the weapons are being supplied by an ex-Marine.”

Garner nodded at the intel. He threw a hand signal over his shoulder, and a teflon-suited officer ran in a semi-crouch past them and up onto the porch. He carried a battering ram slung over his shoulder, which he swung around, bracing it with both hands. “Knock, knock,” Garner muttered. The other man swung at the door, which cracked under the blow. A second swing sent the door crashing inward, splinters of wood flying.

“Go! Go! Go!” Garner and his team stormed through the door. David followed on their heels.

The interior of the small bungalow was hot, and dark, and stank of rotting food, urine and feces. Garner led the way through the house. As each room was declared all clear, David followed. He saw signs that at least two people had been in the room. Spent shells littered the filthy floor. Old food wrappers, and paper cups, soiled the threadbare rug that stank of urine. Dust danced on weak sunbeams that flowed through the broken windows. In a splash of light, on the corner of the ratty couch, David saw a dark stain. He approached it, shoving his Smith & Wesson back into its holster, pulled on gloves and crouched down to examine the still wet spot. “We need forensics in here,” he said, standing up. He heard Konstatinov’s voice put the call through on his rover.

“Is that blood?”

“I think so. Don’t ask me whose, though.” They both knew who it probably belonged to. By this time a block of ice had settled in David’s gut. It was his fault Jairo was here. His fault Jairo hadn’t had the backup he should have gone in with. If he’d been the senior officer he should have been, Jairo would never have stepped out of line and engaged in dangerous behavior. And he’d never have come down here alone, trying to prove he was a good cop.

Someone yelled and a door in the rear of the house crashed open. A fusillade of bullets was just as abruptly shut down. A harsh male voice screamed Spanish invectives, then fell silent.

SWAT led a handcuffed Latino man past David, followed by a second SWAT officer gingerly carrying an Mk 46 assault rifle. David left Konstatinov to secure the crime scene while he hurried through to the back of the house. The structure was empty.

Where was Jairo?

He heard voices out in the living room, but didn't look up when someone entered. It was Konstatinov. "The bus is on its way. No sign of Detective Hernandez?"

"I'll find him."

Konstatinov nodded. "We start back here?"

"Yes, we start back here."

They began the same kind of methodical search they had conducted at Leland. But this time, instead of looking for proof of what had been going on, they were looking for something, anything, to tell them what had happened to Jairo.

David almost didn't hear the sound. They had been through a bedroom, dragging closet doors open and even peering under beds. All David found were dust bunnies and one dead and desiccated rat. Then they moved into the next room, a kitchen only in the broadest definition.

It was a disaster. Whoever had lived here had never cleaned a day in their lives. Grease clogged the sink drains, and food and things David didn't want to identify covered every surface. Flies buzzed around, settling briefly to sample a tasty morsel, before moving off to a better smörgåsbord. The walls were ochre, suggesting a heavy smoker; whether tobacco or crack, he didn't know. The table overflowed with cigarette butts, empty 8 balls and glass basing bowls. The floor under his feet was tacky.

David watched one enterprising fly try to climb inside the sink drain, after who knew what. He could hear it buzzing inside the pipes. A small cluster of flies collected around the cupboard under the sink. David saw the blood first. Then he heard a moan.

He wrenched the door open, and Jairo tumbled out into his arms. Blood flowed from a gun shot wound in his gut. His face

had taken a severe beating. Behind him, Konstatinov shouted into his rover.

“Officer down. Need assistance immediately. I repeat, officer is down. Send a bus, stat.”

David cradled Jairo in his arms, and tried to assess the injuries. His face was a mess, but the wounds looked superficial, though there was a lot of blood. His abdomen, though, was another story. Blood continued to seep out past his hands that were futilely trying to stem the flow. Jairo’s breath was shallow, and rapid, and the pulse at his throat was thready. Shock. David dragged his jacket off and wrapped it around his shoulders.

“Take it easy, Jairo. Help is on the way.”

“G-got him?”

“Yes, we got him. Talk about it later.”

“Not a bad cop after all,” Jairo whispered for his ears only. “Told you I didn’t quit.”

“Yeah, you did. I should have listened.”

“Not your fault...”

But it was.

Jairo reached up and touched David’s face, leaving a smear of blood over his cheek and lips. “Chris is a very lucky guy.”

“So’s your wife.”

“Don’t... don’t tell her.”

“You know I can’t do that. Someone will call her to the hospital. But you’re going to be okay. I promise.”

Jairo blinked several times, and a bubble of blood foamed out of his mouth. At least one of his lungs was punctured. One hand clutched at David’s, squeezing it when a rush of pain filled him.

“Hang on,” David said harshly. “Don’t you dare give up now. Where’s that guy who won’t quit? Don’t lose him now. You have to hang on...”

But Jairo's eyes shut, and he sagged. David refused to let him fall to the filthy floor. He held him in his arms, ignoring the blood that was everywhere.

A brilliant flash of light startled David, who looked up in time to see the second flash from the photographer's camera through the nearest kitchen window. Dark shadows and loud voices raised in protest faded away as some of Garner's men dragged the news people away.

Through the roof of the house an LAPD airship moved overhead. An ambulance moaned to a stop outside. Feet thudded on the floor, shaking the flimsy house. David backed away from Jairo as four EMTs carrying a stretcher went to work. An oxygen mask covered his mouth, and a blood pressure cuff over his arm. "Blood pressure ninety over fifty, and falling. We need to start a fluid drip. Pulse is thready and faint."

They hustled Jairo onto the stretcher, and with long practice, got him out the door and into the waiting bus. David picked up his gore-covered jacket from where the EMTs had flung it as they got to work saving Jairo's life, and followed them out. Just before the door slammed shut, he heard one of the EMTs shout, "He's arresting. Prep him—"

The ambulance peeled out. David jumped into his unmarked, slapped the bubble light on his dash, and took off after the bus.

He stayed on the ambulance's bumper all the way to USC County, where they hustled Jairo inside, shutting him out.

The vigil started.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Saturday, 8:10 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

Chris checked his watch one more time. It couldn't be right. David wouldn't be late on a night as important as this. Would he? It didn't make sense. But then almost nothing David had done lately made sense. His life was in turmoil, and Chris still couldn't figure out if it was a mid-life crisis, or something more sinister.

Could he have possibly grown tired of Chris?

He waited until eight-thirty, pacing almost the whole time, unable to sit. At eight-thirty-five, he dialed David's cell, but it wasn't active. "What the fuck..." Chris clutched the phone in his hand. "Where are you David? Don't do this to me."

When the phone rang, over thirty minutes later, he snatched it up so fast he knocked the slim, cream-colored device off the end table. It was only Des.

"You got the TV on?" Des's voice was flat.

"No, I'm waiting for David. Why would I be watching TV—"

"You might want to turn it on. Channel 5."

Chris put the phone down, and almost ran to the media room. He flipped the TV on and grabbed the cordless beside David's chair. The TV flickered, then settled into a steady signal. He flipped over to the local news channel. "What am I looking at—?"

The screen resolved into chaos. Chris didn't recognize the area, but it looked rundown. At least a dozen black and white units, and a huge black van, crowded around a small house that looked like it was falling apart. At the bottom of the screen were the words: Drew Street, Glassell Park. Chris was still confused. What was going on?

The scene shifted to something more familiar: USC County hospital. What—?

Then he saw David, and his heart slammed into his chest. David was standing inside the doors to the Emergency room, staring into the distance, completely unaware of anything going on around him. A blond uniformed cop stood near his shoulder, and it was obvious he was talking to David, though Chris doubted his lover was hearing much of anything.

“What happened? Was David hurt—”

The venerable Stan Chambers came on screen. “This evening, in troubled Glassell Park, SWAT was called in to rescue a police officer being held hostage by a known gang member. The firestorm that erupted has left one officer in critical condition.”

A camera cut back to Drew Street where a large, very loud Latino woman clutched a young child to her ample breast. “We was just watching TV when all this shooting started. *Pensé que estuvimos muertos*. The police ignore us all the time, and this happens.” She clasped the child to her. “Our babies are dying.”

“Did you see what happened here?” a faceless voice asked the shaken woman, who vehemently shook her head.

“No way, I don’t see nothing. I ain’t no buster. Police need to clean up these streets. It ain’t safe for my babies.” She clutched the baby so hard it started wailing. “Gangbangers run things around here. It ain’t healthy to see too much.”

“No names have been released yet, but Celeo Perez Garza, AKA Podrido, AKA Podawg was taken into custody shortly after an ambulance was called to the scene. An LAPD detective was taken to USC County General. His name has not been released.”

“David...” Chris breathed. But he had seen David only seconds ago. So what was happening? Who was hurt? “What’s going on?”

“They’re not saying,” Des said. “But David’s there and it looks like he was in a cat fight.”

“USC.” Chris stabbed the TV remote off and jumped to his feet. “I need to get out there. I’ll talk to you later, hon.”

“Let me know—” But before he could finish the sentence, Chris had hung up. He paused only long enough to grab his jacket, and rental car keys, and bolted out the door, telling Sergeant to stay. He broke a few speed limits on his way to the hospital.

The emergency waiting room was the usual controlled chaos. Chris spotted a couple of LAPD uniformed cops he didn’t recognize, and thought of approaching them. But he knew cops tended to band together when things like this happened, and they didn’t take kindly to strangers sticking their civilian noses in police affairs. He sidled closer to them, to overhear their conversations.

“Guy went out without backup. No one knows what he was thinking, but Jesus, I wouldn’t be caught dead down there without my partner and backup. Heard this one didn’t even tell his partner what was up.”

“Rookies,” one of the cops muttered under his breath. “Get their asses shot off and one of us has to clean up the mess.” The griping turned to concern. “He going to be okay?”

“No one will say. He’s still in surgery. At least one bullet in him. Whoever it was messed him up pretty good before the shoot.”

Chris drifted away, and was just wandering around, when he spotted David emerging from a room, with a Latino woman he had never seen before, who had obviously been crying. She held a tattered Kleenex in her fist, and would occasionally dab her wet eyes and nose with the useless tissue. David was clearly trying to soothe her.

Chris could see David’s suit jacket and wool pants were caked in blood and gore. Had he been shot too? But no, he wouldn’t be out here if he was injured. So where had the blood come from? He hurried over to where David and the woman stood. David looked up when he got nearer and his face fell.

“Oh, Chris. I should have called, but it’s been crazy—”

“What happened?”

“Jairo got shot.”

Chris fell back a step. Jairo? He threw a look at the teary woman. But hadn't David said he was ending that partnership? But then David wouldn't turn his back on any cop who was hurt in the line of duty.

He nodded at the woman who must be Jairo's wife. “I'm sorry, *Señora*...” He looked helplessly at David, who quickly provided the name. “*Señora* Adele Hernandez.”

“*Señora* Hernandez,” Chris said. “This must be a terrible time for you.”

“He did not tell me what he was doing,” Mrs. Hernandez's thickly accented voice was choked with grief. “He not tell me anything. I knew something bad would happen. I tell him this morning to be careful. Something bad will happen.” She sobbed into her Kleenex. “He never listen.”

“He's going to be okay, *Señora* Hernandez,” David said. “The doctors here are top-notch. They'll take care of him.”

“I must see him—”

The hysterical woman tried to charge through the swinging doors into ICU, and the surgical section. David caught her arm hard enough to leave a mark.

“No, *Señora* Hernandez. You have to leave it to the doctors. They're doing everything possible.”

So Jairo wasn't entirely out of danger. Chris had nothing but sympathy for the wives and partners of cops. You never knew when you were going to get that phone call, or the visit from a detective, who would fulfill your worst nightmare. Chris was tempted to speak, to echo David's sentiments, but in the end he bit his lip, and said nothing.

Two other uniformed cops approached David and the woman. Chris heard their soft, deferential voices. “We knew Jairo from his patrol days. We used to ride together on more than one occasion. He was a damn good cop.”

"Is a damned good cop," David snapped. No one took offense.

"Sure, sorry, Detective. Didn't mean anything by it."

David turned away and caught sight of Chris again. His face twisted up in anguish and Chris thought he was going to leave. He caught up with him near the entrance to ICU.

"I heard about what happened on the news. Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"David—"

"Not now, Chris."

"Please, David. You're just upset. I can imagine what it must have been like—"

"No, you can't." David was still staring off into the distance, like he had been earlier on the news. Like he was reliving the shooting again and again. "He's here because of me. Because I didn't do my job."

"You feel guilty. That's natural—"

"I am guilty," David said softly. "I don't think this is a good place to be having this conversation. Why don't you go home. I'll call you later."

"What about us? Are you just going to kill us because you made one stupid mistake?"

"Hardly stupid. Because of me, and my refusal to do my job, a man is in there. He may be dying. And there isn't a damn thing I can do about it." He jerked his arm away from Chris. "I even lied to you about getting rid of him as a partner because you were so upset over it. Even when I knew it was a lie. He is my partner. Was..." his voice trailed off into a whisper. "I messed everything up."

"I..." Chris stepped away from David, studying his rough, pockmarked face. He didn't know what to say. "I guess I was wrong."

Saturday, 9:55 PM USC County General, North State Street, East Los Angeles

David watched Chris leave. He knew he should stop him. That this wasn't the way this should end, but he was too enervated to care right now. Later he would sit down with Chris and they would decide if their relationship was worth saving. He had seen the signs that Chris had spent most of the afternoon getting ready for their date. He had polished himself into a perfection David couldn't approach. He didn't deserve someone so perfect. Why couldn't Chris see that?

The last few hours had proved one thing. He didn't deserve Chris, period. He should have known that from the beginning, but sometimes he guessed he was slow. It would probably take him a while, too, but Chris would eventually see it was for the best. He'd find someone easily enough, who would be better for him. He dug his fingernails into the palms of his hands at the thought of Chris with another man, then roughly shoved the thought aside. He had to let him go. For both their sakes.

A surgically garbed doctor hurried out of the locked door, and conferred briefly with Mrs. Hernandez. She was earning her stripes tonight. After today, she would be a true cop's wife. He saw her face grow pale, and he hurried over to her.

"What's the news?"

"He is out of surgery. For now. He must undergo more surgery. There is damage..." She wept. "He is going to die—"

"Please, *Señora* Hernandez. You must be strong..." He gripped her arm. "I'm sure he'll be okay. He's young. He'll pull through."

"He thinks he is *invencible*," she hissed. "He will not give up the police work. Not even for a bullet. He loves it too much. You are not married, I know this. Jairo told me so. You do not know how bad it is for a wife."

David didn't dispute the accusation. There was a hell of a lot he didn't know anymore. More people began to crowd into the waiting room. Latinos all, they gathered around Jairo's wife, and

David realized they must be members of Jairo's vast family. The one he used to joke about.

Konstatinov came up and stood deferentially off to the side. He didn't speak until David looked at him.

"The Captain is on his way. He wants a report when he arrives."

David glanced over at Jairo's family. The room was filled with their soft voices and quiet fear.

Fredericks arrived and conferred with the family, offering his sympathy, and encouragement, following department protocol. Finally he approached David and Konstatinov.

"You want to tell me what the hell happened here, Laine?"

"Detective Hernandez developed a contact on Drew Street—"

"He had a CI down there? Where's the paperwork on it?"

"I don't believe he'd formalized the relationship—"

"So he was down there on his own? Did you sanction this foolishness, Laine?"

"No, I—"

"So a rookie D was down there on his own?"

Any answer was going to get someone in trouble. David thought of Jairo in there fighting for his life. If he survived, did David want to put a black mark on his jacket? Face it, Jairo had been down there because he had neglected his duties as senior officer. His mistake. His bad. Not Jairo's.

"No sir. I thought he'd be safe. He was just checking on some sources for me."

"So you authorized this venture?"

"Yes, sir."

Fredericks disapproval was palpable. "I want you to return to the station. I expect a full report on my desk by the time I get back there."

David didn't want to leave. Not until they knew if Jairo would be all right. "But sir, Detective Hernandez—"

"You'll be kept apprised of his condition. Take Konstatinov with you. Interview the shooter. I want a full confession on tape when I get back."

"Yes, sir." David signaled Konstatinov to follow him.

David first step was to secure an interview with the banger who had set Jairo up and shot him. He had Konstatinov stand on the other side of the two-way to observe and listen. As much as he would have liked to plow his fist into the smug banger's sneering face, this was going to be by the book. No fubars allowed. No chance the guy would walk on this because of something he did.

Garza now wore the red jumpsuit of a K10 inmate, on keep away status. The two deputies, who would escort him everywhere he went, until he was returned to the Men's Central and held over for trial, led him to the table and took up position by the door. He still wore his travel jewelry—arm and leg irons attached to a metal band around his waist. David Mirandized him again, and slid the banger's multi page rap sheet across the table at the bored looking man, before pulling a chair out to sit down. David wanted to leap across the table and wrap his hands around the punk's throat. Instead he deliberately put his notebook on the table and tapped the scarred surface with his pen. "Well, Mr. Celeo Perez Garza, you're in a fine pickle here."

"What you mean by that, Güey?"

"It means third strike and you're out, cuz."

"*Lerzo*. You ain't my cuz."

"You're screwed," David said softly, aware the banger was watching him with the intensity of a hawk eying a mouse. "Say hello to hard time, for a long time."

"Ha, you don't scare me, low rent."

"No?" David leaned over the table. He had changed his jacket for a spare he kept in his locker, but there hadn't been a shirt and Jairo's blood was still on it. It felt tacky and hard against his skin. He saw Garza's eyes flick over the stains then look away, pretending indifference. "It means you shot a cop, asshole, and if he dies you're going to fry. I'll personally see to

it. I foresee the green room at Quentin in your future. You think you'll like it there?"

"*No sé*. Ain't gonna happen. I'm made."

Interesting. "You claiming to be *carnale*? You little pissant loser? You think the *Eme* is going to back your play? What do you think the *mesero* are going to do when I let them know you green-lighted a cop like you're some kind of shot-caller? Think that's going to go over well? Or maybe you figure your little Ukrainian friend is going to save your punk ass? Think Degrasses will be there for you?"

Garza looked startled but recovered quickly. "Don't know the dude."

"How did you meet him? I hardly think he'd come down to the 'hood to run a recruitment drive. So how did he find a loser like you to do his dirty work?"

Garza bristled. "I'm clean. Guy never told me he was a cop."

"You really think that's going to mean shit? You're going down for attempted murder of a police officer, receiving stolen property, possession of illegal and unregistered weapons, and probably trespassing, since I doubt if you actually got a lease on that house. Probably tack on a few more weapons charges, and maybe a couple of others. Those years can add up pretty fast if you start counting. And if Detective Hernandez dies... Your ass is mine. Now tell me about Degrasses."

Garza was silent.

"Or go down for him," David said. "I'm sure he'll reward you handsomely. Maybe as well as he rewarded Mikalenko, give you hard candy like he gave Mikalenko. You think the guy cares about you? You're a rat's ass to him. He'll exterminate you just like a fat rodent and never lose a minute's sleep."

"You can't talk to me like that. I want my Cochrane."

David stood up and shut off the recorder. "Okay, have it your way. I'm done trying to talk sense into you." He signaled the deputies lounging near the door. "Take him back. I guess I'll see you in court—"

The taller of the two deputies stepped forward. Garza spoke quickly. "Wait. What kinda deal you talking?"

"You'll have to talk to the DA about that. Dropout and we'll see you get PC. If your information is solid, I think it could keep you out of the chair and off the *listas*."

"No time? Probation?"

"Keep dreaming, Garza. No way you're skating on this. You'll get protective custody, and avoid a shit-covered shiv in your gut the next time you walk the yard. They say you smell it before it hits you. You think that's true?"

Garza looked sick.

"You want to talk?"

"I'll talk," Garza said sullenly. "What you want?"

David sat back down again. He reactivated the recorder, and ran through the introduction again. Once more he advised the banger of his rights, and got him to verbally agree to waive them. He also had him sign a copy of the Miranda card he always carried. "How did you meet Degrasses? What have you done for him? Give me dates, times and locations for your meetings. Did you involve anyone else and in what capacity? That'll do for a start."

Garza started cursing David, who ignored the tirade, and waited until the banger got tired of spewing filth.

"You ready to go on, or do I arrange transport back to Men's Central?"

"I'll take it all back if I don't get a sweet deal. Deny everything."

David didn't bother mentioning the running tape. If Garza wanted to forget it, then David wasn't going to remind him. And he neglected to mention that Konstatinov was watching on the other side of the two-way, taking his own notes.

"How did you meet Degrasses?"

"Through that other dude, the Russian guy."

"What was his name?"

"Mickey. That's all he ever said, like that was his real name."

"You're sure he was Russian?" The last thing the DA would need was a sharp defense lawyer to say he couldn't have possibly meant Mikalenko, since Mikalenko was not Russian. David also didn't mention that Mikalenko was dead.

"How the fuck I know. He talked funny. Sounded Russian to me. Them damn commies all sound alike."

"So you met Mr. Mikalenko first, then he introduced you to Degrasses. Did he ever say where he met Degrasses?"

"Nah, he don't say. Who cares, right? His green's good. His MAC's sweet too."

"You mean the Mk 46s?"

"Whatever they are, they sweet. He tell us he got lots more where those come from. He arm us up good, do some serious set-tripping. Last time we met up, he says we got some major business to tend to. He bringing in some more girls, 'replenish his stable' he says." Garza snorted with laughter. "He got some fine *señoritas*, I gotta tell you. Sure would have liked a piece of that, know what I mean? I tell him I good for business. I already helped him once, when that white dog mess up his girls."

"What white dog?"

"That pasty Russian dude. He call Degrasses up all in a panic, cause all his bitches got dead. Man, Degrasses was pissed on that, I tell you."

David thought fast. "You mean Mikalenko called Degrasses about his girls dying?"

"Deader 'n shit. That blond bitch clocked them. Who'd a thought she had it in her? Degrasses sure didn't."

"So they called you to... what?" Had they been wrong? Had Garza killed Halyna?

"He needed help getting rid of them whores. It was me thought of taking them up to the park and putting them in the ground. That Russian pussy couldn't think straight to save his own ass, less alone Degrasses'."

“And you don’t mind getting your hands dirty, do you, Garza?” David said.

Garza preened. “*Podrido* know how to take care of things.” Suddenly he frowned. “What you mean about Degraesses taking care of Mickey?”

“What do you think I mean, *cuate*?” David leaned forward. “He had him shanked in lockdown, the same place you’re going, when you leave here. Think he’s already got a blade with your name on it? Maybe you’ll get lucky, and they’ll keep you in ad seg for your bit.”

For the first time Garza looked frightened. “You gotta protect me, right? That freak show Degraesses gets me, you got no case.”

Something in Garza’s tone alerted David. “Why’s he a freak? He do something to make you think he’s a freak?”

Through his fear, impatience. Like David was slow to catch on to what was obvious. “He sells women, right? Ho’s his thing for making dough, but it’s not what turns his crank, you get my drift.”

“No I don’t. What does turn his crank?”

“He likes kids, real young ones. I always thought that was sicko. Where’s the fun in dipping your wank in a kiddie butt?”

“You saw him do this?”

“Nah, man, you think I watch that shit? I ain’t sick. I like slit. But I seen him with a little kid once, in his fancy hotel room. I don’t think I was supposed to see it, but this kid come out of the bedroom, rubbing his eyes like he just woke up. Degraesses got real pissed at the brat and sent him back. Thought sure the kid was gonna piss hisself. After that we met elsewhere, you get my drift.”

“How do you know he wasn’t just looking after his nephew or someone’s kid?”

“Shit, my nephew walk like that kid and I’d know someone’s been shoving something bigger than a pinkie up his grunt hole.”

David felt sick. He had to get Degrasses off the street. Permanently.

“Who gave you your orders? Mikalenko or Degrasses? Who did you soldier for?”

“Degrasses *el mero chingon*. I never heard Mickey say boo to him any time they were together. He keep it moving, sure, but I know they come from Degrasses.”

“How’d you know? Why couldn’t Mikalenko have been the top dog?”

Garza gave a harsh laugh. “That fool? Couldn’t hardly find his asshole wit’ a flashlight. Not surprised Degrasses wasted him. *Petiso de mierda*. Some *perros* don’t deserve to live.”

“Who greenlighted him? *Eme* order the hit?”

“Not them. I do my own business. What you take me for?”

David leaned over the table, his face in Garza’s. “What do I take you for? A fool, with more balls than brains. Garden slugs got a higher IQ than you. You want me to go on?”

“I don’t gotta take this shit.”

“No, you don’t. I can arrange a bus to take you down to county right now, if you want. You can be there in time for a breakfast burrito. Now let’s continue this dance, or let’s call it quits. I’m too tired for this shit.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Sunday, 12:40 AM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

Chris had no idea how or when he got home. He stripped off his carefully selected outfit, and dropped everything on the bedroom floor, kicking it aside as he grabbed a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Barefoot he descended the stairs and wandered through the house, touching things as memories played havoc with his mind. The phone rang before he made it into the living room. He nearly tripped trying to get to it, but when he looked at the call display, he saw it was only Des. He let it go to voicemail, not capable of dealing with his friend, and his well-meaning verbal hugs.

He stopped in front of the window, and stared down at the reservoir at the bottom of the hill. Lights flared and flickered in the placid water. A low mist crept off the water, dimming the lights. Sergeant came up and pushed his damp nose against Chris's hand.

The phone rang again. He ignored it and the dog.

It was really over. His mind still couldn't wrap itself around the knowledge he carried deep in his gut. David didn't want him anymore. He was willing to lie to placate him. To fool him into thinking he would be faithful, when all the time he was playing Chris for a fool.

But some small spark in him kept the hope alive. Was that how it really was? Maybe David had another reason for the lies.

How was that possible? He leaned into the picture window, hands splayed on the glass, face inches from the smooth surface. His breath fogged it up, then cleared, then fogged again, as he inhaled, then exhaled. All without conscious thought. Like bugs mindlessly throwing themselves against a lantern's flame, unaware it would scorch the skin off their bodies, leaving them empty husks.

David had always been very protective of Chris. From the first time they had shared a bed, David had shielded him, first from the Carpet Killer, then from any knowledge of what David's world encompassed. Chris hadn't always liked it, but he also hadn't wanted to know the ugliness David lived with day in and out. He just wanted to be there to lick David's wounds when a case went south. Was this just another example of David trying to keep the world away from him? And all he could do was be a shrill bitch, and doubt David's integrity.

The phone rang a third time. He turned to stare at it. Knowing it wasn't David. It kept ringing, and eventually he gave in and answered it. It was Des, as he expected.

"Jesus, hon. I've been calling all night. Where have you been?"

"Nowhere."

"Did you see David?"

"What? Oh yeah, I saw him."

"Well, is he okay? What's happening? The news did nothing but repeat the same story again and again until I thought I'd scream. They still haven't even released the name of the cop--"

"It was David's partner."

"Oh, geez, that's terrible. How's David taking it?"

"How does David take anything?"

"Whoa, man. I think I need to come over there. You're scaring me, Chris."

"I'm okay. I'm going to bed soon. Don't bother coming by. I'll see you tomorrow."

Before Des could say anything else, Chris hung up and went back to staring out the window. The phone rang again. He ignored it. Eventually he went back upstairs, turned off the phone, and went to bed. Sergeant leapt into bed beside him, occupying David's space.

Sunday, 5:45 AM USC County General, North State Street, East Los Angeles

Jairo was out of surgery and in ICU. David found a sympathetic nurse who led him down to Jairo's glassed in cubicle, leaving when he had slipped through the half opened door.

Jairo was still unconscious. A bandage covered most of his head, and there were stitches marring his chiseled face, now lumpy with cuts and swollen bruises. Even his mouth looked puffy. Both eyes were black and shut. But his breathing was even, and his chest rose and fell in a shallow, but steady, rhythm. Drool stained his pillow. His eyes darted around behind closed eyes, and David wondered what dark dreams plagued his sleep.

Jairo's wife, and three men he took to be Jairo's brothers, clustered around the foot of the bed. She looked as though she had aged a decade since he had first seen her the evening before. David didn't intrude. He really didn't want to make small talk with anyone.

Finally, he had to say something, or leave. Like a supplicant, he approached her, and ducked his head when she looked at him. "How is he, *Señora Hernandez?*"

"No one will tell me. The doctor's say he will need more surgery. They cannot stop his bleeding."

David glanced over at the comatose man, looking so unlike his usual vibrant self. He looked back at the woman. He had to speak, to say something, even if he didn't believe his reassurances, "I'm sure he'll be okay. He's a fine detective. It's been a pleasure to train him."

David could see the censure in her eyes. *Didn't train him very well, did you?* David gripped her hand briefly, then beat a hasty retreat, before he could blurt out that it was all his fault. She didn't need him laying his guilt all over them.

David fled back to the waiting room. Fredericks returned, and McKee came in, too. Other cops, uniformed and

plainclothes, drifted in, the worry in the waiting room was palpable.

When the family came back from Jairo's room, the tension notched up twofold.

Jairo had been rushed back into surgery. It didn't look good.

David began to hear muttered prayers, some in soft Spanish, others in English; all heartfelt. He was silent. He didn't know how to pray, or who to pray to.

Around them, the normal activities of a busy hospital increased as the day unfolded. Hospital staff bustled around, breakfast trays gave way to lunch. Visitors came and went, many unnerved by the presence of so many silent uniformed cops.

Newly arrived cops brought coffee and donuts around. David grew jittery with a caffeine jag. His stomach roiled with nausea as he watched doctors come, and go, and consult in whispers with the family, who looked grimmer and grimmer as the day dragged on.

Early in the afternoon, an exhausted looking man in stained surgical gear entered the waiting room, and went straight to Jairo's wife. He put his hand on the woman's arm, and spoke quietly to her.

Her reaction was swift and incontestable. Her scream echoed through the crowded waiting room, and all eyes locked on her. She collapsed, and would have fallen if Jairo's brothers hadn't caught her and led her after the medical staff into another room. The door closed behind them.

David's shoulders slumped. He rubbed his grainy, swollen eyes, and blinked owlshly around him. Everyone traded sorrowful glances, and slowly conversation started again. There were murmurs of shock and disbelief. No one would look at David.

Fredericks came up to him.

"Go back to the station, Laine. It's over."

"No sir," David said softly. "It's not over. Not yet."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Sunday, 5:30 PM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

At the station, he began drawing up the warrant to arrest Degrasses, and search his residence for ties to Mikalenko, all four women, and kiddie porn. When he thought he had built a pretty good case for each item he wanted to search for—including computers and all external storage devices, written and printed documentation, and images and anything that pointed to familiarity with the four Ukrainian women, their doctor, Mikalenko, or the Avenues, he sent the document to the nearest printer. He had to keep dragging his mind back to the task at hand, when his thoughts kept going back to unwanted memories of Jairo. He then called DeSoto only to find she was up in Santa Barbara, visiting family. She wasn't expected back until Monday. "Serves you right," he muttered. "Thinking everyone else is a workaholic like you. Most people enjoy a life outside their cubicle walls."

He grew restless as the day crawled by. The mood in the station house was black, a perfect match for the black armbands everyone in the building had put on. Silence ruled, no one felt like engaging in idle chatter. David desperately wished he could call Chris, but knew he had well and truly screwed that dog. Chris would never speak to him again, and rightly so. He was so wrong for Chris, on so many levels. Loving him had nothing to do with anything anymore. The best thing he could do for Chris was to stay as far away as he could. Except... he didn't want to. He wanted more than anything to climb into his car, and go over there, and make Chris listen. To beg his forgiveness.

"Not going to happen," he muttered, ignoring the look he got from the nearest D.

At lunch, he forced himself to leave the station, to grab a sandwich and buy a new shirt and tie to replace his bloody

clothes. Most of his lunch stayed on his plate. Only a half dozen cups of bad coffee went into him, leaving his nerves jangled, and his stomach nauseous.

He went back over both Mikalenko's and Sevchuk's notes. Sevchuk hadn't been asked about Degrasses. What were the odds he knew about the man?

Only one way to find out. David grabbed his jacket, making a mental note to take his bloody clothes to the dry cleaners to see if they could be salvaged, and headed out the door for Men's Central. Keeping busy was the answer. It gave him a semblance of order to the chaos his world had fallen into.

The doctor looked terrible. He had clearly lost weight and his skin hung on him like sack cloth. He shuffled into the interview room after ten minutes of waiting. No lawyer in sight, which surprised David. David didn't bother cuffing him to the table. Anyone could see Sevchuk was a broken man.

"We can wait for your attorney, if you like."

"Do not bother. I am through with him. I will be pleading guilty and taking my time. My life is finished. I am in no need of outside help."

"You've been cooperative. Your sentence won't be high—"

"You do not understand. Even if I be let go now, today, I am ruined. A doctor with no reputation is no doctor."

David felt a twinge of sympathy, which he quickly suppressed. The guy's despair was contagious, but he'd made his own bed. He'd been reckless with the safety of his patients, and now three of them were dead. Four, if you added Jairo as collateral damage. He was sure Halyna, Zuzanna, and Katrina's family wouldn't feel much pity for the guy.

"I want you to tell me what you know about Degrasses."

Sevchuk made no effort to deny knowing the American. He nodded. "Mikalenko brought me to him one day. They had met while Mikalenko was in Odessa, a resort on the shores of the Black Sea. I do not know how they first came to be partners. I do know Degrasses brought the first woman to Mikalenko. He had met Katrina's husband in the Iraq, and knew she was

desperate, with her husband dead, he thought she would jump at chance to come to America. She did.”

“And thus an empire was born,” David muttered. “What do you know about Degrasses? He have a wife? Girlfriend? Boyfriend? Mother,” he added.

“He never spoke of anyone. No, not entirely true. He mentioned his mother once, and how he was taking care of her, that she was very ill. I did not ask what he meant. Mikalenko never spoke of anyone, either. To him the girls were just commodities.”

And what were you, their big uncle Jozef? He couched the next question carefully. He didn’t want some future defense attorney saying he had planted the thought in Sevchuk’s head.

“Degrasses ever do anything that seemed odd to you?”

“I am not sure I am understanding. What meaning ‘odd?’”

“Just... nothing. Tell me everything you can think of about Degrasses.”

“You know he will have me killed for this? He might even have you killed. I am sure he made certain Mikalenko would not testify against him.”

“That may well be, but we’re on to Mr. Degrasses and he’s not going to find the rest of us so easy to take down. It’s my job to see you’re safe too. And I’m very good at my job.”

“I do not wish to question your skills, but Degrasses is an evil man, with much power. He was decorated Marine. Even his own people do not touch him.”

“That’s going to change. Trust me, the Marines have too much of a reputation to uphold to let one bad apple ruin the image.” David pushed again. “Is there anything you noticed about him? Anything at all.”

“No, I tell you. I hardly knew him...” Sevchuk stopped and thought for a couple of minutes. David thought he was going to leave it there, then he brightened. “I do recall one thing I thought was very strange at the time. Perhaps this is ‘odd.’ Degrasses seemed to have no friends, but he sponsored some

children's groups, a baseball team, as I recall, and maybe another such group. Soccer, I think. Football in Ukraine."

"Why was that odd?" David asked carefully.

"He did not seem like a father type. Or sports type for that matter. I don't think he was ever married. If he had other family besides his sick mother, he never said. It seemed..."

"Out of character?"

"Yes, exactly." Sevchuk frowned as though trying to fathom Degraesses. If only he knew. "It was very strange."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"That is helpful?"

"You have no idea."

Sevchuk shrugged, clearly puzzled by David's actions but mostly beyond caring. David left, and once back at Northeast, made arrangements to have the taped conversation transcribed, along with Garza's jailhouse confession.

The day wound down. He updated the murder books with the new interrogations, and made sure the latest autopsy findings were entered. All three volumes were now thick, and bulging with autopsy reports, crime scene photos, and forensics results, including the initial returns on the serology tests on the substance found at Leland Way. They confirmed it was indeed human blood, and belonged to Zuzanna and Katrina. None of Halyna's blood was found in the house. She had been injured later, someplace else. In Mikalenko's Caddy?

A warrant had been obtained for it, following Mikalenko's arrest. David found it, and poured over the contents. Bingo. Blood found inside the passenger's seat matched that of Halyna Stakchinko. Not enough blood was recovered to have been the cause of her death, the fall had done that. But she had been cut in the vehicle. Which made it unlikely she had done it to herself. David wondered what would drive a young woman to make a man so mad at her that he attacked, without considering the consequences. Halyna had been one very determined woman.

There was nothing else David could do tonight. Tomorrow would be busy, with no partner to delegate tasks to. He briefly

considered stopping in to talk with Chris, but knew it would only end in misery for both of them. Leave well enough alone. That was the smart thing to do. David had never felt less smart in his whole life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Monday, 7:30 AM, Northeast Community Police Station, San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

David was sitting at his desk the next morning, when Lieutenant McKee led a man David recognized as a D2 from Fraud over. Orren Bulkowski, who everyone naturally called Bull, was smirking even before he reached David. The name was not a misnomer. He was a thickset, fifty-five year old throwback from the good old days of the LAPD, the stomp and tromp breed who thought someone's right to remain silent ended on the business end of a choke hold. Rumor had it the guy was holding on by his fingernails to claim his pension, though he had a jacket full of major and minor beefs.

David knew exactly what McKee was doing, but prayed right up until the last minute that he was wrong.

"Laine, Detective Bulkowski has been reassigned as your partner."

Like everyone else, Bulkowski wore a black mourning armband. But nothing else about him spoke of sorrow for their loss. David nodded stiffly, seeing the sneer grow on Bull's florid face. He didn't need his helpful psychic to tell Bull wanted nothing to do with the faggot cop. This was going to be a fun eight weeks until Martinez came back to the homicide table. "Detective."

"Hey, Laine. One rule. No pansies on the desk okay?" Bull chortled at his wit, and looked around to see if any one else shared. He looked back. "Maybe we can clear this little Cossack cootch case." McKee left and Bull leaned over, adding for David's ear only. "Hey, no humans involved, right? Couple of commie cunts get wasted by their commie pimp. Why break a sweat?"

David counted to ten. Then he counted to ten again. It was going to be a really long, fun eight weeks. Hardly fifteen minutes had passed and Bull stood up. "It's pig time," he said with a snorting laugh. David raised one eyebrow. "Plain, iced and glazed."

"You go on ahead. I have a warrant to write up."

"That how you keep your slender, girly figure, Laine? No sugar makes you dull-witted. Studies prove it."

"I'm fine, thanks. Maybe when your break's over we can take this warrant over to justice to get someone to sign it."

"Right." Bull rolled his eyes at one of his Neanderthal buddies across the room. "I know a great little donut shop downtown, run by this cute Korean trim—oh, that's right, trim don't interest you, do it, Laine? You like the old brown hole, doncha?"

Non-humans don't interest me, David wanted to say, but just like he'd done since the day he was outed, he kept his mouth shut, and his face devoid of expression. Like most juveniles, when the fun wore off, Bull moved on to torment someone else.

Bull caught sight of one of the younger female Ds in the department. She was a trim brunette, who wore her hair in the regulation French bun, and severely cut custom suits that did nothing to enhance her figure. Bull didn't need any assistance in crudity. He gave a low wolf whistle, then when the D refused to rise to the bait, he grinned. The grin only slipped when McKee stepped out of his office and crossed to the Captain's office.

Before he could start up again, David busied himself on his computer and the female D vanished into another room. With his audience gone, Bull took off for his sugar fix.

A really, really long, fun eight weeks.

The judge read through the evidence David had accumulated from his two co-conspirators and then skimmed over the warrant, signing it with no hesitation. "Take backup with you," the judge said. "I heard what happened to your partner, Detective Laine. The loss of any officer is a tragedy,

more so when it occurs in the line of duty. See it doesn't happen to you." The judge briefly eyed Bull, but made no similar remarks regarding his safekeeping.

David folded the blue-backed warrant and tucked it in his jacket pocket, under his shoulder holster. "I'll have backup."

"What's the beef on?" Bull asked when they left the judge's chambers, and headed down to pick up their unmarked. David drove, since it gave him something to do with his hands, that didn't involved wrapping them around his partner's fat neck.

"Harmon Degrasses," David said, keeping his eyes on the road. "Murder, conspiracy, human trafficking."

"One of your Ukrainians?"

"No, this one's one of ours." David couldn't resist the dig. "An ex-Marine."

"No way. Those guys are too righteous to get involved in selling pussy. They might like to taste some, but sell it? No way."

"Well, I guess this Marine wasn't too righteous."

"Where are we picking him up?"

"Downtown Marriott. Penthouse suite."

"Posh pillows. Guess pussy pays after all. I'm in the wrong line of work."

Oh how true. David steered around an idling limo surrounded by a bevy of anorexic women and men, all playing for a camera crew in another vehicle. David wondered what reality show they were auditioning for.

David cornered the head of hotel security, and the general manager. Away from Bull, who was out in the lobby eying up anything in a skirt, he showed them his warrants, and explained what would be going down in a short while. "Once the officers arrive, we'll ascend to the Penthouse. One officer will be positioned at each of the exits, though we don't anticipate any problems. I secured plain clothes officers for this, to avoid the embarrassment of having a horde of uniformed men storming your lobby."

"I appreciate that Detective," the manager, a slender, nervous man with a Charlie Chaplin mustache, and a mouthful of perfectly capped teeth said. "Our guests might like that kind of action in the movies, but not in real life."

"I understand, sir."

Eight plainclothes officers showed up, and were directed to the manager's office. Three more teams of unis would be stationed in their cage cars on side streets, in case Degrasses tried to make a run for it. The hotel manager said Degrasses had rented a car, which was currently parked in the underground lot. David sent a pair of unis down to secure it. He'd arrange to have it towed where forensics could go over it.

When everything was in place he gave the signal and everyone went up. One team would go to the roof, another team would split up on the stairs between the Penthouse and the twelfth floor. David knew from his jacket that Degrasses was a 14-year decorated Marine, trained in armed and unarmed combat, an expert marksman. David wasn't taking any chances the man responsible for causing Jairo's death would rabbit, or have weapons on the premises. The suite to the north of Degrasses' was empty. Two sharpshooters with assault rifles were secured there, waiting for a signal from David that Degrasses was making a run.

David stood in front of the door, and took a deep breath. He glanced at Bull to his left, wishing he could have left the uncouth goon behind, but the man was now his partner. He looked beyond Bull, and nodded at the two other officers who would assist in the take down. David pounded sharply on the solid door.

"Open up, this is the Los Angeles Police. Open up and come out with your hands in plain view."

Nobody responded. David listened, but couldn't hear anything inside. He knocked again. When this knock also went unanswered, he nodded at the manager, who had come with them, armed with a master key card. David waited for the door to pop open, and pushed the manager aside to make room for the entering police.

He went in sideways, the others followed, fanning out and covering every window and door. The suite seemed empty. Soft music played in another room, and a vase of day-old flowers sat on a side table. On a second table, an open bottle of Krug Clos de Mesnil rested in a bath of mostly melted ice. A single crystal flute sat on the table beside the ice bucket. The floor to ceiling windows looked over downtown, with the Los Angeles World Trade Center to the far right, and the giant metal sheathed Walt Disney Hall, where he and Chris had bought season tickets to the L.A. Philharmonic. The air in the room felt like someone holding their breath. Waiting.

The door to the bedroom was ajar. David entered it sideways, his duty weapon in his hands, barrel pointed at the floor. The shout of "Clear" came from the living room. A second voice called "clear" from the study. The bathroom proved empty too. Degrasses had rabbited.

David holstered his gun, and told everyone to stand down. His cell rang. It was one of the unis he had sent to the garage to impound Degrasses' car.

"The subject's vehicle is gone from its assigned space."

"He's running," David said. "Call the rental company. Find out what he was driving."

"Detective." A white-faced officer stepped into the room from the balcony. "I think you're going to want to see this." David followed the man, already knowing what he was going to find when he stepped onto the balcony. The boy couldn't have been more than ten. He lay on his back on a lounge, naked, spindly brown limbs criss-crossed with fading bruises. His thin chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. One thumb was tucked firmly in his mouth.

David crouched down on the carpeted surface and studied the comatose boy.

"I think he was drugged," the officer said. "He seems to be breathing okay, but he needs an ambulance..."

"Call child services while you're at it. We'll let them figure out who he is."

Behind David, Konstatinov pulled out his rover and called for a bus.

"Sir," the plainclothes officer who had found the boy crouched beside the lounge. He met David's gaze. "I have four sons, the youngest one must be around this little guy's age. I'll stay with him until child services gets here."

"Sure, Rafael. Take good care of him. If he wakes up, see if he can tell you who he is." He tried not to look at the unmoving boy. "And see if you can find his clothes or a blanket. I'm sure Degrasses didn't bring him up here naked."

"Yes, sir. I'll take good care of him, sir."

Back in the living room, the other officers were growing restless. They had come up here expecting to whip some ass, instead they found an empty room, and an unconscious victim.

David's cell rang again. It was the same uni. They had the car rental manager on the line. Did David want to talk to him?

David stared out the French doors at the balcony, and the skyline of Los Angeles beyond. The manager was brusque, when he came on. "Yes, officer? How can I help you?"

"You can start by telling me what you rented to Harmon Degrasses. Tags, make, model, give me the damn VIN. Then you can tell me how to find him."

"Mr. Degrasses is a regular customer of ours. He always demands the best vehicle we have to offer. In this case a Bentley Flying Spur."

"Mr. Degrasses has permanently checked out of his hotel room, and is now considered a fugitive. It might interest you to know he left a young boy behind, who may or may not survive Mr. Degrasses' treatment."

"Oh dear, I'm sure we never imagined—"

"I don't really care what you imagined," David said. "All I want from you is a means of finding the man before any other young boys end up like this one. Now, can you help me?" He glanced at Bull, wondering if he could turn the guy loose on the manager, grease him up a bit, only to find his newest partner busy ogling the maid who had just come off the elevator.

“Really, I’m not sure—” the manager stammered.

“I will get a warrant if I need to, but if any harm comes to anyone else, I will hold you personally responsible for it. What would you do if a client stole one of your ‘best vehicles’? Surely you’ve had to consider that before you started handing the keys over.”

“Well, yes. All our vehicles are equipped with Lojack systems. We can track them—”

“Then I want you to start doing just that. Tell me where.”

“I’m not sure I can do that without a warrant. If our customers knew we were handing over that sort of information to the police—”

“And what are your customers going to think when they hear you’re protecting a child molester and a murderer?”

“Murderer! You never said anything about murder.”

“I just did. Now I want Degrasses’ movements traced. And I want to know exactly where he is. Now.” David glanced at his watch. “I’ll be over there in ten minutes. You better have that information for me when I get there.”

He disconnected his cell and met Konstatinov’s gaze. “Let’s roll. The rest of you, be ready. We may need to scramble fast.” Not wanting his partner to tag along, he said, “Bull, go back to the station. We’re going to need more firepower. You can get the gears started on that. Officer, let’s go.”

“Where?” Konstatinov asked on the way to the elevator.

“Car place first. Once we get a fix on Degrasses, we deploy our forces to track him down.”

“He may be armed.”

“I expect he is. So are we.”

They left Konstatinov’s partner to bring the cage car around. Konstatinov climbed in beside David, who slapped a light on the dashboard and took off through early afternoon traffic toward Miracle Mile, and the car rental place.

David slammed on the brakes and angled the car up on the sidewalk on Wilshire, in front of the rental place. He left the

lights flashing, and barely paused long enough to lock the doors, before he and Konstatinov stormed inside. Tired of being nice, and getting brushed off, David strode into the office marked Manager, past a phalanx of gaping staff and customers.

He flashed his badge at the man, who stood over the only man present not wearing a suit, who in turn was hunched over an IBM computer, staring at a map on the screen.

Without preamble, David asked, "Where is he?"

The guy with the suit and tie, his name tag saying Mr. Dwight Stewart, stammered, "Casitas Avenue, southeast of Glendale Boulevard." Stewart added an address.

Konstatinov used his rover to call the address in. Within seconds the results came back.

"Long haul trucking company."

"His new stable."

Stewart seemed puzzled. "Horses? I don't understand—"

"You don't have to." To Konstatinov he said, "Get some units out there. Alert SWAT." Back to Stewart he barked, "License plate, car color, everything you got."

Stewart handed him a brochure featuring a Bentley Flying Spur, extolling its virtue as a prestigious vehicle. "It's Silver Tempest, with a Portland interior, and of course, leather trim—"

"I'm sure he's the envy of every man who sees him," David said. He barely glanced at the price: over ten thousand a week, with only fifty free miles. He swung around to face the manager, who winced and stepped back. "He ever go over his mileage limit?"

"No, why—"

"So chances are he didn't take any out of town trips. At least not in this car." David was thinking a mile a minute. "I suppose he could have rented another one, but why bother? He didn't know we were on to him until we nailed Mikalenko. Then he knew the gig was up."

Konstatinov's rover barked. "The officers are approaching the site."

"Tell them lights and sirens off. Approach cautiously. We're on our way."

He threw the brochure back at Stewart who fumbled for it and watched it fall to the floor. No one made a move to retrieve it.

In the Crown Vic, he activated the sirens, as well as the party lights, and raced north on Glendale Boulevard, cutting over to Tyburn, and up to Casita's, just south of the tracks that bisected L.A. The area was an uneasy mix of commercial, rail and residential. Some chatter on the line caught David's attention. He turned off the siren when he got closer.

He grimaced at Konstatinov. "There's a school yard a couple of blocks southwest. We need some unis in there to evacuate. Do it by the book. Get your vest on." David spoke into his car radio to the rest of the approaching units. "Suit up. Don't play hero. We've already lost one. Let's be safe."

By the time he and Konstatinov rolled into the front of the lot, reports were pouring in about families being evacuated, and surrounding streets blocked off. A chain link gate had been cut open, and the normally secured truck yard was open. While David listened, and formulated a plan, he pulled his Kevlar vest on and threw his jacket in the backseat. Beside him Konstatinov did the same. The sun was wending its way seaward, throwing tinted shadows between the crowded warehouse buildings and nearby tracks

Another call came over the radio. "Suspects vehicle spotted in rear of building. No sign of the suspect himself."

David drove slowly around to the back, the car bouncing over the pockmarked pavement. Both he and Konstatinov scanned the lot repeatedly, watching for movement or people. Already the bulky Kevlar vest was making its weight felt. It chafed his armpits. David spoke into the rover again. "Anyone else in the yard?"

A woman answered, "Negative. The area appears empty. There are several trailers, and a half a dozen tractor trailers on

site. There are two on the south side of the main structure that appear to have just arrived. Wait..." A second voice, probably her partner, said something David couldn't catch. "Someone just got out of one of the tractor trailers and he's walking around the back. There's another man... I think it's the suspect who's meeting him."

Suddenly David heard cursing. "Bangers! A brown Malibu just shot through the front gate into the yard. My partner recognized them as bangers. Probably soldiers. They're armed." Seconds later: "A white panel van has entered the compound. We're throwing up roadblocks and closing down the street."

"Call in an airship," David said. He spotted the van before it rolled behind a row of trailers. The windows were blacked out; nothing could be seen of the driver, or any passengers.

"Man in a suit just got into the van. Someone exited the Malibu. They appear armed."

"Come to guard the prince, no doubt," David muttered. He keyed the mike open. "Proceed with caution. If they make you, try to pin them down until help can get here. Don't be a hero," he repeated. Wasted words. There wasn't a cop in the area who didn't know what David had found in the hotel room or the fact that the man responsible for that, and for the death of a cop, was here, now. Most cops reserved a special place in hell for cop killers, even if they ultimately didn't pull the trigger. David was no exception.

This was going to be rough.

A second story window in the nearest warehouse blew out in a shower of glass. Sparks shot off the cracked pavement and cement abutments, pinging off brick and slamming into the hood of David's Crown Vic.

"Get out!" David yelled and slammed on the brakes. A dozens more rounds came in rapid succession. The Avenues had arrived with their MK 46s in full war mode.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Monday, 5:25 PM, Casitas Avenue, Los Angeles

The hiss of nearby air brakes briefly drowned out the echo of automatic rifle fire. The raw stink of diesel and overheated rubber weighed down on David. Dust hung in the air and a low bank of menacing clouds blended with the smog. A row of feather-topped palms marked the opposite side of the property. Beyond lay freight yards where trains rumbled by day and night. Sunlight glittered off shattered glass and chrome.

The rear window on the Crown Victoria's side blew out. David threw himself out the door. He looked up long enough to see Konstatinov do the same, then a new round of bullets slammed into the pavement in front of him, kicking up splinters of concrete and dust. He pressed his cheek to the hot concrete and wormed around so he could free his gun. From under the car their eyes met; Konstatinov looked scared. David looked away. All he knew how to do was hide his fear. He couldn't stop it. Couldn't control it. Couldn't help Konstatinov deal with his.

"They're behind us," he said. "To the left I think. Try to get around behind the car. We'll use it for cover."

Konstatinov inched along the pavement, up on his elbows, darting quick glances over his shoulder at the direction that shots had come. Before long both David and Konstatinov rolled to a stop, hips knocking together, under the protective rear fender of the Crown Vic.

"You stay here," David said. "I'm going to circle around—"

"With all due respect, sir. I cannot do that. We must go together."

David knew he wouldn't win the argument and Konstatinov was probably right. With no idea of where the others were, he

needed the backup. It wouldn't do to repeat Jairo's rookie mistake, or teach bad habits to the boot.

More shots rang out in rapid succession. Instead of moving off, David slid into a crouch and popped the car's trunk open.

"Sir, what are you doing?" Konstatinov said when a series of bullets strafed the open trunk. Then silence.

Nothing moved in the yard. A stiff breeze skittered across the cracked pavement. Yellowed newsprint fluttered along a nearby rusting chain-link fence topped with razor wire. The acrid stink of gunpowder rode the air.

A new volley of shots broke the silence.

In reply David holstered his Smith & Wesson and grabbed the mounted Armalite .223 short-barreled assault rifle out of the trunk, and slapped a magazine into it. He looked along the rear sight of the short-barreled rifle, and leaving the trunk up, signaled Konstatinov to follow as he wormed his way toward the sound of the gun fire. Through Konstatinov's rover, he could hear rapid fire reports from field operators. The armed Avenues were pinned down in the rear of the lot, up against the chain link fence, that separated the truck yard from the rails.

By now there was return fire, and his officers tried to cut down the cornered bangers. The gun fire from the automatic weapons grew sporadic. The bangers were finding things weren't quite as easy as they had anticipated. Someone screamed. David prayed it wasn't a cop. Off to his right, he heard a grunt, and the shuffle of feet on pavement. He swung onto his back, rifle raised, as an emaciated banger, obviously a tweaker, stumbled around the side of a shipping crate. An Mk 46 dangled from one hand.

"Get down!" David shouted. The banger straightened, and swung the nose of his assault rifle up. David met it with his own. The concussion from the rifle threw his shoulder back. But his aim was good. The banger looked surprised as he fell, a neat, almost bloodless hole in the middle of his chest. The Mk 46 clattered to the ground at his feet.

"Get that," David said. Konstatinov retrieved the weapon. One less toy for the bangers to play with. On all fours, the two

scrambled toward the continued sound of gunfire. David spotted a uni outside his cage car, his own patrol rifle clutched in both hands, bobbing up and down to get a clearer view over the car's hood. He saw David, and Konstatinov, and signaled that the banger was just on the other side. David nodded.

"The van's moving, heading towards the gate."

"Stop it. It's Degrasses," David shouted.

Sirens screamed, and more black and whites roared onto the lot. The call was out. Officers under fire. Every cop north of Inglewood was going to be answering that call. The white panel van, windowless, skidded out of the lot, its sides pockmarked with bullet holes. In the driver's seat a figure was hunched over the dash as he tried to flee. David stood up long enough to pop a few new holes in the side. His next round aimed lower and two front tires shredded, laying rubber across the pavement. The van spun around, and in the next instant flipped over onto its side, spewing safety glass and burning rubber. The flayed wheels continued to spin lazily as David crept closer to the overturned vehicle. He waved for Konstatinov to approach from the other side. The rear door opened, and a bandana'd banger fell out onto the pavement. David saw he was armed with what David swore was an Uzi pistol. Apparently nothing but the best would do for Degrasses' crew. He jacked a new 10-round magazine into his rifle and rolled into a crouch, leveling his weapon at the banger. Konstatinov did the same. Faced with the sight of two cops pointing death at him, the banger let his own gun slide to the ground. Having premium firepower didn't count for much, if you didn't have to *cojones* to use it.

"Where's Degrasses?" David shouted. The banger looked away, but not before his gaze flicked toward the vehicle. Waving Konstatinov to watch over the man, he slid sideways along the van until he came to the driver's side.

He spun away and leveled his rifle at the smashed window.

"Get out of there. With your hands in plain view. Now."

A brown hand came out of the window, groping for the door frame. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the banger stand. Konstatinov tensed, raising his weapon.

A young, battered Latino man tumbled through the window, onto the pavement. He scrabbled for his gun, another Uzi, but David kicked it out of his hand. "On the ground. Assume the position."

The Latino proned himself. He twisted his head sideways and scowled at David. "What you doing, cuz? I was just driving."

"Why?" David said. "It ain't Sunday and this ain't the park." He put his foot on the banger's back, and shoved him into the pavement. "Where's Degrasses?"

"He ain't here."

David could make out the corner of Degrasses' rental car, still parked where he had abandoned it. If he hadn't fled in that, where was he—he spun around and grabbed Konstatinov's rover. "Where's that Malibu?"

There was a flurry of voices, all of which ended in the same conclusion: the Malibu, and presumably Degrasses, had vanished.

"Cuff him," David barked at Konstatinov, who slapped restrains over both bangers' hands and feet. David scooted back to the Crown Vic, and slid into the driver's seat. The car was still idling. He threw it into gear, ignoring Konstatinov's cry to wait, and peeled out toward the open gate. He threw the rifle onto the seat beside him, and made sure his shoulder holster was within easy reach.

Behind him the shooting had died down. David hoped that was a good sign. Everywhere he looked he saw unis parading a string of what he assumed were Avenues to waiting cage cars. Then ahead of him he spotted the Malibu spinning through the gate, onto Tyburn Street. A plume of dust marked its passage. At the intersection he could see the barrier, and four black and whites blocking the road in every direction. Degrasses had to have seen them too, but he didn't slow down. Instead he jerked the Malibu right, jinking around the nearest cage car, and clipping the hood of the black and white, bouncing off a telephone pole. Shots met this newest assault. A hole appeared in the Malibu's trunk. David stepped on the accelerator, closing

the distance between them. He aimed for the Malibu, and without slowing, tapped the bumper. Once, twice. The Degrasses' vehicle skidded sideways, striking a second black and white, sending the crouched cops leaping out of its path.

Another round of shots took out the Malibu's back tire. Sparks flew off the shredding wheel as the vehicle continued to slide around. David nudged it again, fighting to keep control of his own car.

"Pull over, asshole," he muttered as Degrasses goosed the gas and fishtailed the other way, barely missing a stop sign, scraping off the driver's side mirror. Torn metal screeched. The driver's side window rolled down and a hand reached through, clutching an Mk 46, which he fired in random spurts. David rammed his foot on the gas, and slammed into Degrasses' bumper again, throwing himself against the wheel, and sending a jolt through his back. Not a good idea with no seat belt on.

He did it again, and had the satisfaction of watching Degrasses skid over the curb into a telephone pole. The Malibu crumpled around the thick pole, paused briefly then took off back toward the truck lot. The passenger's door had been torn half off its hinges, and the window had popped out. The driver wore a blue bandanna and a hoody that concealed most of his face. Only his red mustache gave him away as Anglo. Not much of a disguise.

David threw his car into reverse. Tires smoking, he spun around, narrowly missing a street light, and bounced over the curb, then floored it after Degrasses. In the distance he could hear the pop-pop of renewed gun fire. Wisps of smoke boiled out of the crimped hood of Degrasses' Malibu. David's own vehicle wasn't faring much better. The already lousy shocks were shot. Sound grew muffled, and under the hood he heard the thump sputter of a damaged engine. Something had been punctured in there. Small consolation that Degrasses' wheels were in worse shape.

Degrasses' gun came out again, and this time the shots were right over David's hood. A single spidery hole appeared on the passenger's side, plowing through the seat less than a foot from David's right shoulder. He spun the wheel left, and the Crown

Vic fishtailed toward the chain link gate still half blocking the entrance. He barely had time to throw up his arms when the car swung into the thick mesh. Headlights popped and tires blew. The Crown Vic kept rolling in a full one-eighty, ending up pointing back the way it had come.

David scrambled out, Smith & Wesson in hand as he cleared the debris. The Malibu had also spun out, and now rested on three flats against the white bulk of a trailer up on blocks. The driver's door opened, and Degrasses fell out, palms catching him from pitching onto his face. He rolled over, his Uzi in both hands, firing wildly even before he came to a stop on his back.

David threw himself down. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement. Konstatinov raced around the trailer, his Beretta nine in both hands, as he swept the yard ahead of him.

"Drop the weapon and put your hands over your head," he shouted.

Degrasses ignored him. He pulled the trigger, and a stream of bullets arced through the air toward Konstatinov.

"Get down," David yelled, but it was too late. Konstatinov stumbled back, dropping his nine, before he crumpled to the ground.

David forgot Konstatinov, forgot Jairo, forgot the stream of death all around him. He dropped into a shooter's stance, braced his Smith & Wesson on his knees, and drew down on Degrasses, who was frantically trying to ram another magazine into his weapon. He jammed it in, and swung the nose of the pistol up toward David, who took a deep breath, and squeezed the trigger.

He held it down until the Smith & Wesson was hot in his hands, and the magazine was empty. He didn't lower the weapon until Konstatinov staggered over to him, a scrape on his cheek bleeding profusely, his Kevlar vest dented in the center of his chest, his normally fastidious uniform ripped and bloodied. Gently he took the Smith & Wesson from David's hand.

"Is over, sir. He is gone."

David blinked and met Konstatinov's gaze. He drew back as cops began pouring in to the yard. The airship swooped down, and hovered over the crash site. David could make out Degrasses, lying in a heap beside his Uzi, the bandanna he had used as camouflage in his wasted run for freedom lying in a pool of blood by his right hand.

A news chopper from Channel 5 swooped in beside the LAPD airship, the dust it kicked up getting into David's eyes. He raised his hand to shield his face, blinking away the sudden rush of tears.

A female uni approached him. "Sir, we found something you're going to want to see."

David stumbled after her, dashing tears and dust off his face, knowing he was making a smeary mess. The female uni fingered her baton, and eyed him warily.

"It looks like they just got here around the same time we did."

The trailer was opened, and inside, David could see at least a dozen women, huddled in the back of the trailer. Most of them looked shell-shocked. A few had obviously been crying. David looked around until he spotted Konstatinov, who looked as ragged as David felt. No time for that right now. Konstatinov ignored the EMT who was trying to get him to go with him to the bus. No time for that now.

"Can you talk to them?" David asked, also ignoring a second EMT, who wanted to check him over. "Tell them everything is going to be okay. They have to come down to the station with us, but we'll get them something to eat. Tell them..." David shook his head, his vision blurring. "Tell them welcome to America."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Tuesday, 10:20 AM St. Peter Claver Catholic Church, Pittman Street, Simi Valley

The funeral was held under a cloudless California sky. The brightness was a sharp contrast to the somber gathering of uniformed officers, civilian mourners, and TV crews clustered around the entrance to the grounds. David, and three other men who had worked with Jairo since his Academy days, stood at attention as the hearse carrying Jairo's body drove into the Simi Valley church yard. David's dress uniform and white gloves chafed in the growing heat. Once the vehicle stopped, the four of them took up position on each corner of the black hearse. Behind and above them an honor guard of motorcycles and the missing man formation of LAPD airships muttered over the silence of the mourners. Jairo's widow and the rest of his family, including his two young sons, huddled apart from the sea of blue that filled the cemetery.

Sunlight glittered off chrome, and the array of ceremonial rifles, the leather saddle, and boots of the riderless horse, and the laminated graduation photo of Jairo that most of those present had pinned to their uniforms. A stiff breeze blew off the distant Santa Susana Mountains, and set the funeral vehicle flags flapping. Overhead a redtail hawk rode the currents.

Beyond the gates of the cemetery cars were still entering the grounds. The streets leading to the ceremony had been closed to all but funeral traffic. Cops had come from as far as New York, Alaska and even Canada to attend the funeral of one of their own. The four guards moved off with the hearse, followed by the restless horse, making their way toward the burial plot where the white frocked priest waited in his vestments.

David's gaze swept over the massed crowds, past the dignitaries, including the Chief of Police, the Los Angeles Mayor, and the LAFD Fire Chief, moving up the ranks of white

grave stones, and green slopes to the edge of the cemetery. A pair of fire trucks had been brought in, their ladders crossed, holding a massive flag suspended and whipping in the wind. His gaze followed the hills up. That was when he saw Chris.

He stood above the funeral, dressed in black like the other civilian mourners, his slender figure standing stiffly, feet braced as though in a gale wind. He was too far away to see his eyes but David knew he was staring at him.

Since Jairo's death David had made no attempt to contact Chris, and Chris had not called him. It was better that way. David's guilt rode him like a hair shirt. He had failed one person miserably; he couldn't stand it if he failed Chris, too.

The ceremony ended. The Chief of Police spoke about the tragedy that had befallen one of their own. The rifle salute was fired, the flag folded and presented to Jairo's widow, along with Jairo's shield, then the casket was interred. She wept when she accepted them. Clinging to her legs her two sons stared wide-eyed around them, not comprehending what it all meant. Not comprehending that their father wasn't coming home anymore.

As the crowd dispersed, and made their way back to their cars, David approached Jairo's wife. She looked up at him, her eyes glazed with fresh tears. He stopped in front of her.

"I'm so sorry, *Señora* Hernandez. If there's anything I can do now or in the future..." He took a deep breath. "He was a good cop, *Señora*. One of the best."

The oldest boy, who might have been around twelve, though David was no judge of children's ages, tucked ragged, chewed fingernails in his mouth and stared solemnly at David.

David knelt down in front of him. "I knew your daddy," he said, awkward as hell. Kids intimidated him. "I was his friend. If you ever want to know about your dad you come talk to me."

The boy vigorously chewed on his fingers, eyes wide and staring. His gaze flickered over the photo David had secured to his uniform, then stared at the Smith & Wesson David had donned as part of his formal uniform.

David unclipped the picture and handed it to the boy. "Always remember, your dad was one of the good guys."

The boy clutched the picture, his fingernails forgotten.

David met the woman's gaze again. "You take care of them. Jairo was very proud of all of you. He talked... he talked about you all the time."

She held the folded flag in both hands, pressed under her breasts with a well-worn Bible. "*G-gracias*. He talked of you, too. He was so thrilled to become a detective in your unit. It was all he ever wanted."

David handed over his card, the one with his cell phone number on it. "Please, call me. Anytime. I'll always be there for you."

She forced a shaky smile, and tucked the card into her Bible. "*Gracias*." Then she turned, and led her children out to where the Chief of Police and the Mayor waited to offer their own personal condolences.

David slipped away, retreating to his Chevy. A quick glance up the hill revealed Chris was gone. A tightness invaded David's chest. He thought of going in search of his lover, but shoved the need out of his mind. Let him go. Do one thing right.

Degrasses might be history, but there was still paperwork to tend to. Rules to follow. It was, in the end, the only certainty left in his life.

Tuesday, 8:20 AM Children's Hospital, Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles

David pushed open the door to the hospital room. In a scene eerily reminiscent of his visit to Jairo, the boy lay silent, encased in a web of tubes, catheters and IV lines. The steady thrum of machinery recording every function seemed more alive than the boy himself.

David stood beside the bed, and stared down at the sunken eyes, and the spider thin fingers lying limp on top of the starched hospital sheet.

He glanced back when a pink-gowned woman entered the room. "Detective Laine?" When he nodded, she extended her hand. "I can't thank you enough for what you've done."

David wanted to ask her what that was. Saving the boy? Killing Degrasses? Rescuing the other trafficking victims? Funny, Force Investigation Division hadn't thanked him for any of that. He was on review for drawing and discharging his weapon causing a death, and the labyrinthine passage through FID's justice system had only started. It could well go on for weeks, and if they decided it wasn't a righteous shoot, he could lose his job, and his pension. Maybe even his freedom. As it was, he was on administrative leave until the whole issue was resolved and the Behavior Sciences Section cleared him to return to active duty. It didn't help that he would carry the guilt of Jairo's death with him for the rest of his life. BSS couldn't help him with that.

But that wasn't this woman's problem. He nodded toward the boy. "Any idea yet who he is?"

"None, I'm afraid. One of our nurse's aides reported he spoke last night. She didn't recognize the language. It wasn't English or Spanish, and she's pretty sure it wasn't Korean or Chinese. Or anything she's ever heard." The woman shrugged. "We just have to wait until he wakes up."

"Have you figured out what he was drugged with?"

"That we do know. Chloral hydrate. It was unusual enough to get the doctors talking about it yesterday on rounds. They don't see much of that anymore."

"Good old Mickey Finn."

"Is that what they used to call it?"

"But he's going to be okay?" David studied the comatose figure.

"No sign of brain damage, so he should be fine. Of course that doesn't mean much, if we can't figure out who he is."

She excused herself and left. He stayed, watching over the boy until the day waned, and the supper carts began to roll down the corridor, outside the door.

Friday, 8:40 PM, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

David had tried to stay away. But in the wake of Jairo's death, and the gray pall that hung over the division, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about Chris. Children's Services had taken the boy into foster care, while they had gone about finding out who he was. The boy, whose name was Anbu, turned out to be from the province of Tamil Nadu, in the Indian subcontinent, and a Tamil interpreter had been found to take a statement, which thoroughly condemned Degraesses, and went a long way toward demonizing him in the press. Whether it helped David's case, he never knew. But in the end FID ruled the death of Degraesses and the banger a good shooting, and BSS cleared his psyche eval, and he was put back on duty, with Bull as his partner until Martinez finished up his tour of duty at the 77th. There were some leads on Anbu's family, and public financial support had been pouring in to aid in the search. David suspected the boy and his family would be well taken care of. Meanwhile Sevchuk pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to four years, less time served, stripped of his medical license and being held for deportation.

Ten days after Chris had vanished from the funeral, David drove up Cove from Silver Lake Boulevard and saw a new lime green Escape hybrid parked in the cobblestone driveway. The front room lights were on, as was a single light from the upstairs hall. David jumped out of his Chevy, and hurried up the cobblestone driveway. His knock was met with wild barking on the other side. By the time the door was finally thrown open Sergeant was in a near frenzy, and David's heart was pounding in his chest.

He and Chris stared at each other across the tiny courtyard. Sergeant wound around their legs, snuffling, and shoving his damp nose into David's hand, whining softly.

"Hey," David said cupping the dog's head.

"David. I was really sorry to hear about your partner."

David didn't want to talk about Jairo. "Can I come in?"

Chris stepped aside, and David slipped past him. Sergeant was in his space the entire time, nearly tripping both of them, before Chris told him to go lie down. Chris led David into the kitchen, where a bottle of wine sat on the Santa Fe table with a half-filled glass. A mess of dirty dishes littered the counter and the sink. The faint odor of stale cooking filled the normally immaculate room. Through the open patio doors, the smell of night-blooming jasmine overrode some of the stink.

Chris fished a Bud out of the fridge and slid it across the table unasked. David raised it to his lips and drained half of it.

"How have you been?" he asked.

Chris shrugged. "Keeping busy with work. How about you? I hear you were cleared of that shooting. I'm glad. That was so wrong, to try to punish you for killing that monster. At least you stopped that smuggling ring"

"I didn't really do anything—"

"Stop it, David. For once, stop belittling what you do. You solved this case. You found that little boy, and saved more than his *life*. Stop pretending like it's nothing."

"And I got my partner killed," David said softly.

"That wasn't your fault, David. That gangbanger did that."

David shook his head. "I was his senior officer. I should have kept a tighter rein on him."

"Don't beat yourself up. You're a good cop, David. One of the best men I've ever known. They cleared you—that has to mean something."

"No, none of it means anything if I've lost you."

"Maybe you aren't going to lose me."

On the kitchen table, the front page of the L.A. Times, covering the funeral, was folded beside the even more lurid photo that had appeared in the Los Angeles Special of the interior of the house on Drew Street, showing a blood-covered David holding a dying Jairo in his arms, under the heading "Cop Dies." Both David and Jairo looked shell-shocked. The cameraman had captured David's rage and sorrow well. No

doubt the guy would win an award for the pathos of it all. Would it be worth more if he knew he was ruining David's life? Probably. The Special was a notorious rag that specialized in capturing celebrities in their excesses.

David ignored it. As he ignored everything but Chris.

"I may be going out of town for a few days," Chris said.

David's heart sank. "Where will you go?"

"To my sister's in Oakland. She's been bugging me to come up and see the new baby. I guess now's a good time..."

"We can go together—"

Chris shook his head. "Not this time. I need to think. I need... I don't know what I need, but I can't find it here. I'll take the dog with me. I spoke to my sister, and she's okay with it. They've already got a house full of animals, one more won't make any difference. I need to wrap my head around the fact that you might not be there the next time I turn around." He glanced pointedly at the picture, and David didn't know if he meant getting shot or going off with someone like Jairo. He didn't dare ask.

"Chris—" But before he could finish the sentence Chris was gone. David slumped at the kitchen table. Sergeant watched him with reproachful eyes, then got up and left the room. David could hear the click-click of his toenails on the tile steps.

Outside, the intoxicating smell of the night-blooming jasmine drifted in. Something croaked out in his garden.

From upstairs came banging, and a door slammed. Probably the bedroom closet. Knowing he had to do something, or Chris really would leave, and then where would he be? David took the stairs two at a time. He found Chris in the bedroom, his suitcase on the bed, half-packed. David's heart plummeted further into his stomach.

"I'm trying to save us," he said quietly from the doorway.

"Are we worth saving?"

"Yes, I think we are. I love you, Chris." David came around to the side of the bed, forcing Chris to look at him. "That has to

be worth something. I'm sorry I let you down. I let us both down. You know I've always done my best to keep safe for you. I'm not reckless—"

Chris stood, holding a silk shirt. He stared at David. "But can I trust you ever again?"

"You can trust me."

"You lied to me." Chris dropped the shirt unfolded into the suitcase. Suddenly his legs seemed to give out and he sank onto the bed. "I don't know. I don't ever want that person in the flag-covered coffin to be you..."

"I'm sorry about the lie. I never should have been anything but honest with you. I panicked... Okay, I messed up, I know—"

"No, David. You didn't mess up. You fucked up. You fucked up big time. Say it. For God's sake, say it and mean it."

David closed his eyes. "Okay," he whispered. "I fucked up. Totally and completely. Now can you forgive me?"

Chris stood. He slammed the suitcase shut, and threw it on the floor in the corner of the room. The latch hadn't caught, and it popped open, flinging neatly folded clothes all over the room. He ignored the mess.

He came around to stand in front of David, who could feel the heat off his body. The tantalizing, and aching familiar smell of his cologne filled David's senses. Chris took both hands in his. His voice was husky. "I love you David. I always have and God willing, I always will. But if you ever pull a stunt like that again I will do something violent. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Then I forgive you." He framed David's face with his hands. "Completely. Without reservation."

"No more doubt?" David whispered.

"None."

Chris leaned over and gently planted his mouth on David's. The gentleness lasted all of thirty seconds. David's fists closed over Chris's polo shirt, and his mouth grew savage, and

demanding. Their tongues tangled, as they fought and clawed their way to the bed, where they fell full out across its patterned surface. David broke for air, and wrenched Chris's shirt up, exposing his belly. He raised himself up on one elbow and met Chris's glazed eyes.

"Get that off."

Chris fumbled his clothes off with hands that shook. He had barely shed his jeans before David was on him, his hot mouth pressing against his throat, feeling his pulse thunder under his lips. Chris wound his fingers through David's thick hair, whispering his name. David traced a path of fire over the hard skin of his chest, tasting salt, and passion. Chris moaned and urged him down. David ignored his plea, and continued his leisurely path. He left a trail of heat over the nubs of his nipples that swelled in his mouth.

David circled the swollen erection, tracing the outline of veins climbing toward the bulging hood of engorged flesh with his mouth. "Oh God, David," Chris moaned. "Oh yes."

Only when he had brought him to climax did David crawl back up his body, burying his face against Chris's throat. Their hearts slammed together against the walls of their ribs; David could feel the pulse in his throat. Blindly, he searched for Chris's mouth, ramming his tongue past his lips and teeth, swallowing his groans, and growling, "There's only you. Never anyone else."

He pushed Chris's legs open. David rammed into him, grunting out his need. The only sounds in the room were the squelch of moist flesh, and the slap of skin on skin.

David cried out his name and froze, his back bowed as he emptied himself into Chris's gut. They collapsed together amid the tangled bed clothes. Their ragged breathing steadied, hearts slowed.

Chris played with the thick black hair on David's damp chest. David's hand tightened on his shoulder, and he raised himself up to look down into Chris's flushed face.

"Let's get married."

“Married? How—” Chris tried to sit up, but David held him down. “You never wanted to get married before. What changed your mind?”

“You did,” David said quietly. “I need you. I can’t do this alone anymore. We can get married in Canada.”

Chris squeaked. “Married?”

David nipped at the skin of Chris’s throat, tasting the salt of his passion. “Maybe they won’t recognize it here, maybe they never will, but that’s okay. We’ll know it’s for real. We could go to Connecticut, or Iowa or any of the other places, but I was thinking Banff. I hear it’s beautiful there.”

“Marry? You could take me to the bottom of a coal mine, and it would be beautiful.” A huge smile brightened Chris’s face, erasing all the stress lines that had aged him prematurely lately. “I accept.”

David’s smile lit up his face.

Two months later they stood below a pine-scented cliff, surrounded by the impossibly craggy, forested slopes of the Banff National Forest, nestled around the bowl of Lake Victoria. They spoke the words they had written together. They were flanked by all their friends. Becky and Clay were there; David didn’t think he’d ever seen Becky in a dress, she looked surprisingly feminine, something he knew he’d never tell her. Chris’s sister and her husband came from Oakland. His parent’s declined the invitation, but they sent an exquisite, sterling serving set. David’s parents had not responded, though his stepfather sent them a check for two thousand dollars and a bottle of Mumms, that David was sure his mother knew nothing about. Even Martinez had come, dressed to the nines in a navy pinstripe suit that clearly hadn’t come off any rack, with his wife, Inez, dressed in matching finery. David knew Des had been responsible for that. After Chris had talked a very reluctant Martinez into being David’s best man, Des had put his size-eight foot down, and declared there was no way in hell he was being caught dead on the same continent with Martinez and one of his hideous outfits. He had dragged a bewildered Martinez into his shop on Robertson, and personally

handpicked a subdued Brooks Brothers suit, though it had nearly killed Des not to put him in the latest Paul Smith. Des had arranged for a boutique on Rodeo Drive to dress Inez to match. As the ceremony came to a close, a pair of bald eagles flew overhead, vanishing inland, into the secretive shadows of the trees. Des squealed, "Oh, that is such good luck." He clutched Trevor's arm. "Oh, I love weddings. They make me cry. Give me the word, sugar, and we can be next."

Afterwards, they retired to the Evergreen Dining Room where they drank Cristal, and single malt scotches, and ate elk steaks, quail and Brome Lake duck breast, toasting the couple until the evening waned, and a new day started. Chris and David finally broke away from the revelry, and crossed through the scented night to their suite. The echoes of their guests' merrymaking still ringing in their ears, they faced each other beside the canopied king-size bed. They barely noticed the spectacular moon-washed view beyond the French doors overlooking the Alpine Garden.

David reached up and touched Chris's cheek. Chris leaned into his hand. "My husband," he said.

David laughed softly and cupped Chris's face. "Husband," he whispered. "I love you."

"Prove it," Chris said, a sly smile flitting across his beautiful face.

David folded him into his arms. "Anytime."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PAT BROWN was born in Canada, which she is sure explains her intense dislike of all things cold and her constant striving to escape to someplace warm. Her first move took her to Los Angeles, and her fate was sealed. To this day she has a love/hate relationship with L.A, a city that was endlessly fascinating. *L.A. Heat* and the even darker *L.A. Boneyard* grew out of those dark, compelling days.

She wrote her first book at 17 – an angst ridden tome about a teenage girl hooked up with a drug user and went off the deep end. All this from a kid who hadn't done anything stronger than weed. She read her first positive gay book then too, *The Lord Won't Mind*, by Gordon Merrick and had her eyes open to a whole other world (which didn't exist in ultra conservative vanilla plain London, Ontario). Visit Pat on the internet at: <http://www.pabrown.ca/>

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